



**WARHAMMER**  
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# FAILURE'S REWARD

CHRIS WRAIGHT

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# FAILURE'S REWARD

*Chris Wraight*

I don't remember things well. Sometimes they come back to me. Sometimes, on the worst days, I don't remember my own name.

I remember it right now: I am Tarolf. I have been Tarolf since I was born and the world's sun shone upon me. I don't know when that was. A long time ago, I reckon. Longer than some men live.

When I think like this, I remember the ice. I loved the ice. I loved the way it cracked and crunched when I was running. I can still smell the hides I wore on my shoulders. I wear hides on my shoulders now, but they smell of ash. My shoulders have changed too: they're twice the size they were. I'd look like a monster now if I ever got back on the ice. I'd scare the Hel out of Two-bones and Ulfár if they saw me again.

Who are they, Two-bones and Ulfár? Not sure anymore. They must be dead. Or perhaps they were just dreams. I do dream about the ice – the way it shone wet when the sun was fierce – so maybe all of it was dreams.

Now I look down at what I'm doing. I know all about that. I'm good at my work. When I'm working, I neither dream nor forget, I just *do*. Pure. Careful. That's what the priest reminds me, and it helps.

I cup the sacred piece of unfinished armour in my palm. It's heavy, like a chunk of rock, even though in my big hands it doesn't look heavy. I can't remember what it's made of. There's a name, one I used to be able to say, but now I can never think what it is. It's not steel, nor rock, nor heartstone. I just call it *the piece*. The others know what I mean.

So this is what I do. I use the anvil. I take the piece and I clamp it down in the vice. I wind the vice tight and sometimes the piece dents the iron edges, but you can't damage the piece itself – it's harder than granite.

Then I smooth wax over the surface, a thick layer, wearing gloves to protect against the chem-burn. I take a long time over this. Once it took two days before it was done perfectly. When it's smooth I like looking at it in the firelight. It's soft like skin. Not my skin. Like a girl's skin. Like I remember girls' skin, anyway.

Then I take the engraving point, and I work. I work carefully. It can take weeks. Sometimes months. I don't ever really know, because I get absorbed, and there's no sun or moon down here – just fire and heat and men coming and going. They never look at me, not unless they want to bring me a new piece or take away a finished one. I don't look at them much. I'm happy in my work.

I use the fine point, sharp as a fishhook. It'll take your skin off if you slip, even mine. I bend over tight, my eyes as close as I can get them, tapping away at the wax. Tap, tap, tap. The sound is comforting. It reminds me I'm working, and I never think of the ice or the sun when I have work.

It can take months before I'm done. If I make a mistake I start again. There can be no mistakes on the finished piece: just one, even the smallest, and the magic will be weak. Once I had to start from the beginning, taking the piece back to the forge-heart and the Priests deep in the mountain. They beat me for that, but I knew I had been right to do it even as the blood ran down my back.

Had I not failed, had I become what I had dreamed of becoming, I would not have wanted to wear armour that had a mistake in it. I think about those who succeeded and I want it to be the best even though I will never wear it like I wished to a long time ago.

So I work the wax and make the sacred images, and I trace the old lines and the curves and the knots. I make wyrms and wolf-heads and drake-wings. I do not make runes. Only the priests make runes, and they bind powerful magic when they do. I would like to watch them do that, and see how those shapes are burned on to the armour, but I know that it is secret for a reason.

When the shapes are made through the wax, I get the acid. I bring it in the cauldron and I spill it onto the piece in the vice. It hisses like snakes as it burns. I have to be careful: too much and the piece will be ruined, too little and places are missed. I have to hurry then, to smear it off before it dissolves into the anvil and makes the iron weak.

I got acid on my hand once. It burned through the glove. That is why I have three fingers on my left hand now, but I am lucky that I carve the shapes with my right and can still serve. I am more careful now than I was before. It was a good lesson.

When the acid is gone, I unwind the vice and chip the wax from the surface of the piece. I polish the surface with steel wool and rinse it with water. I pour oil over it, watching as it runs down the lines I have made. Sometimes I just hold the piece up, turning it in the firelight, seeing what I have done. I know when I do this that it will be the last time I ever see it, and that thought sometimes make my stomach sick.

I take up a cloth and wrap the piece carefully. I walk to the priest and I kneel before him, offering it up, my head bowed. He inspects it. He can inspect it, sometimes, for an hour. Sometimes he sends me back. Most times he takes it. That makes me proud. Now that I have been doing this for a long time, he normally takes it. I have become useful, which on most occasions makes the sickness go away.

The last time I went, I saw them fitting the piece I had made. It was the only time I ever saw it happen. They clustered around a Sky Warrior with flame-red hair and smooth skin. He wore the rest of his armour, and it was new and unmarked. Only the piece I had made remained to be fitted. The Priest took it to him and the tech-slaves drilled it in. They fixed it at his knee, between the bigger plates over his left leg. That made him complete.

I should have left then. I knew I should have left. But I stayed for just a moment. I saw the Sky Warrior standing there, and I thought back to when I did the tests and how close I came. I remembered how they had made my body stronger. I remembered how painful it was when I failed, and how I thought I would die. That made my stomach sick again. I remembered how I had wanted to die, and I wished they had let me.

But then the Sky Warrior looked at me, and he saw that I had made the piece. He nodded, once. Then he turned his face away from me, and they kept drilling. The priest noticed me standing there and I was taken away. They took me back down to the forges. They took me to the anvil and gave me a new piece to work on, one with no marks on it.

So now I look down at what I'm doing. I know all about that. I'm good at my work. When I'm working, I neither dream nor forget, I just *do*. Pure. Careful. That's what the priest reminds me, and it helps.

I still get sick sometimes. Sometimes I don't sleep, or I remember things I don't want to remember.

But I have one dream that I like. I see the Sky Warriors in the sea of stars. I see them fighting. I see them wearing their armour. Some of them bear the marks that I made. Like everything they wear, the marks are perfect. Thousands like me have worked in the forges, cutting and crafting. The Sky Warriors do not know it. They do not have to know it. It is enough that they are served.

When I wake from that dream, I am content. I still remember that I once failed, but I also remember that I can still serve. That is the reward: I still serve.

I do not know how long I have been down here, in the dark and the flames. I do not know how long I will stay here. Maybe forever. Maybe until the end of the world.

I don't remember things well. I am Tarolf, and once I loved the ice.

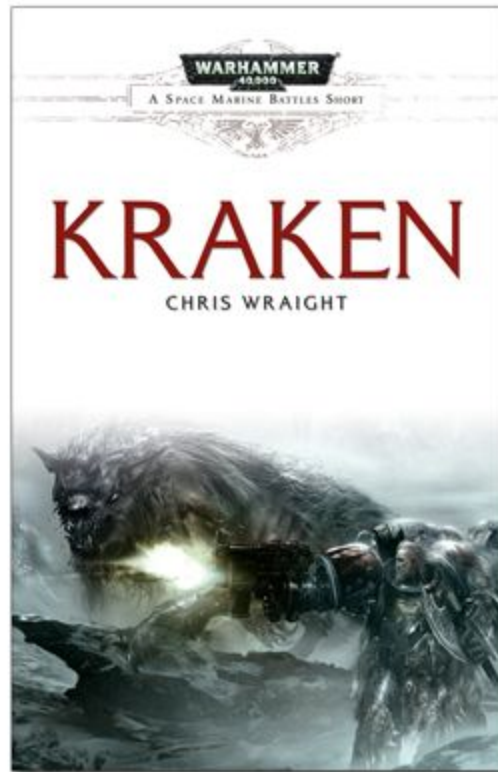
I wish I could fight. That was what I dreamed of.

But Sky Warriors do, and I help them. Sometimes that feels like enough.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRIS WRAIGHT is the author of the Space Wolves novel *Battle of the Fang*. He has also written *Schwarzhelm & Helborg: Swords of the Emperor* and *Luthor Huss* in the Warhammer Fantasy universe.

He doesn't own a cat, dog, or augmented hamster (which technically disqualifies him from writing for Black Library), but would quite like to own a tortoise one day. He's based in a leafy bit of south-west England, and when not struggling to meet deadlines enjoys running through scenic parts of it.



The Space Wolves forge new sagas as they hunt a monstrous beast of the oceans and battle the alien menace of the tyrannids.

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