

WARHAMMER 40,000



SPACE WOLVES 5

THE DARKNESS OF ANGELS

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Rob Sanders

The Dark City rang with the sounds of battle and butchery. From the serrated spires of High Commorrhagh to the insanity of the Middle Darkness, the miserable industry of the Old City to the degradation of the Sprawls, things were suffering and dying. It was home to the murderous and those they would murder. It was a hellish cityscape of barbed wonder and torment, in which the alien and the depraved lived, died and enjoyed the perversity of everything inflicted in between. Above the corpse-thick slurrp of the city's rivers, the slave revolts of the gateway ports and the dimensional flux of the shadow districts, the cacophony of death rose.

The arenas spread like a dark cancer out from the razored towers and crooked pinnacles of High Commorrhagh. Dominating the Sprawls, they drew the bloodthirsty and depraved for kilometres around – alien deviants who filled their worthless lives with their daily fix of death and howled their rabid encouragement from their terraces of black stone. They spat curses in a language of shattered syllables that contorted their thin lips and haunted their features with a wretched fury. They wagered in flesh – that of their slaves, their rivals and their own. They pushed, shoved and screamed at each other as the violence of the arena spread through the auditoria. Knives flashed in the darkness, gutting and slitting. Victims bled their last, stamped into the ground by feverish throngs of xenos intent on commanding the best views – views of alien beasts, the gore festival of traps, and prisoners reduced to the brute desperation of murderous survival.

Krom Dragongaze was one such prisoner. A figure stumbling through the black sand of the arena, the grey of his plate stained crimson with wounds suffered in

the course of never-ending battle. He fought through fatigue and loss of blood.

The dark eldar arena was a crowded circus of death. Blinking blood from his eye, and with plaits of copper-coloured hair slick with gore, the Wolf Lord could see bodies of Space Wolves in the arena. Krom tried to summon some anger or indignation. This was no way for Wolves to die. But the Sons of Russ did die this way. All over the galaxy. When a brother of the Space Wolves died, it was not asleep in his cell. He died badly, as some savaged mess on an alien world or bolt-mulched corpse at the foot of a traitor. Still, as deaths went, this was not a good one.

Krom screwed his eye shut. He tried to blank out the pain of loss, his personal agonies and the baying, pale-faced hordes of the auditorium. If he was going to die, he would die like a Wolf. In the moment. Savage and deadly before the end. Opening a bloodshot eye and the shattered remnants of a sizzling optic, the Space Wolf beheld the doom that had been chosen for him.

Whipping up the arena sand into coiled wisps with its anti-gravitic motors, a huge, gladiatorial abomination drifted towards him. Looking like a fat, floating black scorpion, the sickly construct was hunched with a thick, armoured shell – with weaponised claws and rearing tail. It clanked and crunched with the rancid change of internal gearing. It belched a light black smoke, while flasks of unspeakable fluids bubbled in the shell-ports. It was ramshackle in nature and dripping with the filth of past atrocities, but nonetheless the monstrosity gave the impression of indomitable efficiency.

The thing seemed unhurried, as though relishing the howls of encouragement and bloodthirsty expectation from the audience. A macabre fusion of pallid flesh and murderous machine, Krom's opponent was a semi-sentient torture device – a twisted thing that knew only the delights of a slow death and success measured in screams. It existed to inflict myriad agonies. Festooned with tools of pain, it appeared to Krom less as a gladiatorial killer than a cybernetic butcher, intent on chopping him up a piece at a time until there was nothing left.

Krom spat blood at the arena sand and clenched his fists so hard the joints cracked. Spent. Battered. Doomed. The Space Wolf's hands itched for weapons that were not there. His plate, once a thing of beauty, was a rattling wreck. All he had was the nature of the beast that clawed at his soul and growled to be released.

'It's all I need...' Krom hissed through bloodied lips.

The Wolf Lord didn't wait for his opponent. He weaved across the arena, his boots crunching in the black sands as he stepped lightly through the dead, giving

the pain engine's flesh-fused weaponry some difficulty in tracking him. The alien deviants in the audience whooped their savage expectations.

As Krom ran towards the half-machine, he felt the thing betray a moment of primal uncertainty. Things the size of a Space Wolf didn't usually go on the attack. They usually ran screaming from its scything hook and liquifiers. The Wolf Lord would not. As he took his last few steps, he felt his hearts beat in time with whatever stitched fusion of piston-plugs and muscle pumped wretched filth around the pain engine's veins. He felt for its movements and intentions.

Allfather's wounds, Krom thought to himself, *this thing is fast*. The scything hook cranked around in its bone-socket and flashed for the Space Marine. The crowd seethed with delight. Krom rolled across his pauldron, the hook sparking off his ruined backplate. The momentum carried him to his feet just in front of the pain engine's armoured head. The Space Wolf smashed his fist down at the metal beast. He hit it again and again, his gauntleted knuckles scuffing and cracking against the thick helm. The engine clunked, whirred and gushed hydraulic fluids as it drifted back. Krom's bare knuckles had barely dented the plate, however, and the thing came at him with the nozzles of its claw.

The Wolf Lord did not want to find out what came out of such weapons. Flipping head over boots, Krom landed messily on the sand, just clear of the nozzles. Such a demanding manoeuvre required strength and concentration and the punishing arena fights had stripped him of both.

Again, Krom had a moment to appreciate the monstrous engineering of the pain engine and its recoiling reflexes. Striking out with the nozzled limb while turning on its whirring gravitic motors, the pain engine swung around a set of chain-flails attached to the bottom-plate of the weaponised claw. Running on retractable chains, weighted hooks tore around in an expanding arc. Where they got purchase, the flails ripped sections of plate from Krom's back and embedded themselves in the slabs of muscle about the back of the Space Wolf's shoulders. His pack sparked with the damage inflicted by the cruel hooks.

The hooks sank deep and burned inside his body with some kind of smeared poison. Krom roared, although he was not surprised. Every razor-sharpened edge or cruel point in this foetid, alien place seemed laced with some kind of burning residue or mind-clouding toxin. It was all part of the lethal nature of this dread city. His limbs felt stricken. His breathing was laboured and his hearts thumped to an irregular rhythm. His mind was an addled ache, struggling to stay conscious. Whatever the venom was, it was overcoming his engineered body's ability to resist its perilous effects. Krom knew that the venom was unlikely to

kill him. The pain engine would do that eventually. Like everything else in the crowded coliseum, the venom was a form of theatre. It reduced the transhuman perfection of humanity's finest to a dazed hulk – a tranquilised beast to be played with for the audience's satisfaction. Once the gladiatorial machine had shown off its skills and clunking supremacy, however, the mob would demand death. Something spectacular.

Turning, Krom did the only thing he could – he grabbed the chains. With a wild fury, Krom leaned into the agony of the embedded hooks and hauled the chains around. The pain engine began to move, its anti-gravitic motors causing it to drift around. Without legs or tracks, the monstrous fusion of flesh and machine had no traction on the arena sands and floated around with the centrifugal force of the Wolf Lord's swing. The thing gushed rank liquids through its lines and streamed smoke. It swung out further until suddenly the chains locked, running their course.

Krom felt a tortuous tug through the running lines. Breathing deep and clenching his teeth, he prepared himself for the worst. Letting go of the chain-flails, Krom allowed the drifting bulk of the pain engine to fly off towards the arena wall. The embedded hooks tore free through the Space Wolf's flesh and suit, pulling him off his feet and into an ugly fling across the sand. As the hooks and chains retracted, the pain engine struck the wall. Bouncing off black stone, the thing's shell casing split.

Dark eldar spectators ran to the arena edge to look down on the damage. Krom tried to get up. Muscle raged red hot across his back. Strips of skin hung down through shattered plate. All the while the Space Wolf's mind swam with the plethora of poisons his genetically engineered body was trying to process. He saw the pain engine belch smoke and eject some kind of liquid effusion from its cybernetic body in a squirting stream. The thick fluid hissed on the sand.

While clutching his back, Krom gestured with the fingers of his other hand for the pain engine to try again. The arena crowd went wild. Krom couldn't tell whether his actions were being celebrated or reviled. It didn't matter. He was dead for certain now. All about him he felt the weight of his plate. His damaged pack was faltering and the powered suit dying. He would be soon to follow.

The pain engine rattled towards him. Its hook glinted through old blood and filth, still impossibly sharp. Chain-flails snapped back into place and the pair of nozzles forming the claw of the other appendage dribbled a foul concoction in deviant anticipation. The drips and slurps created smoking pits in the sand, giving Krom the impression of some kind of acid.

As it drifted at speed towards him, the pain engine's tail contracted and the screw-shaped barrel spat a stream of static at the Space Wolf. Krom dived to one side. It was an ugly manoeuvre, the Space Wolf driving his suit on with the pure brute force of his body. He turned to see the static thrash at the sand where he had been standing. Rolling again in the sluggish suit, the Wolf Lord couldn't avoid a second, silent blast. The horrific weapon made no sound, but Krom was noisy enough for the both of them as the static hit him in the chest. He fell back spasming and screaming. His body was wracked with the excruciating agony the weapon had visited upon him.

Krom clenched a ceramite fist out in front of him. His whole body trembled with pain, and his suit was like an anchor dragging him down. His teeth chattered uncontrollably. He punched the sand and roared the agony away. As the effect of the weapon began to fade, Krom's blurring vision returned to clarity. The flat of the merciless hook flashed before his face, smashing him to one side. Krom forced his faltering plate on. He crawled underneath the metal beast, feeling the pulse of the gravitic motors wash over him. The thing turned on the spot, as Krom somehow got to his feet and staggered away.

He heard a discharge of liquid as something spat from the appendage nozzles. Krom tried an evasion but failed. Without his powered reflexes he was merely a Space Marine buried in ceramite. Poison, exhaustion and blood loss were taking their toll. Sliding on the sand, the Space Wolf only half managed to avoid the liquifiers. The foul concoction splattered ahead of him, turning the arena floor to a cloud of steam.

Some of the liquid struck his pauldron and arm, however, and began to eat through the ceramite. While his plate hissed furiously near his face, Krom tore at the seals and locks of the pauldron and plate sections. There was no time for ritual or respect. Hooking his gauntlet under the shoulder plate he ripped it off before clawing the ceramite from his upper arm. He felt the flesh-burrowing burn of several droplets that had eaten their way through. Skin, muscle and bone seethed and a feral roar issued from the Wolf Lord.

He stumbled away from the engine, trying to clear his pain-addled brain just long enough to enact some kind of retaliation. He didn't get a chance to. The metal monstrosity drifted up behind Krom and, firing the stinger pod on its tail, once more blasted a static stream of agony into the Space Marine.

Krom roared, stricken and held there by the agonies coursing through the entirety of his body. The pain engine wasted no time in angling its hook. Coming up behind the paralysed Wolf Lord, it brought the hook up through his ruined

plate and back flesh with a sickening thud. Lifting Krom Dragongaze up on the brutal weapon, the pain engine turned, idling on its gravitic motors. It presented Krom and his suffering to the crowds for inspection. For entertainment.

The sounds of disappointment from the crowd rose to the darklight suns hanging in the Commorrite sky. The cut-glass syllables of abuse rained down on the arena. Improvised missiles pranged off Krom's plate and the engine's metal shell while members of the audience demonstrated their detestation by tearing off cloaks and presenting weapons – as if they were going to climb down into the arena. They were stopped, however, by a cordon of coliseum guards: warrior females dressed in leathers.

The Space Wolf could not tell whom the crowd were disappointed with – him for failing or the pain engine for providing them with entertainment not twisted enough for their appetites. Allowing his agonised gaze to travel up from the commotion, up through the spiteful ranks of the arena audience, Krom could make out the sheltered box manned by slave-servants and coliseum guards. Ragged banners streamed from the structure depicting a serrated shadow, the symbol of the queen's coliseum cult. The queen, who had been absent until now, was summoned back to her throne by the hollering of her audience. If she wanted to remain in power, she had to make sure they were getting a good show. Krom bridled at the sight of her. She was clad in extravagant barbed leathers, the uniform of a gladiatrix. Her theatrical headdress revealed eyes steely with focus, while her bodysuit left little to the imagination. She stared down at the Wolf Lord as the pain engine presented its offering. The decision was hers.

Krom faded in and out of consciousness. The pain was unbearable. He had barely the strength to open his eyes and poison raged through his body, afflicting his mind. His limbs felt like lead, his suit was dead and his movements on the hook an agony.

The queen hesitated over the decision.

The terraces of the coliseum were growing riotous. Dark eldar flashed the sharpness of their teeth and blades, savagely pushing one another. There seemed to be a difference of opinion regarding the quality of the day's entertainment. Female guards in leathers, sporting pistols with long, tapering barrels, were moving through the mobs of disgruntled xenos, ready to mercilessly put down any rioting. With the coliseum in uproar, discontent infectious and the audience seconds away from becoming part of the entertainment, the dark queen had little choice but to act.

Giving a signal of savage disdain, the queen ordered a section of prisoner cages

opened. With bars parting and a hydraulic wall of spikes moving through the cells, more prisoners were forced out onto the arena sands. Crucified upon the hook and held high above the arena floor, Krom Dragongaze beheld his replacements.

Part of him hoped for Space Wolves – although he would take no solace in his brothers being thrust into this arena of torture and humiliation – but he could hear his Drakeslayers roaring their fury and throwing themselves at the bars of cages that would not break. They had not been let loose.

The prisoners were a miserable gathering, mostly humans, emaciated, dressed in rags and showing signs of terrible mistreatment. There was a lone eldar, horribly scarred but stoic. Krom spotted a servant of the Machine God in rust red robes, limping on a shattered bionic. All torturer's fodder for the pain engine. Then Krom saw them. The dark queen's gambit. Three transhumans, like himself. One he recognised as the Dark Angels chaplain he'd seen a few times being brought to and from the arena. His filthy white vestments were draped over his battle-scarred black plate, the hood pulled up to partially conceal his distinctive skull helm. With him was one of his brothers, a librarian in blue armour.

The monster advancing from the furthest cage might have once been a Space Marine but he was no angel of the Emperor. The armoured figure was decked in spikes and the perversity of blood red plate. A Chaos Space Marine uncaged. A World Eater let off the leash. His face-flesh was daemon red and a single horn erupted out of the side of his head, winding about his skull like a crown. He had the fixed smile of a maniac, drunk on the violence to come. Violence he fully intended to inflict in the name of his fell patron.

Marching up to the priest of Mars, the World Eater smashed the hobbling construct to the sand with obvious relish. Sinking probing fingers into the base of the priest's back, the Chaos Space Marine ripped the priest's spine up out of cybernetic flesh. The metal spine dripped with blood and oil and carried with it an armoured cranium housing the victim's half-brain and cogitator. Shaking wires and interfaces loose, the World Eater took a few experimental swings with his improvised flail. As he marched for the pain engine, Krom had no doubt that the maniac had every intention of destroying the monstrous machine – and then everyone else.

The pain engine lowered its hook and allowed Krom to slide off. Hitting the sands like a pile of scrap, the Wolf Lord let out a bellow of agony. The mobile torture machine drifted overhead, advancing towards its new victims. It would

no doubt return later to inflict further horrors on him, the Space Marine thought, for the crowd's edification and entertainment.

Krom summoned reserves of strength he didn't know he had. He felt as though the hook had split him in half. Like an infant animal, he tried to stand. He staggered and fell. He could do it, but it was agony. He crashed back down on the sands in the pain engine's gravitic wake. Everything hurt. Poison coursed through his veins. His shoulder still seared with the acid working its way through his flesh, and his back felt as if a red hot iron had been thrust into it.

He heard screams. Prisoners were dying. The dark eldar pain engine was nothing if not an artist. Like a true gladiatorial showman and torturer, it had zeroed in on the weak for the entertainment of easy kills. It instinctively knew the transhuman prisoners would be more of a challenge and that therefore their suffering should be left until last.

Dragging his forehead off the sand, Krom witnessed what happened when you faced the xenos pain engine without the benefit of a Space Marine's engineered body and training. Men died horribly. The monstrous fusion of flesh and machine wanted to show off the full range of its torturer's tools. Prisoners were hooked through the belly, the scything blade ripping slowly up through the sternum and out through the jaw. They were shredded by the poisoned hooks of the arm-mounted chainflails. Some bled to death on the sand, while others were dragged across the ground by chains. Several were left to tremble, convulse and die where they lay as the poison ravaged their mere human constitutions.

Spitting sand from his lips, Krom saw that the cruel xenos audience were satisfied. The queen's gamble seemed to have paid off. The conflict on the terraces had given way to masochistic delight. Those spectators eager for blood were getting it. Those demanding more challenge and torment for their time and coin were back on the edge of their seats with expectation. Even the leather-bound guards had stopped to soak up the death and suffering.

The screams grew louder, echoing about the coliseum and rising above the city as the pain engine deployed its other instruments of torture. Prisoners either distracted by former abuses or fixed to the spot with present terrors were sprayed down with acid from the engine's liquifier guns. Like wax sculptures, the thrashing victims dribbled to the sand to form puddles of red and white. Within seconds there was little left of them but the echo of their dreadful suffering.

For a moment it looked like the eldar might put up a fight, but then the xenos decided to run. He shouldn't have, Krom decided, as for the relish of the audience's racial hatred, the pain engine hit him again and again with the

agonising static from the screw-shaped barrels mounted upon its overhanging tail. The ghoulish dark eldar were treated to the prisoner scratching at himself on the ground, experiencing more pain than he could bear. After an appropriate show of agony, the prisoner died of his torments.

As the last of the human prisoners turned and ran from the pain engine, the wretch found himself face to face with the World Eater. Swinging his metal skull around on its titanium spinal column like a morning star, the Chaos Space Marine stove in the prisoner's skull. The victim fell before the spiked might of the World Eater, and the traitor splattered the prisoner into the sand with stamps of his gore-speckled boots.

As the two Dark Angels looked on, the gladiatorial pain engine glided up between them and the Blood God's champion. The Interrogator-Chaplain offered an open gauntlet towards the World Eater to indicate that the pain engine was all his. The maniac's smile broadened – a simultaneous acknowledgement of the offer and the fact that he was looking at a dead man.

The World Eater broke into a powered run. As the pain engine accelerated to meet him it reached out with its hook. Smashing the limb to one side with his flail, the Chaos Space Marine began to beat the machine back furiously. Ducking beneath a storm of lacerating hooks, the World Eater allowed the chain-flails to pass overhead before hammering the engine with the reinforced cranium of the tech-priest. The xenos audience screeched with excitement and pain lust.

As sparks flew from the liquifier appendage, the traitor's improvised weapon failed him, the metal skull detaching from the priest's blood-slick spine. Stamping at the pain engine with his boot, the World Eater seemed unstoppable. The brute became a feverish storm of powered kicks and punches. With a kick knocking the gladiatorial machine back on its gravitic field, the maniac picked the metal cranium up from the sand, carrying the weapon like a primitive might a rock. The stinger pod on the engine's tail recoiled, sending a stream of static torment at the Chaos Space Marine. The World Eater didn't move.

'Again!' the traitor roared, an infernal echo to his voice. The weapon seemed to do nothing to the monster. The cybernetic menace blasted the World Eater a second and a third time, each time to bawling encouragement from its opponent.

The World Eater yelled and ran at the clanking contraption. Knocking aside the engine's flaying hook with the metal skull, he proceeded to smash at the armoured shell until the cranium too came apart in a shower of circuits and brains. His maniac's smile now horribly contorted with rage, the World Eater grabbed the side of the pain engine. Pushing upwards with a furious heave, the

Chaos Space Marine flipped the construct over.

Without the stability of its gravitic motors, the horrific fusion of flesh and instrument of torture landed on the thick plate of its hunched back. Sparks flew and the mechanism belched black smoke. It rolled across the sands, each time attempting to right itself. With gravitic motors getting a fix on the ground, the pain engine came to a stop. Shell-mounted flasks were smashed and the monstrosity's hull sizzled and steamed with its own foul fluids. The liquefier appendage showered the sand with sparks and the stinger pod hung at a crooked angle on its segmented metal tail.

Krom watched as the impossible happened. The World Eater wasn't finished. He stormed towards the pain engine, intent on ripping the gladiatorial machine apart. He would probably have done so, if it hadn't been for the stuttering stream of acid the pain engine splattered into his face. With its mechanism damaged and feed lines broken, all the monstrous machine could send the Chaos Space Marine's way was the acid left in its liquefier guns. The World Eater had never screamed before but as the acid spray ate through his face, he heard the sound of his own suffering echoing in his ears.

'Get him up,' Krom heard from behind him. 'Get him up.'

It was the two Dark Angels. As the brother in blue put Krom's arm across his back, his compatriot grabbed his other arm and hauled the Space Wolf off the floor. Krom tried to shrug the Dark Angels off him but his heavy plate, its sluggish servos and fibre bundles resisted.

'Can you fight?' the Interrogator-Chaplain said, his syllables clipped with a nobility of purpose.

'My plate has no power,' Krom growled, almost like an accusation.

'Can you fight?' the Interrogator-Chaplain demanded again, his courteous tone laced with authority.

'Have you ever met a Wolf who wouldn't?' Krom bit back.

'Not yet,' the Dark Angel admitted.

The three Space Marines stopped as they saw the pain engine, billowing black smoke and bleeding fluids, surging across the sands towards them. 'Which is as well, for I fear this will require all three of us. Our tainted friend got things rolling but we shall have to finish this monstrosity.'

Krom wasn't sure he could trust the Dark Angels any more than he could his captors – the rivalry between the Wolf and the Lion was far from dead. Krom was a creature of immediacy, however. He lived and fought in the moment. Necessity made for strange allies and alliances.

‘We shall put an end to this show,’ Krom promised, through his pain. That was all he was willing to say.

‘Brother Othniel will flank right, myself left,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain told Krom.

‘And me?’ the Space Wolf growled with disgust.

‘You will wait for an opportunity,’ the Dark Angel assured him. ‘We shall create one if we can.’

As the pain engine rattled noisily on, the Interrogator-Chaplain and Othniel dragged Krom across the arena, the toes of the Wolf Lord’s boots creating a pair of trenches in the sand. As the machine got close, the Dark Angels dropped Krom without ceremony and peeled off to the sides. Clattering to the ground, Krom pushed himself up on his arms. His plate was like an armoured coffin about him. As the Dark Angels stalked around the pain engine it turned slowly on its gravitic motors, hovering near Krom like a hound defending a buried bone.

Suddenly the Dark Angels ran at the monstrous engine, their robes flowing after them. Othniel reached the gladiator first, skidding to a stop just before the throat-tearing swipe of the machine’s hook. Surging for the weaponised appendage, Othniel balanced the might of his powered blue plate against the hydraulics of the bone-fused limb. The pain engine struggled, but Othniel held fast, forcing the armoured thing back across the sand. Unlike the World Eater or even Krom himself, the Dark Angel’s attack lacked ferocity, but he more than made up for that with stalwart determination.

The Interrogator-Chaplain came from the other side, jumping up onto the side of the pain engine’s armoured shell. Leaping across its hunched back, the Dark Angel cleared the monstrosity with knightly elegance. The pain engine, however, fired the screw-shaped barrels of its stinger pod. Unable to raise the barrel on its broken tail, the pain engine missed the Interrogator-Chaplain and blasted itself in the back.

As the thing drifted backwards towards Krom, Brother Othniel released it. With its gravitic motor stuttering about him, Krom looked up at the pallid flesh of the pain engine. It was muscular, clammy and horrifically interfaced with the dark machinery. With tendons taut and the pain engine’s organic muscles flexing horribly, the Wolf Lord couldn’t tell whether the thing was in some kind of private agony or ecstasy. Then Krom saw his opportunity. The pain engine’s brawny neck ran into its armoured helm, but under its jaw the Space Wolf spotted a weakness. He had to be fast, however, before the monstrosity

recovered and slaughtered them all.

Forcing the fingers of his powerless gauntlet straight, Krom thrust his palm up through the abomination's throat. Helped by the backwards drift of the thing, Krom punched his hand like a claw up inside the pain engine's armoured helm and skull. The construct spasmed, the muscles of its chest and arms contracting. Smoke belched from the machine and fluids were expelled from all its ports. In that second, Krom Dragongaze knew he had it. With disgust-fuelled violence the Space Wolf reached up inside the engine's xenos skull and crushed the twisted thing he found inside. Alien gore poured through the holes in its helm onto the sand.

The monstrosity's gravitic drive stuttered and failed. Withdrawing his bloody gauntlet, Krom heaved himself and his dead plate to one side, moments before the motor failed and the pain engine came crashing down on the arena sands, a smoking wreck.

As Krom lay there, staring up at the dark Commorrite suns with the dark eldar audience screaming for more blood, the Wolf Lord felt the Dark Angels over him once more. Grabbing him by his plate, they hauled him to his feet. The Wolf Lord shrugged them off. As he went to fall again, the Interrogator-Chaplain supported him. Scowling, this time Krom allowed the Dark Angel to help him.

Amongst the audience there was movement. Columns of coliseum guards were filing down through the terraces. Dressed in leathers and carrying a combination of electrified nets and bidents, the dark eldar appeared ready to secure the arena. Jets of flame spouted from nozzles set in the arena wall, growing in length and power. The raging inferno turned blood and sand to glass, forcing the remaining prisoners to gather in the centre of the arena.

The Dark Angels helped Krom across the sand in his dead plate, away from the unbearable heat of the flames. The survivors became a throng of silhouettes. The flames corralled them together before dying suddenly in a great whoosh of heat. As his eyes adjusted to the vanishing glare, Krom saw that the coliseum guards had run up in place of the flames. They encircled the survivors with their number. For the first time, Krom realised that the maniac World Eater was still alive – although a horrifically disfigured mess, roaring into gauntlets he used to cover what was left of his face. The Wolf Lord and the Dark Angels would have killed the traitor, if it hadn't have been for the dark eldar surrounding them.

The xenos held crackling nets, while presenting the twin tips of their forked spears in a circle of death. As the leather-clad guards closed on the Space Marines, Krom bridled. He was exhausted from the prolonged demands of

survival in the arena but his victory already had him bristling with a desire to savage his alien captors. From behind, the Dark Angel Interrogator-Chaplain spoke.

‘If you choose to fight,’ he said, ‘then the Dark Angels shall fight with you. Know, savage prince of the Wolf King, that our lives will be forfeit. I appeal to you. Return quietly to your cage. From there we can make plans for our liberty.’

Krom spat blood at the sand in disgust, the spittle hanging from his chin whiskers.

‘Wolves weren’t meant for cages, Angel,’ Krom growled back at him.

‘There is no honour dying like this,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain told him.

‘I will kill every xenos that tries to lay their filthy hands on me,’ Krom rumbled.

‘Of that I have no doubt,’ the Dark Angel said. ‘But what do you think they are going to do when the corpses of the alien dead are at our feet?’

‘They will flood the arena with flame,’ Krom admitted, managing to shake the effects of the poison from his head.

‘The cages offer us a chance, at least,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain said.

The dark eldar guards tightened the circle about them, the double blades of their spears tapping the plate and dimpling the barbarian flesh of the Wolf Lord. Krom glared his hatred up the length of the weapon at the guard ready to thrust it through his chest.

‘Alright, Angel,’ Krom said, raising his arms in the lifeless plate with difficulty. ‘We do this your way.’ The Wolf Lord turned the hatred in his eyes on the Interrogator-Chaplain, who nodded the blankness of his skull helm in silence. ‘But I hope you are caged with me,’ the Space Wolf snarled.

Surrounded by a forest of spears, the Space Marines were escorted back to their cells. The barred compartments were built into the arena wall so that prisoners could see what was expected of them during the dread games. The cells were little better than the escort, with spikes and razored shafts projecting inwards, limiting the movement of the prisoners and frustrating attempts to batter down the barred doors or rush their gaolers.

Krom wasn’t surprised that the dark eldar took such measures. Compared to even the brawniest of the dark eldar beastmasters, clutching their whips and the chains of their chimeric creatures, the Space Wolves were hulking demigods. They drowned the wretched aliens in their shadows.

Returned to the cells with the remaining members of the Drakeslayers, Krom arrived to grim acknowledgments of ‘My lord’. The Space Wolves had seen

what Krom had been forced to suffer out on the sands and had gone wild in their cells. Now they met their captain with grave, whisker-lined faces in the gloom and eyes that burned like candles in the night.

One face that was not there was that of Jormund Thunderclaw. Krom had lost so many of his brothers that his friend's face was now but a ghostly memory, fading further with each new loss. Krom bit back his bitterness. He had to look out for the brothers that still lived.

Hengist Ironaxe's features looked greyer and more drawn than usual, while Rorven couldn't help a mumbled exclamation of 'By the Allfather' at the extent of Krom's injuries. Haegr Fangthane came to the bars, despite his own wounds, and Bronn Grindalson even reached out to touch the Wolf Lord's ruined plate in reassurance. The Space Wolf was forced back by the thrust of a dark eldar spear. Ulf Horghast, Lars Thorgil and Ingrim Thunderfell growled, spat and kicked at the bars of their cell, drawing the attentions of the xenos to them instead.

'You would do well not to antagonise them, brothers,' the Interrogator-Chaplain told them as he helped Krom along. Grundar Greymane gave him the winter bleakness of his eyes.

'By the Allfather,' Greymane spat. 'My Wolves would savage them all.'

Krom tottered, the poison still potent in his blood and his plate dragging him down, but the Interrogator-Chaplain caught him.

'I believe you,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said. 'But not today, they won't.'

Krom did not get his wish. The dark eldar guards forced the Interrogator-Chaplain to help the Wolf Lord into a cell with his own – Grundar Greymane, who continued to spit blood, and an unusually reserved Beoric Winterfang. The Interrogator-Chaplain and Brother Othniel were placed in the next cage.

Sitting in the cell, with the points of spikes scraping against his plate and cage-spanning blades beneath his chin, Krom had some time to consider whether he had been right to submit to incarceration. Beoric was no Iron Priest, but with time to kill, the leader of Krom's Wolf Guard went to work doing what he could with his lord's plate and damaged power pack. After he had managed to restore partial power, the suit was still a drag on Krom's bestial reflexes but allowed him some protection and manoeuvrability. Meanwhile, Grundar did his best to tend the Fierce-eye's terrible injuries.

Feeling well enough to move around the tiny cage, the Wolf Lord kicked away a bowl of slop the gaolers had provided to ensure the prisoners kept up their strength for the spectacle of the show. Krom suspected all the food and water they were given was drugged to keep the dangerous Space Marines sedated until

they were once more required for the arena. He had ordered that all such offerings be ignored. The Drakeslayers did not need such comforts. The spilling of blood was their mead and the righteous butchery of the Emperor's enemies their sustenance.

As the hours passed under the gloom of the imprisoned stars, Krom regained his strength, his coordination and his mind. It had been a battle – every bit as torturous as the one fought on the arena sands – but eventually he felt his engineered body starting to break down the alien poison, though who knew what side effects it still might have.

Krom watched as prisoners from other cell sections were marched out into the arena to fight for their lives against a menagerie of alien beasts and the small army of warrior women that called the coliseum their home. Crowds came at all hours to shriek, hiss and soak up the merciless violence of the arena. The dark eldar came for their fix of death, perverse pleasures to fill the rancid emptiness of their hearts.

When he wasn't watching the gladiatrix and their monsters, studying their murderous craft, Krom turned his attentions to the cages in which he and his men had been housed. He found Beoric Winterfang, the leader of his Wolf Guard, staring at him. His eyes were glazed with regret, and he quivered with an animal fury bubbling below the surface. Krom knew what was coming.

'I failed you,' the sergeant said finally.

'You fail yourself, sergeant,' Krom told him, 'if you entertain such fantasies – for I know it would be a fantasy indeed, if Beoric Winterfang failed anyone.'

'My lord,' Beoric said. 'It is a failing to not be at your side when you need me.'

'Then I was wrong,' Krom told him with a grim smile. 'You're always failing me. Why, only three days' past, my mug of mead was just beyond my reach. The day before that I noticed a mark that needed polishing on my plate.' Krom looked Beoric in the eye and tried to draw a similar smile from his sergeant.

'Only yesterday,' Krom went on, 'I needed to answer nature's call. I looked around. Where were you, sergeant? Where were you?'

Beoric managed a weak curl of the lips, but his eyes still spoke for the guilt he felt at not fighting by his Wolf Lord's side in the arena.

'You jest, my lord,' the sergeant said, 'but your life was left in the hands of untrustworthy Angels.' Beoric gave the Interrogator-Chaplain in the next cage the daggers of his eyes. The Dark Angel nodded slowly at the Wolf Guard sergeant, as though he were acknowledging some thanks or compliment. As Beoric went to get to his feet, Krom grabbed his arm and pulled him back down.

‘My life was in the most capable hands of all,’ Krom assured him. ‘My own.’

‘It’s my opinion, my lord,’ Beoric said.

‘And I respect that, but opinions are like chin-whiskers. We all have them,’ Krom said. He looked over at the Dark Angels. ‘Present company excepted. If you want to worry about something, sergeant, worry about getting out of here.’

Krom stared at the Dark Angel in his dark plate, hood and filthy robes, who hadn’t said a word since they had been returned to their cells.

‘So, Angel,’ Krom called across the spiked death trap of the cell. ‘You have been making plans, I assume.’

‘It’s what they do,’ Beoric said. ‘Scheme, plot and conspire.’

The Interrogator-Chaplain said nothing. He was lost in something like prayer.

‘Plans for our liberty,’ Krom reminded him.

‘Have faith, Fenrisian,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain told him.

‘I’m not interested in faith,’ Krom spat back, the hackles on the back of his neck rising. ‘Faith can’t cut through bars, Interrogator-Chaplain. Faith cannot be wielded like a weapon in the hand or vanquish enemies like a bolt round to the head.’

‘I cannot argue with that logic,’ the Dark Angel said. Krom waited for more from the Interrogator-Chaplain but he returned to his solemn silence.

‘I don’t know why I’m even talking to you,’ the Wolf Lord growled. ‘I should never have listened to you in the first place. We face hundreds of warriors in the arena, thousands in this damned amphitheatre and millions in the monstrous city beyond. Your counsel has simply added a locked cage to those obstacles.’

‘You forget the flames...’

‘A man can walk through flames, Interrogator-Chaplain,’ Krom said. ‘Bars, less so.’

‘You complain like a dog,’ the Dark Angel said.

‘That might be less of an insult than you imagine, Angel,’ Krom said. He growled to himself. ‘It’s only a matter of time.’

‘You’re not wrong,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain agreed. ‘An opportunity will present itself. It is in the nature of opportunities to do so.’

‘A plague take your opportunities,’ the Wolf Lord said. ‘The Sons of Russ come for us. They are on their way.’

Krom thought he heard something familiar on the foetid coliseum air. He turned his head and put an ear between the cold metal of the bars. The Wolf Lord tried to filter one sound from another. The suffering of prisoners in the surrounding cages. The death and spectacle of the arena. The raucous appreciation of the

audience as the blood sports played out before them. The sound of the Dark City beyond the coliseum terraces – murderous perversion and the sating of alien appetites. Then he heard it. The rumble of rocket engines, turbofans and afterburners. The distant and distinctive roar of Adeptus Astartes gunships on an attack run.

Staring up through the bars, over the wicked terraces of the coliseum and through the serrated towers of the Dark City beyond, the Wolf Lord thought he spotted the silhouette of Thunderhawks against the gloom of the Commorrite suns. As they blasted towards the city outskirts at attack speed, the grey of their hull plating became clear.

The Space Wolf stood transfixed as his brethren dropped from the sky. The Wolves were coming. The Emperor's executioners, falling like the blade of an axe on the Dark City. Coming for Krom and his Drakeslayers.

The Space Wolf Thunderhawks announced their arrival with the flash of dorsal-mounted battle cannons. Krom visualised the dark eldar of the labyrinthine shardscape watching from their leaning towers, stripping bodies in the alleyways of the Sprawls and picking through the ruins of the Commorrite outskirts. They would look up at their stolen suns, and see the streaming silhouettes of the gunships, arriving to deliver the Emperor's justice to this benighted place. There would be panic. Havoc would reign supreme. The sadistic would come to know no mercy. Slavers would know the wrath of the enslaved. The raiders would become the raided...

Krom found himself gripping the bars of his cage. His teeth were bared and he was licking his lips. He shook his head to clear it and looked again up at the sky. The Space Wolves were not coming to rescue them. Such fantasies were probably the result of some remnant of the poison in his veins or just the potent desire for vengeance. Instead of Thunderhawks, Krom realised that he had been staring at a constellation of shadowy blots drifting across the webway sky.

'Nobody is coming for us,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said. He seemed to read Krom's mind. 'Not the brothers of the First. Not the Wolves of Fenris. The webway is an alien environment: another dimensional reality, even. We cannot cross such a realm in our mighty warships. We've tried. Innumerable vessels, hopelessly lost or spat back out upon the galactic plane. Some say that forgotten gods and primarchs still roam the labyrinthine expanse of its passageways. It is a place of elegance and alien intuition that we couldn't hope to understand, let alone navigate.'

'It sounds like you have given up, Angel,' Krom snarled. 'And that is

something a Wolf can never do.'

'I'm glad to hear it, brother,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said. 'Do you think you are the only Adeptus Astartes with unfinished business in the galaxy? I firmly believe that we can escape our present incarceration, this city and perhaps even this alien realm. It is simply a matter of waiting for the inevitable. Before the suns set on this benighted place I am sure we can find a way to help each other out of these less than ideal circumstances.'

Krom had a pithy response prepared, but he stopped himself. He was too proud to truly acknowledge what he owed the stranger, but also too proud to fail.

'Shall we work together, then?' Krom said.

'We are all of the Emperor's blood,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said.

'So are many who have betrayed such a covenant,' Krom said. The Wolf Lord had killed enough renegades and traitors in legionary plate to know.

Once again the Interrogator-Chaplain seemed lost in thought.

'Of course, you're right,' he said, his words heavy and knowing. 'A Wolf's wisdom indeed.'

'What about him?' Krom said. 'Is he of the Emperor's blood?'

The Interrogator-Chaplain looked across at the cage containing the World Eater. The monster sat silent in his spiked, blood-red armour. His face was a ghoulish mess, a gore-stained skull with a single remaining eyeball staring right through the Interrogator-Chaplain, through Krom, and his own agonies.

'He is not for this world,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said. 'By all that is right and true, we should finish off what's left of him, but I fear we won't get that far. He won't give us a choice.'

Krom nodded his agreement. The pair went silent for a moment, only the clash of blades and the deviant roar of the crowd filling the space.

'And just so you know,' Krom corrected the Interrogator-Chaplain, 'I don't think that those suns ever go down.'

A roar of appreciation from a new crowd of dark eldar sadists drew Krom's attention. The coliseum was spilling over with pale-faced spectators, their features sharp and cruel. Extra leather-bound guards had been rushed out onto the arena wall with razorflails, impalers and bidents. As the screeching applause continued, Krom came to understand that some new gladiatrix, torture machine or monster had taken to the arena.

As the Space Wolves and Dark Angels came to the bars, it became clear, at least, who some of the combatants would be. With an agonising clunk, the barred entrance to their cages rose.

‘Eyes open, Drakeslayers,’ Krom said. ‘Round two.’ As spiked panels began to ratchet through the cells, forcing the Space Marines back out onto the sand, Krom felt Beoric Winterfang at his back. The Wolf Lord’s plate felt like sluggish scrap about him.

‘Do you hear that, Fenrisian?’ the Interrogator-Chaplain asked. ‘That’s the sound of opportunity knocking.’

‘Now all we have to do is find the door,’ Krom said.

As the Space Marines ventured out onto the blood-wet sand, Krom remembered the World Eater. Turning, he saw the skull-faced maniac advancing upon Brother Othniel and the Interrogator-Chaplain.

‘Chaplain,’ Krom warned.

The Dark Angel turned and Othniel put himself between the Chaos Space Marine and his chaplain.

‘Traitor,’ the Wolf Lord called, his voice burred like an unfinished metal edge. ‘After, yes? Supposing any of us survive this – whatever it is.’

‘Whatever it is, this barbarian will survive it,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain warned. ‘Best we kill him now, while we have the numbers.’

‘Won’t we need him if we start losing those numbers?’ Krom asked.

The Interrogator-Chaplain and the World Eater stared at each other with burning eyes.

‘The agony of choice,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain said.

An alien roar of nerve-shredding intensity and bombast took the Space Marines’ attentions off the World Eater. Krom felt the sand quake beneath his boots. Something big was crossing the arena. As the prisoners emerged they saw the monster they were expected to fight.

It was a xenos horror, the height and bulk of a three-storey bunker. Despite its size, it moved with predacious assurance on its colossal hooves. A chitinous abomination, the beast was all armoured shell, fang-filled maw and bio-weaponry: a powerful tail, terminating in a hammer-head thagomizer; shoulder-sprouting battering rams; a monstrous crusher-claw and a huge, wrecking-ball symbiont that draped from its other appendage on a fibrous tendril-cord of twisted tendon and sinew.

‘Sergeant?’ Krom said.

Beoric Winterfang hesitated, then understood what the Wolf Lord was asking. ‘It’s a tyrannid,’ Beoric said, identifying the beast for the rest of the Drakeslayers rather than Krom. ‘Carnifex sub-type. Some kind of stone-crusher or siege creature.’

‘Weaknesses?’

‘None,’ Beoric answered honestly, ‘as I recall.’

‘Remember Delta-Phrakaasi?’ Krom asked.

‘We had Land Raiders, missile launchers and grenades,’ Grundar Greymane said.

‘What I wouldn’t give for some grenades,’ Haegr Fangthane said.

‘We can’t kill this,’ the Dark Angel Interrogator-Chaplain said.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ Krom said. ‘You could talk it to death.’

‘We’re not meant to kill it,’ the Dark Angel said. ‘It’s meant to kill us, one by one, for entertainment.’

‘No torture, no suffering?’ Krom asked.

‘Suffering was earlier,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain said. ‘Something to stimulate the appetite. This is the main course – and these deviants can’t get enough of a sudden and bloody death.’

As the Space Marines spread out on the black sand, brawny beastmasters wrangled the monstrosity on huge chains connected to hooks embedded in the creature’s armour plating. The thing was clearly an arena veteran. One of its shoulder battering rams was smashed at the top and had a metal spike hammered into the stump as an extra weapon. The creature had lost an eye and wore a leather hood over the punctured orb like a bird of prey.

Sections of chitinous shell that had been ripped away had been staked back into the creature’s flesh and bound with coils of razorwire.

‘What if we tried to topple it?’ Ingrim Thunderfell said. ‘I’ve seen these things go down before.’

‘Right,’ Grundar Greymane said, ‘but then what? We can hardly punch it to death.’

‘We could go for the other eye,’ Ulf Horghast offered.

‘It’s a tyranid,’ Winterfang reminded him. ‘It could be trailing innards from its headless body and it would still be lethal.’

‘Interrogator-Chaplain?’ Krom asked.

‘This beast could be a solution, rather than a problem,’ the Dark Angel said.

‘Agreed,’ Krom said. ‘We’ve got to stop playing this game for the xenos and start playing it for ourselves. That thing is a biological siege engine, but it’s cut off from its species. It will be confused and easy to draw. Let’s spread out and direct its talents – perhaps get it to take out one or two of these walls and provide us with an escape route.’

As the beastmasters released their chains, the tyranid monstrosity began

stomping towards its prey. The dark eldar audience hissed their excitement – the unstoppable tyrannid construct was clearly an arena favourite.

‘Understood?’ Krom asked.

‘Yes, my lord,’ the Drakeslayers returned.

‘For the Allfather,’ Krom said.

‘For Russ,’ his Space Wolves roared, before spreading out across the arena.

Moving towards the arena walls, with the dark eldar guards in all their svelte repugnance watching over him, Krom waited for the carnifex that was thundering across the arena towards him.

‘Interrogator-Chaplain,’ Krom called. ‘I know your Chapter likes its secrets, but you can at least tell me your name before we die.’

‘Balthus,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain told him. As they prepared for the alien horror to reach them, the pair saw the World Eater stride out into the middle of the arena. ‘Would you look at that?’

‘Maniac,’ was all Krom had to offer on the spectacle.

As the carnifex charged across the sands, shaking the walls of the arena, Krom watched the World Eater walk out before it. He was curious what the Blood God’s champion was going to do. Within horrible seconds, the Wolf Lord found out. As the monstrous tyrannid screeched its way across the killing ground it stamped down on the World Eater with the splayed hoof of a chitinous leg. With the full weight of the monster hammering down on the Chaos Space Marine, plate was crushed, bones ground to meal and what was left of the World Eater’s hate-curdled flesh splattered into a sand-soaking mess on the arena floor. If ever the coliseum had told a cautionary tale it was now. Krom was glad he hadn’t authorised a more direct attack.

‘Remember,’ he called across to his Drakeslayers as they spread out along the wall. ‘Do not engage. Be a moving target. Direct the beast’s attentions at the wall.’

As the tyrannid approached it skidded in the sand. Krom could see that the beast was reluctant to get any closer to the perimeter wall, no doubt having been doused in flame by the projectors one too many times.

‘Run!’ Krom ordered, and run the Wolves did. They needed to disorientate the monster enough for its instincts to overcome its conditioned wariness of the wall. Stomping through the sand with powered steps, the Drakeslayers spread their number and tried to stay ahead of the alien abomination. Its grotesque head, filled to the brim with daggered teeth, reached out from a clinkered nest of chitinous plating. Bringing up its hammerhead tail

and angling its shoulder rams parallel with the ground, the thing stretched its neck and opened its mouth. Two colossal tusks erupted from its bottom jaw, waiting to guide prey in.

As the young Kjarli Tyrvald set the pace, drawing the creature on, Hengist Ironaxe ran the gauntlet of an about face. Turning and accelerating back along the wall the way he came, he caught its attention. Scrambling heavily through the sand, the beast reached out with its crusher-claw. Pushing himself off the wall, to the spiteful abuse of spectators and arena guards alike, the Space Wolf ran between the monster's legs. As the heavy crusher-claw struck the wall where Hengist had been, spidery cracks spread through the wall section. A guard lifted the telescopic shaft of her bident but the incensed organism wasn't interested in her.

Pivoting on its hooves, the beast roared its strange, tyrannid ire before setting off after Grundar Greymane. As Grundar criss-crossed paths with Ingrim Thunderfell, the horrific beast stomped its way along the wall. As Thunderfell held its attention, the tyrannid's shoulder-column spike scouring a trench through the stone, Brother Hrothgar attempted to take up the chase. Uninterested in new prey, the carnifex charged down on Thunderfell, tearing away wall-mounted spools of razorwire and arena torture racks.

'Ingrim,' Krom roared. 'Don't look behind. Just run!'

It didn't help, however. The tyrannid's neck stretched out and the beast swept the Space Wolf up in its plate-mangling jaws. Krom watched another of his Drakeslayers die, disappearing into the creature's maw.

Krom heard the cruel laughter of the audience and felt something wet hit the back of his head. Turning, he saw that the dark eldar guard behind him, a thing of extravagant hair, shredded leather and alien nakedness, had spat at him. Wiping the spit from his scalp with his gauntlet he pointed a thunderous finger at the guard. She flashed a needle-toothed smile of derision.

The Wolf Lord felt it before he saw it. The quake of the beast approaching. Hrothgar had tried to lead it away from his doomed brother and the wall, only to have the abominate alien construct run him down. As it reached out with its crusher-claw, other Space Wolves ran in, daring the beast to chase them.

'Here, you mound of galactic spoilage,' Krom roared, waving his arms. 'Here!'

The tyrannid snatched Brother Hrothgar up in its crusher-claw and snapped the huge appendage shut. What came out between the mashing force of the claws was beyond description.

A predator spoiled for choice amongst a bounty of kills, the thing simply

wouldn't stop, thrashing and turning like a creature half its size. Space Wolves, drawn in to save their brother, now found themselves within reach of the beast's monstrous claw, snapping maw and swishing tail. Knocking an escaping Lars Thorgil into the sand with a pounding ram of its shoulder column, the tyranid pinned the Space Wolf to the ground with a hoof. As Thorgil roared, the carnifex leaned in with its horrific jaws and bit the Space Marine in two.

The tyranid's tail swept around as the creature re-orientated itself. Beoric Winterfang was there. As promised, he hadn't left his captain's side. As the hammerhead end of the tail came around, the sergeant ran at Krom. Knocking the Wolf Lord out of the thagomizer's path, Beoric was struck with the full force of the creature's tail. Hammered across the sands like a rag doll, he landed some distance away, a tumble terminating in a pile of shattered plate. As Krom got back to his feet, Grundar Greymane and Hengist Ironaxe made it over to the sergeant. After a brief inspection, Grundar nodded an indication that the Space Wolf was alive. Signalling with two armoured thumbs to the sky and then two pointing fingers, Krom gave them the order to get the sergeant away from the tyranid and the death that surrounded it.

'Fenrisian,' Interrogator-Chaplain Balthus called. 'The wall.'

Krom nodded. The coliseum boomed with the malicious jubilation of alien spectators. The carnifex screeched its disorientated desire to end them all. Like all tyranid spawn, it had been constructed to kill until nothing about it was left living. Krom had no doubt that the monstrosity would act upon such instincts, given the chance.

Picking up Hrothgar's helm, a gore-filled receptacle that had rolled across the sand, Krom emptied the contents onto the arena floor before throwing the helmet at the beast. Bouncing off its chitinous skull and leather hood, the helmet got the tyranid's attention. Everything so far had run away from the stomping, snapping nightmare. It looked at Krom with the predatory blankness of its remaining eye. Kicking at the black sand, Krom sent a cloud of dust spiralling up about him. It was enough. The huge creature leant into an acceleration. As its maw crunched on what was left of Lars Thorgil, it pounded the arena floor with death-hungry steps.

As Krom ran towards the wall, his plate grinding and pack sparking with the effort, he saw the guard who had spat at him looking down the length of her spear at him. The Wolf Lord felt the arena shake with the steps of the monster behind him. He counted the closing quakes beneath his own footfalls. Then there it was: the delay he had been waiting for.

Skidding down through the blood and dust, Krom put his rattling plate down on the ground. Sand turned to glass where the flame projectors had roasted the arena perimeter, taking Krom onwards. As he crunched to a stop, the soles of his boots hit the wall. There was a whoosh. The monstrosity had stopped to swing the wrecking-ball symbiont attached to its appendage. The weapon swung on a thick tendril of tendons, constricting to destructive tautness. Instead of obliterating the Wolf Lord, the wrecking-ball struck the wall, dashing into the stone.

Rock dust billowed out across the sand. Chunks of stone fell about Krom, further denting his plate. Hooking his thumbs under a large piece of rock, the Wolf Lord heaved, his powered arms faltering.

Through the maelstrom, Krom heard coughing. A slender silhouette bled into focus. It was the dark eldar guard. Having fallen from the wall, she was now back on her feet and aiming the twin blades of her impaler at Krom.

‘Fenrisian,’ Krom heard Balthus call a warning through the murk.

Krom released his grip on the boulder.

The dark eldar coughed again before baring her sharpened teeth. She was going to enjoy slipping her spear into the Space Marine’s throat. The tyranid’s tail cut through the rock dust like an aftershock, the work of the wrecking-ball unfinished. It broke the guard, the hammer-head thagomizer smashing her aside and into the wall. Pushing at the boulder, Krom managed to lift it enough to scrape his armoured legs free.

Scrambling up the mound of rubble, the Wolf Lord climbed through the improvised exit he had created. Beyond, he could hear the seething threats of nearby spectators and the clack of boots as guards converged on the breach.

Blinking the dust from his eyes, Krom sniffed the air. He smelled fuel. Some foul chemical accelerant. The Wolf Lord allowed himself to skid back down the scree. He once more heard the crunch of something approaching across the sand. Turning, he picked up a sizeable chunk of stone and held it over his head. The carnifex punched through the rubble, its chitinous battering rams surging up at Krom. It scrambled up at the Space Wolf, crusher-claw and death trap maw snapping. Hurling the boulder down on the tyranid beast, Krom shattered the stone on the thing’s armoured head.

Krom leapt from the rubble as the monster blinked some semblance of sense and murderous instinct back into its skull. Landing, the Space Wolf felt the servos and hydraulics in his suit protesting. As he pushed himself to his feet and ran from the wall back into the arena, the carnifex did the opposite. Scrambling

on up the scree slope and over the demolished wall, the tyranid sensed prey beyond the settling dust. Victim hordes. A captive audience. As Krom ran from the monster, he found Interrogator-Chaplain Balthus and his Drakeslayers closing on the breach.

‘Back!’ he roared. ‘Get back!’

The explosion blasted Krom from his feet and sent him skidding on his chestplate across the arena floor. The Space Marines were knocked back, losing their footing on the sand. Rolling onto his side, Krom watched a fireball reach up towards the sky. As the carnifex had tried to breach the perimeter wall, something implanted in its flesh by the beastmasters had set off the flame projectors. A fail-safe device to prevent the monster escaping. The wrecking-ball had ruptured the tanks of exotic fuel in the decimated section of wall so when the tyranid tried to cross the projectors set off the leaking accelerant.

Getting to his feet, Krom stumbled away from the raging wall section with his Drakeslayers. After a few moments the carnifex re-emerged, a furious inferno of chitinous flesh. It stomped out of the flames, shrieking from within the blaze. In a blind rage of raw suffering, the abomination ran across the arena.

The Wolf Lord expected that such a spectacle – a wall breach, an explosion and a gladiatorial monster aflame – might have grabbed the attention of the audience. He was wrong. Looking across the ghoulish faces of the spectators, he saw that they were looking up. Peering up at the sky also, Krom could see why.

The shadow he had seen earlier – the blot on the miserable heavens upon which he had projected fantasies of Thunderhawks, rescue and city-wide slaughter – was a shadow no more. The Wolf Lord’s instincts had been right. The flying craft had been on a trajectory for the coliseum. They weren’t bringing salvation from beyond the webway, however, but enemies from within.

Krom watched as an attack flotilla of dark eldar grav-craft, skiffs and barges emerged from their optical shielding and circled above the coliseum like a stirred-up swarm of insects. All aethyrsails, razorvanes and black bulwark plating, the raiding vessels crawled with Commorrite warriors. Like the coliseum guards and gladiatrix, they were all female savages, dripping with blades and black-hearted cruelty. The differences were subtle but they were there. Something in the way the killers wore their leathers, their hair and malicious intent. Unlike the coliseum cult, whose banner bore a serrated shadow, the pendants trailing from the raiders displayed a black talon, the symbol of a rival cult.

While the longer and more extravagant craft carried out their impossible

manoeuvres with a sickly hiss, smaller gunships and transports screamed by, overladen with lithe murderers. Trophy racks braced terrified prisoners across the prows of the vessels and scaling nets allowed mobs of dark eldar to climb down into the coliseum crowds, while others dropped like poison from the skies – leaping from swooping craft with dire grace to land in the arena.

Krom watched the deviant warriors of the Serrated Shadow and Black Talon clash. They shredded one another with tapered pistols, impaled foes on bidents, slashed with wicked knives and cut through crowds with razored flails. The audience was not spared the horror and within moments the entire coliseum was a free-for-all, with spectators drawing blades and pistols of their own.

‘I think the show is over,’ Krom said of the madness.

‘Or just beginning,’ Balthus added.

The Interrogator-Chaplain narrowed his eyes. The prisoner cages were firing. With cage doors rising and advancing spikes forcing prisoners from their captivity, the arena was suddenly awash with gladiatorial prospects, all released at the same time, looking warily at each other and the riotous slaughter taking place on the terraces above. The sand suddenly rippled up about the Space Marines.

‘Look out!’ Krom called.

A length of razor wire running across the arena, carefully hidden, had been cranked to flesh-slicing tautness. One moment Brother Ragnek was there, the white of his battle-gritted teeth showing through his beard. The next, the Space Wolf crashed to the arena floor in two pieces.

Krom tasted blood in the back of his throat mixed with the bitterness of adrenaline. He waited for another wire to sever him but it didn’t happen. All across the sands, a razor sharp web of death sang to a metallic strain, making the arena more dangerous than ever. The newly liberated prisoners backed towards the arena wall but the perimeter only offered the illusion of safety. Movement sensors situated below the surface of the sand set off shooting spikes, streams of mutagenic gas and gouts of projected flame. As more razor wires criss-crossing the sand twanged to tautness, heads were whipped off, limbs lost and bodies cut in half by a network of sprung cables. Krom saw blundering victims torched, speared and transformed into formless abominations of bubbling flesh by the wall defences.

Krom had seen such traps deployed before. He had heard the audience roar its bloodthirsty delight at their murderous activation. He had not seen all of the traps deployed at once, however. It did not play to suspense or the theatrical

nature of the coliseum.

‘A malfunction?’ Balthus asked. The place had turned into a full-scale murderous riot, with dark eldar guards and raiders cutting each other down with barrel and blade.

‘Or prisoner stock being purged,’ Krom said grimly. ‘Perhaps these wretched xenos want to deny us to their back-stabbing cousins. Are we going to wait to find out?’

Balthus and the Wolf Lord looked back at the raging inferno that was the wall breach.

‘The flames?’ the Interrogator-Chaplain said, shrugging. ‘You said that we could walk through them.’

‘I didn’t actually think that we would be doing it,’ Krom growled. He led the prisoners through the carnage of the arena and the corpses, both human and alien, that littered the blood-soaked ground. Away from the clean-sliced corpse of Ragnek Halfhand and visions of gladiatorial gore. Towards the raging swirl of heat and flame through which their escape route lay.

An armoured skiff swept in between the Space Wolves and the breached wall. Several of the grav-craft above, circling like vultures, had seen the liberated prisoners flood the arena death trap. Driven by a desire to secure such stock or simply to enjoy the arena’s gladiatorial bounty, female raiders dropped from their skyborne chariots in their leathers, whipping blades and flails about them.

The warrior women who had athletically landed before the Space Marines smiled with malicious beauty. Their leader, a vision of intoxicating repugnance, wagged a finger back and forth in mock remonstrance, even her long nails filed to serrated shivs.

The warrior women worked their murderous way across the sands. A whirlwind of envenomed blades and black leather armour that barely covered the lithe obscenity of their xenos forms, they athletically negotiated the death trap of the coliseum. They leaped and rolled beneath triggered razor wire. They danced through the fired spikes with a cruel grace while executing freed prisoners with unparalleled skill and merciless bladework. Each artistic death resulted in a fountain of orchestrated gore as the dread beauties closed on the Space Marines.

‘Brothers,’ Krom seethed. ‘Break them.’ He and his Space Marines would be playthings for the xenos no more.

The new dark eldar stepped elegantly through the cadavers and body parts left behind. Krom knew that they were playing with the unarmed Space Marines. He swore by the Allfather, through sharpened teeth, that he would be ready – ready

to disappoint her, her kindred and the howling hordes who had come to watch him and his men die. The Space Wolves would survive the alien madness of this nightmare realm and make it their solemn pledge to end all pirates, raiders and deviant dark eldar that crossed their path.

With a creak of their gauntlets, the closest of his kindred rushed the leading warrior woman. They intended to bury the murderess and her blade maidens in plate and Fenrisian muscle. The dark eldar of the Black Talon were too fast, however, and anticipated their clumsy attack. Invited it. Revelled in it. Moments later, heads had left shoulders, hearts had been skewered and blades bleeding venom had turned proud Space Wolves into convulsing corpses still foaming at the mouth.

As blades sang through plate and gauntlets smashed, more warrior women dropped to the ground. Young Kjarli Tyrvald was turned into a streaming blur of blood and brains by the half-naked dark eldar heralds who flanked their mistress with swirling razorflails. While the lead murderess leapt cables and elegantly butchered fleeing prisoners with a double-bladed glaive, her heralds blessed her path with spilled blood. Advancing with razorflails swinging about them in slaughterous arcs, the warrior women were like a pair of bloody hurricanes. Appalling in their beauty and calm like the eye of the storm, they controlled the speed and reach of their weaponry, swinging the blades of the flail expertly about their bodies.

Krom stumbled back before the deadly arc of one weapon, watching for the change of its air-shredding passage. The dark eldar whipped the razorflail about her, tearing it through the sand at Krom's feet before leaning into an arc that sent the weapon searing above the Space Wolf's ducked head. He pulled back – just in time for the end of the other flail to hiss off the surface of his chestplate. It was a dance of death and Krom had been invited to be part of the entertainment. He knew there was little he could do to combat such a deadly weapon. It couldn't be deflected; it could only be dodged for so long. He needed to turn the razorflail against its wielder.

The Wolf Lord readied himself. Once again he would have to draw the enemy in.

He allowed the weapon its terrible arc and embraced its flesh-tearing impact. The weapon sliced into his side, cutting through his plate and ripping into muscle and carapace. Krom roared as the flail bit into him. Snatching it like a rope with both gauntlets, the Space Wolf hauled on the length of the weapon with all his feral might. The herald lurched forward, off-balance. Refusing to let

go of her gore-dribbling weapon, the dark eldar was torn towards Krom and he was ready for her. Opening his right gauntlet like an outstretched claw, he brought it down on the warrior's head. Tearing his armoured fingers through the bone of her slender skull, Krom brained the xenos, smashing her down into the sand.

The Wolf Lord stood over the corpse of the dark eldar and pulled the length of the razored flail from his side. Blood ran down his grey plate from the clean slice. A shriek brought Krom back to the moment. The second herald, who had been dicing fleeing prisoners with her own razorflail, had seen her sister felled. Running at Krom with her flail tossed about her like a lasso, she issued a mind-splitting war cry.

Stomping through the black sand, Krom accelerated to meet her. As the herald's razorflail came around in a devastating arc, he made a clumsy swing of the same weapon in his hands. Entwining and tangling, both flails were quickly abandoned. Krom had not intended anything else but was surprised at how ready the dark eldar was to release her main weapon. By the time the knotted flails thudded to the ground, the warrior had already drawn a pair of thin, willowy blades. She ran down on the Space Wolf, her weapons like extensions of her lithe body.

Krom intended to smash straight through the warrior with his engineered strength and the bulk of his armour. The dark eldar leapt, however, jabbing at the Space Wolf like a scorpion. He felt the blade squeal between his plates and stab through slabs of muscle. Hitting the ground, the herald rolled before slashing the monomolecular edge of her blades across Krom's pack and pauldron.

The Space Wolf reached out for her with grasping fingers but the dark eldar moved with alien reflexes and a dreadful grace. She was incredibly fast, her painted face a vision of hateful concentration. She weaved and ducked. She leapt and cartwheeled. With each feint and manoeuvre the tip of her blades came in, slipping through Krom's defences to skewer his flesh.

The Wolf Lord's grey plate became a bloody, punctured mess. Krom waited, gritting his sharp teeth through the pain. As one of the dark eldar's blades squealed between two pieces of plate, he tensed, closing the seal about the sword like a clamp. Clinging to the blade for just a moment too long, the herald's hand was still clutching the hilt when Krom grabbed it.

Crushing the delicate bones against the hilt of the weapon with his gauntlet, Krom saw the savage concentration on the face of the xenos shatter. As she brought her second blade up to slash his face, Krom tore her arm around. He felt

the crunch of the herald's shoulder. This time the dark eldar let out an involuntary screech. With her back to him, the dark eldar tried an awkward stab at the Wolf Lord's throat. Leaning back away from the gore-stained point, he tugged the warrior back towards him with her broken arm. Lifting his leg he kicked out at the herald. Servos fired and fibre bundles contracted, sending a powered kick and the sole of an armoured boot into the warrior woman's back.

Krom heard the back break. Her screams were joined by those of the xenos audience. Her blade fell from her hand and her slender body fell after. Paralysed, the dark eldar looked up at the Space Wolf from the floor. She was an untidy heap of broken bones and burning hatred but Krom would not leave her unfinished. Towering over her he pulled her blade from where it was still trapped in his plate. The Wolf Lord flung it down at his opponent, sending it thudding into her chest. Krom watched the blade and the dark eldar's armoured bosom rise and fall one last time before all was still.

The lead dark eldar gladiatrix moved with barefoot grace through the carnage of the arena. Corpses, both human and alien, littered the blood-soaked ground. She turned the double-bladed glaive about in her hands like a dancing girl with a baton as she stepped over the butchered corpse of Haegr Fangthane.

Like a predator scenting prey, she started gaining speed. Holding the shaft of her glaive streamlined along the length of her body, she moved lightly through the carnage. As she ran on she casually twirled the weapon, cleaving a deranged prisoner that came at her in two from the jaw to the hip. She skull-stabbed a fleeing Tarellian and smashed to pieces some captured cybernetic abomination.

Krom tore the short, cruel blades from the bodies of her svelte handmaidens. They were light and alien to his grip. His furious steps took him towards the murderess. With a roar he struck out for her, the short blades clutched like daggers in his gauntlets. The stabbing lunge had every right to rip the dark eldar gladiatrix apart and spill her alien innards on the sand, to turn the perfection of her abominate form into a ruined carcass. It was not to be, however.

The gladiatrix was all silky, unnatural speed and Krom's opponent simply wasn't there as his vicious attack was launched. Somersaulting the Space Wolf, the dark eldar landed behind him. As the Wolf Lord turned, she brought one of the blade-heads of the glaive around and smashed a blade from his hand. Spinning, the other blade came around to slice down through the ceramite of Krom's ruined pauldron. He felt the weapon bite into the flesh of his shoulder and the burn of some caustic coating bleed from the metal.

Krom would not be put off. Instead of withdrawing, the Space Wolf moved in

closer. With his remaining blade clutched against his chest, ready to thrust forth and gut the gladiatrix, he reached out with his free hand. A leather strap, a chain or a lank limb, anything to get an anchor on the alien warrioress. Flipping back, she escaped the clawing grapple of his gauntlet, the shaft of the glaive turning and twirling. Sparks flew from the back of the armoured hand as his gauntlet was smacked away. The flat of the second blade batted Krom's remaining weapon free from his grip.

Before he could react – his movements a slow-motion nightmare – the gladiatrix had jabbed with her glaive, the blade flashing forth in place of her retreat. Gouging a hole in the Space Wolf's grey plate at his thigh, the shaft came at him again and again. Each thrust was a different angle, the glaive darting forth through Krom's grasping defences and retracting before he could lay his fingertips on the weapon. A flashing stab through the cabling of the Wolf Lord's midriff. One to the muscle of the right arm. A deeper gouge to the chest. The spinning blades of the glaive glinting in the dull, darklight of the captured suns, ready to take Krom's head. The Wolf Lord imagined the fountain of gore that would follow. The murderous ecstasy of the dark eldar about them.

Krom looked up into his killer's eyes. They sparkled with hatred and glee. Her taut musculature rippled beneath the pallor of her skin.

As the glaive came around, Krom ducked his head. As he did so, one of his red plaits bounced upwards, only to be sliced free by the blistering passage of the glaive blade above him. He bellowed as he pushed himself up from the sand. It was an ugly lunge. His hands came up, his fingers grasping for the dark eldar's slender neck.

Momentary disappointment crossed the gladiatrix's face. She pulled the glaive back and spun it overhead, intending to cleave the blade straight down through the Space Wolf. The shaft of the weapon hit Krom's outstretched gauntlets. Locking his fingers about its length like a vice, the Wolf Lord held her there. The gladiatrix's body contorted about the glaive, every muscle of her sickly slender form contracted to bring the weapon down. Krom's arms burned from the wicked stab wounds the dark eldar had visited upon him. His lips retracted about his sharp teeth and a low growl issued forth from his chest. He would deny the gladiatrix her death fetish.

Krom heard footsteps approaching across the sand. His gaze was locked with his enemy. He dared not look away. A moment's distraction could end him. He entertained the possibility of more warrior women, padding forth in bare feet to stab and gut him as their murderess held him in position. The sand-crunching

steps were heavier than the coliseum killers, however. An angel of death approached.

Krom watched as the gladiatrix's headdress was knocked from her head. Her face was suddenly covered by filthy, dun white material, pulled so tight that the Space Wolf could see the sharpness of her alien features through it. It was the Interrogator-Chaplain – come to end the xenos. A punishment suitable for the crime of the alien's mere existence.

With the hem pulled across her throat, Krom saw the dark eldar's mouth open in a silent scream, her sharp teeth piercing the material. As the chaplain hauled back on the material cutting across the gladiatrix's throat and covering the abominate beauty of her face, Krom realised that he was strangling the alien with his own robes. The dark eldar released her glaive, which remained in the Wolf Lord's vice-like grip, and tore feverishly at the material with her stiletto fingernails. There was little she could do, however. The garrotting robes were held by one of the Emperor's Angels. The power of his engineered muscle and determination to do his xenos-eradicating duty were more than a match for the fell skill of an alien murderess.

The gladiatrix began to thrash. For her it was no longer about air. The chaplain was breaking her neck. She smashed the sharpness of her elbow uselessly into her enemy's plate. She clawed at him and his hood-buried helmet. As he lifted her up off her bare feet, ready to end the arena's deadly champion, Krom saw her spasmodic hands reach for a thin blade in her belt. Snatching it up, the warriorress made ready to stab the chaplain. Krom saw the discoloured metal and the concentrated venom that smoked from the blade. It was not like the glaive. The glaive was a show weapon. Something to please the audience with its twirling glint. Something to slow down opponents in preparation for a theatrical kill. The knife, however, looked like it could kill at the slightest nick or slice.

With his hearts thudding in his chest and mind swimming with blood loss and doom, the Wolf Lord willed himself to his feet. He thrust the double-bladed glaive back at the gladiatrix, slamming the blade into her chest. The chaplain released his quarry and stumbled back as the tip of the blade erupted from the dark eldar's back. As he backed his filthy robes went with him, revealing the cold shock on the face of the warriorress. As her knife tumbled from her fingertips, landing blade first in the sand, a trickle of blood made its way down her face from the corner of her thin lips.

The Wolf lord roared and lifted the gladiatrix above his head, holding her there as she died, the impaled warrior woman working her horrible way down the

blade and shaft of the weapon. But there was no audience to applaud his efforts or shriek its displeasure. The arena was a nest of pistol-blasting, blade-stabbing havoc. Black Talon raiders. Dark eldar guards of the Serrated Shadow. The deviant wretches that made up the coliseum audience and Commorrite citizenry. All were at each other's throats, while two dark queens fought through the vicious slaughter.

Krom saw the coliseum queen in the spikes and extravagant leathers wielding an impossible length of barbed blades about her nightmare form. Her opposite was a lean killer, whose flesh was powdered theatrically to whiteness. She wore black boots and gloves that reached up her legs and arms. The gloves whipped with finger blades like razored wings, threatening to dice anything that got too close. Krom dropped his trophy, sickened by the alien butchery.

Above the warrior queens, shrieking skiffs visited blistering destruction upon the coliseum with exotic grav-craft mounted cannons. As bombs dropped from the gunships and blade-vened barges, Krom hauled Interrogator-Chaplain Balthus forward.

'Incoming!' the Wolf Lord barked to what was left of his Drakeslayers, but as the bomb hit the arena floor it did not explode as he expected. Instead, a sizzling storm of dark energy tore up the sand, growing to form a dome of immaterial transference. As reinforcements in leathers, clutching tapering pistols, blistered forth from the globed gateway, Krom could see that it was a portable portal used to rush further troops into the coliseum.

Krom looked to Balthus and Grundar Greymane, who had Sergeant Beoric over one pauldron.

'Do you hear that?' Krom said. 'I hear knocking.'

Grundar looked unsure.

The Interrogator-Chaplain wasn't about to abandon such an opportunity.

'It's death to stay here,' Balthus said to the Space Wolves.

'It could lead anywhere,' Grundar said.

'Anywhere but here,' the Interrogator-Chaplain shot back.

'I don't think we have a choice,' the Wolf Lord said, moving towards the nearest portal. 'Space Wolves: to me!'

As a walk became a run and both Space Wolves and Dark Angels converged on the sizzling dome of unnatural energy, dark eldar came at them. Splinter shot blasted from pistols ripped at their plate and warrior reinforcements put themselves and their blades between the prisoners and their escape route. The Space Marines would not be put off their path, however. They barged their way

through the surprised xenos, and before the dark eldar could stop him, Krom had plunged into the interdimensional static of the portal. It washed over him like rising waters, filling the Wolf Lord with a feeling of pain and dreamy disconnection. For a moment his heartbeats died away and his stomach plunged in all directions at once. What felt like an eternity passed in several agonising seconds, as Krom emerged from the other side of the searing dome.

His plate immediately registered the cold. It bit at his flesh through the mangled suit. Balthus, Brother Othniel and Grundar followed. Everything was quiet but for the evil hiss of the portal. They found themselves in a dark chamber, the architecture of which was twisted and rachidian. As the other Drakeslayers made it through the portal, Grundar laid the unconscious Sergeant Beoric down on the floor and made a brief inspection of his injuries. He was out cold, but apart from cracked plate and similar damage to his ribs and black carapace, Beoric looked like he was going to make it.

The Space Marines spread out to search the chamber.

‘Rorven,’ Krom said to the Space Wolf. ‘Watch the portal – wait, where’s Hengist?’

Looking about the drawn faces in the chamber it was clear that Hengist Ironaxe was not with them.

‘He was last to enter,’ Rorven said. ‘He was behind me and then–’

Krom made to enter the alien portal once more. He would not leave the Grey Hunter behind, not while he still lived.

‘My lord, wait,’ Grundar Greymane said, reaching out for him. At that moment a silhouette blazed through the interdimensional static. The Space Wolves tensed. Hengist Ironaxe appeared, his forehead betraying several deep gashes he had not had moments before. He clutched in his gauntlets something that Krom had never thought to see again. Wyrmlaw. The Wolf Lord’s rune-carved frost axe.

Krom cracked the caked blood about his face with a smile.

‘We thought we had lost you, brother,’ he said.

‘I thought you had lost this,’ Hengist told the Wolf Lord, ‘until I saw some xenos looter leaving the cell block with it.’

Taking the frost axe and admiring the blade, he took the Grey Hunter by the fist and held him there in appreciation. He looked behind Hengist at the unnatural energies of the portal.

‘Rorven, Hengist,’ Krom said. ‘Find a way to destroy that damned thing.’

As the Space Wolves searched, they found nothing but bodies. Dark eldar, with

their throats slit and hearts cut out. A swift and brutal massacre had taken place – presumably by the Black Talon reinforcements that had entered the arena from the portal. Other than the dead, the building into which the Space Wolves had walked was deserted.

‘Fenrisian,’ Interrogator-Chaplain Balthus called. Following the voice, Krom and Grundar found the two Dark Angels out on a spiked watch-balcony. Looking around, Krom saw that they were standing on a crooked tower that stabbed up into the dust-choked void. The darkness of the sky was all nebulous reds and blue, reflected in the sulphuric snow that clung to the tower and caked the rocky twilight below.

‘We’re out of the webway?’ Krom said. It sounded like a question but was more of a statement. Balthus didn’t bother to answer.

‘This must be a dark eldar outpost,’ he told Krom. He pointed out the Serrated Shadow banners that fluttered in the gelid breeze. ‘A supply tower or base of piratical operations.’

The Wolf Lord nodded: ‘We found bodies.’

‘Some private war of xenos cults or clans,’ Balthus said.

‘Vicious dogs, eh,’ Krom said. It was one thing to attack a rival cult and their coliseum, but to launch reinforcements from the very bases from which the coliseum expected their own was especially black-hearted. For all the Space Marines knew, however, it could have been a daily occurrence in the Dark City.

‘See that?’ Balthus asked, pointing up towards a bright collection of five stars, like a rash blotting through the nebulous dust of the system.

‘They look close,’ Krom said.

‘They are,’ Brother Othniel said, the light of the stars reflecting off his blue plate. ‘It’s a quintuplet system – two binaries and a lone companion. Rare – and therefore easy to identify.’

‘So,’ Krom said. ‘Where are we?’

‘At a guess, one of the rocky, outlying moons or dwarf planets of the Skarapaz System,’ Brother Othniel told him.

‘I’ve never heard of it,’ Krom admitted.

‘Which is probably why the xenos pirates are using it for a system outpost,’ Balthus said.

‘It’s not far from Harrow Worlds,’ Othniel said.

‘Damn, that’s close,’ Krom said. ‘My Wolves hold station over Dactyla.’

‘The Angels of the First are not too distant, either,’ Balthus said. ‘Now we are free of the webway, Brother Othniel will use his talents to contact the Librarians

and astropaths of our respective fleets.'

Krom grunted and extended a grey gauntlet.

'My thanks,' he told the Interrogator-Chaplain. 'For this. For the arena.'

'Without cooperation, I am certain that we would all be dead,' Balthus said plainly. 'Emperor knows we have both lost brothers. But I take your hand anyway.' The Interrogator-Chaplain took Krom's gauntlet and the Space Marines shook on their shared deliverance.

'Hopefully,' Krom said, looking up at the dust-streaked heavens, 'we would have made our primarchs proud.'

Balthus nodded slowly.

'When our brothers arrive,' the Dark Angel said, 'I fear our truce will come to an end.'

'Yes,' Krom agreed.

'For what our legions could never see,' the Interrogator-Chaplain said, 'was that the Lion and the Wolf were so similar in their differences. It is a blindness and burden that their sons bear to this day.'

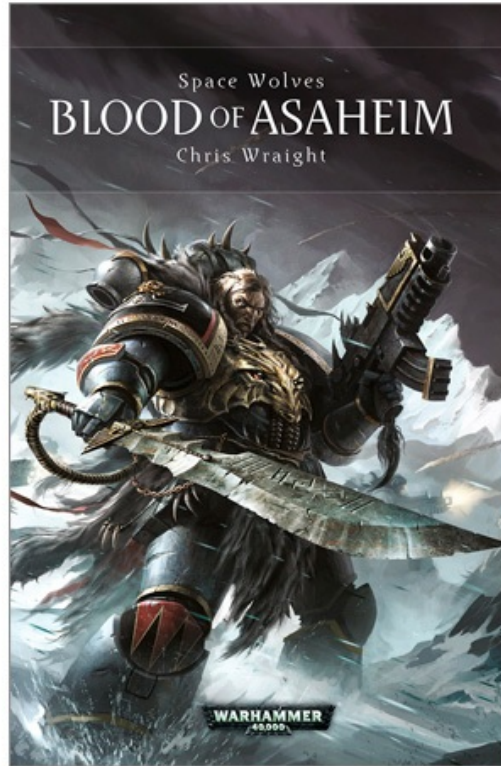
'Aye,' Krom said, peering up into the blackness of the void. 'A darkness indeed.'

'Yes,' Balthus said. 'The darkness of Angels.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Sanders is the author of *'The Serpent Beneath'*, a novella that appeared in the New York Times bestselling Horus Heresy anthology *The Primarchs*. His other Black Library credits include the Warhammer 40,000 titles *Adeptus Mechanicus: Skitarius* and *Tech-Priest*, *Legion of the Damned*, *Atlas Infernal* and *Redemption Corps* and the audio drama *The Path Forsaken*. He has also written the Warhammer Archaon duology, *Everchosen* and *Lord of Chaos* along with many Quick Reads for the Horus Heresy and Warhammer 40,000. He lives in the city of Lincoln, UK.

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