

THE HORUS HERESY®

Chris Wraight

WOLF KING

The Lord of Winter and War



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It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Istvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The age of knowledge and enlightenment has ended.

The Age of Darkness has begun.

~ DRAMATIS PERSONAE ~

The VI Legion 'Space Wolves'

LEMAR RUSS, The Wolf King of Fenris, Lord of the Rout, Primarch of the VI Legion

KVA, Called *Who-is-Divided*, Rune Priest

THE RUNEWATCHERS, Kva's appointed guardians

GRIMNR BLACKBLOOD, Huscarl of the primarch's honour guard

GUNNAR GUNNHILT, Called *Lord Gunn*, Jarl of Onn

SKRIER, Called *Strikes-Slow*, adjutant to Lord Gunn

AESIR, Adjutant to Lord Gunn

OGVAI OGVAI HELMSCHROT, Jarl of Tra

BJORN, 'The One-Handed', pack leader

GODSMOTE

HVAN

EUNWALD

ANGVAR

URTH

FERITH

HVARL, Called *Red-Blade*, Jarl of Sepp

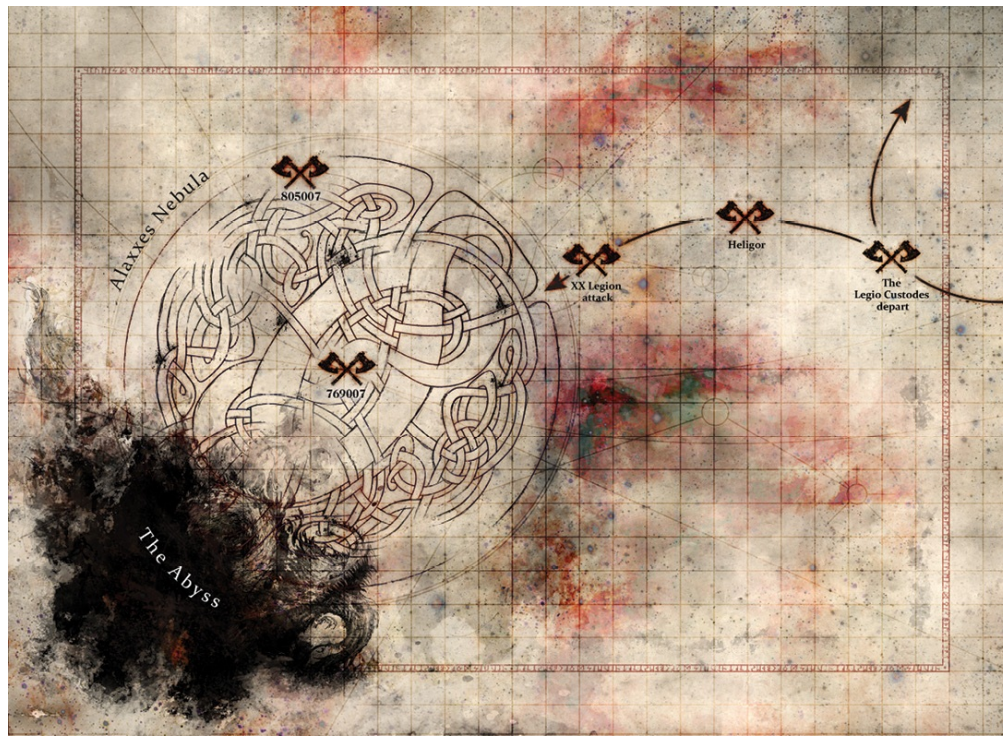
The XX Legion 'Alpha Legion'

ALPHARIUS, Lord of Serpents, Primarch of the XX Legion



While command of the VI Legion has always fallen to the primarch and his pack masters, Leman Russ maintains a warrior council of jarls and thegns known as the Einherjar, or ‘the blood-sworn’.

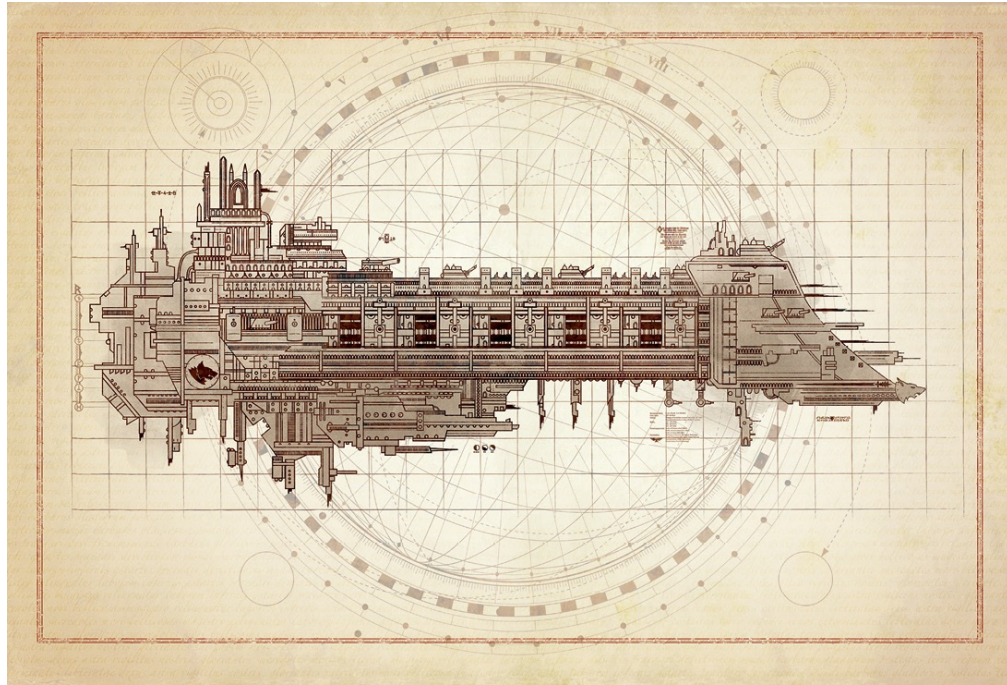
As the old traditions have it, the council must always seek out solid earth upon which to stand, to face one another as equals in the likely event of an honour duel or ritual blooding. Such formality is sometimes overlooked, however, if the practicalities of war make it impossible.



First entered onto Carta Imperialis charts by the Sixth Expedition in 817.M30, the Alaxxes Nebula was initially regarded as nothing more than an impassable shipping hazard. The danger it presents lies in its unique chemical composition – highly corrosive ammoniac compounds combined with vast clouds of dust and hydrogen ice move in an ever-shifting labyrinth, shot through with passages many hundreds of kilometres wide. These clouds can overload the void shields of even the largest Imperial warships, leaving their adamantium hides exposed to rapid environmental degradation. Vessels straying into the outer edges of the nebula will suffer catastrophic hull breaches in under an hour, while ships tumbling out of control in the deep core can be lost within minutes.

In addition to these physical dangers, the nebula is known to baffle sensors and limit vox communication. Ghost returns and false readings make mapping the interior difficult by any means other than physically traversing the clear passages, and such data is often outdated within a few years due to the natural shifting movement of the clouds.





THE HRAFNKEL

One of the first Gloriana-class warships to be gifted to the Legions, the flagship of Russ is also one of the largest alongside the *Vengeful Spirit*, the *Iron Blood* and the mighty *Conqueror*. A monster of the void, the jarls urged the Wolf King to name it from the old Fenrisian legends, and it is said that he thought on this for three whole days and nights. In keeping with the tenets of the Imperial Truth, Russ eventually chose the name *Hrafnkel* – the king who turned his back on the old gods and instead looked to his sons for strength in battle.

THE BLOOD-WELL

The VI Legion – known as the Space Wolves by those who had come to fear them and as the Dogs of the Emperor by those fallen into treachery – were, in truth, no masters of the void. Not like the Khan’s wild-riders, nor the Lion’s tactical magisters, nor, it had to be said, like the analytical cold-bloods of the XX Legion, who approached the matter of three-dimensional war as they did all else – with precision, forethought and subtlety.

For the Warriors of the Rout, raised on a world of shifting ice floes, a ship was a tool, a means of staving off the fury of the slate-grey oceans for just long enough to find firm terrain underfoot. They engraved the heads of dragons into their ships’ prows and wound runes of warding into their long hulls, but they never loved them, not like they loved the axes that could be wielded with freedom on the scarce land. They had taken these ancient ways into the sea of stars with them, and their battleships and cruisers and frigates and gunships fulfilled the same purpose: to deliver them to the field of battle with all swiftness, from where their true strengths – the charge, the fury, the application of unfettered aggression – could be applied in the manner that sated their ever-ravaging war-spirit.

So if the tales be told rightly, the Wolves had never loved the abyss, and so their great warships had been furnished like the continent-firm halls of ancient kings, burning with braziers and acrid with the stench of hot iron. For the Rout, the deep dark was no place to conduct war, for in that place a warrior could not see his enemy. He could not gaze into his eyes as they locked blades, nor feel his fear, nor taste the blood of him on his lips. For such a killer, the vacuum was a mere after-image of Hel, a place without true valour, a lacuna in which nothing but intellect governed the prosecution of battle.

These things must change, Bjorn the One-Handed thought as he ran through the narrow corridors of the enemy starship, his new lightning claw crackling with disruptor charge. *We must become all things to all wars.*

His pack ran with him, their shoulders and heads low, panting through bloody vox-grilles. Godsmote was tight on his shoulder, the *huscarl* to his chief. Only four remained of the seven Wolves who had boarded the Alpha Legion frigate *Iota Malephelos*, but still they ground their brutal way towards their target, cutting hard, breaking armour and the bones within it. They had felled the champion, the monster in Tactical Dreadnought plate that had slaughtered their pack-brothers, and since then Bjorn had led them further up, like a burning brand thrust towards the ship’s beating heart.

Every sinew flared with hot life. The stink of copper filled his helm’s intake. Fast, fast, and faster they went. They ran together, armour clanging against one another in the tight spaces, moving like a single hunter.

They were close now. The bridge beckoned less than five levels up. Bjorn could smell the enemy's anxiety ramping up the closer they got. They couldn't deal with this *speed*, this *ferocity*, and it made him want to roar with pleasure. After so long cramped up in the coffins of iron, playing the game that they hated against foes they could not see, they were fighting again just as the fates had built them to.

The Wolf King will revel in this, the One-Handed thought, as the next bulkhead raced towards them, guarded by men who would soon be dead. *This will stir his old soul. He will growl again like he used to.*

He felt his fangs scrape along the inside of his breathy helm, and he wished he could twist the armour off and breathe the toxic air of the dying ship while laughing at its murder.

Perhaps Lord Gunn had been right. Perhaps this was the way – take the battle into the enemy's face, crack his ribs and tear out his throat. The siege could be broken; Bjorn and his pack-brothers were like a throwing-axe, launched end over end, too fast and too heavy to stop.

He could live with the jarl, who gave him the evil mark whenever he laid amber eyes on him, being right. He could live with anything, if it broke the shackles that had gripped them in the Alaxxes bloodwell for so long.

He glanced at the chrono-mark on his helm display. They were well into the second hour of the action, and that made his heart-rates surge.

We need to get out of here, thought Bjorn, crashing into the bulkhead defences and lashing out with the claw that he had already learned to love so fiercely. *We need to get out.*

I

Three standard days previously, inside the Alaxxes Nebula – called the blood-well, the eye of acid – the Wolves had met in war council.

The Legion had been driven into the cluster by extremity, and only its extraordinary stellar violence had kept them alive to fight on. The gas cloud was vast, a skein of rust-red on the face of the void, falling into deeper and more intensive virulence the further one went in. Sensors were blinded, engine systems crippled and the Geller fields fizzed like magnesium on water. No sane Navigator would have taken a ship into those depths, save but for the certain promise of annihilation on the outside.

There were tunnels within, mere pockets of clear space between the great blooms of corrosive matter. The ships of the fleet could slip down them, guarded and menaced by the lethal shoals on every flank, hidden from enemy scan-sweeps and torpedo-rakes but open to devastating flares that punched through armour-plate and overloaded void shields. As they pushed into the bowels of the blood-well, the Wolves found that the capillaries grew narrower, more fouled, less open, tangled like nerve fronds. A ship dragged into the burning gas fields would be consumed in hours, its hull melting as its shield-carapace imploded and its warp core breached; so the Wolves ran warily, sending escorts out wide and running repeated augur-soundings.

No starlight illuminated those depths, and space itself glowed with the red anger of a clotted wound. The ice-grey prows of the *Vlka Fenryka* ships were as bloody as wolf maws. Every warship carried scars from the brutal battle with the Alpha Legion out in the open void. They had been ambushed while still recovering from post-Prospero operations; outnumbered and outmanoeuvred, and only retreating into the heart of the cloud had kept them alive to fight again. Many of their ships were now incapable of making for the warp even if the gas tides had allowed. Tech-crews crawled over every surface of every battleship, working punishing rotations just to get shield generators functioning and macrocannon arrays back online, but they would never complete that task adequately, not without the attentions of Mechanicum-sanctioned shipyards, and the closest of those was unimaginably far away.

So the Wolves were cornered, wounded and lean with hunger, forced into retreat by an enemy with greater resources and infinite patience. They were harried at every turn, driven onward like cattle before the whip, until the madness of confinement ran like a virus through the decks.

That was the environment in which Gunnar Gunnhilt, the Jarl of Omn, called Lord Gunn by his brothers and second only to the primarch, made his case.

‘They will run us down,’ he said.

The Legion command, a council of forty souls, listened intently. Russ himself had not spoken. The

primarch was slouched in a granite throne, his true-wolves curled at his boots, his ruddy face locked in brooding. Frost-blue eyes glittered dully under a mane of dirty blond hair. The Lord of Winter and War had not fought since the abortive attempt to summon Alpharius to the *Hrafinkel*, and the enforced lethargy seemed to have atrophied him.

Bjorn had witnessed that last fight, had seen his primarch take apart a Contemptor Dreadnought as if it were a child's toy. That power must still have been there, coiled deep, locked in his brawler's hearts even in the midst of endless defeat, but the surface fire had gone. Russ now surrounded himself with runes, listening to the cold whispers of white-haired priests and trying to divine the auguries like a *gothi* of old.

It was whispered, and Bjorn had heard the whispers, that the Wolf King had lost his stomach for the fight; they said that being kept out of the greater war had turned his mind, that the death of Magnus haunted him and that he had not slept a clear night since the Khan had refused to come to his aid. Bjorn did not believe that and knew the whispers were foolish, but something, it had to be admitted, had changed. Lord Gunn knew it, Helmschrot knew it, as did the priests and the ship commanders and the jarls of the Legion.

'They believe us beaten,' Gunn said. 'That makes them unwary. We strike back hard, the fleet together, launching boarding actions to take out the lead battleships.' There were grunts of agreement around the ceremonial circle, lit only by the swaying light of half-cold fires. Above them all, looming in the dark, were totems from the origin-world – animal skulls, knot-handled axes, wide-eyed masks of gods and monsters – still bearing the marks of long-gone Fenrisian wind and rain. 'If we keep running, we will deserve to die here, skinny as starving dogs.'

Russ said nothing, but his fingers moved through the thick fur of the wolves at his feet. He stared into the heart of the circle at the annulus-stone, brought from Asaheim like all the other sarsens in that massive ship. Circles had been carved on its surface, concentric and spiralling, worn smooth by aeons, predating the Great Crusade by a thousand years.

'Gunn speaks true,' said Ogvai, adding to the counsel he had given before. All the jarls were united in this – they were tired of running.

Russ looked up then, but not at Lord Gunn or Ogvai Helmschrot or any of the others. He looked, as he so often did, straight at Bjorn. As he did so, Bjorn sensed the spark of resentment from the elder warriors, even Ogvai, the master of his own Great Company, and he felt the old mix of shame and pride that Russ's attention gave him.

No one knew why the primarch favoured him so much. For some, it was further evidence of the softening of his once-peerless battle-cunning. The rune-rattlers and bone-carvers kept their own counsel, and Bjorn himself had never wanted to know the reasons, not least for fear of what Russ might have seen.

In the event, the primarch said nothing to him. His gaze wandered away again, and one of the two wolves at his feet whined uneasily.

'This will be your fight, Gunn,' Russ said at last. 'Hit them hard, or not at all – they have the numbers on us.'

Lord Gunn did not grin at that, not like he might have done in the past. 'It will be done.'

'You have two hours, once we start,' said Russ, distractedly. 'No more. We break out in that time, or I'm calling you back.'

'Two hours–' started Gunn.

'No more,' snarled Russ, his eyes briefly flashing. 'They outnumber us, they outgun us. We break the cordon and push free of it, or we fall back. I will not have my fleet crippled on their anvil.'

He slumped back into torpor. He had not said whether he would try to hunt down Alpharius again, or leave the bladework to his warriors. He said so little.

Slowly, Lord Gunn bowed his head. He had been given his chance, but the margin for success was slender.

‘As you will it,’ was all he said, his fists balled on the stone before him as if he wanted to break it open.

They tracked the Alpha Legion on long-range augurs for the next two standard days, gaining as complete a picture of the enemy formation as they could. Lord Gunn’s war council estimated that two-thirds of Alpharius’s fleet had followed them into the gas cloud’s heart, arranged in as loose a formation as the treacherous ingress-routes would allow. The rest had remained further back, hanging above the entire sprawling structure to ward against the Space Wolves escaping.

Precise numbers were hard to gauge, even across the Wolves’ own ravaged fleet. Comms malfunctions led to many smaller ships being misclassified as lost when they were still within sensor range. What was clear was that the Alpha Legion resources were far in excess of what Gunn had at his disposal, and their capital ships were in better shape too. *Hrafinkel*, the fleet’s lone Gloriana-class behemoth, had taken a beating during the escape into the nebula and would only offer ranged support to the break-out attempt. That left the line battleships *Ragnarok*, *Nidhoggur*, *Fenryrsavar* and *Russvangum* to carry the main assault, even though the *Fenryrsavar* was in only marginally better battle condition than the flagship.

The Alaxxes gulf presented tactical challenges: there was no space to spread out into the void, or to make elaborate manoeuvres. They would be fighting in the largest of the gas tunnels, hemmed in on all sides by the shifting curtains of foaming crimson. The aperture’s diameter at the narrowest point was less than two hundred kilometres – a claustrophobic space to be marshalling a battlegroup in, and one that gave almost no room for proper movement.

Given those constraints, Lord Gunn had opted for the one thing his Legion could always be relied upon to excel at: full-frontal assault, conducted at speed and with full commitment. The core attack from the capital ships would be supported by two wings of strike cruisers, each one aiming to power ahead on either flank to hem in the lead Alpha Legion vessels and keep their lateral gun-hulls busy. As soon as battle was joined, Gunn would give the order for massed boarding torpedoes and gunship assaults. The earlier encounter in the deep void had driven home the lesson that the Wolves’ only real advantage lay in hand-to-hand combat, despite the self-evident risks of losing warriors to a more numerous enemy. Lord Gunn’s aim was, so he told his brothers, to ‘ram our blades into their throats, twisting them so deep their eyes will burst’.

No one disagreed. The councils were concluded, swords were sharpened, armour was sanctified with runic wards and battle-rites were completed. Being hunted didn’t suit the Wolves, and the chance to turn the tables sat well with the Legion’s bruised soul.

Late on the second day, as the chronometer had it, the fleet was put on high alert. The trajectories had already been calculated, responding to expected Alpha Legion movements. The pursuing fleet was allowed to close in through a gradual slowing of the main plasma thrusters, made to look consistent with steadily leaking containment shells.

Throughout all of this, Russ remained only part-engaged. He spent increasing amounts of time in his own private chambers. Petitions went unanswered. Soon it became apparent that he’d meant what he’d said: this was Lord Gunn’s attack.

As the fleet chronometer clicked into the nominal nocturnal phase, trigger-signals were distributed throughout the Wolves’ rearguard, alerting them to the imminent movement of the battleship-core. The trailing escort vessel *Vrek* reported augmented real-view sightings of Alpha Legion outriders at a range of nine hundred kilometres, and those readings were fed into the prepared attack-pattern cogitators.

Six minutes later, the order for full-about was given and the bulk of the rearguard executed a lazy turn.

The slowness of the manoeuvre served two purposes: to allow time for the lumbering battleships to bring their forward lances to bear, and to delay alerting the enemy that a major reconfiguration was underway until the last moment.

Nine minutes after that, attack vectors were transmitted to all line vessels – battleships, cruisers, frigates, destroyers. Boarding parties were given their target-locations and sealed in launch tubes. As if in anticipation of what was to come, the gas clouds on all sides throbbed violently, sending arcs of glowing matter lashing across the face of the cloying depths.

Two minutes later, the lead Alpha Legion vessels entered true visual range. They were already formed up into defensive positions, spaced evenly across the width of the gas tunnel to prevent a sortie slipping through. The closest signals were those of strafe-attack destroyers, all now bearing the scaled sapphire livery of the XX Legion. Behind those came the bigger vessels, the real targets: Dominus and Vengeance-class warships bearing the hydra mark upon their axe-blade prows.

Lord Gunn, standing fully armoured on *Ragnarok's* throne dais, took in the final assessments of the enemy formations. His amber eyes glittered under grey-black brows, scrutinising the void as if he would twist it apart with his fingers. On the ranked levels below, warriors of the Rout looked up at him, waiting. They all knew that the last time they had attempted to engage the Alpha Legion head-on they had danced with destruction, and now every expression was tight with the need for vengeance, to prove themselves, to do *better*.

We are the Wolves of Fenris, thought Gunn, drawing strength from their devotion. *We are the executioners, the savage guardians*.

He gripped the iron rails, leaning out over *Ragnarok's* cavernous bridge-chamber.

‘Begin,’ he ordered.

And with a void-silent glare of superheated promethium, the massed ranks of the Rout’s battlefleet lit engines, activated weapon banks and powered up to attack speed.

First, flanking wings of strike cruisers leapt down the edges of the tunnel, overburning their engines in an attempt to hit faster than the Alpha Legion could respond. *Ragnarok* took the central dominant position, covered on all sides by four wings of escorts. *Nidhoggur* and *Fenrysavar* formed up in a loose triangle position on the battle-plane, angling to widen the leading fire-aperture to its widest point.

The gap between the fleets closed. The Alpha Legion formations remained static, each vessel locked tightly to the next by the range of their main macrocannon batteries. They made no attempt to match the Wolves’ attack speed, but kept up a steady velocity, holding together in the classic lattice formation.

In void war, structure was everything. In the open void, a fleet’s defence hung entirely on its overlapping formation. Every warship of the Legiones Astartes was ferociously, almost comically, over-armed – built to subdue the galactic empires of xenos, each was the equal of an entire world’s sub-warp defences, capable of dishing out phenomenal rounds of atmosphere-shredding punishment from long range. Putting such vessels into geometric patterns in which every single ship guarded the flanks of another produced an exponential multiplier effect, and thus Crusade war-fleets slid through the void like glittering predator packs, giving an enemy no unwatched facets and no open sectors. To break a settled Imperial fleet formation was a daunting task, and every shipmaster in every battlegroup knew the importance of maintaining the armour of numbers.

But this was not the open void. The Alaxxes tunnels prevented the most flamboyant outflanking figures, and so what was left was a test of speed and close-range manoeuvring, something that the VI believed gave them the advantage. Though they couldn’t match the XX Legion’s patient accumulation of territorial advantage, they could outdo them in daring.

So the Space Wolves outriders hurtled into contact with a kind of feral abandon, rolling away from incoming flak-battery fire, their lances burning like stars. The Alpha Legion vanguard fell back, maintaining their interlocked position, soaking up the first assaults.

It took only seconds for the capital ships to engage. Making use of the narrow channels cleared by the strike cruisers' runs, *Ragnarok* launched a massed salvo of torpedoes, backed up by lance-fire from its escorts and tightly packed broadsides from its own macrocannons.

That hurt the Alpha Legion ships. The volume of impacts, launched all at once, smashed frontal void-coverage and sheered adamantium buttresses. Gunn had ordered every commander to run primary weapons grids at overcapacity, running the risk of system overload but giving a savage punch to the opening exchanges. Two hurtling Wolves destroyers were lost in catastrophic explosions as their power-containment systems failed, but the resulting maelstrom compensated for their loss – half a dozen Alpha Legion ships were crippled or destroyed in the blaze, including a Dominus-class monster with the ident *Gamma Mu*.

That, though, was not the primary purpose of the attack. Hangar doors on every warship hissed open, bleeding oxygen into the void in plumes. Waves of boarding torpedoes burst from the delivery tubes, clustering and twisting before locking on to strike coordinates. Secondary wings of gunships launched while the mother ships were still at attack speed, shooting off on pre-planned assault vectors as the lateral batteries opened up behind them.

Lord Gunn had made his move, committing the fleet to close-range assault, and it lit the gas tunnel walls with sunbursts of thruster backwash. Powering towards the hulking monsters ahead, the salvos of tiny assault craft screamed towards their targets, taking the slender hopes of their Legion with them.

Bjorn's pack launched from the fast-attack frigate *Icebitten* during the first few seconds of the assault. The boarding torpedo tore into the battlesphere alongside the others, wheeling and diving through exploding plasma bursts as the cogitators ran the trillions of calculations needed to deliver them to their target.

Locked down in his restraint harness, Bjorn saw the incoming ship-ident flash up on his helm display a split second before they hit it: *Iota Malephelos*. It didn't mean anything to him then; it was just another one of the swarm of escort craft that the boarding parties were aiming to take down, freeing the capital ships to open up with their main gun-lines.

With a sickening *crack*, the torpedo crashed into the vessel's hull, and Bjorn's world dissolved into a juddering chaos of white noise and follow-up impacts. The torpedo's prow smashed deep through layers of armoured decking, screeching like a banshee before grinding to a halt amid molten tangles of burning steel.

Meltas fired, clamps blew and the bow doors slammed open. The thunder of driver-engines, amplified by the close-pressed walls, gave way to the howl of escaping atmosphere. Bjorn ripped his restraints free, unhooked his bolter and charged out of the flaming aperture. His pack – Hvan, Ferith, Angvar, Eunwald, Urth and Godsmote – fell in close behind, their helm lenses shimmering crimson in the whirl of lambent shadows.

Bjorn no longer carried *Blóðbringer*, the power axe he'd borne during the previous action, but now wielded a master-crafted lightning claw at the end of his left arm and bolter in his right gauntlet. The fighting was heavy, first against well-armed ship menials, then against the real targets: Alpha Legionnaires. The traitors emerged from the flickering shadows, their scale-pattern armour dark under failing lumen-strips. The pack wiped out the three of them, overwhelming in both numbers and speed. They stayed tight after that, sweeping down narrow feeder-corridors with the blood still hot on their blades.

More mortals were slain as the pack zeroed in on the objective, all members acting in concert, driven to a greater pitch of savagery by the burning need for vengeance.

The sternest test came just before the command bridge – an Alpha Legion champion in Terminator plate, backed up by a dozen more Space Marines and mortal auxiliaries, blocking further access amid the criss-cross ironwork of barricades. The legionnaire came straight towards them, chainblades revving under blazing combi-bolters. Hvan was blasted out of contention and thrown against the deck in a hail of shells. Godsmote ducked down below the volleys; his chainsword lashed out to bite, but was kicked away and crunched into a bulkhead. Urth and Eunwald slammed themselves back against the corridor's walls, launching ranged fire at the enemy.

The champion never spoke. There were no vox-amplified roars of aggression, just silent, efficient murder-dealing. Ferith was downed next, unable to evade the sweeping paths of bolts, his armour shattered into a network of blood-edged cracks. Angvar charged, and was crushed against the far wall with a mighty swipe of the Terminator's right arm.

Roaring death-curses from the Old Ice, Bjorn leapt out at the enemy. His four adamantium talons snarled into energy-shrouded life, harsh blue against the gloom around him.

The champion came at him hard, chainblades juddering in a bloody shriek. The two warriors crashed together, and Bjorn felt the raking pain of adamantium teeth cutting into his pauldron. He took a bolt-round close to the chest, nearly hurling him onto his back. He veered, swerved and thrust, twisting to keep his foe close.

He thrust his claw upward, catching the legionary beneath the helm. Lesser talons would have cracked and splayed, breaking on the reinforced gorget-collar and opening Bjorn up to the killing blow.

But these talons bit true. Their disruptor shroud blazed in a riot of blue-white, tearing into the thick ceramite. The claws pushed deeper, slicking through flesh and carving up sinew, muscle and bone. Hot blood fountained along the adamantium claw-lengths, fizzing as it boiled away on the edges.

The champion staggered, pinned at the neck. Bjorn twisted the blades and the enemy fell, his throat torn out, thudding to the deck with the heavy, final crash of dead battleplate.

Bjorn howled his triumph, flinging his claws wide and spraying blood-flecks across the corridor. In his wake came his four surviving brothers, firing freely, locking down the surviving Alpha Legionnaires and driving them back.

Godsmote, Bjorn's second, chuckled something as he ran past, but Bjorn paid no attention.

'Slay them!' he roared. 'Slay them all!'

His body pumped with hyperadrenalin as they rampaged onwards. He knew they'd been lucky – surely not many enemy ships would carry so few legionnaires – but the ecstasy of combat washed away doubt. The remaining levels blurred past in a whirl of slaughter, and soon the blast doors to the command bridge loomed. Bjorn, Eunwald and Urth crouched down at the head of the leading corridor, training their bolters on the doors, while Godsmote sprinted up, laid breacher charges and raced back.

The detonation blew the corridor walls apart. Bjorn powered up through the flying debris, firing instinctively through the percussive explosions. His pack-brothers remained close on his heels, and the four of them crashed through the disintegrating lintel and into the chamber beyond.

The bridge was circular, with the command throne in the centre and terraces and servitor pits arranged concentrically. The crew had had plenty of warning, and a hail of las-fire and solid projectiles zinged towards them out of the drifting smoke.

Bjorn vaulted over a sensorium pillar and crunched into a three-metre-wide pit full of mortals. He sliced his way through them, punching his crackling claw into armour shells and the soft flesh beneath. Having cut his way down the length of the pit, he boosted clear at the far end and swung around for the next target.

By then Godsmote and Eunwald had driven a bloody swathe through the open centre. Urth's bolter-fire had downed snipers clustered in the high galleries, and he was now working his way along the terraced stations, ripping menials from their places and flinging them to the deck below.

Bjorn strode to the ship's commander, a mortal in Alpha Legion colours still occupying the tactical throne, his face white with fear. The commander tried to raise his pistol to his forehead, but Bjorn grabbed it, hurled it aside and seized him by the throat, lifting him bodily from his seat.

The man's veins bulged, and his fingers scraped frantically along Bjorn's gauntlet. There had been a time when Bjorn might have demanded information, for something that might unlock the Alpha Legion's mysterious strategy, but no longer. Too many pack-brothers had died, and his hatred was pure.

'This we will do,' Bjorn hissed, 'to you all.'

He broke the man's neck, taking his time to squeeze the life out of him, before casting the corpse down and crushing the skull beneath his boot.

Then he raised his claw overhead, threw his bloody head back and howled again. The rest of his pack paused in their killing and did the same, and the entire bridge of the *Iota Malephelos* – gore-streaked, broken, strewn with the slain – echoed to the millennia-old war cries of unpitied Fenris.

The two fleets grappled truly then, locked in close-range combat across the whole width of the cloud tunnel. Ranks of boarding torpedoes hit their targets or were gunned down, leading to a rolling cascade of brilliant explosions along the leading flanks of the Alpha Legion's protective cordon.

The only response from the ranks of sapphire was a steadily more concentrated pattern of counter laser-fire, scything through the twisting mass of battleships to strike at the capital vessels beyond. No Alpha Legion ship launched its own boarding parties, preferring to hit hard at a distance. The inner core of heavy battleships drew together slowly, buffered by burning rings of escorts.

Lord Gunn watched the carnage unfold from *Ragnarok's* bridge, searching for signs that the high-risk tactic had paid off. A whole swathe of frigate-class Alpha Legion vessels had been disabled during the initial assault and was now drifting away from the battle-plane, their hulls riven with explosions. Slate-grey gunships plied a devastating trade among the remains, swooping close to rake them with strafing fire from battlecannons and heavy bolter mounts. Combined with the hammer-strike volleys from *Hrafinkel's* long-range artillery, the Wolves' assault had left the Alpha Legion's outer fleet badly dented.

Still the enemy remained static. They made no attempt to protect their outer ranks, and let the first wave of frigates burn. Dominus-class warships drove up the centre, wreathed in flame along their massive sides, bolstered by fresh fire-support drawn from the rear of the Alpha Legion formation. Soon the volume of lance-strikes reached critical levels, sizzling through the void as if the beams could set it alight. With no room for flanking moves, the Wolves vessels began to turn clumsily, launching broadsides from their ventral batteries in an attempt to match firepower levels.

All across *Ragnarok's* bridge, tactical reports flooded in, attended to by sprinting menials and relayed to the Legion's command points. Several boarding parties had closed in on their prey's bridges. Three light warships had already been taken, another six were contested and two more had been destroyed from within.

Slowly, Gunn began to realise the truth: the Alpha Legion commander, whoever he was, was happy to let his lesser ships die. The frigates were undermanned and poorly protected, bait for the infantry assault that he must have known would come. Nothing would deflect the onward advance of their capital warships, all of which were now training forward weapon arrays on the numerically inferior Wolves. Gunn's battleships could compete with them for a while, but not forever – so much had been thrown into the first wave, counting on the enemy not wishing to surrender its vessels and so compromising formation to save

them.

He felt the beginnings of a foul sickness in his stomach. *Ragnarok* ploughed onwards, right into the heart of the cataclysm, all lances thundering. His shipmasters were piloting with skill, rolling and angling the guns to maximum effect. All around him, local space bumped and spiralled with the corpses of burned-out hulls, but still he saw that it would not be enough.

They knew I would launch the gunships.

Ahead of him, less than a hundred kilometres out, the Alpha Legion's core group of line battleships was drawing up into lance-range. None of them had made any attempt to shield the frigates in their line of fire, and from the power build-ups detected it looked likely they were planning to fire straight through them. They were bound to hit some of their own, though they clearly calculated that many had already been boarded and crippled, thus limiting the loss to the whole fleet.

It was a wretched philosophy of war. Gunn checked the chronometer. Less than an hour of Russ's impossible deadline remained. Unless something changed quickly, his assault had no chance of breaking through.

'Increase fleet attack speeds!' he thundered, knowing how close he had already pushed them. 'Order all vessels to concentrate fire on the vanguard formation!'

It was not over yet. The two fleets were still grinding into one another like juggernauts, and a random warp-core breach or sudden loss of nerve could still turn the tide. All around them, lit up by the flares and bursts of las-fire, the boiling heart of Alaxxes pressed in, seething like the nine hearts of Hel. The Alpha Legion advanced before it, as cold and calm as machines.

'Break them!' Lord Gunn roared, his whole voice shaking with the wrath that burned up from his hearts, his gauntlets clenched tight. 'By the Allfather, by immortal Fenris, *break them!*'

The last of the defenders on *Iota Malephelos* were slaughtered, the control systems taken over and the whole place had begun to stink of still-hot blood.

Godsmote strode over to one of the sensorium consoles and looked down the list of incoming signals. 'Fekke,' he swore, watching the pinpoints of light dance.

Bjorn looked out of the bridge's cracked real-view portal and saw the ruddy void beyond scored with explosions. Local space was clogged with the arcs and crackles of energy-release ripping into gargantuan void-craft with an eerie, deceptive silence. Even as he watched, the burning hulk of a strike cruiser bearing Alpha Legion markings tumbled across the visual field, its spine broken, saviour pods shedding from its underbelly like spawn released into the ocean.

'Status,' he demanded, moving over to Godsmote's position. Eunwald and Urth took up guard by the broken doorway, reloading their bolters.

'It is Hel,' said Godsmote, sounding impressed.

Bjorn only needed to glance at the tactical scope to see that he was right. Lord Gunn's manoeuvre already had no chance of success. The Alpha Legion cordon across the gas tunnel held firm, bolstered by their willingness to let their outer flanks be ripped away. Bjorn suddenly saw why their seizure of *Iota Malephelos* had been so easy: the enemy had husbanded their strength, allowing the Wolves to expend theirs on weaker outriders. Waves of boarding actions had taken out much of the protective aegis of smaller ships, but not enough to seriously expose the main formations of capital vessels.

Russvangum and *Ragnarok* had waded into the heart of the battle, their flanks blazing with broadsides, surrounded by the vast cordon of the Alaxxes blood-well's lethal blooms. *Hrafinkel* stood further back, launching barrage after barrage of torpedoes, hammering a path towards the enemy's heart in a cascade of smouldering, broken ship-spines, but it was all too slow, and all too blunt.

The Alpha Legion held the advantage. They could afford to lose two ships for every one Space Wolf vessel, and they played the game well. Lord Gunn had driven the Rout vanguard hard, knowing they needed to gouge a hole in the defensive wall and knock the supporting vessels out of position. He'd almost done it in one sector – *Ragnarok* had taken apart its nearest rival, a leviathan named the *Theta*, and was continuing to power up the very heart of the battlesphere with all cannons spitting.

But several dozen Alpha Legion ships had the ident *Theta* – everything was repeated, referenced and double-signalled, which was another hateful mark of the XX – and it made no difference to the tactical situation. The Wolves had not established positional dominance, and were now at the mercy of greater ship concentrations. Beyond the darkening mass of this particular *Theta*, more battleships were already lumbering into position, supported by new wings of escorts. The Wolves could not muster anything like that discipline, and with their warriors spread thin in disruptive operations, the shackles of the Alaxxes tunnel edges prevented anything other than a frontal assault they were now ill-equipped to maintain.

‘He will take us back,’ muttered Bjorn, seeing the inevitability of it.

‘We will never get a better chance,’ said Godsmote.

He was right. If they failed to break out now, all that remained was to be driven deeper in, where the void corridors would narrow further, restricting their options down to nothing. They would be hounded, day after day, until death came for them in petty battles conducted at long range.

A poor way to die.

Bjorn strode over to the command throne, kicking aside the broken-necked corpse in the way. He summoned up trajectory readings for the frigate, overrode them and punched in new orders.

‘This isn’t over yet,’ he growled, sweeping his helm lenses across the devastated bridge. ‘Find a comms station. Prepare new allegiance codes for *Ragnarok*.’

The *Iota Malephelos* swung around hard, angling towards the closest Alpha Legion vessel, a frigate bearing the mark *Keta Rho*. The ship was fully occupied running up close to a Wolves formation led by the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, and its main lance was powering up for the strike. All around them, a thousand other battles were playing out, studded amid a maelstrom of flaring cannon discharge.

The weapon-control console on *Iota Malephelos* was almost exactly the same as the one on *Helridder*, bar the variant sigils. The irony of this war was its awful familiarity – they were fighting with the same weapons, in the same way, with the same commitment.

The *Keta Rho* swam into the real-view portal, still powering along the same trajectory towards its target, and Bjorn unlocked the codes he needed. Hundreds of metres below him, the broadside batteries slammed open, primed for firing.

‘They have detected our course change,’ reported Godsmote.

‘Too late,’ said Bjorn, activating the gunnery release.

Iota Malephelos continued on its trajectory, flying clumsily now that the secondary guidance crews were all dead, and launched its full payload at the *Keta Rho*. The space around it sizzled with coruscation as the guns all fired at once, hurling a storm of ship-killing shells across the narrowing gap between them. *Keta Rho* attempted evasive action at the last moment, but it was too close to escape. In a series of sharp impacts, its facing flank was peppered with cannon bursts, shattering the void shields and penetrating down to the hull plates below.

Immediately, other Alpha Legion vessels started to home in on *Iota Malephelos*’s position, now alive to the switch of allegiance.

‘Come about for another pass,’ said Bjorn, watching the tactical display fill with enemy signals and wondering how long they’d last.

Godsmote made the adjustments just as the chronometer hit the two-hour mark. Almost instantly, the

fallback order came over the fleet comm.

Lord Gunn had had enough – even he wouldn't see the fleet ripped apart to salvage his pride. All across the battlesphere, assault rams, boarding boats and gunships would already be streaking back to their hangars, covered by whatever escorts had survived the initial melee.

The *Keta Rho* still lived, and was turning to bring its own weapons to bear. Six other enemy ships were hurrying up from the starboard nadir, all zeroing in on the *Iota Malephelos*.

'What are your orders?' asked Godsmote.

Bjorn didn't need to look at the tactical displays to know what he needed to do. It made him sick to contemplate it, but there were no alternatives.

'Broadcast the new ident,' he snarled, tasting – again – the pain of retreat. 'Then full-burn, back with the rest.'

Gunn remained at the helm of *Ragnarok*, glaring grimly out across the bridge of the enormous battleship. Below him, ranked across the dozens of terraces radiating out from the command dais, hundreds of mortals and servitors struggled to enact the withdrawal command without getting the ship destroyed. Alpha Legion vessels streaked in from every direction, now at full velocity, aiming to pierce the outer defensive shell and get in among the more damaged warships.

'Maintain the perimeter,' warned Gunn, flagging up a weakness in the sector held by *Fenrysavar*. 'Get the gunships landed. *Skítja*, we need to pull those torpedoes out.'

The entire Wolves fleet was contracting, pulling in on itself and swivelling into retreat trajectories. It was a dangerous time, risking exposing the battleships' flanks before they could power up to full speed again. Some captured vessels were responding to the command, but not enough to replace those lost in the fury of the counter-assault. The claustrophobic dimensions of the gas tunnel hindered them further, since straying into its margins would be as catastrophic as a full lance-battery strike, so everything was tight, constricted by the volume of incoming fire as well as the collapsing dimensions of the battlesphere.

Gunn glanced down at the full-range hololith, noting the positions of the battleships. The *Hrafinkel* had remained in the centre of the formation, somehow eking out even more ranged support from its ravaged gun batteries; it was the linchpin around which the rest of the fleet was turning.

He stared at the flickering image before him, feeling a kind of hatred for it. The primarch was aboard that ship, lurking in his chambers, lost in a surly indifference. He should have been *here*, leading the charge. Lord Gunn was a veteran of centuries of warfare, but was under no illusions about the disparity in shipmastery between the two of them. Perhaps Russ could have done it. He'd have summoned up something, dragged out from the depths and hurled into the enemy's treacherous faces. That was what he was *for* – to do the impossible, to haul the Legion out of the mire and set it loping back into the hunt.

'Lord, the fleet is pulling clear,' reported *Ragnarok*'s navigation master. 'Trajectory has been set – are we joining them?'

Even as the man spoke, fresh shudders radiated up from *Ragnarok*'s bowels. More impacts followed – solid rounds, torpedoes, las-bursts, all raking along shield-arcs that were already close to failing. If Gunn closed his eyes he could feel the ship's agony, cut with a thousand wounds and bleeding into the vacuum.

He could order a final charge. He could send the battleship surging into the oncoming Alpha Legion vanguard, destroying as much of it as he could before they snapped the ship's neck at last. They might even board before the end, and he'd die like a warrior, the corpses of his enemies piled high around him on the command bridge.

Then I would slay with a smile, he thought.

'Pull away,' Gunn ordered, forcing the words out. 'Cover the retreat. Maintain ordnance barrage. We

will be the last to fall back.'

Then he turned, his huge shoulders a fraction lower, and looked away from the forward oculus, sickened by it.

II

The runes.

Images carved into ever-firelit stone and iron, crude to the casual eye, but then they were never carved for the attention of casual eyes. Those of the *Vlka Fenryka* knew how to look at them, how to read them, how to mark the balance and the weight and the under-meaning.

No Fenrisian sigil had a horizontal stroke – every incision was vertical or diagonal, gouged out by the tip of a burin or a killing blade. The greatest shape-smiths of the ice world, the *volundr*, spent as long crafting their tools as they did etching the sacred sigils, for the tools were charged with marking the blank screens of wood, stone, metal or bone with devices that would last for eternity. The creators breathed out the name of the rune as they worked, hunched amid shadows, fixing the contour of it against the material, binding two souls together, creating something greater than the mark and the marked.

It could take a decade to complete an inscription. If an error was made, the wood would be burned, the stone smashed, the metal melted, the bone shattered. The *volundr* embellished the meaning-bearing script with knotwork patterns, traced in razor-slender lines around the ranked rows of sigils, calling up the souls of wyrms, of eyeless creatures from the Fenrisian deep-dark, of black-barked yews, of venerated blades of renown. No cut was made without deliberation and no symbol was idly chosen, for the lattice of sigils and emblems carried its own meaning.

The *Fenryka* knew, as they had always known, that the cuts warded against the soul-eaters, for the under-realm was made of ideas, and every idea was a word, and every word had its rune.

Thus the work was not decoration. It was metaphysics.

The primarch Leman Russ knew all this. He knew it as completely as any living soul, and understood more of the ways of the runes than even the greatest of his smiths, for he was made of the same stuff from which the tapestry of fate was woven, and the runes penetrated his being in a way that none of his warriors would ever truly understand.

And yet they had known of the rune-marks for longer than him: Fenrisians had understood the sacred forms for as long as men had lived on the death world, and men had lived on the death world for longer than the Imperium had been in existence. Runes had been carved on bone fragments out on the ever-moving ice long before Russ came among the *vlka*, when they were used to keep the worst of the cold from the flicker-circles of fire pits. The old gothi had mumbled eternal truths from under layers of cured hides, turning the bone-tokens over in gnarled hands, communing with the pulse and beat of the world-soul as their violent home churned its way through the sea of stars.

This was not always well understood, not even by the wise: the primarchs were strangers to their

people. They had no home worlds, not even Terra; all they had to their names were adoptive subjects, who moulded them, and were moulded in turn, until something new was created, something which might be strong or might be broken, but was always a hybrid, whose provenance was shrouded by the capricious games of labyrinthine deities.

Every gene-son of the Emperor, in the dark of the doubting night, could wonder how much of his psyche had been forged in the amniotic tanks of the Hearthworld, and how much on the plains and forests and deserts of the planets they had been scattered to. Every one of them could hear the corrosive whispers in their dreams: *you are the stranger, you were not meant for this place, your people are not your own.*

Even the Lord of Winter and War, the living embodiment of Fenris, clad in wolf pelts, his frost-blue eyes the colour of the arch of Asaheim, heard those whispers.

And he heard them strongly now, as he squatted fur-draped on the stone floor of his chamber, letting bone-tokens run through his scarred fingers. Those fingers had spent most of their time clasping an axe. They had never been used to craft or to caress, so they were broad fingers, the flesh as hard as boiled leather, underpinned by adamantium-like bones.

For a long time, knowing what he knew of his own strength, Russ had doubted whether it was possible for a primarch to be truly hurt, let alone killed. Now he knew that both were possible, for he had done it himself. If he closed his eyes, he could still see the look of startled horror in Magnus's lone eye, moments before the screaming warp-hurricane had ripped his broken body into fragments.

In his dreams, he heard his brother's final words before the end, just as the glass pyramids shattered.

You are a sword in the wrong hands, my brother. You have severed an innocent neck, and it will plague you forever.

Russ had given the words no thought at the time, for every man, legionary and demigod he had ever slain had pleaded for his life before the end – they always did, clawing at life like a starving whelp for the teat. In any case, he had hated Magnus. He had hated him completely for what he was and for what he pretended to be.

And yet. And yet.

He picked up the rune-tokens and cast them down again. They fell in a loose clatter, tracing out the swirl of future-lines graven on the stone. Some fell facedown, and were ignored. Others showed their mark to the sullen light of the fires.

Ahlwaz. Gugnir. Dag. Rizam. Izhad.

What did it mean? Russ relaxed his exhausted eyes, red-rimmed from two weeks without sleep, letting them lose focus as he attempted to peer beyond the material realm.

There is a pattern. They speak. The Allfather is silent, but the runes speak. There is a pattern.

If that were so, he could not see it. He persevered, opening his mind to possibility. There was a glimmer, for a moment, just on the edge of the senses, then nothing.

From the velvet shadows, Freki growled, a rumble that curled along the floor like spilled oil. The two true-wolves were slumped at the edge of the light-circle, barred from entering the runes' ward. Geri, the wiser of the two, made no sound.

Russ looked up at them and cracked a dry smile. 'Wasting my time?' he asked, scratching the stubble on his chin. 'Aye, perhaps.'

Then he looked up and around, tracing his gaze across the chamber. Old blades hung from chains, twisting gently. The braziers burned low, emitting only dull light and little heat. The place reeked of embers and old sweat – smells of confinement. The door had been locked for a long time, and none of his people would dare cross the threshold unless he summoned them.

One rune remained facedown, the one that always did so. However Russ threw the tokens, the Bear

never showed itself.

‘I read one thing right, though,’ Russ mused. ‘We are beaten from the same ingot, he and I.’

Geri looked up at her master, golden eyes unblinking. Russ clambered to his knees. He stretched his huge arms out, feeling the muscles flex, missing the weight of Mjalnar. Then he paused, his hearts beating heavily, and listened.

There were no sounds, save for the ragged breath of wolves and the spit of the coals, underlaid by the ever-present grind of the colossal engines that drove *Hrafinkel* through the twists and shafts of the Alaxxes Nebula.

‘Deeper in,’ Russ breathed, knowing what the fleet was being driven to.

He could have gone back then. He could have taken command again, wresting it from Gunn, who only knew how to fight the old wars and whose soul was already half-dragged into the cold grip of Morkai. The others would have welcomed it. Their eyes would have shone again, for the Wolf King would be back among them, and surely he would have *answers*, and the pattern of war would swing around again, and the Wolves would go back to being the masters of their own fate, to being the feared, the killers.

They had been those things for so long: telling the stories to one another, building the psychology of invincibility, taking on the mantle of the exceptional. It had shielded them, for a time. What they believed, they had become. For a while, they had lived up to the impossible, and he had let them, sharing in the glory, watching as the galaxy learned terror from them.

He could have gone back. Sooner or later, he would have to.

Freki growled again, showing disdain. Geri remained silent.

Slowly, Lemman Russ, primarch of the VI Legion, reached down for the runes again.

Gunn reached his own chambers at the summit of *Ragnarok*’s command spire later than he’d intended. Everything seared at his nerves, goading him, provoking the rage that made him superlative when the shape of war allowed it. All that rage was wasted now, locked inside the iron coffin of his starship, unable to find expression where it belonged – on the field of battle, his enemy within range of bolter or blade, close enough to smell.

Now the Wolves were retreating again, mauled again, piling deeper into the unknown, and the shame of it gnawed away at him. Twenty vessels, including the strike cruiser *Runeblade*, had been lost in the assault, and only seven successfully retrieved by boarding squads. Three more ships had been lost to the enemy on the retreat, unable to maintain the pace and swallowed up by Alpha Legion hunters snapping at their heels. Another had been enveloped in the acidic gas clouds during the full-about manoeuvre and had been dragged with agonising slowness into the metal-chewing heart of the clouds. The core of the Legion’s vessels remained intact, though savaged again, and now had to maintain full speed from damaged engines even as the routes into the cluster’s heart grew narrower and more perilous.

Damn the Khan, Gunn thought.

The White Scars had been in range during the first assault, and they had surely known the odds the VI Legion faced. It still wasn’t clear why they had chosen not to come to their aid – had they too turned from the Allfather’s side? It was easy enough to imagine that they had. Perhaps it was this that had snapped Russ’s resolve. Until the Khan’s failure, the primarch had been his old defiant self; afterwards, the fire had died.

Gunn slammed his fist against the door-release, and the iron panel slid open. The chamber beyond was just like all the others on *Ragnarok* – barely lit, thick with the aromas of coal ash and burnished metal, decked out sparsely with age-blackened wood and fittings of iron.

Two Wolves waited for him inside – his second-in-command Skrier Strikes-Slow, long dreadlocked hair

framing a sharp face latticed with scars, and Aesir, whose augmented chin line glistened metallically in the gloom.

Other figures flickered as hololiths, transmitted from their own ships, since inter-vessel transport at such speeds had become too insanely dangerous even for Fenrisian crews. Ogvai was the foremost of those, brooding in a luminous shroud of pale green.

Lord Gunn joined the circle. 'So,' he said. 'Defeat, again, and now running.' No one replied. The silence was damning in itself – *running*, the foulest word. 'And where is he in all this? Has he spoken?'

Ogvai shook a weary head. The *Nidhoggur* had been in the thick of the fighting, and was still in flames across its lower levels. '*We are all curs at the table now.*'

'Then what do we do?' asked Gunn. 'He will not hear me.'

'*He knows what you would say,*' said Ogvai.

'We wait,' said Skrier. The Strikes-Slow moniker was a piece of Wolves' mordancy – he was the fastest blade in the Great Company and had a kill-tally of nineteen Alpha Legionnaires from both boarding actions. 'He communes with the gothi. He searches for the wyrd-path.'

'He is the primarch,' muttered Aesir.

'And what if he is?'

'I did not swear my blade to a rune-reader,' said Gunn. 'I saw him fight on Shrike, and *that* was the Wolf King.'

'*None of us are the same now,*' said Ogvai. '*Not like we were on Shrike.*'

'We can be. He should be fighting, not sulking on *Hrafinkel*.'

Aesir looked uneasy, as did some others. They all had their doubts, but Russ was still the Legion's master.

'*So what do you say, Gunnar?*' asked Ogvai. '*Just whining to ease your stomach, or do you have something for me to listen to?*'

Gunn hesitated. Treachery had spread so far throughout the body of the Imperium that the slightest intimation of insubordination felt dangerous. In truth, he did not know what he wished for, other than to have things back the way they were: Russ with fire in his old belly and cursing the enemy from between spittle-laced fangs, and for he himself to be the old shield-bearer, at his master's side, doing what they had all been gene-bred to do.

He tried to gauge how the others felt, what they would be ready to do, how to take them with him. He was aware of his inadequacy then – he was a warrior, a skull-taker, not a diplomat.

'We cannot run forever,' he said, sticking to what they all knew was true. 'We have not mapped the inside of the cloud – the tunnels will close around us, and we will have to turn. There will be a reckoning, and we cannot fail a third time. We must find a way.' A note of something like desperation entered his voice then. He heard it in himself, but could not suppress it. 'There will be a way.'

Some heads nodded. A low murmur of approval, laced with throat-catching growls, echoed over the vox from those on other ships.

'And the Wolf King?' asked Ogvai.

Gunn gave him a steady look.

'There is more to the Legion than the primarch,' he said, hating the words as they spilled from his mouth, though not wishing to take them back. 'Perhaps that is what fate is teaching us here.'

The captured *Iota Malephelos* rattled through the twisting capillaries along with the rest of the fleet, now flanked by corvettes bearing Space Wolves livery. In the final moments before the retreat had gathered full pace, a few transports of *kaerls* had been landed, giving the vessel a skeleton VI Legion crew. Bjorn's

pack had then gone through the rest of the ship methodically: killing the remaining senior Alpha Legion menials, securing mid-ranking mortals in the cells until they could be assessed and pressing the lowliest and the servitors into keeping the ship together. Sensor-carrying bomb-crews swept every deck, searching for booby traps left behind and disarming anything that looked remotely suspect.

And because this was an Alpha Legion vessel, everything was suspect, and everything was checked, and then checked again.

Bjorn remained on the command bridge, overseeing the hasty repair of guidance systems damaged during the assault. There was still much to do. The Navigator had sealed himself inside his blast-resistant blister at the summit of the ship's topmost spire, and they would soon have to find a way to hammer their way inside without fatally compromising the ship's warp capability. Every cogitator system had been protected by layers of encryption, making all but the most basic operations fiendishly difficult. All they could do for the moment was patch up the damage, hunt down the remainder of the crew and keep the ship on as close an approximation of the void-path as possible.

Bjorn glanced down at a mid-range augur display beamed onto a lens to the left of the command throne. The markers of Alpha Legion pursuers were stubbornly visible just beyond lance-range, never slackening their pace. They were impressively dogged.

Not for the first time, he found himself speculating over what their orders were. Had Alpharius been in communication with Magnus? Had the Khan followed him into treachery? There were plenty of other primarchs who hated the Wolves enough to support their culling – Angron, certainly. Lorgar, possibly. The Lion? An outside chance that he was part of it, though his honour would surely have demanded an open declaration of war.

The frustrating thing was *not knowing*. They needed to get to Terra, to hear the words of truth from the Allfather's mouth – until then, all they had were rumours and shadows.

As Bjorn ran through the various scenarios for the hundredth time, a rune suddenly lit up on the close-range sensor array. He augmented the feed. Something was closing in on the *Iota Malephelos*, travelling fast, seemingly launched from one of the other Wolves ships. He switched to a true-vision monitor, and saw it come in, thrusters burning blue-white, powering hard just to keep pace with the hurtling behemoths around it. Immediately, *Iota Malephelos*'s anti-ship gunnery trained itself on the intruder, tracking its erratic inbound course.

'Stand down,' Bjorn voxed to the gun-crews, hoping that enough of a chain of command had been established for the signal to reach its destination. He pushed himself from the throne and moved from the dais, indicating to the mortal shipmaster, a kaerl taken from the *Ragnarok*'s complement, to assume command. He knew where the incoming ship would dock, for he had recognised the profile of the vessel – an inter-fleet crew lighter, containing a maximum of four passengers. He had no idea why in Hel they were trying to use one of those at such speeds when there was a functioning vox network available, or even teleporters if they were desperate. Clearly someone had thought it was important to come over in person.

Bjorn hurried down to the sub-bridge receiving hangar, a relatively modest hall in comparison with the cavernous main docking levels below. As he went, he smelled the subtle aromas of the Alpha Legion on every surface – a melange of fragrances, eluding definition, hard to eradicate even if he had been given the chem-teams to hose down the floors and walls.

By the time he reached the hangar's apron, the void shields over the exit aperture had been withdrawn and the lighter was coming in to land. The vessel touched down heavily, bringing the stink of overheated engines with it. Steam boiled up from the wedge-shaped stabiliser vanes as the undercarriage flexed on the deck, and a blunt embarkation hatch hissed open.

The first two down the ramp were warriors in bone-white Mark II Legion armour, the overlapping plates covered in black-inked runes. They bore images of Morkai on their breastplates and carried long-handled, single-bladed axes the length of force halberds.

Behind them, clanging down the metal, came the third occupant, a massive figure decked in archaic plate. He went helmless, and Bjorn saw white-streaked and plaited hair piled over a lined, tattooed face. The skin was pierced with a dozen metal spikes. He carried a long staff with him, crowned by a slender animal skull and hung with jangling rune-totems.

The atmosphere across the hangar seemed to electrify, and Bjorn felt an itching sensation run down his spine. The two white-clad attendants fell back, allowing their master to limp more clearly into view. Though tall, the gothi seemed strangely withered, as if his body were wasting away within its containing brace of ceramite.

Bjorn knew the name of this one, just as all in the Legion knew it: Kva Who-Is-Divided, the Wolf King's counsellor.

'Then you are the Fell-Handed,' the Rune Priest said, in a voice that sounded like claws scraping through coal shards.

'One-Handed, jarl,' Bjorn corrected. 'Named that way since Prospero.'

Kva fixed him unsteadily with two black-pinned eyes, their irises as deep and rich as polished bronze. The Rune Priest looked unfocused, as if not sure where or when he was. A faint tang of ritual incense rose from his gorget collar. 'For now,' he said eventually, his cracked lips twitching. 'You will come with me.'

Bjorn hesitated. He had much to do just to keep the *Iota Malephelos* from spinning apart into the void, and no warning had come in from the *Hrafinkel*. 'On whose command?' he demanded, holding his ground.

Kva shot him a wry look. 'Whose do you think?' A serpentine smile twisted across an ever-moving face. 'He likes you. Consider that a blessing or a burden – your choice.'

He turned without waiting for a reply, and his honour guard fell in alongside him. Bjorn took a quick look around the hangar. It was his prize, one extracted in the face of defeat, and it would have been good to stamp his mark on it.

But orders were orders, and Rune Priests did not expect them to be questioned.

He started walking.

One standard hour after his infiltration, the intruder moved out.

Penetration of the *Hrafinkel*'s outer hull had been difficult. A Gloriana-class battleship was a vast thing, a sprawling city in space that housed tens of thousands of souls and played host to staged battles across its flanks that the battlefields of Old Terra would scarce have been able to match, but even so the Wolves had been vigilant about their perimeter. His one-man shadow-craft had been forced to dance and spin, running the gauntlet of ferocious flak-scatters while the energies of ship-killing lances blazed and roared through the void.

He'd gone eventually for a knuckle-shaped protuberance hanging below the main engines, a hulking mass of ironwork that had clung like a tumour to the vast cliff of *Hrafinkel*'s nadir-facing flank. There had been just the tiniest gap in anti-ship las-fire, just the faintest weakening of void-shield coverage – just enough, barely, for his void-sliver to slip into the shadow and break through.

His ship had never made it into the *Hrafinkel*'s interior. It had been designed to deliver him close enough to enact the boarding cycle and then pull away, back out into the maelstrom of las-beams. Its destruction, nineteen seconds after it had got him within a hundred metres of the flagship's side, would register on *Hrafinkel*'s data recorders, erasing suspicion should the augury of his incoming strike ever be checked by an unusually diligent menial.

A hundred metres of empty void was trivial to traverse, and his power-armoured form had shot across the gap like a shell from a bolter. The steel-grey hull had raced towards him, lit up by the flash of incendiaries bursting across a metallic horizon. He'd slammed into the armour-plates, clamping on with mag-grips, then run a scan and crawled, spiderlike, to the nearest access hatch. Two breacher charges had been fixed, followed by a brief retreat, then a silent explosion.

Seconds after that he was inside, crawling through a metal-latticed interior, latching on to buttress rods and burrowing towards the pressurised zones. He'd located an angle between two brace-beams, perfectly dark, surrounded by thick metal plating. It was thirty metres in from the infiltration point, stinking of oils and foetid bilge-fluids, at least a hundred metres below the nearest inhabited deck.

There he waited. He rode out the shudders as the *Hrafnkel* took a pounding from the ranged ships beyond. The thought occurred to him more than once that the flagship might be destroyed in the barrage, in which case his mission would have proved both pointless and short. Soon, though, it became apparent that the Wolves' offensive had failed, as it had always been destined to, and the boom of sub-warp engines powering to full-burn told him that the flagship was resuming its course back into the heart of the cluster.

So he waited until the hour had passed, listening to the countless creaks of the starship's interior under transit-stress. During that period, he did three things.

First, he ran checks on the specialist equipment his armour was provided with: scan-resistant resonance emitters, enhanced augur-units, whisper-quiet power mechanisms. He was wearing Space Wolf grey – naturally – with pack-markings identifying him as a warrior of Hvarl Red-Blade's Great Company. The disguise was not enough to withstand determined scrutiny, but sufficient to allow brief periods of movement out in the open.

Second, he fixed a loc-reading into his helm's cogitator, which then plotted a route to his destination. *Hrafnkel*'s interior would no doubt differ significantly from those he was used to, but all Legion flagships were laid down to a similar template, allowing him some certainty.

Third, just before setting off, he activated the encrypted transmitter lodged underneath his power-unit backpack. He checked that the encrypted data burst was clearing the *Hrafnkel*'s void shields and getting to where it needed to be. It was all but undetectable to anything other than its partnered receiver array, but even if it was somehow intercepted then the encryption was designed to mimic the faulty output of a failing realspace augur node, something the *Hrafnkel* had hundreds of right now.

The hour clicked up on his chronometer, and he took a moment to gather himself. He was buried in the ironwork entrails of a vaster-than-vast starship, surrounded by warriors who would kill him as soon as they smelled him – isolated from any support, lightly armed, alone. By any standards, even those of his own secretive Legion, it was a dubious undertaking.

But then that was the shape of war, and in any case, he was psychologically incapable of being daunted by it, so he moved off on schedule, going silently, slipping into the shadows he had been born to traverse.

The transit over to the *Hrafnkel* was violent. The lighter was buffeted by the enormous engine-washes of an entire fleet at full-burn and still in close confinement. Bjorn, his body thrown around within his restraint harness, glanced out of the armourglass real-view portal and saw the leviathans all around him, their thrusters flaring like supernovae. Beyond the silhouettes of the great hulls lay the tortured interior of Alaxxes, glowing in petulant fury, as raw as any wound in the materium.

The Rune Priest sat opposite him, fingers drumming on his staff, eyes flickering, body never at rest. Every so often he'd mumble something unintelligible, before his expression snapped back into focus. When it did that, there was a terrifying intensity to it, though it only lasted moments before disappearing again. It was as if he were flitting between locations, one real, one hyper-real, never really alighting in

either.

Bjorn did not scorn that, for gothi were gothi. The Rune Priests were one of the few constants that straddled the worlds of the Old Ice and the transformed Asaheim – the seers of the runes remained, peering into the chaos underpinning the senses, taking the cost onto their own souls so that the tribes they served could navigate and prosper.

Kva's being, so they said, was shared between oververse and underverse. In another Legion no such deviance from orthodoxy would ever have been tolerated, but in this, as in so much else, the Wolves were the exception.

'I do not understand,' Bjorn said eventually.

Kva blinked at him twice, and his focus clarified. 'Why the Wolf King wishes to see you? He is treading obscure paths now. He sees something, and now I see something. He will cling to what has been revealed.'

That did not make things much more obvious. The lighter veered sharply. The two white-armoured guards remained as silent as grave-markers, their faces hidden by slab-fronted helms.

'Why does he hide?' pressed Bjorn, knowing the short flight was the only opportunity he'd get for answers.

Kva snorted a laugh. 'Hide? Is that what they're saying?' He shook his white-streaked head. 'This Legion only knows how to do one thing. Remember – he is not one of us. He is better than that.' The Rune Priest looked thoughtful suddenly, as if that idea had only just occurred to him. 'He is not hiding. Not now. For the first time, he is listening.'

Listening to what? Bjorn almost asked, but thought better of it. The lighter ducked under the immense shadow of *Hrafinkel's* docking apertures. Bjorn caught a fleeting glimpse of a battle-scarred wolf's head device on the scorched flanks, almost erased from the metal by las-fire.

'I do not know what to say to him,' said Bjorn.

As the lighter entered *Hrafinkel's* gravity bubble, Kva gave him a look that almost amounted to understanding – the strangest of all the Rune Priest's chameleonic expressions. 'Our old weapons are blunted,' he said. 'He sees it even if the others do not.' The crooked smile returned, the glassy eyes, the impression that he was seeing things that were not really there. 'We cannot get out of Alaxxes. We are not strong enough. What does that tell you?'

Bjorn did not know, but then he did not accept the verdict – there was nothing the VI Legion could not accomplish, given enough time and enough fervour. He made no attempt to gainsay the Rune Priest, though, for by then the lighter had entered the hangar, and the docking legs were already extending.

Kva slammed his restraint harness back, glad to be free of the shackles, and got, wincing, to his feet.

'Come then, *One-Handed*,' he said. 'Time to see if his faith in you is well founded.'

Six hours after the abortive attempt to break out of the Alaxxes Nebula, *Ragnarok* assumed the vanguard position at the head of the fleet. The rest of the capital ships clustered in close, at times less than a thousand metres away from one another, thundering through the twisting cavities in the hellish maze like cattle jostling at a gate. Another escort ship was lost during that period: an outrider, sucked into the crimson fronds as it attempted to execute a tight turn through a ragged gap. The edges of the void tunnels were getting closer, and great plumes of matter continued to be ejected, raking across the already stressed void shields of the larger ships. And all the while, patiently, carefully, the Alpha Legion maintained their pursuit, never falling beyond the Wolves' rear scopes, sticking to the task with relentless consistency.

Lord Gunn stood on his ship's bridge, watching the fleet reports scroll in, one after the other. The tally of damage and loss was becoming maddening, and there was nothing he could do to staunch it – at least, not

while remaining true to his orders not to engage again.

‘*Hrafinkel* is losing pace,’ he muttered, watching the fleet flagship gradually slip down the order. The massive battleship looked to be leaking atmosphere from several sections, and its sub-warp engines were glowing dangerously.

Aesir looked up from his station two metres away. ‘It is wounded, jarl. We send them messages, but they are not answered.’

Gunn watched the colossal *Hrafinkel* reel amid the gusts of rust-red. It had been the finest ship in the fleet, the equal of any boasted by another Legion, and now its rotten carcass was drifting into ruin, dragged along in the wake of lesser warships.

‘No word from the primarch?’ he asked, already knowing the answer.

Aesir shook his head.

Gunn slumped in the throne, pressing his chin against steepled fingers. If the *Hrafinkel* fell back further it would become a liability. *Ragnarok* would have to slow the pace just to provide ranged cover, and that would endanger the other ships of the fleet.

‘Who commands the ship now?’ he asked.

‘No clear word.’

Gunn stood up. ‘That is not good enough.’

Aesir looked up at him uncertainly. ‘Jarl?’

‘It is the *flagship*. If the primarch will not command it, others must.’ He started to walk, striding up from the command throne towards the heavy blast doors at the rear of the bridge’s observation tier. ‘Take command here. Ensure we remain at the biting edge, and allow no release of the pace.’

‘The fleet is at full-burn,’ warned Aesir.

Gunn turned to give him a withering look. ‘Tell *Hrafinkel* I’m coming. Tell them to have their teleporters ready, and tell them to lower their bridge shields or I will rip them clear myself.’

Russ had come to Fenris, so they told him afterwards, during a time of storms. The *skjalds* still spoke of them – the northern skies cracking open, lit by sheets of silver, and the earth of unbreakable Asaheim shifting for the first and last time in mortal memory.

Russ himself remembered none of that, nor of the time before, save for the fractured dreams that came to him in the brief lulls between battles – the smells of chemicals and the hum of arcane machinery; the half-aware sensation of floating in fluids, listening to the careful movements of attendants outside the amniotic tanks; the tick-tock of monitoring equipment; the whispering of voices that may or may not have been human.

To have those memories was impossible, so they must have been projections from after the event, only crystallising once the Allfather had explained the circumstances of his creation. After that, Russ had been forced to accept that he had not been birthed on Fenris at all, and that the wolves, the ice, the storm and the summer-fire were all a random imposition on a childhood that had been conceived very differently.

Of course, there was a sense in which he had always known that. Even before the Allfather had come he had felt the *wrongness* of it, as if some colossal sham had been perpetrated, locking him in a nightmare at once seductive and terrifying. The wolves bowed their heads before him, as did the mortal warriors he conquered or slew with such bewildering ease, and he wanted to scream at them, ‘Who *are* you? Why am I stronger than you?’

There had been no understanding of this on Terra. The Emperor, the Allfather, his shifting visage always impossible to read, had kept him in isolation for a long time, doling out information in morsels, teaching him to use power armour, to command starships, to control the warp-awareness that ran through his veins

as thickly as his hyperoxygenated blood.

'I could leave Fenris now,' Russ had once told his father. *'The planet is too wild for life – it will never support the armies you deserve.'*

Leave Fenris. Unimaginable to think that he had ever said that. At the time of that exchange, decades ago, the Fenrisians of the VI Legion were being brutally moulded into the death world's image. They had started to build the Fang, hollowing out the Great Mountain with earth-gougers the size of Warmonger Titans. The Emperor had clearly expected the Wolves to be drawn from the world of ice and fire, and that, whether by chance or design, their uniquely violent home would remain the proving crucible of the Legion.

And so the pretence continued. Russ became more like the Fenrisians than they were themselves. He guzzled *mjod* with the *baresarks*, and wrestled blackmanes to the bloody snow, and roared out scorn and mirth across the sea of stars. He let the gothi adorn his armour and engrave his swords. He kept out of the counsels of Guilliman and the Lion, and ignored every emissary from Lorgar. He did just what the Allfather had told him – he became the weapon of last resort, the most faithful, the prosecutor of dirty wars.

There was no resentment when Fulgrim's purple-and-gold Legion took the Palatine Aquila, nor when Vulkan was taken aside for so long into secret confidence, nor, most of all, when Horus was made Warmaster and the arguments over who was the truly chosen son became academic. Russ knew, right down in his gut, that the Wolves had been made the way they were for a reason, that none other could perform their blood-soaked function. In the final analysis, were the Imperium to falter, it would be his foot pressed against the neck of any usurper, watched over by the benign and inscrutable gaze of his gene-father, the author and definer of all his misery and his uncertainty, all his bliss and all his glory.

But now that sham was over. He had truly become what he had once only pretended to be. He felt the world-soul pulse under his skin, and no scrubbing would remove the stain of it. The runes were no longer just marks, to be tolerated as the suspicions of a backward people. They spoke to him, like conspiratorial jailers gloating over the turning of a prisoner to the cause. In defeat, he at last understood why the Emperor had never let him leave Fenris behind.

It has claimed me. It has clawed me back.

He looked down at the runes again, scattered before him on the stone, the same pattern as before. The shape of it was emerging, dragged out into reality like a bloodied infant bawling on the tent floor. He stared hard, seeing some of the same things he'd seen before, and new things, blurred by doubt, intruding on the margins of the picture he'd created for himself.

He was close now. He could hear some of the words, mumbled by fate and on the hinterland of hearing. Just a few more throws. Just a few more casts onto the shifting sea.

The chime sounded at his doors, shattering his fragile sense of understanding.

He had no idea how long he had been studying. From the burned-out braziers, it must have been hours. The only light in the chamber came from the ports in the far wall, letting the dull red of the gas clouds flood in.

'Enter,' he rasped.

The door to Russ's chamber slid open, revealing the familiar outline of Kva Who-Is-Divided, his heavy runic plate crawling with inscriptions in the lambent firelight. Beside the Rune Priest stood the One-Handed, Bjorn, radiating a mix of curiosity, defiance and doubt.

Russ smiled. He was still young, the Bear. His ice-spirit had not quite been quelled by gene-breeding and psycho-conditioning, and burned much the same as any hunter out on the wastes.

That is what we need now. That is why they call him out.

‘So then, One-Handed,’ Russ greeted him. ‘What do you know of the runes?’

The intruder made his way up from the infiltration point, climbing steadily, moving silently. Manoeuvring a battleship the size of the *Hrafinkel* was a task of mind-bending complexity, requiring the coordinated actions of thousands, and so for over an hour his passage through the decks was unimpeded.

He was able to hug the gloom of damage-darkened corridors. When he had to break into the open, his path lit by the grimy sodium lamps that dotted the lower regions of the starship, he attracted almost no attention – the crew were busy, and rarely raised their gaze towards one of the masters in any case, and would have found little to disturb them if they had.

He took in the atmosphere of the vessel. The differences between this and his own Legion intrigued him. The smells were almost overpowering – a mix of ash and animal, thick as smog. The VI Legion seemed to care little for the fitting of their vessels, though every so often they would surprise him – an intricately carved stone, standing alone in the shadows, covered in traced outlines of mythical beasts; or weapons of exquisite artistry, hanging on chains over granite altars.

He catalogued everything, transmitting visual records over the secure link, knowing the pics would be scrutinised. When he allowed himself to appreciate it, *Hrafinkel* was awe-inspiring in size and capability. The forge levels alone were colossal – he had crept along gantries in the high vaults, peering down through the columns of churning smoke, watching new armaments crawl off production lines, each attended to by armies of iron-masked menials. The thralls working the lines didn’t appear to realise that they were already beaten.

Could they come back? Could they somehow rally, even at this late stage? The chance could never be discounted, and thus his presence was more than a triviality.

He kept moving. The interior was labyrinthine, and corridors would double back on themselves with almost sadistic regularity. Most of the decks seemed to have been constructed as concentric circles, with chambers radiating out from central spokes. As he progressed, he gradually began to see patterns in the arrangement, as if the whole thing were some kind of ritual space, built for the ceremonial glorification of the warrior caste.

It has not done you much good, he thought to himself as the first of his two targets came within augur-range.

He started to go faster, tracking the path towards the comms-station, seeing it edge closer on the augurlens with every step he took.

Almost there.

Kva did not come in with Bjorn but limped back off into the shadows to attend to his own business, his movements stiff as a crow’s. Once Bjorn was across the portal, the doors slammed closed.

The primarch Lemman Russ knelt on the floor, enclosed in a carved wyrd-circle, bone-tokens laid out like scattered childhood toys. Until that hour Bjorn had only seen the Wolf King in battle-stance or seated on granite thrones passing judgement. To witness him that way – crouching in grimy armour – was unsettling.

‘Come closer,’ said Russ, remaining where he was, waving him in.

Bjorn entered the old fire-circle, his plate still bloodied from the *Iota Malephelos*, his lightning claw hanging inactive by his side.

‘Why do you think you are here?’ asked Russ, pushing himself up from the floor.

Bjorn could have given a dozen answers to that. It would have been safer to admit ignorance, but he knew that was not what was being asked for. ‘Because we are losing,’ he offered. ‘Because you are out of answers.’

Russ stomped over to his true-wolves, reached down to Geri’s nape and ruffled the thick fur. ‘Aye, Gunn

thinks that. My Einherjar think that. Now you.'

'You expected different from me?'

'I do not know. I spent a lifetime learning to sound the depths of the Fenris-born, and mastered it completely, and then you come along, and I see how blind I can still be.' He looked back at him, and his blue eyes – so un-Fenrisian – glittered. 'Tell me more.'

Bjorn felt the danger in the room. Freki's lips pulled back in a half snarl, exposing yellow fangs the length of his hand.

'Prospero wounded us,' said Bjorn, opting for the truth. 'You, most of all. Now bad luck dogs us. We are hounded by it, so you remain here while the fleet is cut to pieces and you do not know what to do. You fear that we will die in the Alaxxes blood-well, never get out, never fight in the battle to come.'

'Fear,' murmured Russ, thoughtfully. 'You truly think I fear.'

'There are many breeds of fear,' said Bjorn.

Russ drew in a long, grating breath. Bjorn suddenly felt that he was half-right, though he didn't strike near the centre of it. He was no more insightful than the rest of his Legion – everything was seen through the prism of hunter and prey, either fighting or fleeing, and so he had fallen short.

'Do not think I grieve for Magnus,' Russ muttered. There was animus there still. 'Do not make that mistake. He was executed, and that was what we were charged to do.' His fingers dragged through Geri's nape, harder now. 'Magnus was a bastard. Magnus was a liar. Magnus would look you in the eye and lecture you while he blundered through the immaterium like a raging *konungur*. Hel, we always knew more than him – what to touch, what not to touch. Our bone-rattlers knew more than him. There's intelligence, and there's hubris. I don't grieve for Magnus, not for a second. I'd do it again.'

For a moment, Bjorn saw the flash of old anger, the tidal wave of wrath that the old Russ could unleash within a heartbeats, glinting like the blood-red sun behind thick clouds, and believed everything he said.

'Maybe so,' Bjorn said, going carefully. 'But Magnus was not the enemy.'

Russ looked up. 'Really? Tell me why not.'

'Valdor knew about the daemon on Prospero, and he knew what it meant. Who gave us the orders? Who told us not to sanction Magnus, but to lay waste to his world?'

The blue eyes never faltered. 'It came from the Allfather.'

'You know it did not.'

'We did what was asked.'

'We were deceived.'

'We followed the order!' Russ roared, taking a single step towards him. The twin wolves rose to their haunches, and the chamber suddenly seemed thick with the scent of kill-urge.

Bjorn stood his ground. 'And who could be relied on to do that? Who would carry it through completely, perfectly, even if it meant the breaking of a Legion?' He took a deep breath. 'We were *dupes*, my lord. We were Horus's willing instruments.'

Those were words of death. The VI Legion could endure almost any privation save for humiliation, and that was all he offered his liege lord. Bjorn maintained the gaze-lock with his primarch, never flinching, knowing that Russ could finish him with his bare hands and hardly break a sweat.

The chamber fizzed with energy. Russ seemed to tower higher somehow, to drag the shadows to himself, to rear upwards, dark and hollow-eyed. He looked terrifying then – as he must have done at the end on Tizca, breaking the back of the Crimson King amid a world of unleashed murder.

Slowly, though, the illusion eroded, and the threat passed.

'Well said,' Russ murmured.

The primarch walked over to the chamber's far wall. An iron-rimmed port opened out on to the void

beyond. Open space glared back, the same rust-red as it had been for many months, clear of stars, churning and chaotic.

‘Do not think I don’t know what our nature has cost us,’ Russ said, gazing out through the dirty armourglass. ‘Other Legions have not borne the brunt as we have. Others have forged their own kingdoms. They tell me Guilliman wrote a book. Maybe, with all that time on his hands, he might have seen this coming.’

Bjorn hung back, aware of Freki and Geri’s hungry eyes still on him. He could smell their eagerness to leap at his throat, held back only by the word of their master.

‘Gunn thinks I have lost my mind,’ said Russ. ‘You do too, I see. None of you know this mind. You never have done.’ He turned, and gave Bjorn a fang-filled grin. ‘Perhaps I have found the key, eh? Perhaps I have discovered what my father was always trying to tell me.’

He walked back over towards Bjorn, and opened his palm. Bone-tokens rested on it, each marked with a rune of telling. He shook them, like a village scryer about to cast knuckle bones on a board. Bjorn looked at them doubtfully, but the primarch remained eager, his eyes alight with a gambler’s desperate enthusiasm.

‘Shall we see what they say, then?’ asked Russ, moving to throw.

The comms vault was one of dozens scattered across the *Hrafinkel*’s vast innards. Each chamber was a node in a network, spread out like ganglia in a body, drawing together towards the command bridge nexus where every signal and scrap of data was processed. At the very summit of the system was the battleship’s Spire of Star-Speakers, occupied by the caste of blinded warp-dreamers and protected by concentric rings of steel-trap security. Breaking into that pinnacle would have been nigh impossible, and was in any case superfluous since the lower-order stations could give the intruder what he needed.

He edged down the iron-ringed corridor ahead, keeping his body pressed against the nearside wall. At the end, five metres away, stood a pair of security doors, locked and braced and crowned with snarling wyrm heads. The space in front of him was deserted, though he could already hear the rhythmic tramp of boots from lower down.

He crept forwards. The facing wall was lead-lined and equipped with low-level sensor-baffles, but he still could pick up blurred signals from the other side. He estimated six bodies within, none of them Space Marines, but all likely armed. He withdrew a wide-angle cortical deadener from his thigh – a neural blocker, capable of inducing coma across a ten-metre diameter – and activated the power pack. His bolter, too noisy for this work, remained holstered.

He edged up to the doors, checked he was unmarked and entered a code into the door-release mechanism. He had plenty of combinations to try out, most taken from the mid-ranking official he’d immobilised six levels down, others gleaned from listening instruments placed against unguarded comm-grid stations. The first code failed, as did the second, but the third prompted a green access rune and the door’s locking mechanism clicked clear. As the heavy panel slid open he strode inside with the swagger of a true-born Wolf.

The chamber was hexagonal, thirty metres across and tiled. A huge open shaft soared away above, lined with gargoyled columns and ironwork repeater-stations, and the gulf between them crackled and snapped with energy. A lone comms column stood below the shaft’s maw, a barb of dark metal studded with convoluted pipework, all connected to a metre-thick bundle of cables that snaked around its base. Cogitator stations, ancient and creaking, lined the chamber’s perimeter, their valves and neuroclusters flickering and chuntering as raw data flooded in from the *Hrafinkel*’s arrays of augur banks.

His estimate had been near enough – seven mortals wearing Legion-grey shifts turned to see him enter

and immediately bowed, clasping their fists across their chests. Two were encased in carapace armour and carried projectile weapons; the others had laspistols at their belts.

He raised the cortical deadener and released the charge. A snap rang out across the chamber, echoing dully from the shaft's walls, and the seven occupants slumped to the ground as one, their eyes glassy and blood trickling from their nostrils. He closed and brace-locked the doors behind him, then turned to the nearest cogitator station.

The Wolves made very little use of written records, but their warships had all been built on Mars and the automated systems tracked battles just like any other Legion's. He inserted more access codes into the receptor keypad, waited for the right one to slot in, then watched as the screens before him filled with sigils. He read the Crusade campaign marks with interest.

Thuleya. Ghenna. Olama. Teris IX.

There were plenty more, stretching back across the length of the galactic conquest. The VI Legion had not taken many worlds, but the record of their encounters was second to none in brutality. He scanned the loss tallies with a kind of morbid fascination.

Six cruisers lost. Four cruisers lost. Command-pack lost. All packs lost.

He wondered how many other Legions would have tolerated those wounds. His own? Possibly not, unless they were necessary for the ultimate objective. Then again, what *was* the ultimate objective for them now? The situation had become complicated. There was so much doubt, so much overlapping of aims, that only the immediate horizon had any clarity. That was the problem with using deception as a tool of war: the blade cut both ways, and just as sharply.

He moved on to the records of fleet movements, tallying it with the data he already had. From the Prospero warzone, to the rendezvous with a Legio Custodes reserve fleet on the system's edge, to Heligar for secondary operations against three XV Legion outposts, to the deep void to refit, then to the Alaxxes. They had been driven hard, even before the commencement of the most recent hostilities. He studied the logs, updated his list of functional battleships, then sent all of it over the secure channel.

He heard footsteps clunking past him in the corridor outside, and worked faster. He gained access to *Hrafinkel's* battle schematics. He scanned across the other capital ships: *Nidhoggur*, *Ragnarok*, *Fenrysavar*, *Russvangum*. He calibrated their strengths and weaknesses, their damage reports, their combat readiness. He started work on trajectory information, tapping into course-change orders and extrapolating the routes still open to them.

He knew, as the shipmasters of the Wolves fleet could not, what their options were now. Their ship commanders would have a choice soon. He did not know which course they would take, and neither was it essential to his mission to make such a prediction, but he found himself speculating what they would do in any case.

He could take a guess. They had acted true to their natures thus far.

As he filed the data for transmission, he heard noises outside the door. Footfalls halted.

He paused, hunched over the cogitator, making no sound, no movement, listening.

Something... *sniffed*. He heard the code panel being tried, and the door mechanism clang up against the brace-lock.

He reached for his bolter, retreating silently across the chamber towards the column at its heart. Above him, the open shaft snarled with arcs of electricity, as if angered by his presence.

A muffled explosion kicked out, followed by a ripple-impact along the metal-mesh floor. The doors slammed open, briefly silhouetting a power-armoured figure between them.

He fired. Three bolts streaked across the gap, one aimed at the helm, two at the chest. By then – unbelievably – the Wolf had already moved, ducking down, firing blind, running while bent double.

He retreated, firing again, using the massive comms-spike to shield himself. The legionary closed in fast, his bolter held one-handed, the other gauntlet clutching a short blade that burned with a cold blue fire. Reactive shells slammed and cracked from the walls around them, smashing the pict screens, making the vault echo with jarring impacts.

There was nowhere to run. The Wolf stood between him and the only exit, backing him up against the far wall, closing in for the hand-to-hand clash.

He drew his own sword, activating an energy-field as it slid from the scabbard. The Wolf leapt at him, and the blades locked. The two of them crashed against the far wall, weapons snarling as their disruptor fields intermingled.

‘What *are* you?’ the warrior hissed, and there was just a fragment of doubt in that voice. The Wolf knew something was wrong – enough to attack without giving challenge, but not enough to quell all his doubts.

He pushed back hard, wrenching the Wolf’s blade-edge from his chest, pushing it wide. His other hand had already moved, jamming his bolter’s muzzle against the legionary’s belt.

He fired at point-blank range. The reactive round exploded instantly, hurling the Wolf back through the air. He fired again, following up with two more hits to the torso, giving his opponent no time to recover. He ran over to where the warrior lay sprawled on his back and plunged his energised blade into his stomach. The point jarred through ceramite and into flesh, and he twisted it, leaning his whole weight into it.

The Wolf’s blood spread across the floor. His blade-arm twitched, the sword clattered from his gauntlet and his helm clanged back.

He sprang up again, his whole body now burning with hyperadrenalin. Had the Wolf voxed before launching the attack? Were there others within earshot of the combat? Time was now against him, and he was still a long way from the command bridge; his mission was only half complete, and already fate had crippled his plans.

Fate? He smiled wryly. *Since when did we believe in that?*

Then he was running, back out of the comms vault, skidding across the corridor beyond, caution now sacrificed for speed.

Behind him, eight bodies lay on the floor of the chamber, blood mingling on the metal.

Kva felt the death as a stab in his primary heart – a sharp pain, brief and over suddenly. His mind had been loosely bonded to the world of the senses, half roving in the plane below and free to move amid its mists and darknesses. He had seen the Alaxxes cloud part before him, its innards bifurcating, showing the way towards the empty void where they were doomed to die.

He snapped back into focus, blinking heavily. He was in a scrying chamber, the air acrid with smoke, the carcasses of ravens open and glossy on the stone before him. His attendants, the bone-clad Runewatchers, stood on either side of him, just as they always did. They were like inverse shadows: subordinate and omnipresent.

‘Did you feel it?’ Kva asked them, reaching for his staff.

They nodded, already moving. They were twins, those two, gene-brothers ripped from the ice and given into the care of the priesthood. Their armour was identical, the runes upon it studies in symmetry. That had always been the way on Fenris, for those gothi powerful enough to command it – two followers, one soul shared across two bodies, or so the old myths had it.

‘How could someone have got on board?’ Kva muttered. ‘Do they guard nothing on this ship?’

The doors to the scrying chamber slid open, sending rolls of smoke tumbling across the deck beyond. Kva strode out, his staff heel clicking, the two Runewatchers falling in behind him with their long axes

poised. He could have sounded the general alarm, but this way would be quicker, for he already knew where to go and who he was tracking, though it was strange that the killer's soul had only now broken the surface of the warp's skin.

They dared to come here, to the flagship. I am impressed.

'Guide me,' rasped Kva, letting his mind skate across the fragile bond between worlds. He was after a creature of flesh and sinew, but the markers of the deed would hang in the aether like blood in water. 'Warrior or no, he will squeal before I slit his throat.'

Russ cast the bone-tokens to the ground, and they clattered across the stone. The runes fell among the swirls and intersections of stone-floor carving, some facedown, some exposed, all illuminated by the rust-glow of the nebula's half light.

Bjorn stared down at them, unsure what he was meant to make of it. He was no scryer, and the pattern looked random.

Russ, however, pored over the scattering, his expression intent. He knelt down, looking closely at where the symbols lay in relation to one another. 'Zhad,' he murmured, letting a finger hover over the token but not touching it. 'Khaman. Liwaz. So this one falls again.'

Bjorn tried to see what his primarch was seeing, and failed.

Russ looked up at him. 'This is the way of it, every time,' he said. 'Variations, but the core is solid.'

Bjorn swallowed his pride, knelt down on the stone and the two of them studied the circles together.

'There are always choices,' said Russ. 'Fate never closes doors, just shows the cracks around them. This tells me what it has been telling me for days.' He gave Bjorn a dry look. 'That the Wolves will never escape the blood-well.'

Bjorn looked at the circles again. For a brief moment, just as the primarch spoke, he did indeed see something there. Not an image, but a kind of certainty, conjured up by the formations below him. *In the blink of an eye, the floor below became translucent, opening up over a gulf beneath – stars, falling away to infinity, marked only by a thousand glimmering paths through the void.*

The vision didn't last, though it gave Bjorn some insight into what the primarch was seeing. Perhaps Russ was seeing those things even now. Perhaps he *always* saw them.

'There must be a way,' Bjorn said, retreating back into the old habit of dogged warrior-faith.

Russ chuckled mordantly, and shrugged. 'I throw these stones across the circle, and I ask two things. Can we run? Can we fight? In either case, it gives me the same answer.'

He reached down for the token with the black wolf's head: Morkai. Bjorn did not need to be told what that meant.

He found himself growing impatient. The fleet was still in full retreat. Fighting would surely come again soon, and there were better preparations than scrabbling across the floor seeking guidance from the aether. 'These answers are no use to us,' Bjorn said, getting back to his feet. 'What is the point in asking?'

Russ clambered upright as well, his huge body rolling up from the floor. 'We have to interpret.' He ran a hand through his blond hair. 'Sooner or later, Gunn will find a way out. He will make for it, doing what he has been trained to do. He will provoke a third battle, believing that the open void will give him the advantage he seeks. At least it will be fighting, he will think. If we are to die before reaching Terra, better to do it with a blade in our hands.'

Russ rolled his shoulders, and for the first time Bjorn saw the fatigue in the primarch's movements. How long had he been doing this, over and over again?

'That, though, will kill us,' Russ went on. 'And it will kill us to keep running through these tunnels, for the Alpha Legion can go for longer than we can, and faster, and with more ships. So what remains? I have

only this – to go deeper in.’

Bjorn looked at him sceptically. ‘You said the Wolves will never escape the blood-well.’

‘If the wyrd has been written...’ Russ tried to crack a half-hearted smile. ‘Consider us, One-Handed. We have always fought the wars of others. We have chased down every renegade and xenos and ripped their throats out. We have broken ourselves on the altar stone of my father’s will, and we were glad to do it, for it cemented our place by his side. We started to believe the stories we spun out of nothing to bring terror to our enemies. We were the attack dogs, the sentries, the watchers of the unwatchable.’

Bjorn didn’t like the sceptical tone in Russ’s voice. These were things that were true, things that defined the Legion.

‘Always working alone,’ Russ said, shaking his head as if in bemusement. ‘Dragging my brothers to task, letting it be known that we would do anything – *anything* – to keep the Great Crusade intact. Hel, I even went after Angron. My wrecked brother. What did I think – that I’d succeed with him? What kind of arrogance was that?’

‘We were necessary,’ said Bjorn evenly.

‘Yes, yes we were, but for whom? What other Legion would have cracked itself apart on Prospero when it could have been carving out new worlds for the dross of humanity to rut and mawl on? Enough of it!’

The old anger rushed back. A low growl shuddered through the air, picked up by the supine true-wolves, who snarled in sympathy.

‘Jarl, I do not know what you are telling me,’ said Bjorn.

‘Just this,’ said Russ, impatiently. ‘It cannot go on. My brother has ripped the Imperium apart with lies, and if we do not change ourselves then we will deserve no better than the sorcerers we destroyed. I will no longer be the axeman of the Emperor. I will no longer see my sons crippled, shorn of allies, clinging to old myths of primacy. There is a path here. There is a road through the briars, and we have to learn to see it.’

He reached down again. Three more runes still lay on the stone, all facedown. Russ picked them up, and showed Bjorn the first two of them.

‘The serpent, the many-headed beast,’ he said.

‘The Alpha Legion.’

‘So it would seem.’

‘What is the other?’

Russ turned it over. ‘*Bjorn*. The Bear. It never falls faceup. Never. Why is that, do you think?’

Bjorn looked at the scratched symbol, and something within him froze. For an instant, he had an unbidden sense of endless, grinding time, of cold shadows, of a loss that tore at him like a wound.

‘This was why you summoned me,’ Bjorn said.

‘You are a part of it. Every time I scry the path of the future, I see you there, on the edge, and so I want you by my side when I remake this Legion. I want you with me as we go deeper in.’

Bjorn looked up at him, and the vice around his hearts did not ease. ‘This place hates us,’ he said. ‘It will crush us before the end.’

‘The whole galaxy hates us,’ said Russ, grinning with an edge of abandon. ‘Always has. If we wish to live, we must spite it a little further.’

The uncanny rush of teleportation was mercifully brief. A shiver of the void, a stab of cold laced with the half-heard howls of emptiness, and it was over.

Lord Gunn stood at the centre of a broken sphere of dissipating warpfrost. He strode through it, twisting his helm free, shaking the curls of aether residue from his armour. Skrier and Aesir had come across with

him, scorning the extreme danger of riding the warp waves between two titanic vessels at full-burn.

The command bridge yawned away in every direction, opening out onto the crimson void through a hundred armourglass portals. The throne – a massive pile of hewn granite, its arms carved in the likeness of two curved-backed hunting wolves – remained empty, a gap at the heart of the teeming spaces around it.

‘Who commands here?’ Gunn demanded, striding up towards the primarch’s seat.

Mortal crewmembers held back, their faces torn between awe and relief. A dozen Wolves of the primarch’s own honour guard fell into formation before the empty throne, each one wearing a blackmane pelt over ridged armour-plate. They were led by Russ’s huscarl, the one-eyed Grimnr Blackblood.

‘You know the answer, jarl,’ Grimnr warned, taking his place between Lord Gunn and the place of command.

‘The fleet tears itself apart,’ said Gunn, squaring up to him, keeping his hands close to his belted weapons. ‘Or are you so blind you do not see what the old man is driving us to?’

‘This is his throne.’

‘I do not see him on it.’

Grimnr’s face was like a grave-mask – unmoving, blank-eyed. ‘He will return. Until then, no other takes his place.’

Gunn spat contemptuously on the ground and strode over to the main bank of tactical hololith projectors. As he approached, a cluster of robed Mechanicum magi scuttled to get out of his way. Gunn gestured at the flickering fleet-deployment runes hanging in the bridge’s command space. ‘You can see this?’ he asked, scornfully. ‘You can read these runes?’

Little had changed since the retreat had begun. The Alpha Legion was still just out of lance range, still monitoring them, still pursuing. The Wolves flotilla had become dangerously compacted, still operating at full sub-warp speed, filling the tunnels from edge to treacherous edge. The ports above them were now a deep, dark red. The Wolves were running out of space.

‘My orders are not to engage,’ said Grimnr.

‘You can see where that is getting us.’

As Lord Gunn spoke, Skrier and Aesir moved quietly, purposefully, around the edge of the command dais, watched all the while by Grimnr’s warriors. The rest of the bridge operated just as normal – hundreds of kaerls and Mechanicum thralls bent over their stations down in the pits – though when they dared they shot sidelong glances up at the demigods disputing above them.

Grimnr’s dead gaze flickered up towards the high real-view portals through which Alaxxes’s turbulent matter boiled and seethed – they all knew what happened to ships driven into that poison. He looked back at Gunn, as implacable as before. ‘The primarch charged me. We keep moving.’

Gunn narrowed his eyes; it looked like the veins in his neck would burst from frustration. ‘We need to *turn*,’ he snarled, the words swollen with fervour. ‘You must, surely, see this. Someone needs to grip this thing before we are all destroyed. The flagship must command again – I cannot do it from *Ragnarok*.’

Grimnr let a flicker of uncertainty mar his otherwise stony visage, just for a second. It was enough – Gunn seized on it, drawing up to him, fresh urgency in his commander’s voice. ‘We break no faith,’ he pressed. ‘You feel the same as I. We are *warriors*. If he will not do what is necessary, we must.’

Grimnr still stood between the jarl and the command throne. He looked back at the hololiths, at the close formations of Alpha Legion outriders, at the heavy deployments just a few seconds behind them, and the yearning in him showed nakedly – to take them on again, even if it meant ruin; to die with honour, rather than seek escape with none.

But the moment passed. Ice returned to his features, and his hand slipped to the shaft of his axe. ‘Come

no closer,' he growled.

Skrier and Aesir drew bolters, as did the rest of Grimnr's entourage. Lord Gunn glowered in the centre of it all, poised to move, his tattooed brow dark. For a split second, he remained static, unable to take the fateful step of drawing blood on the bridge. Once done, that act could never be undone; they all knew it, but still his hand stayed ready to draw.

'Lords!' called out *Hrafnkel*'s mortal sensorium master, shattering the tight silence. His station was a few metres down from the throne level, and his voice was almost ludicrously thin next to the bestial tones of his masters. 'Forgive me – the cloud.'

All heads turned. The real-view portals remained thick with the shifting blooms, just as impenetrable as before, pulling in close and scraping at the edges of the fleet's outriders. The forward hololith projections, though, peered deeper into the oncoming clusters. They picked out the way forward as a wireframe tunnel, hanging in the vault of the bridge along with the tactical displays, twisting and turning as it coiled into the depths of the nebula. For hours it had been a single thread, narrowing like a clotted artery. Now it had changed: twenty-thousand kilometres down, the path branched, threading two separate lines between the dense plumes, one corkscrewing back on itself and plunging into the depths of the cluster, the other shooting straight ahead, widening, aiming true.

They could all see what the long-range augurs were telling them about the second strand. Lord Gunnar Gunnhilt watched the data unfold and felt a sudden burst of joy – the first he had felt for a long time.

'At last,' he murmured, letting his gauntlet uncurl from his blade's grip. 'The way out.'

He was running now, tearing along the narrow ways. Kaerls looked up at him, startled – they saw the blood on his armour, and the drawn blade, but shock stayed their hands.

He wondered if he ran like a Wolf. In his mind's eye, he had always imagined them loping, their shoulders rocking as they swept into contact, heads low, panting. The VI Legion would know him by his gait, if nothing else, but there was no time left to consider that, to mimic it, to learn by watching.

He passed through hangar antechambers feverish with activity. Welders fizzed and snapped against the carcasses of las-blackened Stormbirds, all of them clustered with menials desperate to get them void-worthy again. He swept through deserted refectory halls, the metal slabs empty, the utensils kicked over and forgotten. He tried to find hidden ways – side routes between generator-housings and service gantries – but his course always forced him back into the open, under the lumens where his scent would be picked up.

He had a constant mental image of the vastness above and below him – the caverns and the shafts and the lamplit halls, piled on top of one another, crawling with warriors his equal or better, all trained and honed to kill the outsider. They were coming for him now, and he had so little time left. The task would have been hard enough even before his cover had been ripped away, but now there was no chance; there was only the attempt, performed for his own satisfaction as much as anything else. At least the fleet's schematics had been transmitted, plus the battle records. That data alone would give his masters the edge they needed, making the incursion worth the sacrifice.

He burst out into a wide open space, and the enclosed walls suddenly yawned away from him. He was on the edge of a chasm, a gulf between sectors. Ahead loomed a metallic cliff face, pocked with blinking marker lights, striated with floor levels rising up into the heights. The deck fell away from him a few metres ahead, and the abyss was spanned by a single bridge, just wide enough for four men or two Space Marines to traverse side by side.

This was a defence bulwark, created should the flagship be boarded in numbers. Beyond it would be the command levels, the training cells, the navigation and astropath spires. The far side of the span terminated

in a pair of heavy blast doors. The whole place was eerily empty, eerily quiet, though muffled booms echoed up from the depths where the forges still churned. High up on the far wall stood the emblem of the Legion: a snarling wolf's head, twenty metres across and beaten into obsidian-black metal. It looked like the threshold to some half-forgotten underworld of human imagination, imbued with the latent terror of the VI Legion in their own domain.

He powered back into a sprint, knowing how vulnerable he was while out in the open. As he raced out to the bridge, the floor dropped away into darkened clouds of drifting engine smog.

The isolation did not last. One moment he was alone on the bridge, running hard for the far end; the next, two white-armoured warriors blocked his path, their axes snaking with pale energy. They had snapped into being from nowhere, and now strode towards him, chillingly silent, their bone armour glowing like phosphor in the gloom.

He skidded to a halt, aimed his bolter at the closest and squeezed the trigger. The weapon fired but the bolts exploded immediately, nearly throwing him from his feet. He swung round, righting himself, feeling a sudden heat at his back, and saw a third warrior approaching from the other direction.

He was surrounded, caught out in the open, skewered between foes. He glanced down at the chasm below and saw other spans crossing the shaft, connecting lower levels to their counterparts within the bastion zone. The nearest was a twenty metre drop, after which the plummet went on indefinitely.

He glanced back up at his pursuer. This one wore the dark-grey plate of the Legion, though it looked strangely ill-fitting on him, as if too big for the wasted frame within. The Wolf limped towards him, clanging an iron-footed staff on the bridge deck, his black and white streaked hair swaying around an unhelmed head.

A Rune Priest, then – the idiosyncratic name the Wolves gave their Librarians. There was no fighting one of them. He leapt from the bridge's edge, pushing out as far as he could, his limbs cartwheeling out in the open. For a moment, he had the unnerving sensation of being completely suspended amid nothingness, waiting for gravity to yank him down and on to the narrow strip of the lower bridge.

Except that it didn't. He remained out over the edge, but he never dropped. Crackles of whip-thin lightning wormed across his armour, and his limbs snapped rigid. Like a fish on a line, he felt himself reeled in and pulled back towards the bridge. He craned his neck to see the two white warriors and their grey-clad master converging.

He thrashed wildly against his bonds, managing to break the grip of the psychic hold just as he was pulled back over the edge. He smashed to the deck, activating his powerblade as he fell, lashing out as the first of the white warriors reached for him. He batted one outreached gauntlet away, swiped back at an incoming axe head, then swivelled, knowing the Rune Priest was the greater threat. He charged in low, trying to take him out with speed before the witch could use whatever powers he possessed.

The ball of lightning hit him hard, ripping at his helm and sending him slamming and skidding across the bridge's surface. He tasted blood in his mouth and felt his hearts kick into overdrive. Another blast hit, sharp and hot as magma, tearing up his breastplate.

He hurled his blade, sending it end over end, throwing blind in a desperate attempt to hit just one of them before they ended him. Something heavy cracked down on his right pauldron, shattering the bones within and sending a radial wave of pain shuddering through his torso.

He tried to drag himself up again, and felt his faceplate fall away, cracking open like an eggshell. An axe-edge plunged into his back, dragging down along the line of his spine, and the agony flared up wildly, making him cry out through bloodied teeth.

He felt consciousness slip away and fought to keep it – he wanted to be aware for when the killing blow came. Despite it all, he found himself grinning through the pain. He'd already done enough – the Wolves'

fleet movements were known, their movements past and projected, along with their strengths, their weaknesses, and, most of all, their strategies, catalogued and packaged and sent out over encrypted carrier waves ready to be picked up by the fleet. If nothing else had been achieved, that was sufficient for what had to happen next.

He fought against the numb blur that ran up his limbs. The last thing he heard was the Rune Priest's voice, shocked, outraged, crying out to his bone-armoured familiars.

'Hold!'

And that was the end. He never felt the crack of his bare head hitting the deck, his skull fractured amid the growing pool of his own blood.

'He has done it,' said Russ, suddenly.

'Done what? Who?'

Russ grinned. 'Gunnar. He has found the way out.'

Bjorn wanted to ask how he could possibly know that. 'That is what we need, then.'

Russ's grin turned to a sour laugh. 'Open void? Have you forgotten why we went into this place?' He rubbed his eyes with balled fists, kneading the tired flesh. 'The clouds are our protector. We take the Alpha Legion on in the open, in our condition, with these numbers, and it will be the last battle we fight.' He shook his head wearily. 'Gunn knows this. He *wants* it. He wishes to die, weapon in hand.'

Bjorn could understand that. It was the way he wished to die, too – in combat, face to the enemy.

Russ stirred from the ritual circle, pulling the pelts over his shoulders. His movements seemed at once more energetic.

'You have the answers, then,' said Bjorn, hesitantly.

'Answers?'

'You were searching. You called me. Did you learn what you wanted?'

Russ shrugged. 'I only know this – we must not leave. Gunn is here, and he will be pushing the fleet harder now.' He clapped a heavy hand on Bjorn's shoulder – the burly punch of a brawler, roughly affectionate, a thin mask over brutal power. 'I feel reborn.'

Then he started walking, clapping his hands for the true-wolves to follow. They uncurled from the deck, tongues lolling, amber eyes glowing.

'Come, One-Handed,' Russ said, opening the doors with a gesture. 'We have a jarl to bring to heel.'

Kva gazed down at the body. The Space Marine lay prone on his back, his helm half torn away by the lightning the Rune Priest had unleashed. Underneath was a bloody face covered in flecks of broken ceramite. The Runewatchers came to stand beside him, and the three of them studied their kill.

Except that the warrior wasn't dead yet. He was tough – one of his hearts was still beating, and he had gone into a restorative coma. One of the Runewatchers raised his axe, ready to bring it down across the warrior's neck. Kva lifted a finger, and the axe-blade was withdrawn.

Kva knelt down, feeling his atrophied joints creak as he lowered himself. The wasting disease that gnawed at his bones was only partially contested by the gene-conditioning that enabled him to wear his armour. He was a fractured thing – part superhuman, part invalid – and only a Rune Priest would have been suffered to live with such weakness.

He prised the rest of the shattered facemask from the warrior's flesh, pulling the vox-grille away and discarding it. The warrior had snow-pale skin, thin lips and a pronounced, haughty bone structure. His black hair was slicked-down in clumps amid the ruins of his helm's inner systems.

Kva flicked up the warrior's eyelids, looking at the brown eyes. He projected his mind into his, but found only echoes of consciousness to draw on.

Even so, there could be little doubt. He looked up at the Runewatchers, who were as silent as ever.

‘A riddle,’ he murmured, speaking to himself, surprised that he had not sensed it earlier. ‘This one is not a serpent.’

He pursed his lips, for once entirely blind to the onward turns of fate.

‘And so now we ask this,’ said Kva, thoughtfully. ‘What is a Son of the Lion doing in the Alaxxes Nebula?’

III

The junction between the ways drew closer. Lord Gunn never approached the command throne, but his orders now rang across the *Hrafinkel*'s bridge. His two adjutants, Skrier and Aesir, maintained their positions at the top of the wide stairway leading up to the command platform. They shared the space uneasily with Grimnr's forces, but for the moment their weapons had been placed back in their scabbards. With the advent of a genuine choice, one for which Russ's standing orders gave no guidance, all now deferred to the Jarl of Onn.

Gunn himself studied the augur schematics intently. The gas tunnel, narrowing for so long, plunged down tortuously, winding like a dragged length of entrails, before reaching a spherical chamber no more than a few hundred kilometres in diameter. Two spurs ran clear of that chamber, one angling back and leading further into the nebula's heart, one heading – so the augurs told him – clear to the border.

The manoeuvre would not be straightforward. The entire fleet would have to be piloted down through the aperture without losing any more ships to the encroaching gas, for he would need every lance and macrocannon for what came next. Once out in the void there would be nowhere left to run, no shoals to beach upon and no corrosion to devastate void shields – just a final reckoning, with the *Hrafinkel* at its heart.

Gunn knew how far the Wolves would take that. He knew what they would suffer to gain the win, and he knew what pain they would absorb to break the back of their tormentors.

You have the numbers, he thought, looking at the Alpha Legion vanguard as it maintained the chase. *You have the weapons. You have the position. But do you have the stomach?*

'Enact formation change,' he ordered.

The command was passed down the ranks and sent out across the fleet, and the ships began to move. For the bulk of the pursuit, *Ragnarok* and *Hrafinkel* had taken station at the rearguard in order to see off any strikes from the Alpha Legion fast-attack wings, but now the two battleships started to crawl forwards, outpacing the destroyers around them, ready to assume ownership of a new vanguard. Tactics were reordered, moving from the spatial requirements of confinement to standard open-void patterns.

The intersection was still a long way off. The exit from the cloud was further still, but already the plan was crystallising in his mind. The fleet would burst clear of Alaxxes, slow rapidly and perform a full-about to present their arms to the aperture. As the Alpha Legion emerged behind them, the Wolves would let rip, concentrating all fire at the point from which the enemy had to emerge, taking out as many ships as they could.

That would hurt them. It might not even up the odds, but it would make them bleed. After that, the carnage

could begin in earnest, up-close and ship to ship, in an orgy of shield-breaking.

Do you have the stomach? he thought again, repeating the words in his mind like a mantra. *I cannot believe you do.*

‘Jarl,’ came an interruption from the sensorium decks. *‘They are reacting.’*

He glanced over at the hololith banks, and saw the Alpha Legion vanguard creeping closer. They had clearly seen the same thing as they had – the divergence, the chance for breakout.

Gunn smiled savagely. He could see the fast-attack frigates piling on engine-burn, pulling ahead to clear the shots for the monsters beyond.

‘You cannot stop this now,’ he murmured, speaking softly to his pursuers and watching the glowing runes shift like pieces on a regicide board. ‘No one can.’

They dragged the body through the blast doors, up into the closest sealable chamber. The two Runewatchers took up position outside, leaving Kva and the infiltrator alone. The Rune Priest propped the Dark Angel up against the chamber’s wall. The remnants of his helm and gorget kept his head upright, and a mix of blood and drool ran down from his slackened mouth.

Kva gripped the Dark Angel’s jaw and brought the tip of his staff closer. The shadow of the mounted skull fell across the warrior’s battered face, making his features look cadaverous.

‘Awaken,’ hissed Kva, lifting the Dark Angel’s chin.

He could sense the flame of the warrior’s soul, burning weakly. It would not take much to snuff it out.

‘Come back,’ Kva said, sinking his own mind into that of his subject’s. *He saw the soul running ahead of him, flitting like a deer between trees. He gave chase, weaving between shadowed boles, calling out. The dreamscape was not like any forest of Fenris – it was rich, mottled with verdancy, as ancient as the bones of the world upon which it stood.*

He caught up, grabbing the fleeing figure, reeling him back, tearing him out of the mirror-realm and back into the world of the senses.

The Dark Angel came to, coughing up blood, his eyes glassy and rolling.

‘Stay,’ commanded Kva, his hand slipping to the Dark Angel’s exposed throat, feeling for the strength of his pulse. ‘I do not permit you to die.’

The warrior stared stupidly for a moment, disorientated and struggling to breathe. Kva waited, maintaining the barrier between the worlds lest the Dark Angel’s soul slip back into the underverse. Slowly, his breathing returned to something close to normal; the bleeding clotted, the eyes clarified.

‘What are you named?’ asked Kva.

The Dark Angel did not reply. It didn’t look like he’d understood.

‘What are you named?’ asked Kva again, this time inflecting the words with command, forcing truth.

‘Ormand,’ he rasped, hacking up more blood from his throat.

‘You are of the First Legion.’

‘As you see.’

‘What are you doing here?’

‘I could ask the same thing.’

Kva let go of Ormand’s jaw. ‘If your helm had not been broken—’

‘You would have killed me.’ Ormand hacked again. ‘Yes, that was the risk.’

Kva looked down at his armour – a decent resemblance to VI Legion markings. ‘It may still happen.’

Ormand looked up at him, his breathing stabilising. ‘Traitor or loyal?’

‘What?’

‘That is the only question now. Who commands the attack dogs? And the hydra? But your answer matters

not – we have the data. My mirror on the *Alpha* has done the same thing, unless he was caught sooner than me. Perhaps they were quicker – after all, they are born to this.’

Kva narrowed his eyes. ‘You do not know what has happened, do you?’

‘Prospero burns. The galaxy is riven by storms. Two Legions enter the Alaxxes Nebula, each at each other’s throats. Terra is cut off, and all dreams become nightmares. What, in our position, would you do?’

Kva began to understand. ‘And there are more of you?’

‘Many more.’

‘Where?’

Ormand tried to rise and failed, falling back against the chamber wall, his breath rattling. ‘You know nothing of this place. Alaxxes is a fortress. There are depths, and in those depths are treasures.’

‘The Lion?’ Kva ventured, grasping at the faint chance. For all their history of antagonism, the primarch Lion El’Jonson and Russ together would surely be enough to turn the tide.

Ormand’s bitter smile returned then. ‘The Lion? How would I know?’ He edged closer, conspiratorially, as if enjoying the exchange of confidence. ‘And I care not, for I give less than a damn for the Lion. None of us do.’

Kva must have given away his surprise, for a glint of satisfaction showed in Ormand’s bloodshot eyes.

‘If you wish for the truth, it is this. We were sent to this place by Caliban’s protector, following shameful orders that were obsolete before they were given. It is he who we follow, and it is by his will that you live or die.’ Ormand smiled coldly. ‘Best you know this now, priest. You are among Luther’s army now.’

Russ and Bjorn entered the command bridge just as the tunnel intersection drew within five thousand kilometres. For a moment, none but the guards at the gates noticed them, and all other eyes remained fixed on the forward oculus, the hololith projections and the fleet position indicators on the tactical screens.

Russ waited for a moment, amused, standing with Bjorn and the two true-wolves in isolation. Lord Gunn was the first to pick up the scent, and twisted around. The others followed, greeting the primarch’s return with a mix of shock and relief.

‘What is this then, Gunn?’ asked Russ, swaggering up to the throne. ‘The last I heard you were on *Ragnarok*, where you belong.’

Gunn glared back at Russ, still with one foot on the command throne dais. ‘There is a way out, lord. The void beckons.’

Bjorn remained at Russ’s side, keeping close watch on the other warriors. The bridge hummed with an air of tight expectation – they were sniffing around one another, tasting the potential for violence. Aesir and Skrier drew closer to their liege lord; Grimnr and his followers shadowed them.

‘A way out,’ said Russ, musingly, looking at the projections. ‘And a way in. It seems we have a choice.’

Gunn’s face flickered with exasperation. ‘You are jesting, of course.’

Russ gazed around the bridge. His ruddy skin glowed with amusement, but there was a hard undertone to it.

‘I think the time for jesting has gone now, Gunnar,’ he said, flanked by Freki and Geri. He glanced at the tactical displays glimmering above them in hololithic translucence. ‘We will take the turn. We will go deeper in.’

‘No!’ Gunn’s outburst was involuntary, an expression of pure frustration. ‘There is another way.’

‘We have tried that, have we not?’ Russ’s voice dropped, as if offering the jarl a way to back down without confrontation. ‘Gunn, no one doubts your valour. But this time, believe me, it will not be enough.’

Gunn glanced up at the intersection, now rapidly approaching. ‘The movements have been planned,’ he insisted.

‘They can be changed.’

‘Not *now*.’ Gunn’s face twisted into anger – as his stratagems dissolved, he was losing the fight. ‘Where have you been, lord? The orders have been given.’

‘You should have learned trust by now. We will not leave the cluster. We will take the route deeper in.’

‘No, we will not.’ Lord Gunn’s fangs were bared. The old warrior was scarcely less imposing than his primarch – a head shorter and less bulky in armour, but with the scarred, hook-fanged mien of the seasoned fighter. ‘I care not what the runes say – we have fled for long enough.’

That was an open challenge. Bjorn felt his lightning claw twitch almost involuntarily, and heard the throaty snarls from the true-wolves. All across the bridge, warriors silently prepared themselves.

Russ, though, reached for no weapon. He strolled over to Gunn, casually, his hands open and held loosely. ‘It has been hard for you,’ he said, his voice still soft, ‘but I warn you – check yourself. I will need my shield-bearer at my side.’

‘He already is,’ said Gunn, witheringly, his eyes flickering towards Bjorn.

Russ’s gaze darkened. ‘Go back to the *Ragnarok*. Take the order.’

By then the two of them were just a hand’s breadth apart. Lord Gunn looked up at the Wolf King, his expression unreadable.

‘This is how it starts,’ the primarch said to him. ‘Resentment, real or imagined. It grows, and there are powers ready to feed on it. Do you think it was different with Horus? He made a mistake, one mistake, and that was the end. Do not be like him, brother. Remember your vows.’

‘We were made to *fight*,’ hissed Gunn, his defiance bleeding into something like desperation.

‘True enough,’ said Russ, reaching down, placing a gauntlet on his shoulder. ‘But this is what divides us from the Twelfth Legion – we pick our battles. I will need you, Gunn. This will be your triumph.’

Then he reached down and whispered something into the jarl’s ear. Bjorn was standing too far away to hear what was said, but it was brief – just a few words. When Russ lifted his head again, Gunn’s expression had changed. It remained hard to read, but the defiance had gone.

Russ turned away from him and addressed the bridge.

‘Deeper in!’ he cried. ‘We have been shown a path – we will take it. Look to the viewers, and see that the enemy knows our mind. Resume full-burn. Realign the fleet to defensive formation. They will come at us now, just as they see what we do.’

All across the bridge, thralls hurried to enact the new orders. Grimnr’s warriors stood down, withdrawing from the positions they had taken to defend the primarch. Warning klaxons sounded as the new trajectory was entered. The deck shuddered as the plasma drives keyed into a new register, gaining speed again, sliding from one set of instructions to another.

Lord Gunn stood silently for a while, as if all of that meant nothing. Then, without saying anything else, he turned, beckoning for his two escorts to follow him. Bjorn watched them head back to the teleporter station, though his attention was soon dragged back towards Russ.

The primarch strode to the edge of the dais overlooking the ranks of his people. His wolves curled and paced around him, no longer sluggish, their fur standing stiffly and their fangs bared.

Russ was reinvigorated, vital once more, calling out orders with his shoulders pushed back. All around him, the Legion crew raced to fulfil his demands. They went swiftly, surely, happier now that the chain of command was clear again, and their every movement betrayed the same singular fact: *the Wolf King has returned*.

It was infectious, and Bjorn was not immune. As the *Hrafnkel* sheared around, its damaged vastness responding to the new orders, he felt a shiver of anticipation.

The Alpha Legion were closing. The coming manoeuvre would be tight and bloody, with no surety of

success.

No matter. The hunt called again.

‘Now we must move,’ Kva told Ormand.

The Dark Angel winced and tried to rise. The injuries he’d been given by the Runewatchers were severe, though, and he collapsed.

Kva hissed with irritation, and reached down to his belt. He emptied some dried herbs from a leather pouch, crushed them between his fingers and forced them into Ormand’s mouth. The Dark Angel chewed, gagged, and nearly spat them out again.

‘Throne,’ he slurred. ‘What foulness do you people eat?’

Kva shot him a wintry smile. ‘It will preserve you.’

The Rune Priest grabbed him by the arm and hauled him up. Ormand managed to stagger to his feet, his flesh even paler than usual.

The two of them limped to the doorway, Kva supporting the heavy burden, Ormand struggling to keep his precarious footing. The doors slid open, and the Runewatchers came to their aid, sliding their hands under the Dark Angel’s shoulders.

‘The Lord of Winter and War is back on the throne,’ Kva told his servants, inclining his head for a moment, listening, sensing. ‘We do not have much time.’

‘Then the choice has been made,’ slurred Ormand, his head reeling as he was dragged along by the two silent Runewatchers. ‘You have no use for me.’

‘You know what waits for us if he takes the harder path.’

‘It matters not. I cannot help you now.’

Kva glared at him. ‘You can tell him what lies at the heart of the blood-well.’

‘I did not come here to give you counsel.’

Kva forced the pace. ‘We will see. He can be persuasive.’

‘So you’ll hammer it out of me?’ Ormand coughed out a bloody laugh. ‘Then your reputation is deserved.’

Kva rounded on him. ‘We keep our oaths. While under my protection you will not be harmed. I will take you into his presence, and you will see for yourself who is worthy of your counsel.’

‘It matters little,’ replied Ormand, shrugging weakly. ‘They already know all your secrets – whether you live or die is no longer in your hands.’

Kva started walking again. ‘That has been the case for a long time, Dark Angel,’ he muttered.

The Space Wolves fleet shot into the intersection, breaking from the long tunnel and careering through the narrow chamber between the ways. Ahead of them lay the straight path leading to the exterior – a gaping maw amid the semi-stable clouds of swirling red. It would have been easy to plunge straight into that, following the spear-straight road to the open void, but instead all the ships applied retro-thrusters, throwing flare patterns of angry neon ahead of themselves before twisting upwards to face the second opening.

The outriders were more agile, turning on their axes and angling over to the new course. The manoeuvre was a tougher proposition for the leviathans, which burst into the intersection amid lattices of priming thruster-burn, their massive bulk fighting hard against the sudden application of reverse force. *Hrafinkel* was first out, having been pushed by Russ to take up the lead position, followed by *Russvangum* and *Fenrysavar*. The rest of the fleet ships – frigates, destroyers, gunship carriers, picket vessels – piled in after them, still perilously close to one another, straining like cattle on the stampede.

The turn was ludicrously tight. It would have been a challenge to execute even without the closing

presence of the Alpha Legion hunters. One of the flanking destroyers, a veteran of void war from the earliest days of the Crusade with the ident *Svart-sól*, took the turn too wide and ran into a vomited corrosion-spur on the sphere's inner edge. Its dagger-line profile tumbled further in as its plasma drives overloaded and explosions rippled along its flanks. The momentum was unstoppable, and *Svart-sól* was swallowed up by the shifting innards of the cloud, its void shields crackling crazily, its systems exploding in series.

Unable to pause, the main fleet powered onwards, sweeping around through the heart of the intersection chamber, taking up new positions, the smaller ships shifting and tacking to avoid the massive vessels on every side of them. A flurry of void-mines was ejected in staggered waves to block the entry point, but little else could be done to slow the Alpha Legion advance – every crewmember on every vessel was fully occupied in bringing the fleet into its new orientation.

All except one. *Ragnarok* was the last out, and made no attempt to haul its prow into line. Instead, the battleship rolled into a broadside attitude, standing sentinel over the chamber's entry point, its guns already primed to fire.

As soon as Bjorn saw that, watching the encounter unfold from the bridge of *Hrafinkel*, he knew what had been conveyed.

'Did you order this?' he asked Russ, unable to take his eyes off *Ragnarok*'s position.

'I freed him to take his own course,' said Russ, concentrating on the route ahead, his gaze barely flickering.

The first Alpha Legion vessels broke through the mine cordon, crashing into the spinning points and detonating trails of plasma along their sides. Two were destroyed in crashing balls of flame, but four got through, then seven more, until the forerunners were surging through the gap.

Forward lances whined into life, ready to cut through the still-turning heart of the Wolves fleet, but one obstacle lay between them and their prey.

The *Ragnarok* opened up with a full broadside volley, its macrocannons spitting colossal amounts of ordnance into the approaching Alpha Legion offensive front. The fire pattern was that of a commander with nothing to lose – there was no attempt to conserve ammunition, just an unloading of every last scrap of ship-killing potential left in the warship's battered frame. The whole vessel shook as its wrath was poured out, and the red glow of the clouds was temporarily eclipsed by the supernova of weapons discharge.

Alpha Legion corvettes exploded instantly, blown apart as their shields were overwhelmed. Follow-up craft were immolated in turn, caught by the expanding waves of solid-round fire that punched through void shields and smashed apart armour-plates.

'He cannot follow now,' observed Bjorn, watching as *Ragnarok* dragged itself to a full halt, holding sentinel over the entrance to the intersection and throwing all its remaining rage at the oncoming maelstrom.

By then *Hrafinkel* had angled for the escape. Along with the rest of the fleet, the flagship kicked main thrusters back to full power and leapt forwards, accelerating hard for the second of the two apertures, the one that led deeper into Alaxxes. Scattered long-range fire from the lead Alpha Legion ships raked across its flanks, but most was absorbed by the *Ragnarok*, still interposed between the two fleets, a lone guardian blocking the gate.

'He does what he must,' said Russ, his jaw clenched tight. The aperture ahead of them was as tight and constricted as any of the others, and bringing the entire fleet through it would be an act of supreme shipmastery.

Hrafinkel's structure screamed as the engines ramped up, hurling it away from the battle in a burst of

thruster-blaze. The remaining capital ships followed, speeding up to full velocity, their ploughshare muzzles dipping for re-entry. The aperture's edge raced towards them, ragged, gaping like a maul wound and exposing the contorted tunnel route within.

Bjorn glanced up at one of the real-view ports, an iron-rimmed window filled with the dark shadow of the *Ragnarok*. He wanted to call out, or salute, or mark the stand in some fitting way, but all gestures seemed futile.

The aperture's lip swept past, and the roiling mass of cluster cloud blurred the port, blocking sight of the doomed battleship.

'Until next winter,' breathed Bjorn, bowing his head.

'Maintain fire rate!' roared Gunn, striding back and forth across his bridge, ignoring the showers of sparks and the shrieks of tearing metal. Aesir and Skrier remained at his side, though the rest of the Great Company had taken to the saviour pods and were now surging across to the sanctuary of the *Russvangum*. Every hand who could be spared had been jettisoned, leaving behind only those required to man the guns, to keep the broadsides hammering, to keep the shield generators powered for as long as possible. Thousands had been saved. Thousands would still die.

'You should go, too,' he told them.

Aesir grinned back. 'No pods remain. In any case, I wish to see this.'

Lord Gunn grunted, half approving, before turning back to the business of hurling out orders. 'Hold position – do not drift!'

The Alpha Legion were pouring through the gap now, spilling out of the tunnel like rats from a pipe. *Ragnarok's* assault had accounted for many more of the smaller escorts, which blazed and fizzed like firecrackers, but now the capital ships were emerging, their armoured prows able to weather the storm and their lances glowing hot for the strike.

The first impact struck halfway along the *Ragnarok's* facing flank – a line of searing white that punched through the outer hull and into the decks beyond, shredding adamantium and melting steel. Two more shots scythed inwards, spat out from the looming shadows of the *Zeta Telios* and *Gamma Lycurgus*.

Ragnarok's bridge rocked, and a buttress crashed down from the roof near the forward-facing oculus. Cracks zigzagged across the deck, followed by the ominous creak of spars flexing.

'Keep firing!' bellowed Gunn, knowing his voice would be transmitted to all gunnery levels, amplified to all crews still sweating at their stations even as the ship's decks rippled and cracked around them.

'The hounds have been loosed,' said Skrier, his voice darkly appreciative. 'Here come the masters.'

Ragnarok was losing position now, hammered back by the rain of incoming projectiles. Some escort-class ships had powered on past, swinging upwards to follow the escaping Wolves main fleet, but the tight confines of the intersection chamber made a pass by the bigger ships more dangerous – they would have to destroy the *Ragnarok* first.

'That is the one,' said Gunn, striding over to a distorted tactical hololith that hissed with white noise, and pointing at a new ident-rune emerging into the intersection chamber.

It was the *Delta*, the largest of many of that name: sleek-jowled and sparse-framed, a hunter-killer of impeccable pedigree, its prow glistening sapphire and its weapon ranks pristine in polished steel. So many of the Alpha Legion ships were in prime condition, laid down last in the long line of Martian foundry orders and unscarred by centuries of war. Not for the first time, Lord Gunn cursed the XX Legion's place in the Great Crusade – they had not suffered, they had not conquered, and now they were positioned to break the back of a Legion that had done both.

Aesir was already sending orders to the burning engine rooms. Skrier was commanding the response

crews to shore up what bulkheads remained, to limit the spread of the fires that surged down the crumbling network of corridors and shafts.

Gunn remained in position, watching as the *Delta* edged closer. Its flanks were already alight, hurling las-beams at *Ragnarok's* failing void shields, cycling up for lance-strikes into its smouldering bows. That one battleship could already muster power far in excess of that left to Gunn, and the *Ragnarok* was also being hit by volleys from a dozen more ships.

‘Enact,’ he said, his eyes alight with fervour. ‘Now.’

The *Delta* remained at range, hanging over the *Ragnarok's* prow and discharging its deadly payload. Its commander planned to cut up his prey from a distance, clinically, harbouring his already overbearing strength for the greater battle to come.

Ragnarok shuddered as the course-change order filtered down to the enginarium. The blackened prow swept upwards, driving directly into the heart of the storm, and its forward real-viewers were lost in a haze of multicolour as the remaining void shields took the strain.

‘Slower,’ ordered Gunn. His hearts were hammering now, his eyes fixed on the prize. The *Delta* was a similar size to *Ragnarok*, and the two immense vessels – one burning, the other undamaged – dwarfed all others in immediate range. ‘Not yet...’

All his remaining guns angled aft of the Alpha Legion battleship, slicing past its rear thrusters. The final salvos of torpedoes were launched along the same trajectory, snaking impotently towards *Delta's* hindquarters. It was trivial for the Alpha Legion navigators to keep their ship away from such erratically aimed dregs – all they had to do was hold station, hovering just under the curve of the blood-red clouds and raining more accurate fire down on the approaching *Ragnarok*.

But holding station was all Gunn required of them – a ranged firefight was not what he had in mind. ‘Now, everything!’ he roared. ‘*Everything!*’

The jump in power was instant. The *Ragnarok* had sacrificed all else to give itself one last boost to the plasma drives – a final surge, its spine aflame, its weapons gone, its shields flickering out, but still with just enough brute mass to endure the desperate barrage from its target.

The *Delta* saw the danger too late and tried to move, but it was hemmed in, trapped against the inner wall of the gas clouds, caught ahead of the arriving Alpha Legion ships, and blocked below by the rapidly closing mass of *Ragnarok*. The two monsters hurtled towards one another, one flaying its engines in direct-line speed, the other twisting awkwardly to evade the collision.

Gunn drew in a deep, satisfied breath, seeing the outcomes narrow down. He watched as the *Delta's* flanks filled the forward oculus – rank after rank of raging macrocannons, huge overhanging plates of sapphire hull-sections, the hydra icon of the enemy picked out in bronze and verdigris.

‘I still serve,’ he whispered.

Ragnarok's prow crashed into the *Delta* amidships, plunging through its outer shields with a rolling crack of dissipating energy fields. The entire bridge slammed over, tilting hard. Armourglass shattered, the floor thrust up and the remaining thralls were thrown from their stations. Aesir was crushed as one of the supporting pillars came down across him, while Skrier was lost in a riot of explosions down in the servitor pits. Lord Gunn alone kept his feet, staring up at the carnage overtaking both ships.

For all its incredible mass and momentum, *Ragnarok's* charge was not enough to break the *Delta* apart. Its prow lodged deep, grinding to a halt amid the twisted glut of melded decks. The *Delta's* own powerful engines kicked back, and the snap and boom of macro-charges announced the imminent arrival of boarding parties.

All of that, though, was now useless. The *Ragnarok's* charge had not been launched with the aim of destroying the *Delta*, but to push them both into the looming tunnel's edge. As Gunn's bridge began to fold

in on itself, the first blush of crimson rushed across the *Delta's* trapped flank, gnawing at the reactive shield cover.

He began to laugh, taking pleasure in the kill. He was alone now: his crew slain, his throne consumed by fire, his domain imploding. A cluster of cables swung down from the roof, spewing sparks that skittered and bounced across the deck. From below, he heard the booms of the superstructure coming apart, consigning any still alive to the chill of the void.

It had been enough. The engines still burned, disconnected from his control but raging with their inferno hearts, shoving both ships into the embrace of corrosion. He imagined the panic spreading on the *Delta*, cascading from deck to deck. He imagined the fury of the commanders, and the scrabbling, futile search for teleporters before all was lost.

‘No time left,’ he said out loud, savouring the knowledge.

Ahead of him, witnessed through the jagged edge of smashed armourglass viewers, the *Delta* was clawed apart, its outer shell oxidised and its soft innards burst into pulp. Something huge detonated – fuel lines, perhaps, or a shield generator – and a tide of unleashed fire swept from stern to bow, breaking up hull plates as it travelled. The entire structure shivered, and deep explosions blew out from its heart. The spine broke, folding around the *Ragnarok's* onward trajectory like a crumpled fist.

Tangled together, the two void-titans tumbled deeper into the consuming haze, their hides bubbling and bursting, their bowels igniting. By the end, Gunn could see nothing but the walls of his own kingdom collapsing in on him. Pillars crumbled, arches disintegrated, view portals clogged.

But Gunner Gunnhilt knew. He knew, as his own ship crushed the life out of him, that he had driven his enemy into the blood-well and destroyed them both, and that in the apocalypse of their mutual annihilation the rest of the fleet had been given just a little longer to evade their own reckoning.

So he had served. In the end, given all vows, that was all he had ever wanted.

‘For Russ and the Allfather!’ he roared, smiling, as the darkness took him.

The *Hrafinkel* hurtled along the winding capillary, its shields flaring as it scraped the edges of the devouring shoals. *Ragnarok's* sacrifice had given them a start, but the Alpha Legion did not slacken the pursuit. Russ drove the remains of his fleet mercilessly, flogging their engines harder and pushing them deeper down.

Their progress was visible on the tactical schematics – a strung-out line of battleships, bereft of formation, corkscrewing in procession as they raced further into the cluster. More had been lost on the turn, to the Alpha Legion's forward guns or to the ravening cloud banks, but the core had held, bolstered by the backbone given by the *Nidhoggur*, *Fenrysavar* and *Russvangum*. *Hrafinkel* had pulled to the fore, its Gloriana-class engines still potent despite the horrific damage they had taken.

Bjorn could only watch. He had no control now – the captured *Iota Malephelos* was commanded by Godsmote, and still burned along with the rest of the fleet. It was a wretched sight: the VI Legion, limping ahead of destruction, its warships a motley mix of the looted and the crippled.

And in all of that, with all the rush and race, he had still not asked the question of his primarch.

‘What do you hope to find in there, lord?’ he asked.

Russ, absorbed in the command of his flagship, barely acknowledged him. ‘Find in there?’ He pursed his lips. ‘Guesses.’

Before Bjorn could press him further the blast doors at the rear of the bridge hissed open. Kva burst in, followed by his two Runewatchers, who between them dragged the bloodied body of a VI Legion warrior.

‘Lord,’ the Rune Priest announced, ‘you will wish to see this.’

As he approached, all those on the command dais – Grimmr, Bjorn, Russ and the others of the Legion's

honour guard – instantly sensed the wrongness. The half-conscious warrior looked *Vlka Fenryka*, but he smelled like nothing of the kind.

Russ gazed down at the captive. ‘Kva,’ he said. ‘What have you dredged up?’

‘The First Legion,’ replied the Rune Priest, pulling Ormand’s chin up and exposing his face.

Russ drew closer. Ormand stared up at him blearily.

‘And what are you doing on my ship, Dark Angel?’ asked Russ, sounding genuinely curious. ‘You are a long way from home.’

Ormand coughed, and blood flecked his lips. ‘Not so far, lord.’

Russ’s eyes narrowed. ‘Then what dwells here? You know this?’

‘I have seen your fleet data, lord,’ said Ormand. ‘I have seen your damage-tally. I know what pursues you. Frankly, I do not think you will live to see what dwells in the Alaxxes Nebula.’

Russ smiled. ‘Just like your gene-sire,’ he said, fondly. ‘Arrogant *skítna*.’

Freki sidled close, snickering. Russ was about to ask him more when the forward scopes suddenly streamed with fresh data. The *Hrafinkel*’s shipmaster called out, and routed the new sensor readings to the overhead tactical lenses.

‘Lord,’ the shipmaster reported, ‘the tunnel ends.’

All eyes snapped to the pict screens. The twisting gas tube was giving out, opening up. A long way ahead, the walls of churning cloud fell away, spreading into a broad bowl. Soon it became apparent that the gulf was vast, far larger than the chambers they had already passed through. Long-range augurs beamed images of a lightning-bound sphere within the depths of the cluster – an abyss, ringed by distant walls of the ship-burning plasma. Mid-range augurs plumbed less than a third of it – the rest gaped away, a world-sized lacuna, circled by fire.

All knew what that meant. The perilous safety offered by the closed-in world of the cluster had ended, and they were headed back into a space big enough for many fleets to deploy.

Russ looked at the data grimly. A flicker of confusion marred his grizzled features, as if some promise had been broken. He looked at Grimnr, at the shipmaster, then at Kva.

‘So Gunn was right,’ he said, dryly. ‘There is no protection for us within. Send out word to the fleet – on my mark, turn to face the enemy.’

He could never look entirely unhappy, not with the prospect of battle, whatever odds remained. He reached for Mjalnar, ignoring the Dark Angel.

‘No more running,’ he said. ‘We make our stand here.’

IV

Once inside it, the inner gulf stretched out around them. The gas clouds pulled back so far that it looked almost as if the fleet were back in the open void. Course-correction orders were given again, cascading down command levels, spilling out from the centre and into the bridge of every frigate and gunship carrier. Exhausted navigation crews responded again, dragging more power from their overstretched engines, keying in murderously tight response times and pulling back into new defence patterns.

There was no time to enact a proper defence. Russ roared out his orders, drawing up his forces in the best approximation of a holding formation – the four remaining capital ships in the centre, underpinned by the cover of their surviving strike cruisers. Two rapid-reaction forces, each six destroyers strong, drew up on the flanks, primed to streak forwards on command with the aim of breaking enemy clusters as they formed up. A long miscellany of less capable ships, mostly missile-boats and corvettes, hung back as a reserve, bolstered by the captured Alpha Legion craft. Together with the remnants of the frigate squadrons, all of which were deployed either at the zenith or nadir to prevent outflanking, the VI Legion prepared itself for the coming impact.

It hit them just as the final ships were sliding into position. The Alpha Legion had not fallen far behind, despite Lord Gunn's holding manoeuvre at the intersection. Two wings of hydra-marked frigates powered into the gulf, lances already firing. They were followed by more frigates, then strike cruisers, battlecruisers and finally the heavy battleships, six of them, clustered around the Gloriana-class *Alpha* – a monster in sapphire and gold, impregnable amid its tight web of interlocking support craft.

The assault was fast, hard and overwhelming. With no physical constraints on any axis, the Alpha Legion scattered wide, unravelling into a classic encirclement manoeuvre. Gunships streamed from open hangar bays, whole swarms, tumbling as they dropped into attack vectors. Forward lances opened up, sending spears of ship-killing energy crunching into void-shield arrays.

In seconds the two fleets had hit full engagement, tangling into one another, rotating and coalescing. The major battleships became islands of stability around which riots of destruction radiated. Squadrons of attack craft were immolated by single broadsides, their blasted shells smashing into bigger hulls at full speed and scattering debris along the baroque flanks of their killers. Every vessel operated at full capacity, hollowing out their last reserves of shells and torpedoes, filling the vacuum with a maelstrom of spiralling wreckage.

The *Hrafinkel* dominated the centre of the Wolves line, wreathed in a steady corona of suppressing laser-fire and flanked by its hard-pressed strike cruiser wings. Unlike the other battleships, which held steady at their allotted sectors, it thundered up through the heart of the battlesphere, smashing aside any minnows

too slow or too clumsy to get out of its path.

On the flagship's bridge, every Space Marine had helmed up and drawn weapons. Over a hundred of the Rout's warriors were assembled there, spread among its many levels and terraces. Every mortal crewmember had donned a rebreather and strapped on carapace armour, dull grey under the low-level combat lighting.

'That is the target,' breathed Russ, watching as the *Hrafnkel* cut its way towards the looming *Alpha*. The enemy flagship wallowed in an expanding ring of smouldering ship-shells. Already it had accounted for two attack frigates, their hearts ripped out by the volume of lance-fire before they had been able to respond. 'This time he will face me.'

All those assembled on the bridge knew the risks, saw the danger, and approved. They had tried to avoid a pitched engagement for as long as possible, knowing they could never win it, but since one had been forced upon them the only option was to go for the throat, to tear out the neck of the enemy Legion's master. Alpharius had so far not shown himself, even in sham, but Russ had always been convinced his brother was somewhere in the enemy ranks, marshalling the campaign from the safety of his hidden throne.

The flagships powered closer to one another, smashing aside the waves of lesser craft that piled in to slow them, their void shields cascading in whirls of colour as incoming fire slammed into the hull-lines. *Hrafnkel*'s bridge trembled as each of its guns fired in rotation, cycling madly through the last of the ammunition reserves. The ship was tearing its own innards out, spewing them up and spitting them in raw defiance at the horde of enemies that circled, stabbed and goaded it.

'Seen enough yet?' asked Russ sardonically, turning to the Dark Angel who still stood beside him. 'Or did you only come here to watch us die?'

Ormand now held his stance unaided, but was clearly still in no condition to fight. 'I have no power to save you, if that is what you believe,' he said.

'Then your presence here is a mystery to me.'

'I only observe.'

Russ turned on him, massive in his full battleplate, his fanged face hidden behind a wolf-snarl death mask. 'Then observe *this*,' he snarled. 'Observe the way of death for the Wolves of Fenris. The serpent will fight his way to me now, as he smells weakness at last, but still he does not see the danger. We have nowhere left to go. They have run us down, and all we have is the corner.'

As the primarch spoke, the *Alpha* swam up towards them in the forward viewers. The flagship's huge bridge oculus, its facets cracked, showed the immensity of their opposite number, towering ahead and above them, holding station like a raptor in the high airs, secure and inviolable. Its weapon banks had already opened up, hurling waves of projectile fire at the *Hrafnkel*'s flame-backed hide, making the void shield coverage flex and spit.

'Flay it!' roared Russ, knowing that all power had already been fed to the forward weapons array.

Hrafnkel's lance punched out, sending a lone beam cracking into the *Alpha*'s prow. The strike was good, smashing across the thick hull armour and diving deep within, but it did nothing to halt the battleship's trajectory.

When the return strike came, it was withering. Every one of the *Alpha*'s undamaged batteries opened up in unison, flooding local space with flame and making the viewers go white. So many strikes hit their mark that *Hrafnkel*'s hull sensors overloaded and screamed nonsense readings to the station operators. The entire ship keeled over, thrown out of its barrelling run by the massed impact. The bridge shook, rocked by cracks that shot up from the deck to the dome, swayed by explosions that surged out of every fractured power line and energy conduit.

'Steady course!' bellowed Russ, still on his feet, his great frostblade in hand, raging at the ruin around

him. 'Return fire!'

As the words left his mouth there was a secondary explosion from several decks down, one that made the plasteel beams under them swell. The fore void shields gave out in a scream of static, exposing the deeper black of the unbarred void.

A second later, in a move that had clearly been planned, the eye-watering sting of teleport energies filled the bridge, followed by the hard bang of air displacement. A hundred warp-spheres burst into being, clustered around the far end of the bridge chamber. Each one exploded in a shiver of hoarfrost, revealing a Terminator-armoured warrior within.

The entire bridge exploded with bolt-rounds as both sides opened up with all the weapons they possessed. The Terminators were immediately deluged in shells, launched from every kaerl, every adept, every Wolf. The invaders fought back with murderous efficiency, striding through the storm of bolts and bullets, letting their heavy armour absorb the punishment before doling out more of their own.

'To me, *Vlka Fenryka!*' Russ thundered, charging down from the dais, his voice ringing with black fury. 'Slay swift!'

Bjorn was already running, weaving through the hurricane of shells to get to the enemy. There were thousands of armed mortals on the bridge and almost a hundred Wolves, but the Terminator-clad adversaries more than had their match. They had come to sever the wolf's neck, to cut off the head and let the body wither.

Bjorn vaulted over a disintegrating comms-pillar, ducking down into the servitor pit below as return fire whistled back at him. Then he was up again, firing from his own bolter while his lightning claw blazed from its disruptor field. He closed in on the first enemy – a monster in scaled Tactical Dreadnought plate laying down a bow wave of auto-cannon fire that was pulverising everything in its path.

Bjorn got a volley of bolts away; they clanged into the enemy's gorget and made him reel. Bjorn pounced after him, slicing with his claw to rip out the enemy's stomach. The Terminator matched the blow, lashing his power fist around and slamming Bjorn bodily out of his path. Then he turned the cannon on him, coolly aiming at his helm to finish the uneven contest.

But the barrels never spoke – the Terminator was ripped from his feet in an explosion of silver and flung five metres back, crashing along the deck with a squeal of gouged metal.

Bjorn looked up. Kva had unleashed the storm, and tongues of ice-bright lightning snapped and seethed from the deck to the cracked roof, impaling Terminators on twisting columns of glassy aether-matter and blowing them apart from their core. Armour fragments, spotted with boiled blood, joined the clouds of metal shards spinning through the air. The volume of raw noise became ear-shattering, echoing from every shell-pocked wall and rebounding across the battlefield.

But the wrath of the Rune Priest was nothing compared to that of his primarch. Russ barrelled into the wall of Terminators like a breaking avalanche, shrugging off the torrent of shells zeroing in on him and driving into the enemy head-on. Those in his path were smashed aside, their armoured bulk cracked and bludgeoned by the star-blaze arcs of Mjalar. Russ wielded the frostblade two-handed, swinging it like a warhammer, severing neck joints and slicing clean through battleplate. He was soon surrounded by an orbital welter of blood and electro-static, flying in slicks around him as he opened his throat and roared out his wrath.

'*Fenrys!*' he bellowed, summoning all the wrath of the ice-world's soul. 'For the ice world!'

Russ had not fought with that freedom in a long time. The kinetic force of his charge drove the Alpha Legionnaires back towards their teleportation loci, fighting furiously just to avoid annihilation on the edge of the frostblade.

Bjorn had seen enemies dissolve entirely in the face of his primarch's charge. He had seen xenos turn

tail and flee, and even Legiones Astartes formations buckle when faced with the psychic shock of the unleashed Wolf King. The Alpha Legion, though, held firm, falling back in steady ranks, fighting hard, still trying to bring him down.

With a sudden lurch, Bjorn realised the truth of what Russ had said: his brother must be among the Terminators, fighting with them, holding them together. His presence was almost palpable, bleeding through the tumult like hunt spoor. Bjorn raced back into combat, hunting now for the slightest sign of difference – a taller enemy, a faster one, one immune to the worst of Kva's storm-fire.

His hearts spiked with exhilaration. There were *two* primarchs on the bridge, and the prospect of bringing retribution to the author of all their pain spurred him into even greater feats of combat. Bjorn charged at the Terminator downed by Kva's warp-lightening, who was already clambering to his feet and aiming the autocannon again.

Three of Bjorn's battle-brothers came with him, running hard, firing from the waist even as they activated their close-combat blades. They leapt as one, a blur of grey amid the fractured whirr of the battle, and landed as one, hacking and tearing like a pack of wolves on the neck of its prey. Bjorn had come down on the Terminator's neck, plunging his claw between helm and gorget. The second Wolf took out the autocannon with a glittering power axe, another checked the Terminator's swinging power fist with a storm shield, while the fourth chopped its feet from under it. Acting in close concert, they dragged it back to the deck, their movements a whirl of blades.

Bjorn ended the contest, jabbing his claw in deeper, breaking the seal and being rewarded with a jet of blood seething up the length of his jammed talon. As he had done so often, he ripped his blades free, dragging strips of flesh with them and flinging them away.

He threw his head back, let his lungs unlock and roared out his battle-fury. The warriors around him did the same, filling the bridge with the massed howl of the Rout unleashed.

But there was no time to bask in the kill, for the enemy was still a threat; two thirds of its strength was intact and clustering around Russ, concentrating all their energies on bringing him down. Bjorn burst clear, head low, firing into the mass of Terminators ahead.

You are here, he mouthed, and picked his target.

As the space around him dissolved into frenzied combat, Ormand staggered back behind the throne dais, his presence forgotten. The Rune Priest who had dragged him before the primarch strode off into battle, his skull-topped staff crackling with eye-burning lightning-spears. Every Wolf on the bridge was now fighting, charging into the heart of it, heedless of the damage being meted out by the massed Terminator assault.

The columns above him cracked, spraying him with splintered stone. Combat lumens flickered and faltered as their chambers were shattered. The flagship was listing badly, its course faltering as decisive command was wrenched away from it. The *Alpha* was still visible in the forward oculus, still pouring on waves of las-fire despite the presence of its own warriors aboard. A hundred battles were taking place across other bridges and within the hulls of other compromised starships, each led by squads of Space Wolves or Alpha Legionnaires, each utterly committed to the kills that were now coming freely.

Ormand staggered, feeling blood slosh in his armour. They had taken his bolter from him, and he felt useless and weak. He fell to his knees, dragging breath heavily through his bloodied mouth. Looking out across the raging battle made him nauseous. The fatality rate was already crippling. Whichever Legion emerged as the victor would carry horrific casualties, and for a cause that even now made little sense to him. His Calibanite brothers understood the war only in rough outline, derived through snatches of garbled astropathic messaging and a few captured vessels running ahead of the gathering storm.

Withdrawal into the depths of Alaxxes had exacerbated the isolation, something that could never have lasted forever even if events had not forced their hand.

As it was, they had been dragged into the light prematurely, their long vigil disturbed by the afterglow of a far greater conflict. With no guidance, and no way of getting any, they had done what they could to establish the truth.

Ormand sank to his knees, bracing against the base of the pillar beside him. Russ was still at the heart of it, still breaking his enemies apart, a mountain amid the swirl of lesser warriors. Seeing a primarch fight made him keenly aware that he had never seen his own, and had no knowledge what it must be to follow one of the eighteen into battle.

Perhaps that was what had made his people as cautious as they had been. The heritage of Caliban should have bred more fortitude – selecting the enemy had never been difficult under the shadowed eaves of the eternal woods. Seeing the two Legions grapple with one another, knowing what he knew now, he began to see the shape of it all unravel. The tangle of interlocking claims came apart, revealing a certainty beneath, one that he had been grasping at ever since reading the combat logs.

When the impulse-unit at his wrist lit up, he almost missed it. He shuffled down further, edging into the shadow of the pillar, and lifting his gauntlet to his mouth.

‘Where, then?’ he asked.

‘Close,’ came the crackling voice from the unit. ‘*We thought they had killed you. We are glad to be wrong. Do you have anything else?*’

‘You surely have what you need.’

‘*Just one word.*’

Ormand looked up, casting his pain-filled gaze across the scene of carnage. The Wolves were fighting hard, but their end was now snapping at their heels. The primarch would be downed eventually, his claws bloody, and then the battle would be over. With the *Hrafnkel* gone, the fleet would follow. Having seen them in all their defiant glory, he found he could no longer be impartial.

‘Loyal,’ he said, wondering, as the word left his lips, whether that was any longer something to celebrate. ‘There can be no doubt.’

Russ hacked his way through the enemy, barely seeing those whom he slew. They were a blur, a mass of armour and muscle, inert fodder for his blade. He had already sensed the true enemy, and besides that presence nothing else mattered. He ignored the wounds he took and the losses of his pack around him; he just kept moving, grinding through the walls of sapphire and gold.

He had never hated Alpharius, not like Guilliman had hated him. The Alpha Legion had been an irrelevance, an afterthought, a gang of shadow-huggers at the beck and call of Horus who were worthy of nothing more than faint scorn. At least Magnus had been a proper enemy, out in the open, getting his hands thick with sorcery where it could be seen. Alpharius had been... nothing. A whisper, a suspicion, an echo.

That was no longer the case. Russ’s loathing burned white, a seam of diamond in his soul. There was no victory in this fight any longer, just a chance for vengeance under the gaze of the *Hrafnkel*’s graven images.

You are a sword in the wrong hands, my brother.

They had been empty words when they were spoken, and now they were even less than that. Deception or no, Magnus had deserved his fate, and if they were all damned now then at least there was penance in eliminating another traitor before the end.

‘Face me, brother!’ he roared, his mighty voice rising above the thunder of battle. He crunched aside one Alpha Legionnaire with his gauntlets before eviscerating a second, never resting, his entire body

transmuted into a machine of battle-fury. ‘My ships are burning! My sons are dying! What can you fear now?’

And then, before him, the battlefield suddenly opened up. The surviving Wolves pushed the gap wider, grappling with foes that outmatched them but somehow forcing a chasm between the ranks.

At the far end of the opening, standing alone, was a legionnaire in Terminator plate, arrayed just as all the others were. There were no unique sigils on his armour, no deference from his brothers around him, but Russ *knew*.

He lowered Mjalnar towards the Alpha Legionnaire’s neck.

‘*I mark you!*’ thundered Russ, breaking into the charge that would carry him close.

The Terminator braced, accepting the challenge, saying nothing but readying a long blade that spat with an emerald energy field.

Before either of them could strike, though, the viewports above suddenly blazed with light. The deck rocked more violently than before, buoyed by a shock more profound and more violent than any starship could generate. *Hrafinkel*’s bridge quaked, harrowed to its core, and combatants were thrown from their feet.

Even Russ was driven to his knees as the deck see-sawed around them. Mortals were crying out now, not from battle-lust or pain but from shock. The remaining view screens filled with new signals, bursting with runes that spilled from repeater-stations and overlaid the already congested battlesphere.

Russ steadied himself, peering up at the real-view portals to get some idea – any idea – of what had happened. For a terrible moment everything went dark, as if the void beyond had wrapped itself around them to choke the last life out.

Then the shadow cleared, replaced by rows upon rows of glittering lights, each one lodged amid a plunging rock face of astonishing size. Turrets sailed past, colossal towers, bridges and parapets, each one crusted with ranks of ship-killing weaponry. Engine thrusters bigger than whole destroyers glowed hot red, bleeding out into the void like shackled suns.

From under the shadow came more warships, each one as dark as night, unmarked by battle but with their weapons primed and ready. Dominus-class warships headed up a whole flotilla in assault formation, dropship bays open and gunwales unsheathed.

The colossus was a star fort, a Ramilies-class world-ender, one of the great anchor-engines of the Imperial arsenal. Even alone such a monster would have been capable of taking on the two battle-ravaged fleets that now lay under its vast shadow, but with its escort flotilla in tow the shape of the encounter had altered entirely.

‘Come about!’ Russ shouted, seeing the star fort’s guns angle towards them. ‘Pull clear! Pull clear!’

His cries were given no time to have an effect – even if the navigation crews had been able to enact them, the ships were too close and too damaged to respond.

But the star fort was not aiming at the *Hrafinkel*. Its immense beam weapons opened up, sending star-blaze shafts leaping across the void. The *Alpha* was hit hard, its shields deluged with a tide of spilled plasma, and it slewed wildly away from the impact. Other Alpha Legion ships were also hit, cracking apart from the impact shockwaves, their engines exploding as more lance-hits burst clean through them.

In the wake of the ranged assault, black-armoured attack craft screamed through the gaps, racing past the hulls of the engaged battleships and strafing them. Their larger battleship counterparts moved into firing positions, swinging around to expose long, macrocannon-filled flanks.

The Alpha Legion ships, having been in the ascendant for so long, were suddenly overwhelmed by wave after wave of attacks. The remaining Wolves hit back where they could, responding instantly to take advantage of the sudden reversal of fortune. All across the battlesphere, boarding parties were hastily

recalled and attack runs pulled back to bolster faltering lines. Everything swayed on a fulcrum, teetering wildly until the new shape of battle could be determined.

Russ pulled himself to his feet, searching for his opposite number amid the confusion. Teleport-bubbles were snapping open again, pulling Alpha Legion Terminators back to their own flagship before it was ripped apart by incoming fire.

The lone Terminator facing Russ activated his locus, and aether-frost raced up his armour shell. He deactivated his weapon and inclined his helm in what might have been acknowledgement, or mockery, or maybe just regret that they had not locked blades.

Russ watched him go, still too far away to intervene. All around him, his surviving warriors got back to their feet and reached for their weapons, hunting down any Alpha Legionnaires whose teleport loci had failed, or limping back to the command stations to oversee *Hrafinkel*'s retreat from the fury of the warzone.

As Russ looked up at the oculus above him, his whole body still burning with hyperadrenalin, he saw the star fort rise higher, gaining altitude over the battle-plane in order to give it a steeper fire-angle. The sheer size of it was incredible – even after serving alongside full Imperial expeditionary fleets, some of which had contained war engines of a similar class, such a creation could still impress him with its flamboyantly outsized majesty.

Russ saw Bjorn limping over to him, his armour marked with bolter-impacts. Bjorn twisted his helm off, exposing a bloodied mane of dark hair.

‘There is your answer,’ he said.

‘To what?’

Bjorn nodded towards the real-viewers, still dominated by the underside of the colossal star fort as it ground its way after the imploding Alpha Legion vanguard. ‘The serpent, the many-headed beast.’

For a moment, Russ did not see what he meant. Then, as the vast armour-plates slid past, he caught sight of the star fort's emblem – a lone sigil mounted within a ring of gold, embedded at the very heart of its armoured underbelly.

Perhaps the name had come from Terran lore, or maybe it harked back to one of the many warped beasts of Caliban. In any case, the image was unmistakable – an amalgam of lion, dragon and snake, rearing on clawed hindlegs, surrounded by gold runes arranged in twisting, branch-like patterns.

‘*Chimaera*,’ said Russ, reading the massive ident-plate.

‘The runes read aright.’

The star fort passed overhead, driving the Alpha Legion vessels away from *Hrafinkel*'s local space. Russ felt a hollowness, the aftermath of a fight he had been destined to lose. He had never been saved before, pulled away from defeat by the actions of another Legion. Something of Lord Gunn's old intransigence flared up within him then, the pride of the Rout, pricked by its failure.

We were the guardians once. We were the watchers over all the others.

Now they were just one of eighteen Legions – humbled by the XX Legion and rescued by the First. There was a kind of symmetry in that, though one that made his stomach turn.

‘What are your orders, lord?’ asked Bjorn.

Russ snapped out of his introspection. The void was still alight with ordnance, and the battle was not yet won.

‘All survivors rally to *Hrafinkel*,’ said Russ, sheathing Mjälнар and striding back to the command throne. ‘We must see what we have left.’

He paused then, looking at the devastation around him, the blood on the decks, the ruins of what had once been the centre of his undefeated war-fleet. It would take months to restore, if such a thing were even

possible.

But that paled beside the greater grief, the one that could never be expunged.

They had lost.

‘I recognise my failing,’ Russ said, speaking to himself, unheard by the others. ‘Be assured, I recognise it at last.’

V

The arrival of *Chimaera* changed everything. The Alpha Legion fleet had been spread wide, outflanking the numerically inferior Wolves in order to bring the maximum amount of fire to bear. Reserves had been minimal, as had sensor-watch on the extremities of the void chamber.

The star fort had emerged seemingly from nowhere, though in reality the seasoned First Legion pilots had used the curtains of cloud to mask their approach, relying on the augur-distortions created by the Alaxxes Nebula's idiosyncratic effect. The star fort's firepower was enormous, just as its makers had intended when they built it – it was a battle-changer, a fleet-killer, a system-destroyer.

The *Alpha* was mauled deeply during the first exchanges, placed as it was at the forefront of the XX Legion's assault on *Hrafinkel*. It might have been destroyed entirely but for the sacrifice of its escort wings, including three strike cruisers with full battle-complements of Alpha Legionnaires onboard. Even so, the flagship barely made it beyond the range of *Chimaera*'s gunnery crews, limping back into the heart of its own fleet, its spine burning.

The prospect of resistance lingered a little longer. The Alpha Legion still had a full battlefleet, which despite three full engagements was in far better shape for combat than the equivalent Wolves ships. Lines were drawn, and commanders swivelled their ships' flanks to present broadsides.

As the starships closed, however, the scale of the turnaround became brutally apparent. The Alpha Legion's forward lines were doused in a rolling tide of beam weaponry, punching through shields and rupturing drive-housings. A whole raft of lesser warships exploded in sequence, spraying shattered hull segments across the void. The *Alpha* and the other major battleships responded with concentrated volleys of their own, but the disparity in severity was obvious. When the remaining Dark Angels battleships piled into the attack, joined by the few Wolves vessels still capable of launching significant actions, the reverse soon threatened to become a massacre.

Even as the Alpha Legion ships turned tail, shifting trajectory to line up for the void chamber's entry point, *Chimaera*'s batteries reached full pitch, hurling ferocious quantities of plasma, las-beams, heavy projectiles and torpedoes into the reeling enemy lines. The void ignited, eviscerating some ships from prow to stern, rocking others with the recoil of exploding engine chambers. Gunships fleeing for the safety of their hangars were caught in the tempest and obliterated. The *Nidhoggur*, *Russvangum* and *Fenrysavar* led a counter-attack from the depths of the beleaguered Wolves formation, adding their guns to the maelstrom emanating from the star fort's steadily rotating flanks.

Eventually the order for retreat was given, and the Alpha Legion withdrew back down the tunnel they had emerged from just hours earlier. The retreat was messy, and more ships were ripped apart on the way

out, harried all the way back to the aperture by vengeful Space Wolves and battle-fresh Dark Angels. After a final defiant barrage, the *Alpha* and most of the core of the XX Legion's fleet managed to extract themselves, slipping into the channel, followed by their strike cruiser entourage.

At the aperture's edge, in a final act of desperation, four ships remained behind, blocking the passage down the tunnels just as *Ragnarok* had done. Their void shields were drenched by simultaneous strikes from a hundred incoming las-beams, filling the tunnel's mouth from edge to edge with ballooning plumes of flame. The residual ships fought hard and well, manoeuvring as best they could in the tight space to rotate shield-facing hull segments, but even so the delay was only temporary, as one by one they disappeared amid shattering explosions.

Their sacrifice was just enough. Beyond them, the bulk of the Alpha Legion fleet slipped down in the capillary tunnels, flying ahead of destruction, heading at full-burn towards the cluster's edge. By the time the way was cleared for pursuit it was too late to bring *Chimaera*'s firepower to bear. The star fort drifted to a halt, remaining sentinel at the void chamber's edge. The Dark Angels battlegroup fell in around it, mopping up the last resistance before spreading out into a holding formation.

A few of the Wolves fast-attack craft made a break for the aperture, their rage driving them to visit vengeance on the retreating enemy, but they were hauled back in by furious orders from the *Hrafnkel*. There was no strength left for a proper assault, and once separated they would have been picked off. The battle was over, and although survival had been achieved, there was no strength left for retribution.

The last of the wreckage spun and clanked its way clear of the battle site, drifting amid frost-crystals of blood in the void. Battleships slowly wound down their lance arrays and depowered their main drives. The survivors came together amid the drifting clouds of burned metal – battle-savaged VI Legion warships pulling alongside pristine First Legion escorts.

Above it all hung the massive profile of *Chimaera*. Its hull-edges were dark from cannon discharge, and its crenellated heights flickered from overloading void generators. It was magnificent, a king among vassals.

Less than twenty minutes after the last guns had ceased fire, the comm-burst reached *Hrafnkel*'s bridge. It was terse yet polite, just as inter-Legion communications between these two had always been.

'*Commander of Chimaera salutes and gives honour to commander of Hrafnkel,*' it went, hissing over the damaged vox-units of the flagship's cracked command throne. '*He requests all vessels come to full-stop, weapon batteries power down and fleet commander makes transit to Chimaera for consultation. By the Emperor's will.*'

By the time that came in, Russ was back at his station, seated on the throne and surveying the frantic repair work taking place all across the bridge. He cracked a wry smile.

'By the Emperor's will,' he murmured. 'And what can they know about that?'

Grimnr was instantly furious. 'Do they not know a primarch's vessel?' he raged. 'They should come *here*. Lord, I will make the summons.'

Russ held his hand up. 'Peace,' he said wearily. 'Look around you. Would you wish them to see our weakness? In any case, they have the right of it. We were not the victors here.'

He rose to his feet. The heavy drilling had already started, and medicae crews jostled with gangs of Mechanicum workers, securing, making good, tying together. Casualty numbers were still coming in, and early indications were that they were ruinous. The Legion had been critically wounded, and the scale of the damage was apparent to all who studied it. To fight again, in any capacity – that would be a miracle. The prospect loomed large now, the one that Bjorn had correctly identified as haunting Russ's dreams – to miss the great battle, to be forced to the sidelines, to watch as others became the lords of the unfolding war.

‘I will go,’ Russ announced, rising from the throne. He turned, looking over to where Ormand still sat slumped, his wounds left untended amid the thousands of casualties requiring the skills of the Wolf Priests.

‘And you,’ said Russ. ‘You will come with me.’

The interior of *Chimaera* was lamplit, echoing, filled with marching ranks of marble pillars amid a velvet gloom. Menials shuffled in the shadows, swathed in thick robes and carrying ceremonial staves marked with the images of beasts. The designs were heraldic devices, stylised in the tradition of Caliban, as tortuous as the forest in which their inspirations had once dwelt.

Russ and Ormand were escorted from the landing stages by Dark Angels in obsidian-dark armour. Each of the Calibanite knights carried a longsword, and their heavy battleplate was draped in pale robes. Cowls had been cast across their helms, making the lenses glow like the light-caught eyes of felines.

All honour had been paid to Russ on his arrival in the cavernous landing halls. Every Dark Angel had bowed, clasping a gauntlet to his chest. The menials had lowered their faces to the deck, remaining prostrate until he had passed.

Russ found that distasteful, but said nothing. Everything about the crew of *Chimaera* was unusual. They wore the war-plate of the First Legion, though with subtle alterations – there was a green amidst the black lacquer finish, and the repeated motif of the beasts, iconography redolent of a kingdom forever overlooked by brooding canopies.

‘How long have you been in this place?’ asked Russ, walking through a long gallery hung with ceremonial swords.

‘Fifty-nine years,’ said Ormand, limping heavily. ‘Alaxxes is a newer outpost.’

‘How many outposts are there?’

‘When we left Caliban, there were six. There must be more now.’ Ormand looked at Russ apologetically. ‘It has been hard to maintain communications. Sometimes we even lose touch with the home world. In here, in the clouds, it is worse.’

‘So what in Hel are you doing here?’ asked Russ.

Ormand gestured ahead of him. ‘If I may, lord.’

They passed through a pair of massive darkwood doors and entered a long hall with a stone floor and tall windows carved into the walls. The rust-red of the void bled through stained-glass images of knights slaying horrors of the deep wood. A throne had been set up at the hall’s far end, surmounted by a huge representation of a chimaera in burnished bronze. Fires guttered in iron torches hung from the pillars, and the pungent smell of incense wafted across the flags.

We are not so dissimilar, Russ thought. *We both take our home worlds with us.*

Knights of the First Legion stood silently in the aisles, remaining motionless under the shadows of the great columns. A lone figure waited for them at the hall’s end – a lord commander by his livery, standing helmless next to an empty throne. Two iron candelabras burned on either side of him, casting flickering light across a lean face. As Russ approached, he bowed deeply.

‘My lord primarch,’ he said, his voice precise and aristocratic. ‘My thanks for coming here. I am Althalos, castellan of this fortress.’

Russ drew up before him, a clear head taller and far broader. His ornate battleplate still bore the marks of the fight with the Alpha Legion. Amid such austere finery, he looked like an ogre that had stumbled into the halls of the just.

‘You want to do this here?’ he asked.

Althalos raised an eyebrow. ‘My lord?’

Russ drew his frostblade, already tiring of the ritual, and only stopped when he heard several hundred bolters slide from their holsters.

Althalos looked at the blade cautiously. 'I had understood, my lord, that we were allies.'

Russ looked at him for a moment, then at the Dark Angels with their weapons trained on him, and slowly replaced the blade. 'Actually, this is refreshing,' he said. 'You really have no idea.'

'I think I guess,' said Althalos, smiling thinly. 'We have been away from our primarch for a long time. Some traditions have no doubt passed us by.'

'For the better, perhaps,' muttered Russ. 'So tell me. This is a major fleet. Your spy tells me you have more. What has happened here?'

'We had hoped for answers from you,' said Althalos. 'Lord Luther has done nothing more than what was asked of him – he has raised fresh strength from Caliban, training and equipping new Chapters and sending them out into fastnesses across the void. We are now greater in strength than at any time in our past. We have ships and weapons, and knights to bear them. What we lack is certainty. Our orders have not changed even if the Imperium has.' Althalos drew closer. 'We know some things, but not all. We know that the Legions are now at war, that Isstvan has burned. Nightmares of treachery assail our astropathic spires in every cycle, and yet the images are confused.' He shot Russ an apologetic look. 'And so we have chosen caution. We had to be sure. If you will forgive me, your reputation...'

Russ waved that away irritably. 'It matters not. What counts is the next step.' Already the thought of a hidden Legion was making his mind race. If there was strength on Caliban, more than any had guessed, then the course of the war would change decisively. A grand alliance could restore his own Legion's fortunes. The initiative could be seized, the fight taken back to Horus. 'But what of the Lion?'

Althalos gave him a dry look. 'Quite.'

'You have heard nothing?'

'I hoped you had news. You are brothers.'

'That means less than you might think.' He had no idea where the Lion was. The expeditionary fleets had been scattered widely, following their own courses, carving out new branches of the Crusade. The Lion had been among the proudest of them, driving his Legion hard, vying with Guilliman to conquer the fastest. Russ had often thought of him in the days since Prospero, trying to guess, as he had done with so many of his kin, which way he would have gone. Perhaps Horus had gained another convert, but that was hard to imagine – the Lion had wished to be Warmaster himself, and he would surely never have settled for second place behind his old rival. 'As matters stand, I can tell you nothing,' he said, truthfully enough.

'That is a matter of regret,' said Althalos. 'The Protector of Caliban has been waiting for a long time. It is hard for him – Lord Luther's soul is proud, and this silence has tested him.'

Russ nodded, though his attention was already wandering. The condition of the Lion's deputy was something that did not concern him at all – the galaxy would never remember his name. What was of huge importance, though, was the deployment of resources – an entire army, hidden beyond the fringes and overlooked by all, Horus included.

'My fleet requires time,' Russ said. 'We need supplies. We need new weapons.'

Althalos nodded. 'These we can provide. And in return, we need information. We need to know the shape of the war, how things stand.' He gave Russ a strange look. 'It is hard to know who to trust, even among ourselves. These questions have never arisen before.'

Russ smiled wolfishly at him. For the first time in a long while, he could see a path unfolding, a way forward. The retreat could be halted, and fresh blood brought back for the counter.

'All these things will be yours,' said Russ, clapping the Dark Angel on the shoulder roughly, as if he were a battle-brother of the Rout. 'We were fated to meet here, lord commander. When the record of this

war comes to be written, they will say that the destiny of Caliban was set on this day.’

The smile broadened, fang-thick and amiable.

‘We shall be allies, we two. Such is my vow – fear shall kindle in the hearts of Horus, and it will be the coming of Wolves and Angels that stirs it.’

Two standard days later, Bjorn was summoned back to the *Hrafinkel*. The surviving ships of the fleet had spread out across the void chamber, guarded by a mix of Dark Angels vessels and serviceable Wolves warships. The refitting began again, and every vessel rang with the whine of drills and the boom of turbo-hammers. The medicae bays remained full, as did the processing morgues. The Wolf Priests would be extracting gene-seed for many days yet, and the corpses still lay in grim rows outside the fleshmakers’ laboratoria.

Russ met Bjorn in his private chambers. His two true-wolves were there, just as before, though they slept now, snarling and snickering amid dreams of pursuit.

Bjorn bowed as he entered. ‘We appear to be alive, lord,’ he noted.

‘That we do.’ The primarch looked more than alive – he looked rejuvenated. The ashen pallor he had carried for so long had been shrugged off, and what remained was ruddy with the old generous energy.

Bjorn glanced down at the rune-circle on the chamber floor. The knuckle-bone tokens lay on the engraved lines, and it looked like they had been there for some time.

‘You have not been casting,’ Bjorn said.

Russ chuckled – a purring growl. ‘I asked them for long enough. We must learn to go further now – our enemies cannot be the only ones to scry the ways of fate.’

Bjorn thought on that. ‘No, I suppose not. And yet...’

‘It is forbidden. We forbade it, and we censured the one who dabbled deepest.’ Russ waved a warning finger at him. ‘But it is different. *This* is different. I understand it now, though it took the serpents of the Alpha Legion to drive me to it.’

Bjorn let that go. One day, the Wolves would have to examine their mystical creed, to ask themselves the hard questions the Thousand Sons had ducked, but amid a galaxy-spanning war that was still expanding, that day was a long way off.

‘They told you the Wolves would never leave the Alaxxes blood-well,’ Bjorn said.

‘They did,’ said Russ. ‘The Legion that leaves is not the one that entered. We came into the blood-well as executioners, and we leave as something else.’ He smiled. ‘We are changing, One-Handed. We are evolving.’

‘Then where next?’

‘I know not. The First have much to tell us, and they are close with their secrets. The fleet will not be ready to fight again for months, and it will never be the force it was – we must choose our fights now. Horus will be marching. I can feel it, like the drum of many footfalls, getting closer. When we meet him, we must be ready.’

Since returning from *Chimaera*, Russ had often mentioned taking on Horus. It had become a mantra for him, an article of faith. There was no one else, in his mind, capable of landing the killing blow, no one with the sheer battle-fury needed to take the Warmaster down.

Bjorn said nothing about that either. In the months ahead there would be many opportunities to talk of strategy, and now was not the time.

‘So you are still going to Terra,’ he said.

Russ nodded. ‘Kva tells me the storms are less complete now – there should be a way. I need to speak to Malcador, and I cannot wait for the Legion to join me. You will oversee the work when I am gone. Drive

them hard – the forges must be stoked.’

‘But Ogvai–’

‘–knows the shape of things, as do the other jarls. They also know better than to go against the Old Wolf. Learn to work with them.’

Bjorn nodded. Since his restoration, Russ was impossible to gainsay. If there had ever been a crisis within him, a breakdown of the superhuman confidence that had animated him ever since slaying the first enemy on his adoptive world of endless violence, it had now been quelled. The old light was back in his eyes, as hard as frost.

‘We are *back* now,’ said Russ. ‘We have sounded the depths, and lived to tell of it. Our enemies will be crowing over our funeral pyre, free of the long shadow of Fenris, but that shadow will never leave them – it will slip towards them when the fires burn low, as cold as it ever was, and just as bitter.’

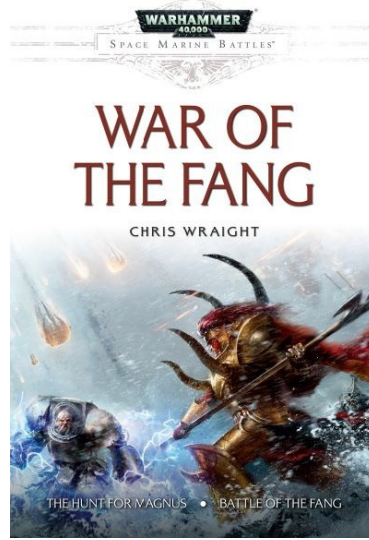
Bjorn smiled at that. It was impossible not to – the raw joy of it, the pleasure in the hunt; it had all been restored.

‘You and I, then, One-Handed,’ said Russ, his fangs bared. ‘The lines will be drawn, the fleet will return. And when we next howl, the universe will *shake* from it.’

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 [*War of the Fang*](#).



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, detectable 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 discharge their contents further down – two squads of Grey Hunters, each eight strong, fleet 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-swelling 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.’

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A BLACK LIBRARY PUBLICATION

First published in Great Britain in 2015.

This eBook edition published in 2015 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN 978-1-78496-048-3

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