

The illustration depicts a character in ornate, dark blue and gold armor, likely a Fatespinner. The armor is highly detailed with intricate patterns and a large, curved shoulder guard. The character is set against a background of a blue, ethereal landscape with a large, green, tree-like structure. The overall tone is dramatic and atmospheric.

WARHAMMER
40,000

CHRIS WRAIGHT

FATESPINNER

The cover art features a character in highly detailed, ornate armor. The armor is primarily a deep blue color with intricate gold-colored filigree and patterns. The character is shown from the chest up, wearing a helmet with a visor. The background is a gradient of light blue to dark blue, suggesting a sky or a vast, open space. The overall aesthetic is that of a classic Warhammer 40,000 novel cover.

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A THOUSAND SONS STORY

FATESPINNER

Chris Wraight

THERE WERE FOUR of them, moving steadily through the tunnels. The two Rubricae went soundlessly, their massive sapphire shells glinting softly in the darkness. Ramon, Sorcerer Lord of the Thousand Sons, snake-crested, gilt, strode between them.

Phaelias, the lesser sorcerer, brought up the rear. As he went, he observed the way his master walked. It was an oddly fluid gait for such an armoured behemoth, almost human.

Though of course Ramon wasn't human. Neither was Phaelias. "Human" was just a baseline descriptor, one rapidly superseded by both psychic awareness and physical enhancement. The baroque armour they all wore - the fluting, the sigils, the esoteric devices - they were the warning markers, like poisonous animals displaying their toxicity.

'It is close,' Phaelias said.

By then they were three kilometres underground and deep into the foundations of hive-spire Gorgantias Magnificens, Rigo V's principal administrative centre. Far above them, millions of Imperial citizens teemed and bred and mingled, all of them trained from birth to watch out for the xenos, the witch, or the traitor. As a member of Magnus's endlessly fragmented Legion, Phaelias comfortably ticked two of those boxes, and he felt the clusters of souls keenly, dumbly fearful, locked in their rituals of terror and ignorance.

Ramon angled his serpentine helm. 'What do you sense?'

Phaelias paused. The dank tunnels dripped around him, hollow with decay. No mortal human had trodden the paths for centuries. Like so much else in their vast, crumbling empire, they had let this place drift out of the margins of memory, left behind like driftwood against an ebb tide that would never return to the flood.

Or maybe they had reasons. Maybe old, old dreams of terror kept them from scratching too far beneath the poisoned soils of their worlds. 'It knows we are here,' he said, carefully. 'It stirs already.'

'And what does that tell you?'

'That other ears will hear it,' said Phaelias. 'That it places us in danger.' Ramon nodded. The jewelled tip of his staff swayed in the dark as he moved off again. 'We are always in danger.'

Phaelias hurried after Ramon. The Rubricae fell into step again, eerily matching their masters' strides.

'If it is permitted,' asked Phaelias, knowing the probable answer but giving it a try nonetheless, 'what waits for us?'

Ramon was neither a cruel nor a tyrannical master. He had schooled Phaelias fairly and skilfully, generously imparting the more subtle gifts of the Changer of Ways, aiding him in his quest to clamber up the stairway of knowledge. For all that, he had always been close, guarding his secrets just as all the scattered magi of the XV Legion did. They had become a cabal of hoarders and jewel-thieves, nurturing secrets over millennia in the endless hope that one day they would blossom again.

Ramon kept walking.

'That will become clear,' he said. 'For now, please, just follow.'

THE SLATE-GREY LANDER drifted on to the platform like a scrap of storm-cloud cut loose from the sky. Once down, its crew bay doors hissed open, revealing five backlit figures within. They moved down the ramp with a swagger, clad in Mark VI battleplate adorned with the marks of their infamously hostile ice world.

Thorskir Helstujrm followed his warriors down, clanging an iron-shod staff on to the rockcrete. His armour was as grey as the rest, though adorned with black-edged runes across the ceramite. A glittering psychic hood rose above an un-helmeted head, revealing a ruddy, wind-blasted face. Like all Sons of Russ, his jaw was swollen and his eyes were amber.

Waiting for him was a delegation from Gorgantias Magnificens command cadre, dozens of scribes in velvet robes, a hundred honour guard troopers from the governor's own retinue, and three sentinel walkers standing on the edge of the platform with their weapons lowered deferentially. Incense had been churned out of blowers mounted on the spire's flank, but the driving winds of Rigo had already dispersed it.

The governor, a tall man in heavy crimson robes, bowed low.

'Be welcome to Rigo,' he said, gown flapping. 'I am Governor Alexian.'

Thorskir looked at the man coldly. 'You have corruption on your world.'

'So you tell us, but—'

'He has left a trail of ruin across nine systems. He has corrupted and he has destroyed. Now he is here, in your city, and you do nothing.'

Alexian swallowed. 'Since your warning, we have doubled the patrols. Tripled them. We found nothing.'

Thorskir didn't respond. His expression went briefly glassy. His mind's eye receded deep within him. The Space Wolf pack around him did not move, and the wind moaned across the landing stage, clattering the runic totems bolted to their armour.

Then he stirred again, his golden eyes snapping back into focus.

'Below,' he said. 'Your spire has deep roots.'

Alexian looked to those around him nervously. 'There are... proscribed areas.'

'Not to me,' said Thorskir. 'And not to him.'

'Will you heed a warning, then?' Alexian looked almost desperate. 'Do not go.'

Thorskir's face went taut with contempt. 'If you have not the stomach to sniff his spoor, then do not think to prevent me.' He gestured to the rest of the pack, and they began to move out. As they did so, the Rune Priest voxed them over a private channel.

'Ramon is here, brothers,' he told them, confirming in words what his psychic senses had told him. 'Run swift, run hard. We will have his head this day.'

'OPEN THE DOOR,' Ramon ordered.

The iron portal had been laid with reinforcing bars and braced with a network of adamantium secure clamps. The archway above it was cut from solid granite and studded with warding runes of an ancient script - gorphelion - that no mortal on the planet still read. This place had been built before any of the spires had been made, by hands that may not even have been human. The extreme age leaked out of the stone, deadening the vitality around them, stilling the rhythm of Change like water thrown on a fire.

For all that, the power bleeding from the other side was psychically palpable. The closer one got to it, the thicker the air seemed, and the dimmer the sounds of respiration and armour-hum became.

One of the Rubricae grasped the principal iron brace and squeezed. With a shriek of tortured metal, it came away. His counterpart did the same to the next. Then they both smashed their way through the locked barrier, working as silently as ever, ripping aside the twisted metal plates and kicking the shards away.

Ramon and Phaelias followed them in. A rust-red light swelled out of nowhere, creeping across the chamber like unravelling parchment.

The room was barely five metres in diameter. The walls were rockcrete, the floor marble, and every surface was heavy with finger-thick dust. In the centre stood an altar of bare stone, marked with more ward-runes of obscure provenance. Beyond the altar, set into the rear wall, was a low archway, filled in with what looked like rough granite blocks. A single rune of protection had been scratched into the stone across the joints, deep-etched, hammered by a powerful hand.

Once close, Phaelias felt the full presence of the entity seething behind the arch. It was a mind, a conscious mind, infinitely malicious, scraping against its close bonds, maddened by confinement yet still unquestionably cogent. He opened his consciousness to it, briefly, and gasped.

Ramon chuckled. 'Careful. Strong enough for that yet?'

Phaelias shook his head, clearing it. 'It is... fearsome,' he whispered. He found

that the sheer scale of it thrilled him. 'How was it confined? Do we release it?'

Ramon said nothing. He moved towards the rune-wards graven on the altar. Moving slowly, his every gesture stiff with ritual care, he started to destroy them.

Each one resisted for a time, glowing hot like molten iron, pushing back against his whispered words. Every time a ward was broken, the chamber's edges shuddered, as if briefly loosed from physical extension, and the detectable presence behind the archway grew stronger. Phaelias heard its scuttling, its haggard breathing, its spectral heart thudding in the hinterland between reality and delusion, and felt the hairs on his arms prickle.

Soon, just one ward remained, the one carved on the granite wall set under the arch. Phaelias watched Ramon edge closer to the barrier. The Sorcerer Lord placed his gauntlets against its surface, and the lone ward-rune began to glow, just like the others. Phaelias braced himself, speculating on just what order of creature lay on the other side of the arch. He could make a guess, drawing on the arcane bestiaries of warp denizens he had studied in the crepuscular libraries of the Eye: this one was a devourer, a gnawer of men's souls, a seizer of bodies and a wearer of flesh. Though he knew he ought not to, and knew he ought to trust to the fates, he wondered whether Ramon was reckless to release it, for its power was obviously formidable.

Then, just as the last rune was about to shatter, Ramon withdrew the pressure. He reached for a pouch at his belt and withdrew a fragile object - a golden amulet shaped like a tear. Pressing it against the granite, he re-sealed the ward. The amulet flared up briefly, as if lit from within, sparkling, then sunk into the rune-marked stone, lodged fast as if it had been there from the creation of the worlds.

Ramon leaned close to the arch and whispered a single word into it, his lips nearly touching the granite.

Then he straightened and turned to Phaelias.

'You know what comes next, don't you?' he asked.

Phaelias didn't reply, but Ramon's words made his blood run cold, as if something else were coming now - something terrible, and furious, and savage

beyond the dreams of mortal imagination.

THORSKIR FELT THE build-up of energy long before he reached the buried chamber. He raced through the catacombs, splashing in the bilge-water, running hard along with his battle-brothers, his staff swinging like a long-handled axe. As he homed in on the psychic spoor, he prepared his mind for the test ahead.

It felt like he'd been hunting Ramon his entire life. Hel, it felt like he'd known Ramon his entire life, even though the two of them had never met in combat, and the only traces of him had been engraved in the misery of the corrupted, the damned, the dead. The Sorcerer Lord had always been just a fraction ahead, taunting him across a hundred ruined worlds with the deferred promise of confrontation.

No longer. The witch had erred at last, giving away the pattern of his movements, allowing the scry-bones to read it through the vagaries of the warp, allowing him to catch up. Rigo V had swum up out of the murk, the target, custodian of a hidden fear no son of Prospero could resist tampering with. Thorskir had leapt at the chance, burning through the void, driving his Navigator close to madness with the requirement for speed. They had cut the way between the worlds with unaccustomed ease, which only reassured him that he was meant to be there, to catch him at last and bring him to trial by strength.

For all that universe was dominated by power, by strength, there was also luck, and at last it seemed that his had changed.

The Space Wolf skidded round a corner and entered a long tunnel, thick with dust and ankle-deep in foetid water. The roof hung low, draped with old cables and thick with a patina of rust and filth. Ahead of them, at the far end, was a shattered door. Rust-red light spilled from the other side of the barrier.

+For Russ!+ Thorskir sent to his brothers, the hard-edged joy of the kill-urge rising in his gullet.

Then he was in, crashing through into the chamber beyond, shattering the broken edges of the old doors with his armoured bulk and sending the pieces smashing across the floor. His pack piled in behind him, dropping into fire-crouches and sweeping the space with bolter muzzles.

The chamber was empty. Thorskir hefted his staff and flooded the narrow room

with light.

An altar lay ahead of them, broken apart. Beyond that lay an archway, intact and marked by a guard-rune.

Thorskir cursed. His inner sense had never lied to him before. He had seen Ramon here, he had felt him. The pack-warriors stood up again, still wary, emanating disappointment.

He withdrew a bird's-skull device from his staff shaft. He pressed it into the dust and listened.

You know what comes next, don't you?

The phrase hissed out - an imprint of the last words spoken there. Thorskir studied the skull's empty eye sockets and watched the way the light within them changed.

'Twelve years,' he muttered, feeling intense, painful frustration boil up within him. 'He was here twelve years ago.'

Vasik, second-in-command, relaxed his combat-stance. 'Your will, then?'

Thorskir drew in a long breath. He replaced the skull device and looked over at the archway. There was a presence behind the wall, the one that had surely drawn Ramon there, just as it had drawn him - shockingly malignant, locked away by only the slenderest of shackles.

Why had Ramon not dismantled the wards? Why had he not finished what he had started?

'What remains here is not for us,' Thorskir ordered, wearily. 'The Inquisition will be informed, and they can clean up what filth remains.'

Vasik nodded curtly. 'It will be done.'

Only then did Thorskir's gaze rest on the amulet. The golden tear was still fused into the granite of the archway, lodged deep, set fast, covered in a thin layer of dust. As soon as he saw it, an old chill ran through his body, one he had forgotten he ever used to have. The chamber seemed to elongate around him,

distorting, rippling. For a minute, he heard the muffled roar of the storm on a distant world, echoing from the roof of a cave that hung with moss-draped stalactites.

'Anything else?' asked Vasik, but Thorskir barely heard him. Before he knew what he was doing, he had walked over to the amulet and crouched down over it.

'Priest?' queried Vasik, concerned.

Thorskir didn't listen. The amulet was so familiar, and so beautiful. He pulled the chain free of the wall, admiring the way it sparkled in the palm of his gauntlet. The golden tear tugged for a moment in its mount, as if reluctant to be parted from the granite, then came free with a click.

As soon as he did so, a sharp crack rang around the chamber. The rune's outline broke open, shattering the ward-seal. A growl of storm-wind burst out from nowhere, cold as ice, rousing the dust around them in drumming layers.

Thorskir pulled back just as the archway collapsed in front of him. Something blacker-than-black, a clot of void, pulsed out of the ruins, dribbling across the breach, bubbling like oil.

Thorskir's senses suddenly returned. With a lurch of horror, he hurled the amulet away and brandished his staff. Lighting crackled along its length, sharp and silver, blazing cleanly against the overhanging shadow.

The clot of darkness writhed upward, extruding, twisting, dragging itself into corporality. Thorskir lowered the staff-tip and let rip. Actinic energies, hot with the ozone-stink of thunderheads, shot down its length, speared right at the heart of the inky matter.

'Banish!' he roared, followed up by a stream of Fenrisian wyrd-curses. His pack opened fire, peppering the far wall with bolter-shells and filling the chamber with clouds of powderised stone.

Amid the swirl and the fury, Thorskir was painfully aware of what he had done. What had he been thinking? Why had he done it? He slammed his staff-tip around, generating more storm-force and hurling it into the blackened maw. He felt the wyrd-tempest surge up within him, just as it had so many times before, poised to sweep the daemoniac taint clean from the world's face.

But the words, the bolter-shells, the lightning, none of it had any effect. The creature's bloated mass swelled further, steaming and pouring into slopping, wriggling shapes. A mouth cracked open amid the sluices of its rapidly firming flesh, and a single name span out from smoke-tumbled lips.

'Vasha.'

Thorskir stumbled instantly, dropping to one knee. The staff fell from his grasp, his hearts raced into overdrive. Struggling for breath, he reached for the gladius at his belt. He drew it, but the oily tsunami slapped into him, latching on like a slick, dragging at his shoulders and drowning him in boiling strands of effluent. Thorskir's senses went black, his mouth clogged up, his helm-lenses blurred to dark. Acid-burns ran across his skin, and he cried out in primeval pain. He tried to summon up resistance, but he was drained, weak as a child, crippled by the word, the name, the memory.

Then the pain vanished. As suddenly as it had arrived, the rush of wind echoed out, the void-clot guttered away into dregs, the echo of bolter-fire died.

'Priest?' asked Vasik again.

Vasik and the others were all staring, their bolters aimed at him. None of them moved. They were uncertain, locked from moving by some sudden doubt. They had seen what had come out from under the arch and where it had gone.

The thing that had once been Thorskir smiled. It felt the skin at the edges of its mortal mouth rip, exposing teeth that were already lengthening. Somewhere deep inside it, the human owner of its body was already screaming. It would be screaming for a very long time to come.

'Your priest is, I regret to say, no longer able to answer,' the devourer drawled, flexing the curved bone-claws that were already bursting from its gauntlets.

The Wolves opened fire in unison, their aim perfect, the volume of fire devastating, but even so the pain of bolt-rounds punching home was nothing more than a fleeting irritation.

The daemon-priest stretched its arms out wide, drawing in fresh fronds of oily essence, clothed in ragged sheets of void-perfect darkness. It bellowed out its challenge, making the chamber shake, and felt the birth-agony of wings ripping

out from its shoulders, and hooves pushing through armoured boots, and fresh bone-spurs scraping along the inside of cracking ceramite. The chamber briefly rang with movement, desperate blade-strikes, and the vomit of a hungry fire.

Then the lights went out, and all was silent save for a long, panting chortle.

PHAELIAS WALKED ACROSS the colonnade towards Ramon's chambers. The sky above was a serene lilac, fading with the cool of the evening. Perethalias was a beautiful world, a veritable garden, albeit one prone to sudden and violent shifts in orbit. Such were the joys and the perils of dwelling in what the Imperium called, with admirably blunt accuracy, the Eye of Terror.

Phaelias was in a good mood. His ascension to Sorcerer Lord had passed off smoothly. His powers were the greatest they had ever been. He felt suffused with them, stuffed with them, as if anything - whether in the world of the senses or the world of the unlocked mind - were now possible.

It was intoxicating, to feel that way. He could understand now, for the first time perhaps, why things had turned out the way they had for his Legion, and what the dangers were for them still. However, for the present he could allow himself a little enjoyment in what had been a centuries-long journey, one which he intended to make last a few more before it reached its end.

He reached Ramon's private gallery and spied his old master standing at the far end of a glass-domed alcove, in a sky-blue robe, a little stooped, observing the movements of the heavens through an antiquated telescope of brass and crystal.

As Phaelias walked up to him he noticed that the robe was in the Prosperine style, of a fashion that had died ten millennia ago. Perhaps its fabric was even original, not a facsimile. You could never be sure - Ramon had ways of sourcing all sorts of things.

'So you achieved it,' said Ramon, turning to greet him. 'You are a lord of our magicks. Well done.'

Phaelias bowed. 'All credit goes to you.'

Ramon waved away the compliment. 'So. Where now?'

'I do not know. The fates will present.'

'That they will.'

Ramon moved away from the telescope, leaving it angled up at the evening sky on its frame. The two of them began to stroll back along the gallery, their soft shoes brushing against age-worn stone.

'Are you aware of the current status of Rigo Five?' Phaelias asked. Ramon smiled. Phaelias guessed that even he, whom they were already calling the Fatespinner, the Shaper of Doom, the Warper of Worlds, was not immune to a little mortal pride.

'Rigo Five,' Ramon said. 'Precious Rigo. Yes, I am aware of its status.' He shot an impish glance at his protege. 'It burns. It has burned for a standard year, and it will burn for another hundred. Once a portal is opened, a door like that, it is not so easy to close.'

Phaelias observed his master's face as he spoke - the lines, worn like cracks in limestone, breaking across a tanned face.

'Oh, the Imperium will struggle on with it,' Ramon went on. 'In time, sooner or later, they will douse the fires. In the meantime, though, we are free to act elsewhere.' He clasped his hands before him. 'It was, in all ways, a satisfactory episode.'

Phaelias remembered how it had been. For a long time, he had had no idea why they had left with their work undone, with the final ward-rune intact and the soul-gnawer still locked in its ancient prison at the base of the spires. He had doubted, in truth. He had speculated that perhaps his master was guilty of hesitation, of not wishing to grasp the dangerous prize for fear of what it might do.

Then, twelve years later, word had come to him of what had happened on Rigo V. It was welcome word, carried across the Ocean from spire to spire, tracing a happy line in the warp like a trail of gold coins strewn on a heaving sea.

They told him that the bloody reign of Thorskir the Painbringer had begun. The Daemon-Priest, amalgam of warp-horror and Wolf, had turned Rigo V into a hellworld, a nightmare of chewed flesh and screaming, one that the Imperium would pour trillions of its mortal souls into before the agony ceased. The dog had followed the scent, panting along it just as Ramon had made him, and then

he was snared, caught, left to blunder into the baited pit where a greater predator waited.

'The devourer,' Phaelias mused, remembering. 'If we had opened the gate ourselves, it would have consumed us.'

Ramon nodded. 'It would have tried.'

'Then, if I may, a question.'

Ramon waited patiently.

'The Wolf who pursued us,' said Phaelias. 'He broke the final ward himself, the one you left intact. And, when that was done, he could not defeat the thing behind it, though he was a master of the powers just as we are. How was this done? They were two chances, were they not? Two slender chances?'

A satisfied glimmer passed across Ramon's lined face, an intimation of content old age, of plans come to fruition and others slowly ripening.

'That,' he said, adjusting the sleeve of his robe and making the pale fabric shimmer like the dawn sky over Tizca, 'shall be my secret.'

THE SLEET LASHED down, cascading down outside the ragged cave-mouth and steaming where it bounced from the stone. The night was wild, but then the nights were always wild on Fenris.

Huddled inside the cave's maw, Nikja pulled her child close to her. He was a sickly infant, one whom the gods clearly wished to have a short life, and the storm made him squeal and bawl. She was exhausted and alone, for the hale of the tribe were still on the long hunt and would not be back for two days. Her meagre fire sputtered in its pit, barely warming the air around it.

Suddenly, the hanging pelts draped over the cave mouth were pushed aside, ushering in a fresh blast of icy, rain-wet air. Nikja rose, heart thumping, still clutching her child. She had a knife in her free hand instantly - blunt from use, but still capable of cutting flesh.

A man stomped inside, shaking the slush from his boots. His shoulders were heavy with furs, and he was massive, bigger even than Ereka, the baby's father

and the headman of the tribe. Indeed, for a moment Nikja thought it might be him, but as the firelight caught his face she saw that his skin was unusual - tanned, lined, with eyes like sunset.

Nikja stared, knife in hand. He let the hanging pelts fall closed behind him, then looked at her. He had a strange face. It made her want to be sick, though she couldn't say why.

'Who are you?' she demanded, staying close to the fire.

'I have travelled a long way,' the man said, his Fenrisian accented heavily with an odd tang, sounding both tired and wary. 'Can I see the child?' She should have refused him. He was a stranger, and no living man walked abroad when the storms were full, but somehow, for some reason, it was hard to resist. She let her knife fall, barely hearing the clink as it bounced from the rock floor. Then she lifted the child up and held him out for the man to look at. He scrutinised the infant for a long time, peering into his eyes as if he could see past them and into the child's fevered mind. 'What do you call him?' he asked.

'Thorskir,' she replied, cowed by his manner.

The man nodded, as if that confirmed something he already knew. He pulled a golden amulet from his furs, and gave it to her. Nikja held it up to the firelight, and it turned slowly, glittering. It was shaped like a tear. She had never seen anything so beautiful, and it made the bone trinkets Erek had given her seem hopelessly crude. Thorskir reached out for the gold, his griping suddenly quelled. His little eyes never left the tear's outline.

'A gift,' said the man. 'Hold it over him, every night, when you sing to him. It will make him strong. You want him to be strong, yes? One day, if you do this, the Lords of the Mountain will surely come for him.' Nikja looked up, suddenly afraid. 'I cannot take it.'

'You can,' said the man. 'Fear not - I will come to collect, one night when the sleet blows and the child is a man. For now, enjoy the use of it.' He pushed back against the hanging pelts, and the frigid wind howled in. Then he hesitated. 'Thorskir. That is not his name, is it?'

'It is,' she said.

'But you have another one. One that only you use.'

Again, it was so hard to resist. Every question, every soft fragment of speech, it compelled her to open up. She knew it was wrong, and that Erek would be angry if he found out, but then she looked at the spinning tear of gold and her lips seemed to open by themselves.

'I do,' she said.

'Tell me.'

She could feel her pulse racing. She wanted to vomit again, and sweat burst out across her forehead. 'I named him Vasha, in my heart,' she mumbled, and suddenly felt wretched, as if some terrible secret had been given away.

The man with the strange eyes looked at her. 'Vasha. A good name.'

'Why must you know it?'

'Because a name is a powerful thing,' he said. 'It raises the weakest and humbles the mightiest. Keep it secret. Tell no one of it.'

'Wait!' For some reason, she wanted to stop him leaving now. Once he was gone, all she would have would be the cold and the silence and the long wait by the faltering hearth. 'Will you not stay?'

He shook his head, smiling dryly. 'This is a place of danger for me.'

'Then why did you come? Who... are you?'

He considered that. 'An instrument. For now, look to your son.' The lined face became sadder. 'I place on him a powerful doom. That is my task, to twist fate, to trace it through the wearing ages, like a spinner at the loom. Believe me, by the end of this, when the thread is played out, all the galaxy will know his name. Sister, I tell you truly: they will fear it.' Then he was gone, the pelts swinging, the hiss of the ice-rain playing across the storm's wind.

Nikja looked down at her child. An eerie feeling of calm came over her, and the nausea faded. Thorskir, cradled in the crook of one arm, was still transfixed by the amulet in her hand.

She smoothed his sweat-matted hair back from his brow.

'Such kindness,' she whispered, looking at the fine working of the gold and wondering how much it was worth. On Fenris, where all things were in flux, it was nigh-priceless, and she would have to guard it carefully, keep it to herself. 'Praise the Allfather. Not all men are liars and brutes.' She kissed her son on his forehead, feeling warm for the first time in weeks.

'Perhaps fate has smiled on us,' she told him, rocking gently. 'You will be a great lord of warriors, just as I prayed you would be.'

The fire spat. Outside, the wind hammered at the door.

'Perhaps,' Nikja said, her worn features creasing into a tired smile, 'our luck has changed at last.'

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