



WARHAMMER
40,000



WAR ZONE
FENRIS

LEGACY OF RUSS 3

**LYING IN
FLAMES**

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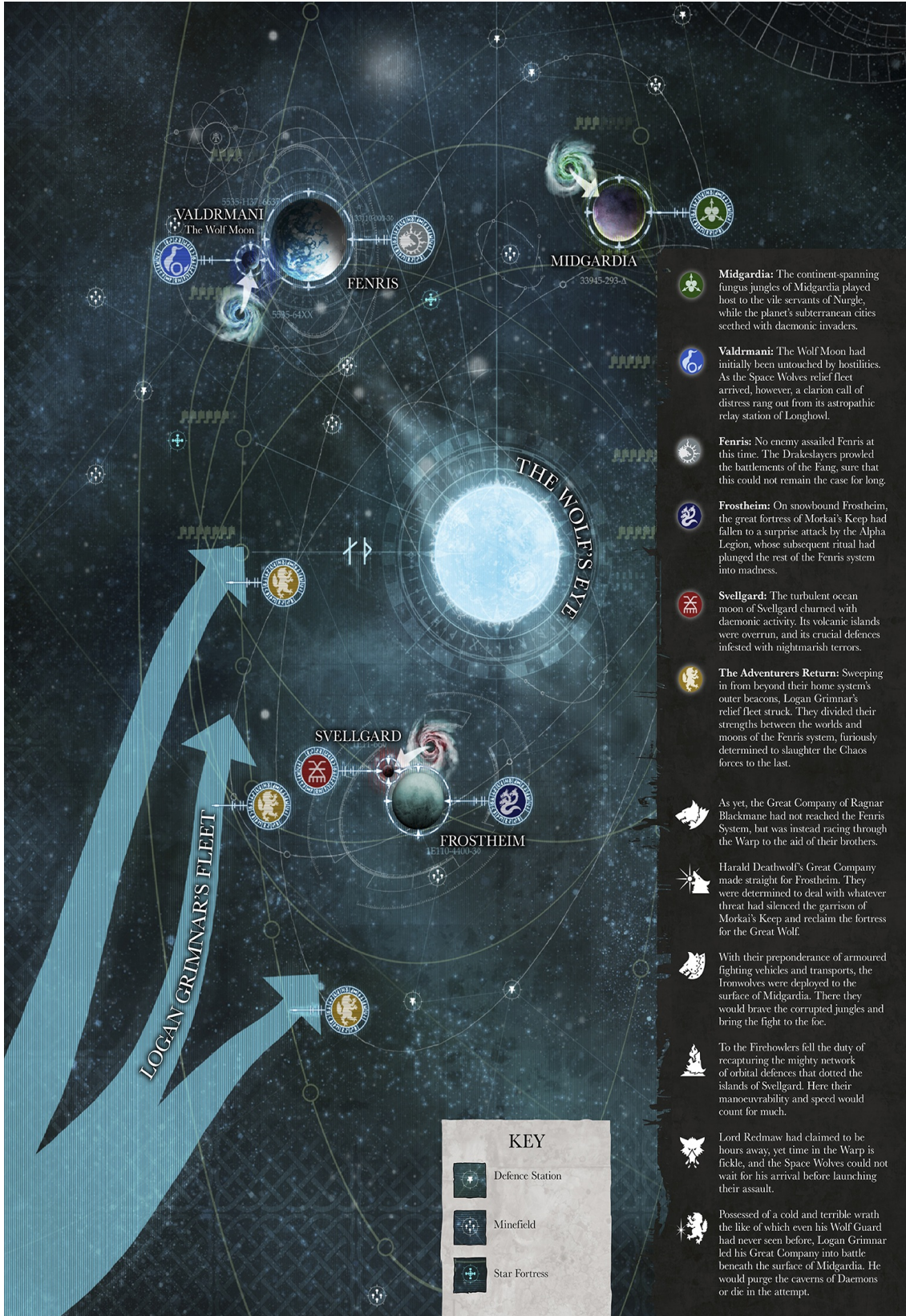
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5533-1137-6633
VALDRMANI
 The Wolf Moon

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MIDGARDIA

THE WOLF'S EYE


SVELLGARD


1E110-H00-30
FROSTHEIM


LOGAN GRIMMAR'S FLEET


KEY


-  Defence Station
-  Minefield
-  Star Fortress


 **Midgardia:** The continent-spanning fungus jungles of Midgardia played host to the vile servants of Nurgle, while the planet's subterranean cities seethed with daemonic invaders.


 **Valdrmani:** The Wolf Moon had initially been untouched by hostilities. As the Space Wolves relief fleet arrived, however, a clarion call of distress rang out from its astropathic relay station of Longhowl.


 **Fenris:** No enemy assailed Fenris at this time. The Drakeslayers prowled the battlements of the Fang, sure that this could not remain the case for long.


 **Frostheim:** On snowbound Frostheim, the great fortress of Morkai's Keep had fallen to a surprise attack by the Alpha Legion, whose subsequent ritual had plunged the rest of the Fenris system into madness.


 **Svellgard:** The turbulent ocean moon of Svellgard churned with daemonic activity. Its volcanic islands were overrun, and its crucial defences infested with nightmarish terrors.


 **The Adventurers Return:** Sweeping in from beyond their home system's outer beacons, Logan Grimmar's relief fleet struck. They divided their strengths between the worlds and moons of the Fenris system, furiously determined to slaughter the Chaos forces to the last.


 As yet, the Great Company of Ragnar Blackmane had not reached the Fenris System, but was instead racing through the Warp to the aid of their brothers.

 Harald Deathwolf's Great Company made straight for Frostheim. They were determined to deal with whatever threat had silenced the garrison of Morkai's Keep and reclaim the fortress for the Great Wolf.

 With their preponderance of armoured fighting vehicles and transports, the Ironwolves were deployed to the surface of Midgardia. There they would brave the corrupted jungles and bring the fight to the foe.

 To the Firehowlers fell the duty of recapturing the mighty network of orbital defences that dotted the islands of Svellgard. Here their manoeuvrability and speed would count for much.

 Lord Redmaw had claimed to be hours away, yet time in the Warp is fickle, and the Space Wolves could not wait for his arrival before launching their assault.

 Possessed of a cold and terrible wrath the like of which even his Wolf Guard had never seen before, Logan Grimmar led his Great Company into battle beneath the surface of Midgardia. He would purge the caverns of Daemons or die in the attempt.

LYING IN FLAMES

Robbie MacNiven

Morkai's Keep, Frostheim

'Canis!'

Harald Deathwolf's roar came too late. Glacius was embedded in the chest of a disintegrating plaguebearer and his storm shield was raised as rusting blades stabbed and slashed. Canis Wolfborn knelt, bleeding his last at the far end of the corridor. Harald saw the wyrd-wrought black steel of his executioner, a Khornate Herald, rise above the press.

Then Fangir struck. The thunderwolf moved like a charge of lightning through the melee, painted red with the gore of the swordlings it had torn apart. As the hellsword fell the faithful beast slammed into its wolf-brother's side, knocking Canis over. The daemon's sword struck, and there was a yelp of pain.

'Canis!' Harald repeated, shouldering his way through the manic fight, the shock of his storm shield blasting combatants from his path. Ahead Canis lay unmoving, blood pooling beneath him. Fangir writhed beside him, the Herald's sword lodged deep in its shoulder. With a snarl of fury the Khornate daemon wrenched the weapon free and struck the huge thunderwolf again, cutting into the meat of its flank. Fangir twisted and howled.

Harald wasn't going to reach them in time. He cleaved apart a brace of capering pink wyrdspawn, grunting as the frost axe carved through their shimmering, ever-changing flesh. They were getting tougher, stronger, faster. Reality in the vaults of Morkai's Keep was starting to disintegrate, unravelling beneath the sheer, stinking, gibbering weight of the daemoniac onslaught.

The Khorne Herald stabbed Fangir again, seeking to lance the monstrous thunderwolf's heart. Protecting Canis with its body, the huge beast was unable to attack properly. Its fur was dark with its own blood. Harald couldn't get close

enough.

An explosion rocked the corridor, throwing the Deathwolf into the shoulder plate of one of his Wolf Guards. A section of wall to his right came crashing down, the rubble burying the nearest daemons and splitting the skull of an unfortunate Blood Claw. Harald braced himself, ready for yet another flood of wyrdlings to come bursting through the gap.

But instead of gnashing, shrieking horrors, the swirling smoke of the breach was ripped apart by the thunder of bolter fire. Muzzle flashes and the lightning-crackle of activated power fists lit hulking shapes as they pushed through the rubble, their sheer size knocking the breach wider. Terminators, armoured in black, a white gauntlet sigil adorning their right pauldrons. Iron Hands.

The tide turned. Trapped in the corridor's confined space, the daemons could do nothing but throw themselves at the new arrivals. Standing firm, with legs braced and backs straight, the Iron Hands gunned the unarmoured monstrosities down, the hammering of storm bolters and the whir of assault cannons almost too loud even for Harald's auto-senses to filter.

'Wolf Lord, this is Sergeant Baalor of Clan Company Haarmek. I advise you to fall back to our position immediately.'

'Not without Canis,' Harald snarled at the Iron Hand over the vox. 'Deathwolves, to me! Ravening Jaw pattern!'

His Wolf Guard, the Riders of Morkai, snapped shut around their lord, using the space torn by the Terminators' fusillade to finally establish some sort of cohesion. Like a fang piercing rotting meat, the small wedge of Wolves punched through the last remaining daemons between them and Canis.

The Khorne Herald was waiting. It stood over Fangir's prone body, dripping with the thunderwolf's blood, its guard down and arms outstretched in challenge.

'Face me, Wolf,' it hissed, looking directly at Harald. 'And die.'

'Maybe next time, daemon,' Harald spat. His Wolf Guard stayed locked around him, power weapons crackling with lethal energies, as their jarl knelt beside Canis.

His visor was still reading vital signs. The Wolfborn's hearts were labouring, and his eyelids flickered as his sus-an membrane forced him into a regenerative hibernation. It looked as though the daemon's thrust had severed his spine.

'You need a Wolf Priest,' Harald told Canis, hoping he was still capable of understanding him. 'Don't try to move.'

'Fangir,' Canis murmured, the words barely leaving bloody lips.

'He's coming too,' Harald assured him, and then turned to his Wolf Guard.

‘Send that thing back to hell,’ he snapped, nodding at the breach. But the Khornate daemon had already gone. The rest of its kin were dissolving. Harald slung Glacius across his back and bent to heft Canis across his shoulders, his armour’s strength-enhancing servo bundles whining in protest. ‘Bring the thunderwolf,’ he added. Two of his Riders, Gunnar Felsmite and Denr Longblade, hefted the limp animal between them.

‘We are departing, Wolf,’ the monotone voice of Sergeant Baalor crackled over the vox. *‘With or without you. None of us can remain down here any longer.’*

‘We’re with you,’ Harald growled, grunting with the strain of carrying the Wolfborn. ‘Deathwolves, withdraw to the Iron Hands.’ The Terminators parted to allow the retreating Space Wolves through, never once interrupting their mechanically precise bombardment of the daemoniac creatures scrambling after them.

Outside Morkai’s Keep a storm was building. It had come from the east, heralded by a wind that howled and bit with the feral savagery of the World Wolf itself. Thick, ugly clouds had turned day to night, and snow had started to swirl and eddy across the glacial plateau where the bleak fortress hunched.

Iron Captain Terrek of Clan Company Haarmek stood like a statue forged from black ceramite and silver steel, impervious to the elements that clawed at him. He gazed up at the fortress’s bastions, the lenses of his bionic eyes peeling away the thickening snow to reveal weapons damage and battle scars. Outside the walls the corpses of traitors and heretics had been heaped in dark, rapidly freezing piles, awaiting a flamer’s kiss. The remains of others still lay scattered across the great glacier’s surface, uncollected. The Space Wolves had been interrupted before they could finish their purging.

‘Clan Commander, we have him,’ clicked a voice in Terrek’s ear. It was Brother-Sergeant Baalor, normally commander of Tactical Squad Baalor, now leader of the composite squad of Terminators assembled to retrieve the Wolf Lord Deathhowl. Terrek acknowledged the message with a blink-click of his lenses.

‘You’ve found him?’ asked a sibilant voice. Terrek glanced briefly down at the Shadow Hunter Scout Sergeant, Arro, crouched at his side. He and his four Initiates had drawn their camo capes up over their heads like cowls, leaving only the pallid flesh of their lower faces and the nubs of their nascent fangs visible beneath the snowy folds.

‘We have,’ Terrek confirmed.

The Shadow Hunter infiltrators had returned five minutes earlier, with news that Terrek had already guessed at. The defences of Morkai's Keep were no longer tenable. The Iron Captain had deployed his Terminators on the recommendation of the other Chapter's scouts, teleporting them into the Keep's vaults to retrieve the Wolf Lord. He'd served alongside the Shadow Hunters before, and though their combat doctrines and personal outlooks were inefficient by the standards of the Iron Hands, their disparate approach to warfare had yielded some analytically exceptional results. If his grey-clad allies said Morkai's Keep was lost then it undoubtedly was, regardless of all the fire and fury of the Space Wolves.

The sounds of combat within the fortress reached Terrek's audio receptors, carried by the howling wind. Bolter fire, chainblades, throaty warcries and the unnatural sounds made by the neverborn as they fought, bled and died. The noises were eclipsed momentarily by the shriek of three afterburning turbofans as a black-plated Thunderhawk gunship banked overhead, coming in to land beside the three already occupying the glacier's edge. The warriors of Terrek's strike force – six squads – stood at parade rest in the shadows of their heavy transports, the snow piling up on their towering, immobile frames.

'We are at the gates,' Baalor voxed. Terrek and the Shadow Hunters waited. The main entrance to the Keep lay open before them, the rail lines that would have sealed the huge adamantium blast doors sitting inert. The enemy had come from within.

'I have a visual,' Arro said. The Hunter's advanced eyesight had detected movement – shapes emerging from beyond the gate, striding implacably through the deepening snow. Soon Terrek could discern three of his Clan Company's sergeants – Baalor, Zernn and Haamel – bedecked in the archo-mechanical glory that was Tactical Dreadnought armour. Behind them came a bloody mass of figures in the blue-grey ceramite of the Space Wolves. The three remaining Iron Hand Terminators, Krevvin, Horst and Thall, brought up the rear.

Terrek's steel-plated jaw clenched as he saw the ichor-stained creatures loping in the midst of the Space Wolves. Too savage-looking even for their barbaric Chapter, the animals' distended, muscle-bound frames were clad in archaic scraps of armour and their limbs bristled with dark fur. Even at rest their features were contorted into beastly, leering snarls, their fang-filled maws drooling with spittle. They moved hunched over, stooped like predators, almost as though they mocked the firm and unbending posture of the Iron Hands leading them. These then were the mutants the Dark Angels had warned them about. He fought to

swallow his disgust, and opened a vox-channel with the motley pack.

‘Wolf Lord Harald of the Deathwolves,’ he said. His bionics scanned unfamiliar runic markings and pelt totems, picking out the figure most likely to be the leader. The one he settled on carried one of his pack-kin over his shoulders, the fallen warrior’s blood streaming down the Wolf’s grey armour to leave a red trail in the snow. Behind him two more Wolves hefted the carcass of a huge, furred Fenrisian beast between them.

‘I am Harald,’ the Wolf said, stopping before Terrek as his Terminator sergeants took post either side. ‘And who in the Allfather’s name are you?’

‘Iron Captain Aleron Terrek, Clan Company Haarmek, of the Iron Hands.’ The words issued flat and lifeless from the bionically augmented warrior’s vocaliser. ‘And this is Scout Sergeant Arro of the Shadow Hunters Tenth Company.’

With a grunt of effort Harald laid the body he’d been carrying in the snow before the Iron Captain. A quick optical scan by the Iron Hand revealed, to his surprise, that the Wolf still lived. Just.

‘He needs an Apothecary,’ Harald said. ‘As does his wolf-brother.’ He nodded back at the huge beast being reverently lowered by his packmates.

‘That creature is his brother?’

‘We are all brothers, machine-man.’

‘Where are your own Apothecaries?’

‘My Wolf Priest is with the rest of my Great Company,’ Harald said, his impatience with Terrek obvious. ‘Still fighting inside the keep. I am going to rejoin them.’

‘You will do no such thing,’ Terrek said, his voice remaining monotone. ‘You will vox your squad leaders and order them to withdraw immediately.’

Harald took a step towards him, his visor’s red lenses level with Terrek’s optical hardware.

‘We’ve fought all day to purge this fortress of wyrd-taint,’ the Wolf said, the words a snarl rasping from his helmet’s vocaliser. ‘Morkai’s Keep belongs to the *Vlka Fenryka*, given by oaths and secured by blood. We will not abandon it, not after so many sagas have been written in its defence.’

‘Then you will all die,’ Terrek said simply. ‘Morkai’s Keep has been target-locked from orbit by my battle-barge, *Iron Requiem*. I have instructed its gunnery crew to open fire in exactly... twenty-one minutes and eighteen seconds. The ship’s bombardment cannon will level this glacier, and seal any of the warp filth that survive far below the surface.’

‘You cannot,’ Harald said, turning from the expressionless visor of the Iron

Hand to the silent, cowed menace of the Shadow Hunters. ‘You would not dare strike at the sovereign territory of the sons of Russ!’

‘My Clan’s most senior Iron Father will attend to your dying brother,’ Terrek said. ‘We will make... repairs. But only if you cooperate.’

‘This is outrageous!’

‘This is logical. Your keep has fallen. You require my assistance. I, however, do not require yours. Extracting you was merely a courtesy, and one that I extended with considerable risk. Had my Terminators not successfully teleported into your vaults and brought you clear, my squads would have lost their sergeants at a stroke.’

It was apparent the Space Wolf wasn’t listening. He was pacing in the snow like some caged animal, every distant howl and clash of steel still echoing from the keep attracting his gaze. Terrek had taken more than enough of the hot-tempered warrior’s foolishness.

‘Our fleet intercepted a transmission from this world’s moon, Svellgard,’ he said. ‘It seems the Wolves of your kinsman, Sven Bloodhowl, are also beset.’

Harald stopped his pacing and faced the Iron Hand once more.

‘The World Wolf’s Lair is under attack again?’

‘Yes. Seemingly with even greater force than before. As soon as we have dealt with the incursion here, my Clan Company and I will be bound for Svellgard. There are already other elements of the crusade fleet en-route.’

‘What crusade fleet?’

Terrek’s response formulae faltered, and he glanced at Arro. The Shadow Hunter Scout simply shrugged.

‘Wolf, we have much to discuss.’

The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard

Sven Bloodhowl no longer laughed as he killed. Now he did it with furious intent – not the primal rage of his Wulfen Murderpacks, but with the lock-jawed, stone-eyed determination of a warrior seeking vengeance.

Torvind was dead. When the Thunderhawk *Godspear* had taken them back to the World Wolf’s Lair, Sven had been able to see just how massive the new horde assailing it was. The sea around the missile control complex churned and foamed as ten thousand fanged and clawed nightmares dragged themselves up from the deeps, the wailing cacophony of their voices like a gale battering at the bunkers and redoubts from every side.

As *Godspear* banked round to land, the Wolf Lord had seen the first wave of the daemons' new assault succeed. A cohort of red-scaled swordlings poured up the rocky knoll that dominated the southern tip of the island, flooding towards its fortified vox-mast like a rising, blood-soaked tide. From the open hold Sven had watched the stab of bolter fire and plasma beams as the Grey Hunters assigned to the mast's defence – the Blackfangs – died to a Wolf.

Worse was to come. Emerging from the thrashing waters below came clanking monstrosities – twin Soul Grinders, climbing the craggy cliffs on segmented, arachnid-like mechanical limbs. From the knoll's top their maw-cannons would have an unrestricted line of sight across the whole island.

Sven had led the counter-attack. He and his Bloodguard had dropped from *Godspear*'s hold as they had done innumerable times before, jump packs blazing, power weapons wreathed with disruptive energies. The Soul Grinders had broken and died, one shattered by Kregga Longtooth's power fist, the other by Uuntir's thunder hammer, the enraged daemons possessing the war engines dissipating into the ether.

But it was a trap.

More wyrdlings darted from the waters lashing the crag, these ones impossibly fast. On sleek, lithe-limbed mounts, the Slaaneshi seekers had scaled the rocks in a matter of heartbeats and were upon the Bloodguard before they could rally to their jarl.

Alone, the Space Wolves fought with their customary skill, strength and savagery. This time it would not be enough. Accompanying the mounted daemonettes came a soporific fogbank that rolled in off the sea. Purple-tinted and cloying, the unnatural miasma worked its way through their armour's vents and numbed the Wolves' razor-sharp senses, slowing each thrust and riposte, deadening each blow. Sven had found himself alone in the impenetrable fog, swinging Frostclaw at nothing, the ululating shrieks of the creatures darting around him making him shudder with strange, unnatural gratification.

He didn't see Torvind fall, and perhaps that was for the best. Under such conditions, it could not have been a death befitting such a warrior. When the young Drakebanes powered into the mist with their own jump packs howling, banishing the vile wyrdcraft with fresh blades and bolters, Olaf had discovered Torvind lying prone at the foot of the vox-mast. His helmet was discarded and his white features frozen in an expression of wide-eyed joy, framed by his long red mane. The cut running across his throat, ear to ear, had been made with a blade so fine his flesh had closed shut after its passing, sealing in the blood. As

Olaf, still dizzy from the daemonette's wyrdling musk, probed the wound it had finally come jetting out. He realised the blow had cut the young Bloodguard's throat right back to the bone.

The knoll could not be defended, that much was obvious. Sven, his Bloodguard and the few remaining Drakebanes had withdrawn to the island's interior defences, and the Wolf Lord had ordered his Vindicators to turn their cannons on the vox-mast. A salvo of heavy siege shells had sent the rocks crashing into the sea, denying them as a vantage point for more daemonic artillery.

All that had only been the beginning. The daemons were relentless. From defence turrets and hardened bunkers, rockcrete redoubts and plasteel-plated bastions, Sven's Bloodhowls gunned them down. Salvoes of bolts burst plaguebearers like oversized boils, or reduced swordlings to a red mist. Lascannon beams seared through clanking, whirring daemonic war machines while bolts of plasma vaporised flocks of undulating, manta-like sky-screamers as they swooped down with snapping maws. When the tide rose too high, the stink of promethium vied with the pervasive reek of the wyrdrealm as flamers burned the filth away. The odour of melting wyrdflesh was the worst thing Sven had ever smelled.

And it was all for nothing. On and on the daemons came, cohort after cohort pulling themselves, drenched, from the surrounding sea like some madman's parody of accelerated evolutionary progress. It didn't matter how many were banished back to the wyrdrealm. It didn't matter how long it took them to gain the stony shingle, and then the cold, bare earth between the beach and the outer bunkers. All the spawn from a galaxy-spanning hell were flooding up through the three ever-widening rifts beneath Svellgard's oceans. The Bloodhowls could have fought for millennia and not vanquished a fraction of their attackers.

'Input the missile launch codes,' Sven ordered Yngfor Stormsson, whose Firemaw Long Fangs occupied the keep at the heart of the Lair. 'And rig the central silos for demolition. I am contacting the fleet. We are evacuating.'

'Lord, communications have been intermittent since the vox-mast was felled,' Yngfor reported. *'And it will likely be another half hour before we can even begin to extract.'*

'Then we'd better start now,' Sven growled. 'I'll hold them off.'

And so the jarl led his eighth sally of the day into the daemonic host. Frostclaw keened, reaping wyrdflesh with every stroke, neither warp-forged steel, leathery hide nor hardened scales any protection against its razor-ice edge. In his other fist the whirring teeth of Firefang glowed white-hot, a biting blur of fury that

shrieked as it sawed through chitin and bone.

Sven killed mechanically now, the fires of his battle-song extinguished. Torvind's death, and the deaths of all the others who had been dragged down beneath the maddening tide, counted for nothing. Svellgard was lost. The Firehowlers had failed.

'*Lord, communication from the fleet,*' said Yngfor over the vox. The rest of his words were lost on Sven as he was forced to duck the swipe of a beast of Nurgle's meaty worm-maw, the flailing blow catching the top of his jump pack and causing him to stumble. He righted himself with a snarl and plunged Firefang into the pestilential monstrosity's swollen belly, revving the chainsword violently. Reeking offal, chewed maggots and flayed meat battered at him, drenching him in toxic green sludge. He kept sawing until the beast had stopped squirming, up to his knee plates in eviscerated daemonic guts.

'Repeat,' he snapped into the vox. Then, suddenly, Yngfor's message became irrelevant. He realised what the Long Fang had been trying to tell him.

Their salvation was at hand.

Overhead the blank, slate-grey skies were being inscribed with fiery contrails, like a hundred meteorites burning through Svellgard's upper atmosphere. It was a sight he'd seen many times in over a century of warfare, and yet still it thrilled him. He prayed to the Allfather that there would never come a day when it did not.

Above him, an orbital assault was beginning.

'Yngfor,' he voxed. 'Forget my last orders. All packs are to hold their ground. Help is on its way.'

The Void, Fenris System

The Strike Cruiser's name was *Star Drake*, and its shipmaster was the youngest in the Space Wolf Chapter Fleet. He was called Ranulf, and he was a big-boned, blond-haired warrior who seemed ill at ease in the void, pacing around his bridge like a beast that had not been fed for days.

Captain Stern watched him without comment. The Grey Knight stood immobile beside the Wolf's command throne, hands behind his back, waiting. They had left the upper orbit of Fenris less than an hour ago, Stern's dozen remaining silver paladins occupying the cells reserved for the packs of Wolves that were the *Star Drake*'s usual cargo. Krom Dragongaze's parting words echoed through Stern's thoughts.

‘Ranulf will take you to the Rock,’ he had said. ‘He’s wasted above the Hearthworld, without any foe to face. He hungers for glory.’

‘I seek negotiation,’ Stern had cautioned. ‘Not battle or glory. The last thing we need is to give the Dark Angels any more reason to doubt the loyalty of you or your kin.’

‘He’s simply to transport you to the Rock,’ Krom had said. ‘Then he will join Egil Iron Wolf’s fleet above Midgardia. You are not responsible for him.’

For that, Stern was thankful. The Space Wolf hadn’t stopped moving since they had broken from orbit. He spoke only in grunts, not so much hostile towards his passenger as indifferent. The two other Wolves who commanded the ship’s serf crew seemed similarly distressed. One was overseeing the watch at the enginarium, whittling runes into a wooden token with single-minded intensity. The other stalked the ship’s lower decks, apparently without purpose, snarling at any who got too close.

Stern placed one gauntlet on the hilt of his sheathed nemesis force sword.

‘How is our progress, shipmaster?’ he asked.

Ranulf was down among the cogitator tiers of the bridge’s lower level, momentarily out of Stern’s line of sight. There was a long pause before the Wolf called back up to him, his voice sounding hoarse.

‘Tolerable, daemonhunter. Another three hours will see us within short-range hailing distance of the fleet around Midgardia.’

‘My Brotherhood appreciates your assistance in this matter,’ Stern said, wondering what the Wolf was doing.

‘Anything that lets us strike back at these treacherous fools,’ came the halting reply.

Stern wondered briefly whether Ranulf was referring to the daemons that infested the system, or his supposed brother Adeptus Astartes in the crusade fleet above Midgardia.

‘I will take my leave, for now,’ the Grey Knight said. ‘I must brief the Knights of my Brotherhood on the situation we might expect once we reach Midgardia.’

There was no reply. Stern turned to depart.

Below him Ranulf crouched, hidden between the cogitator banks, fists clenched, eyes screwed shut, his whole body shaking in mute strain. The kaerls around him stared at their lord in silent, wide-eyed terror, edging along their benches away from him.

Slowly, a growl began to build, deep within the Space Wolf’s chest.

Stern was halfway towards his commandeered cell when the inter-ship vox-net exploded.

At first it was just screaming. Stern's sword was in his hand instantly, energy crackling up the blade.

'Brothers, report,' he demanded. All his Knights were still in their cell blocks. None were any more aware of what was happening than he was.

The screaming worsened. It was no longer just a single voice, and no longer just on one frequency. On three separate channels, the sounds of indiscernible Fenrisian pleas drowned out all other communication.

Stern checked the channel sources. The bridge, the enginarium, and sub-deck seventeen, deep in *Star Drake's* bowls. Realisation struck him just as he heard the first feral snarls over the vox. His blood ran cold.

'Artemis, Gideon, Ethold, deploy to the engine deck immediately,' he ordered. 'Simeon, Osbeth and Caldor, track vox-channel nine-eight-two-oh. Everyone else rendezvous on the bridge.'

'What is it, brother-captain?' Gideon asked. *'I sense no warp taint here.'*

'You're right,' Stern said. 'It's worse.'

He sprinted for the bridge, bursting through the open blast doors just as a flood of screaming kaerls poured in the opposite direction. The leadmost scrambled to make way for the silver-armoured warrior as he thrust between them, eyes on the monster prowling the deck below.

The monster that had once been Shipmaster Ranulf.

The Space Wolf had succumbed to his kind's inherent curse. The warrior's armour was now split and twisted around fresh growths of muscle, his gauntlets broken by wicked claws. The shipmaster's face was barely recognisable, a contorted mess of blond fur and fangs. Yellow, lupine eyes stared wildly up at Stern as he sensed the Grey Knight's arrival.

'It's the Space Wolves,' Caldor voxed as the other Knights made the same discovery. *'They've gone berserk.'*

'Don't kill them if you can help it,' Stern said. He slowed as he reached the metal staircase leading from the upper half of the bridge to the lower, deactivating his force sword as he went.

'Ranulf,' he said to the Wulfen. 'Do you remember me, Ranulf?'

The Wulfen snarled. It had killed. There was blood on its claws and matted in its beard.

'I know you do not recognise my scent, Ranulf,' Stern said, spreading his arms, opening his guard. 'I am not one of your pack. But remember my voice. I am

your cousin, Space Wolf.’ He halted a dozen yards from the Wulfen, the beast seemingly frozen to the spot.

A half dozen kaerls, cowering beneath their clattering cogitators, chose that moment to run.

‘No!’ Stern barked at them, but too late. The thing that had been – or maybe still was – Shipmaster Ranulf leapt as they passed, a feral howl tearing from the monster’s throat. Two of the serfs went down beneath its claws, screaming. Blood splattered across their workstations.

Stern activated his sword once more and sprang forward, features set. Lowly Chapter thralls or not, he would not allow any more innocent Imperial blood to be shed.

Ranulf turned with a speed even the Grey Knight captain couldn’t match, claws slashing across his silver breastplate. Stern grunted at the impact, swinging his sword around as he sought to keep the Wulfen at bay. The beast, however, had no time for finesse. Ducking the swing it wrapped two arms around Stern’s midriff and heaved. The Grey Knight found himself going down beneath the creature’s sweat-stinking weight, servos protesting.

The two Space Marines struck the decking grille with a crack. Stern immediately regretted trying to talk to the beast face to face and leaving his helm mag-locked to his belt. The Wulfen pinned his arms and tried to savage the Grey Knight’s skull with its fangs. Stern could only turn his head away, bloody drool splattering him.

Somewhere, a claxon began to wail. Red emergency lighting bathed the bridge. He felt the deck shift fractionally beneath them.

‘Brother-captain!’ The voice of Alacar, one of Stern’s brothers, caused the Wulfen’s head to snap up. Six Grey Knights occupied the upper bridge, force weapons activated, storm bolters levelled.

Stern used the opportunity the distraction afforded him. He head-butted the Wulfen. The creature grunted as its head snapped back, fangs crunching, its grip on Stern’s arms loosening a fraction. The Grey Knight ripped one gauntlet free and, as the Wulfen’s head came back down, eyes filled with raging madness, he pressed two fingers to the creature’s scalp.

‘Enough,’ he enunciated, driving a spike of his will, blindingly bright, into the beast’s mind. His psychic soul flare illuminated more than he’d expected, more than just the animalism displayed by the creature’s behaviour. Fear, sorrow, pain. Above all, awareness, no matter how base. Whether he’d wanted to or not, Stern could not deny that the creature was still a Space Wolf. Ranulf was still there.

And Ranulf now slumped, suddenly limp, across Stern. He was unconscious.

The other Grey Knights reached his side. With some difficulty they dragged the sprawling Wulfen off their captain. Stern found his feet.

‘Brothers, report.’

‘The enginarium is secure,’ crackled Gideon’s voice in his ear. ‘But we had to put the Wolf down. Brother Ethold is wounded, and the engine systems themselves were damaged before we could purge the mutant.’

‘Ethold?’ Stern asked.

‘I’ll live,’ came the big Grey Knight’s response.

‘How bad is the damage to the engines?’ Stern glanced at the red lights still blinking across a slew of the bridge’s cogitator banks.

‘I don’t know, brother-captain. The mutant killed a number of tech-priests. The remainder are assessing the damage as we speak.’

‘Have them shut off those claxons,’ Stern ordered. ‘Caldor, status?’

‘Our Wolf is also dead, brother-captain. He threw himself from a stanchion when we cornered him. Some sort of madness gripped him.’

‘They are cursed,’ Alacar said beside him. ‘We should kill this one, before it awakes.’

‘That is not our decision to make,’ Stern said. He cast around the bridge, his enhanced senses picking out the hiding places of the bridge’s surviving crew.

‘You,’ he snapped, pointing at an old man in the pelt-trimmed robes of a huscarl, trying to cower behind a holochart. ‘Where are this ship’s holding cells?’

‘Deck theta nine, lord,’ the serf stammered. ‘That’s the main brig.’

‘You will lead my battle-brothers there with this prisoner, as soon as you have told me what this means.’ He gestured at the flashing rune banks of the nearest cogitators, and then at the wolf-headed claxon horns that still howled from the bridge’s arching roof.

‘Lord, the enginarium has gone into lockdown,’ the huscarl said. ‘Any weapons fire on the drive deck could trigger it. It will need to be overridden.’

‘You can do so?’

‘With time, lord. But there may also have been damage done to the control mechanisms.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘That without basic repairs our projected course will take twice as long to achieve.’

‘Where can such repairs be effected?’

‘Our engineers would likely be sufficient, lord. But it may be quicker to seek assistance from the nearest docking station.’

‘And where would that be?’

‘We will need a moment to triangulate our exact location.’

Stern waited in silence as the huscarl bent over a rune bank, wizened fingers tapping away. After a few moments the claxons shut off, though the lights continued to wink urgently. Slowly, more wide-eyed kaerls began to emerge from their hiding places.

‘Return to your stations,’ Stern ordered. ‘Now.’

‘I have our coordinates, lord,’ the huscarl said, sliding a freshly inked data chit from a cogitator’s imprint port. ‘It would appear...’ he paused to scan the slip of paper, then looked at Stern’s boots, uncertainty radiating off him.

‘Speak,’ Stern commanded.

‘The closest station is a Ramilies-class star fort, *Gormenjarl*. It is part of the system’s defence network.’

‘Contact it immediately. Inform them of our requirements.’

‘That’s the problem, lord,’ the huscarl said, still not meeting the Grey Knight’s steely gaze. ‘All contact with both *Gormenjarl* and the system’s other Ramilies, *Mjalnar*, was lost at the start of the daemoniac incursions. Our signals go unanswered.’

Stern gazed out into the star-studded expanse stretching away beyond the *Star Drake*’s open vision port. The problem was clear. They were partially stranded hours from their destination, and time was running out. But everything about *Gormenjarl* boded ill.

‘How big is the Ramilies’ defence contingent?’ Stern asked. The huscarl paused, scanning his cogitator screens.

‘Six platoons of Imperial Navy armsmen and a single pack of Grey Hunters. The ones on rotation when contact was lost were the Redpelts of Lord Kjarl Grimblood’s Great Company.’

It was surely a trap. The onset of the Wulfen curse at such an inopportune moment could not be coincidence. What if the Space Wolves’ genetic instability really was warp-tainted?

But that did not change things, Stern told himself. Not yet. The Dark Angels had to be stopped before they started a full-scale war with the Wolves. The carnage such a conflict would unleash could only serve the Ruinous Powers. Once the situation had been stabilised, then the Wolves and their bestial defect could be subjected to judgement.

Stern had to get to the Rock as soon as possible. And that meant braving a daemon's schemes.

'Chart a new heading,' he said to the huscarl. 'Get the engines back online and divert as much power to them as you think they can handle. Take us to *Gormenjarl*.'

The Void, Fenris System

At times like these, standing aboard the bridge of the battle-barge *Holmgang*, Ragnar Blackmane felt truly helpless.

For a Fenrisian warrior, born and bred beneath clear, cold skies on the banks of icy seas, the confinement of void travel was akin to the worst sort of imprisonment. In his younger years the Wolf Lord had spoken with officers of the Imperial Navy who had relished the endlessness of the galaxy beyond their ships' bulkheads and vision ports. They talked of limitless space, of the ultimate expanse, a wanderer's quest that could last forever.

Ragnar saw none of that in the starry darkness he now gazed upon. Only nothingness. The way his pack brethren referred to it – the Sea of Stars – was a misnomer, a lie told to comfort their instinctive dislike of the void. It was nothing like the beautiful, windswept seas of the Hearthworld. It was worse than desolation, worse than abandonment.

Truly, it was a void, nothing more and nothing less. It trapped him in a box of adamantium, his sword-skill and battle-lust rendered impotent. The killing was done by others, by gunnery thralls and range finders, target locks and servitor breach-loaders, none of it glorious, all of it torpid and impersonal. The Young King's only hope during void engagements was for the savagery of a boarding action. Those, he allowed, were rare, sweet fights. Then a warrior's speed, his strength and his fury meant everything. But even those few seconds of blood and steel couldn't eclipse the shuddering monotony of voidborne travel.

Ragnar hadn't moved from the centre of the *Holmgang*'s bridge since his fleet had translated in-system. After hailing Krom he'd tried to raise Sven on Svellgard and Harald on Frostheim. His efforts to make long-range vox contact had failed, though he'd reached Harald's flagship, in orbit above Frostheim. The ship's chief vox huscarl had reported vessels belonging to the Iron Hands, Ultramarines and Shadow Haunters moving into orbit, making no threatening moves towards the Wolf fleet but refusing all offers to communicate.

Right before the end of the last transmission the huscarl had reported an

Ultramarines Strike Cruiser and a trio of Astra Militarum mass transporters breaking away from the fleet in the direction of Svellgard, orbiting on the far side of Frostheim. At the same time Iron Hands Thunderhawks had been picked up heading for low orbit on a trajectory that would take them to Morkai's Keep. Whether they went to assist Harald Deathwolf's warriors or purge them, Ragnar didn't know. The thought that loyal cousins may at that very moment be tearing at one another's throats because of some wyrd-spawned trickery made his entire body shake with anger.

As far as Midgardia was concerned, information was even patchier. The crusade fleet there, led by the Rock, dwarfed the one taking post around Frostheim and Svellgard. The Space Wolf ships in orbit appeared leaderless – on the rare moments when *Holmgang* was able to establish reliable contact, the reports from the huscarls were conflicting and confused. Logan Grimnar was lost. Seemingly now Egil Iron Wolf was too. There were rumours the crusade fleet was about to unleash exterminatus on Midgardia.

Loudly and without shame, Ragnar damned the waiting to the Seven Hells.

At last, a change in the soul-searing monotony. Augur beacons chimed, and kaerls scurried to and fro beneath the bridge's dais as data was collated.

'What is it?' Ragnar demanded, staring out into the void, the nothingness, as though his keen eyes would have been able to pick something out of the endless emptiness.

'A ship just entered our furthest engagement proximity zone, lord,' said a huscarl, bowing to the Young King.

'What ship?'

'Our cogitators are working to identify it right now, but it appears to be Imperial.'

At the moment that counted for very little. Ragnar bared his fangs in annoyance as he waited for the chattering cogitators to finish their arcane computations.

'I have it,' said a second huscarl, peering at the fuzzy green display of a data-slate. 'The ship is a fast cutter, New Star pattern, but appears to have been extensively modified. It's transmitting an ident-signal...' He paused for a moment. 'But it's blank, my lord.'

Ragnar's expression darkened. He watched the red blip representing the anonymous vessel drawing fractionally closer to the Space Wolves fleet on one of the bridge's holocharts, like a seaborne minnow darting cautiously towards a great Fenrisian kraken. There were few ships in the galaxy that bore blank ident-signals, and fewer still that would dare approach an entire Space Wolf fleet on a

war footing.

‘There are no other ships within striking distance?’ the Young King demanded, eyes darting across the charts and the oculus feeds.

‘No, lord.’

‘Extend the augur range and scan again. I want to be certain.’ Even at the best of times, the appearance of such a vessel didn’t bode well. And these were far from the best of times.

‘Lord, it’s hailing us. Vox only.’ For a moment, Ragnar hesitated. Then he gestured at the communications array.

‘On speakers. Let’s hear him.’

The voice that addressed the crew of *Holmgang* was one Ragnar felt he’d known all his life – firm, uncompromising, self-assured. It was the voice of the Imperium, cracked with age but still smouldering with resolution. It was exactly what the jarl had feared, as soon as he’d seen the blank markers of the mysterious ship’s designation.

‘Greetings, Lord Blackmane,’ it said. ‘My name is Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay of the Ordo Hereticus, Segmentum Pacificus Divisio. Aboard the Allsaint’s Herald.’

‘Lord Inquisitor,’ Ragnar acknowledged. ‘You’ve come from the crusade fleet, I take it?’

‘Not exactly. More like in spite of the crusade fleet.’

For all the voice’s apparent strength, it could not disguise its frailties from Ragnar’s keen senses. The Wolf could detect the slight wheeze that came with aged, failing lungs and the soft, wet slap of fleshy lips. While de Mornay’s tone retained much of what must have once been a considerable will, Ragnar doubted the man’s body had stood the test of time so well.

‘Your ship comes here seeking me,’ the Young King said. ‘Why? What business have you with the *Vlka Fenryka*?’

‘Noble Wolf, I do not know how much you are already aware of,’ de Mornay answered. ‘But time presses, so I will speak plainly. The Dark Angels have not come here to banish daemons. They are here because they are convinced – all of them – that your Chapter is harbouring the curse of a mutation far beyond the limits sanctioned for Adeptus Astartes gene-seed. And, as you can gather from their following, the Imperium at large appears to have been persuaded by them.’

‘The Imperium, but not you, Lord Inquisitor?’ Ragnar demanded. De Mornay didn’t reply, and the young Wolf let the silence stretch. The accusations of mutation had left him pale-faced with anger, but he swallowed it, bit back at the

beast snarling inside him. They were already lacking friends as it was. Cementing his Chapter's isolation would not help any of them.

'Why are you here, de Mornay?' he repeated.

'Suffice to say for now that I believe the Dark Angels' interest in your... unfortunate secret conceals one of their own, one which surely must be far darker than what your wolf-brethren are currently struggling with.'

'You speak in riddles, inquisitor,' Ragnar said. 'I already count Lukas the Trickster among the ranks of my Great Company, I wouldn't want you to give him competition.'

'These channels are undoubtedly being monitored, Wolf Lord,' de Mornay said. 'Yes, even with your ciphers and encryptions. The Inner Circle sees much, and hears even more.'

'You are beginning to sound senile, inquisitor. What is this madness you speak of?'

'I request an audience with you directly, Lord Blackmane. Aboard your ship.'

The sudden demand caught Ragnar by surprise.

'Into the wolf's lair?' he said slowly. 'Don't you believe any of the stories you've heard? Do you think you would be safe?'

'Not safe,' de Mornay allowed. 'But at least certain. Discussing matters face to face would be preferable to this. Your Chapter wards others away with the appearance of savagery, but your souls are not dark. I know Chapters that are.'

'You would rather a wolf's lair than a lion's den,' Ragnar said, smiling grimly. 'Very well, Lord Inquisitor. We will receive you. And perhaps venture into the den together.'

Sub-orbit, Midgardia

Midgardia wasn't hailing him.

Conran was not surprised. Normally a descent upon the Magma Gates would have required dual-level clearance codes and at least one vocal scan. But the only thing that spoke to him now over the vox was static.

The non-encrypted channels were a mess. Control of the airspace above the planet had collapsed completely. There were dozens of fliers aloft, from sleek unicutters to swollen cargo sows. They gave Conran's Stormwolf a wide berth, not merely because of an instinctive fear of the Adeptus Astartes, but because his was the only transport headed planetside while the rest fled.

'This is foolishness,' said Kreg's voice for the eighth time.

Conran didn't reply. The Long Fang had almost physically blocked him from leaving *Wolftide's* bridge.

'What does the lion care for one wolf?' he'd demanded.

'It's not one wolf,' Conran had snapped back. 'Logan Grimnar is down there. Egil Iron Wolf is down there. Our jarls, our champions, the greatest living heroes of our Chapter. I will not be the one to abandon them.'

'You cannot help them down there,' Kreg had said. 'Hail the Rock again. Try one last time.'

But Conran could take no more. He would not scream hopelessly into the void while his packmates died.

The same loyalty clearly did not occupy the minds of the citizens of Midgardia. The landing plates and docking spires of the Magma Gates, rising above the blotched purple canopy of the surrounding spore jungles, were awash with people seeking salvation. Looking to the skies for landers that would never come. The Wolves in orbit had already taken on board what they could. As the Stormwolf banked overhead Conran saw the muzzle-flash of small-arms fire as a mob of refugees attempted to rush an area of the plates cordoned off for upper-spire dignitaries. The guards – privately hired muscle, no doubt – cut down the initial rush, but could not reload fast enough to stop the next. Conran lost sight of them as they were swamped by a sea of scrambling, screaming men, women and children.

The Space Wolf had seen such sights many times before. Civilian panic and disorder had been a feature of almost every warzone he had ever fought in. But this was not some crater-scarred war world in some distant frontier system. This was Midgardia, sister planet to noble Fenris itself, part of the Space Wolves' fiefdom. The thought sickened him.

'*Conran,*' said Kreg again over the vox. Conran cut the channel.

He banked left, angling the transport for the highest point of the Magma Gates, the planetary governor's control spire. Finally, he received a challenge, if only an automated one. A servitor demanded a string of ident-codes over the vox. Conran gave them, and was cleared to land. He noted with surprise that Governor Sandrin's private shuttle, a gleaming chrome autowing, was still sitting idle on its docking strut.

Conran let the hardwired auto servitor pilot the Stormwolf down, releasing his restraint harness and standing by the cockpit hatch. There was no one to greet him at the landing strut. Blast doors led from the plate into the control spire proper. Even this high above the canopy, the corrosive effect of Midgardia's

daemon-enhanced spores was obvious. Metal rusted and flaked and the blast doors opened with juddering reluctance, as though they hadn't been used for decades. Below, the purple jungles stretched in an endless sea, discoloured now with foetid shades of green, a smog of ugly yellow-tinted spores hanging over the deformed canopy. The Wolf Guard didn't linger outside.

He stalked the council chambers and corridors of the spire, his senses on edge. How far had the wyrd-taint been able to spread since they'd evacuated? Judging by the panic being exhibited on the public docking plates he assumed the Tallybands had at least penetrated the Magma Gates' outer bastions.

The control spire, however, seemed utterly deserted. That was until his auto-senses detected the sound of raised voices emanating from Governor Sandrin's personal chambers.

The rooms themselves were not the sumptuous things other planetary rulers might have enjoyed. The Magma Gates were more military garrison and administrative hub than a governor's palace. Sandrin himself was not an Imperial Commander in the true sense of the title. It was the Space Wolves, and not the High Lords of Terra, who had appointed him as Governor of Midgardia, just as it was the Wolves that had appointed every one of the planet's rulers since the Imperium had first granted the Chapter full rights over the Fenris System.

Sandrin himself was a competent enough man, a hard-working, long-suffering administrator who preferred a clerk's ink-stained apron to his fur-trimmed robes of office. Yet it was the latter he was wearing now, standing beside the unmade bed in his private sleeping chamber. His angry words masked Conran's approach.

'I won't tell you again, Melain, I'm not leaving! Take the children and the shuttle. Go straight to the Wolf fleet in orbit, they'll give you sanctuary. But I must stay.'

'Why?' Melain wailed. The governor's wife was knelt before her husband, still in a dishevelled nightdress, face swollen with grief and streaked with tears. Two children, eyes wide with frightened bewilderment, stared on from a chair in the corner of the room. The older of the two, a little girl, was the first to notice Conran. She screamed.

Both parents turned, faces etched with fear. The realisation that it was one of the Adeptus Astartes, and not some foul daemon standing in their doorway, didn't do much to lighten their expressions.

'Governor Sandrin,' Conran said. 'I did not think to find you and your family still planetside.'

‘I-I won’t leave,’ Sandrin stammered. ‘It would be a dereliction of my duties as an Imperial citizen and a betrayal of my oaths to your Chapter and to Fenris. In ten thousand years no governor has abandoned Midgardia.’

‘Your courage does you great honour,’ Conran said. ‘But surely we cannot ask the same sacrifice from your family. I know what is coming through the spore jungles in this direction. I certainly would not wish my kinsfolk to experience it first-hand.’

‘I won’t leave my husband,’ Melain said, defiance hardening her grieving expression.

‘Yes, you will,’ Conran said. ‘For the sake of your children. I will take you onboard my own Stormwolf. You will be delivered safely to the flagship of my lord Egil, in orbit above.’

‘He sent you to retrieve us?’ Sandrin asked.

‘No. He is still deep in the underworld. I came on my own initiative. A misguided faction of our fellow Adeptus Astartes has been threatening to fire-bomb Midgardia’s surface. It seems we cannot stop them without drawing blood. I had hoped my presence planetside would make them reconsider. I cannot simply sit in orbit any longer while this world is burned to ash.’

‘We have been betrayed?’ Sandrin asked incredulously.

‘I fear so, governor, though just by whom or what I do not yet know. Let me escort your family outside.’

‘At least come to the shuttle,’ Melain begged. Conran saw the resistance in the governor’s pinched eyes, but after a moment he glanced at his two offspring and nodded.

‘Hurry,’ Conran said.

Melain gathered the children by her side, and the four followed Conran back to the landing strut, their wiry, pale Midgardian bodies dwarfed by the towering Space Wolf.

‘The atmosphere is becoming ever more toxic,’ Conran warned before the strut’s blast door. ‘The air itself has been infected by the Archenemy’s presence. We must be quick.’

The family nodded. Conran raised a gauntlet. ‘On my mark.’

He hit the door’s release rune. Beyond it, they didn’t get far.

The Space Wolf was only a half dozen yards across the strut’s plate when the little boy’s shriek brought him up short.

‘What’s that?’

The Wolf had seen it too. A spear of light, flickering with the burning of

contrails, stabbing down from orbit. It struck a few miles east of the Magma Gates. Fire blossomed, a conflagration that mushroomed like the jaws of the great Fire Wolf, consuming all around it.

‘Allfather protect us,’ Conran said.

Above, the crusade fleet opened fire.

The Warp

They challenged him. He would not be their king, so they came for him one by one. Old friends and Long Fangs all. He put them down, each in turn, stripped of his battleplate, hair matted, his body streaked with blood and sweat, panting from between bared fangs.

Was he still so different from them? Was there still any point in resisting? Even when they submitted? Even when knees bent, and throats were bared in subservience?

He accepted their fealty, though his whole body itched to join them. Surrender to the gnawing, black, clawed thing inside him.

But no, no. Resist. You are more than a beast, though you may no longer look or think it.

The daemons came for him next. The wyrdrealm knew of their approach, and of the threat they posed. It had already tried to slow them, to delay their arrival in the Fenris System. Now it attacked the fleet’s Geller fields. Things with snapping tentacles and a thousand weeping eyes materialised onboard their vessels. With rending claws and howling beast-oaths, each one was sent straight back to the hell that had spawned it.

The warp could try its trickery for eternity, but fate was inexorable. Nothing would stop the Redmaw now.

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