

WARHAMMER 40,000



SPACE WOLVES 4 DARK CITY

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Steve Lyons

His opponents had never stood a chance.

Most likely, thought Krom Dragongaze, *they were never meant to*.

There had been six of them to his one – slobbering ghouls with flat eyeless faces and rows of trembling nostrils. They had come at him in flurries of claws and teeth, blunting both against his armour. The last one had wrapped its mouth around his forearm, clinging to him tenaciously for all its wounds. He tore it free and dashed it to the floor.

Throwing back his fiery mane, he loosed a howl of triumph to the heavens.

Then his victory soured in his throat. The crowd's roars washed over him, reminding him where he was. He knew what they wanted from him. The last of his enemies was twitching at his feet. They were baying for him to hurt it again. They wanted him to torture it, to eke out its dying agonies.

He spited them by staving in the ghoul's skull with his maul, though this was an undeserved mercy. The dark eldar's cheers turned to jeers, their fine features twisted in displeasure. *Russ, if only I had my pistol*, thought Krom.

He was barrelling towards them before he knew it.

He jumped off the finely balanced, polished bone disc of the stage. He ploughed through knotted coils of razorwire. He vaulted onto the high wall that separated him from the crowd. He came as close as he ever had to getting over it. Then whips enwrapped his arms, his legs, his throat, as they always did. Krom knew it was useless to struggle against his captors, and yet, wreathed in the red mist of rage, he always did.

The whips crackled with profane energy, and his nervous system burned. The slave masters yanked Krom back into the arena and he writhed in the black sand,

convulsing helplessly, coughing up foam and flecks of blood.

The sky of Commorragh had a sullen crimson cast. It rested heavily on the tips of the arena's jagged spires and the brooding ziggurats overlooking it. Shrivelled black suns glared balefully down at him. When Krom had first arrived here, another prisoner – a dishevelled Imperial Guardsman – had told him he would see no other sky for as long as he lived, which would be until he met his match in combat. 'Then it will be a long life,' Krom had boasted. He hadn't seen the Guardsman again.

The crowd had forgotten him already. Other battles were in progress across the various stages, offering them many more opportunities to sate their lust for suffering. A member of the wych cult that ran the arena was carving up a tau fire warrior. Krom wondered if it too had been captured on Dactyla. Beyond them, he saw clawed fiends, a battered-looking Chaos Terminator – and a figure in a filthy pale robe and black power armour.

Krom's weapon was torn from his nerveless fingers. Six slave masters hauled him away through one of the many dark portals that led to the arena's bowels. By now, the descent through the foetid passageways, with their pulsing, green-tinted light, was a horribly familiar one. His footsteps rang off the floor, which felt like marble but was black with sickly-looking veins coursing through it.

An iron gate hissed open for him, and Krom was thrown to the floor of one of the gladiatorial cells. Unable to lift his hands to catch himself, he landed like a sack of grain. He found his voice in time to curse his gaolers as they locked the gate behind him.

It was several seconds before he could lift himself into a sitting position, propped against the wall. He hated letting his cellmates see his weakness, even though they were as battered as he was. He snapped at them, telling them to lift their chins and square their shoulders, show that they would never be bowed, and they shuffled to obey him.

'What did they have you fight?' asked Jormund Thunderclaw.

'Some manner of ghoul,' Krom spat, and he described in detail how he had slain each of them in turn. 'I almost butchered my audience too. I was close enough to smell their fear, see myself reflected in their eyes. Next time...'

'Allfather be praised, we still have that,' Jormund rumbled. 'Though we may die here, still we can despatch many more of His enemies ahead of us.' It disturbed Krom to hear him talking like that.

Each of the Space Wolves bore the marks of the slave masters' lashes, but Jormund's Terminator armour was in the worst state of them all. He had fought

so hard to begin with. The slave masters, however, had wrapped him in chains that, like their whips, crackled with dark energy. They had stripped out his heavy weapons and shattered his servo-motors, until it was all he could do to stand.

The thought that Jormund was learning to accept his fate made Krom rage. He wanted to leap to his feet. He wanted to yell out to his Wolf-brothers. Three of them shared his cell. There were more in the others. He wanted to remind them that they were the Wolves of Fenris. Most of them were members of his own company, the Drakeslayers. He wanted to tell them to rise up, break through their bars and tear out their gaolers' throats.

'Brother Dreadhowl,' he recalled. The young Blood Claw had been taken to the arena some time before him. Krom hadn't seen him there, but that meant nothing. 'Did he... Has he returned?' No one answered his question. No one had to.

Krom had given up trying to count the days he had been here. His auto-senses suggested that a month and a half had passed, but each of his brothers had a different tally. For the first few days, or weeks, he had been sure that the rest of the Drakeslayers would follow him here. No matter that their journey was impossible – for him, for their Wolf Lord, they would find a way to make it.

He knew now that no one was coming. If he was to escape this hellish place, it would be up to him alone. So what if his captors had the upper hand for now? What if the red sky was teeming with dark eldar ships? And beyond that sky, outside of this dark city...

Krom had been brought here unconscious. Some of his brothers had been awake for the journey, however, and they had spoken of the horrors...

They were lost.

The gunship *Rolling Thunder* had followed a dark eldar skimmer through an energy-charged portal. Now, she was barrelling her way through a realm of...

It was impossible to describe.

Ulrik the Slayer crouched in the troop compartment, peering through a narrow forward viewport. The Stormwolf's sensors couldn't process the data they were receiving, so couldn't be trusted. Other than an occasional fleeting glimpse of their prey, Rogan Bearsbane, their pilot, had only his instincts to guide him.

'It's like flying through an ice storm,' he said. His voice sounded strained over the vox-net.

'We can't afford to lose that skimmer,' said Ulrik, tightly.

He had thought this would be something like flying through the warp. It was worse than he could have imagined. Through the viewport, he too saw snow and ice, but he knew – perhaps thanks to the relic helm he wore – that nothing they were seeing was real – not as humans understood reality. He couldn't look into the face of the raging storm for long; it made his eyes ache. Even when he screwed them shut, he could feel the unreality's substance, like static, in his head.

There are brother wolves aboard that craft, the High Priest reminded himself. *I did the right thing, going after them – whatever the outcome.*

'They've seen us,' Rogan growled over the vox. 'They're weaving, trying to throw us off their tail. They're smaller than we are, more manoeuvrable. It's only a matter of time before they make a move we can't match.'

Ulrik grimaced and pressed his eyes to the viewport again. *Rolling Thunder* had dropped back onto the skimmer's tail, but her engines were howling in protest at the abuse they were receiving.

Then a hole gaped open in the heart of the static storm – a deep, black hole – and the skimmer banked and plunged assuredly into it. Rogan tried to follow it, but the storm closed in again and suddenly he was flying towards what looked like a sheer ice face. He unleashed a stream of colourful curses as he pulled up sharply. 'I don't see any sign of them. We've lost them!'

In the troop compartment, more curses filled the air. The Drakeslayer Beregelt was more stoic; still, he gripped the sides of his seat almost hard enough to crush them. His own fate didn't concern him, Ulrik knew, rather that of his captured Wolf Lord.

Ulrik slammed his crozius arcanum into the deck plates, so its winged wolf-skull head crackled with sacred energy. 'Are we so easily beaten?' Ulrik roared. 'Should we cower here, whimpering over the slightest setback? We *will* find our brother Wolves, if we have to wade hip-deep through dark eldar corpses to do it.'

'Tear this foul realm down around their twisted ears!' cried Thord Icenhelm.

'For Russ!' bellowed Ulrik, and the others joined their voices to his. He wished he felt half as confident as he sounded.

It was the High Priest's duty to maintain his brothers' morale, even when, privately, he feared their cause was hopeless – that they might be trapped in this godless realm forever.

Two more days passed, maybe three – Krom couldn't tell – before the slave masters came for him again.

They didn't have to call his name. Everyone knew whom they wanted. He had counted their footsteps as they approached his cell. Six dark eldar always arrived to fetch him, more than for anyone else. He was already standing, waiting for them, when the gate hissed open.

They beckoned to him, speaking harshly in their obscene language. A handful of the senior gaolers had translating machines, which they used to communicate orders to their prisoners. The rest had other ways of making themselves understood.

These six had their whips readied in case of trouble. Had Krom tried to fight them, he knew they would have flayed him gleefully – before dumping him, half-insensate, in front of his assigned opponent anyway. He had barely survived the experience last time.

They took him through the green-veined passageways again. They passed rows of sealed gates, from behind which he heard the occasional muffled howl of pain, anguish or rage. He could hear the roars of the arena crowd growing louder.

Two more Wolves were waiting, each with his own escort, in the cramped muster area. On the closest stage in the arena, a pair of fleshless monsters with clawed tendrils were tearing into each other, urged on by the lashes of their beastmasters.

‘Did you hear about Brother Silverpelt?’ Beoric Whitefang asked him, bleakly. ‘They put him up against a monstrous spider with blades on its legs.’

When Krom had first been delivered to his cell, he had been dismayed to learn that Beoric too had been caught, although he was secretly comforted by his Wolf Guard commander's stoic presence. He suspected that Beoric had allowed himself to be captured, so as to remain at his lord's side.

Krom nodded. ‘I hear he removed all eight before the spider's poison killed him.’ It was important that such stories, and the names attached to them, were remembered. Beoric knew nothing of Brother Dreadhowl, however, when Krom asked him. It seemed that no one had witnessed his fate, so his story would remain untold.

An appreciative roar swelled from the arena crowd. Another contest had ended, on one of the further stages. A minute later, its victor was brought inside, walking upright and proud, and Lars Thorgil was marched out to replace him.

Krom had seen the black-armoured figure before, but never close up. Now he could see quite clearly the winged sword emblem on his robe and the skull-shaped faceplate beneath his hood – the stranger was a Dark Angels chaplain.

Krom's lip curled involuntarily. Krom hated the Dark Angels and their mysterious ways. His experience of them had left him with an impression of secrecy and superiority. He couldn't trust them because they only trusted themselves – and as rumour would have it, they couldn't even trust some of the brothers in their own ranks. It was true that an age before there had been tension between Leman Russ and the Lion. It was also true that while the primarchs forgave each other, there were many in their legions – and the Chapters that followed – who could not forgive.

In the arena, the beast fight had reached its bloody conclusion. The victorious creature was being driven away by its master, while shackled human slaves hosed the loser's remains from the stage.

Then it was Krom's turn to fight.

He was taken by the arms again and marched out beneath the sullen sky. His appearance was greeted by an audible thrill of anticipation. His stomach turned at the thought of his audience being so pleased to see him. They knew he would give them a good show.

Something was different this time.

He was taken to a stage at the farthest edge of the arena. In the midst of the tiered seating, an expansive podium overlooked him. Squatting upon its lip was an ostentatious ebony throne that, tonight, was occupied. The arena's ruler was in attendance, surrounded by obsequious servants and sycophantic cronies.

Krom was struck by the creature's beauty, but was instantly disgusted with himself. *It is an evil beauty*, he thought, *a glamour to disguise a monstrous soul*.

The queen was as much a warrior as her followers, clad in barbed leather armour that left her thighs and stomach exposed. She wore a sword belt hung with fetishes, and an elaborate leather headdress.

She saw him looking and returned his gaze coolly, with a twinkle of amusement in her eyes. She had had him brought before her, he realised suddenly. He was fighting at the queen's pleasure, for her entertainment, tonight.

Krom looked for a weapon. There were plenty strewn across the stage and around it, though few of any quality. He chose an axe with a serrated metal head, because nothing better was available. It was a poor replacement for his own. Wyrmlaw had been prised from his fingers while he lay unconscious. It lay somewhere in the arena, too large and heavy for most to wield it – Ragnek Halfhand had seen it.

His opponent made her entrance to the arena. She was a gladiatrix, a female arena fighter. She wore similar leathers to her queen, although her outfit was less

elaborate. As she strode into the arena, Krom's lips curled back from his fangs. Until now, he had only been pitted against other prisoners. To finally face one of his captors... He had longed for such an opportunity.

He fixed the gladiatrix with a smouldering glare as she strutted towards him. Her dark eyes met his, unafraid. Her jet-black lips smirked at him. He prickled at the creature's arrogance. Tightening his grip on his axe, he began thundering towards her before she had even fully mounted the circular stage. He let her see his teeth and feel the full force of his lungs.

The gladiatrix had drawn a pair of swords that had been concealed in her bodice. No scrabbling for weapons in the dirt for her. She sidestepped his charge and slashed at him, cutting into his right vambrace. Krom snarled as he swung his axe again, but the gladiatrix pirouetted away and was suddenly behind him. He whirled to face her as her twin blades stabbed towards his eyes. He barely batted them away before they blinded him.

He lunged beneath the gladiatrix's swords, trying to tackle her. She back-flipped away from him, landing in a taut crouch across the stage, her black lips taunting him. The crowd that had cheered for the Wolf Lord a minute ago screamed now for his enemy to cut him, to let them taste his dying agonies.

He embraced the white-hot rage that they stoked in his chest, let it energise him but not control him. He had to keep his wits about him.

He hacked, sliced and thrust at his opponent doggedly. She evaded each blow with a grace that made him feel slow and clumsy. *Russ, this is like battling the nightfiends!* he cursed, remembering the shadowy creatures that had beaten him and brought him here. But there had been many of them, Krom reminded himself, and he had been slowed by wounds and poison when he fought them.

He eased back deliberately, making the gladiatrix come to him. He would show her – and her baying supporters – that he could be quick too. She obliged him, and her blades whirled around his ears like turbines. Krom twirled his axe, gripped the haft with both hands and parried each attack with its chipped head, metal striking sparks off metal.

The gladiatrix overreached herself and his haft caught her wrist, breaking the bone. She dropped a sword, and Krom followed through by shattering her nose with his elbow. Startled, the eldar wheeled away from him and dropped into a defensive crouch again. She wasn't smirking any longer, but Krom, with the taste of his opponent's blood on his lips, was leering like a beast of prey.

They circled each other, narrow-eyed and alert for an opening or sign of weakness from the other, each tuning out the crowd's impatient demands and

biding their time.

Krom's eyes kept flickering over the gladiatrix's shoulder to the queen on her ornate throne. She was craning forward eagerly, moistening her lips with her tongue. Then her gloved hand glided across a rune panel in her armrest, and the throne itself rose into the air and edged over the podium's lip, straining closer to the spectacle before it.

Krom's opponent on the stage took advantage of his momentary distraction. The gladiatrix flew at him again in a flurry of razor-edged metal, scoring his armour and forcing him onto his back foot. He defended himself against her, but kept an eye trained on the queen.

In that moment, for the first time in too long a time, he saw a story worth the telling. Krom Dragongaze recognised a deed worth giving his life for.

He went on the offensive, hammering at his opponent with more brute force than precision. As before, his blows came nowhere close to landing – nor were they meant to. He drove the gladiatrix back towards the edge of the stage. Then, as she whirled out of his grasp, he leapt off the stage and, with all his might, he hurled his axe towards the queen's slender white throat.

To his dismay, she caught the hurtling projectile.

He barely saw her hand move – she just plucked the axe from the air. Krom had lost his weapon and turned his back on an enemy for nothing.

He heard her footsteps running up behind him – too late. The gladiatrix leapt onto his back and slipped her blade behind his gorget, into the side of his neck. If she expected the pain to cripple him, however, clearly she didn't know the Sons of Russ.

Krom reached over his shoulders, snatched his foe's head in both hands and wrenched her off him. He slammed her into the stage, breaking her bones, divesting the creature of her second sword and expelling the breath from her lungs. He held her down with one massive gauntlet over her face, almost smothering her.

The crowd roared once again for Krom Dragongaze. *They don't care who wins, he realised, as long as someone suffers – even if it's one of their own.*

This time, he gave them what they wanted.

He kept the wriggling, spitting gladiatrix pinned down, her agility no use to her now. He drove his free fist into her, shattering the rest of her bones and pulping her flesh. When the creature could take no more and passed out, Krom tore her still-beating heart from her chest and displayed it to his audience defiantly.

His gaze remained fixed on the queen and her hovering throne. He bared his

fangs and snarled at her, conveying the unmistakable message: *You're next!*

She raised the axe to her mouth, unperturbed. She ran her tongue along its blood-encrusted edge, seeming not to care that she cut herself in the process. Then, casually, she snapped the wooden haft in two and tossed the parts back into the arena.

Blood was spurting from Krom's neck. Even his Larraman's organ couldn't staunch the flow entirely. He was forced to clamp his gauntlet over the wound. He needed the ministrations of a Wolf Priest. There were no priests here, however.

The dark eldar slave masters were moving in around him with their whips. Fatigued and weakened by blood loss, he was unable to resist them.

Ulrik blinked and remembered where he was.

He felt as if he had been trapped in a waking dream for weeks, but his chrono informed him that it had been less than a minute.

He wrenched his gaze away from the viewport. Still, tendrils of harsh, white light streamed through it, tearing at his eyes. *When men look upon the unfiltered warp*, he thought, *it drives them mad. Perhaps the same is true of this realm?*

His brothers were shifting uncomfortably in their seats, some of them cradling their heads in their hands, shrinking away from the light. He almost ordered the viewport blocked, but he had to be able to see what was out there.

Leoric Half-ear, the Rune Priest, was sitting in a meditative pose, his eyelids flickering.

'I see... I see the pathways, but they're tangled together,' he said, 'and I see...' Whatever Leoric saw, it was so terrible that he could not speak of it. His face was pale and clammy with sweat.

Olav Brunn was staring out of the viewport, in a trance. Ulrik leaned forward, seized him by the shoulders and shook him. He waited for the Wolf's eyes to focus. 'Have faith,' he commanded, augmenting his voice to reach all of them, whatever their states of mind. 'Remember, the dark eldar endure in this realm. They build their cities here. Are we, with the Allfather's light to guide us and protect us, not stronger than they are?'

He opened a vox-channel to Rogan Bearsbane in the cockpit. Ulrik couldn't imagine how he was coping up there, with no respite from the realm's madness. Indeed, he sounded confused, distracted, on edge. The High Priest talked to him, trying to reassure him and keep him focused. It was only because of Rogan's piloting skills that they were still alive.

‘If you can find a place to land...’ he suggested, hopelessly.

Rolling Thunder was buffeted fiercely, and a series of violent cracks – like the shifting of massive quantities of ice – reverberated through its structure. The Space Wolves looked to the hull above their heads, anxiously.

‘No place... there’s no place for us here,’ murmured Leoric. ‘We’re not welcome... We should leave before... before we are...’

Then, suddenly, they were flying straight and level again, and the hateful light had faded. It was like a weight had been lifted from Ulrik’s soul. He heard Rogan Bearsbane’s breathless voice: ‘The storm... Thank the Allfather, the storm is lifting.’ Ulrik looked through the viewport again. *Have we found our destination, after all? he wondered. Or have we somehow blundered our way back into realspace?*

All he could see was blackness.

Then, he felt gravity tugging at his stomach, and realised that *Rolling Thunder* was in a vertical dive. Rising up to meet her were the ruins of an ancient city that looked like it was constructed from a lattice of bones, suffused with a soft internal light.

‘I can see them sheltering behind their walls.’ Leoric whispered. ‘I see them dancing, laughing, feasting... but they are dust.’

Ulrik blinked and suddenly the city was bright and young again, its streets teeming with shadowy phantoms. Then it dropped away rapidly as Rogan raised the gunship’s nose. The tendrils of the icy storm ensnared them once more and the city was gone.

Some of the others had seen the phantoms too. Beregelt turned to Ulrik, his incomprehension written on his face.

‘Time means nothing here,’ the High Priest growled, and the thought could have driven him – even him – to despair. Not only did this realm span known space, its passageways crazed between the layers of reality like capillaries – they extended into past and future too. He lacked the knowledge to navigate it.

He recalled the legends he had heard of those – such as Jaghatai Khan – who had tried before him and been lost. *We could fly for centuries, millennia, Ulrik realised, and never find our captured battle-brothers, never meet another living soul, never find a way out.*

He suppressed a shudder. *Perhaps we already have.*

A disturbance rippled through the gladiatorial cells.

Krom felt his hackles rising. He clambered to his feet and strained at the bars,

trying to see outside. He hadn't slept for as long as he had been a prisoner, but he had shut down his brain one section at a time to rest it. This allowed him to remain alert, but he knew it also left him prey to waking hallucinations.

Am I seeing things now? Krom wondered, as a familiar figure stalked towards him through a sickly green haze. If he was, then his brothers were seeing the same. They were on their feet in each of the surrounding cells, unleashing howls of protest. The eldar queen paid them no heed. She had locked gazes with Krom, and they held each other's eyes until she came to a halt – a step away from the point at which he could have reached through the bars and gutted her. She addressed her entourage of grovelling serfs and slave masters in their own language, in a voice like splintering ice that made Krom's teeth itch. He spat curses at her, to drown her out as much as anything. The slave masters snarled at him and brandished their whips in threat.

The queen hadn't taken her eyes off him. Krom felt, as he had in the arena, that she found him amusing – which enraged him all the more. She spoke curtly to her escorts again, then turned on her heel and stalked away from him, the howls of the captive wolves echoing after her.

The slave masters came back for Krom a short time later. They normally gave him longer to recover between contests – his neck still throbbed as his body struggled to heal the gash in it, and any strenuous activity was likely to tear it open again. They beckoned to Jormund Thunderclaw too, who rose with difficulty in his crippled suit of armour.

The journey took longer than it had before. Jormund moved slowly and unsurely, and no amount of threats or punishment could make him go any faster.

'You should feel honoured,' a slave master told Krom as they walked. His words emerged from a vox-grille slung around his neck. 'Janaera herself is impressed with your prowess in the arena.'

'I couldn't care less what your bitch queen thinks of me,' Krom snarled.

'She has named you favourite of her warriors.'

Krom bridled. 'A Wolf of Fenris belongs to no one, even less so a—'

The slave master talked over him. 'Impress the Grand Archite and she may choose to extend your life.'

'Tell your "Archite" to face me fairly in combat herself. Let her see my prowess close up instead of watching like a cringing cur from the shadows.'

'You will end your days here all the same, but you could see more of them. The ruling succubi arrange the arena bouts, and for a favourite of theirs they will—'

Krom spat in the dark eldar's face. It snarled and its whip lashed out at him.

Brother Jormund started forward, affronted by this slight to his lord, but Krom motioned him to stand down. He wiped a trail of blood from his cheek with the back of his gauntlet, and bared his fangs in a grin. Getting under his captors' skins may have been a tiny victory, but still he savoured it.

In the muster area, he was handed a double-bladed frost axe, its keen edge gleaming. Wyrmlaw! He looked at it in surprise, expecting some trick. He took the proffered weapon all the same. It felt good, it felt familiar – it felt right – as his fingers closed around it. It felt like an extension of his hand. He had missed it sorely.

‘There is some advantage in being the Grand Archite’s favourite, after all,’ said Jormund, wryly. ‘She wishes to see you at your best, evidently. Perhaps she will return my missile launcher to me too. *Then* she will witness a spectacle.’

The slave masters said nothing to that suggestion. Instead, one of them produced a skeletal key, unlocked the massive shackle that encircled Jormund’s left arm and began to unravel the heavy chains that bound him. Krom saw the relief in his battle-brother’s posture as he was able to straighten his back and square his shoulders.

The next thing he knew, the trailing chains were being wrapped around *him*.

Krom tried to protest, but the slave masters tightened their cordon around him. They clamped the shackle around his left forearm, tightened and locked it. He was bound to Jormund now, a triple length of chain stretching barely more than an arm’s length between them. Whatever was waiting for them out in the arena, they would face it together.

They were taken to the farthest stage, as Krom had expected.

It took them an age to reach it. He and Jormund struggled to coordinate their movements. More than once, Krom was almost pulled over by the larger, heavier Terminator. Some members of the crowd laughed and jeered at them. A fat, rotten, purple-skinned alien fruit burst against Krom’s pauldron.

They rounded a stage that was bordered by bone-carved pylons, like fangs around a daemon’s mouth. The podium came into view and Krom’s eyes darted to it. Sure enough, the Grand Archite was draped across her throne.

He and Jormund had found a rhythm now and made better progress, though Jormund’s right foot dragged behind him. They clambered awkwardly onto the circular stage and their escorts withdrew to the shadows. Jormund reached for a giant, spiked mace, almost yanking Krom off his feet again in the process, to the crowd’s amusement.

Krom took out his anger on the eldar queen. ‘Come down here and fight me,’ he

bellowed up at her. ‘You enjoy the taste of pain? I will treat you to agonies like you’ve never before imagined. I will tear out your black heart with my teeth.’

His words were likely unintelligible to her, but his tone and gestures certainly conveyed his meaning. Still, the arrogant expression on the Archite’s pale face didn’t flicker. Krom considered hurling his axe at her again.

He was distracted, however, by a sudden flurry of activity behind him. Half a dozen dark eldar, led by a beastmaster, were hauling a new combatant across the arena. It was fighting them all the way. Even their whips couldn’t subdue the raging creature. They had been forced to bind it, as they had Jormund, with chains.

Krom saw a spiny carapace and six powerful limbs, and knew right away that he was looking at a tyranid organism. ‘A genestealer,’ he muttered, darkly.

‘A broodlord,’ muttered Jormund, ‘to judge by its sheer size and the shape of his head.’ His voice sounded strained, which boded ill.

With much pushing, lashing and cursing from the slave masters, the creature was dragged up onto the stage, whereupon it immediately grew calmer. Krom saw a glint of intelligence in its beady eyes. It seemed to understand that the two armoured figures across from it were being offered up to it as prey.

The beastmaster had the broodlord’s chains removed, and its captors hastened away from it. It dropped into a crouch. A slobbering, spiny tongue, as blue as its hide, flicked out between its fangs. Krom felt a palpable wave of dread washing over him, almost strong enough to freeze his feet to the stage. Jormund stepped in front of him, thinking to shield his Wolf Lord, but Krom pushed him aside.

The monster sprang at them – and rebounded with a high-pitched screech as Wyrmlaw sliced into its hide. Its clawed feet skittered on the stage’s smooth surface, and it leapt at Krom again. This time, he splintered its exoskeleton. He would have done more, had the chains that bound him to Jormund not snapped taut.

Still, the monster flew at Krom a third time, a fourth and again, until Wyrmlaw inevitably missed its mark – glancing off the monster’s shoulder. Then it was upon him. Razor-sharp claws shredded his armour and gouged at his face. The monster’s jaw dropped open, wider than Krom would have thought possible, and he recoiled from its unholy breath. He couldn’t fight it on so many fronts at once.

He thanked the Allfather, then, that he wasn’t fighting alone.

Krom was wielding his axe two-handed, tugging on his battle-brother’s arm with every swipe. That had made it difficult for Jormund to join in the fight thus

far. Now, however, the Terminator delivered a crushing mace blow to the broodlord's spine. When that didn't deter it, he tried to drag it off his Wolf Lord by its throat, which at least afforded Krom some respite from its breath. The monster's claws continued to tear at him, however, as it thrashed in the Terminator's grip, tearing up his greaves with its hind feet.

Krom wrenched himself free of it at last, though he lost his right pauldron and a clawful of flesh in the process. The broodlord squirmed out from between Jormund's massive arms to slash and snap at him. Krom had no time – and could gain no space – to lick his wounds. Jormund staggered beneath the monster's vicious onslaught, and so the Wolf Lord staggered too. Then the broodlord turned and flew at him again. *It thinks me the weaker of the two of us because I am smaller*; he realised, and bridled at the insult.

Krom smashed his axe blade into the monster's head with all the strength he could muster. He thought he might have snapped its neck – but if he did, it barely noticed. Its claws ripped into him again, and Krom knew his only hope now was to fight in the manner of the monster – with desperate abandon, surrendering himself to the feral part of his own nature, clawing, biting, kicking, gouging.

The red mist descended upon him, and he welcomed it.

Krom wrestled with the broodlord on the ground, though he had no memory of falling. There was blood in his eyes, his nose, his mouth; his armour had been rent, his regal red cloak was in tatters and the gash in his neck was gaping open again.

Jormund came to his rescue once more. Krom heard the repeated impact of metal against flesh, the broodlord snarling and spitting, and suddenly its smothering weight was lifted from him. The wolf part of him didn't want to let it go, and it howled in thwarted anguish as the creature was wrenched out of his hands. He reached after it, but blood rushed to his head and made it spin.

The stage was sticky with blood that was definitely, at least in part, his own. His fingers found Wurmclaw's haft and closed around it. He hadn't even been aware that he had dropped it. His auto-senses screamed warnings in his ears, but he muted them. His auto-medicae was running dry of painkillers. Slashes from the broodlord's claws criss-crossed his armour and had cut searing trails into his flesh.

He could hear Jormund and the monster fighting, but the sounds – like the roar of the crowd – seemed somehow distant from him. He tried to use the chains that connected him to Jormund to haul himself up. They were slack; he didn't

understand why. Somehow, he managed to get his knees underneath him and clambered laboriously to his feet. He stood, unsteadily, blinking, and realised that the fight was behind him.

Jormund was on top of the broodlord. He was holding it down with one knee and the ragged stump of his right arm. Incredibly, Krom realised, it had hacked off the Terminator's forearm, divesting him of his mace and the chain's shackle alike. Jormund's left hand, however, had a grip on the monster's head, his index finger sunk up to the knuckle in its eye socket. He slammed its head into the stage repeatedly, sending splinters of bone and gobbets of brain tissue flying.

Krom lurched towards them, a defiant roar rattling in his chest, his axe raised. The broodlord's claws were tearing open Jormund's sides. Krom aimed for its elbow joint – *an arm for an arm*, he thought – but his blade hewed into the stage instead. He couldn't tell if his target had moved or if he had simply misjudged its position. He was struggling to focus past the dark red blotches in his vision.

Jormund Thunderclaw sagged, and his limbs splayed out underneath him. He was at least comatose, if not dead – either way, the dark eldar would burn his body.

The broodlord was faring little better. Its remaining eye rolled back into its head, and Krom heard it struggling to breathe. Its claws twitched weakly and it couldn't drag its mangled body out from beneath the Terminator's crushing weight.

He sagged to his knees beside it. He took over where Jormund had left off, hammering at the monster's head. He blotted out everything else, blotted out the arena crowd and thoughts of his brother's demise. It took all his focus, all his strength, to cling to consciousness, to raise his axe and bring it down, beating out a steady rhythm.

Krom felt heavy hands on his shoulders. He shrugged them off, but they returned in greater numbers, rougher and more insistent. It was over. His enemy was dead. It had died some minutes ago. He had pulverised its skull. He had lost his left gauntlet and pulverised his knuckles too. The crowd had grown tired of him, seeking out other spectacles. The slave masters had come for him, to return him to a cell. Until the next time.

It took four of them to carry him, and he struggled against them all the way. The portal to the cells swam ahead of him and, belatedly, he remembered the Grand Archite. *Is she still watching me?* He was sure he could feel the creature's cool gaze on his back. He could imagine her smirk as she enjoyed his humiliation, drank it in.

At least she saw, at least they all saw, that I won, he consoled himself. With that thought, he allowed the beckoning darkness to claim him; and, for the first time in more days than he could count, Krom Dragongaze passed out.

Time had become elastic. Seconds had stretched into days and weeks, while months and years had passed by in the space of minutes.

At some point, another portal loomed in front of them, filled with fire. Flames hotter than the core of a star reached through it and licked at *Rolling Thunder's* hull, threatening to draw her in. Cold beads of sweat were forming on Ulrik's brow, although he had the protection of both the Stormwolf's ceramite plating and his own armour.

Rogan's skilled and violent handling of the controls saved them. Shearing away from the inferno, they were snatched by the static storm's capricious currents again. Their port wing scraped against something all too solid. As *Rolling Thunder* screamed in agony, Ulrik could only pray that she wouldn't be torn asunder.

'The Allfather is with us,' he assured his brothers as the buffeting finally abated. He said nothing of the vision he had glimpsed inside the fire. It had lasted a fraction of a second, no longer, but it was scarred upon his retinas: a twisted, leering, monstrous face.

Perhaps he had only imagined it...

They ploughed on through a nest of giant insectile creatures, which pursued them angrily for some distance. Repeated bursts from their helfrost cannon eventually discouraged them, but one latched onto the hull. Rogan scraped it off against a wall of ice, but lost the starboard cannons in the process.

Another hour, a month, a decade sped by. The storm clouds funnelled around them, plunging them into a tunnel barely wide enough to fly through. Shadowy creatures invaded the troop compartment, cackling with gleeful malevolence.

Leoric sat bolt upright. 'The warp,' he intoned, 'it's straining at the barriers... seeping in through the fissures...'

Ulrik had drawn his pistol, but the words jolted him to his senses, made him realise that the Rune Priest was seeing only phantoms. 'Don't look at them!' he yelled. He screwed his eyes shut, but still he could feel the ghosts battering at the barriers around his mind, every one of them bearing the face he had seen in the flames.

'The Allfather is our shield,' the Wolf High Priest declaimed, lighting up his crozius. He recited a litany of protection, entreating all those present to join in.

Two of his brothers had succumbed, however, one foaming at the mouth, the other trying to claw out his own eyes, while Rogan was screaming gibberish over the vox-net.

Time passed.

Ulrik found himself praying with Rogan, guiding him back to the light. Emund Firetooth, a novice Blood Claw, was beyond such help – Beregelt had granted him the mercy of a bolt round to the temple. The phantoms had receded when they had left the tunnel behind them. Still, Ulrik felt the itch of their intangible claws behind his eyes, at the base of his brain.

Leoric furrowed his brow in concentration. ‘I see something,’ he said, ‘but we have to hurry. We have to—’

‘Did you see Lord Krom and the others?’ Ulrik asked quickly. ‘Can you take us to them?’

Leoric shook his head. ‘No, I did not see them. I thought I saw the way *back*.’

Ulrik’s hearts sank. He met Beregelt’s eyes and saw the same dismay reflected in them. Inwardly, he railed against the idea of turning tail, of abandoning his brothers to their fates – not to mention the missing Great Wolf whose trail had led them here. *But what about the brothers aboard this ship? I am responsible for them too.*

He gave Beregelt an almost imperceptible nod. The veteran Drakeslayer lowered his gaze to his feet, but understood.

‘Don’t try to resist it,’ Leoric said. ‘Let it take us where it will. It wants us gone.’ Olav Brunn relayed his words to Rogan Bearsbane.

‘We shall return for them,’ Ulrik swore in a quiet but resolute growl. ‘Somehow, one day, we shall return for—’

‘Russ’s teeth!’

Rogan threw the Stormwolf into a lateral spin, forcing the Space Wolves to cling to whatever they could reach. Ulrik scrambled to the viewport again, as something huge and blue and grey careened out of the static towards them.

‘High Priest!’ Beregelt strained forward beside him, his pale yellow eyes widening in astonishment. ‘Isn’t that... Wasn’t that...?’

‘Another gunship,’ Ulrik breathed.

It was already gone, peeling away from them into a pocket of icy mist. They had come a hair’s breadth from a collision, close enough that Ulrik was left with an afterimage of the pilot’s ruddy, red-bearded face gaping at him open-mouthed through his glaxis. He had recognised that face. He had recognised the gunship too. It seemed impossible – but what had Leoric told them? *I thought I saw the*

way back. He remembered his own words too: *Time means nothing here...*

‘We’re almost there,’ Leoric said, unable to conceal the relief in his voice despite himself.

Ulrik opened a channel to Rogan Bearsbane. ‘Maintain our course,’ he said.

‘But High Priest, I saw—’

‘I know what you saw, Brother Rogan. Maintain our course. The Allfather is with us, he has found us even here – and he will guide us out of the storm.’

Already, Ulrik could feel the turbulence around them easing. A solemn hush descended in the troop compartment, and for a long time – or a short time, it was still impossible to know – the only sound to be heard was that of *Rolling Thunder’s* engines.

At last, Rogan’s voice buzzed in Ulrik’s ear again, more composed than it had been. He reported a gap in the storm ahead of them. Through the gap all was black, but Rogan said he thought he could see the pinprick sparkle of stars, real stars. Ulrik turned to Leoric, who nodded sagely.

‘Take us through the gap,’ Ulrik ordered, though the words weighed heavily on his heart. After all they had endured, to be spat back out into real space... It was almost more than he could bear. He had failed in his mission – he was no closer to finding Logan Grimnar than he had been. As for Krom Dragongaze and the other captured Space Wolves...

They would have to save themselves.

Krom was woken by the hissing of the cell gate. The slave masters had come for him again. Ragnek Halfhand protested that it was too soon, that Krom needed more time to heal – but the Wolf Lord silenced him with a glare. Wolves did not beg.

Jormund’s sacrifice had left Krom, for one of the few times in his life, despondent. Many may have been surprised to hear it, but there was a limit to the Fierce-eye’s arrogance, after all. He had tried to do his fallen brother justice. He told how fiercely he had fought, and how well – in graphic detail, with embellishments to cover what he had not seen – and ensured that the story was spread. He had set his pride aside, giving Jormund due credit for saving his life. He wasn’t sure what good it would do.

Jormund Thunderclaw’s story would die between these walls. As would the stories of too many others. Krom remembered the Guardsman he had met on his first day here, and knew he had spoken truly. Not even the mightiest champion left the arena a victor. The only way out was in defeat and death – at least,

according to the dark eldar's rules.

His right knee had seized up. His damaged servo-motors were no help to him as he struggled to stand. He began to understand how Jormund must have felt, a prisoner of his own armour. Two slave masters took Krom under the arms and hauled him roughly to his feet. He shrugged them off. He intended to keep his dignity, at least.

He had only three escorts today. He walked unaided between them. He considered snatching one of their whips. He was sure he could take one, even two of them down before they subdued him. Defiance meant certain death, however. He preferred to take his chances – such as they were – in the arena.

The muster area was unusually crowded. A dozen Chaos cultists were waiting there, chained together. They sneered and cursed at Krom, straining to reach him. He bared his fangs at them in return. They had the look of new arrivals, unbloodied and still strong. Krom took some solace in the likelihood that they were about to die.

As they were herded away, another combatant was led through, back towards the cages. It was the Dark Angels chaplain. He turned his head to look at Krom. He offered no greetings, nor even acknowledged the other's presence. His armour was dented and scored, but he appeared to have weathered his ordeals well, on the whole.

Krom glared at him, but had no chance to speak as the slave masters were jabbering at him excitably, prodding him with their whip handles, and – sooner than he had expected – it was time for him to fight again. He took a deep breath, gathering his depleted energy, focusing his willpower.

Impress the Grand Archite and she may choose to extend your life...

They hadn't given him Wyrmlaw this time. Had the queen grown tired of him already? *So what if she has?* he thought stubbornly. *The span of my life is for no xenos scum to determine. Not while I have breath in my body and strength to fight.*

Krom lifted his head, squared his shoulders. He made the sign of the aquila. Then he stepped out beneath the crimson sky of Commorrhagh and let the roar of the xenos crowd wash over him.

The arena had been restructured during his absence. The polished stages had been removed to create a single fighting space that stretched from one arena wall to the other. The large surface was covered in sharp black sand that crunched beneath his boots. The eldar were clearly planning for this fight to be a grand finale, Krom realised grimly.

As he crossed the huge space, he glimpsed the queen's throne. It was empty. Her absence stoked his anger. *I'll give these xenos a show like they have never seen before*, he swore, *one to leave them cowering in fear of the Allfather's might!*

In the centre of the arena, he found the chained Chaos cultists waiting for him. His lips twitched at the prospect of being the one to slay them.

The cultists weren't alone, however. Dozens of other combatants were being herded from their cages. There was a group of tau fire warriors to Krom's left and beyond them, two groups of Imperial Guardsmen. There were orks to his right, including one hulking warboss with a scarred pit in place of its right eye, and a Traitor Space Marine in tarnished black and gold. *A Black Legionnaire!*

A slave master prodded Krom in the back, mistaking his surprise for trepidation. He shrugged it away from him with a snarl.

Krom was weighing up the traitor, intending to engage him first, when a roar went up from the crowd and he realised that he had misjudged the situation. He was not expected to fight his fellow prisoners. Rather, his true opponents came wheeling out of the sky towards him. The slave masters withdrew and Krom dived for the nearest axe – but the traitor reached it before him, snatching his prize out from under his nose. He dropped into a crouch, empty-handed.

Suddenly, they were all around him – a gang of young dark eldar males, heavily-inked and leather-armoured. There were thirty or more of them, whooping and screeching, poised atop skyboards, which they steered with their feet. They hacked at their prey with double-bladed polearms, and had already eviscerated a pair of cultists.

Two of the hellions flanked a tau and lifted it off the ground between them. Then they were gone, escaping into the sky again, out of reach.

The attack left the grounded combatants in disarray. The surviving cultists pulled this way and that, hampered by the chains that bound them to a pair of bloody corpses. The orks were snatching up every weapon in reach, hurling them at the circling predators. Krom made a grab for an ancient-looking chainsword, while he had the chance.

The hellions were putting on an aerial display. They repeatedly tossed their luckless victim to one another, much to the crowd's delight. Only when the tau was battered, broken and partially dismembered did they fling its body away from them with casual contempt. As they swooped on the arena again, however, Krom was ready for them.

Three skyboards hurtled towards him. He sprang to meet the centremost of

them, hoping to surprise its rider. He brought his chainsword down in a double-handed smash, which the hellion parried, by a hair. The dark eldar swerved away from Krom, the jagged edge of its board clipping his foot. He landed heavily on his injured leg and crashed onto one knee.

The hellion hooked a bone pylon with its polearm, whipped its board around and flew at him again. One of the orks saved him, though that surely hadn't been its intention. It appeared as if from nowhere, barrelling through the Chaos cultists, pouncing on the low-flying dark eldar with a murderous howl. It had run out of weapons to throw, without thinking to keep one for itself, but its meaty fists alone could crush bones.

The skyboard veered between two pylons and flipped over, depositing one hellion corpse and one thrashing-mad greenskin in the dirt below. Slave masters rushed to drive the latter back into the centre of the arena.

The other hellions were gone again, but for one other that had become separated from its board. The cultists swarmed over it, denying it the chance to stand. About a third of the prisoners had fallen. Krom realised that the hellions had picked off the weakest of them. Most of the tau warriors and several Imperial Guardsmen lay among the dead.

The hellions swooped again, but this time their tactics had changed. They focused their attacks upon a single target. They swarmed around the Chaos Space Marine like angry insects, stinging with their polearms. Swatting at them furiously, he cleaved one through the stomach and caught a second in the throat with his elbow and flipped it backwards off its board.

Once again, the cultists swarmed the fallen hellion.

At last, a hellion swooped carelessly into Krom's reach. Bones ground together inside his patched-up left gauntlet as he swung his whirring blade, and he sucked in air between his fangs. It was worth the pain, however, to open his enemy's throat.

The Black Legionnaire had claimed a few kills of his own, as had the orks. When the hellions withdrew, this time, only twelve of them remained. It was less than half their original number. They had whittled the traitor down, however, leaving him to bleed out from a hundred cuts and gouges. They performed a victory circuit of the arena, garnering wild applause, giving Krom and the other remaining prisoners – a handful of Guardsmen and cultists and three orks, including their warboss – a minute to collect themselves.

Krom took charge, barking at the Guardsmen to form a defensive circle, back-to-back. The hellions attacked for the final time, and for Krom, the next few

minutes were a blur of ducking, diving, swiping and screaming. He was at the centre of a maelstrom, barely able to react to one threat before the next came at him from another direction. He didn't dare stand still for a second, so he pushed his battered body as hard as he could to keep moving, keep fighting, stay alive. The sand of the arena was slick with blood, and more than once he slipped and almost lost his footing.

Through a red haze, he saw the ork warboss' neck being severed. He saw the last of the Imperial Guardsmen speared by three polearms at once. There were dark eldar bodies on the ground too, however, several of them thanks to Krom's efforts.

Then his sputtering chainsword was parried so fiercely that it span out of his broken hand.

He found himself in a crouch in the middle of the stage, surrounded by mutilated corpses. The final hellion was plummeting towards him, cackling madly. He propelled himself forward, diving beneath the oncoming skyboard, landing facedown – as he had planned – beside the Chaos Space Marine. He prised the axe out of the traitor's dead fingers, rolling onto his back as the skyboard whipped around again. He hurled the weapon at the skyboard's underside. Its blade lodged deep inside the board's workings, sending it careening out of control, skipping and spluttering across the sand, taking its rider with it.

It was over, and Krom was alive. He was the sole survivor.

He tried to stand, but a fresh gash in his side that he didn't recall sustaining – combined with his old, unhealed injuries – rendered him temporarily incapable. He fell back to his knees. With his hearts hammering in his ears, at first he didn't hear the ominous thrill that rippled around the arena.

A shadow blotted out the sky's sullen light. Krom raised his head to find a blurry shape looming over him. He couldn't tell if it was beast or machine, or a perverted amalgam of both. A pale, muscular torso was hunched inside an armoured carapace, which bristled with implements of war and torture.

It had no legs but hovered, like the skyboards, on anti-gravity motors. A thick, segmented tail coiled over its head, a twitching xenos weapon grafted onto its end like a sting.

Whatever this unholy contraption was, Krom was in no state to fight it. Even if he could, there would only be more behind it. His fate had never truly rested in his own hands, after all. The Grand Archite had decided the time and manner of Krom Dragongaze's demise, as soon as she had ceased to be entertained by him.

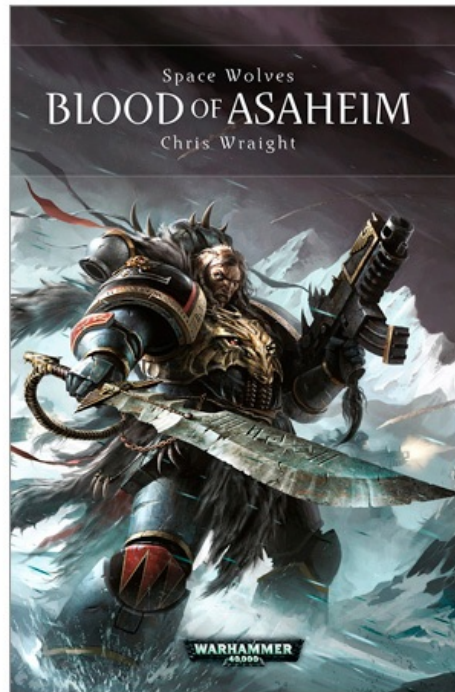
And that time, it seemed, had come.

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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