



Parting of the Ways

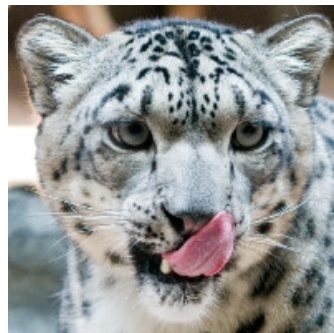
A Space Wolf Audio Drama Script (2014)

Written by Chris Wraight

Performed by Gareth Armstrong, Robin Bowerman, Ian Brooker, Steve Conlin
and Jonathan Keeble

Scripted by Reverend

Created by



&



Bjorn (crying): "For Russ!"

Bjorn made the cry before every fresh combat. The Primarch had been gone now for three hundred years consigned to legend along with his brothers, but the name still carried the Wolves into war just as it had ever done and just as it would for eternity. The beast reared above him, many times Bjorn's height raking open a dozen maws across its hide, then hundreds, then thousands. Warp-spanned jaws snapped and gaped sprouting lashing tongues between serrated incisors, vomiting clouds of ether vapor that sunk like spittle onto the dust.

Bjorn plowed into its flanks slashing out with his claws, punching bolt rounds at close range, aiming for the wounds his brothers had already given it before it had killed them. He was stronger than any of them had been known and faster too darting back, driving forward and hacking out, propelled by a fury of such purity that he made his power armor blink as blur and his weapon arm fly.

The creature reeled, screamed as chunks of its body were sliced free. Bjorn headed for the heart powering inward, working as furiously as a smith of the anvil, going for whatever unnatural organs pulsated within its chameleonic hide. A tang of demon flesh fizzed in the acrid air carried like flames across promethium and the beast rallied drawing deep on the corruption of its heart.

(beast roaring)

Lightning cracked along the horizon red as wine stains and the ground shivered. New tentacles each barbed with meter long spikes shot out wrapping around Bjorn's limbs. Poison spores splashed open dousing his armor in a iridescent sludge. New flesh growths swelled into life reaching kill messins with obscene speed, every one crowned with hooks, mauls and flails.

Bjorn fought on even as the spikes punched deep into his greaves. He cut down the tentacles as more curled around him. Soon he was enveloped, a mortal warrior battling a living wall of ever mutating demon flesh. It tried to choke him, to froth him, to swamp him, to crush him, but he kept cutting it back, slashing it down, cleaving it open. The beast's movements became frantic, its talons raked across Bjorn's torso tearing up the armor plates and driving deep under them. Scythe like growths gashed across his limbs breaking the ceramite.

(Bjorn howling)

He roared not in pain, but through the renewed kill urge and his efforts redound. Blood, his own and the creature's, mingled in speculthrone redolence. Every blow was delivered with mortal strength, smashing the stairway around them, sending the walls shuddering. There could be no prolonging. The delivery of force was too compete, too unbounded, too elemental.

(monster roaring)

Bjorn laughed as he felt his body torn apart knowing that he was dealing yet more damage to his prey. He laughed as his breast plate was cracked and his right arm was ripped from his wrist joint for by then the creature had been eviscerated, stripped out from the center, its glowing innards exposed to his claws.

Bjorn (crying): "For Russ!"

There was no pain, only ferocity. His legs gave out from under him, poisoned and broken, but he still swung out with his lightning claw cutting out the warp matter rearing over him. The talons drove deep twisting into the pustules and ganglia within. It screamed shaking the spires of ash and sending him toppling down around the two of them. It thrashed and flailed twisting on pins of disrupter charge. What remained of its flesh carbonized, curling ink black and the lolling tongues crisped as it fell apart.

(monster falling down)

When its body gave out at last and the warp solded its heart was blown apart and sent tumbling back into the ether, Bjorn collapsed amid the crater of its destruction and for the first time felt the true scale of his agony.

(Bjorn groaning)

He had destroyed it, but it had destroyed him too. At last after centuries of ceaseless battles he had met a foe that had the measure of him. He could no longer feel his limbs, his lightning claw clattered uselessly to the ash. His vision swam with blood and the last of his armor systems failed in a hail of static.

With what meager strength remained he managed to roll onto his back. Above him the skies were streaked with crimson and scored by fresh trails of smog. The screams and cracks of battle became muffled as the world sunk into a blurred fog. He heard what might have been Landers

coming in, reinforcements perhaps, sent to bolster the strike force he had taken to Morelion to slay the beast. He managed a dry smile of that. Too late now... He had rushed into combat just as he had always chosen to and this time it had undone him. That he had died like a warrior ought to die. In combat with nightmares standing up to them, sending them back to hell. It was a worthy end, one that would find a place in the sagas, even set against all else he had accomplished. In truth he had never asked for more not even when the whole galaxy had been in flames and all allegiances had been torn up.

And so as he felt the cold claws of Morkai reach for him and the pain slip into numbness, and his awareness cloud and fade, Bjorn managed a final smile with broken fangs.

Bjorn (breathing hard and hardly speaking): "For... Russ..."

CHAPTER 02

(vessel flying)

The tracked isolation unit crawled over the rock plates, its armor great flanks blinking with life sign markers. Two lords of Fenris accompanied it, power armored, heads bowed. Ahead and behind them three dozen warriors of the rout marched amid the smoke and sulfur. An honor guard assembled to take the fallen Great Wolf from the world of ash and bear him back to the world of ice.

Thrane: "Does he live?"

Wolf Priest Thrane Winter Claw was war grizzled, clad in night black plate, his helm daubed the white of skull bones. He swung a crackling crozius from his right clenched fist, still activated from combat. Anger animated his every word, that he had been too late... That he had seen the Great Wolf fall, but had not been swift enough to intervene. By the law of the Chapter he should have been extracting the progenoids of the dead now, for there were many of them. But all that paled beside the need to keep the Fell-handed from further harm.

Kagrim: "He walks the path between the worlds".

It had been Rune Priest Kagrim who had first felt the tremble in the web of fate, who had demanded a force to follow the Great Wolf to Morelion, who had sent down the Landers and deploy the extraction squads. Even now the battle brothers he had brought with him were fanning out

from the drop sites, torching and slaughtering. Their hammer blows were even heavier than normal propelled by grief and fury.

The Fell-handed had fallen. Though none of them believed that quite yet. Bjorn had guided them for the three centuries since the disappearance of the Primarch, holding the Chapter together during the years of rebuilding, guarding the rout's ferocious independence from the dead hand of Terra's administrators reforging the warrior's way. The brothers whispered that he could not die. He was the soul of the Chapter, he could not die.

Winter claw reached over to the isolation unit's armor glass canopy and smeared bloodied ash away from the surface. Underneath Bjorn's face stared up blindly, twitching, his eyes open but unseeing. They had taken his helm off, and now his mouth, nostrils and neck veins were all infiltrated with feeder tubes. Further down metal wires punched deep into his hearts and lungs, keeping blood circulating, keeping oxygen entering, keeping the shock from ceasing up his organs. Antitoxins fizzed in his veins, battling the poisons riddling his ravaged body. Crude sewchers had been used to knit the worst of his great wounds together, but they did little more than keep the ragged edges of his flesh from coming away completely.

Thrane: "He is in the dream".

Winter Claw monitored the life signs blinking on the edge of the savior unit. The machine was like a great tracked coffin, a bulky contraption that clunked and choked and reeled its way towards the waiting Lander. It stank of the Adeptus Mechanicus, of the primacy of iron over flesh. Kagrim looked up. Morelion sky was shot with spirals of bloody cloud. The wind shrieked across it as if laughing.

Kagrim: "You saw the body. The dream will not save him".

Winter Claw growled, a snarl of animal frustration. The Great Wolf should never have been on Morelion, not with such a paltry retinue around him. But then there hadn't been any persuasion with the Fell-handed. He hunted where he wished to with whom he wished to and that had always been the way of it.

Thrane: "Why do his eyes not close?"

Kagrim: "He sees something. The mind is not yet gone".

Ahead of them the squat outline of the fleet Lander steamed on Morelion 's hateful rock plates, its atmospheric engines wining to take off. The rear ramp was lowered, poised for the surge that would take the craft hurtling up to the orbital cruiser.

Thrane: "What is he seeing?"

Winter Claw scrutinized the face under the armor glass, desperate for some sign of life, a vitality that the Fell-handed would rise again.

Thrane: "What is he seeing?"

CHAPTER 03

(weird sounds, bell chanting)

Armies of voices (marching and chanting): "Bjorn! Bjorn! Bjorn!"

The hall of warriors in the heights of the Valgard rang with noise. Vats of steaming mjod had been dragged up from the Refactorium by Kaerls. Each one slopping with dull thick liquor. Laughter rose up in the smoke clouded vaults, raucous and hard, the sound of posthuman lungs opening up, celebrating victories, remembering fallen brothers. For those who were gone the rout did not bow their heads in commemoration. They called out the names raising their drinking horns, roaring out the deeds, counting the numbers of warriors, slay tallies and gangs.

Bjorn hung back leaning against the cold stone, remaining far from the circles of fire. A part of him wanted to join them to chant the names of the fallen and raise a clenched fist to their memory. It should have been a time of universal celebration, the fortress of the Fang was complete at last. The Great Scouring was accomplished, the wounds of Heresy were beginning to scab over if not heal. The sixth legion was now the Chapter of the Space Wolves, though that had scarce altered the manner of war on Fenris. They still fought the same way, laughed the same way and savored the same pattern of the hunt. All except Bjorn. Even elevation to the Primarch's own Wolf Guard had not changed that. He clung to the shadows just as he had ever done. His long black hair matted, his mutilated left arm stump itching for the armor that made him whole.

Russ: "You are not drinking..."

He did not need to turn in order to see who the speaker was. No warrior of the Chapter spoke like that. The voice was too deep, too resonant, to suffused with the ancient majesty of the depleted order of Primarchs. Bjorn watched as Russ strode into the open, his blond hair lit red by the fire pits. The Wolf King had changed since the days of the crusade. All those who would survive the final inferno on Terra had changed. When they smiled it was forced and when they laughed that was a hollowness to it.

Bjorn: "I find my thirst is lacking".

Russ: "So it ever was with you".

The Primarch folded his burly arms and leaned against a pillar.

Bjorn: "You must do this every year?"

Russ: "My sons fight and die across a thousand worlds. For one day, one day they may be allowed to revel in what they have done".

Bjorn: "The feast of the Emperor's ascension. Ascended to what exactly?"

Russ gave him a warning look.

Russ: "Have I care..."

But Bjorn was in no mood to take part in the pretense.

Bjorn: "You and I are no better, my lord, and to fear the agents of Terra, nor to listen to them. It has been more than two hundred years since the great siege. The Emperor does not speak. He is not seen outside the palace and Dorn built him a prison, not a throne".

Bjorn knew the danger in those words but the euphoria of the victory that still pumped through the veins of the Imperium disgusted him. Some of those that now spoke for the burgeon of the Administratum of mankind seemed to genially believe that the darkness had been banished for good, that the victory was complete and that there would never again be a time when humanity would stare extinction in the face.

Russ shot him a weary look.

Russ: "So serious. You never change, just for once though could you not raise a tankard?"

Bjorn looked out over the hall filled with ranks of the warrior-born. They were singing now, reciting the great sagas, remembering Gunnar Gunnhilt and the great jarls of the ages. If he joined them they

would welcome it. They would call out his name and tell of the great deeds that were attached to the Fell-handed, the shield-bearer of the Primarch, the chosen son of the Wolf King. It would be good to share in that. The other members of the retinue were already there standing at the tables, roaring up the words until the hammering roof rang with them.

Bjorn: "You will tell them the same tales?"

Bjorn looked back at his Primarch, the one who had sponsored him from the very start, elevating him to second in command of the entire Chapter in the face of the older jarls' disapproval.

Bjorn (ironically): "They will love it and so will you".

Russ nodded, a smile flitting across his scarred face.

Russ (laughing): "Aye, it does the heart good".

Bjorn: "But what then, lord? We are few. There are beasts left to slay and while we tarry they are spawning in the dark. We should be out there. The brood of Horus lingers and one day it will return".

Russ's expression changed and the smile dissolved. These were things they both knew, though to speak of them out loud even in the fastness of the Aett felt like sacrilege.

Russ: "Come!"

The Primarch clapped his hand on Bjorn's shoulder.

Russ (laughing): "The feast is prepared. You will take your place at the table. You'll eat. You will drink and just for a moment if you are not careful you might crack a grin. The beasts will still be there when we are done".

And then he walked off, Leman Russ of Fenris, his rolling gate taking him down the center of the great hall. As he passed among them his warriors cheered and banged their blades against the long tables. A slayer king among his people who loved him with all of fierce brutal love that Fenris could cultivate for the savage soul. Bjorn watched him go. Was he more hunched than he'd once been? Was the old swagger a little less fluent?

But then he had been imagining that for centuries, ever since alexias in the aftermath of Prospero. And he had been wrong then. He needed to stop dwelling on the darkening future. Russ was with them when so

many of his brothers were not. And as it had been it would always be. And so wincing Bjorn moved off ready to join his brothers in the light of the fires.

CHAPTER 04

(bells chanting)

(Bjorn taking a breath)

He died twice on the passage from Morelion to Fenris. They had all seen the monitors go flat reporting that both hearts had given out and that the soul had left the body fleeing to the halls of the slain, apt to take his rightful place by the side of the rout's most lethal. But Winter Claw was a proud fleshmaker and did not give in easily. He and Kagrím labored over the slab cutting muscle, treading tubes into arteries, altering the mix of coagulants and anticoagulants, suppressants and stimulants, so the hearts kicked back into life twice as if dragged into the universe on a chain. Bjorn's great chest shuddered and he drew breath again.

(Bjorn taking a breath)

The strike cruiser burst from the warp dangerously close to Fenris so desperate were they for speed. The hangars of the Valgard had already been prepared for the Lander which dropped into the atmosphere like a falling star. Bjorn or what remained of him was hurried into the fleshmaker's laboratories, chambers that had seen a thousand fallen warriors go under the deep plunged knife. They laid him out in the central chamber, spare with white tiles, glimmering with green-etched lumens and reeking of antiseptic and engine oils.

(mechanical noises)

Mechadendrites clattered down from the ceiling held in place by great iron bracings. Servitors scurried silently to Winter Claw's side proffering rows of scalpels and saws and lever masked thralls hung back poised to fetch whatever sarks and potions their master demanded. Kagrím knew better than to interfere, his task had been to lay the wards against maleficarum, to protect the fragile soul from the snares of the warp as they plied the void depths. Now the struggle was one of flesh and blood and in the caverns of the demon-warded Aett there was no longer

danger from the howling terrors of the underverse. Kagrim watched Winter Claw work.

Kagrim: "Tell me..."

Winter Claw had removed his helm and his face was shiny with sweat. He operated deftly casting glances at picter lenses before adding another line.

Thrane: "He ought to be gone".

The Wolf Priest yanked on a nutrient tube and threaded a metal pin underneath.

Thrane: "He will lose his legs, his right arm and his stomach. The bleeding does not stop. He is on the edge".

Kagrim watched grimly. The lower half of Bjorn's body now sawn free of its armor was little more than a pulpy gory mass, flecked with the white of broke bone. His lower torso was ripped to ribbons and the entrails glistened within pulsing as his hearts labored. Winter Claw's machines now breathed for him, whizzing mechanically down segmented tubes. The Wolf Priest reached for a circular saw.

Thrane: "I will open the chest. He is bleeding to death and the wound is within".

Kagrim watched the fine-toothed blades rev up.

Kagrim: "That will end him".

Thrane: "He is already ended. What do you think we can accomplish here? He will never bear a blade again. It would be a mercy to slit his throat".

Kagrim knew where the anger came from. The Wolves did not keep their warriors alive at all costs. Those who could fight again were saved. Those who could not were given the Allfather's mercy.

Kagrim: "There is another choice".

Winter Claw paused, perfectly aware of what the options were.

Thrane: "Has blademaker answered?"

Kagrim: "He stands ready. Give the word and they will prepare the vessel".

Still Winter Claw did not move. It was a grim fate for any warrior of the rout but for the Great Wolf it would be unprecedented. There was in any

case no guarantee of success, the knowledge needed for insertion was already faltering and those who had created the machines were long since dead.

Thrane: "Would the rout serve a leader in the tomb?"

Kagrim: "If he lived and his soul well preserved they would follow him into the Eye itself".

Thrane: "But what if his mind is changed? Half of those placed in the vessel go mad. Do you wish to go down in the annals as the one who gave the Chapter a demented Great Wolf?"

Down on the slab Bjorn's head shifted and a fresh line of blood ran down from his lips. Warning runes flashed red along the whole bank of Medicae units and more steams were automatically pumped down the feeder tubes. Kagrim leaned over the body, a heap of tangled bone and sinew now barely held together by the pins and vices of Winter Claw's art. The progenoids could be extracted if he gave the command. There was a kind of immortality in the sacred geneseed, one that would be a benefit to the Chapter for eternity. Perhaps, that would be enough. Perhaps they had already done more than loyalty demanded.

Winter Claw revved the circular saw again aiming the cutting edge along the center line of Bjorn's fused ribcage. That was the only substantial part of his skeletal frame that remained intact. Once the cut was made the only outcomes could be death or wretched augmetic half-life or interment as one of the fallen.

Kagrim: "Do this and there can be no return".

Thrane: "You say it as if there was a choice".

Winter Claw guided the saw to the bone. As the blades bit the sound was like a shriek of banshee. With a crack the structure broke and Bjorn's chest lay open in a swimming mire of blood and muscle, the swollen organs shivering within. Winter Claw gazed down at the mess of tissue. For a moment he said nothing, his mind working furiously. Kagrim let him make the judgment. This was his realm.

(warning runes flashing)

Now readings streaked across the picters, all of the marking red, none of them comforting. Finally the Wolf Priest's shoulders sagged and Kagrim knew what the cause must be.

Kagrim: "Then we are decided".

Winter Claw nodded.

Thrane: "Summon blademaker. The Great Wolf will be interred".

CHAPTER 05

(Space Wolves chanting)

Hours passed in the hall of warriors. More was drunk, the mood became febrile. The chanting of the sagas became erratic. Brawls broke out at the far end of the massive chamber and the smoke churned up from the braziers making the air thick and acrid. For a time Russ had whipped up the further himself standing at the head of the high table, bellowing along with the recited sagas. He swore and spat grinning at the memory of those great souls who had gone and raised a curved horn to their memory. His retinue sat with him tearing into slabs of fire blackened meat, slamming their fists on the wooden boarding drum beat unison. Blood ran down their beards and sweat glistened on their scarred faces.

Bjorn had made an attempt. He had taken his station at the far end of the table and meat had been thrown before him. He knew the sagas just as well as his brothers and he raised his drinking horn to those who had gone. He listened to the long screeds of prays to the Allfather and the ritual denunciation of the serpent Horus. As time went on though his dark mood returned. The drink tasted sour in his mouth. Something had changed. Even as the flames leapt higher a chill wind ran through the hall. The brawls became surly, blades were drawn and not replaced in scabbards. Shadows pulled at the base of the pillars darkening, creeping like tar around the old stone.

Soon even Russ noticed it. He withdrew from the recitations and supped in silence. The Wolf King presided over a growing storm sitting like one of the gods of legend as the tempest swirled around him. His blue eyes went dull, his weapon blistered hands pressed into the board before him as if he would squeeze the grain apart. Bjorn watched chewing on the strands of meat, ignoring the roar of his brothers as the hall descended into a massed churn of acrimony.

Bjorn: "He has sensed it now, a fell wind from beyond the mountain bleeding into the cracks of the Fang. He cannot ignore it forever".

Russ (crying): "No more!"

(silence)

Russ clambered to his feet scattering the iron salvers before him. His voice rose above all others swelling into the smoke choked heights and making the flags of the whole floor tremble. They were stilled. The warriors of the rout, more than two thousand of them in defiance of the Codex turned to face the high table. A faint hiss sighed from somewhere like the whisper of something hidden, something subtle. The blood had gone from Russ's face. Where he had been ruddy, flushed with mjod, now he looked like an ice specter. All noticed it.

Russ: "We come here to celebrate the Allfather. We come to remember his sacrifice and his ascension from the world of the senses and his victory over my brother the traitor".

The words echoed dully from the vaults like a blade being hammered against the stone and there was no celebration in them. Bjorn pushed his meat away.

Russ: "We remember the dead who even now gather in the oververse, their blades sharp, their aim tin. They are better than we are for they perished in a war to end all wars. And their souls have been purified. And what of us? Those who remain wallowing in the drakes the fallen gods have left us".

There was a dangerous look in the Primarch's eyes just as he'd once worn when fighting the Alpha legion in the aftermath of Prospero.

Russ: "We have grown fat. We have the beasts within us but it has never yet been mastered".

His warriors became uneasy. Their Primarch had never spoken to them in this way. Russ grabbed his drinking horn and the mjod slopped from its bronze rim as he held it aloft.

Russ: "So let us celebrate my father's ascension. Let us remember what he was able to accomplish. Let us remember what he birthed and what he foresaw and then what he lost and how he failed. Do not mourn the fact that he no longer walks among us for the galaxy is too small to accommodate such souls. He was of an age of gods and we are slumped in an age of mortals".

Bjorn looked out at his brothers and saw the uncertainty etched on their faces.

Russ: "The light of the stars will fade. This place will grow old and the ice will crack it. We will forget no matter how much the scalds tell the old tales. What battles are left for us like the ones before. My fallen brothers are gone. Malcador is gone, the lich's cluster are round the Golden Throne and whisper of deeds done before they were born as if it were they who achieved them".

The Primarch looked unsteady on his feet and his eyes went glassy.

Russ: "I doubt of all this. One thing remains true. We were not on Terra. We were not there when the palace fell and that shame will pursue us for eternity".

The drinking horn fell from his fingers rolling across the board, its content spilling.

Russ: "It remains unfinished".

He was no longer looking at his warriors. He spoke to himself or to some presence that was unseen.

Russ: "I have waited too long building this mountain, squabbling with Guilliman. I will not grow old, feeble, limping around the crumbling inheritance. I have an oath to keep. There are beasts left to slay".

Bjorn felt a cold sweat break out across his skin recognizing the words he had used. Russ's grizzled hair had lifted, ceased by premonition. His gaze ran across the hall, inscrutable, rye and a smile danced on his fanged face. It was as if he was seeing things from long ago or perhaps yet to come.

Russ: "Listen, my closely brothers. There shall come a time far from now when the Chapter itself is dying. The foes shall gather to destroy us. Then, my sons, I shall listen for your call and whatever realm holds me and I come I shall no matter what the laws of life and death forbid. At the end I will be there. For the final battle, for the Wolf Time!"

(Space Marines crying in unison)

A ripple ran through the entire chamber, a thrill like a kill urge. Russ's retinue got to their feet, their predator eyes shining. Russ gave the battle signal for muster, began to move and they followed him down from the high table. Bjorn made to join them, to take his place at the head of the company. Once he was back at Russ's side again he could ask the questions that now clamored inside him. He could demand to know what Russ had seen and why his mood had changed so violently.

And what came next and who they were hunting. But Russ turned just as the last of his guard joined him leaving Bjorn exposed on the dais.

Russ: "Not you".

Bjorn stopped in his tracks. For a moment he thought he must have misheard. The entire Chapter was assembled, waiting, watching, their curiosity running like startled deer.

Bjorn: "Lord... I do not..."

Bjorn felt a sudden sickness. Russ did not falter even though his face was grey.

Russ: "Not you".

There were no more words. The Primarch turned away and strode down the length of the hall. His retinue, his Wolf Guard fell into line behind him and the ranks of the Space Wolves parted again to let him pass.

Bjorn remained on the high dais, alone now, frozen by the command. He watched Russ go striding again, his huge frame animated. All weariness seemed to have dropped from him and his shoulders rolled, his spine was straight. Even then Bjorn considered disobeying. He considered racing after his Primarch demanding to know why he was left behind alone of the retinue and what new vision had seized the Primarch's impulsive mind. The two of them had quarreled before and there had always been reconciliation. If he was at fault, if there was some way in which he'd erred, there would be a path back from it. Russ had always been a hard master but not a cruel one. In time there would be a reckoning. Russ would return after his own good measure and then all would be explained. The Primarch had made impulsive decisions before and this will be no different. So Bjorn did not force the issue. Trusting that the vision would be revealed he let his master leave without asking why. But as he watched Russ duck under the archway and pass from the hall the nausea did not shift and the cold wind scraped across the stone.

CHAPTER 06

(sounds of the forge)

They took him down through the winding ways of the Fang. His body escorted at all times by warriors of the Great Companies. The need for

haste was paramount so his suspensor bier was taken down through the thurifers of the great vertical shafts running from the summit of the mountain down to its ice crypt routes. As the bier made its passage mortal thralls gathered in murmuring crowds, their faces drawn with the mix of hope and trepidation. Some cried out to fate for his deliverance or made clenched fist salutes or fell to their knees in grief. The bier plunged further and the ways became hotter. The stone tinged red, the air thick with promethium fumes. The emblems changed from sigils of hunting packs to those of the gods of iron: from the axe to the hammer.

By the time they reached the deep forges, the ancient Sledzhek blademaker was waiting for them. His armor was just as it always had been, dark as pitch, crusted with the residue of a hundred campaigns, crowned with servo arms that clasped and clang like war trophies. Kagrim and Winter Claw brought Bjorn before the Iron Priest treading along a wide causeway that jutted from a frothing sea of magma. The interment hall of the causeway's end was vast, its roof soaring away up into the heart of the mountain. Deep shafts around the rock shelf glowed with primordial fire, flaring and spitting up the bare stone. Heavy machinery from the dawn of the Imperial age studded the platform's boundary, red lined, huge, growling with coiled power. Ranks of iron thralls, their faces hidden behind thick metal masks, lined the radial gantries, spanning the fire lake.

As Bjorn's suspensor casket drew up before him the blademaker bowed, his hands already clasping the tools that would reshape and reform the broken corpse.

Winter Claw: "What do you say? Can it be done?"

Sledzhek studied the bloodied mass for a long time, his helm lenses clicking as ocular instruments made measurements.

Sledzhek: "I remember the first time I laid eyes on him. Just another hot blood, eyes bright from killing, swaggering around my forge, hunting for weapons. He was one-handed then, bereft of the claw. I sent him away. He took one anyway".

Sledzhek leaned over gently pulling up the flesh on the bier, his armor's ocular worrying the whole time.

Sledzhek: "I thought he'd be dead within days. I thought I'd outlive him just as I outlived all the others. Even now I would prefer to be wrong about that".

His servo arms got to work. Iron thralls pushed forward inserting metal spurs into the suspensor bier. The flames in the shafts below swelled, splashing heat against the chamber walls. From behind the blademaker where nine columns of stone loomed in close ranks, chains clanked then pulled taut. The chasm yearned open gouging steam as pistons slid to full extension.

Sledzhek: "His hearts are beating. His spirit clings on. You have worked wonders here, fleshmaker".

Winter Claw said nothing but withdrew with Kagrim to let the iron thralls get in close. Sledzhek looked like some massive iron spider, hunched over its prone prey, servo arms extended ready to pick the remains apart. His servants began to drone, to intone archaic rites of appeasement to the gods of the machine, of the anvil, of the angry world's heart.

Once the chasm had opened fully more chains clanked tight, each one the width of a man's wrist. Crimson effluents spilled out from the void below seething across blackened stone. Engines thrummed into gear and something began to rise, hauled up from the uttermost depths, out of the silent vaults from where no light or heat ever came.

Kagrim: "The finest tomb... Nothing else".

Sledzhek now engrossed in his preparatory work hacked up a scornful laugh.

Sledzhek (laughing): "All of my tombs are finest".

A drill extended from his leading servo arm.

Sledzhek: "But fear not. There has never been one like this".

As his words echoed around the forge chamber, the empty outline of the Dreadnaught chasse emerged from the shaft, gripped by eight chain lines. It was massive, a hunk of adamantium and ceramite, blocky, angular, doggedly indestructible. As Sledzhek had promised it was superlative. Its front panels were studded with gold images, a rearing wolf, a fork of lightning all in fine knot-work tracery, the equal of any ancient slyer king's barrow. Everything about it was exquisite, the pinnacle of the iron worker's art, hewn with the heavy hammer, but finished with the artisan's eye.

Winter Claw knew enough of the Iron Priest's craft, to see that nothing of the like would ever be made again. This was the last of the machines

laid down before the lore of Mars had began to fade and when Sledzhek died there would be none built to ride with it.

As the empty chasse was swung over its chain harness the interment machines throttled up into life and the army of robed thralls bore up their sacred vessels. Lines of incense tinged steam coiled up into the fire-lit heights and Winter Claw and Kagrim pulled back to the causeway, knowing that Bjorn had now passed out of their power to preserve. He would either return as one of the entombed, or this would be his final battle, surrounded by the angry glow of the forges. Winter Claw was about to turn away when more machinery was hauled by the chains twisting and clanking in the ash flapped air. He paused gazing up at what blademaker had chosen to drill onto the Dreadnaught's outer skin.

Winter Claw: "Ah, then... That is fitting... "

Kagrim watched the weapon arms sway over the platform guided now by a dozen augmetic hands. Even deactivated the long talons glinted eerily as if itching to flex.

Kagrim: "That is no ordinary claw. How long has he kept that down here?"

Winter Claw: "It is the Great Wolf's weapon. Perhaps he knew the day would come".

The two of them turned and went back the way they had come pursued by the echoing noise of metal being sheared, beaten and cut. Somewhere amid all the chanting and welding and hammering mortal remains of Bjorn lay in all their bloody vulnerability. Before the day was done those fluids and organs would be decanted into new harnesses, fused to the reactor power heart of a Dreadnaught.

Kagrim: "I cannot imagine it yet. I would not know how to address him".

Winter Claw snorted.

Winter Claw: "The same as we ever did if we do at all. The Fell-handed, the Great Wolf".

CHAPTER 07

The hunt for Russ went on for years. One by one the Great Companies left the Fang pushing deeper into the void with every new attempt

spending longer out in the emptiness, taking more risks, following up less promising leads. The mood of them changed. In the early days the jarls had laughed about the honor of finding the Primarch thinking of the moment when they would return in triumph, Russ at their side and bearing the spoils of whatever quest he had accomplished. It took a long time for those laughs to die away and for the thought, the terrible thought to take root. That he wasn't coming back.

Bjorn had not been on those first missions. He had remained in the towers on the mountain, telling himself that he would hear the news of the Primarch's return at any stage. Whenever he closed his eyes, all he saw was the grey face of his master on that final night. And all he heard were the words:

Russ: "Not you".

The Chapter had not only lost its gene sire. It had lost its entire retinue. The Primarch's Wolf Guard, the finest and the best of Fenris. No decisive mark of their voyage trajectory ever leaked back and so all they had were distorted stories from unreliable sources. Leads that soon went cold or sent them on fruitless quests into the obscure reaches of the Imperium.

It was the time of change, the last of the traitors had been hurried back to the Eye and a hundred thousand worlds were being resettled. Adeptus Mechanicus exploratory fleets were forging new paths into the dark searching obsessively for knowledge lost in the years of fire. The new Imperial Guard was raising garrison after garrison marching out in battle groups, almost as huge as those of the Great Crusade. The old legions had their own rebuilding to do. Guilliman sons and the remnants of their brutalized star empire, the lions pursuing their own occluded purposes, the angles taking out their rage on new enemies - the xenos, the witch. All of those armies had already lost their masters and so had little sympathy for the barbarians of Fenris who had once thought themselves watchers over the faithfulness of them all.

In the end Bjorn had not been able to resist. He had taken a ship, half believing that he alone would be worthy to track down the Primarch's spoor. He had traveled further than any other skirting the edge of known space, plumbing the insanity where the abyss met the ether. Taking his ships beyond the light of the Astronomican to where the stars themselves burned with strange fires.

In his hearts of course he guessed the truth. Russ had known he was not coming back. Why else would he have said what he had said? Already those words were being engraved on tablets in the dusty vaults by Imperial scribes ossifying into legend with terrifying speed. For all the Imperial populace venerated the memory of the Primarchs, in truth many were glad to see them slip into the past, to become something they could worship in the abstract without fearing that they would once again rise up to unleash a tangible terror.

By the time he returned to the half-world Bjorn had heard all the stories. He had heard that Russ sought out the Lion to make amends for their old feuding, that he fought an eternal combat with the resurrected cadaver of Horus, that he searched for the tree of life to heal the Emperor's soul, that he was imprisoned in the heart of a hollow sun and tormented by his old adversary Magnus. That he had passed beyond the boundaries of space and time and now roamed among the gods ready to return when needed, accompanied by the fallen of his legion, sundered in a paradise of warriors.

Bjorn came back to Fenris in the depths of helwinter, when the world shivered in the iron grasp of kilometer-thick ice and the flanks of the mountain creaked and snapped like old bones. He strode up through the empty halls of Valgard, the torches burning low and drear, and entered the Primarch's old chambers at the very summit. Though he had done it a hundred times before, he paced and rummaged through what had been left behind, kicking through the dust.

By then there was nothing to retrieve. Russ had left no books, no records, not even captures of his final thoughts. The chambers were spare, ringing with emptiness, the air tasting of burned out embers. For many hours he was undisturbed. In the end only one came to disturb his torpor, a warrior as young as Bjorn had been at the outbreak of the heresy, inducted into the Chapter with no memory of the old legion, only a zeal for the new order, a burning desire to prosper in a new Imperium of high lords and inquisitors.

So it was that Thrane, the one they called Winter Claw, stood under the open archway leading into Russ's empty rooms, glaring openly at the Fell-handed.

Bjorn: "What do you want?"

Bjorn flexed the lightning claw that had become his totem.

Thrane: "They say you are back for good, lord. I came to see if they spoke right".

Bjorn shook his head dismissively and resumed his troll through what litter remained of Russ's belongings. He barely knew the name of the Wolf before him, only that he had been marked for the priesthood and would take his training under the eyes of the fleshmakers.

Bjorn: "That does not concern you, whelp. Go back to your slabs".

Winter Claw remained where he was.

Thrane: "And I came to speak sense to you, since no one has willed".

Bjorn's head snapped up and his talons twitched.

Bjorn: "Go now, or do you wish me to give you a lesson in pain".

Thrane: "You could not harm me more than you harm yourself. It cannot go on".

For a moment disbelief stopped Bjorn replying. Then he took a lone stride towards Winter Claw bringing his claw into range.

Bjorn: "If you seek to goat me, you have picked a bad moment".

Winter Claw gazed fearlessly at the rending spikes.

Thrane: "You have been away for a long time. While your ships have been tearing the void, we have been rotting in the cold. End it now for the love of Russ".

Bjorn: "Do not mention that name!"

Thrane: "Why not?"

Winter Claw's young face was disdainful.

Thrane: "Your hearts pined".

(Bjorn smashing Winter Claw)

Almost before he knew it Bjorn punched out catching the younger warrior and cracking him back against the wall. The movement was superb, a shocking display of casual power summoned up from nowhere. No one left alive in the Chapter could move like that and that gapped Bjorn further since Russ's retinue had gone. Bjorn had always had been alone. Now the isolation was aching.

Bjorn (angrily): "Dare not to make me truly angry!"

Bjorn loomed over the reeling outline of Winter Claw.

Bjorn: "I would have got you in a heartbeat".

Winter Claw smiled dryly and pushed the claws from his face.

Thrane: "I do not doubt it. This is not about me. You know who gnaws at your soul".

Bjorn: "Of course I know... I have known it ever since he chose me".

(Bjorn punching Winter Claw again)

He shoved Winter Claw away making the priest's acolyte stagger into a weapon rack bereft of blades.

(Bjorn screaming and crying)

Bjorn whirled around hurling the detritus of his master's belongings across the room, smashing the empty scabbards against the walls, lashing out with both fists.

(Bjorn screaming)

Bjorn (infuriated): "I know what he was doing. He has left his Chapter a nurse mate. One to watch over them in his absence. Just one link to the past, to the age that he and his brothers so majestically turn to skitter".

He smashed up another piece of the past.

Bjorn (infuriated): "And of all of many treacheries that is now the deepest for I would have followed him into the maw of hell and he knew it. And he knew that I would not question the order, not until it was too late".

Winter Claw got back to his feet watching soundlessly as Bjorn destroyed what was left of his Primarch's possessions. Bjorn reached for a bag of knuckle bones, the kind used to scry the runes. For a moment he stared at them remembering a time he'd seen them cast across the ritual circle. Then he crushed them in his gauntlet.

Bjorn (infuriated): "And what is this inheritance? Nothing! We have no book of laws. We have no empire. We have no respect. We are feared then we are hated and that is the legacy of Lemman Russ to his people? The galaxy is being reborn around us and he is not within it".

Winter Claw picked his way closer carefully.

Thrane: "They are saying the Wolf Lords will go they own way now. There is nothing to hold them together".

Bjorn stopped, his breathing heavy.

Bjorn (calming down): "Who says this?"

Thrane (laughing): "It has been whispered in the Fang for years but you were not here to listen and now they do not even bother to whisper".

He drew closer looking at the disarray.

Thrane: "They would listen to you. All know that Russ chose you. We can still follow an order if we know who is giving it".

Bjorn (laughing): "Lead yourselves".

Thrane: "Why do you think he said nothing to you? Ask yourself. Did he ever do anything without reason?"

Bjorn paused. The question had haunted him for years, anything would have better than that sheer absence. If he had given just one reason, one that he could have understood.

Bjorn: "Maybe he did not know where he was going".

That got the sneer it deserved.

Thrane: "They still talk of that night. They say his face was like a specter's. Whatever he had to do, it made him sick".

Bjorn remembered. He remembered his own sickness as complete as black fever. The hall had been swimming with the dark energy summoned from some well of fear the Wolves had never suspected they had or had buried or had given birth to in the arrogance of their great triumph. Bjorn slumped against the wall, his fury spent. He had been angry for years and it had driven him nowhere but the hollow void. Now surrounded by the ghosts of a half-empty fortress all that remained was knowledge. Dreadful knowledge.

Bjorn: "He was always trying to draw me in. I was content in the shadow but the summons would always come. He said he sensed the strange fate for me, the end of which he could not see. So he kept me close as if he might be able to understand it if only the firelight was strong about me".

As he spoke the days of the great war came back to him whispering around the gloom of the chamber. He saw the faces of Godsmote, of Tooblade, of Gunnhilt. He remembered Prospero burning, its crystal cities shattered, its libraries a haunt of demon avatars. Despite all that had happened afterwards that had been their greatest battle. The one

which would define the Chapter thereafter, a victory that was both their glory and their damnation.

Bjorn: "I told him we had been deceived. He would not believe it at first but he could not evade the truth forever. That changed him, the way he killed was different after that".

Winter Claw nudged his boot through the wreckage. He did not look odd by being in the Wolf King's old chamber. He did not look as if he would be odd by anything.

Thrane: "So you say... For me I cannot. I cannot whether Russ went into battle with a song in his hearts or whether he wept as he slew".

(Bjorn in fury smashing everything)

Bjorn rammed on him, the anger returning so quickly. Winter Claw shouted preempting the attack, standing defiant.

Thrane: "For he is gone, brother... All of you are gone now who run and scampered at the whim of the Sigilite. Who brawled with your brothers. Who missed the reckoning on Terra. Do I mourn that? Why should I? There are more battles now and if we fight them free of old men with their minds and their past than that sits well with me".

Bjorn: "Not all of us are gone yet".

Thrane: "Yes, that is right. Just one remains who skulks around the void hunting for his old master, begging to have the leash put back on".

Bjorn drew his fists back clenched for the strike knowing that killing the whelp would be trivial. Winter Claw made no move. He stared back provoking, taunting.

Slowly Bjorn lowered his gauntlet. He was being played so easily. Why was that? Had he lost his guile along with so much else?

Bjorn: "You only say this because you were not there".

The new breed, the warriors who had flocked to Asaheim in the rebuilding, how could they know? They had not seen the race of gods turning on itself. They had not seen the Imperium torn asunder by the literal forces of hell and the glory of the crusade dissolve into the nightmare of mutual hatred.

Thrane: "And that is why you fight this. That age is over, jarl, let it go. You though..."

He thought for the words.

Thrane: "You are one of us. You are Fenrika. You have taken the trials. In that, believe me, you are better than him".

The idea was so stark, so blasphemous that Bjorn almost laughed out loud but the whelp was being serious. Winter Claw stood before him fearless, earnest, his amber eyes steady.

Thrane: "You must be Wolf King now. They will follow no other".

Yet again they were dragging him into the center. A dozen other jarls would have taken the honor with both hands, rushing to the Annulus, eager for the glory of it. For him though the process had been slow, gradual, tectonic, pulling him from the edge, making him stand before the gathered Chapter. Their eyes on him waiting, expectant. Had there ever been a time when he could have stopped it?

Bjorn: "There was only one Wolf King. I cannot be another".

Thrane (laughing): "Then take another title. Think of something new".

Bjorn looked around him. He could feel the force of the arguments hamming him in, trapping him. The Chapter would fracture without him. They had looked for Russ for long enough, something new would have to be found. An accommodation, an evolution. These would be his chambers soon. The dust will be driven out, his own weapons brought in. They would carve his pack markers on the stone. In time it will be forgotten that the Primarch had ever dwelt there. He sensed the footfalls of fate overtaking him again.

Bjorn: "My titles were always given to me".

Thrane: "Give it time. I am sure the scalds will come out with something".

CHAPTER 08

The interment took five days. During that time blademaker did not sleep. His thralls attended him the whole time approaching with vials of sacred oils and leaving with slopping pans of blood. The forge machines thundered powering the vast energy banks that kept Bjorn's life intact while his body was disassembled, rearranged, remade. Kagrim and Winter Claw were the only souls from outside Sledzhek's own retinue the Iron Priest suffered to remain in the chamber. The three lords met at the close of each arduous day when Sledzhek would give

them his assessment of the work. Each time Winter Claw would ask the same thing.

Thrane: "He lives yet?"

Each time Sledzhek's reply was the same though there was never confidence in it.

Sledzhek: "Aye, he lives".

On the final day the thralls were banished. The lake of magma burned sullenly robbed of the fury that had accompanied Bjorn's arrival. Cables were withdrawn from blood cycle engines, forges shuddered into silence. The three priests strode across the causeway deeper into the chamber of fire and iron and of the shadow of the lifting machines and the metal shapers.

Blademaker's summons had come in the deep of the night during the hours reserved for meditation. Kagrim had been engaged in attempts to scry Bjorn's fate, Winter Claw in his gene labs pouring over the law of the Canis Helix. They had both responded instantly recognizing the finality, knowing what it meant. They assembled among the stone columns. Bjorn's sarcophagus stood before them complete, rid of the tubes and unguents that surrounded it. The weapon arms had been attached bolted on to the housings during placatory ceremonies. The hatches had been sealed, the face plates drilled closed, the generator linked to the motive systems. For all that it was still inert. No lights flickered along its flanks, no smoke coughed from between stacks. The slab of metal and gold was as inanimate as the columns that overshadowed it.

Thrane: "He lives yet?"

Sledzhek's reply was grating from exhaustion.

Sledzhek: "I know not, not yet. This is the moment. The mind impulse unit is dormant. I guess you would wish to be here when I gave the command".

Kagrim ran his eyes carefully over the Dreadnaught shell.

Kagrim: "Any sign?"

Sledzhek: "None and there is only one way of knowing. Will you give me leave?"

Winter Claw looked up at the mighty face of the machine, the rearing wolf, the heavy lightning claw arm and remembered how it had been with them three hundred years ago in a dusty chamber of the summit of the Fang.

Thrane (remembering): "You must be Wolf King now. They will follow no other".

Thrane: "Do it!"

Sledzhek raised his gauntlet and made a gesture in the air. It wasn't clear what his link to the machine was, but as soon as his armored fingers moved, something changed. The Dreadnaught's systems growled into life, the hiss of pistons gave way to the grind of servos followed by the throaty judder of the power coils keying up. Winter Claw watched carefully, his crozius clutched tight. Both his hearts beat hard. Nothing else happened. The machine was activated, ready for movement but it remained stationary. A gilt screen of blank metal gazed back at them giving no clue as to the state of the occupant within.

Kagrim: "Blademaker, I sense nothing. Is he...".

Thrane: "Wait!"

Winter Claw felt the hairs on his arms suddenly prickling. The chamber seemed to swell with energy and the magma in the shafts began to move.

Thrane: "Wait!"

CHAPTER 09

The dreams had been long and terrible. Everything had been cold and for so long. It had not been the cold of Fenris which for all its terror was a physical thing, but a deeper cold, one that pushed down through the bones and into the mind, clawing it, making it listless and freezing it into nothingness. In those dreams he relived the deeds of the past in succession, the images marching past him as he remained motionless, cast adrift on a sea of pain.

He saw the bad star falling from the skies of Fenris long ago and felt the wind on his face as he raced to meet it. He saw the demon creature on Prospero as the spires burned around them and heard it call out his wrong name. He saw the claw from Hrafnkel's forge and saw himself using it against Alpharius's snakes. He saw the final run to Terra, the

dark war ships of the first legion alongside them and the first site of the throne world wreathed in flames like ribbons of heart's blood. He saw Russ in the ruins of the Imperial Palace, the debates, the arguments then the long journey back to Fenris and the dawning of the new age. And then last of all he heard the words again and they still had the power to kindle the fury, the bewilderment, the grief.

Russ: "Not you!"

He reached out to Russ to haul him back, to stop him leaving the hall, but his grip fell short. He stumbled, he hit the stone floor bloodying his mouth. There was a lurch like the world falling away from him, tumbling into the abyss over and over. Pain came back rushing, hammering. He felt his eyes open again, the lids scraping over the whites except there were no eyes. He opened his mouth to scream but there was no mouth, just the agony boiling through the few veins he still possessed. He clenched his fist and something that was not his fist moved, heavy as bars of adamantium, massive, disconnected.

A veil was lifted, colors, sensations, stinks and sounds, all came rushing back at him bulging through nerve ends and spilling across his psyche in starbursts.

(Dreadnaught screaming mechanically)

He screamed again and the sound shocked him. A machine roar amplified, echoing, resounding as if he were buried alive within it. He tried to move, to lift an arm, to take a stride and felt the world reel around him, heavy with inertia. He heard shouts in a language he knew and wondered if he had died indeed and this was now the underverse with the ghosts aside. Then the colors resolved themselves, deep blacks, reds. Three lords of Fenris stood before him clad in the battle plate of warriors.

For a moment he thought they were his judges, the choosers of the slain came to take him back to Russ's side. But then they bowed, all of them sinking to their knees and offering obeisance. He wanted to shout at them, to demand to know what was happening, but then the full horror began to assert itself and he remembered the beast, the maws, the ash plates of Morelion.

One of the bowing figures stood up again. Bjorn knew him. Winter Claw, the priest's whelp. Though no longer a whelp and now wearing the sacred rune marks of the Chapter's elect.

Thrane: "You are returned to us, lord".

(Space Wolves cheering around)

And then Bjorn knew truly what had taken place. He flexed his muscles and felt fiber bundles twitch. He turned his head and felt the weight of slabbed shoulders shift. His vision was a multi hued riot of false color mediated by targeting systems for weapons that were now as much a part of himself as his hearts, his lungs, his residual flesh.

The chamber around him rang with fire and noise. They were saying more things, trying to get close to him. He heard summons, there would be soon more of them crowding the chamber, ready to offer fealty, laying their weapons before him just as the barbarians of the ice did for their chiefs. In that instant he understood the lesson of the hall of warriors. It was the grief that had kept his spirit shackled to his corpse. It was the fury burning star hot over so many years that made him cling to life with such tenacity. It was resentment that meant he could never leave the mortal earth as the warrior should, never take his place in the halls of the slain. They had used it. They had brought him back. Russ had told him once that he could not see Bjorn's fate. So stubborn to the end the Primarch had fashioned it for him, locking Bjorn to the guardianship of the Chapter that he himself had abandoned.

Bjorn: "This is eternal".

He felt the roar unmatched power of the Dreadnaught flood through him.

Bjorn: "I can never leave. I can never follow him".

More of his brothers were arriving now, offering their salutes, crying out his titles. The Fell-handed, the Great Wolf. They were there in ranks, their weapons held high. The sea of steel grey amid the furnaces devoted to him in a way that they had never been devoted to anyone before, not even the Primarch who had not been born on Fenris and who had been more god to them than jarl.

Bjorn: "This is eternal".

(Space Wolves crying)

And so as they cheered, as their joy spilled out into the vaults of blademaker's kingdom Bjorn lifted his new head, opened his new vox amplified throat, threw wide the new lightning claw and howled.

(Bjorn howling)

