



**WARHAMMER**  
40,000



**LEGACY OF RUSS 6**

**WOLF  
TRAP**

**ROBBIE MACNIVEN**

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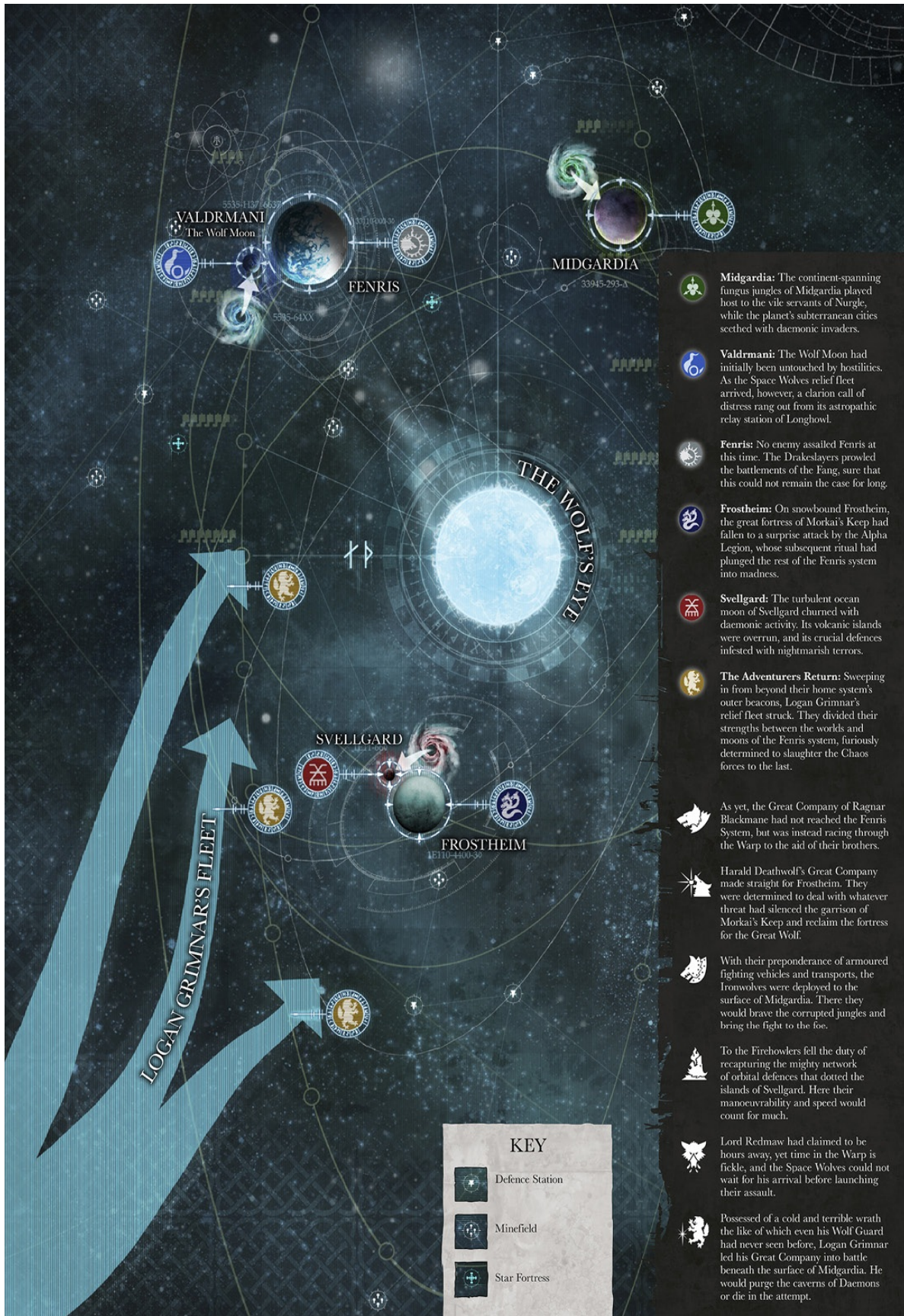
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VALDRMANI  
The Wolf Moon

FENRIS

MIDGARDIA

THE WOLF'S EYE

SVELLGARD

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.

# WOLF TRAP

*Robbie MacNiven*

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjalnar*

The very walls of *Mjalnar* shuddered and shifted, plasteel plating suddenly as insubstantial as a heat mirage. Through the haze came wyrdlings, their blades and claws reaching for Ragnar and his Space Wolves.

‘Blackpelts, to me!’ Ragnar roared. Normal forces would have been annihilated by so sudden and horrific an ambush. The Blackpelts, however, were far from normal. Back-to-back they fought, Tor Wolfheart and Alrydd the Bard, Uller Greylock, Hrolf Longspear and Svengril the Younger. With bared fang and wild eye they smote the creatures of Chaos, the warped corridor ringing with Fenrisian steel and crackling disruptor fields, snapping bone and snarled oaths. They were the Young King’s most favoured warriors, chosen as much for their brutal sword-skill as for their combat experience. Against them the lesser daemons of the wyrdrealm, for all their rage, could do little.

And they were as nothing compared to their lord. Ragnar was a blur of unrestrained, natural-born violence. He’d abandoned the protective knot of the pack, striking out further down the corridor. Normally a Wolf Lord’s personal retinue would have striven to defend their leader, adopting a formation that covered his back and protected his blind spots. But the Blackpelts knew better than to try that when the battle-joy had taken hold of their Young King.

Ragnar killed. It was simple. It was brutal. It was a terrible thing to watch, something that even his Wolf Guard treated with reverence. He was a blur of perpetual motion, never hesitating, never stopping, not even thinking. It was instinctive, deadly, the result of transhuman genetic engineering and the warrior conditioning of an already martial race, combined with over a century’s bloody battlefield experience. *Frostfang*, Ragnar’s ancient chainsword, was a blur, a

halo of tearing teeth that left a haze of viscera hanging in the air around the lunging, spinning shape of the Wolf Lord. He danced the warrior's dance, darting death that sawed through limbs and skulls and torsos and sent clutches of nightmares tumbling back to hell together.

Inquisitor de Mornay was only half aware of him. His plasma pistol was in one fist, venting steam from its coolant valve as he fired down from his palanquin. Sister Marie stood behind the rocking platform, hammering her combi-flamer into the mass of bug-eyed, snapping monsters clawing at them. Her black power armour was pitted and scarred, its holy surface befouled with a sheen of dripping ichor. She was reciting the Thirty-Third Prayer of Revelatory Salvation in low, hard tones as she killed, eyes gleaming with the fires of a warrior given sacred purpose. When the tide rose too high she triggered the flamer, and the corridor was filled with the stench of roasting warpspawn and the dancing light of blazing promethium as it ate hungrily at the shrieking creatures.

Subconsciously, the inquisitor was regretting not bringing the arco-flagellant, or donning his exo-plate. A part of him had hoped the rumours of *Mjalnar's* corruption would prove to be unfounded, and the last thing he'd wanted was VX Nine-Eighteen rampaging through the star fort's narrow corridors. That was a mistake he wouldn't make again.

The daemons screamed with fury, enraged at the fact that their trick had been discovered. Without the intervention of de Mornay they would have driven Ragnar and his packs to the brink of turning, the Wolves' frustration with the star fort's seemingly endless, deserted corridors leading to the triumph of the Canis Helix. The Young King would have become the Young Beast.

And then, as sudden as it had begun, the ambush was over. The last daemons flickered and vanished with fading howls. The walls were whole once more, painted with dripping slime and riddled with bolt-rounds. Ragnar twisted to a stop in a low crouch, *Frostfang* held upwards, its kraken teeth still revving. The Wolf Lord remained frozen for a second, fangs bared, a single twitch all that was needed to trigger another killing spree. But none came. He stood and deactivated the chainsword, wiping a globule of shorn wyrdmeat from the casing.

'I needed that,' he growled.

'We can't stay here,' de Mornay said. His plasma pistol whined as it recharged, hot in his gloved grip.

'We aren't going to,' Ragnar said. 'Pack, on me.' He keyed his vox.

'Report.'

'*It's an ambush, lord!*' shouted Hostor over the link. The sounds of fighting

were clearly audible in the background.

‘The whole station is a trap,’ Ragnar replied. ‘Objective remains the same. Secure the command deck.’

‘*Understood,*’ said Hoster, the word underpinned by the sound of a revving chainsword.

‘The other packs?’ Uller asked as Ragnar broke the link.

‘Unresponsive,’ the Wolf Lord said grimly. ‘World Wolf pattern. We have an objective to secure.’

‘Where are you going?’ de Mornay demanded as the Wolves moved off down the corridor.

‘The command deck, of course,’ Ragnar called back. ‘Via the nearest vox terminal. Someone has to warn the rest of the Chapter that those Grey Knights were right.’

‘The place is infested,’ de Mornay said. ‘We’d be better off evacuating and bombarding the station with your fleet.’

‘I’ve seen worse cases of corruption,’ Ragnar said. ‘Haven’t you, inquisitor? Besides, do you think that little scrap was enough to satisfy me?’ The Wolf laughed.

Glowering, de Mornay rolled his platform in the pack’s wake.

### *The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard*

‘All packs, focus fire!’

Sven didn’t need to clarify the target. The burning Bloodthirster was hurtling through the air like a comet, aimed unerringly at the heart of the World Wolf’s Lair. It roared a challenge as it came, the sound seeming to shake the whole moon to its core. The receding waters around the island churned as yet more daemons joined the assault, answering the great slaughter-lord’s defiance. For a moment, just a split-second, Sven thought he understood what it meant to be a mortal, armoured only in plates of metal, facing down the molten, white-hot fury of a god’s avatar. He wondered if Jarl Stormpelt had known the same feeling when he had duelled the same monster, all those centuries ago.

Bloodhowlers and Deathwolves opened fire as one, filling the air with death. Bolter rounds, streaking missiles, spears of plasma and heavy las hammered at the greater daemon, ordnance enough to decimate an army in seconds.

It didn’t even slow. Missiles burst in the air before they could strike, detonated by the thing’s infernal heat. Hard rounds became molten spray that pattered from

its craggy black hide. A demolisher cannon shell detonated in front of it, the shrapnel barely touching it. The daemon burst through the smoke with its roar still ringing through the fire-streaked air, its blazing eyes fixed on the control keep. On Sven.

‘Leave me,’ the Wolf Lord said. Olaf looked at him, saying nothing.

‘Do not question my orders, long-tooth,’ Sven growled, turning to face him.

‘Do not question our loyalty, pup,’ Olaf replied, unsheathing his wolf claws. Around him the other Wolf Guard activated their own weapons, the air filled with snapping blue energy.

‘I will not have the greatest of the Firehowlers die here,’ Sven said. ‘I am going to order Yngfor to target this keep and launch one of the World Wolf’s Claws.’

‘It would be minutes before it struck,’ Olaf countered. ‘You’re a tolerable fighter on a good day, pup, but do you really think you can keep that piece of wyrd-dung busy for that long?’ The rest of the Bloodguard growled their agreement.

‘Bloodhowl!’ The voice interrupted Sven before he could respond. He turned to see Harald Deathwolf pull himself from the access hatch up onto the keep’s battlement. The big Wolf Lord was grinning.

‘Not you too,’ Sven said.

Harald just laughed and slammed a hand into his pauldron. His Wolf Guard, the Riders of Morkai, were following him out onto the parapets.

‘That’s one big beast,’ Harald said as he watched Infurnace’s fiery approach. ‘I want its skull for my hall. Maybe I’ll take the name Stormpelt, eh?’ The Riders of Morkai snarled and beat fists against their breastplates. The Bloodguard responded in kind, the two grey-pelted packs facing one another down like feuding Blood Claws.

‘Yngfor,’ Sven snapped into the vox, linking to the depths of the keep, where the Long Fangs were helping to coordinate the fire support.

‘*We can’t stop it, lord,*’ the Long Fang said over the background thunder of heavy bolters. ‘*Nothing can touch it.*’

‘Cease fire,’ Sven ordered. ‘And launch one of the Claws. Lock onto this keep’s coordinates.’

‘*But lord—*’

‘Don’t argue,’ Sven said. ‘Just do it. Then get to the secondary command bunker.’ He cut the link.

Harald had activated his frost axe, the disruptor field snapping along Glacius’ twin heads.

‘It will kill us all,’ Sven said.

‘It’ll kill you, Bloodhowl, you fangless pup,’ Harald said. ‘Not me. I told you, I want its head.’ He pointed Glacius at the oncoming daemon, and howled a challenge.

Despite himself, Sven grinned. He activated Frostclaw.

Infurnace struck. Its great, cloven hooves slammed into the keep’s parapet. Rockcrete crumbled, slamming back into the Wolf Guard. Sven bowed into the wave of debris, auto-stabilisers struggling to keep him upright, feeling the wreckage hammer and score his armour. The daemon found purchase on the edge of the battlements and cracked its whip, the chains rattling. It roared its defiance in the Wolves’ faces, the heat like a melta’s passing shot. The air shimmered and wolf pelt tokens singed and caught light.

Harald struck first. Glacius was an arc of ice carving through a furnace’s heat, straight towards the daemon’s head. The blow never landed. The Bloodthirster moved with a speed that should have been impossible for a creature of its size, smashing aside Harald’s blow with the spiked haft of its own burning axe. The Wolf Lord stumbled, and a strike from the creature’s whip slammed him down onto his back.

Gunnar Felsmite was the first to die. The Wolf Guard threw himself at the monster, his claws sparking. One set buried in the thing’s thigh, cracking the black skin. Flames burst from the wounds. Gunnar twisted the claws free a split-second before the daemon beheaded him. The jetting blood steamed in the superheated air.

Denr Longblade was next. He swung his longsword up in a parry, but the axe simply carved through the steel and then down through ceramite, flesh and bone, cutting the Space Wolf in half.

Nils Ironclaw and Fior Frostmane died together, both gutted by a single vicious swing. The blow struck Sven too, meeting the head of Frostclaw. The force of it rung down through the axe, throwing it from the Wolf Lord’s numb grasp.

A single second’s opportunity. A moment amidst the fire and blood. Fangs bared, Sven threw himself inside the greater daemon’s guard and thrust Firefang up. The chainsword’s teeth bit deep into its lower torso, chewing through brass plate and wyrdflesh. Sven thrust harder with both hands, roaring as he forced the blazing sword up to its hilt.

‘I am a Firehowler,’ he snarled. ‘I am a son of the Fire Breather. You cannot burn me.’

Infurnace backhanded him, the blow sending the Wolf Lord grinding across the

parapet's bloody rockcrete in a shower of sparks. He came to a stop next to Frostclaw. He managed to get a hand on its haft again before the Bloodthirster's whip lashed out, chains snapping around his outstretched vambrace. With a grunt Sven found himself dragged up onto his knees. The rockcrete beneath him cracked and split as the beast dug its hooves in.

'*Sven!*' Olaf's wolf claws slammed down on the whip's taut length. The chains shattered and Sven slumped back, hand still on the haft of his weapon. Infurnace roared as Istun swung his power axe at the beast's back, hacking into flesh that had the consistency of coal. It spun with its terrible speed, and the Bloodguard narrowly ducked a swing of its axe.

'You've done enough,' Olaf snarled, dragging Sven to his feet.

'Yngfor,' Sven voxed.

'*Still inputting the coordinates, lord,*' the Long Fang replied.

'Then do it faster!'

'*Lord, you'll destroy half the island!*'

'You have to go,' Olaf snarled in Sven's face. 'Some of the Great Company must survive.' Behind him Istun bellowed with pain as the Bloodthirster's huge axe cleaved through his right arm. Uuntir slammed his thunder hammer into the beast's knee, but even that mighty weapon did little more than crack its dark skin. Flames licked from the wound as Infurnace shattered the Bloodguard's storm shield with a single stroke.

'Firehowler!' It was Harald. The Wolf Lord's nose was bloody and broken, and his eyes blazed with battle fury. But instead of pointing at the greater daemon, he gestured upwards. Sven followed his finger.

Directly overhead, a patch of Svellgard's slate-grey clouds was flaring with a blood-red light. A second later the voice of his flagship's vox huscarl, in orbit above, crackled in his ear.

'*Lord, a ship of the crusade fleet has just launched a lance strike against Svellgard's surface.*' Suddenly it made sense. Sven looked at Harald.

'Run.'

*Transit line four hundred and three,  
the Underworld, Midgardia*

The transport tunnel resounded with screams and the tearing of flesh. Around Egil Iron Wolf his brothers fought, back and forth across the rail lines of the sub-crust highway, hacking and chopping into the resilient, dead flesh of the

plaguebearers. The necrotised daemons felt nothing, and hacked back at the Wolves with their own rusting blades, trying to drive them against the packed earth of the tunnel wall.

The Nurgle Herald that challenged Egil was no warrior. The Iron Wolf realised that, to his surprise, as he darted back from the daemon's first clumsy swing of its pitted broadsword. It was obese and rotten to its core, reduced to shuffling after the Wolf Lord as it tried to swipe at him. Its blade would not kill Egil. But the miasma of filth that surrounded it might.

The Iron Wolf lunged, razor-fast, the wolf claws of his right fist blazing with power. They punched through the daemon's breast with ease, four points searing through pox-scarred flesh, yellow fat and cancer-gnawed bones. Egil ripped downwards, spilling a slew of vile innards, seething with fat maggots.

The Herald laughed.

Egil's visor was awash with red runes. The air around the Herald and his infernal Tallyband was hyper-toxic. Pulsating puff-ball growths infesting the plaguebearers' skin were bursting and popping all around the embattled Space Wolves, clouding the air with a noxious fug of green daemonspores. His auto-senses told him his armour was literally disintegrating, layers of ceramite being eaten away every second. When it was gone, he'd be a puddle of rotting matter in the time it took to draw breath.

Egil thrust desperately at the Herald with both fists, its broadsword clanging uselessly off his pockmarked breastplate. The wolf claws tore deep again, carving up its engorged folds, spilling pus-blood and writhing worms. The thing just tried to stab him again. It was impervious. A movement flickered through the spore cloud behind it.

'Go back to the wyrdrealm, you rancid scum,' Egil snarled as he embraced the Herald, both sets of claws locked deep inside its noxious body. A warning sound wailed in his ear as his armour lost integrity, the ceramite gone, the shaped plates of adamantium and plasteel beneath stripped almost to their servos. His breath caught, intake filters clogged with green slime. The Herald was laughing again. It leaned into Egil's helm, worm-tongue caressing his audio receptors.

'I am Phugulus, wolf-man,' it croaked. 'And I come bearing a message.'

Egil buried his claws deeper, trying to find something vital, pushing against a seemingly impervious mountain of decay. The daemon's phlegm-choked words echoed around his skull.

*'Logan Grimnar is dead.'*

'Moln!' Egil roared, and flung himself backwards, claws sliding free of the

weeping flesh. The daemon stumbled, and a bolt of blue lightning split the green smog behind it. It struck the Herald's horned skull with a thunderclap that echoed back from the highway tunnel's sloping walls.

Phugulus exploded. Moln's charged thunder hammer, swung two-handed, burst the bloated monstrosity like a huge ulcer, sending out a shockwave of gory pus and burning meat so thick that it physically drove Egil back a pace. The Herald's demise was met by a wail from its plaguebearers.

'Krak grenades, collapse the hole,' Egil snapped, slashing down the nearest lesser daemons as they tried to recover. He was rewarded seconds later by a trio of splitting detonations as anti-tank grenades collapsed the maw-tunnel the plaguebearers had crawled in through. He shouldered another daemon to the ground and stamped hard, snapping first its ribs and then its neck. More fungal balls burst as the daemons died, but without the Herald the air's toxicity readout on Egil's visor had already begun to drop. He swung at another plaguebearer that had buried its blade in Olaf Ironhide's knee joint, cutting its head from its shoulders as Olaf ripped the blade free.

'It's nothing,' the Ironwolf grunted as a scream split the tunnel's choking air.

The plague wyrm still lived. It was being hammered by the Champions of Fenris, its loathsome white flesh riddled with bolt-rounds and torn by chainswords and wolf claws. Yet still it healed, its unnatural physiology impervious to even the most violent blows of the enraged Wolves. Its fang-ringed maw snapped hungrily at them, driving part of the pack back. Judging by the shape bulging grotesquely halfway down its gelatinous gullet it had already snapped up one of the Space Wolves, his scream now silenced.

'That thing must die,' Egil said. 'We cannot let them infest any more of the underground. On me.'

The Ironguard fell upon the wyrm's twisting, writhing length. Their power weapons carved out great chunks of flesh and stinking, misshapen organs, cursing the thing back to the wyrdrealm as it splattered them with sizzling yellow slime. Egil aimed a strike for the folds beneath the Wolf who was being slowly swallowed, slicing the membranous skin open. Like some foul parody of a birth, the remains tumbled from the wound in a cascade of steaming digestive juices.

The Wolf started screaming again.

Egil stabbed down without hesitation, piercing what remained of his skull and ending his blind, acid-melted agony.

'In the Allfather's name, die!' came a shout. Throwing caution aside, Lenold

had flung himself directly towards the wyrm. As it reared before him he emptied his bolter on full auto into its maw, howling as he blasted apart fangs and flesh in a storm of mass-reactive shells.

The wyrm struck, snaking down beneath Lenold's barrage to snap at his legs. The sudden, sinuous strike pitched the Wolf from his feet. In an instant the Champion of Fenris was half locked in the thing's shattered jaw, bolter falling from his grasp as he sought purchase on its slippery skin. He grunted in pain as its sucking maw grated through his power armour.

'Lenold!' Egil threw out both hands, claws retracting as he grasped onto the Wolf's vambrace. His armour hummed and whirred as he dug his heels in, battling the daemon's strength. It twisted and shook its head like a hound, dragging Lenold a foot deeper into its acidic gut.

'Give... me... a grenade,' Lenold managed between clenched fangs.

'I'll have to let go,' Egil snarled.

'Do it.'

Egil released Lenold's vambrace. In an instant the Champion of Fenris was dragged down by the thing's horrific peristalsis, but not before the Iron Wolf was able to smack a primed krak grenade into his gauntlet.

'Back!' Egil barked. He threw himself away from the wyrm, dragging the nearest Champion with him. The tunnel highway echoed with the thunderclap of a detonation, and once again a jet of stinking offal splattered the Wolf Lord. He scrambled back to his feet, wiping yellow viscera from his visor's lenses.

The wyrm was headless, but still far from dead. It writhed madly in a pool of its own effluvium, as though still seeking bodies to devour. Even as Egil watched he could see its flesh growing and reknitting, the nubs of half-formed fangs sprouting around the decapitated skin.

'Focus your attacks,' he ordered. 'Start fighting like one pack and we may finish this damned thing.' He triggered his claws again and swung for the daemon's gaping wound.

Together Egil, his Ironguard and the Champions of Fenris ripped into the plague wyrm's remains, hacking and stabbing and slicing at the wound torn by Lenold's sacrifice. Beneath the savage fury of the Wolves, even the daemon's powers of regeneration were not strong enough. The sons of Russ fought on, drenched helm to boot in wyrdling filth, ripping the thing apart with their gauntlets, ploughing waist-deep through pulsing, sucking flesh. Egil's claws finally tore through the last hunk of its meat, splattering it in dripping chunks against the tunnel's wall. He spread his arms and loosed a rare howl, turned

mechanical-sounding by his vox amplifiers. The Ironguard and the Champions joined him, united in their slaughterous exaltation. The noise echoed eerily down the tunnel as the stinking remains of the wyrm shimmered and, finally, flickered from existence.

The hunt for the Great Wolf would go on.

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjalnar*

Ragnar beat the horror's head against the side of the vox station. The thing simply giggled, gibbering some arcane nonsense. With a snarl the Wolf Lord swung *Frostfang*, splitting apart the amorphous pink flesh and revving the weapon until the thing imploded into nothingness. From the nothingness, popping into being like a conjurer's trick, two lesser blue horrors lunged at him. He beat them both down with his chainsword, spitting on their shifting remains. Finally, they too vanished from reality.

'Room secured,' Ragnar growled, panting.

With the maleficarum trickery broken the vox terminal hadn't been far from their boarding point, but nor had the way been easy. More daemons had dropped from a service hatch, mottled black furies with fluttering wings. Confined to the corridor, they'd been butchered in seconds. The beast of Nurgle in front of the terminal's doors had been a more difficult challenge. De Mornay had eventually vaporised its bloated skull with a plasma bolt after Sister Marie's combi-flamer had set it alight.

The vox terminal beyond had been filled with capering horrors, who let out an almighty cacophony when the Wolves blasted their way in. Ragnar had kicked the first in the face as wyrdfire had begun to coalesce around its flailing arms, smashing it into a hundred glass shards that reflected back crazed images before they vanished.

The rest of the horrors soon followed. Svengril and Tor secured the far door while Ragnar activated the star fort's vox uplink. After a moment the monitors blinked into life, and a low hum permeated the room. The glow underlit Ragnar's smile.

'This is Ragnar Blackmane to all *Vlka Fenryka*. The Ramilies-class star fort designate *Mjalnar* is currently subject to a daemoniac infestation. It is being cleansed. Repeat, it is being cleansed. All forces take note, but no reinforcements are required.' He ended the recording and waited while it uploaded to the beacon, the transmission cogitator rattling.

“No reinforcements are required”,’ de Mornay echoed. He sounded incredulous.

Ragnar shrugged.

‘The corruption isn’t as bad as Krom made out it would be.’

‘You nearly tore each other apart,’ de Mornay said, looking from Ragnar to the Blackpelts who crouched tense, silent, waiting for his next order.

‘That was before we found an enemy to fight,’ Ragnar said, without a hint of irony.

‘Give me the vox horn.’

‘What?’

‘I said give me the vox, I need to send a transmission.’

‘To whom?’

‘You forget yourself, Wolf,’ de Mornay snapped, his voice suddenly loud. ‘I am a member of the God-Emperor’s Holy Inquisition. The sum total of those I answer to in this galaxy is nil, bar Him on Terra. Now *give me the warp-damned vox horn!*’

One of Ragnar’s Wulfen growled at him. De Mornay turned to the bestial warrior, eyes blazing.

‘Be silent!’ he barked. The Wulfen took a crouched pace backwards, eyes wide. Its packmates whimpered.

Ragnar stared at the inquisitor. For the briefest moment, he could see the fiery young warrior that had resisted the Dark Angels on Calva Senioris, still bloodied, still unbowed. Wordlessly, he passed the vox horn to him. The disparity in sizes between the towering, armour-plated, ichor-streaked Wolf Lord and the old, palanquin-bound mortal only emphasised the latter’s strength of will.

‘This is Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay, Ordo Hereticus, Divisio Segmentum Obscurus, ident code four five seven, seven three eight alpha. Voice scan initiate.’ Ragnar looked at his pack-kin, all staring at the glaring inquisitor. The voice scan must have come back positive, for de Mornay continued.

‘Requesting clearance to all data files on ordo forces currently operating within the Fenris System, priority A-one.’ He entered a string of galactic coordinates and location tag-codes. ‘Combat group Omicron, Ordo Malleus Chamber Militant Third Brotherhood. Establish link.’

Ragnar’s surprised expression was replaced by a frown as de Mornay spoke again.

‘Captain Stern, this is Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay of the Ordo Hereticus,

currently transmitting from the star fort *Mjalnar*.’

‘What’re you doing?’ Ragnar demanded, but de Mornay ignored him.

‘Yes, we’ve met resistance. Corruption level three beta or kappa, no higher. But I suspect it will grow worse the deeper we get.’

Ragnar turned his back on the inquisitor and gestured to Tor. ‘Take point, we’re moving on.’

The Blackpelt nodded eagerly, punching the door’s activation rune. Beyond it lay another empty corridor. Ragnar scowled.

De Mornay caught up with them quickly, palanquin grinding and juddering on its servitor tracks.

‘What was that?’ Ragnar said without bothering to look at the inquisitor.

‘I called in reinforcements.’

‘I told you we don’t need any. I have six more packs waiting with the fleet, they only need a word from me to board and storm this accursed place.’

‘Then forgive me if the thought of being surrounded by your Wolves isn’t the comfort it was before I saw you nearly turn into ravening monsters,’ de Mornay said. Ragnar snarled, but the retort died in his throat as the walls shuddered, and a fresh wave of wyrdlings launched their ambush.

### *The Void, Fenris System*

Stern cut the vox-link and turned to the *Star Drake*’s gunnery huscarl.

‘That’s enough. I have new orders. Helmsman, set a course for *Mjalnar*’s last recorded location. I shall provide more detailed coordinates momentarily.’

As the Space Wolves serfs scurried to do their new masters’ bidding, Stern returned his gaze to the strike cruiser’s viewing port. Beyond it *Gormenjarl* drifted through the sea of stars. The mighty Ramilies was no more. It listed, oxygen venting from its shattered spires and bulkheads, surrounded by a halo of burned, broken debris. Its gun decks lay blown apart and its docking spines twisted, while a single ruthlessly accurate, point-blank strike from *Star Drake*’s main cannon had demolished its command deck and whatever slinking, squirming horrors had lurked in the darkness within it.

The star fort was still far from completely annihilated, but it was badly wrecked. Stern had tagged it with a priority beacon, forbidding entry to it by Inquisitorial mandate. When time allowed, the Emperor’s servants would return to finish the job he had started. For now, though, he was needed elsewhere.

‘Brethren, perform the Rites of Cleansing and rearm. We are not done yet. Give

thanks and praise to the Emperor that He has blessed us with further purpose this day.'

### *The World Wolf's Lair, Svellgard*

Like a spear cast by the Allfather from distant Terra, a lance of fire fell from Svellgard's heavens and destroyed all it touched. The pillar of flame ignited the grey clouds, burning them away and leaving a halo of radiance around its crackling shaft. It struck the very heart of the island housing the World Wolf's Lair, slamming down onto the parapets of the central fire control keep.

Infurnace burned. The monstrous greater daemon had proven impervious to every hard round and munition fired at it. Against the force of a concentrated lance strike, however, even it was not untouchable. The ultra-heavy energy beam caught the Bloodthirster at its heart. As the battlements around it shattered, Infurnace stood transfixed, hooves braced and arms spread wide, its roar of fury melding with the thunderous crack of the beam's impact. The daemon began to disintegrate, flesh turning brittle, bursting apart, wings snapping and becoming ash. The light of the lance strike engulfed it, as the walls of the keep melted and collapsed.

As swiftly as it had come, the pillar of energy blinked from existence, its thunderclap rolling across the ever-receding sea and echoing back from the nearby islands.

The noise woke Sven. For a moment the impact with the dirt had combined with the sensory overload of the lance's strike to short out even his enhanced senses. His chrono display told him he'd been unconscious for a little over thirty seconds. In that time the keep had gone, replaced by a crater of fused rockcrete blocks and melted plasteel girders.

The Wolf Lord dragged himself to his feet. Beside him Harald stirred, blinking in the aftermath of the strike. Clotting blood on his brow had joined that of his broken nose, matting his hair. Sven had grabbed him when he'd realised what was happening and triggered his jump pack, Longleap, driving the modified dual-vector thrust Valkyris pattern to full turbo. According to his visor display the strain had momentarily shorted out the pack's lift capacity. Kregga and Olaf had both leapt clear as well, dragging a pair of Harald's Riders of Morkai with them. Of the rest of the twin packs, however, there was no sign.

Frostclaw was embedded in the stony earth a few yards from the deep furrow that marked Sven's brutal landing. The Wolf Lord limped to the axe and tugged

it free, absently noting the injuries scrolling across his visor. A twisted right calf and two fractured ribs, along with a sprained left hand. He tried to flex it but could not. Pain flared momentarily before it was overwhelmed by the stimms pumping through his body. He gritted his fangs. Focus.

The edge of the crater where the keep had once stood was smoking. Sven hefted his frost axe and limped towards it. He heard Olaf call out behind him as the Bloodguard gathered his wits, but he ignored him. His wounds throbbed, but he ignored them too. He had to know.

His jump pack recharged with a ping, its rune blinking green again. He reached the crater's lip, mounting the rubble of its outer edge with some difficulty. Beyond, he found himself looking down into a tangled bowl of wreckage, the keep's remains melted and fused together by raw heat.

At its centre stood Infurnace.

At first Sven thought the daemon had been petrified. It stood with its arms wide, its flesh now ashen and stiff, its wings gone. Like some nightmarish statue, it reigned in silence over the devastation surrounding it, a testimony to total annihilation in a galaxy of eternal war.

Then it moved, its horned head turning fractionally to face Sven, ash drifting from it. The Wolf Lord saw the fires that still smouldered, deep in the cracked pits of its eyes.

Sven howled, and triggered Longleap. The pack flared in harmony with the Firehowler's rage, launching him at full turbo into the pit on a pillar of fire. Infurnace moved, but only slightly, as though battling its own paralysis, parts of its burned form breaking and crumbling. It could not stop the Wolf, not now. Sven struck it from above, boots-first, the impact shattering whatever remained of the daemon's spine. In a great cascade of ash and sparking embers he crashed through the greater daemon, and Svellgard's cruel wind finally whipped its remains away. For a moment, the Wolf Lord's advanced hearing detected the distant echo of an angry roar. Then the last of the dust settled, and all was still.

Sven rose from his crouch amidst the wreckage, and turned slowly back towards the crater lip. The crack in his fused ribs ached. Harald, Olaf, and the surviving Bloodguard were standing looking down at him, splattered in grime, blood and ichor. Sven bared his fangs.

'Find out whose ship did this,' he snarled, pointing at the rubble beneath him.

*Iron Requiem, in high orbit above Svellgard*

The machine-spirit of *Iron Requiem* thrilled with the knowledge of another successful strike. Hardwired into the ancient warship via his command throne, Iron Captain Terrek felt the ship's exaltation as his own. It brought joy to a soul that had not experienced such an emotion in over a century, momentarily warming cold synth-skin and making the Iron Hand's autoheart thud a little faster. For a moment – just a fraction of a second – the Iron Captain remembered what it had been like to be human.

And then the moment passed, a statistical anomaly, subsumed and made irrelevant by the cold, hard reality of the present. The Space Marine shifted in his throne, data cables rattling. It would not do to become so engrossed in the triumphs and failings of his own flagship, no matter how tempting. As much as it vexed him, his duties demanded more than a purely machine instinct.

Still, the exhilaration was not entirely misplaced. The lance strike had been accurate to a thousandth of a degree, a noteworthy achievement even for the *Requiem's* venerable targeting systems. It had also resulted in the annihilation of the target. The heat signature being emitted by the neverborn entity no longer registered on the *Requiem's* powerful augurs. The flow of information Terrek was constantly receiving via his auto-senses estimated that fatal collateral damage consisted of no more than two to three dozen individuals and some rockcrete and plasteel command structures. Again, for a lance strike into the heart of a contested battlefield, it was an excellent final result. One to be replicated, and swiftly.

Terrek requested further data. It flowed to him without hesitation, ramping up his sensory input, his mind a blur of scrolling, ever-changing digits and statistical readouts. Beneath the frenetic activity of his neural nodes, his deeper consciousness swam, torpid, heavy and cold. He would like – it considered – to petition the Iron Council for a transferral to the position of Master of the Fleet. The current Master was reaching the end of his independent productivity, weighed down as he was by almost half a millennium of augmentations. Given his experience and machine-bred aptitude in the field, Terrek considered the likelihood of the success of his application to be as high as seventy-eight per cent.

Such thoughts did not register with the main thrust of the Iron Captain's attention. He was busy communing with the other ships of the fleet, touching upon their machine-spirits directly without having to waste time going through the tedium of vox-channels and the sluggishness of fleshy minds, so prone to misunderstanding and obstinacy. There could be no delay. They had to strike, as

the old Medusan phrase went, while the iron still burned. He estimated a window of opportunity no wider than a few minutes, after which the optimality of a full-scale orbital bombardment would begin to decrease.

As though in answer to his thoughts, a worrisome miscalculation reared its ugly head amidst the stream of data codes. Something nagged in the Iron Captain's ear. It took him a moment to realise it was the click of his personal vox. A transmission.

As though from a dream, the drifting, distant voice of his vox seneschal reached him. He dismissed the tiny man with a single, raised silver digit, already aware of the contents of his message.

'Epathus,' Terrek said, his voice, for a moment, indistinguishable from that of a mind-wiped translation servitor.

'*Iron Captain,*' the Ultramarine replied. He was currently onboard his own flagship, now holding station on the other side of Svellgard, between the moon and Frostheim. Even over the vox, he managed to somehow sound altogether more human than Terrek.

'I am preparing firing solutions, brother-captain,' Terrek said, struggling to draw his mind far enough out of the machine cant to formulate a diplomatic response. 'I must not be disturbed.'

*'Firing solutions for targets on the surface of Svellgard?'*

'Your logic is flawless on this occasion, brother-captain.' The last word bore a suffix of binary code, a sudden blurt that Terrek had to clamp down on, like a tick. A shadow of discomfort passed through his thoughts, soon gone.

*'With respect, such a course of action has been advised against by the rest of the crusade fleet, including Supreme Grand Master Azrael,'* Epathus said. *'Except in the direst of circumstances.'*

'I compute the three identifiable warp rifts below Svellgard's oceans to constitute dire circumstances,' Terrek replied.

*'But shelling the Wolves from orbit on one of their own moons would represent another,'* Epathus countered. *'They will already be furious at the damage your first strike has caused.'*

'The damage may have included as few as two-dozen casualties.'

*'Two-dozen too many in their eyes, I assure you.'*

'Four times as many are likely to have perished at the hand of the greater daemon assailing them had I not struck.'

*'A fact that will only antagonise them even further. I have served alongside the Wolves before, Iron Captain, on Granthia Nine. Depriving them of a great kill is*

*considered a grievous insult.'*

'That is wholly illogical,' Terrek said, feeling the faintest stirrings of anger flicker in the depths of his neuro-circuitry.

*'But it stands,'* Epathus said. *'If you want an unchecked bombardment now, you risk initiating a full-scale civil war. Their twin fleets in orbit alongside us will retaliate, and that will only be the start.'*

The numbers had stopped. They hung in their thousands in the air around Terrek, blinking insistently. An algorithm left incomplete did not portend to good things, and the Ultramarine's interruption had pushed his calculations beyond their time threshold. By now it was likely that the Space Wolves had sought shelter in their lair's subterranean bunkers. Casualty ratios from an orbital bombardment would be slashed by over two thirds.

Terrek could no longer destroy both the neverborn and Svellgard's Space Wolf defenders at a single stroke.

Why he would want to do so was not entirely certain, beyond the fact that his logic engines had traced the reason for the crusade fleet's existence back to the persecution of the sons of Russ. Terrek was simply attempting to cut out the wasteful intermediary experience. The Ultramarines, however, clearly possessed less foresight. He scratched at one of his few remaining patches of human flesh, white and scarred beneath the housing of his right cranial bionic optic.

'Very well, Epathus,' he said. 'I commend myself to your alternatives, whatever they may be.'

*'Not an orbital bombardment,'* the Ultramarine said. *'But an orbital assault. Let us demonstrate to the Wolves the power of the Imperium, and what happens to the enemies of that power. That will show us where they truly stand.'*

*Transit Line four hundred and three,  
the Underworld, Midgardia*

Egil wiped green daemonspoor sludge from his helmet's vox grille and the thermal waste dissipaters on his backpack, switching to his armour's internal oxygen reserve with a thought-impulse.

'If more of them carry their infections down here we won't be able to continue our hunt for the Great Wolf,' Moln said grimly. Like all the Space Wolves still with Egil, the few scraps of his armour not coated in a crusting layer of slime shone scarred silver, stripped to the lowest layers by the nightmarish atmosphere.

'I agree,' said Orven. 'If the surface has been completely overrun we do not

have long before they begin to infest these tunnels as well.'

'But is it overrun?' Bjorn wondered out loud. 'What of Conran's signal? It comes from the Magma Gates, does it not?'

Egil nodded, but stayed silent. Conran's distress transmission had been weighing on him since he had detected it. Suddenly things had grown complicated again. Had his Great Company evacuated Midgardia as he'd ordered? Or did Conran's presence point to a larger contingent of Ironwolves? If not then why was he here? And what had caused him to loop a remote distress pattern from the peak of the Magma Gates?

Suddenly, his quest for the Great Wolf did not look so noble, or quite as selfless. He had abandoned his own Great Company, his own pack-kin, during a difficult and dangerous operation. He had left them leaderless. Such an act harmed the integrity of the whole strike force. Even now he could feel the distress of the surviving Champions of Fenris as they sought guidance following Lenold's demise. When pack leaders died and the links in the chain of command were shattered, the warriors of Fenris returned to their instinctive state, giving deference to the alpha. Until one established itself, a leaderless pack could be prone to prevarication and ill-considered decisions. Egil could feel just such uncertainty creeping through the Wolves now, in the Champions and even among his own Ironguard.

He glanced at Grimnar's battered, gilded thunderwolf skull. It was cradled in the claws of a crouching Wulfen, the beast looking up earnestly at Egil. For a moment the Iron Wolf considered the paradox, of the symbol of one of the greatest Wolves ever to have lived being held in the malformed hands of something that they couldn't even be sure wasn't wyrd-tainted. Egil realised, however, that it had taken a moment's introspection to come to that conclusion. When he had first seen the Wulfen with the Great Wolf's broken crown, he had seen only a wolf-brother guarding one of their Chapter's sacred relics. The other Wolf Lords could yet disagree, but Egil knew he had come to accept the place of his cursed brethren within the ranks. They were all one.

The thought made up his mind. He addressed the combined pack.

'We are returning to the surface,' he said. 'If only momentarily. We must discover what is occurring there, how we might be of assistance, as well as resupply and receive reinforcements. If the situation is stable, we shall return here immediately to resume our hunt.'

As he'd expected, there were some growls of challenge. He faced them down, as unbending as the iron that marked his crest.

‘I am a Wolf Lord, leader of eleven packs. Honour demanded I come here seeking our lost king. I do not deny, I desired it in my own hearts as well. But I cannot spurn my duties any more. I must see to my Great Company and coordinate the defence of this world, or whatever remains of it. I have promised to return here as soon as I am able, and I cement that now with an oath, before you all. I swear I will find the Great Wolf.’

The growls became more approving, and there were nods, even among the Champions of Fenris.

‘Those who wish to stay here can remain, and continue the hunt,’ Egil went on. ‘But I shall be taking the thunderwolf’s skull. I will keep it safe, until I can give it back to Logan Grimnar in person, and tell him the saga of the brave Wolves who fought and died to preserve it.’ More approval. Egil knew from long experience that now, more than ever, it was time to show strength and certainty. He turned away from the pack, drawing up a chart of sub-level one on his visor. The nearest route to the Magma Gates began at a tunnel branching eastwards from the highway, a hundred and fifty paces back up the rail line. Egil began to walk.

Behind him, the entire pack followed.

### *Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjalnar*

Something terrible had taken up residence in what Ragnar’s visor schematics called Strategorium Six-A. Before hell had overturned reality onboard *Mjalnar* the room had served as a small strategic amphitheatre, plasteel tiers lined with cogitator lecterns encircling a large, central holochart.

What had once been a space reserved for grave military discourse was now a playground for creatures with no fixed form. Horrors of Tzeentch leapt, skittered and cartwheeled around the buckling chitin plates that had been the strategorium’s seat tiers. Above the holochart, like a nightmarish projection, a more powerful daemon had manifested in the shape of a huge, disembodied eye – a throbbing, lidless, veined orb with an iris that shimmered and changed with kaleidoscopic intensity, passing through every colour in the spectrum in a matter of heartbeats. The jet-black well of the slit pupil at the heart of the storm of colours seemed bottomless, fathomless, as equally impossible as both finite and infinite realities. Even just glancing at it, Ragnar felt a splitting migraine burst and flare behind his own eyes.

De Mornay was right. The nearer they drew to *Mjalnar*’s tainted heart, the

worse the corruption was becoming.

‘Blackpelts, into them!’ Ragnar roared.

His Wolf Guard needed no encouragement. Howling oaths and spitting for luck, they flung themselves into the strategorium, slaughtering the nearest horrors without hesitation. Ragnar made straight for the wyrdling eye at the centre of the chamber, not meeting its gaze, focussing on each individual creature in his path as he split and carved and cut them into shards of riotous colour.

‘Ragnar, wait!’ shouted de Mornay from the chamber’s entrance. His warning came too late. Over the now-familiar stench of the wyrd, Ragnar caught the distinctive, chlorine-like smell of ozone. A second later a thunderbolt of purple lightning snapped up out of the daemon eye’s pupil.

The bolt struck Tor Wolfheart square in the breastplate, slamming him back into the side of the tier behind him. The Wolf slumped, his armour smoking, and for a moment Ragnar thought the Blackpelt was dead. Then he stirred, and Ragnar felt a rush of relief. It was short-lived.

Tor began to scream.

The Wolf Guard lurched forward onto his knees, his bolt pistol and power axe clattering to the deck. Gauntlets scrabbled at the breastplate where the lightning had earthed itself. Then the metal armour cracked, splitting the plate’s embossed wolf’s head. Tor’s screaming grew worse.

Ragnar could only watch as something that looked like a fleshy maw ripped itself open in the Space Wolf’s chest. The power armour cracked further, and the Wolf’s organs began to thrust up out of his broken chest bones in a wash of blood. The terrible wound seemed to spread, ripping its way from Tor’s thorax to his groin, the armour peeling back grotesquely. The Wolf Lord realised the Blackpelt was literally being turned inside out.

It was Sister Marie who ended the Wolf’s misery. She engulfed Tor in a jet from her combi-flamer. The Wolf’s screaming as the fire roasted his deformed body sounded almost relieved compared to what had come before. Finally he stopped, the once proud warrior reduced to indiscernible, burned flesh.

The daemonic eye unleashed its lightning again. The purple bolt cracked into the chitin flooring a yard to the left of Svengril the Younger. Fleshless, raw hands burst up out of the smoking impact, grasping at the Wolf’s boots. Snarling, Svengril stamped them to a bloody mulch.

‘Take cover,’ Ragnar shouted, dropping down behind one of the cogitator lecterns ringing the strategorium’s centre. The Wolves and Marie did likewise, de Mornay rolling his palanquin back out of the chamber.

*'We need reinforcements,'* the inquisitor voxed.

Ragnar didn't respond.

The horrors capering around the eye shrieked and bawled with insane laughter as their master fired again. A third bolt hammered the lectern Uller Greylock was crouched behind. In an eyeblink the cogitator was transformed into a cloud of multi-coloured butterflies that dispersed into the wyrd-charged air. Uller, wide-eyed, found himself sheltering behind nothing. The power of the daemonic orb's mutating energies crackled and snapped around it, and the horrors laughed all the harder, like children delighted with their parent's trick.

Howls interrupted them. The sound came from two of the four corridors branching off from the chamber, bouncing and echoing back from its high dome. Ragnar felt a thrill of relief, and rose in time to see his Blood Claws bust into the strategorium from two opposite sides.

Except they were no longer his Blood Claws.

What had once been Maegar's Pack and Asgeir's Allslayers were now something else. The mark of the Wulfen was unmistakably on them. They'd discarded their helmets and much of the armour plating on their legs and forearms, revealing wicked claws and bristling fur. They ripped into the strategorium like a primal tide, fangs bared, muscles straining as they savaged the horrors around the eye.

The thing attempted to defend itself. More lightning snapped from its centre. Wulfen convulsed, one collapsing with a howl as its bones were transformed into jelly, another choking as both arms ran and melted together into a fleshy tentacle that then proceeded to strangle the writhing Wolf to death. Another bolt struck like a chain, bouncing between three of the former Blood Claws. One was turned instantly into a frozen statue of glittering, multi-coloured gems, another collapsed as its blood was transformed into amasec, and the third simply vanished, leaving behind a small silver eye token.

Such warping, unnatural powers would have broken the sanity of most attackers instantly. To the Wulfen it only served to heighten their instinctive blood-fury. The two Murderpacks hit the centre of the chamber at the same time, leaping up onto the holochart from all sides. The eye managed one last bolt – turning a Wulfen into an open book that caught light and blazed away to nothingness – before their claws reached it. The thing deformed and burst with stinking, clear liquid as the Wolves' talons raked its cornea, ripping into the retina, gouging down to the vitreous centre. The daemonic pupil dilated, the slit of black nothingness widening, and with a wet thud it detonated, showering the chamber

in gelatinous chunks.

The Wulfen howled their victory. Ragnar dropped down into the holo-pit, approaching them tentatively. The murderlust was still in their lupine eyes, and he knew himself how difficult such passions made it to differentiate between friend and foe, or understand when the battle was over.

One of the Wulfen on top of the chart, still splattered in the daemon eye's viscera, leapt down to face Ragnar. For a second, the beast held his gaze. Then it bowed. Only then did Ragnar recognise pack leader Maegar.

'Lord,' the transformed warrior managed to grunt from between its fangs. Ragnar felt an unexpected upsurge of remorse. This was his fault.

'Well met, Brother Maegar,' he said quietly, putting a hand on the Wulfen's slime-slick shoulder. It seemed to shudder, but maintained its deferential pose.

'Could not... control pack...' Maegar growled. 'Asgeir dead. One pack now.'

Ragnar understood. Beneath the strain of being led in circles through the infested star fort, Maegar and Asgeir's Blood Claws had succumbed en-masse to the curse. In the fighting to reach the strategorium Asgeir had fallen, and now the Wulfen had instinctively banded together into a single Murderpack.

Ragnar realised they were all staring at him, suddenly silent. It was no different to meeting the glare of a pack of wild Fenrisian wolves. Ragnar let his own gaze slowly travel over them, grip tightening fractionally on Maegar's shoulder.

'It is good to see you again, brothers,' he said, slowly and clearly. 'Now on, to the heart of this place. The wyrdling stink is still strong in the air. I would see it purged.'

As one, the Wulfen snarled their approval.

### *The Magma Gates, Midgardia*

Egil reached sub-level seven before Olaf Ironhide collapsed. The pack assumed defensive positions as the Iron Wolf moved back down the transit line to the fallen warrior's side.

'The rot,' the Ironguard growled between gritted fangs. He nodded down at his leg. Despite the enhanced clotting agents in Space Marine blood, the injury dealt behind his knee plate by the plaguebearer's sword was still leaking a discoloured, yellowish fluid.

'Skol,' Egil said, supporting Olaf up into a sitting position. The servo-skull buzzed over the Space Wolf's leg, the bio-scanner implanted into its left eye socket bathing the scarred silver plates in a wash of green light. After a moment

it blinked out, and the results uploaded to Egil's bionics.

'The organics of your left leg are severely infected,' he said after a moment.

'I know, lord. The damn spores got in.'

Egil nodded. 'I'm no Wolf Priest, but the limb is ruined and the infection will spread if we don't remove it. If it hasn't already.'

'You do it, lord,' Olaf said. He thrust his Fenrisian rune sword towards the Iron Wolf. Egil took it.

'Bjorn, help me with the plate,' he said. The two Wolves stripped the remains of the power armour from Olaf's leg. The stink of rotting meat filled the air as the final part was lifted away. Skol's stab-lumen lit up the ruin that had been the Ironguard's limb. The flesh around the initial wound had completely sloughed off, revealing yellow bone pitted with infection. The rest of the leg was rotten with fast-working decay. Some skin came off along with the power plates, revealing the dark-veined muscle beneath. Pus welled up from the injury, and the skin further up the limb was as white as a Fenrisian helwinter.

'Do it,' Olaf urged. 'Quickly.'

Egil didn't hesitate. While Bjorn lifted the leg, the Wolf Lord slid Olaf's combat knife in a circular motion around the Space Marine's upper thigh. Dark, infected blood pattered on the tunnel transit's dirt floor. The flesh parted, and Egil began to cut into the meat of Olaf's limb with his sword. The Ironguard grunted, hands clutching handfuls of dirt. His body would be flooded with stimms and counterseptic while his secondary heart kicked in, countering the bloodloss. It would all be in vain if Egil didn't finish the amputation before the infected leg corrupted the rest of the Space Wolf.

He felt the Fenrisian blade grate as it struck Olaf's femur. He triggered the weapon's disruptor field, blue energy wreathing it and cutting through the bone in a heartbeat. Olaf gasped, but still didn't cry out. Egil cut the power to the blade, not wanting to further widen the wound, and cleaved through the remaining muscle with a grunt. Olaf slumped back.

'Let it clot,' Egil said. 'Moln and Orven will help you.'

'One will do,' Olaf growled.

'Orven.' Egil gestured at Highfell, who bent to help Olaf onto his remaining leg. The blood from his stump had already slowed to a trickle, the flow stemmed by the Space Marine's Larraman cells.

'We go on,' Egil said.

The grav lifts into the Magma Gates' depths were no longer functioning. The

pack was forced to go from one supply transit to another, entering the surface settlement through a network of low service corridors and forgotten storage bunkers. By the time they reached sub-level one the signs of burning were obvious.

The pack slowed as it reached the surface level, becoming more cautious. The vox offered no inkling as to what awaited them beyond the underworld. All the channels were dead, a wall of static. All that existed was Conran's remote emergency beacon, blinking from somewhere in the Magma Gates' command spire. A grim, sinking feeling settled over the Wolves as they began to climb through the Gates' main levels.

Everything had suffered fire damage. Walls, floors and ceilings were blackened, and smoke still rose from twisted, melted machinery that occupied the service levels. Fire smouldered in places, and the air was dark and heavy with a pall of ash. They started coming across bodies too – at first just a few blackened bones, but more the higher they went. Soon the corridors of the Magma Gates were wall-to-wall with blackened skeletons, their contorted, grasping death-postures speaking of the agony and desperation of their final moments. They had been burned alive, en-masse.

'Something terrible has happened here,' Moln growled as they climbed a blackened stairwell towards the higher levels. Egil didn't reply. The air was thick with burned flesh, but the stink of wyrdlings, that sickly smell that had invaded his senses for hours, was suddenly absent. The only occupants of the Magma Gates were the sightless, scorched skeletons of thousands of its citizens and defenders.

'Conran's signal is near,' Egil said. 'Two more levels up.'

'If he was caught in this damnable fire we'll find only ash,' Moln grunted.

'I pray to Russ you're wrong, brother.'

They passed through a council reception chamber, elegant rustbark furniture reduced to charred stumps, the formerly plush carpet now a few fused strips around the flaking walls. Overhead, a ceiling fresco representing the Fenris System had been darkened by smoke, but had remained otherwise miraculously untouched. Egil blink-saved an image of it on his bionics as they passed underneath and reviewed it as they climbed to the next level.

He lingered on the blue-and-white orb of Fenris, and then on the sky-blue of Frostheim, and its darker attendant, Svellgard. Finally, the purple orb of Midgardia, occupying the centre of the painting. Classification *Terrum Mortis*, death world. Six and a half billion souls, eight hundred and ninety-two

settlements, a production output of timber, toxins, minerals and, of course, warriors. Wolves had died defending it many times before, and each time the invader had been defeated. The Magma Gates, the greatest above-ground settlement, the conduit between the underworld and the surface and one of the planet's bastions of Imperial authority, had never fallen.

Until now. Even if no attackers stalked the hallways, corridors and sleeping blocks, it was apparent that the Magma Gates were only a husk, gutted by whatever infernal fire had been unleashed upon them. It would have been easy to ascribe the grim destruction to foul maleficarum, but the accusation didn't sit well with Egil. The creatures of the wyrd loved to corrupt, to twist and defile. They loved perverting the order of mankind, loved mocking it with their insane parodies. They were bred from humanity's greatest fears and insecurities, and from such things they drew strength. Destruction – at least the unthinkingly total, undiscerning, anonymous ruination Egil saw around him – did not befit the servants of the Dark Gods. There was no defilement here. Death alone reigned, a charred ash-spectre.

They found Conran. His remains were in one of the Planetary Governor's apartments, adjacent to a shuttle landing strut. His armour was singed black. Egil broke the neck seal, and found badly cooked meat within. The emergency beacon was still transmitting from his gorget. Egil cancelled it.

The body was not alone. Cradled between Conran and the wall were a jumble of bones. Skol's scan showed four distinct sets of remains, male and female, of varying ages. It looked as though Conran had been attempting to shield them when the firestorm had rushed down the corridor.

'Take him,' Egil said to two of the Champions of Fenris, pointing at Conran. He looked at the bones the Wolf was cradling. A glance at the planetary overview files saved into his auto-sense data backup showed that the current Governor of Midgardia, Wellim Sandrin, had a wife and two children.

Moln's shout from the far end of the corridor broke the Wolf Lord's pondering. The Ironguard had stalked to the blast doors leading out onto the spire's landing strut. Finding them half open and the mechanism burned out, he'd stepped onto the platform.

'Morkai's heads,' he swore loudly as he saw what lay beyond. Egil joined him, checking his armour was still properly sealed as he stepped outside of the Magma Gates' shell.

He didn't need to ask the reason for Moln's curse. What had happened to the settlement became suddenly clear. What had happened to all of Midgardia

became clear.

The planet burned. From horizon to horizon a towering black thunderhead – like an endless mountain range – blossomed up into the sky. Between it and the spire, a vast plane of grey stretched – ash, bristling with the stubs of a million burned and charred trees. The wind that whipped at the two Space Wolves shifted vast dunes of ash and filled the air with thick, swirling dust and sparking embers. The sky overhead was as choked as the ground below, creating a ruddy twilight underlit, in the distance, by the inferno that continued to consume the rest of the planet.

Midgardia's spore jungles – tainted or not – were no more. An irradiated, windblown desert now surrounded the Magma Gates. The daemons were gone.

Without a word, Egil sent a hailing message to the *Wolftide's* vox array, now blinking green in the top left of his visor.

### Iron Requiem, *in high orbit above Svellgard*

The Wolf wanted to talk. In fact, judging by a scan of the stress levels in his voice, he wanted to kill.

Terrek wasn't listening to him. Key words pinged in the Iron Hand's backup mem-bank, logged for later review: *outrage, revenge, traitor, betrayal*. Beyond that, the Iron Captain had only briefly recorded that he was talking to Sven Bloodhowl, Wolf Lord of the Firehowlers Great Company. One day it may be relevant. Just not now.

Terrek's primary concern was for his deployment schematics. The entire might of Clan Company Haarmek was to be combat-dropped on Svellgard within the next hour. Current strength stood at ten squads, besides his own – six tactical, two devastator, two assault, along with another of bikers and the supporting armour. The venerable Dreadnought elders, slumbering in the battle-barge's hold-sanctums, would not be awakened for so simple an operation.

It had already been planned out in detail. Terrek had spent the time in-transit to the Fenris System with a choir of stratego-servitors, assessing all the potential war zones, the likely opposition, and deciding upon the best means of engagement. Now he aligned the preparation matrix for the moon of Svellgard with a high-priority neverborn incursion. Only one element required the reanalysis he was currently undertaking – that the Space Wolves were now to be considered non-hostiles. Despite what the Wolf was saying to him over the vox.

The orbital assault algorithm was almost complete when a wailing intrusion

snapped at his attention. He was dimly aware of bridge serfs scurrying and shouting around him, beyond the ghostly vision of his machine self. His probes located the problem without their garbled messages, shouted over the screaming of proximity alarms.

There was another fleet translating in-system.

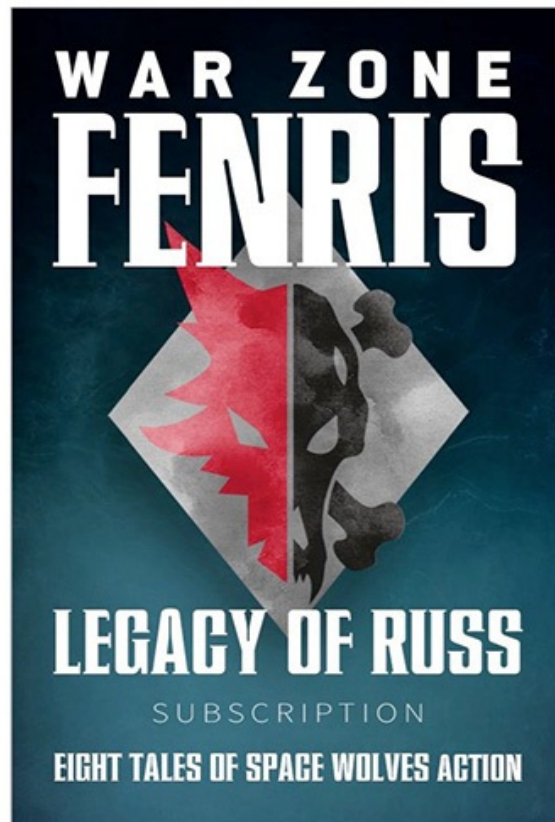
*They were home.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Robbie MacNiven** is a highland-born History graduate from the University of Edinburgh. His hobbies include reenacting, football and obsessing over Warhammer 40,000. He has written the Deathwatch short story 'Redblade', and the Warhammer 40,000 stories 'A Song for the Lost' and 'Blood and Iron' for Black Library.



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Published in 2016 by Black Library, Games Workshop Ltd,  
Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

Cover illustration by Mac Smith.  
Produced by Games Workshop in Nottingham.

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ISBN: 978-1-78572-214-1

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