

# WARHAMMER<sup>®</sup> 40,000



## SPACE WOLVES 1

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**Ben Counter**

For the first time in many years, Logan Grimnar was exhausted from battle. He had held off the tau for nearly three days as the xenos had sent unending packs of attack-beasts and swift hover-tanks to harass the Space Wolves.

The aliens had paid dearly for the chance to tire out the Great Wolf of Fenris. Hundreds of tau and their alien auxiliaries lay among the rocky canyons covering the surface of Dactyla. Now, as the Great Company stood and faced the xenos outside, Grimnar stood on the threshold of the temple he had come to this world to find.

‘Can the Great Company stand?’ asked one of Grimnar’s champions. Each of the half-dozen warriors was taken from the Chapter’s Wolf Guard, armed with Terminator armour and their pick of weaponry from the Fang’s armoury. It was rare that anyone would speak to Grimnar so bluntly, and Grimnar still had ample fury in him to round on the warrior.

‘You know better than to question the resolve of our brethren,’ he snarled. ‘They will stand as long as they have to. And we will ensure that is not for long. Follow me and speak no more.’

The temple was more ancient than the Great Crusade itself. Echoes of a long-dead xenos empire’s architecture broke through the living rock of the tunnel complex beneath the ground. Even as Grimnar led his champions down further, he could hear the reports of tau pulse rifles and the replying volleys of bolter fire.

They were Space Wolves, and the tau were as drained by the running battle as Grimnar and his brethren were. The Great Company would hold. The tau assault would be blunted. He knew this because this was the place the runes had

described, and Grimnar would not return from this hunt empty-handed.

‘There,’ said Grimnar, indicating a symbol cut into the wall. It resembled a serpent coiling around a skull. ‘Njal Stormcaller cast that rune as I watched. We are close. Just a little further.’

Grimnar felt the weight of the Axe Morkai as he walked. The warrior he had once been would have dearly loved to lay it down and rest, but those were the thoughts of a lazy pup and not the Great Wolf, so he forged on until he came upon a massive circular slab of rock blocking the way ahead.

Without a word, Grimnar put a shoulder against the rock and pushed. The Wolf Guard joined him, adding their strength to his. The slab rolled aside, revealing the way into the chamber that lay at the heart of the complex.

Purple light bled from the vault. Grimnar’s autosenses were not enough to shut down the glare completely, and he held a hand in front of his face, squinting. The Wolf Guard had their storm bolters ready to open fire on any enemy that might emerge from the temple’s core, but they held their fire.

They saw what Grimnar did. And in that moment, all the weariness of battle was gone.

Ulrik’s watch included the dawn hours, when the blood-red light of Fenris’ sun broke across the glacier-bound mountains. It was the season of fire, when Fenris came closest to its star and the equatorial oceans boiled. In the environs of the Fang there was no warmth, but the ground heaved and cracked like distant thunder as the glaciers experienced a rare thaw.

‘It will be today,’ said a voice behind Ulrik. It was that of the Wolf Lord Krom Dragongaze, whose Great Company had the duty of manning the Fang during the Thirtieth Great Hunt. Krom wore his trophy rack on the back of his power armour, surrounding his ruddy face with a halo of jangling bone. The orange ridge of hair along his scalp was dark in the reddish dawn light. ‘Do you not think so, Lord Slayer?’

‘Perhaps,’ said Ulrik. He anticipated the return of the Great Companies as much as any at the Fang, and yet he could not let the emotions of a Fenrisian close to the surface.

‘I can smell it,’ said Krom. ‘My Great Company is restless. It is not a glorious task, to serve as housekeepers here while the rest of the Chapter is on the hunt. I must fight to keep them focused, and yet I itch to be let off the leash myself.’

‘Sometimes,’ said Ulrik, ‘we must keep the wolf caged.’

‘That is not as easy for us as it is for you,’ said Krom shortly.

Ulrik kept looking into the distance. He wore, as always, his armour's skull-faced helmet, and so Krom had no chance of reading anything from his face. Ulrik let the silence fall, broken only by the distant moan of the thaw and the cries of frosthawks wheeling overhead.

'Forgive me,' said Krom. 'I spoke out of turn.'

Ulrik did not turn to face the Wolf Lord, and instead pointed a finger up towards the colouring sky. A silver streak was just visible there, like a falling star, a thread of precious metal suspended.

'The *Canis Pax*,' said Ulrik. 'You were correct, Lord Dragongaze. It is today.'

The *Canis Pax* carried with it the Great Company of Alaric Nightrunner, known to the rest of the Chapter as the Silent Howlers. They descended in a fleet of shuttles from their strike cruiser and landed among the eyries of the Fang, and were met by a host of thralls to assist with their docking procedures and get the first glimpse of the trophies they had brought back. The brothers of Krom Dragongaze's Great Company, the Drakeslayers, lined the processional down towards the cell blocks and sparring halls of the Fangs, saluting Nightrunner's battle-brothers on their return. Behind them walked Alaric Nightrunner himself, cutting as dashing a figure as there was among the Space Wolves, with skin the colour of beaten bronze and thunder hammer swinging at his hip. Alongside Nightrunner's Company marched the Rune Priest Njal Stormcaller, by some accounts the most powerful psyker the Space Wolves had fielded for thousands of years.

Everyone there cried out the same question: what trophy had the Silent Howlers brought back to Fenris? No Wolf Lord ever returned from the Great Hunt without a new prize to be displayed at the Fang as a symbol of the Space Wolves' relentlessness at the hunt. Alaric did not carry a new skull or captured banner, and met all questioners with the same knowing smile.

Ulrik was not among the honour guard. This was a time for the Space Wolves to be uncaged and to let their spirits run wild. They needed times like this. They did not need a presence like Ulrik standing over them to remind them of their duties. Instead, the Wolf Priest spent several hours in the Reclusiam, drafting missives to be sent out by courier-thrall to the most loyal tribes of Fenris. Each one called for them to send an emissary, one of the wise and powerful men permitted to know of the Chapter's workings, to the outskirts of the mountain fortress' hinterland, where a shuttle from the eyries of the Fang would transport them to the inaccessible peak. There they were to hear of the exploits of the

Great Hunt, and take the tales they heard back to their tribes.

It was part of the cycle that brought new blood into the Chapter. The youthful warriors of Fenris learned of the Space Wolves' heroic deeds and sought to emulate them in the endless battles between the tribes and with the furious indigenous life forms of Fenris. The Wolf Priests, led by Ulrik, chose the most valiant, and brought them into the Chapter to be put through the Bleeding and made into Space Wolves. The myth of the Space Wolves was as crucial a part of the process as the warlike Fenrisian stock, and the Great Hunt served to create new legends that grew and spread with every telling.

Elsewhere in the Fang, for nineteen days Alaric Nightrunner kept his silence. In that time three more Great Companies, those of Bran Redmaw, Gunnar Red Moon and Sven Bloodhowl, arrived home laden down with the trophies they had taken. Finally the emissaries from the tribes arrived, and Ulrik led them wordlessly into the fortress – wise men and warlords, the soothsayers and patriarchs of their clans. The call went out for the Space Wolves to gather in the Great Hall and hear the sagas of the Great Hunt. The first to take the place reserved for the saga-teller was Alaric Nightrunner.

Ulrik presided over the feasting. There was only so much of the leash that could be given to a Space Wolf. Five Great Companies were present in the Great Hall and Fenrisian ale was flowing, a concoction of fermented plant life lethal to an unaugmented man. It was strong enough to affect a Space Marine in spite of his enhanced capacity to filter out toxins, so Ulrik was ready to intervene in case boasting and challenging turned to bloodshed among the battle-brothers. Ulrik stood in his black, skull-faced armour, silent while the cheering and drinking songs of the Space Wolves battered against him like a sea wind.

Alaric Nightrunner approached the enormous fireplace to a tremendous cheer. The tribal emissaries applauded too, and among them Ulrik recognised the First Spear of the Bear tribe, a muscle-bound warrior carrying a kraken-tooth lance, and the hooded emissary of the Stargazer tribe. The Frost Wurm tribe, the Flint Striders and the People of the Burning Sea had also sent representatives. Not all the tribes had answered Ulrik's call, but many had. Whatever tale Alaric was about to tell, it would soon be heard by all of Fenris.

Alaric heard the cheering for a minute, then motioned for quiet. The noise lowered enough for him to be heard.

'I carry no trophy for you,' he said. The battle-brothers cried out in dismay. 'But that does not mean I have disgraced the Great Hunt. Far from it! No, I have

a tale for you, and fear not, there will be plenty of reason to pour yet more of Fenris' bounty down your gullets.

'Our hunt took us to the edge of the Ghoul Stars, where the void is as clouded as a corpse's eyes. The *Canis Pax* was my steed and my brethren were sharpening their blades for the chase. The region is haunted by warp predators and the ghosts of fallen xenos empires, and there is always worthy quarry to be had! Njal Stormcaller, whose casting of the runes guided all the Great Companies on the Great Hunt, stood by my side, and he looked upon the diseased void with great relish. He foresaw the foes all but begging to be put to the bolter and the chainsword. And I had my thunder hammer and spear ready to take the foremost head!'

The brothers of Alaric's Great Company cheered and pounded the feasting table. The Space Wolves of the other companies shoved the Silent Howlers and jeered, but they could not drown out the celebration.

'And we were not disappointed! But it was not some void ghost or spectre that we found. No, the quarry found us. Which of you has not faced the accursed tyranids upon the battlefield? The shadow across the stars, the Great Devourer? You all have cause to hate the tyranid, and indeed I have left a thousand of their foul warrior-beasts headless and gutted in my wake. And yet, I had never faced them like this.

'The *Canis Pax* was pursued by a great hive ship of the tyranids. This monstrous, living thing was like one of the whales that live in Fenris' deep oceans, but vast enough to swallow the *Canis Pax* whole! And indeed, that is what it intended, for it hounded us for many leagues across the void.

'The hive ship loosed its spores, and they fell upon the hull of our strike cruiser. I despatched the brothers of my company to face the boarders, and furious battle raged on the *Canis Pax*! Elbow-deep in dark ichor were my brethren, their snarls of rage punctuated by the sound of chainblades through chitinous armour. And what tales of heroism I could tell you of the hours they fought! Time and again they fended off the tyranids as the xenos tried to breach the bridge and engine rooms. They led counter-charges to the alien beachheads, where the raw void had bled into the decks.

'Hundreds of tyranids were slain. The smaller creatures attacked in waves. The warrior-creatures that serve as elites and officers among their kind directed them, and were singled out for combat and destruction by the pack leaders of the Silent Howlers. I took my place outside the bridge, and beside me stood the Stormcaller. He called on the World Wolf to open his jaws, and a score of

tyranids tumbled into the void he conjured! He bade the lightning fall upon the enemy, and a brood of warriors was charred to smouldering chitin by the sky's fire that answered! And as the enemy charged, I killed one with every spear-thrust, and crushed a skull or a ribcage with every swing of my thunder hammer. Thus did the first prey of our Great Hunt fall, and it was good!

'But brothers, it was not enough, for the hive ship itself was closing in. If we did not destroy it, it would consume us. Even if we outpaced it, there might have been a million warrior-beasts in its belly to send against us. And though the brethren fought with fury, some were brought down and slain. Howl the names of Agmundyr Iron Talon, Kari the Swift and Hrolfyr Bearhide! For they reaped a toll of the xenos filth before they fell.'

Alaric Nightrunner's Great Company howled a long, high note of mourning for the fallen. The other Space Wolves did not harangue them now. Alaric grabbed a flagon from the table beside him and poured the foaming ale down his throat in one, and at his signal the Silent Howlers did the same.

'And when the fight paused,' continued Alaric, 'I turned to the Stormcaller. To him, I said, "We cannot destroy this hive ship alone. Our torpedoes cannot penetrate its hide, and its presence so close prevents us from jumping into the warp." And the Stormcaller replied, "Is this Alaric Nightrunner who speaks? The Wolf Lord most renowned for his cunning, for whom no battlefield conundrum is too obscure? Use that cunning, my lord, and with wisdom seal its fate!" Thus did Njal Stormcaller speak to me, and I was much chastised by his words, for they were true. But in that moment, I knew the solution.

'Imagine, my brothers, the void, befouled by the presence of the Ghoul Stars. The hive ship pursues the *Canis Pax*, and disgorges more boarding spores with every moment. And now, when the hour is darkest, a hero emerges! A Stormwolf gunship flies from the strike cruiser's fighter decks, and it is painted with the heraldry of the Wolf Lord, Alaric Nightrunner! Can you see it, my brothers?

'Then a hatch opens, and the Wolf Lord himself steps out onto the hull. White vapour streams from the faceplate of his helm. He carries the spear with which he slew the Frost Worm of Jormun Glacier. He holds it above him, and though none can hear him in the void, he is yelling obscenities at the hive ship, and demands it fight him one to one, spear against voidborne might!'

The Silent Howlers were laughing now, whooping between swallows of Fenrisian ale. They began banging the tables rhythmically, a drum roll that shuddered the floor of the Great Hall. Alaric was posing with his spear, holding it above his head as he brandished it at an imaginary hive ship.

‘The hive ship closes in. Its jaws open in a grin wide enough to swallow the *Canis Pax*. Deep within its gullet are colonies of tyranid filth, tens of thousands of them roosting in the cavern of its mouth, thousands more crawling between its teeth to pick at the morsels of its last meal. The Stormwolf flies closer, the Wolf Lord draws back his arm to strike... and he is gone!’

The laughter stopped. The Great Hall was suddenly silent as every Space Wolf there imagined the hive ship’s jaws closing on the Stormwolf, swallowing the gunship and the Wolf Lord alike.

Alaric held them there, extending the moment of silence for as long as he dared.

‘And then... boom!’

The Silent Howlers erupted. Ale splattered on the walls and floor as they held their flagons aloft.

‘I give you Njal Stormcaller,’ exclaimed Alaric over the din. ‘The greatest worker of wonders ever born to Fenris! For it was he who created the illusion of the Stormwolf, and of myself atop it, waving my spear as if I meant to harpoon that great whale of the void. And that illusion was wrapped around a most tasty morsel – a cyclonic torpedo, a deep detonation warhead, such as the *Canis Pax* uses to rake the flanks of its prey. The hive ship’s hide was too stout to let the torpedo through, but once the beast had swallowed its prey, I gave the order to detonate!’

‘The warhead must have gone off close to the beast’s brain pan. Instantly, it became ill-coordinated and slow, and faltered in its pursuit. And those of you who know the tyranid well are aware of how the lords among them coordinate the lesser beasts from afar. The hive ship controlled the creatures assailing the *Canis Pax*, or else its brain was used to transmit the commands from whatever distant horror leads their fleets. The control was broken, and now the tyranids on board the *Canis Pax* became unfocused and panicked, striking about at random or seeking to flee. And what Space Wolf could resist such a hateful foe, suddenly so ripe for the killing?’

‘So I led my brethren in falling upon the tyranid. It took three hours to finish the task. Three hours of butchery and revenge! I must have taken two hundred hormogaunt heads, and a dozen warrior-beasts fell beneath my thunder hammer and spear. There is joy in the hunt hard-run and well-fought, it is true, but I cannot deny the pleasure of the hunt that falls upon the prey when it has been made weak and desperate. And when the *Canis Pax* was free of the xenos taint and its decks were awash with dark blood, we turned to the hive ship.

‘Its jaws lolled open. It drifted without purpose. I ordered the *Canis Pax* to turn

about and unload its missiles and torpedoes down the beast's ruined throat. Its innards were blasted through, and it vomited forth a mighty torrent of torn xenos flesh and dead tyranids. How could such a sight be so foul, and yet so glorious? Thus was the death of the hive ship, and thus did the Great Company of Alaric Nightrunner take its quarry in the Great Hunt!

Alaric gave a grand bow and the battle-brothers of his company chanted his name. Alaric accepted their acclaim with exaggerated humility, laying his spear on the floor before them as they cheered.

'Wait!' cried a voice. Krom Dragongaze's face was flushed with drink, and no doubt with anger that he had not had the chance to bring such a tale back from the Great Hunt. 'You tell a fine story, Lord Nightrunner. But every lord on the Great Hunt must return to the Fang with a trophy of his kill. I see you carry no new baubles. Where is your trophy?'

'Lord Dragongaze,' replied Alaric with a smile. 'You have but to look.' He pointed to the large windows at one end of the Great Hall, which led onto a balcony looking out over the snowy hinterland of the Fang.

Ulrik followed the gaze of every Space Wolf. Through the windows, a pair of Stormwolf gunships came in low over the peak of one of the Fang's sister mountains. Between them was strung an enormous object that took shape as the mists were blown away by the engines – it was a titanic length of curved bone, lined with thousands of teeth. It was several hundred metres long, and looked to be part of a much, much larger skull.

The ships lowered the jawbone onto the peak, where it became lodged between spurs of snow-capped rock.

'The jawbone of the hive ship,' said Alaric Nightrunner. 'Presented to my brothers of the Fang.'

In the hours of feasting that followed Alaric Nightrunner's story, the Great Companies of Erik Morkai and Egil Iron Wolf arrived back at the Fang, accompanied by fanfare and feasting as before. Ulrik again stood back from the celebrations, and watched from the Great Hall's balcony as Engir Krakendoom's shuttle fleet descended to the eyries.

Ulrik saw that Njal Stormcaller had joined him on the balcony. The Rune Priest's fierce, wind-burned face was not flushed with drink. Ulrik had noticed him abstaining from the Fenrisian ale.

'How straight was Lord Nightrunner's tale?' said Ulrik. 'I will not contemplate he lied, but his are the tales that gain and lose much in the telling.'

‘True enough,’ said Njal. The various rune-stones and bone trinkets hanging from his robes jangled in the chill wind as he watched Lord Krakendoom’s shuttles coming in to roost. ‘All that he said happened, happened. He did not say that my casting of the runes led him to the Ghoul Stars, where there was no sign of our true quarry. He did not disclose the great disappointment I saw in him that he had brought down his enemy with a ploy from afar, rather than slaying a champion of the warp that in single combat, or some xenos corruptor whose death marked the freedom of a human world. But yes, his tale was straight enough, as it goes.’

‘Krakendoom is almost as garrulous as Lord Alaric,’ said Ulrik. ‘I expect he will demand the saga-teller’s place next.’

‘And he is not shy to call out those who do not match his exploits. Perhaps you will be needed in the hall before long.’

‘No doubt,’ said Ulrik. ‘I have broken up scraps between him and Dragongaze since they were Blood Claws.’

Already there was a commotion in the Great Hall as the first of Engir Krakendoom’s Great Company, the Seawolves, took their place among the revellers.

‘Let us hear what he has to say,’ said Ulrik.

‘Think of the foulest place,’ said Engir Krakendoom. ‘Think of the most noisome pit, the rankest orifice of a world you have ever been to. Now think of it twice as filthy, three times as foetid, four times as brimming with vermin! The world you think of now is Sorixyn IX. And there the Great Hunt led us, and though it was a world benighted and embattled, the Seawolves leapt right into this sea of filth! For there the soldiers of the Imperium fought, and there were enemies that needed killing.’

Krakendoom’s Great Company had a reputation for fierce ship-to-ship combat prowess, and they wore that reputation on their armour as kill-markings and memorials of engagements. Many of them wore now the skulls of the lizard-like pests that infested the jungle world of Sorixyn IX, and more than a few wore ork skulls or finger bones as trophies of their last battles. They were as boisterous as ever, cuffing and wrestling with one another as their Wolf Lord spoke.

‘The Imperial Guard on Sorixyn were veterans of death world campaigns, and yet this world was preying on them as if they were newborn pinklings! And their foe was the ork, that most resilient of vermin, which was moving at will through the dense jungle hunting man and beast. Truly, if there was ever a world that

cried out for the tender touch of the Space Wolves, it was this one.

‘The Seawolves fell upon the orks where the fight was fiercest, and many were the life-debts pledged to the sons of Fenris by regiments of the Imperial Guard in return for their deliverance! At Foulfester Ridge and the Blackleaf River we left heaps of the orkish dead in our wake. Our Stormwolves strafed the crude orkish airfields and our packs rampaged through their mech-yards and supply trails! But there was one foe that could not be fought with the tactics of drop pod and bolter volley. No, this was a creature whose legend was as dangerous as an entire war-host of greenskins, whose existence eroded the will of the Guardsmen more than the cruelty of the jungle or the savagery of the ork. And they called it the Thousand-Handed One.

‘While my brethren joined the Imperial Guard in fending off the orks, I made it my duty to hunt down the Thousand-Handed One. For was this not an omen, to have such a quarry placed in my path while upon the Great Hunt? It was for such a hunt that I was born. Why, you ask? Because of this nose!

‘This nose, my brothers, is as keen as any blade in the armouries of the Fang. This nose has slain more foes of mankind than the guns of a battleship! There was no corner of Sorixyn this Thousand-Handed One could flee to where I would not sniff him out. It was among a heap of slain Guardsmen that I picked up his scent. And what a scent it was! Who among you has not experienced the stench of the ork?’

At this, a disgusted groan and angry grumbling rose from the Space Wolves. A quirk of the Chapter’s gene-seed, one inherited from the Primarch Lemman Russ himself, was an exceptionally well-developed sense of smell. There was indeed nowhere to hide from a Space Wolf once he had the scent, and he could close his eyes and sense a world picked out in smells instead of colours. Engir Krakendoom prided himself on a sense of smell that had tracked a Fenrisian werekraken across a stretch of fjord and glacier, and many a Space Wolf could proudly claim feats of olfactory prowess.

And it was true that orks stank. Ulrik himself could remember his first whiff of the greenskin. It was something that truly never left a Space Wolf’s memory.

‘Yes, you know it well,’ continued Krakendoom. ‘That hint of spoiled offal. That mixture of sweat and stale ordure. The fire of the filth that clings between its fangs! The pus and rot of its battle-wounds! When the Wofltime comes, when I stand beside the Emperor and Lord Russ to fight the final battle, I shall rejoice to know that soon I will never have to smell an ork again!

‘And the Thousand-Handed One had a very particular scent of its own. Its name

came from the men's hands it took as trophies and wore about it everywhere it went. It had the smell of death on it as well as the orkish stink. And so I followed it through the jungle, through gullies choked with foulness and across pools of bubbling sulphurous bile. Sorixyn IX tried to stop me as best it could with its own exotic smells, be it the rot-lily or the carrion of a fallen scarasaur, but I did not relent.

‘And I was being hunted in turn. The Thousand-Handed One knew I was after it, and it had my trail, too. We circled one another through the jungle, closing and drawing away, each seeking the perfect terrain to strike. Were we equally matched? Was this a quarry whose prowess in the hunt matched that of Engir Krakendoom?’

‘It was many days after I picked up the trail that I found a dark and foetid hollow. I knew the Thousand-Handed One was at least half a day away. I judged the place perfect to lure in my prey and subject him to a lethal array of death traps. I set up deadfalls and snares, spear-throwers loaded with the springs of young saplings, spike pits and tripwires, using every scrap of field knowledge I had learned in decades upon the battlefield. And at the end of this gauntlet I waited, the bait for this trap, feigning injury and exhaustion such as would make me an irresistible feast for the savage ork.

‘But the Thousand-Handed One was not a son of Fenris. It knew not the honour of the hunt, the respect granted to the prey, the bond between hunter and quarry we learn while barely out of the cradle. It cared nothing for a clean kill, face to face. No, it was a coward. And once it divined my location, it called on the greenskin artillery on a nearby hill to bombard my position with a firestorm of furious shrapnel!’

The Space Wolves hissed and spat to hear of the dishonour of the greenskins. It was said that a long time ago, in the age of the Scattering, human encountered ork for the first time and instinctively came to a place of mutual hatred. Orks had just enough concept of civilisation to delight in tearing it down, enough sense of honour to wantonly breach it whenever they could.

‘And yet,’ said Krakendoom, calming the grumbling with an outstretched hand, ‘I was no fool. Of course I knew the greenskin would call on its big guns to flush me out. Of course I knew the Thousand-Handed One would cast away all the honour of the hunt and take its cheap kill while it could. And so I had prepared a way out of my death trap, a tunnel through the rocks that broke from the clinging mulch of the jungle floor. It was just big enough to admit my mighty frame, and as the shells whistled down I crawled through it and out into a nearby valley

where the artillery could not find me.

‘For hours the shells fell. The sky was black with smoke, and lit with the red lightning of explosions. A terrible thunder rolled across the jungle! Yet I was unharmed, and in that valley brimming with foulness, I waited. Predators fled from the thunder, but they saw in me a fellow hunter and gave me a wide berth.

‘Finally, the fires no longer fell from the sky. As the echoes died, I heard the war cries of the greenskins as they moved through the remains of my death trap. And I caught the scent of the Thousand-Handed One, at the head of a band of orks, and I knew they were searching for my corpse.

‘Yes, the Thousand-Handed One was looking for me. And it found me! I leapt from my hiding-place, no longer content to skulk like a lizard in the undergrowth. For the first time I saw the Thousand-Handed One up close, and what a beast it was! Twice the height of a Space Marine and three times as broad, a hulking monstrosity such as had terrorised the whole battle zone of Sorixyn IX. Chains of severed hands hung around it. Its enormous fangs were crusted with filth and gore. It carried an axe well-stained with the blood of Imperial Guardsmen, and its dark green skin was as gnarled as the bullet-scarred trees of the jungle.

‘Across the smouldering ruin of the jungle our eyes met, and the Thousand-Handed One knew it had been outfoxed. For a moment it showed the honour of the prey, just enough for it to bark angrily at the other greenskins who followed it so they shied away and did not intervene. I drew my mighty frostblade, its teeth carved from those of the kraken I slew with my own hand. The ork hefted its axe, a weapon huge enough to fell the mighty jungle trees with one stroke. And we charged.

‘Can I speak truly of the fury of our battle? Though I take quick to the tale, I do not have the words. If the greenskin had found its mark, it would have hewn me in two. But I did not give it the chance. I called on every feint and swordsman’s trick I learned in the sparring halls of the Fang, even those tricks my people taught me when I was but a stripling boy in the halls of the Devil Lynx tribe. Never have I faced such a foe, and never have I dredged so deep within myself to solve the riddle of the blade before me.

‘But the Thousand-Handed One was an ork, and I was a son of Fenris. Angered at being outwitted by me, it sought to split me from crown to fundament with a mighty downward swing of its axe. But I rolled out of its way and the axe was buried in the charred ground. I rose to my feet, drew back my blade, and with a howl of revenge I plunged it into the back of its skull!’

The Space Wolves cheered. There was little they enjoyed more than to hear of the death of such a xenos.

‘The blade came out of its mouth, and the matter of its brain sprayed from between its teeth!’

More cheers.

‘And when I tore my frostblade free, its skull was emptied, its eyes dull, its axe hanging limply from dead fingers!’

The Seawolves whooped and howled and banged their tankards on the table. With a smile, Engir Krakendoom reached into a leather bag hanging from his waist and took out a pair of withered, gnarled green hands, each three times the size of a man’s, severed at the wrist.

‘This is the trophy I bring back to the Fang!’ he exclaimed. ‘The hands of the Thousand-Handed One!’

Ulrik watched over the placing of the ork’s severed hands in a niche in one of the Fang’s many trophy halls. Over the millennia, trophies almost beyond counting had been brought back by Space Wolves who had taken a notable kill or achieved a crucial objective. A band of thralls curated them, keeping the rolls of which trophy was taken from which foe and by whom.

The emissaries of the tribes watched the interring of the hands in a crystal display case, for they would take the story back to their tribes of the astonishing, exotic things the Space Wolves took or cut from their foes. The youths of their tribes would seek to win the eye of the Space Wolves, some of them would win trophies of their own, and the cycle would continue.

With great pride, Engir Krakendoom watched the thralls close the lid on the display case. The ork’s hands took their place alongside the battered helmet of a Thousand Sons traitor and the severed arm of an accursed eldar farseer. The Seawolves howled in triumph as Krakendoom’s offering to the Fang was added to the spoils of the Thirtieth Great Hunt.

Wolf Lord Berek Thunderfist emerged from his shuttle carrying the war-glaive of an eldar pirate, one he had personally slain while his Great Company stormed the space hulk *Vivisector*. Shortly after him arrived the Great Company of Harald Deathwolf. Harald had the head of the rebellious governor of Triskel Secundus, carried with mock gravity on a pillow of bloodstained velvet. Finally Kjarl Grimblood arrived, his Great Company badly mauled in a brutal clash with a warband of Night Lords traitors, and he brought two dozen blasphemers’ hearts to adorn the trophy halls of the Fang.

Only the Great Wolf Grimnar had yet to return. Almost the entire Chapter was at the Fang, a rare enough occurrence, and so Ulrik watched carefully over the Great Hall as the feasting and drinking continued.

None could say who would take to the place of the saga-teller next. It was not unknown for Wolf Lords to fight a duel over the right to tell the next tale, wrestling with hands and bared teeth alone, or instigating an ale-fuelled brawl between their companies. Beneath Ulrik's gaze, none would dare fight now, but still the tension was there. Berek Thunderfist, normally reserved among the Wolf Lords, might relate one of his fabled episodes of bluster and bravado when the ale flowed and seek to seize the attention of the Great Hall. His Great Company certainly encouraged him to do so, but for the time being Thunderfist was content to sit and tear with his teeth at the hunks of meat the thralls brought up from the Fang's lower reaches.

One of the tribal emissaries stood and walked towards Ulrik. It was the emissary of the Stargazer Tribe, in his dark blue hooded robes. The Stargazers were rarely seen outside the mountain pathways they knew so well, and though Space Wolves had been recruited from among them they were few in number and suited more to serving as lone Wolf Scouts than as packmates among the Blood Claws and Grey Hunters. Ulrik had walked among them seeking candidates for the Blooding before, but not for some years. It had been a surprise that the Stargazers had sent an emissary at all.

'Lord Slayer,' said the emissary. 'I have heard much of the exploits of the Great Hunt to tell to my people upon my return. They will seek to make war to catch the eye of the Fang, and so we will become strong. For this reason you brought me here. But I see now that you give the teller of tales a sacred place, as is our custom too. May I petition you for a turn to speak?'

'This is an unusual request,' said Ulrik. 'Thralls of the Fang are permitted to tell a saga, for indeed Leman Russ bade the Chapter grant the greatest respect to he who tells it. But for someone outside the Fang to be given the honour is rare indeed.'

'I understand,' said the Stargazer emissary. 'But for now, no Wolf Lord is minded to take his place by the fire, and I feel it would benefit the battle-brothers greatly to hear a voice from the world of the tribes they have left behind. It will remind them who they are.'

'Then take your place, emissary,' said Ulrik. 'You have shown no fear in speaking with me. I shall show you the respect that is due to an elder of your tribe. Tell your tale.'

The emissary bowed in thanks, and shuffled to the place by the fire. By the looks of him he was old, well past the age of a warrior, which on Fenris meant he had been a fierce and tenacious man in his youth to have survived so long. Bone fetishes and runestones jangled as he walked, the implements of the soothsaying and divinations for which the Stargazers were known.

The babble of conversation died down as the Space Wolves realised the old man was about to address them. They were curious to hear what such a man would say, for only the oldest Long Fangs had heard someone from outside the Fang regale them with a saga.

‘My people read the stars,’ began the emissary. ‘Though we divine the future in many ways, it is among the stars that we find the most profound truths. The Crone Fenris looks down at us with her thousands of eyes, and in that glittering void we seek to understand things that are distant in space or time. My people have read from the stars a tale that I believe concerns you here, for having heard the sagas of your exploits, I realise the night sky has granted us a glimpse into the Great Hunt.

‘On the extreme edge of all things there lies a rocky and harsh world, one devoid of life in its natural state, named Dactyla. And yet there is life there now, an alien that men call the tau, and in great numbers he has colonised this world. For what purpose I cannot say, for none can understand the mind of the xenos, and curses on him who tries. The runes your own seers read led one of your number, the Great Wolf Logan Grimnar, to Dactyla, and it took many months for him to arrive there. He rejoiced, for there were xenos to slay, and the Great Wolf loves nothing more than fresh xenos blood on his axe. There he bade his Great Company set about the xenos with much fury, as if exacting revenge for some unknown wrong, and the tau fled in terror as the Space Wolves descended from the sky.’

Ulrik had not expected this from the emissary. He did not think word of the particulars of the Great Hunt was known among the peoples of Fenris – and yet Grimnar had indeed set off for the Eastern Fringe, following the runes cast by Njal Stormcaller on the eve of the hunt. The Stargazers were known for their prowess at reading the past or the future, and sometimes events in the present that were far away, but nevertheless Ulrik had not heard of one divining distant events in such detail.

Whatever Ulrik thought, the place of the saga-teller was indeed sacred, as Leman Russ himself had decreed. So the Wolf Priest respected the emissary’s right and listened on.

‘Yet the tau waxed great in number,’ the human continued, ‘and called many more to the battlefield. Lord Grimnar wished not to become mired in war, for he had not come to take the heads of the tau but to seek the quarry of which the runes had spoken. So he gave the order for his battle-brothers to fight on the move, through the valleys and tunnels of Dactyla, fending off the tau as he strove on for his destination.

‘The Grey Hunters met the tau advances with walls of bolter fire. The tau sent forth giant suits of walking armour and tau warriors armed with weapons that could fire from a league away. They sought to race ahead of the Great Company and lay ambushes, but the Blood Claws fell upon them as they laid their explosives and dug their foxholes. Tau blood flowed on upon the black stone of Dactyla, and yet the tau did not relent.

‘Svalgar Brokentoorth was the first to fall to the tau. His wargear failed him, and a shot like an arrow of bright energy found his primary heart. He was the first, but not the last. Though the Great Company covered many leagues at a bound and evaded every tau attempt to bring them to battle, yet one by one Space Wolves fell. And as the running battle continued, they had no time to mourn their dead. They committed the names of the fallen to memory, took their gene-seed and wargear, and forged on, for the Great Wolf would not let his quarry go.

‘Finally, Grimnar espied his goal. He had not known what form it would take, but now he saw it was a mighty gate hewn into the rock, the threshold of a temple older than mankind. It was graven with symbols from a language that had not been spoken in millions of years. Surely this was the place the runes had spoken of, and Grimnar’s prey lay within.

‘The Space Wolves stood with their backs to the gate, and made ready to defend the temple against the tau. The xenos had brought in squadrons of mighty armoured suits and metal beasts from their base on Dactyla, and now these stood arrayed against the Great Company of Logan Grimnar. The Long Fangs shot down a xenos machine that flew like a steel eagle, and it spiralled down into a squad of Fire Warriors in a ball of flame. Great was the celebration to see the aliens burn! And yet more were cresting the ridge above the Space Wolves with every moment.

‘Grimnar chose six heroes to accompany him. Six mighty champions of his Wolf Guard, to stand with their lord while the Great Company fought. He threw open the gates to the temple that had stood closed for aeons, and entered.

‘From outside, the sound of battle reached the Great Wolf’s ears. The tau had surrounded his brethren and it seemed attrition alone would seal their fate. Just

as the noble predator is cornered by a pack of scavengers on the winter ice, so did the Space Wolves face a foe many times their number. And just as that great beast is slain not by one mighty blow but by a multitude of tiny bites, thus the Space Wolves' doom appeared to them. The tau did not fight face to face and fist to fist like the men of Fenris, but from a great distance with arrows of light, and soon more Space Wolf dead were added to the tally to be mourned when the battle was done – if any Space Wolves remained to remember them.'

The Space Wolves grumbled and glowered. Any talk of falling to the xenos was cause for anger, and now they were hearing of it from a tribesman from outside the Fang. Even though it was just a tale the emissary was telling and they had no way of knowing its truth, the words carried a certainty to them. Ulrik knew he would have to watch them carefully, for already the emissary had strayed into dangerous territory. When it came to protecting the good name of the Great Wolf, the Space Wolves might need to be discouraged from turning to violence.

'In the temple, the Great Wolf felt the leaden ache of long battle in his limbs. He had fought for so long, and yet the greatest test he felt sure was now to come. His champions were resolute, yet he knew they, too, were at the point of exhaustion. They had all fought for many times the hours any of us among the tribes could, and even Space Wolves can only fight for so long.

'In the depths of the temple was a great portal. Grimnar and his champions hauled aside the stone barring the entrance, and looked upon a great chamber with walls of amethyst. In the centre of this chamber was a sarcophagus, huge in size, inscribed with rough-hewn runes. To Grimnar's shock they were in the tongue of Fenris, an old dialect and yet one he could read. They spoke of the heroic deeds of he who was within, and a dread curse on those who had put him inside. Grimnar bade his champions remain by the doorway, and approached the sarcophagus himself. He shattered the sarcophagus lid with a blow from the Axe Morkai, and looked on the corpse within.

'It was a sight the Great Wolf knew well. He had seen that mighty countenance many times in the histories of his Chapter, but now it was withered and dry, with skin aged like desiccated leather. He also knew well the wargear in which the corpse had been buried, the dark and dull grey livery of the ancient Space Wolves Legion, the mighty frostblade that lay beside the body now tarnished and blunted with neglect.

'Logan Grimnar sank to his knees. He let out a terrible howl of abandonment, and in his heart truly he knew despair for the first time. For the Great Hunt was over. Logan Grimnar, the Great Wolf and High King of Fenris, was looking upon

the corpse of the primarch Leman Russ.'

The uproar was furious. Space Wolves yelled insults and curses at the emissary. Krom Dragongaze threw one of the great feasting tables on its side, spilling heaps of meat and gallons of ale onto the flagstones. A young Blood Claw drew his combat blade and stepped towards the fireplace, face creased with anger.

'No!' yelled Njal Stormcaller. 'The place of the saga-teller is sacrosanct! Sheathe your blade, Brother Freigar!'

'This cur has blasphemed in all our hearing!' retorted Erik Morkai. The Dark Wolf, as he was known, glared from beneath his mane of black hair, fury in his equally black eyes. 'He speaks of the death of Leman Russ. But Russ swore he would return to us, at the Wolftime! To say he is dead is to defy the very word of the primarch!'

'It was Russ who commanded that no man lay a hand on the teller of the tale,' argued Berek Thunderfist. 'Though my fury is stoked, I shall choke it down. I bid all my brethren do the same.'

'This man is not even of the Fang!' yelled Brother Kulfrang, a Long Fang of Engir Krakendoom's Great Company who was one of the longest-serving pack leaders in the Chapter. 'Who will curse us for spilling his blood? Who will call us to heel?'

'The Stormcaller and the Thunderfist speak true.' Ulrik the Slayer did not have to raise his voice for it to cut through the din. The brothers quieted their anger when they heard the Wolf Priest speak up. 'No man may harm the teller of tales.' Ulrik stepped towards the emissary, who through the uproar had not moved or spoken a word. 'But I stand apart from the rules of the Chapter. The bindings of Russ' rules do not hold me as they do you.'

Ulrik tore the hood from the emissary's face.

Where the face of the Stargazer tribe's emissary should have been, there was instead an endless and starry void, as if the entire universe could be glimpsed therein. Galaxies spun in the darkness, and stars were born and boiled away to nothing. Empires could have lived and died in the time it took Ulrik to tear his eyes away, mindful of becoming transfixed by the vastness of the sight.

Ulrik's crozius arcanum, the power weapon that served as the badge of the Wolf Priest's office, was in his hand. Its power field crackled into life as he brought it around in a vicious, bisecting strike up into the emissary's torso.

The emissary was gone, flitting in a heartbeat to a place several metres away. The crozius thrummed as it swiped through nothing. Already the Space Wolves were bringing out their knives and bolt pistols, but as shots cracked across the

Great Hall the emissary vanished from one point to the other, impossible to pin down or hit. Brother Freigar, the Blood Fang, dived at the emissary but he was caught in a tendril of psychic power and flung against the wall.

The shape of the daemon was no longer that of a man. It was a spectre, its shape formed by the folds of the cloak whipping around it. It had four arms, three of them on one side of its body, multicoloured flame flickering around its hands. The other hand pointed a long, black talon down at Brother Bjarki of Thunderfist's Long Fangs. Bjarki was thrown into the air and slammed into the ceiling, tumbling back to land with a smack on the stone floor.

'Hold, daemon!' Njal Stormcaller jumped up onto one of the feasting tables, blue-white light flashing around him as he called a lightning bolt to each hand. He hurled one bolt like a javelin and the daemon, its robes whipping around it, teleported out of the bolt's path. The second bolt slammed into the ceiling of the Great Hall and cast out a crackling cage of electricity, trapping the emissary in bars of raw energy.

'The words of the daemon are lies!' shouted Ulrik. 'You seek to bring us despair but we see through your untruth!'

The daemon turned its empty face towards Ulrik. 'There is no deceit,' it said in a dark, liquid voice, 'as cruel as a truth disbelieved.'

Blue-black power was gathering between the daemon's hands. Njal's cage held it now, but in moments it might be free.

'By the jaws of the world wolf, be devoured!' yelled Njal. He drove his staff into the floor and a black fissure opened up in the air, the maw of a crack in reality. Like a crevasse running across a glacier, it roared towards the daemon.

The jaws of the world wolf was a particularly Fenrisian application of psychic might, an exhortation for the spirit of Fenris itself to swallow the enemy and condemn him to an oblivion more profound than destruction. Njal Stormcaller had a mastery of the power that no other Rune Priest had ever approached. The battle-brothers knew it was coming and dived out of the way as the fissure streaked across the Great Hall.

The daemon cackled and the lightning cage shattered. Ulrik felt the shockwave hitting him, lifting him off his feet to slam him into the wall behind him. He stayed conscious through the impact, willing himself to observe what happened.

The daemon held up a hand and the fissure stopped just before it was swallowed up. The daemon started to reel in the blackness, winding it like thread into a sliver of black lightning that echoed those Njal had called forth. Then, as if mocking Njal, the daemon hurled the bolt at the Stormcaller.

Njal yelled as the bolt hit him between the eyes. His cry choked in his throat and he toppled to the ground.

Ulrik was on his feet now. The crozius was hot and angry in his hand. The daemon turned to him again.

‘Despair,’ the daemon said. ‘The truth, the lie, it is all the same. It is all despair.’

The thing that had claimed to be the Stargazer emissary shifted form into a swirling blue-black bolt of energy, and hurtled off through the window of the Great Hall, over the balcony and out across the snowy landscape of the Fang’s hinterland. Ulrik ran to the balcony rail and saw it vanish behind the mountains, off past the peak where the hive ship’s jawbone lay.

The Space Wolves rushed to the balcony. Bolt pistols chattered as they fired after the daemon, but it was long gone, swallowed by the Fenrisian sky.

Ulrik turned from the window. Njal Stormcaller lay by an upturned table, face down on the flagstones. Ulrik turned him over and checked his life signs from his armour – the Rune Priest was alive, but his hearts were hammering arrhythmically. Ulrik took a vial of stabilising serum from the many compartments and pouches around his waist and injected one into the Stormcaller’s neck. His heartbeats became slower and more regular. Njal’s face, burned to leather by the winds of Fenris, took on a little more colour as Ulrik checked his pupils.

‘What manner of thing was the intruder?’ asked Wolf Lord Krom Dragongaze, walking over from the furious mob of Space Wolves by the window.

‘Take the Stormcaller to the apothecarion,’ said Ulrik. ‘See to it yourself. Then I will seek your answers.’

Ulrik knew the vaults of the Fang better than anyone in the Chapter. He had to own that knowledge alone, for among its treasures were books of lore that could not be entrusted to anyone save a Wolf Priest. One of them was an account of the mad mind-wanderings of a nameless warp-prophet, where he described a being that came to him in his dreams. It was a being with a face of stars, one that could take on many forms, and dictated to the prophet a million-line poem that drove men mad.

Another was a tome proscribed by the Inquisition but recovered by the Space Wolves from a raid on an apostate cardinal’s palace. It was a catalogue of the beings which the cardinal had summoned from the warp and had bargained with for obscene pleasures and ancient secrets. One of those beings was a thing that

took on the shape of anyone the cardinal thought of, and mocked him with what turned out to be the truth of his violent death at the Space Wolves' hands.

There were others. Glimpses here, mentions there. It had many names but the title most often given to it was the Changeling. A creature born of the will of the Lord of Change, the warp power of knowledge and lies. An agent of the purest Chaos.

There was no mystery as to how the Changeling had entered the Fang. Ulrik had invited it. Perhaps it had been masquerading as the emissary of the Stargazer tribe for years before it got its chance to stand before the Space Wolves and weave its fiction. Perhaps it had taken over the emissary's form after Ulrik had sent the word out, and had left the real emissary frozen in a snowbank or thrown in dismembered chunks into the sea. Whatever the case, it had used Ulrik to enter the Fang and take up the place of the saga-teller in the Great Hall.

Ulrik knew anger well. It was impossible to grow up on Fenris and not know it. The chief Wolf Priest had to keep his anger caged, bolted down and restrained, so it did not overwhelm him and drive him to the same destructive and reckless acts he dissuaded in the rest of the Chapter. But he felt that caged wolf growling now, inflamed by the rage and disgust he felt at having been the Changeling's means of penetrating the heart of the Fang.

Ulrik banished these thoughts as he stood over Njal Stormcaller. The Rune Priest was still comatose. All the fury of the world wolf had been driven back through Njal's mind and had forced his brain to shut down. The Wolf Priests and the apothecarion thralls would ensure his body was looked after, but only Njal himself could put his mind back together. Ulrik had never seen the Stormcaller as vulnerable as he looked now, stripped of his armour beneath the Wolf Priest's shroud, wires and tubes hooked up to the autosurgeon and medical cogitator beside him.

'We will find it, brother,' said Ulrik. 'We will bring it to justice. Many have tried, but it has chosen us as the means of its destruction. And the sons of Fenris will deliver.'

The only reply was the ticking of the cogitator's autoquill, scratching out the beat of Njal Stormcaller's hearts onto its reel of parchment.

'It lies,' said Ulrik. 'That is how it sows destruction. Its tale of Russ' death was a lie. If we do not believe that, we are lost.'

*There is no deceit as cruel as a truth disbelieved.*

The daemon's words were intended to create the fissure of doubt in the Space

Wolves' mind, to make them wonder if Russ really could be dead and the prophecy of the primarch's return meaningless. It wanted to force them onto the path that would lead them to despair. While Ulrik lived, the Changeling would not succeed.

'But the brothers are beginning to ask the question,' continued Ulrik. 'And there has been no sign of the rest of the fleet in the sky. They ask why the Changeling came to us, and what it intended with its lies of Russ' death. And above all, they ask the question to which I must turn my own mind.'

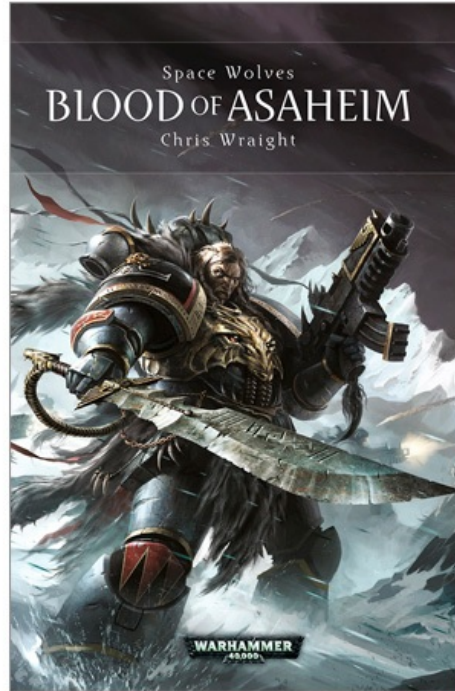
Ulrik had not spoken it out loud, but here, with only Njal Stormcaller to hear him, he gave it voice.

'What has become of the Great Wolf?'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ben Counter** is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors, with two Horus Heresy novels to his name – *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*. He is the author of the Soul Drinkers series and *The Grey Knights Omnibus*. For Space Marine Battles he has written *The World Engine* and *Malodrax*, and has turned his attention to the Space Wolves with the novella *Arjac Rockfist: Anvil of Fenris* and a number of short stories. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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