

WARHAMMER
40,000



SPACE WOLVES 3
EYE OF THE DRAGON

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Steve Lyons

The pressure on Ulrik's chest suddenly eased.

The shadow of the gargantuan battlesuit above him – the shadow of death – unexpectedly disappeared.

He could barely see or hear past the alarms in his helmet. His auto-senses were in overdrive, diagnosing the damage to his armour, to his body, mostly telling him what he already knew. They told him only one thing that mattered: he was alive. His wolf amulet had protected him from being crushed, though it couldn't have done so much longer.

The venerable Wolf High Priest had been spared to fight yet another day. He muttered a grateful prayer to the Allfather, as he looked for the agency through which his will had been done here.

The sky of this dreary alien world was screaming; its ground was trembling. Drop pods in blue-grey livery, the Space Wolves' colours, were plummeting through the clouds, striking the ground like meteors. One of them had landed just behind the battlesuit, the force of the sudden impact throwing it off-balance.

Ulrik forced his battered armour, and his equally battered body, to move. Before the battlesuit's shas'el pilot could regain control – before that heavy foot was raised to crush the life out of him again – he dragged himself out of the dirt and staggered away from it. His damaged lungs burned with every breath of air he gasped in.

The battlesuit loosed a volley of plasma rounds after him. They were comfortably off-target, though Ulrik felt their heat washing over him.

The first of the pods opened to disgorge fresh Space Wolves upon the battlefield. Ulrik recognised a few of them, saw the badge of the Sun Wolf on

their shoulders and knew who must have brought them here; as if he hadn't suspected it already.

Of all the twelve Wolf Lords, only one would have disregarded the High Priest's orders and followed him here. Only one would have been so eager to prove himself – for the thousandth time – in action.

That one had just saved Ulrik the Slayer's life.

Krom Dragongaze's red cloak billowed around him as he stepped out of the drop pod. Its violent landing had sent cracks through the hard earth, but his gilt-edged artificer armour had easily absorbed the brunt of it.

He heralded his own arrival by firing a volley of explosive bolt-rounds into the air. In his other hand Krom clutched his signature weapon, Wyrmcclaw, a huge double-bladed frost axe. It only took him a moment to choose his target.

'Take out the battlesuit,' he roared into his comm-bead.

Towering above all else, the tau machine was an irresistible lure to him, particularly as it was already damaged. The battlesuit's head had been staved in and its pilot had thrown open its chest hatch in order to see. As a bonus, it seemed to have beaten the Wolf High Priest. The prospect of succeeding where Ulrik the Slayer had failed made Krom's mouth water.

His orders were received and understood by his Wolf Guard, his company's fiercest warriors. With the exception of the Old Wolf's Kingsguard, Krom's Wolf Guard was the largest among the Great Companies – thanks to the example he set for his warriors, he was quick to claim.

They leapt from the drop pod a breath behind their lord and fanned out around the enemy, bolt pistols and storm bolters rattling.

'Keep your distance,' their pack leader cautioned them over the vox-net. 'One of those things can shatter power armour with a blow, but we have the advantages of speed and agility over it. Best to weaken its defences with ranged fire, then move in for the kill.'

That was Beoric Winterfang, always the calm voice of reason. His age and wisdom had been cited by some as a useful counterbalance to Krom Dragongaze's hotheadedness, but he was one of Krom's disciples all the same, and as loyal as the rest of them.

'Sometimes, I wonder if you have wolf's blood in you at all,' Krom grumbled to himself, not for the first time. Beoric's centuries of distinguished service, however, demanded his respect.

The battlesuit shuddered and reeled beneath the Wolf Guard's sustained assault.

It was anything but helpless, though. It snapped up a giant arm – more precisely, a multi-barrelled cannon attached to its shoulder joint – and unleashed a blinding storm of plasma rounds upon its assailants.

There was scant cover to be had, so there was little the Space Wolves could do to evade the white-hot fire that swept over them. They could only weather the onslaught as the markings and adornments on their armour blistered and burned.

Jormund Thunderclaw, a head taller than the others in more durable Terminator armour, pushed his way to the front of his battle-brothers. He planted his feet in the ground and brought his cyclone launcher to bear. A cluster of krak missiles screamed out from over his shoulders to blaze a laser-guided path towards their substantial target, bursting against the battlesuit's energy shield and engulfing it in noise, fire and smoke. Its cannon continued to lash out, but half-blindly now.

Many of Ulrik's strike force were recovering their wind, and the rest of the tau had begun a hasty pullback, finding themselves outmatched. The remainder of Krom's Drakeslayers – his Blood Claws, Grey Hunters and Long Fangs – were harrying their foes' heels, speeding their retreat. The High Priest had rejoined the battle too, in spite of his injuries.

Krom pierced the miasma around the construct with a narrow-eyed glare. His nostrils twitched at the scent of burning electrics. The battlesuit's cannon had been silenced. Any moment now, he judged, its pilot would make a break for it, try to trample his way over the blue-grey perimeter that was tightening around him. Krom saw his chance and took it.

Ignoring Beoric's sage advice – as was his right – he charged, lips peeled back from his fangs and axe awhirl above his head.

Wyrmlaw was edged with the ground talons of a Fenrisian ice wyrm; its blade cut harder than diamond and was lent additional power by the arcane runes carved into it. Krom smashed the blade into the battlesuit's right knee joint, where a missile had already struck. For a moment, the axe remained lodged there, drawing out more smoke and furious sparks. It wasn't enough.

The pilot glared down at him from the battlesuit's chest cavity, its black eyes inhumanly cold. Krom threw himself with all his strength, all his fully-armoured weight, shoulder-first against the pylon of the battlesuit's right leg. Already off-balance, at last it fell. Krom recovered his axe with a wrench as the suit toppled away from him.

His Wolf Guard joined him now, at Beoric's command. They swarmed the felled machine, hacking through its sputtering shields with frost blades and power weapons. They dragged the hapless pilot from its cockpit and were

snapping, howling, vying for the honour of tearing out its throat.

Within minutes of Krom Dragongaze's arrival, the battle was won. He puffed out his chest with pride and turned to face Ulrik.

'You're welcome,' Krom grinned.

'I told you to stay behind at the Fang,' Ulrik snarled.

'I had a feeling I might be needed here,' Krom answered him, brazenly.

Ulrik subjected him to his grim helm's full glower. Most men – even those of Fenris – would have flinched from its judgement in fear. Not Krom, though. It was not for nothing that he was known as Dragongaze, or the Fierce-eye.

Krom's head was bare, with bright russet hair sprouting from his scalp and chin, spilling over his gorget in plaits. He met Ulrik's searing gaze with equally fiery red orbs of his own, and showed by the twitching of his lips that he relished the contest. The wolf-skull totem that he wore on his back loomed over his own skull. It appeared to be leering at Ulrik too, eye sockets full of insolence.

'We have idled too long at the Fang,' said Krom. 'My Drakeslayers are impatient to bloody themselves again, after missing out on the Great Hunt.'

A growl formed at the back of Ulrik's throat, but he let the matter drop. He had made his point – for what good it might do, what good it ever did – and Krom's disobedience had saved him, after all. His death would have wounded the Sons of Russ grievously – especially with the Great Wolf still missing.

Olav Brunn padded up to him. 'High Priest, the tau may be licking their wounds for now,' he counselled, 'but they will doubtless regroup and attack again. If the Great Wolf is to be found here—'

'Grimnar came here,' interrupted Krom, 'to this planet?'

'To explore the ruins of the city here, we believe,' Ulrik confirmed, 'and Olav is right, we may not have much time to search for him.'

Krom nodded and turned away from him abruptly. He fixed his eyes on the mildewed walls of the city across the plateau, as if he expected them to wither as most men did in the heat of his glare. At the same time, he barked into his comm-bead, jolting his Great Company into action.

Ulrik gave the same orders to the members of his smaller force. The Drakeslayers, however, were hungrier and better rested than the High Priest's battle-brothers and, spurred on by their Wolf Lord, they took the lead.

Krom had his Wolf Guard form up around him and loped towards the crumbling city gates himself. He made sure to beat the Wolf High Priest through them.

The city reeked of dust and decay, making Krom's nose itch. Its streets were narrow and winding, lined by the skeletons of half-demolished buildings. He felt hemmed in. A heavy silence had rushed in to fill the void left by the end of the battle, and the grey sky seemed a long way away.

The city had not been lived in for long before the Dactylan catastrophe had forced its evacuation. It felt lifeless, soulless, sterile. *An ill place for hunting.* Few feet, Krom knew, had trodden these streets in many decades, even centuries.

Few feet, he thought, *and yet some...*

The dust had been disturbed, and recently. There were too many trails to separate one from another, so he dispensed with the business of trying to follow them. He had his company fan out across the rubble. If there was something to find here – a clue to the Great Wolf's whereabouts or Grimnar himself, perhaps crippled and in need of assistance – a Drakeslayer would find it or he would know the reason why.

Krom rounded the curve of a great mouldering dome, long since laid low by spiny roots that had risen up beneath it, thrusting outward triumphantly through its shattered doors and windows, only to then succumb themselves to age and blight.

A junction loomed, at which five narrow roads corkscrewed away from each other. Krom split his Wolf Guard into packs and chose the central route for himself: the one least likely, in his judgement, to loop back towards the walls.

Scant minutes later, however, he caught familiar scents on the breeze and came face-to-face with six battle-brothers, treading the same road as him but in the opposite direction. *This place is a maze,* he thought sourly. A man without his wolfish instincts – and less importantly, his armour's auto-senses – would have lost himself by now.

The first discovery was made by a novice Blood Claw. His voice burst over the vox-net, proud and hungry to impress. A moment later, Beoric Winterfang delivered a more measured report from somewhere further eastward. The content of his message was much the same as that of the Blood Claw's. Each had come upon the site of a recently fought battle – and each had found its casualties.

'I recognise Uri Stormhammer,' Beoric voxed. 'A staunch member of the Old Wolf's Kingsguard. He has been dead for some days.'

'Then Grimnar *was* here,' Krom replied. *And may be yet.*

'My lord, I see another corpse,' chimed in the eager Blood Claw. 'It's a Space Marine, my lord, but not of Fenris. He bears the symbol of Caliban.'

Krom's top lip curled at the mention of the Space Wolves' ancient rivals.

‘We have Dark Angels here too,’ Beoric confirmed. ‘One has clearly been felled by a chainsword – and, my lord, I see no tau. We have no tau bodies here.’

That could only mean one of two things. It was inconceivable that any Space Wolf had fallen without taking at least one of his enemies with him. So, had the tau simply removed their dead for burial? It was not impossible, but they had engaged Ulrik’s force outside the city – and so far, Krom had detected no fresh tau scents within it.

He clenched his fists inside his gauntlets. It had been a long time since Krom had gone toe to toe with a Dark Angel – and then he had certainly proven which of them was superior. He would relish the chance – an excuse – to prove it again.

He took a moment to consider that happy scenario. Another vox, however, demanded his attention. He recognised the voice of Egil Redfist, the Blood Claws’ commander.

‘Lost contact with three of my Wolves,’ he reported ominously. ‘I’m sending you details of their last known location and leading my pack there now.’

So, there were still enemies – living enemies – hiding in the city. Dark Angels? *No*, thought Krom, *they wouldn’t lurk in shadows*. Tau? *Perhaps...* But the hairs on his neck and down his spine were tingling, as they had been, he realised, since he had passed through the crumbling gate. The air had a scent, a taste of something he couldn’t quite define, but it clawed at the lining of his nose and prickled his throat.

Krom Dragongaze’s instincts were never wrong. There was something evil here.

‘This one can still be saved,’ said Wsyr Flamepelt.

He was speaking of a grey-haired Long Fang, whose hand he had seen protruding from beneath a pile of stones, whose body he had uncovered.

The Long Fang’s wounds were deep, but his enhanced physiology had staunched the bleeding and slowed his metabolic rate to less than a crawl. It might be weeks or longer before he woke – Space Marines could remain in healing comas for centuries – but wake he would.

‘Too late to tell us what happened here,’ Ulrik grumbled.

He ordered that the brother be returned to the *Canis Pax* where he could be properly tended to, then strode away, his heavy brow furrowed beneath his helm.

He had voxed Krom Dragongaze, and knew that the Drakeslayers had found more bodies. *Not enough to suggest a massacre*, he considered, *but cause for concern nonetheless*. What had happened to Logan Grimnar that had kept him

from tending to his wounded or burying his dead? *For that matter, what brought him – the Dark Angels too, not to mention the tau – to these festering ruins in the first place?*

‘Another Dark Angel over here,’ Olav Brunn grunted. This one was far beyond helping. His armour was seared and dented; he lay crumpled against the foot of a spiral staircase that led nowhere.

Ulrik cast a shrewd eye over the corpse, seeking clues to the mystery. The Dark Angels and the Space Wolves had long been rivals, but fighting one another to the death was quite another thing. Unless, he concluded, the Angels had been touched by the taint of Chaos. He studied the body closely, but the Space Marine, Ulrik satisfied himself, was only what he appeared to be.

He updated Krom on his situation, eliciting a cruel bark in response. ‘I make that seven of theirs to five of ours,’ the Wolf Lord boasted. *Thus far*, thought Ulrik. Unlike Krom Dragongaze, he didn’t see everything as a competition.

He was listening, with one ear, to a vox-report from the *Canis Pax* in orbit. He had instructed its shipmistress to make continuous scans of the planet’s surface. He voxed the news to Krom.

‘The tau are regrouping on the plateau, with a dozen more battlesuits. There may be advance parties searching inside the city already.’

Could the tau have ambushed Krom’s missing Blood Claws? he wondered.

Krom snarled, ‘Good. Let them come.’

‘No,’ snapped Ulrik, feeling his gorge rising again. ‘We cannot let the tau delay us here. Save that battle for another day. We need to find what we came to this benighted world for and get out of here. Do you understand me, Krom?’

‘As you will,’ the Wolf Lord allowed thickly, then broke off contact.

Ulrik took a breath and reminded himself of the Fierce-eye’s more admirable qualities. He had certainly had to recite them often enough. The Great Wolf had repeatedly threatened to expel Krom from his Chapter; either that or rip out his throat. It had been the High Priest’s thankless task, each time, to ask him to reconsider.

It was Ulrik – an old wolf even then – who had recruited Krom and overseen his training. He had seen Krom’s belligerence and bouts of fiery rage as weapons worth tempering. The many great victories that Krom had since won, the foes left bloodied in his wake, the unshakable loyalty he inspired among his Drakeslayers, all of these things showed Ulrik’s choice to have been the correct one.

And now I owe him my life...

A sudden flurry of vox reports assailed his ears. At the same time, he heard the unmistakable sound of gunfire coming from the north-east, deadened by the intervening stone buildings, and then more gunfire, this time from the south.

The Space Wolves were under attack.

At the very first gunshot, Krom bolted into action.

He sprinted across the dead city's narrow roads, through the shells of its sundered buildings, scrambling over heaps of debris. He came up short, letting loose a howl of frustration, as a solid wall rose to block his path. He turned and pushed his way back through the Wolf Guard who were following at his heels, seeking a way around it.

He reached the site of the battle too late. It was almost over.

A half-pack of Grey Hunters had surprised a tau scouting party. There had been six tau to three Space Wolves, but the xenos were unskilled in hand-to-hand combat and their attackers had been upon them before they could use their pulse rifles.

Four tau had been efficiently dismembered; the remaining two had fled in opposite directions for their miserable lives. The Space Wolves would have chased them down without a thought – and Krom would probably have joined them – had Beoric Winterfang not arrived at that moment and instructed them to stand fast.

‘The High Priest said we weren’t to let the tau delay us,’ he reminded Krom calmly, in response to the Wolf Lord’s murderous glare. ‘Nor would it be wise to split our forces any further than we have, until we know more about the threat we face.’

The knowledge that Beoric was right did nothing to assuage Krom’s anger. He unleashed it upon the nearest viable targets, the Grey Hunters. He raged at them for letting the tau escape, not being faster, stronger, more alert. ‘When we return to the Fang,’ he swore, ‘you’ll each spend a week training with the Blood Claws, learning to use those blades – and should I ever witness such a clumsy display again, I’ll beat you black and bloody myself. No excuses. I will not have–’

He broke off, realising that his voice was competing with a new sound.

He whirled around as a craft plunged, whining, out of the sky behind him. It was small and black, the shape of an arrowhead. It bore no Imperial design. Nor was it tau, judging by its harsh lines and angles. It was coming right at him – a suicide run, Krom thought, and he bellowed at his men to scatter and leap for cover.

The craft pulled up short of the ground, tilting to evade the surrounding buildings by a hair; it was more manoeuvrable than Krom had imagined it to be. He glimpsed a pilot behind its glacis, saw two more heads poking out of a weapons emplacement at its stern.

‘What in the warp is it?’ he cried.

Then the gunners got to work, strafing the street ahead of them with thousands of tiny, sharp projectiles spat from a long-nosed cannon. Krom had ducked into an archway, letting its intricate stonework bear the brunt of the assault. Some splinters ricocheted off his armour, however, and a few stuck in it: slender, quivering shards of crystal, glistening with neurotoxins. He knew what he was facing now.

Beoric, with his centuries of experience, had seen it at once.

‘Eldar!’

The shadow of the craft flitted over them, its belly almost scraping the Space Wolves’ heads. Its gunners rotated their cannon to spray out more shards in their wake, forcing the Drakeslayers to scramble for new defensive positions.

Crouched in his archway, Krom emptied his bolt pistol in the enemy’s direction. His targets were the gunners’ exposed heads, but at this range, through a blizzard of poisoned needles, they were nigh on impossible to hit.

‘Use your weapons, you sons of dogs,’ he bellowed at his Wolf Guard and Grey Hunters alike. ‘Bring that damned thing down, and you might just show me you have iron in your blood, after all.’

The black xenos craft, following the road’s curve, had disappeared behind a dome; that gave them some respite from its splinter cannon at least, a precious moment to regroup. Krom could hear its antigravity engines, however – quiet by any normal standards but loud in the city’s silence. It hadn’t gone far.

He pulled two crystal needles out of his forearm, one out of his chest. He dashed them to the ground, where they shattered. He reloaded his bolt pistol.

He heard Wolf High Priest Ulrik’s voice, insistent, through his comm-bead

‘I have reports of gunfire from your position. What’s happening over there? Krom!’

Krom drew his breath to answer him, but held it. *He can wait another moment, he thought, for better news.* Other voxes were coming in, in any case, competing with each other to be heard. Egil Redfist, in search of his missing Blood Claws, had come upon a xenos ship too, and three more Space Wolves packs, spread across the city, had likewise suddenly found themselves under fire.

Russ, they’re everywhere at once, thought Krom. *How is that possible?*

The black craft had climbed out of the maze of streets and banked steeply around; now it came swooping in again, snapping the spire off a square tower as it skimmed over it. For a second time, the Space Wolves found themselves fixed in its cannon sights; this time, however, there was one important difference.

This time, Krom Dragongaze knew what was coming, and he was ready for it.

They leapt from inside the broken buildings, behind the archways. They appeared on balconies and parapets and at the shattered windows of crumbling towers.

Ulrik cursed himself for a novice. He had caught their scent on the wind but misjudged their proximity, concerned about the brothers he had been rushing to assist. He had shouted a warning in the moment the ambush was sprung, and this alone had kept his pack – six-strong at present – from being entirely surrounded. Still, they were badly outnumbered.

He counted over twenty of them: dark eldar warriors in flexible, black armour. Spikes bristled from their shoulders, knees and elbows, horns from their conical helmets. Like all their kind, they had a sun-starved pallor to their skin – those few that showed their faces – and yet they were muscular and lithe, with their tapered ears and chins, filed teeth and silken black or white hair.

‘Their weapons are strong, but their armour is weak,’ Ulrik bellowed. ‘Hit them fast and hit them hard. For Russ!’

But even as he led the charge to battle, he voxed an appeal – to anyone, any Space Wolves who weren’t already themselves besieged – for reinforcements.

The black craft came around for another strafing run: its third.

Krom had feared it might not. His men were well entrenched in doorways and windows along each side of the street – good sniping positions. They had shattered the pilot’s glaxis and, he felt certain, winged one of the gunners. He had thought the dark eldar might change their tactics, perhaps even turn tail.

They had drawn blood, however, and they had a thirst for more.

Ulvar Razorfang had ventured too far out of hiding to line up a perfect shot. The splinter cannon had snapped around towards him in a heartbeat, and its crystal shards had shredded him. He had reeled back into his doorway, hitting a wall hard – he was still propped up against it. He hadn’t moved in over a minute.

At least three other Space Wolves were wounded – Krom Dragongaze among them. Like Ulvar, he had chosen to take a risk and had been punished for it. This time, he told himself, he would be faster. *No excuses.*

Crouching beneath his stone arch, he judged the skimmer’s approach by the

whining of its engines. When it was almost on top of him, so close that it had to level out of its dive and its cannon couldn't target him for a second, he made his move.

This time the climb was easier, because Krom could use the handholds he had punched into the stone already. The numbness in his left shoulder, however, was spreading along his arm into his fingers. Aloud, he cursed the splinter that had found the gap between his gorget and his pauldron, momentum driving it through his power armour. He had yanked out the stem, but the tip had embedded itself in his flesh.

What if the poison spreads to my primary heart?

He didn't like to think about that. He clambered onto the top of the archway, and this time his timing was near perfect. The skimmer was right there, almost within his reach. Had he lifted his head a second earlier, it would likely have taken it off. Indeed, another ship – with normal engines – could have fried him in its backwash.

The dark eldar gunners hadn't seen him. They had their backs to him, focusing on the targets strewn across the street ahead of them.

A lesser man – even some Space Wolves, such as Beoric Winterfang – might have taken a moment to think, to assess the situation, and thus been too late to act. Krom trusted his instincts, which had always served him well. He let them guide him now and made the jump. For a heady second, he flew.

Not fast enough! Like a shadow, the black skimmer slipped out from underneath him. Krom howled, reaching for it with straining arms and fingers. His numb left arm threw off his balance, and suddenly he was flying no more but falling. He felt a stab of emotion – not fear, never fear, but shame.

And because Krom Dragongaze refused to bear that shame, because he couldn't fail in front of his pack, somehow his flailing hands found purchase after all. They caught on a snare chain, trailing from the skimmer's port wing. He bit back another howl – this one of pain – as his injured shoulder was almost wrenched out of its socket.

The sudden addition of Krom's plummeting weight threw the craft into a spin; caught unawares, one of the gunners pitched over the side and fell past him. The craft wasn't high enough for the fall to be fatal, but the nine Space Wolves waiting below would see to that.

It was taking all of Krom's strength to cling to the chain, but he had to climb it; dangling in mid-air, he was horribly exposed. As the skimmer levelled out, its wingtip struck tortured sparks off the marble skin of a tower – whether

accidentally or in a frantic attempt to scrape him off, he couldn't tell.

He willed his arm to work, to haul him up the chain and onto the skimmer's stubby wing. It lurched as he planted a foot on it, and its engine pod trailed black smoke. The surviving gunner saw him and wheeled the cannon around towards him. Krom fixed the alien with a menacing glare and half-charged, half-stumbled into its turret.

He wrestled the xenos for control of the splinter cannon. Dark eldar were quick and they were agile – but in a contest of strength, he had a servo-assisted edge over them. The gunner surrendered its cannon and snatched instead for a flail at its hip.

Krom left his axe slung across his back. He grappled with the xenos, pinning its spindly arms to its sides. He felt its lightweight armour cracking in his pincer grip, and only wished he could see the frightened face of his enemy beneath its black, impassive helmet.

Somehow, it squirmed free of him for a second, but it was struggling to draw breath. It reached for its flail again, but Krom delivered a brutal, backhanded blow with his gauntlet, which almost took its head off. As the xenos reeled, Krom barged it, leading with his good shoulder. It tried to brace itself, but a fortuitous lurch of the skimmer betrayed it and sent it tumbling after its late partner.

The dark eldar flipped head over heels in mid-air; it would land on its feet, but the craft was flying higher now than it had been and the impact would likely shatter the xenos' bones.

The pilot had managed to lift the skimmer's nose and drag it up above the rooftops, but was struggling to keep it there. Krom drew his axe, intending to cut his way into the sealed cockpit, but was forced to make a grab for the cannon instead. The black skimmer plunged into a barely-controlled dive and careened around the narrow streets, scraping a wing against a building here, ploughing through a mast there.

The engine pod was coughing up gouts of flame; Krom could see through the glaxis that the pilot was losing a fraught battle with its controls. It was only by the Allfather's will that they hadn't been spread across the city already.

Krom had no choice. He had to jump for it.

Russ, but these xenos are fast – or are my injuries slowing me down?

Ulrik was flanked by a trio of dark eldar. They lashed at him with blades that telescoped into razor-studded flails at the flick of a wrist, making them

impossible to parry. In contrast, they evaded each blow of his energy-wreathed crozius, seeming almost to be enjoying the dance. Their eyes shone fervently in the slits of their tapering helmets; above these, each wore the jagged symbol of their warrior kabal. It was not one that Ulrik recognised.

He described ever wider arcs with his weapon, trying to keep them at bay, but they darted between his swings and raked at him again. So far, the force field generated by his amulet had absorbed most of their punishment, but they were wearing him down, and his lungs were feeling the strain again. Ulrik had to change his tactics or he would lose this fight.

The next time a flail lashed out at him, he entangled his crozius in it and yanked on it sharply. His intention had been to disarm, but the wielder clung to its weapon stubbornly, which led to a brief and decidedly one-sided tug of war. As the xenos stumbled into him, off-balance at last, the Wolf High Priest swiped at it with his free hand, sending it reeling into one of its fellows.

In the process, he left his back exposed to the third, and its lash sliced through his fur-trimmed cloak and flayed a layer of ceramite off his forearm.

He had opened a gap in the dark eldar's circle, however, and he lowered his head and powered through it before they could regroup. He drew his plasma pistol, wheeled around and fired at them as they leapt after him, flattening his back against a stone wall so they couldn't surround him again.

The odds were still against him, but he suspected that was about to change.

Ulrik counted three brothers felled by flails and venom blades, and two others by splinters fired from the shadows – but many more had responded to his summons, most of them Drakeslayers. *I may owe Krom my life again!* The battle was spreading to engulf a city block, and the Sons of Russ were no longer on the defensive. They had begun to claim a few kills of their own.

Some packs across the city were not faring half as well. Reinforcements hadn't been able to find them in time. The vox-channels had been clogged with their voices a moment ago, but one by one they were falling ominously silent. Ulrik hadn't heard from Krom, but he had contacted Beoric Winterfang and had learned that his Wolf Guard had also been attacked.

They appeared so suddenly, with no warning at all, thought Ulrik, *and my ship's scans didn't detect them. Could it be...?*

The dark eldar were bringing in additional forces too. A pair of hulking, slaving beasts had joined the melee, dwarfing the humanoid combatants of both sides. Ulrik had encountered their like before. They resembled colossal, violet-hued apes, many-eyed and many-toothed with barbed tails and massive,

razor-sharp claws.

A lean figure hovered above these clawed fiends on an anti-gravity skyboard: a dark eldar beastmaster. It was driving its charges onward with judicious lashes from a crackling whip. Its chest was bare, its belt hung with animal skulls, and it wore a shamanistic mask that resembled the monsters' own features – perhaps one of the arcane methods by which it asserted its dominance over them.

Two packs of Krom's Grey Hunters engaged the beasts. Ulrik voxed them across the battlefield.

'Bloody them and you'll send them into a berserker rage,' he warned them. 'Take out their master first, and they're as likely to turn on the dark eldar as not.' *Far easier said than done*, he knew.

His own three opponents were upon him again with their flails. Ulrik turned the red-eyed, snarling visage of the Wolf Helm of Russ upon them; one of them faltered for an instant, and he stove in its skull with his crozius.

He filtered a single voice out of the babble that filled his ears: '—saw they were outnumbered and fled from us. We ran some of them down, but the rest seemed to melt into the shadows. We have four Blood Claws down. As we arrived, they... the xenos were loading our battle-brothers onto a black skimmer.'

They're using hit-and-run tactics, Ulrik realised, keeping the bulk of our forces disoriented – and divided – while they pick off our stragglers, one pack at a time. And take them where? He feared he knew the answer to that question.

It was time he took the offensive.

Three dark eldar warriors had been enough to keep him on the back foot; two was a different matter. Ulrik lunged at them, taking the blows of their flails, whirling the sacred crozius – his weapon, but also his badge of office – end over end. One of them managed to dance out of his path, but the other did not. These xenos were fast – but so too were the Sons of Russ.

Ulrik roared as he battered his enemy repeatedly, giving it no time to draw breath, splitting open its helmet and driving it into the ground. When he was done, he rounded on his remaining opponent – to find it gone.

It had not left alone, he realised. No more than a handful of dark eldar lingered on the battlefield – some had fallen, but not enough to justify the drop in numbers – and their snipers' heads had vanished from the surrounding windows.

His battle-brothers hadn't noticed yet, or were just too preoccupied to care. The clawed fiends had scented their own blood and been driven into a frenzy, as Ulrik had predicted they would, and it was taking every man at hand to contain them.

He couldn't see the beastmaster. *Had he been shot down or had he withdrawn with the others, leaving his charges behind?* He tried to vox Krom Dragongaze, but received no answer again, so spoke to Beoric Winterfang.

'I assume the *Ironpelt* is in orbit?' he asked, referring to the Drakeslayers' strike cruiser.

'It is, High Priest,' Beoric confirmed.

'Contact your shipmaster. Have him launch his Thunderhawks.'

'High Priest, the tau—'

'I know. Our scans told us the same. I don't need those ships to land, just to look as if they might. I'll have my own gunships join them.'

'A distraction,' said Beoric.

'Keep the tau's air defences busy for ten minutes, then withdraw.'

Ulrik didn't wait for any further questions. Switching to another frequency, he issued a series of orders to his own shipmistress, Asgir. At the same time, he reloaded his plasma pistol. With that done, he bellowed his war cry again – raising an answering howl from as many Space Wolves as could hear him – and returned to the fray.

The smoking wreckage of the black craft was strewn all about him.

Krom could no longer feel or move his left arm at all; on top of that, he had twisted his back and scraped his armour, ricocheting off walls and outcroppings on his way to the ground. Repair cement had patched up the damage to the armour; the damage to his body would require more time and care.

He voxed Beoric, on a frequency that allowed the other Drakeslayers to overhear him.

'I've dealt with the xenos craft. Its crew are dead.' He made the boast sound almost casual. 'Making my way back now; I need a fix on your location.'

Krom didn't reveal how close to death he had come, how soon after his leap from the skimmer it had smacked into the near-intact stone wall of a tower.

Its pilot may have crashed deliberately, he thought, knowing it was dead either way and desiring to take its killer with it. He considered digging the dark eldar's corpse out of its mangled cockpit, so he could spit on it.

His impromptu flight had carried him deeper into the ruined city. All was quiet here now the wreckage had settled – but he feared that wouldn't last. Beoric and the others were over five miles away from him. *Too far*. He had their bearing now, but would still have to find a route through the streets to reach them.

'We should come to you,' suggested Beoric. 'There are more of us. It would be

safer. You should take shelter until we—’

The Wolf Lord cut him off with a contemptuous snort. ‘If you expect Krom Dragongaze to hide like a mewling—’

He froze as he felt his hackles rising and heard an all-too-familiar whining noise from above and behind him.

‘What is it?’ hissed Beoric through his earpiece. ‘My lord?’

‘Another skimmer,’ he answered through his teeth. ‘It’s seen me.’

For a moment, Krom was ready to stand and fight. His right forefinger was curled around the trigger of his bolt pistol before he knew he had drawn it; through narrowed eyes, he glared along its barrel at the black shape bearing down on him. He had brought down one dark eldar ship today, why not another?

He hadn’t been hurt last time. Nor had he been alone.

Krom had no choice, but that didn’t mean he had to like it. He put off the decision as long as he could, perhaps a second too long. He emptied his magazine in the enemy’s direction and hurled violent curses at them – futile gestures both, except for giving vent to his impotent fury. The black craft levelled out, careering between the city’s stone husks. Its cannon began to spit, its poisoned darts tearing up the road in front of him.

Krom turned tail and ran for his life.

One of the two clawed fiends had finally fallen.

Even thrashing about in its death throes, it had continued to bloody its claws and fangs and knocked at least two Space Wolves off their feet. It couldn’t beat back all of them, however, and a dozen chainswords hacked at the beast until it shuddered and fell still, dark blood matting its violet fur.

Ulrik had remained on the edge of the melee, firing into it when he had seen a clear shot, reserving the rest of his attention for matters elsewhere. In the sky he could see distant blossoms of light, the only signs of the pitched battle being fought up there. Occasionally, a ship – one of the combatants – would dip into the atmosphere and his enhanced hearing would detect the faint roar of its engines.

At last, he heard the sound he had been waiting for.

‘*Rolling Thunder* to Wolf High Priest Ulrik,’ a voice rumbled in his ear. ‘I’ve made it through the tau blockade. Descending towards the abandoned city now.’ Simultaneously, he heard engines above his head, deep and throaty, and saw their contrails burning across the heavens.

The remaining clawed fiend was mortally wounded, too angry and stupid to

accept that it was dead. *The Drakeslayers are capable and numerous enough to take care of it*, Ulrik judged, *as their commander would no doubt insist if he were here.*

He broadcast a general-frequency vox to his own forces, those fighting the monster alongside him and those further afield. He told them to disengage from their battles, those that could, and prepare to rendezvous with him at coordinates to follow.

He was contacted by *Rolling Thunder's* pilot again, on cue: 'I've identified a possible landing site, a plaza, on a bearing of oh-seven-four degrees, two point one miles from your vox-signal. It'll be a tight squeeze, but I think I can—'

'I'll meet you there,' barked Ulrik.

Russ, don't let me die like this!

Krom hurtled around another sharp bend in the road. He saw a narrow gap between two buildings and plunged into it. It opened onto a circular plaza, where the dismembered legs of mildewed bronze statues still clung to broken plinths. He was too exposed here.

He glanced over his shoulder. He couldn't see the black skimmer but could hear its whining engines zeroing in on him. He turned back the way he had come, squeezing back between the buildings in the hope of confusing his pursuers.

As soon as he reached the road again, however, they pounced on him. Krom howled as his back was peppered with poisoned splinters. *Don't let me be cut down from behind, running like a frightened man-cub. Don't let that be how I am remembered. Let me meet my killer face to face and die with his blood on my claws.*

He was lucky this time. His armour saved him, preventing the needles from reaching his flesh.

A window loomed in front of him. Without stopping to think, he dived through it. His twisted back betrayed him. He landed on his numb left shoulder, sending a jolt of pain through him. His armour automatically upped his medication, but he countermanded it, needing his senses to be sharp. Splinters thudded into the far side of the wall behind which he was sprawled. At least he had found temporary shelter.

He couldn't stay here.

Krom scrambled away from the window, avoiding the shafts of grey light that streamed in through the roof. He crouched in the shadows and sniffed the musty air. His keen eyes pierced the gloom, exploring the innards of the dome in which

he found himself. Its shell was relatively intact, but its internal walls had crumbled. There were plenty of egress points, designed and otherwise.

He could hear the dark eldar craft circling above him. No doubt they would direct ground troops to this spot to root him out. He couldn't afford to rest. He had to move, to get away from here, before they arrived.

He picked a window and loped across the rubble towards it, being sure to stay out of the light. He flattened himself against the wall and waited. When he judged that the skimmer was at the farthest point of its circuit, Krom bolted. He tumbled, head over heels, through the window, landed on his feet and ran. He was counting on taking his pursuers by surprise, on his reflexes being sharper than theirs were.

He wasn't fast enough – or they were too fast. Barely had he taken six steps when the skimmer was riding on his tail again, swooping down on him like a giant bird of prey, its cannon firing. More than one of its needles penetrated his armour this time, and buried themselves in his back.

Krom staggered and almost fell. He realised that the nearest cover was too far ahead of him, so turned back while he could. He scrambled through the same window he had emerged from, back into the broken dome. This time, he knew there would be no escaping from it. He was trapped here.

He couldn't reach the splinters in his back with only one hand. The injectors in his armour were flooding his system with anti-venoms, trying to counteract the dark eldar toxin – but the only thing holding it in check, he felt sure, was the rage bubbling white-hot in his veins. He embraced that rage like a brother.

He refused to let his legs fold underneath him. He kicked out at what was left of the walls instead, demolishing them and punching a fresh hole in the side of the dome. He voxed Beoric Winterfang, because he needed to scream at someone. 'Where are you?' he demanded. 'Do I have to slaughter every xenos on this planet by myself? What in Russ' name do I keep a Wolf Guard for?'

From Beoric there was no reply. Krom's hearts, both of them, were pounding in his ears as if competing with each other. The skimmer still circled overhead. The dark eldar troops, their warriors, would be here soon, he knew. All he cared about now was being on his feet to greet them.

He found a place in the shadows to crouch, from where he could watch every entrance to the dome. He clutched his bolt pistol in his right hand, though he had to concentrate to keep it from shaking. He would cut down two, maybe three dark eldar before they knew where he was. Then, when his gun was empty, the rest would come to him and Wyrmlaw would deal with them.

They would find him surrounded by the gutted corpses of his enemies, and would know that a battle worthy of legend had been fought here. The Sons of Russ would toast the memory of this day at many feasts to come.

They would long tell the tale of Wolf Lord Krom Dragongaze's last stand.

The narrow streets were empty again, which was no more than Ulrik had expected. It was typical of the dark eldar to spring a surprise attack then retreat with their spoils while their victims were still disoriented. *Not this time*, he vowed.

Rolling Thunder's engines now drowned out all other sounds for him; her wolf's-head shadow blotted out the light momentarily as she passed over him. She was a Stormwolf, an assault ship capable of carrying sixteen Space Wolves into battle.

Ulrik loped around the corner of another fractured hab-block, the five members of his Wolf Guard at his heels. The Stormwolf was sitting there, waiting for him. She almost filled the cramped plaza in which she had put down, wreathed in her own exhaust smoke, looking battered but defiant – as indeed she always had.

Its pilot, Rogan Bearsbane – a ruddy-faced, heavy-set Iron Priest sporting a voluminous beard – flashed him a grin from the cockpit as he lowered the boarding ramp. Ulrik waved his battle-brothers ahead of him, and was pleased to see others – more than he had expected – streaming into the plaza to join them.

One group of three wore the badge of the Sun Wolf. They were members of Krom Dragongaze's Wolf Guard, though neither the Fierce-eye nor Beoric Winterfang were among them.

A Wolf Guard by the name of Beregelt squared up to the High Priest. 'You're taking a gunship in pursuit of the dark eldar's captives.' It wasn't a question.

'The Great Wolf was here,' said Ulrik. 'If they took him—'

Beregelt interrupted him, boldly. 'We're coming with you.'

Ulrik growled at him, 'I have as many Wolves as I require.'

'They have our Wolf Lord cornered,' said Beregelt, stubbornly. 'Beoric is leading a pack to his side, but I fear they may not reach him in time, especially not if there is a gate to the eldar labyrinth in these ruins.'

Ulrik nodded. 'It may be what brought the Great Wolf here.'

It didn't surprise him that Beregelt knew of such matters. The Wolf Guard had served long enough to have seen many things.

'You plan to follow the dark eldar through that gateway,' said Beregelt. Again, it wasn't a question. 'Lord Krom would want his Wolf Guard aboard that ship.'

And just how was Krom separated from his Wolf Guard, Ulrik thought to snarl, especially after I cautioned him against being reckless? He bit back the words. Now is not the right time. 'Very well,' he conceded gruffly, then turned his back.

He climbed aboard the waiting gunship, and left Beregelt and the Drakeslayers to follow him as they wished.

They had come at him from nowhere.

Krom Dragongaze cursed them, cursed the splinters in his back, the neurotoxin in his system, cursed himself most of all for his weakness. He had closed his eyes, unwittingly, for a second: long enough for them to strike.

The poison had tightened his chest, making it difficult to breathe. His pulses were irregular, his secondary heart pumping frantically to compensate for his failing primary. He had prayed for his enemies to find him soon, lest he die first and be denied his blaze of glory.

He had rested his brow against a half-demolished wall, though he didn't remember doing so. His auto-senses warned him that the temperature in the dome had dropped sharply – but, insulated by his armour, he had paid them little heed. He had thrown back his head with a shuddering breath as the cold had touched his lungs. His eyes had snapped open and he had found himself beset.

They were unlike any dark eldar he had encountered before.

They were similar in build and facial features, but their skin was ebony-black rather than milky-white. They had marked themselves with tattoos, which flowed like oil, forming one hideous, blasphemous shape after another. The creatures were wrapped in pale robes, blood-spattered and stinking of death – fashioned, Krom realised, from layers of flayed skin stitched together.

They slashed and thrust at him with sickle-shaped blades, wielded with the precision of surgical knives, but they also tore at him with fangs and claws.

Krom dropped his pistol. He hadn't had a chance to use it and knew he probably wouldn't again. He drew his axe. He wasn't sure how many opponents he was facing: one second he thought there were only three of them, the next he was sure there were five or more. They seemed to phase in and out of the shadows around him.

Shadows...

He *had* heard tell of creatures like these, long ago. Was it Ulrik who had spoken of them at some point, early on in his training? *Tales told by lesser men*, he had thought at the time, *to frighten their young*. How had the High Priest named these semi-mythical creatures? He remembered now: *nightfiends!*

It was whispered that they could spring from any man's shadow. *Is that how they crept up on me?* Krom wondered. The way the darkness appeared to deepen around them, as if they were sucking light out of the world, he could believe it.

He felt cold emanating from their very souls, and when he swung Wyrmlaw at them, even when he was positive that its blade had cleaved their flesh, often they remained unbloodied. They were swift – as swift as their dark eldar brethren – and he feared that the poison in his body was slowing him down, but it wasn't only that. It was almost as if these creatures were shadows themselves.

He screamed at them until his throat was raw, hurling every curse he knew at them. He called them cowards and challenged them to face him like warriors, one at a time. The only sounds they made in response were vile hisses. Their blades and claws continued to slice through him, chilling his flesh where they touched it.

Krom fought back as fiercely as ever he had. His tiredness, his shortness of breath, were almost forgotten. His armour had dosed him with stimulants, but nothing could replace the natural rush of battle. Still, his efforts so far were proving futile. Worse, he had the impression that the shadow-skinned creatures were holding back. They could have slain him by now, but instead they were sporting with him.

The thought enraged him, and he whirled his frost axe with renewed vigour and laughed as he felt it biting into flesh and splintering bone at last. The tones of the creatures' hisses changed, then – they sounded affronted, as if they had the right – and some of them melted away, to leave but three arrayed in an arc before him. These three raised their arms, their talons pointed at him like spears.

Krom managed to take a single step towards them before he was struck by another wave of freezing cold.

He tried to raise his good arm to protect his face, but found he couldn't. He was paralysed and the nightfiends were swarming him again, more of them than ever. They wrenched Wyrmlaw from his helpless fingers; for a moment he thought they would use it to take his head, but they had something worse in mind.

They encircled him, grabbed at him, tipped him backwards off his feet. They shouldered his power-armoured weight between them, and Krom would have howled in rage at this humiliation had his lungs not been frozen.

The cold – or was it the poison? – had spread behind his eyes, stealing his senses from him one by one. Inwardly, he railed at the indignity of his fate: to be shamed in this manner, to be made a wretched hostage. Outwardly, there was nothing Krom Dragongaze could do as the icy shadows claimed him.

Ulrik sat in *Rolling Thunder*'s passenger compartment, knee to knee with Olav Brunn, Beregelt and Leoric Half-ear, a Rune Priest he had requested join them in case they had need of his particular talents. Ulrik blocked out the deafening roar of the Stormwolf's engines as he spoke to Asgir, on the orbiting *Canis Pax*, by vox. He had instructed his shipmistress to make continuous scans of the abandoned city and keep him informed of the results.

'I see them, High Priest,' she reported. 'Dark eldar Venom skimmers in all sectors. They're fading in and out... I can't get a lock on them...'

Allfather be praised, thought Ulrik, *we still have time*.

Rogan Bearsbane voxed him from the cockpit. 'I have eyes on a skimmer and am in pursuit. We can't match it for manoeuvrability, though. It's weaving in and out of the buildings, even through them. If it wants to shake us off, it only has to—'

'High Priest,' Asgir cut in on him. 'Something else. Three signatures closing in... no, taking up positions around you, matching your course and speed.'

'The tau?' Ulrik guessed.

The shipmistress confirmed it. 'I'm reading them as Manta gunships.'

The dark eldar are their enemies as much as ours, he thought. *They are watching us to see what we will do. More likely, they have guessed we won't be their problem much longer.*

'Russ' teeth!' Rogan spluttered, suddenly, and he slammed the Stormwolf into a steep, banking turn.

At the same time, Asgir reported that a new icon had erupted onto her tactical hololith. The accompanying data, however, was gibberish.

Ulrik pushed himself up from his seat and pressed his eyes to the slats of a narrow viewport in the forward hatch. From this limited perspective, however, he was too late to see anything of import. 'What is it?' he barked at his pilot. 'What did you see?'

'Down in the ruins,' Rogan answered. 'Some... some xenos artefact. It had three curving pylons, like claws. Then suddenly, between them... It was like... like staring into the heart of the warp itself.'

'What about the skimmer?'

'It flew into that... High Priest, what is it?'

'It's a gateway,' said Ulrik. 'And your orders remain the same. Our captured battle-brothers are aboard those ships. The next one to approach that portal...'
He had switched to a general frequency, allowing his brothers to hear him. 'You will follow them through.'

For the first time, Rogan demurred. ‘High Priest, are you certain—?’

Beregelt sat forward. ‘They may have taken Lord Krom in there,’ he said, quietly.

That seemed to settle the matter. Some of the other Space Wolves exchanged uncertain glances, but none raised a voice in protest. Nor did Rogan speak again, but Ulrik felt the Stormwolf coming back around.

‘We don’t know what’s in there,’ Leoric warned.

Ulrik turned to Beregelt. ‘Vox the rest of your company. Tell them where we’re going and that we may not return. They are to wait six hours; then, in the absence of further contact from either of us, return to the Fang.’

He was likely wasting his breath. With the dark eldar gone – and even without Krom to lead them – the Drakeslayers would probably find an excuse to re-engage the tau. *So, let them. It is none of my concern,* he thought.

He peered out through the narrow viewport again. He saw the portal ahead of them, just as Rogan Bearsbane had described it. It was as if the xenos construct had torn a hole in the surface of reality itself – and beyond it...

He could barely look at its blinding, hateful light, even with his eyes protected by the Wolf Helm of Russ. He made the sign of the aquila across his chest and silently asked the Allfather for his guidance. This was either a monumental act of courage or one of insanity; he couldn’t tell which.

But the Great Wolf may be in there...

Ulrik offered another prayer – aloud, this time, for all to hear – that the Allfather might still be able to watch over them where they were about to go, so far from the things they knew. Then a dark eldar skimmer dropped into his line of sight, span into the light and was completely swallowed by it. He voxed his pilot, ‘There it is. Go! Go!’

Rolling Thunder plunged into the seething portal.

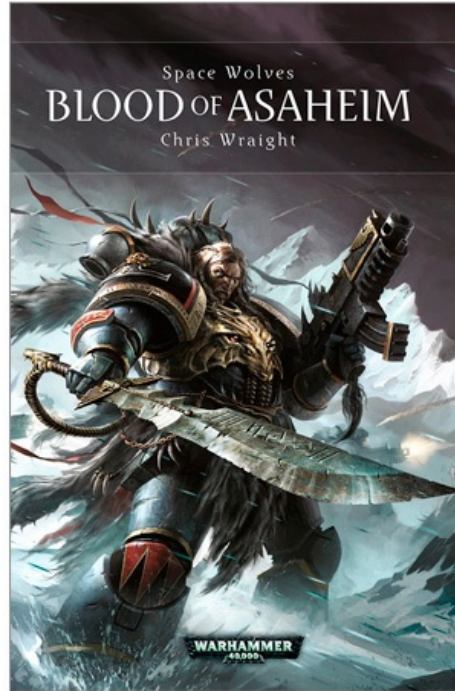
And left the tangible universe behind it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Lyons' work in the Warhammer 40,000 universe includes the novellas *Engines of War* and *Angron's Monolith*, the Imperial Guard novels *Ice World* and *Dead Men Walking* – now collected in the omnibus *Honour Imperialis* – and the audio dramas *Waiting Death* and *The Madness Within*.

He has also written numerous short stories and is currently working on more tales from the grim darkness of the far future.

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