



WARHAMMER
40,000



LEGACY OF RUSS 8

FATE
UNBOUND

ROBBIE MACNIVEN



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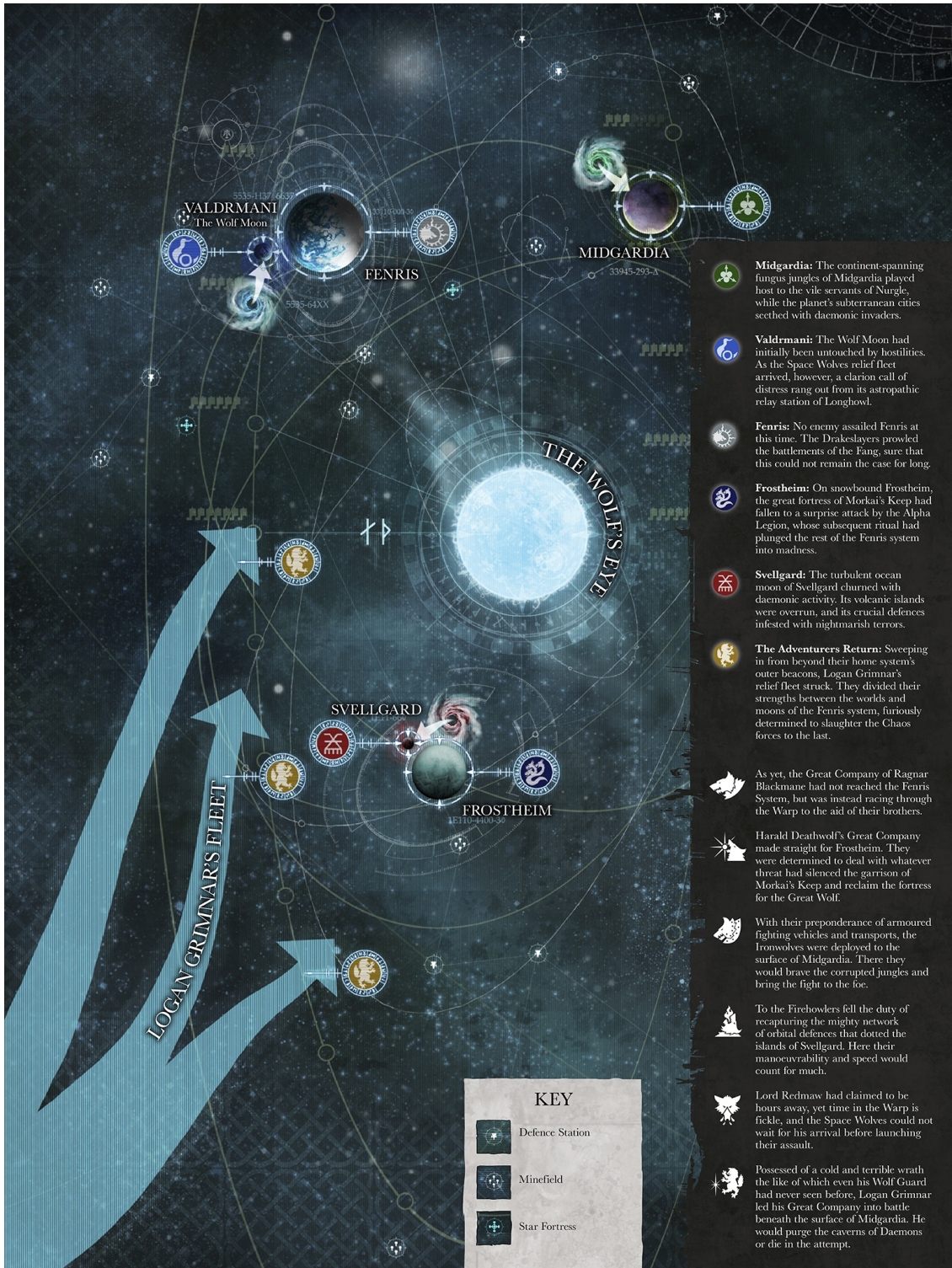
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VALDRMANI
The Wolf Moon

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.

FATE UNBOUND

Robbie MacNiven

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

The bridge of the Rock was a scene of chaos, and the Changeling rejoiced. It had done its work well. Azrael was locked into a dead-end argument with Egil Iron Wolf, and his underlings were at his mercy. Or, more accurately, the mercy of the bridge's comms chief, Vox Seneschal Mendaxis.

The communications pits heaved with activity as vox serfs attempted to contact the crusade fleet, the channels overlaid with orders to cease fire and demands for clarification. The augur banks were still picking up the occasional lance strike as Navy captains continued to respond to the Space Wolves barrage, in defiance of the confused messages emanating from the Rock. Amidst the disorder the Changeling sent out codes that further distorted what was happening – little blurts of static that cut up vital messages, contradictory targeting data-speech, new heading requests.

Through it all he listened to the conversation crackling back and forth between Azrael and Egil Iron Wolf. Each was demanding that the other stand down, the Dark Angel ordering the Wolves to withdraw to Fenris, while the Wolf was ordering the crusade fleet to disengage and leave the system. Neither appeared to be listening to the other. The Changeling cut and chopped the link at opportune moments, fighting furiously not to burst into laughter.

Such games amused it. They were a distraction, it was true, but for now the thing wearing Vox Seneschal Mendaxis' flesh had nothing better to be doing. The plans were in motion, turning and changing within themselves. The actors necessary for the play to begin were on their way, but until they arrived the Changeling would have its idle fun. It sent fresh firing coordinates to a squadron of Navy Sword-class escorts, locking them onto their Wolf counterparts. A flurry

of clarification requests came back. Grinning, it ignored them and broke the data-link.

The air around the figure of Mendaxis shimmered for a moment, the blemish on reality visible only to those with attuned warp-sight. The Changeling shuddered in its false skin, feeling the swirling skeins of Fate around it constricting. Of the thousandfold paths laid out by its master, more and more were slipping away, the few that remained yawning like the maws of hungry parasites as they sought to latch onto the present and take their place as the future.

The air shuddered again. It was drawing nearer. On a distant world, a ritual the Changeling had first set in motion a century before was reaching its climax. The Rock was bound with powerful wards, but the Changeling had done its work well, breaking the necessary ones with the help of its master. The fortress-monastery was still a difficult place to be, the sacred seals long ago woven by the Lion's Librarians, making the daemon's borrowed flesh crawl, while the incense that filled the bridge's air caught in the back of its throat. The games were a pleasing distraction from such discomforts. Soon, however, its patience would be rewarded. Soon they would be here – the Silver Fool, the Young King, the Angel Hunter – and then the real games could begin.

Svellgard

Svellgard's oceans died, and its islands churned with battle. As the three Imperial strike forces forged towards the trio of warp rifts sucking away the moon's seas, only one faltered. The Wolves were alone.

Sven's jump pack carried him up onto one of the Soul Grinder's segmented, arachnid-like limbs. His auto-stabilisers whirred as he cut the pack's turbo, using its momentum to throw himself along the twisted warp-steel and up towards the daemon engine's cockpit. The metal there was bent and deformed with growths of pulsing purple skin, sprouting at the top into a mouth-like cannon. The war machine's fleshy upper arms snatched for him, one vast meat-fused mechanical claw carving overhead. Sven ducked the swing and then triggered Longbound again, bounding up onto the top of the machine's pulsing turret.

His boots dug into skin as he landed, the thing's pistons shrieking like tortured voices as it attempted to twist its bulk and throw him off. Face contorted with hatred, Sven began to hack at it with Frostclaw. He started with the maw cannon, the axe's ever-keen edge hewing through metal and the meat entwined around it. The engine emitted a machine roar, trying to reach him with its vast claws, but

the Wolf made the angles impossible. He began to beat at the top of the turret itself, hacking through thick folds of muscle and chitin growths to reach the corrupt metal beneath.

The rest of his Skyclaws were assaulting the Soul Grinder simultaneously, chainswords striking sparks from its mechanical limbs. One of the young Wolves was snatched up in its claws, his scream cut brutally short as the huge blades scissored shut, bisecting him. Sven hacked harder, a howl building in the back of his throat.

Below he was dimly aware of the arrival of the Deathwolves, Harald's ichor-soaked warriors pitching into the melee alongside his own. A second Soul Grinder took a Vindicator's demolisher shell to its turret, blowing out in a blizzard of twisted wreckage. Below Sven Frostclaw finally bit into metal, scarring the black steel. He swung again, with all his strength, fangs gritted. The frame shattered beneath him, and an ear-splitting shriek, like steel scraping along steel, rushed from the machine's wound. Sven smelled rotting meat and burning copper. He triggered Longbound.

The Soul Grinder stumbled and finally collapsed, its infernal bulk crushing a Skyclaw too slow to leap backwards. The air above the rent in the machine shimmered as the daemon possessing it escaped, vanishing back into the immaterium with one last piercing shriek.

Sven touched down beside the twitching wreckage, shaking and panting. The daemons had recoiled at the engine's death, massing their strength near the foot of the dune the Firehowlers were battling across. Harald pulled Icetooth to a stop beside the staring young Wolf Lord.

'We need to consolidate,' the Deathwolf said. 'Our losses have been too heavy.'

Sven said nothing, still staring into the distance, jump pack idling, streams of black gore slipping down his armour.

'Take up position on the brow of this dune,' Harald said. 'Let the Wulfen and the Claws hold them back long enough to reform the packs.'

'You yourself said we can't hold them,' Sven said. 'If we stop going forward, we die. All of us.'

'But we can buy time,' Harald said. 'And right now, no matter how hard you fight, pup, time is our only true hope.'

The Holmgang, in high orbit above Midgardia

The bridge of the *Holmgang* was hushed and tense. It was immediately apparent

the moment vox contact was established with the ships above Midgardia that Ragnar's fleet was too late. Amidst the total breakdown in communications discipline, one thing was made clear by the fleets anchored in high orbit – Midgardia was burning.

Ragnar said nothing. Madox's vision had been true – before him, beyond the crystalflex ports, the death world was smeared with great whorls of black ash, its once-purple surface now a barren grey shot through with the flickers of fires so vast they could be viewed from orbit. More flames flared nearer, in the void between the ships already clustered above the planet. The crusade fleet and the Wolves defending Midgardia had turned on each other. The realisation made the Young King sick to the pits of his stomachs. He had failed.

'Lord Egil Iron Wolf is hailing us from his flagship, *Wolftide*,' Ragnar's vox huscarl said quietly. He motioned for the Chapter-serf to accept the link, not taking his eyes off Midgardia.

'*Lord Blackmane, well met.*' Egil's voice came through choppy and distorted, the range still extreme for ship-to-ship uplink communication.

'Lord Iron Wolf,' Ragnar said. 'Tell me my eyes deceive me.'

'*They do not, Blackmane. The Lion has burned Midgardia.*'

'And now you burn the Lion?'

'*They must be stopped.*'

'And they will be,' Ragnar growled. 'I swear it to you. But this may not all be their doing. There is dark maleficarum at work here, Iron Wolf. I have seen it.'

'*I have no doubt, Blackmane. There are wyrdspawn everywhere.*'

'And closer than we may think. I have enlisted the help of the Grey Knights. They will put a stop to all this.'

'*You would trust the daemonhunters?*' Egil asked. '*What of our Wulfen? Recall that they sought us out on Absolom not so long ago in order to persecute us.*'

'Krom saved their lives above the Wolf Moon, and I fought alongside them on *Mjalnar* to purge the wyrd-taint that had taken root there. They have had the chance to condemn us, but they have not.'

'*Not yet. Perhaps they are not strong enough to right now.*'

'They could have joined the crusade fleet against us. They know more than just the Wulfen are at stake here.'

'*And how can they be of any help to us?*'

'They will lend weight to our cause when I enter the Lion's den,' said Ragnar. 'Even the Angels cannot ignore the sons of Titan.'

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

Azrael glared down at the holochart auspex from his command throne. For hours the runes representing the crusade-fleet assets and those of the Wolves had remained largely static, overlaid with intermittent trajectory paths. Now, however, the Rock's augur ports, already busy trying to track the spluttering half-engagement playing out with the Iron Wolf's fleet, were blinking red with warning lights. New sigils were appearing within the chart's sphere, multiplying with each static-wash update. Another Space Wolves fleet was approaching combat-effective range. The initial scans said it belonged to the Great Company of Ragnar Blackmane.

Azrael knew the name. The impetuous young Wolf Lord had encountered the Unforgiven on a number of occasions in the past century. Few of those occasions had been positive in nature. Azrael had read the reports.

Nor was Ragnar's fleet alone. Azrael saw the sigil representing *Allsaint's Herald* blink into existence, and had to suppress a surge of rage. Of course de Mornay would return, with a pack of tamed hounds to do his bidding.

'The meddling fool has brought pups for his dirty work,' Asmodai hissed from beside Azrael's throne, reading his Chapter Master's thoughts.

'I should have known he would. It makes no difference. We shall break from orbit and make for Fenris. That should sharpen the minds of these animals.'

'Lord, we are being hailed by *Allsaint's Herald*,' said Vox Seneschal Mendaxis, cutting in. 'Shall I accept?'

'Negative,' Azrael said. 'We have no time for—'

'Greetings, *Supreme Grand Master*,' crackled de Mornay's voice before he could finish.

'Mendaxis, I said—'

'*Before you break the link, you should be aware I have members of the Ordo Malleus' Chamber Militant onboard this vessel. Just in case you were considering firing on us as well as the Wolves.*'

'We are not the traitors here, de Mornay. You are the one parlaying with mutants.'

'*Enough of your thunder, Azrael. Even you can't deny this situation has gotten far out of hand. You have lost control of your own fleet. Let us speak, face to face, and resolve all this before it degenerates any further.*'

'I do not see how you can help. You will simply seek to further your own misguided agenda, as ever.'

‘You will receive us aboard the Rock, Azrael. I have the power to declare you excommunicate traitoris, you and your whole Chapter. Don’t believe I won’t use my Inquisitorial edict.’

‘Your threats are as ridiculous as they are ill-conceived, de Mornay. But we have come to expect that.’

‘Lord Azrael.’ The voice on the other end of the vox was suddenly different – heavy and leaden with grim, restrained power.

‘Who is this?’

‘I am Captain Arvann Stern of the Grey Knights Third Brotherhood. I am here on the business of my Chamber Militant. I would speak with you in person, Supreme Grand Master.’

For the first time since entering the Fenris System, Azrael felt a flash of uncertainty.

‘You are accompanying de Mornay?’

‘We are with the Lord Inquisitor, yes. He has our protection, naturally.’

‘You may come aboard, but he may not.’

‘If we are to resolve this situation without shedding the blood of any more of the Emperor’s servants, I strongly suggest he comes as well. As does a representative of the Wolves. This madness has gone on for long enough.’

‘They will try to intimidate us,’ Asmodai muttered. ‘It is ever their way.’

‘We will come alone,’ Stern said. *‘No retinues. We seek only to discuss what has happened here.’*

‘If there is any attempt to censure my Chapter—’

‘There won’t be. The destruction wrought here has been the work of the Archenemy. Together we shall root out their taint and banish it back to where it belongs.’

Azrael was silent, watching the markers blinking on the holochart below him, and the oculus viewscreens scattered across the bridge’s expanse. Even with Ragnar Blackmane’s arrival, the Wolves above Midgardia were still heavily outgunned by the crusade fleet. The Rock alone would have been a match for them. But the presence of the Grey Knights had pierced the fug of confusion and recrimination that seemed to be shrouding Midgardia’s orbit as thoroughly as the ash clouds now choking its atmosphere. Azrael could not deny that since unleashing the firestorm, matters had been spiralling out of control. The freefall had to be arrested, even if that meant having to court the Wolves and rebuff de Mornay’s latest misguided accusations in person. He keyed the transmission rune in his throne’s armrest.

‘I shall expect you within the hour,’ he said, and cut the link.
Below, the Mendaxis-thing smiled.

Svellgard

It was *Iron Requiem* that struck the killing blow. That, and the combined firepower of two Imperial Navy cruisers, *Reducto Ignis* and *Pride of Galthamor*. Guided by the venerable battle-barge’s ancient locking beacons, the three capital ships speared Svellgard’s eastern warp portal with a direct orbital bombardment.

Terrek’s Clan Company contained the neverborn as the ships rained annihilation on the maw they were clawing up out of. The Iron Hands had formed a cordon of ceramite and steel, bolters thundering death at anything that crawled from the great, discoloured whirlpool that marked the portal’s heart. Nor did they stand alone. The Astra Militarum, bloodied but unbowed after their struggle across the bared seabed in support of the Space Marines, added their fire to that of the Angels of Death, a blizzard of fizzing las-bolts finishing anything that managed to breach the curtain of hard rounds laid down by Terrek’s automaton-like brethren. Imperial Knights were with them now too, half a dozen striding through the deeper surf, bright heraldry gleaming in the dying light. Their heavy weapons barked and roared, lacerating the daemonic cohorts with irresistible firepower before they could form to attack.

Despite the destruction, the barrage laid down by the ground attack forces was insignificant next to the power of their fleets. The spines and chitin fangs that thrust above the waves, marking the edge of the portal’s maw, snapped and shattered. Svellgard’s swirling ocean was thrown into further turmoil by each burning lance strike and each super-heavy munitions shell, the waters foaming and erupting in towering columns. The concussive boom and crash of the roiling sea utterly smothered the howling of daemons and the hammering of mortal weaponry. It did not quite, however, drown out the exultations which blared from vox casters, laud hailers and every human throat. The daemons shied away from the holy litanies as assuredly as they did the bolts and las.

Terrek monitored the portal’s closing from atop the hull of *Dark Vengeance*, the mighty Land Raider rocking beneath the Iron Captain as it was hammered by surf thrown up by the continuing bombardment. It was perched on a battle-scarred reef jutting above the maelstrom churning through the rift maw. The Iron Hand’s bionics scanned the waves, reading the energy output torturing Svellgard’s deepest points. The neverborn did not have long, his calculations

estimated. Even as he watched, those still flinging themselves on the sons of the Gorgon flickered, their material forms unravelling beneath the twin assaults of fire and faith. They attacked with a frenzied abandon only immortal nightmares could enjoy, but they were banished all the same.

The tactical readout put the Ultramarines on course to close the northern portal within the next hour. The data from Epathus' assault was ultimately much the same as that transmitted by Terrek, only slight deviations in time and casualty ratios separating the twin strike forces. The same could not be said for the Wolves.

The Shadow Haunter Scouts had stopped reporting back half an hour earlier, but the auspex uplinked to the readout showed their attack had stalled completely. The two Great Companies had merged on top of what looked like an exposed coral dune, the green wolf's head runes on the display surrounded by a thick sea of blinking red contact markers. Estimated losses for the combined force stood at just under half, and the figure rose even as Terrek monitored it.

At the current rate of daemonic incursion, the Iron Captain gave them two more hours before they were completely overrun, give or take a twenty-minute margin of error. And that thought did not worry him in the slightest.

A hellsword punched through Sven's battleplate. The blow was like a spike of fire being driven into the Wolf's side. He grunted with the impact and the sudden rush of pain, his body flushing with painkiller stimulants. The swordling tried to claw through his helmet's lenses with its other hand, shoving the blade deeper as it did.

Sven cut its head off. Black ichor fountained across the Wolf, and after a moment the thing flickered and vanished, sword and all. Sven bit back a moan as blood flowed from the wound in his side, battling to blank out the pain.

He was tired. His thoughts, still coloured with the arrogant exuberance of a young Firehowler, railed against the idea of admitting it, but it stood as a fact, incontrovertible despite his own *skjald*-worthy battle-lust. He had been fighting for days without rest or sustenance. His armour was scarred and in need of maintenance, the servos whirring and heaving, the auto-senses lagging fractionally. His body was no better; it was bruised, cut and bleeding, his hand still sprained and his rib-plate now split in two places. A swooping pack of furies had also managed to rake a wound through the seal of his right pauldron. His vital readouts told him the hellsword had just pierced his oolitic kidney. The wound was far from fatal – his genhanced biology was already rushing to clot

and reknit the damage – but the sudden pain had brought home the reality Sven had been denying.

They were all going to die.

If Harald knew it he wasn't admitting it. The Deathwolf was marshalling the defence of the northern and eastern side of the coral shoal, directing the ordnance of the Predators and a trio of Land Raiders at its base as they poured fire into the onrushing wyrdspawn. Sven's heavy armour did much the same on the opposing slopes, while the bloodied packs gathered themselves further up, checking bolt magazines and dragging thick chunks of daemonic viscera from their chainblades.

Sven counted the heads of the Skyclaw pack around him. Four of the youths still stood. Olaf, his brow a crusting mess where a daemonette's claw had caught him earlier, was his last standing Bloodguard. Kregga still lived, but had been almost gutted by a Khornate murder engine. He'd been dragged to the hill's crest where the Wolf Priests were seeing to the Wolves' wounded. The rune on Sven's visor representing his vital signs display pulsed weakly.

The Skyclaws were staring, and he realised abruptly that he'd been clutching the wound in his side, gauntlet slick with his own blood. He snarled at them, like a pack leader, and they averted their gazes.

'*Not long now, pup,*' Harald's voice crackled over the vox.

'Before the last of us vanish beneath this tide of filth?' Harald didn't respond. The air around Sven throbbed as a macrocannon shell from low orbit turned the seabed two hundred yards south into a roiling ball of flame. The Space Wolves ships had shifted their firepower from the southern portal to the wyrdlings flinging themselves at the stalled ground advance. Even their great weapons would not be enough. Time, the basis of Harald's desperate strategy, was running out.

Then Sven's short-range auspex display lit up, and finally everything changed.

Shuttle Forty-Eight Nine-B, in high orbit above Midgardia

The Rock made *Gormenjarl* and *Mjalnar* look like reclusiam outhouses set alongside a fully fledged Ministorum basilica. It completely filled the pict feeds of the *Herald's* shuttle, a craggy planetoid of black, crater-scarred stone studded with bristling spires. Defence turrets, communication uplinks, augur shafts and the yawning maws of spacedock ports were set alongside the crenelated structures that presumably housed the Dark Angels chapel-barracks, armoury

cells and training towers.

A whole fleet could have rearmed and refitted safely within the Rock's bowels. The light of the Wolf's Eye reflected back from a thousand arched, stained crystalflex viewing ports and the barrels of a hundred super-heavy defence-system weapons. Light throbbed from the fortified planet shard too, idling in its vast plasma drives and warp engines, and flickering with actinic energy where its ancient force shield shorted and sparked. Crowning it all was the Angelicasta, the Tower of Angels, a great bastion-pillar of dark, shattered stone and flying buttresses surrounded by a cluster of cathedral-sized ruins.

Looking upon the ancient spaceborne monolith, even Ragnar felt a pang of doubt. The fortress-monastery of the Dark Angels matched the Fang in its towering, seemingly indestructible bulk. It represented the original might of the First Legion, a throwback to mankind's sundering, the days of wrath and ruin when brother had fought brother and the fate of the galaxy had stood poised on a razor edge.

'Into the Lion's den,' the Wolf Lord muttered.

Neither Stern nor de Mornay answered. Both were watching the visual feeds alongside Ragnar, their faces grim. For the first time since Ragnar had met him, the inquisitor had welcomed them aboard his shuttle standing up, rather than slumped in his palanquin. He was clad in a suit of humming mark seventeen exo-plate, thick with vitae-support coils and strapped-on life pumps. His torso was shielded with reinforced layers of flak, while an energy-conversion pack plugged into his back plates powered the armoured leg callipers and limb braces that held him firm. Though the inquisitor was pale with the obvious strain placed upon his ageing body, he seemed to draw a grim pleasure from Ragnar's surprise when he saw him.

'Try to keep up, Wolf,' he'd said, patting the plasma pistol locked to his hip. Now, as they drew near the Rock, Ragnar noted the inquisitor's knuckles were white beneath the plasteel tendons of his exo-armour, his scarred body clearly charged with anticipation. Once again the Space Wolf wondered at the man's obsession with the Dark Angels. The relationship between the ordos and the Adeptus Astartes was often fraught, but de Mornay seemed to have dedicated his entire life to hounding the Lions. Ragnar wondered how much longer they'd permit him to chase them.

'We go to negotiate, not fight,' Stern said.

'They're often very similar, good captain,' the inquisitor replied. 'Both should be conducted from a position of strength. That's something you learn quickly

once you join the ordos.’

The shuttle docked, sliding through a deactivated section of the force shield and into the waiting maw of one of the Rock’s ports. Ragnar released his restraining harness as the landing probes brought the transport to a shuddering halt. The main hatch disengaged with a thud of clamps and a whine of hydraulics, venting gouts of steam. Beyond it the docking bay was scattered with dead-eyed haulage servitors and scampering Chapter-serfs in discoloured white shifts. Gargoyle-headed vox speakers inset into the bare stone walls blared servicing orders and screeds of data updates.

A single Dark Angel waited for the three arrivals, the white cowl of his habit drawn up. He gave a short, stiff bow as they stepped out onto the bay.

‘Lords, my name is Sergeant Elija. If you will follow me.’ He turned without waiting for them, pacing off towards a grav lift. Ragnar glanced at Stern, but the Knight’s face was unreadable. They followed.

If the Fang was a tribal lair carved into Asaheim’s cold stone, then the Rock was an ancient cathedral long abandoned. Elija led them down echoing corridors thick with dust and through antechambers overlooked by the towering statues of hooded angels. The floor beneath was flagged with stones and the heavy brick walls bound with shafts of age-dulled plasteel, while the ceiling overhead was vaulted and choked with deep shadows. Burning, spiked braziers flickered at intervals down the corridor, their light seeming to deepen the foreboding gloom. The only signs of life – though it was a cruel jest to call it such – were the servo-skulls that occasionally hummed past, or observed them with blinking optics and empty sockets from brass charging ports set high on the corridor walls. Until they came to the bridge, they met no one.

Ragnar wondered whether the apparent desolation was just for show. He could feel the humming power of the charged asteroid vibrating through the surfaces around him, and distant booms and clunks occasionally shook pattering motes of dust down from the vaults overhead. He knew there were hundreds of Adeptus Astartes and tens of thousands of serfs above, below and around him. Either the Dark Angels wished to hide their strength, or unsettle their visitors.

And despite Ragnar’s burning dislike for the sons of the Lion, their efforts were not wholly in vain. An air of unutterable melancholy hung over the entire fortress-monastery, an ache of the heart that had gone on for far too long. For the first time, the Space Wolf felt something more akin to remorse rather than spite when he considered the Unforgiven. While the halls of the Fang echoed with exuberant boasts, *skjald*-songs and the sounds of feasting, the Rock lay in cold,

sepulchral silence, alone in the void.

The silence at least was banished when they reached the primary bridge. The plainsong chants of course-chartists warring with the crackle of vox horns, the rattling of cogitators, the blaring of alarm systems and the whir of augur pickups and oculus viewscreens, the scuffle of hurrying feet and the frantic murmur of situation reports finally gave evidence of activity. Elija led the trio through the feverish workings of the vast, echoing command hub, Stern at the fore, de Mornay limping at the rear in his walking armour.

Their path led them to a great, hooded figure, overseeing the ceaseless work from a throne centred atop a dais that rose from the surrounding communications pits like some ancient ziggurat. Beside the throne stood a second figure, similarly clad in a white habit, the black battleplate and screaming-skull helm marking him out as one of the Dark Angels' Interrogator-Chaplains. Both figures surveyed Elija as he stopped beneath the dais and struck his gauntlet against his breastplate in salute.

'Welcome, Brother-Captain Stern,' said the figure on the throne. He rose and descended the stairs, servos humming. All the while he looked only at the Grey Knight, eyes dark and piercing beneath his cowl.

'Supreme Grand Master Azrael,' Stern said, nodding his head in a brief show of respect. 'My thanks for receiving us here.'

'You left me little choice, Grey Knight.'

'Choice is a luxury few of us possess.'

'That much is true.' The Dark Angel and his Chaplain reached the foot of the dais, facing the interlopers. Throughout the exchange they had pointedly ignored both Ragnar and de Mornay. The Wolf Lord felt his anger spike. He could sense the inquisitor beside him struggling to hold his tongue.

'My Master Interrogator-Chaplain, Brother Asmodai,' Azrael said, introducing the reaper-like figure beside him.

'Explain your presence here, daemonhunter,' Asmodai said, words slipping like serpent's venom from his black, cowl-shrouded helm.

'There is something wrong with this place,' Stern said. 'I felt it as soon as I stepped onboard.'

'Do not abuse my hospitality,' Azrael said. 'I have brought you here in good faith.'

'Then indulge me, lord.' Stern cast his hard gaze across the bridge. 'I have hunted the filth of the warp for as long as you have been Master of your Chapter. My kind are trained to root out taint, and my warp-sight knows when they are

near.’

Ragnar noted that the holy etchings on the Grey Knight’s silver aegis had started to glow dully.

‘Recently there have been a... number of inexplicable incidents,’ Azrael said slowly, as though unwilling to admit as much. ‘One of our Scouts disappeared from the apothecarion, and a number of the Chapter-serfs have been acting strangely. Even our Master Astropath is unsettled. My own vox seneschal has been—’

‘Where is he?’ Stern interrupted, hand dropping to the hilt of his force sword.

Azrael glanced at the primary communications pit and frowned. His gaze travelled up, and caught the back of Vox Seneschal Mendaxis, trailing data cables and readout scrolls as he walked brusquely towards the bridge’s open blast doors.

‘Mendaxis!’ Azrael barked. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

Stern’s blade rasped from its scabbard, and the air was suddenly full of static charge. Mendaxis didn’t look back, but darted through the doors, far faster than any human being should have been able to move.

‘*Daemon,*’ Stern snarled.

Svellgard

Like the Wolf That Stalks Between Stars, the Redmaws fell from the void upon Svellgard. The vox thrilled with howls and snarls, and the words of Bran himself.

‘Hold firm, brothers. The Lost have returned.’

Drop pods struck the seabed to the south of what should have been the site of Sven and Harald’s last stand. Wulfen burst from them as soon as their flanks dropped, driven into a maddened frenzy by the confined spaces. Four Murderpacks ripped into the daemons north of the warp rift, their howls echoing up to their embattled brethren.

The rest of Bran Redmaw’s Great Company – those who had resisted the curse – followed. They fought their way from their pods with savage efficiency, bolters hammering the knots of daemons not already broken apart by their sudden, brutal arrival. Thunderhawks sped low overhead, raking the lesser daemons with more bolter fire, their forward cannons blasting apart the larger engines and writhing spawn. Within minutes the drop zone was secure.

Sven and Harald had no need to confer, either with Bran or each other. Together

they ordered their bloodied packs forward, fuelled by the wild strength of warriors who had learned their immediate deaths were not yet inevitable. They led from the front, trying to outpace each other, frost axes an icy blur in the cold, ichor-saturated air. Darkness was falling, and the last gleam of the Wolf's Eye touched upon the tarnished armour of the three Great Companies as they came together near the rift's swirling, churning edge.

The killing did not end there. The daemons flung themselves at the Wolves with even greater fury than before, heedless of their fate, desperate to rip flesh and shed blood before they were thrown from the material universe. But they found their fury outmatched. Bran's Wulfen – almost half his Great Company – were savage even for their cursed kind. They fought on despite the gravest of wounds, seemingly sustained by the purity of their hatred. The legions of the Dark Gods could not stand before them.

As the circle finally tightened around the last rift, the ships of the Wolves' three fleets combined their armaments, raining fire down into the hellmaw. Together Sven, Harald and Bran hurled the wyrdspawn back into their watery abyss, while the colossal tear of weeping flesh and bone that had burrowed from the darkest dimension into Svellgard's reality was unmade by orbital annihilation. On the Wolves fought, killing now on instinct, exhaustion driving out conscious thought and leaving room only for the swing of blade and the slash of claws.

And then, suddenly, Sven found no more wyrdflesh for Frostclaw's slick edge. He spun, snarling, expecting to be struck from behind, fearing some fresh maleficarum.

Instead he realised he was staring back at the remains of his pack – ragged, panting, bloody in twilight's last light. The anger and the hatred that had sustained him was suddenly gone, and he fell to his knees amid the surf, head bowed.

It was over.

And yet, in truth, it had barely begun.

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

The Changeling laughed freely as it fled. It darted down the bridge's main access corridor and then right, through a sub-shaft, the doors sliding open with a flick of the Mendaxis-thing's hand. Around it Chapter-serfs scrambled to get out of the way, wide-eyed with shock.

Throughout the Rock, warning claxons began to wail. The vox piece still fitted

to the Mendaxis-thing's ear was alive with frantic chatter. Through it all, the furious voice of Azrael boomed.

'Stop that thing!'

The Changeling managed to control its mirth long enough to spit a string of arcane syllables, grotesquely distorting the Mendaxis-thing's mouth in order to utter the unnatural words. The vox-link clicked and went silent, the channel killed as assuredly as if the transmission stud had been flicked. The daemonic entity bound to the scrapcode virus the Changeling had uploaded from the primary communications pit had awoken. It would take weeks of machine-psalms and recoding before it was banished and the Rock's internal communications systems were functioning again.

The giggling daemon vaulted down a plasteel stairwell and knocked a serf out of the way. At the daemon's touch the man screamed and convulsed, flesh breaking out into hideous, bloody growths. The Changeling didn't even notice, barging through one door and then down another flight. Around it reality was a blur, a haze of multiple possibilities overlaying and interlocking with each other. Its goal lay down, deep down, amidst the stygian darkness of the Rock's forbidden crypts and vaults.

Soon the distant ritual would be complete, and its master's plan one step closer to glorious, irresistible, ever-changing fruition.

They found Mendaxis in a long-disused venting shaft for a reserve thermal coil. His neck had been snapped and he'd been stripped naked, his wizened body hung upside down from a coolant pipe and carved bloody with dark sigils. The corpse was weeks old.

Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar was there too. He'd been struck so hard that his skull helm had fractured. He still lived, but his sus-an membrane had forced his body into a regenerative coma, and he was immobile. Azrael snapped orders at a train of anxious Chapter-serfs to have him taken to the apothecarion. The hunt resumed.

'This way,' Stern said. He pounded down a flight of stairs, ceramite ringing off steel, the air heavy with the static charge of his force blade's disruptor field. Azrael and Ragnar were right behind him. The Wolf Lord had *Frostfang* out, its rotor idling throatily, while Azrael had drawn the Sword of Secrets, the power weapon's ancient obsidian blade crackling with its own energy field.

Asmodai and de Mornay followed, the inquisitor in front, struggling in his whirring battle-suit. Having the Master Interrogator-Chaplain stalking directly

behind him set the inquisitor's whole body on edge, and with every step a part of him expected to feel the Dark Angel's ignited crozius arcanum slam into his back.

Below, Stern pushed deeper, through another set of blast doors that, until recently, had been firmly warded and sealed. There were few warp entities capable of penetrating the psychic defences of a fortress-monastery as ancient as the Rock, and even fewer capable of surviving there for any length of time. Whatever the thing was, it had left behind a trail. Its passing would have been invisible to untuned mortals; Stern, however, had the witch sight.

A cloud of spores, glowing with a luminous, sickening light, hung in the air before the Grey Knight, marking the corrupting influence of Chaos. Azrael had commanded his Librarians to attend him, but the whole of the Rock's hardwired vox-network had unexpectedly shut down, undoubtedly evidence of further daemonic tampering. The corridors of the Rock would need to be thoroughly cleansed once the threat had been removed, but until then the passing taint was the only way of tracking the daemon.

That, and the scattering of hideously mutated, mewling bodies it left in its wake. Ragnar killed each deformed horror with a swift thrust of *Frostfang*, while Stern and Azrael pressed on. They could hear the thing's laughter echoing up from the levels below, mocking and childlike.

'It's headed for the vaults,' Azrael said. 'We can't let it reach them.'

'What is it trying to achieve?' de Mornay called after him.

'Let's stop it before we find out.'

'Lower your blocking shield, Supreme Grand Master,' Stern said. 'Allow my brethren to teleport aboard. We could cut it off.'

'No. We will find this trickster eventually, with or without your help.'

The trail led them through the Rock's gloomy structures, out into a processional way lined with graven statues of hooded, skeletal angels. The great force shield crackled and spat lightning overhead. At the far end of the way vault doors loomed, just one of a number of entrances leading deeper into the fortress-monastery's hidden depths. The doors themselves were carved in the likeness of more angels, features hidden by their cowls, broken swords in their fleshless fists. Two Deathwing Terminators, looking for all the world like two more towering, bone-carved statues in their off-white Tactical Dreadnought armour, stood either side of the heavy doors. They raised their storm bolters as the party approached.

'Lower your weapons,' Azrael snapped. The Terminators hesitated before doing

so.

‘Lord, you... only just passed this way,’ said one of the hulking Deathwing.

‘We have been compromised,’ Azrael replied. ‘There is a shapeshifting warp entity on the loose. He could be any one of us. No one is to enter or leave here alone, is that clear? Only when there is more than one of us. Even if the Lion himself demands passage, you are to halt him.’

‘Yes, lord.’ The Terminator’s red lenses swung across Ragnar, Stern and de Mornay, lingering on the inquisitor. ‘And what of these three?’

‘They are with me,’ Azrael said. ‘For now.’ The Dark Angel pulled his cowl back, stepping up to the door’s retinal scanner. It blinked, and there was a gentle hiss as the great Angel-crafted slabs of adamantium rolled smoothly back.

Beyond, darkness. It took a second for even Ragnar’s advanced senses to adjust. Below, a stone stairway led to a second set of great doors, similarly inscribed with the Chapter’s *angelica mortis* heraldry.

Azrael hesitated at the top of the stairs, a hand snatching Stern’s pauldron before he could descend. He looked back at Stern, Ragnar and de Mornay, his dark eyes holding each gaze in turn.

‘Down here, you must stay by my side at all times. There are places you cannot go.’

‘Wherever the warpspawn are found, there shall I smite them,’ Stern said, reciting one of his Ordo Malleus canticles. Azrael said nothing, but removed his hand. Asmodai leaned in close to de Mornay, words hissing from the shadows of his cowl.

‘I’ll be right behind you, inquisitor.’

Into the darkness they went.

Soon.

The realisation thrilled the Changeling. To an immortal such as it, time was everything and nothing – the warp made it eddy and shift in inconceivable patterns. And to the Changeling, the past century of painstaking preparation had felt like an aeon.

It slid through another ward gate, its muttered incantations burning away the hexagrammic seals. It no longer laughed. Matters had become serious. The games were over. Fate, the very essence of the future, was writhing about it like a great, slippery sea creature. It had to snatch onto it, grasp it, latch its yawning maw to the present, so that its silver tail became the future, stretching out into infinity.

It was deep down now, so close to the core of the Rock that even the throb of the mobile fortress-monastery's engines was a distant, tiny tremor, fainter than the last beat of a dying man's heart. The air around it shivered, as though the musty, ancient place found its presence repellent.

It was directly below the Tower of Angels. It passed through mouldering, lightless crypts and ancient armouries, the blades and battleplate thick with cobwebs. Even the Angels dared not tread here, bound up in their own superstitions. The Changeling could sense the revulsion Azrael felt as he accompanied a trio of outsiders into the most sacred depths of his home, twinned with his fear. He knew exactly what the daemon's intentions were.

A cavernous, bare rock tunnel took the daemon back up a level, out of the Angelicasta's depths. The sweet, slow-burning taste of lingering pain and despair lured it on, filling its warp-flesh with vigour. It would be their salvation. And through them, it would take despair from these few, and give it to the many.

A cluster of dungeon vaults lay ahead, just some of those that pierced the Rock's cold heart. The green ceramite and white cloth that encased the Changeling were serving it well. None dared doubt the veracity of the Supreme Grand Master himself.

More guards fooled. With the entire vox-network disabled it was impossible for Azrael to get news of the imposter to travel ahead of the daemon itself. By the time they realised their mistake, it was already outside the first reinforced hatch. Outside the very first of the cells holding the Fallen. The dungeon's anteroom was circular, two-dozen heavy, barred doors each leading off to an individual holding block. Each one was flanked by graven statues, their broken swords inscribed with active warding runes. To the Changeling's warp-sight, the very stonework bled despair, agony and regret, the tendrils of emotion a delicious aroma to the hungry daemon. Its borrowed hand reached for the gene-lock of the first hatch.

Where it stopped. A shudder – a rare sensation – ran down the Changeling's borrowed spine, the shadow of an instinctive reaction born from its time wearing mortal flesh. Skin prickled and the servos in the illusion of its power armour whirred as its fists clenched. Around it, for the first time since it had set events in motion, Fate buckled.

There was something at the far end of the cell corridor. The Changeling could not so much see it as sense the absence of the aether around it. To the daemon's warp-sight, the thing was really an un-thing, a black void without tangible thoughts or emotions to define it.

The daemon tried to look upon the un-thing with Azrael's flesh-eyes. It was diminutive in size, its form hidden beneath the thick folds of a bone-coloured cloak, as though in imitation of the Lion's sons. The shadows beneath its deep cowl were utterly impenetrable, as dark to mortal eyes as its soul-presence was to the Changeling's warp vision.

It did not move. It did not have to. The Changeling found itself taking a step back, the daemon's flesh quivering. Fear was something the Changeling could not feel, only feed upon, but the sight of the un-thing watching him from the shadows caused the daemon an indefinable, icy discomfort.

The Changeling could not stay here. It could go no further. This part of the wider plan was unnecessary anyway, a mere addendum to the ritual that would carry the daemon's trickster away, and drag the Lions with it. The Changeling doubled back the way it had come, the cells untouched. Fate's weave morphed, the future a newborn, fresh entity.

Behind it, the Watcher in the Dark remained silent and unmoving. It was still there, unseen, when back within the Angelicasta's depths the Lion, the Wolf, Knight and Angel Hunter finally caught the Changeling at bay.

Svellgard

The madness was gone. The skies above Svellgard no longer blazed with firepower, and the ocean's remains lapped at their new shores, tides calm once again. The great tracts of barren, exposed former seabed steamed in the evening light while the tundra of the islands – now hilltops – gleamed coldly.

'Well met, Redmaw,' Harald said. His fellow Wolf Lord nodded, face and forearms streaked with wyrdling ichor.

'Likewise, Deathwolf. It is good to finally bloody the Murderpacks.'

'The curse has struck you hard, brother.' No comment had been made of Bran's savage appearance. The Wolf Lord merely nodded, looking out over his packs. They still prowled with hungry intent around the crags and shoals of Svellgard's former seabed, their wyrd-hate unsated.

'It was a long voyage here, Deathwolf,' Bran said eventually. 'I am just thankful we made it at all.'

'Our companies owe you life debts,' Harald said, glancing over to where Sven was pulling himself back onto his feet with the assistance of his Bloodguard, Olaf. The vox in Harald's ear clicked.

'*It's Arro,*' said the Shadow Haunter. Last the Wolf Lord had seen of the sinister

descendant of Corax, he and his sole remaining Initiate had been battling alongside Feingar and his Coldeyes Wolf Scouts. *‘The crusade forces have been ordered to evacuate the surface immediately. You may wish to do the same. I suspect another bombardment is imminent.’*

‘They wouldn’t dare,’ Harald said, fighting to keep the weariness from his voice. ‘After all this, they couldn’t now strike us from orbit.’

‘I cannot claim to know their minds, Wolf Lord. But your Chapter are the executioners of old. Tell me, if you were loosed upon mutants, would you stop anywhere short of total annihilation?’

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

‘Brothers,’ said the Stern-thing.

‘Daemon,’ Stern replied, raising his force sword. Ragnar, Azrael, Asmodai and de Mornay came up short behind the Grey Knight, staring at his twin, a perfect reflection dominating the far end of the corridor.

The Stern-thing’s face twisted with a wild grin, an expression that looked utterly unnatural on the Knight’s graven features. Ragnar activated *Frostfang* at the same time that Azrael and Asmodai brought up their own blades.

‘Stay back,’ Stern said, pacing towards the waiting daemon. ‘There isn’t room enough for all of us.’

As much as it pained him, Ragnar saw the daemonhunter was right. The corridor was a narrow one, the paladin’s silver pauldrons almost scraping its stone walls. The grin on the opposing Stern-thing’s face remained fixed.

‘I was beginning to wonder if you would ever catch me, brothers. It was getting lonely down here, amidst the—’

Stern struck. If any of them had expected the daemon’s trickery to unravel, they were to be disappointed. The Stern-thing met the real Grey Knight blade for blade, and both weapons flared with equal force, bolts of lightning arcing and snapping at the surrounding walls. The two warriors drew back as one, the movements perfectly mirrored. The daemon’s mimicry was sickeningly accurate.

‘Begone, foul warpspawn!’ the Stern-thing bellowed, abandoning its grin in favour of a theatrically grim expression. ‘Back to the black pit from whence you crawled!’

‘I have not come here to be mocked,’ Stern snarled, and slashed. Again the blades clashed.

‘Speak not unto the daemon,’ the Stern-thing said, all fake earnestness as the

two parted once again. Ragnar was thankful the narrowness of the corridor prevented them from circling one another. He doubted he'd have been able to keep track of the true Stern.

And then, the thing changed. There was a blaze of light, diffracted and kaleidoscopic. Ragnar snarled and averted his eyes. When he looked again, Madox glared back at him over Stern's shoulder, baroque armour gleaming in the glow of the lumen orbs.

'Everything I told you was true, Wolf,' the Thousand Sons sorcerer said, voice dripping with disdain. 'Why didn't you listen? You could have saved Midgardia. You could have saved your Great Wolf. And now he's gone. *Logan Grimnar is dead.*'

Ragnar took a pace towards the daemon, fangs bared. Azrael snatched him by the shoulder.

'Rein in your savagery, Wolf. It's trying to trick us.'

'Is it, Lion?'

This time the voice was as cold and cutting as serrated steel. The corridor was abruptly plunged into darkness, the actinic lightning of Stern's, Azrael's and Asmodai's weapons the only illumination. When the dull lumen orbs flickered on a second later, the thing had changed once again.

Now it was clothed in a manner not dissimilar to the Dark Angels, white robes hanging over ancient, black power armour. The thing's hood threw its features into deep shadow. An ornate, heavy-looking blade hung from a scabbard, draped from chains behind twin pistol holsters.

'I am here to make you answer for your crimes, Keeper of the False Truth,' the figure said. 'I am here to make you repent. In the name of the Lion—'

Azrael's roar drowned out the daemon's words. The Master of the Unforgiven thrust violently past Stern, obsidian blade lunging for the hooded figure. It darted back, the crackling light of Azrael's sword illuminating a vicious grin beneath the cowl.

'Stop!' Stern bellowed. 'You don't know what you're dealing with!'

Ragnar felt his hairs prick as the Grey Knight thrust a fragment of his will into the command, charging it with psychic energy. Azrael shuddered to a halt, face contorted with fury. Stern pushed him aside.

'I know what you are,' the Grey Knight said, addressing the daemon. 'Even in the realms of the warp it would be impossible for anything else to do what you have done here, Changeling.'

'Don't be so sure, corpse-worshipper,' the hooded Space Marine said. Then,

still grinning, he exploded. Bloody meat and shards of ceramite scythed towards Stern, Azrael and Ragnar, evaporating as the illusion came undone. Something unfurled itself from the space where the Adeptus Astartes had been, spreading feathered pinions, its beaked head stooped against the corridor's low arches. It screeched, the sound piercing Ragnar's ears and shaking the rock around him. For a moment even Stern stood transfixed, staring up at the crouching, blue-feathered Lord of Change.

'M'Kachen,' the Grey Knight breathed.

+Who else?+ The greater daemon's words thrust directly into their minds, accompanied by a peal of mocking, avian laughter.

'No,' Stern said through gritted teeth. 'Your lies are at an end, Changeling.'

'We are buried in lies here,' the daemon taunted. 'They're all around us.'

It made a series of arcane gestures with its claws. There was an ear-splitting crack, and a sudden fissure appeared in the stonework to the right of the greater daemon. Sickly, diffracted light blazed from it, followed by a phantom gale that tugged at the habits and cowls of the Dark Angels. The M'Kachen-thing croaked a series of unutterable syllables and the cracks split wider, bursting apart in a hail of shattered stone. The portal blazed with eldritch energy, the howling of a realm of pure madness grating from the jagged, broken stone like a million razor blades.

Horrors bounded from the infernal light. The dank air filled with their mad gibbering, and warpfire sparked and ignited in the corridor around them.

'Stop them,' Stern shouted. 'I will banish the trickster.'

Asmodai struck first, roused to righteous wrath by the presence of warp filth in the Rock's most sacred depths. The ghost-wind snapped at his white-and-green habit, making it billow around his black armoured form. He swung his crozius arcanum in a crackling arc, the wings of the holy weapon wreathed in white energy. Daemons disintegrated before him, their unnatural flames breaking and spluttering harmlessly around the Interrogator-Chaplain. The rosarius hanging from an adamantium chain around his neck, crafted in the likeness of the hooded Angel of Protection, blazed with golden energy as it shielded him from the dark warp magics.

Ragnar and then de Mornay fought to join him, pressed against the corridor wall. The Wolf Lord carved through one pink horror after another, *Frostfang* reducing them to writhing ectoplasmic blobs. Even as he killed them their swirling remains reformed into smaller blue horrors, sneering and snapping at him as they tried to claw through his power armour.

De Mornay fired his plasma pistol into the twisted mass coming from the portal at point-blank range, a prayer on his lips. The incandescent bolts of blue energy vaporised the leading clutch of daemons, but still they came. Soon the pistol was burning in the grip of the inquisitor's exo-gauntlet, steam venting from the carbon-adamant ventilation casing and the magnetic accelerator coils ribbing its spine glowing blue with overuse.

Down the corridor, Azrael and Stern fought the Changeling. It was a blur, toying with reality as it battled the two Space Marines, the borrowed flesh of the greater daemon seeming to shift and twitch like a faulty viewfeed as it phased away from its attackers. The Angel and the Knight rained blows on it, their weapons wreathed with power, but the daemon matched each and every one with a long silver staff. A riposte dented Stern's pauldron and scarred Azrael's breastplate, ripping his habit.

The thing was fast. Azrael recklessly lunged into its guard, the black obsidian of the Heavenfall Blade punching like a lance towards the thing's shifting core. It moved again, but this time too slow to properly avoid the sudden strike. The Sword of Secrets caught the Changeling in the flank, the ancient weapon searing through feathers and flesh alike. The M'Kachen-thing let out a screech and snatched at the Supreme Grand Master. Left exposed by the lunge, he found his arm gripped in the greater daemon's avian claws. It twisted viciously, and there was an audible snap before it flung the Dark Angel bodily back against the chamber's far wall.

Stern thrust forward, force sword blazing with white light. The winged greater daemon parried the blow with its staff, deceptively spindly arms bolstered by the strength of the warp. Stern locked in place, servos groaning as the two strained.

Azrael found his feet. He took the Sword of Secrets in his left arm, his right broken by the daemon's claws. As Stern pinned the creature's guard the Dark Angel seized the opportunity to lunge in beneath the Grey Knight's raised weapon, but his thrust never connected with the daemon's lower limbs. It spat a string of twisting syllables, and the Dark Angel was forced to his knees by a sudden flood of pain. His secondary heart kicking in with a jolt, he snarled with agony as he tried to force his burning limbs to obey his commands. The Sword of Secrets slipped from his grasp, the obsidian blade clattering and shorting as it struck the dusty stone floor.

Ragnar saw the Supreme Grand Master battling to rise and Stern held in place. He dragged himself free from the press of horrors, gouging a path through their flailing bodies. Asmodai fought on, feet planted before the portal, the Angel of

Vengeance that tipped his crozius arcanum dealing death from its deadly wingtips with each stroke. The press of daemons had forced de Mornay up against the wall, his overheated pistol abandoned, servos straining as he sought to grapple with two horrors forcing themselves upon him with their snapping, drooling maws.

‘I abjure thee,’ Stern was snarling, wreathed in white fire as he pitted his psychic strength against that of the Changeling. ‘I banish thee. I cast thee out of His Holy Realm.’

The daemon echoed his words with its own dark litany, the titanic energies building between them threatening to shake apart the whole tunnel. Azrael managed to force his way back onto his feet once more, teeth gritted against the pain suffusing his body. He clutched the Sword of Secrets in one shaking gauntlet.

Ragnar smashed apart the last horror between him and the Changeling. Stern was still pinning its staff with his own blade. He saw his opening. A prayer to Russ on his lips, the Young King swung *Frostfang* for one of the daemon’s straining limbs.

The ancient chainsword bit true. The daemon’s shriek matched the weapon’s roar as it juddered through warp-woven feathers and flesh. Light blazed once again. The phantom wind redoubled in strength, accompanied by the crash of more splitting rock. His auto-stabilisers activated as he fought to stay upright, a gauntlet going up to shield his eyes.

Through the blaze he saw silhouettes. Stern was standing tall, his sword held high. The greater daemon was gone, replaced by a hunched, multi-limbed figure. Behind it reality had further come apart, the stone of the tunnel wall now disintegrating into nothingness. Beyond it Ragnar caught an impression of tall, broken turrets and snapping pennants. The view seemed to plummet, morphing and changing into a bare stone chamber occupied by armoured figures – unmistakably Adeptus Astartes. They stood waiting on the other side of the rift, their features indiscernible in the blazing light that ringed it.

The lesser daemons howled and shrieked. The invisible wind ripped at them, tearing their coruscating flesh away in great globules, sucking them back into the portal that had birthed them. De Mornay managed to tear himself from them as they were whipped away into oblivion. Asmodai crushed the morphing skull of one more with his fist before it was dragged back into the immaterium.

The figure stepped through after its disintegrating minions, as though struggling in a gale. The portal shimmered. Ragnar managed to take a pace towards it, his

howl torn away by the wyrdwind. Stern was at his side, the daemonhunter still bellowing his sacred oaths. Azrael managed to reach out too. The Sword of Secrets lunged, almost piercing the veil of reality as the hunched creature slipped away.

And then it was over. Like wakefulness asserting itself after a vivid dream, both the light and the gale vanished. The momentum of the Space Marines carried them forward, but rather than plunge through the rift and into the mysterious chamber, their gauntlets struck scorched stone. The warp portals were gone, the only evidence of their existence the burn markings on the tunnel wall. And the faintest sound of giggling laughter, echoing away into nothingness.

Stern slumped against the wall, even his prodigious mental strength spent. Azrael grimaced, extending his broken arm until bones cracked and snapped back into alignment.

‘I was blind,’ the Dark Angel said bitterly as the stimms kicked in, as though speaking to the Rock itself. ‘I was fixed so firmly on Fenris I could not see the snares set about my feet.’

‘About our feet,’ Ragnar said, gazing at the burn marks on the wall. ‘We have all suffered from this wyrdspawn’s trickery.’

‘It will pay,’ Azrael said. ‘For such mockery, I will hunt it to the edges of realspace and beyond.’

‘Before you do that, I think we would all benefit if you withdrew your ships from here,’ de Mornay said. The inquisitor was shaking and pale with pain and exhaustion, only held upright by the scarred frame of his armour. ‘There has been enough misplaced bloodshed already.’

Azrael looked at the inquisitor and then at Ragnar, his dark eyes holding the Wolf’s bestial gaze.

‘The Imperium will not allow you to harbour mutants. If we do not call you to task, another will. Then our actions here may seem lenient.’

‘There are proper channels,’ said Stern, sheathing his force sword. ‘A conclave of the ordos should be called and the matter debated openly. I have witnessed the wolf-beasts with my own eyes. Without them, this system would have fallen to daemoniac infestation. I can find no trace of warp taint upon them, only grievous genetic anomalies.’

‘I agree,’ said de Mornay. ‘As terrible as they seem, I would be dead without them. They must be judged openly, and with due process.’

Azrael was silent for a moment more. When he spoke again it was with brusque finality.

‘The crusade fleet will withdraw to the system’s edge while the situation is assessed. I will have my Librarians scour this place. If they can pick up the daemon’s spoor, they may be able to track it to wherever it went. I believe it is still within the material plane. We cannot permit its continued existence, and I won’t allow its acts here to go unpunished.’

‘It will lead you on a pointless dance of destruction,’ Stern warned. ‘It is known in our grimoires as one of the most devious of all the Trickster God’s servants.’

‘All the more reason to destroy it,’ Azrael said. ‘Until we can, though, and until the time is right to sit in judgement, I shall order my fleet assets to disengage from Fenris.’

Iron Requiem, *in low orbit above Svellgard*

The dark bridge of the Iron Hands battle-barge hummed with power, the atmosphere crackling with pent-up energy. The lance batteries were almost fully charged.

Terrek watched the Space Wolves on the moon below, picking out their positional markers with the machine-mind of his hardwired auto-senses. He sat once again in *Iron Requiem*’s command throne, linked directly to the ancient warship, his cold steel body inert as his thoughts communed with *Requiem*’s spirit. It was tired but exhilarated, the air of the bridge heavy with the smell of discharge and las after-burn, the battle-barge’s great guns still glowing hot in their open ports. It had been a righteous hammer today, a purger of the unclean, a destroyer of the impure.

Its holy work was not yet done.

The Wolves below were beginning to evacuate, perhaps sensing what was to come. They were too slow. Terrek had returned to his flagship almost an hour earlier, as soon as his objective on the surface had been completed. There was no time to be lost. While the Wolves were still clustered in battle array, they presented an optimal target.

Epathus had refused to join him in the strike, and there was no word from the Shadow Haunter Scouts still on the surface. It did not matter. Where others flinched, the Iron Hands remained unbending. *Requiem*’s firepower would be more than enough, and with their surface assets destroyed the Space Wolves fleets would be left open to his squads’ boarding pods and teleport strikes. By the time dawn touched the dark side of Frostheim, Terrek would have reclaimed both the world and its moon for the Imperium.

The iron was hot. It was time to strike.

Terrek realised the bridge serfs were pleading for his attention. He understood why a moment later, as a priority vox signal beamed into his consciousness, flowing directly from the *Requiem's* communications banks into his mind via his cortical plug. He blink-scanned the message.

++ inter-fleet transmission ref. 97/19/RDM ++
++ sender: Gloriana-class battleship *Invincible Reason* ++
++ ident-code 7697: callsign Lionsword ++
++ *This is Supreme Grand Master Azrael to all crusade fleet elements. All ships are to disengage with immediate effect. New heading coordinates are being transmitted. There are to be no hostilities conducted against the Space Wolves from this moment onwards. Repeat, all ships are to disengage immediately. Stand by for further orders.* ++
++ message ends ++

Terrek felt a rush of anger even his detached thoughts struggled to suppress. *Iron Requiem* responded in sympathy around him, the engines flaring fractionally as the ancient vessel shared its brother's dismay. The moment was now. The iron burned. The renegades were exposed, their mutants at the crusade fleet's mercy.

More data streamed through his thoughts. The Ultramarines ships were breaking from orbit. Even as he assessed their likely heading, the rest of the crusade fleet began to depart. Terrek buried another surge of anger.

Without the rest of the fleet to support them once hostilities resumed, the statistical likelihood of a decisive victory over the Wolves began to drop. The urge to strike, to purge the foul taint of the unclean, still burned bright, warming his cold augmetics and throbbing through his synth-organs. His own internal logic systems, however, would not permit him to override a direct order from Crusade Command. The judgement of the Wolves would have to wait.

With a thought, Terrek began to power down the lances.

The Fang, Fenris

There had not been so many Wolves on Fenris since the great hunt for the Wulfen had begun. Six Great Companies – even ones as bloodied as the Firehowlers or the Deathwolves – made the halls blaze with life. The warriors feasted and boasted and drank, and tried to forget that Midgardia was ash, and

Longhowl an abattoir, and Svellgard a wilderness of rock and mud pools, and Morkai's Keep a ruin.

Their lords could not so easily ignore what had happened in the war zone that the Fenris System had become. They gathered in the Hall of the Great Wolf, in the heart of the Fang. The vast chamber was cold, its craggy, pelt-draped walls only half lit by a few lumen braziers. At its centre lay the great stone slabs of the Grand Annulus, the flickering light picking out the wolf crests of the Great Companies inscribed upon the twelve blocks, and the scorched, unmarked darkness of the thirteenth.

Sven, Harald, Krom, Egil, Bran and Ragnar stood upon their respective slabs. They all still wore their battleplate, the ceramite scarred and pitted. Each tried not to glance at the empty stone bearing the carving of the Night Runner – Logan Grimnar's crest.

'I request I be allowed to return to Midgardia immediately,' said Egil Iron Wolf, shattering the chill silence. He held the battered, gilded skull of Fellclaw, the Great Wolf's crown, in his hands. Skol hummed around his shoulders, the servo-skull's pict recorder blinking.

The other Wolf Lords were silent. 'I made an oath,' Egil went on. 'To return. The fires set by the Angels did not reach into the subterranean levels. The Great Wolf is still down there.'

'And we will find him,' Krom said quietly.

'So let me go.'

'We all wish to go,' Krom said. 'But we cannot abandon the rest of the system. The crusade fleet remains active on its edges. They are simply waiting for official sanction before returning.'

'Kjarl Grimblood's Great Company is projected to arrive in-system soon,' Ragnar said. 'Let him go to Midgardia. We cannot forsake it.'

'I will join Grimblood alone if need be,' Egil said. 'My Great Company can remain here in defence of the Fang, if that is what you all wish.'

'We must secure Svellgard as well,' Sven said. 'The Claws of the World Wolf may be needed if the crusade fleet returns. And the vaults of Morkai's Keep should be scoured.'

'And what of the doppegangrel-spawned wyrdling trickster that caused all this?' Krom asked. 'And the inquisitor you claimed would assist us, Ragnar?'

'De Mornay departed after the Lions,' Ragnar said. 'I do not believe he will ever stop chasing them. As for the wyrdspawn, I saw it with my own eyes. I suspect it was the Changeling, the same filth that infiltrated the Fang after the

Great Wolf first disappeared, and impersonated him on Dargur. Russ only knows how long it had secreted itself aboard the Rock. Even the daemonhunter, Captain Stern, could not fully banish it.'

'The Lions will hunt it,' Krom said. 'We have more pressing concerns.' None needed to say what those concerns were. The Wolf Lords' eyes were drawn to the single, scarred black slab of the Annulus, the one unmarked by any sigil. That of the Thirteenth Company. The Lost. The Wulfen.

'Let us not think ourselves so superior to our kin,' Bran said, looking at each of his fellow lords in turn. He had donned his armour once more, though a wildness still glinted in his eyes, burning yellow in the half dark. 'Let us not imagine this curse – if we must call it that – is an affliction visited upon our Thirteenth Company alone. Can any of us here deny that we have felt its pull long before the reappearance of our brothers? Would any here face me and claim that this deficiency has not been with them every day since they first bore our primarch's gene-seed? We do not understand the Thirteenth, so we fear them. But at the same time, we know them, for who among us has not seen our closest brothers join them? Who among us cannot see ourselves mirrored in them?'

'The right and the wrong of it all can be debated with more time than any of us currently possess,' said Harald. They were the first words he had spoken, and all eyes turned to him.

'It is clear we must work to discover a means of artificially restraining the influence of the Canis Helix,' he continued. 'But one thing is certain. We stand at one of the darkest points in our Chapter's history. The greatest powers of the warp have conspired to destroy us. Not only the Imperium at large, but us specifically. A tide of filth fouler than any I have ever seen has engulfed our worlds. We have resisted, as is our way, yet I believe this saga has only just begun. I cannot say whether the Wulfen are our salvation or our doom. Before Svellgard I believed the latter. But since then my mind has been clear. Cursed or not, I would rather die beside my pack brothers – all thirteen companies – than ever raise Glacius against even a single one of them.'

There were growls of approval from the other Wolf Lords. Harald went on.

'Our Chapter has suffered many losses, and those not yet fallen stand on the brink of madness. Morkai's Keep is a shattered ruin, and the surface of Midgardia an ashen wasteland, its population – our own subjects – wiped out. The Great Wolf is gone. Many of our allies believe we are both lost and damned. Treachery stares us in the face, while defeat snaps at our heels. Other warriors would despair. But not us. We are greater than any wyrd-spawned plot or jealous

mortal's lies. We are the Allfather's chosen, his rough-pelted warhounds, the scourge of the heretic and the bane of all traitors. Our sagas sing of ten millennia of triumph, and we will be sure to add to them yet. For Russ, and for the Wofltime.'

He looked at the heart of the Annulus, at the spherical stone inscribed with the crest of the Space Wolves Chapter itself.

'Fenris endures.'

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.

[The Great Wolf is missing. Ulrik the Slayer and Krom Dragongaze set out on an odyssey to find him. The hunt is on...](#)



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