

WARHAMMER
40,000



ALEC WORLEY

STORMSEEKER

A SPACE WOLVES STORY

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STORMSEEKER

Alec Worley

The huge wolf pelt hung like a rancid curtain. It was ragged and infested with maggots, the whole thing as moist as the day it had been peeled from the flanks of a dead Fenrisian wolf. Anvarr Rustmane unpinned the final rivet and the heavy pelt flopped into his waiting arms, unveiling the bulkhead that housed the sacred engine of his Stormwolf gunship. Pipes and cables pulsed like arteries, their junction box embossed with the emblem of a glowering wolf's head.

The immense Iron Priest recited a memorial prayer of the Adeptus Mechanicus, folding the stinking pelt as reverently as if it were the banner of a Wolf Lord. As Anvarr had explained to those of his brothers who had grumbled about the smell, the Stormwolf's machine-spirit had insisted the pelt remained untreated, so the trophy could better permeate the gunship with its feral aura.

The assortment of charms and relics that adorned Anvarr's battered blue-grey power armour clinked in the darkness, the significance of these mementoes unfathomable to all but the Iron Priest himself. The matted ropes of rust-red hair that ran down his back presented a tapestry of fangs, spikes of bone, cogs, spent bolter casings, lengths of relay wiring tied in elaborate knots. Each braid offered a chronicle of battles past. Anvarr's mane clattered as he bowed his head before the engine and raised the folded pelt before him, backing away and down the Stormwolf's hold as he concluded his prayer. The Iron Priest glanced up as he reached the open ramp, and the embossed wolf's head seemed to glare back at him from the gloom.

Anvarr frowned and handed the pelt to a waiting servitor before emerging onto the busy flight deck of the strike cruiser, the *Ragnarök*. His battle-brothers surged about him, the boots of their power armour clattering as they hurried between the docked aircraft that loomed like rows of monoliths either side of

them. To Anvarr's preternatural senses, the flight deck reeked of bio-enhanced adrenaline, as dozens of hearts pounded in anticipation of clashing with a hated foe.

Hailing from the Deathwolves Company, Anvarr and his detachment had been stationed in this sector to hunt a pair of elusive dark eldar pirates. The xenos had been raiding the vast mining cities located upon the sun-scorched death world of Vityris. Hardened by generations of crystal-mining beneath the planet's blistering sun, the colonists had apparently proved to be durable material for the pain-farms of Commorragh, the degenerate stronghold of the dark eldar.

The Deathwolves had hunted for weeks without detecting any sign of their quarry. Then, less than an hour ago, a scout pack had reported that one of these pirates, along with his entire raiding party, had captured a remote research station overlooking a network of canyons. It appeared the xenos were stranded there, although the scouts knew not how. After weeks of frustration, Anvarr was eager to join his pack in combat, but knew the hunt could not commence in earnest just yet.

'Brother?' said a voice beside him.

It was Eadric, the youngest of the Iron Priest pilots in Anvarr's assault wing.

'This is all I could find,' he said, presenting a handful of totems: bundles of bones, fangs suspended from strips of leather, and a huge severed paw bearing claws the size of ork cleavers.

'Trinkets!' spat Anvarr. 'The machine-spirit requires a tribute of suitable magnitude! That pelt was torn from the beast's back after I slew it with my bare hands! Have the Rune Priests nothing else for us?'

'Nothing that can be prepared without the proper ceremony,' Eadric said.

'You'll have to fly without, Anvarr,' said another voice.

Anvarr turned, his braids clinking, as he faced his fellow alpha.

Skaldr Frostbiter mag-locked his chainsword and bolt pistol to his belt, the weapons having just received blessings from the Iron Priests Kaarle and Varg. Frostbiter, a Pack Leader of the Wolf Guard, was a fine Space Marine, a blonde-bearded giant whose radiant charisma inspired all those around him, although he smiled far too much for Anvarr's liking.

'My Stormwolf's machine-spirit has just told me the pelt is no longer a worthy tribute,' Anvarr said. 'I need a replacement, or else disaster will befall this hunt, I promise you.'

Skaldr exchanged a glance with Eadric.

'I need a proper totem,' Anvarr said impatiently. 'A relic fragment. Anything!'

Perhaps you have a trophy I might borrow, brother...?’

‘Anvarr, we need to make planetfall within the next fifteen minutes. The *Ragnarök* has jammed the research station’s comms relay. We must strike before the xenos hear us coming.’

Anvarr stared at him, incredulous.

‘But to fly without tribute is an invitation to disaster,’ he spluttered, his voice rising, spit flecking his beard. ‘An insult to the Ommissiah, neglect of the sacred mechanics of fate itself. To break with ritual is to break with faith, brother...’

Skaldr placed a calming hand on Anvarr’s shoulder.

‘And I have faith that you will honour the Allfather with your skill, Anvarr,’ he said calmly. ‘You are not one for boasts, Rustmane, which is why perhaps you need reminding that you stand among the finest pilots in our Chapter.’

A pack of Blood Claws approached them, reckless wild-haired whelps. They jostled and laughed as they filed into the hold of Anvarr’s Stormwolf.

‘It is time,’ Skaldr said, slapping Anvarr’s pauldron. ‘Fear not, brother,’ he said, departing with yet another smile. ‘Sometimes valour is tribute enough.’

Anvarr kept his curses to himself as he turned to the three Iron Priests under his command.

‘Very well,’ he growled. ‘I doubt compliments alone are honour enough for the Ommissiah, but the Deathwolves have xenos to kill. To your ships then, brothers.’

Eadric, Kaarle and Varg nodded and hurried to their ships as Anvarr looked away and whistled. From across the flight deck loped Cogfang, Anvarr’s cyberwolf. The hulking creature had once been a coal-black Fenrisian Ironpelt, whose pack had fought alongside the Deathwolves on several campaigns. After an invigorating clash with a horde of World Eaters, Anvarr had found the beast dying upon the battlefield, a chainaxe buried in its chest and a dead Traitor Marine still clamped in its jaws. Anvarr had taken his find as a sign from the Ommissiah that he should save the life of this valiant beast. Cogfang’s bionic front leg clanked as he ascended the ramp, saliva trailing from the serrated iron trap that replaced his lower jaw as he followed his grumbling master inside the Stormwolf.

The Blood Claws were cursing and arguing as they locked themselves to the walls of the hold. Anvarr shoved past them. When the Iron Priest reached the bulkhead, Cogfang sat on his haunches, his head almost level with his master’s shoulders. Anvarr produced a clay cup carved with runes and filled it with a pungent measure of mjod from a metal decanter built into Cogfang’s throat. The

cyberwolf yawned – a strange metallic whine – and shook itself, rattling the cybernetic cables that wormed through its pelt. Its bionic eye cast a bloody glow over the Iron Priest’s face as he murmured a prayer of contrition, dipping his fingers in the cup and painting runes around the engine bulkhead.

A hush had descended upon the hold and Anvarr felt the eyes of his young passengers upon him. It amused him to think of the stories that circulated around the feast halls on the many occasions he declined to attend, that Anvarr Rustmane communed as much with the voices in his head as with the spirits of the armoury. He concluded his ritual by raising his cup to the engine then tipping what was left of the Fenrisian liquor down his throat. The mjod scorched his tongue and warmed his chest, filling his nose with a perfume of fermented honey and frost-nettle.

He caught the eye of the nearest Blood Claw. Nudged by his fellows, the whelp looked as though he were about to comment but had thought better of it.

‘Mjod is a sacrament, little brother,’ Anvarr said, smiling to himself. ‘It helps me commune with the machine-spirits.’

As he downed another measure from Cogfang’s decanter, his ears twitched at the sound of an amused whisper.

‘Clearly he and the spirits have much to say.’

Anvarr paused as he ascended the ladder into the cockpit, casting his red-rimmed eyes over the two ranks of Blood Claws.

‘Aye, we have much to discuss,’ Anvarr said. ‘Flying this vessel without proper tribute to the machine-spirit is a heinous offence, tantamount to flying under a curse, some might say. Unless I can convince it that you are a cargo worthy of being borne into battle, it may allow a fan blade to snap or a fuel line to leak and we’ll die in flames before we reach the battlefield. And so your names shall go unheard in the sagas to come.’

The Blood Claws were silent.

‘But rest assured, little brothers,’ Anvarr laughed. ‘Should we burn, my guts shall be filled with drink enough to light our passage all the way to hel.’

Anvarr’s yellow eyes flashed like coins as the ramp lifted and darkness enveloped them all.

‘Fangs of Russ!’

Anvarr voxed the Blood Claws in the hold beneath.

‘Save your songs for the feasting halls, damn you!’

The whelps had been singing battle hymns ever since leaving the strike cruiser.

Perhaps they were honouring the Stormwolf in their own crude way, but their howling distracted him from reciting his own murmured entreaties to the machine-spirit.

The hurtling Stormwolf emerged into the planet's atmosphere, and the rippling sheet of fire that covered the canopy gradually disappeared, revealing the gunship's long, shuddering snout and a piercing sun beyond. Canyons veined the rust-red mesa far below, cracking the landscape as though some waking behemoth strained beneath its surface. The sun gleamed viciously upon lakes of shattered crystal, the remains of countless glass bodies that formed in the upper atmosphere and rained upon the planet's surface. Anvarr felt the engine behind him growl like a restless beast. He shifted uncomfortably.

The ship trembled and rattled as Anvarr continued his descent, shaking on his pilot's throne as he absorbed a weight of acceleration that would have crushed the chest of an ordinary man. Atmospheric and positional data scrolled and flickered across the Iron Priest's vision, the gene-implants in his brain feeding him a constant stream of information from the ship's sensor array. Four arrowheads bleeped before his eyes in a steady diamond formation. Kaarle and Varg's Stormfangs flew abeam on Anvarr's flanks. They each carried a unit of Long Fangs, white-haired veterans all, as prodigious and majestic as the great lascannons they bore into battle. Eadric remained steady on Anvarr's tail, his Stormwolf carrying another unit of eager young Blood Claws.

'There's Skaldr,' voxed Kaarle.

The Iron Priest looked up to see four golden dots emerging like comets from the clouds ahead. Anvarr voxed the *Ragnarök*.

'Drop pods sighted,' he said.

'Received, Assault Wing,' the *Ragnarök* replied. 'Drop pods will reach the target in thirty seconds.'

'Too late, I fear, to save those poor wretches who were manning the research station,' Kaarle voxed.

'Indeed,' Varg said. 'Any the xenos have left alive will be welcoming death by now. May Russ guide us in granting them vengeance.'

Anvarr continued his dive, leading his assault wing towards a magnificent canyon, slowing to cruising speed as he levelled out high above a river of crystal shards that ran along the floor of the chasm. He leaned on the sticks and the canyon walls rose either side of him, the level mesa disappearing from view. With a blink-click, he dismissed part of his tactical display and snapped a row of switches above his head, activating the sensor relays in the Stormwolf's prow.

Anvarr's helmet filled with the hot scent of the outside world, the smoky smell of arid rock, the hot tang of seared crystal.

'Snouts to the wind, brothers,' he voxed, accelerating slightly ahead of the pack and dipping low enough above the crystal river for his thrusters to carve a glittering spray as he passed. Although initiated in the mysteries of the Cult Mechanicus, Anvarr remained a Space Wolf, his Canis Helix gifting him with the senses of an apex predator. He read the land as it flowed beneath him, detecting every subtle pattern wrought by wind and sun, devouring every secret as he rode the curve of the canyon walls.

As the Space Wolves' briefing had explained, the surface of this death world was beset with what the mining colonies called 'shard-devils'. Stirred into life by columns of superheated air, these vast swirling towers guzzled loose rocks and crystal debris and spat them in all directions. Anvarr scanned the trail ahead for the telltale sign of whirling dust that heralded the arrival of such a maelstrom.

The Iron Priest led his pack down a fork in the canyon, following the buffeting wind like a wolf tracking prey. Streamers of smoke appeared ahead, lining the sky atop a sheer canyon wall ahead. As Anvarr slowed, he detected not only the familiar musk of bolter fire, but also the sour oily stench of the xenos. Acting as one, the Space Wolf assault wing angled their thrusters, their ships rising out of the canyon and looming over the smoking research station.

The four empty drop pods surrounded the station like the pinnacles of a castle. Skaldr and his Wolf Guard had broken into the various bunkers and would be deep in the underground tunnels by now, exterminating the cornered xenos with blade and bolter. Occasionally a lithe black figure would spring like a spider from an exit hatch and flee towards the outlying crags, crying out as it stumbled through ankle-deep drifts of razor-sharp crystal debris.

'Ready yourselves, whelps,' Anvarr voxed his Blood Claws as the rest of the assault wing fanned into position behind the drop pods.

'Be grateful the machine-spirit has deemed you worthy of being carried into battle,' he roared. 'Now, destroy the xenos filth as your brothers drive them into your arms. Blood your blades and win yourselves honour enough for a ride home!'

The youngsters yelled and whooped in reply. Cogfang howled among them, his cry ringing through the Stormwolf's hull like an alarm as a red warning rune flashed on Anvarr's tac-display.

Something was closing in on him from behind, moving at unthinkable speed.

The Iron Priest felt the engine judder beneath him, and could have sworn he heard a ghostly laugh.

Clad in elegant black carapace, Iruthyr Xynariis, Archon of the Kabal of the Forked Tongue, stalked towards the invading savages like a huge venomous insect. He was grateful for the opportunity to vent his displeasure. His raiding party's webway portals had shattered upon entry to this world. Sabotaged. Agents of the Book of Sorrows, his rival Kabal, were the obvious culprits. As if this were not humiliation enough, he had been forced not only to abort his latest raid, but also to take refuge in this stinking human burrow.

Three armoured apes blocked his exit from the control room, their maskless faces grimacing amid flashes of booming gunfire. Iruthyr vaulted over an exploding control console and scuttled over toppled furniture as a trail of blasts chased him across the room, destroying an entire wall of surveillance monitors. A short while ago, Iruthyr and his exhausted raiders had been availing themselves of the humans that had been stationed here, feasting on their tortured screams. Then the apes' assault pods had landed overhead, shaking the bunkers' foundations and spoiling the meticulous flesh-peeling he had been performing upon a shrieking captive.

Iruthyr rose from behind cover and fired his splinter pistol twice and with seeming carelessness. Spikes of poisoned crystal punctured the eyes of the two bearded savages closing in on him. Iruthyr slithered between them as they toppled to the floor, their blue-grey power armour clattering as the bodies inside convulsed in agony. The dark eldar sidestepped another clumsy burst of gunfire and slid his huskblade into the shooter's throat. Iruthyr shuddered with pleasure, feeling his muscles invigorated by the pain radiating from his victim. He watched the ape's face shrink into a withered brown skull before withdrawing the blade and sprinting through the nearby exit, splinter pistol in hand.

The corridor outside rang with nearby bolter blasts as Iruthyr bounded through a set of double doors and into the elevated tunnel that led to the station's hangar bay. Here his beloved Razorwing jetfighter sat undamaged, fully fuelled, its missiles unspent. Dust hissed against a porthole beside him as a booming shadow passed overhead.

He peered outside and saw a huge blue-grey vessel, a gunship by the look of it. Its ramp yawned in mid-air, disgorging several wild-eyed apes wearing bulky jump packs, each waving a chainsword as they leapt one by one from the gunship. Through the opposite window, Iruthyr saw another gunship circling

nearby, flanked by two more, each with a huge ice-blue cannon embedded in its snout. Iruthyr felt a flicker of disbelief as he considered the possibility that his raiding party – veterans of countless incursions, selected from among the finest mercenaries and murder-artists of Commorragh – could actually be slaughtered by these brainless animals.

One of the gunships exploded in mid-air.

Iruthyr flinched as a ball of fire tore the vessel apart in a shower of debris and burning bodies. Three bat-like shadows streaked overhead as the shattered gunship sank, crashing to the ground with a boom that shook the corridor.

Iruthyr's communicator crackled into life.

'Brother?' a familiar voice purred. 'Are you there?'

'Isabella,' Iruthyr gasped.

'You sound surprised.'

Iruthyr fumbled for an answer to the contrary as he watched the remaining gunships scatter, the streaking shadows driving them into the air with volleys of disintegrator fire. Clearly, the apes had not expected a rescue attempt either.

'After all this time,' Isabella said. 'After everything we have built together, have you not yet learned that the Kabal of the Forked Tongue stands for the two of us, or it does not stand at all?'

Iruthyr heard approaching cries and ran down the corridor as more explosive rounds tore open the wall beside him. He turned to see another gaggle of apes pounding towards him.

Iruthyr ducked as he heard the familiar whine of an approaching monoscythe missile. The projectile pierced an overhead skylight and detonated in the midst of his enemies, bursting into a sizzling halo that decapitated the apes and destroyed the surrounding walls. Long-haired heads rolled for an instant on a dwindling shelf of energy, then dropped to the floor.

'I have another present for you, brother,' Isabella said as her twin scrambled to his feet. 'Captured saboteurs of the Book of Sorrows. I have prepared them as part of a pain-feast to celebrate your return to Commorragh. But first, won't you join me in this little appetizer...?'

Iruthyr laughed as he ran towards the hangar bay.

Another burst of disintegrator fire slammed into the Stormwolf's snout, punching the ship into a spin that turned the world outside Anvarr's canopy into a whirl of smoke and flashing gunfire. The Iron Priest grunted as he heaved at the sticks, arresting his turn in time to lance the air where he calculated his

enemy would appear, but his las-bolts strafed nothing but empty sky. Another shadow screamed past him as Kaarle's and Varg's enraged curses crackled over the vox. The wreckage of Eadric's Stormwolf smoked nearby as Anvarr struggled to dismiss the thought that his failure to honour the machine-spirit had not gone unnoticed by the Ommissiah, and that his brothers were now paying the price for his dishonour.

He voxed the two gunships as he saw a red arrowhead on his tac-display streak towards him from behind, preparing to fire upon his exposed tail.

'They're trying to scatter us,' he said. 'But they're moving too fast to be accurate.'

He heaved his Stormwolf to one side, avoiding another blazing disintegrator beam as the crescent-winged jetfighter sliced past him. The craft was sleek and black, veined with green, its barbed fins like those of a venomous fish. Razorwings, the xenos called them, named after some predatory alien bird. Anvarr blasted after it with his heavy bolters, but the jet merely twirled aside, peeling away to commence another run.

Anvarr wheeled hard, the battleground rising into a wall beside him. The xenos were swarming now. Those that had escaped the bunker were leaping aboard open-topped skiffs, which must have arrived alongside the fighters. The skiffs' crews helped their comrades aboard, handing them masks to protect their eyes from the crystal splinters churned into clouds by the aircraft that thundered above them. The rescued xenos took up position and fired their rifles at the bunkers where Skaldr's Wolf Guard now crouched, pinned behind cover. Small-arms fire rattled upon the ceramite hide of Anvarr's prowling Stormwolf as the Razorwing dived overhead.

He glanced at his tac-display. Every time Kaarle and Varg moved to deploy their troops behind the xenos' skiffs, a Razorwing dived at them, seemingly out of nowhere, and cut them off. Even if the gunships could land, their troops would likely be cut down by the swooping fighters. His assault wing was being worn down and prised apart.

'Abort deployment,' Anvarr growled over the vox. He swung his Stormwolf hard to port. Kaarle's Stormfang reeled into view on the other side of the station, dodging twin beams of disintegrator fire from the Razorwing above him.

'Ignore the ground for now,' Anvarr voxed. 'Let us tear these three little birds from the sky first. For Eadric! For the Allfather!'

Anvarr charged towards the distant Stormfang, intent upon destroying the xenos fighter bearing down on Kaarle's gunship, heedless of the other fighter the Iron

Priest knew was closing on his own tail. The heavy snout of his Stormwolf dipped as he accelerated, the battleground rising to meet him, rifle-fire sparking on his armoured canopy. His augmented brain engaged in myriad calculations, Anvarr felt the engine rumble beneath him. He commenced a prayer of invocation to the machine-spirit, surrendering himself to instinct as he corrected his approach, training his attention upon the area behind Kaarle's Stormfang where the xenos fighter would appear. As he closed in, he realised he had not taken fire from the Razorwing behind him.

A shadow enveloped the cockpit. Anvarr looked up to see the fighter hovering upside down above him. Unlike the ships of its two wingmen, the fighter was not black, but a livid purple, its canopy wavering a few feet from his own. The dark eldar pilot was female. She wore no flight helmet, her red and black hair hanging in a ponytail as she gazed down at the Iron Priest, oblivious to the streaking gunfire that surrounded them. He was close enough to see that her hooded eyes regarded him with a mingled look of curiosity and disgust, as though he were a dead animal about to be dissected.

Anvarr concluded his prayer to the machine-spirit as he brought two sets of weapons to bear.

'I'll give you something to watch,' he growled. The helfrost turret whirred into life above his head and he sensed the heavy bolters lock at his sides, feeling their weight as though he held them in his own hands.

He thumbed both fire buttons a split second before the xenos fighter appeared in his sights, expecting to hit the ship dead centre, destroying it with a single blow.

Both weapons stalled and the fighter flashed past unmolested. Anvarr cursed aloud, glaring in rage as the fighter released another burst from its disintegrators, destroying a rack of missiles in the flank of Kaarle's Stormfang.

He commenced a prayer of entreaty as he pulled up after it, but the xenos fighter was faster and rose out of sight. The machine-spirit had refused Anvarr's plea, allowing the ammunition feeds to become misaligned, or perhaps static to have impeded the targeting relays, denying him glory and perhaps costing his packmates their lives. Such was the price of his failure.

The purple Razorwing followed him, still hovering above his head. Anvarr punched the inside of his canopy, cursing with rage. The dark eldar woman laughed as she pulled back, dazzling Anvarr as sunlight flooded his cockpit. She corkscrewed into position behind him, chasing him as he climbed after the other fighter, which curved back to continue its attack upon Kaarle.

Anvarr bared his fangs as the speeding fighter wavered into his sights. He slowed enough to achieve a target lock, although he knew he would need to accelerate if he had any hope of evading the blast about to tear into his tail. Anvarr fired his heavy bolters and prayed.

Shuddering thunder answered him as the bolters pounded long lines of explosive rounds into the fighter's path, stitching fire across its left wing as it zipped past. An explosion threw Anvarr forward in his seat. Warning runes glimmered on his tac-display as the ship dipped to one side. He had lost one of his thrusters. Another was badly damaged. As he pulled aside, he saw the fighter he had wounded roll directly in front of his packmate's Stormfang. The vessel's helfrost cannon spat a dazzling blast that enveloped the black Razorwing, freezing it white. The xenos fighter tumbled to the rocky ground where it shattered like porcelain.

Anvarr turned his helfrost turret to face the fighter behind him. He fired wildly, thanking the machine-spirit for not disabling the weapon permanently. The disintegrator bolts that lanced the air either side of him ceased as the purple Razorwing peeled away in search of easier prey. The Iron Priest gave chase as quickly as his shattered thruster array would allow.

'My thanks, Anvarr,' Kaarle voxed. 'I shall sing your sagas louder than thunder.'

Anvarr grunted.

'Deploy your troops to the south-west,' he said.

Kaarle retreated, leaving Anvarr to cruise after the purple Razorwing. The Iron Priest fired his las-cannons at the fighter's rear, but the vessel dodged every volley, rolling aside each time as if pestered by insects.

'Anvarr!'

It was Skaldr.

'We grow lonely down here behind cover,' he voxed. 'Any chance of some company, brother?'

'Kaarle's sending you a bellyful of Long Fangs,' Anvarr replied. 'They shall bite the xenos' flanks shortly.'

The purple Razorwing had joined its remaining wingman in attacking Varg's smoking Stormfang, the two fighters like moths battering a dying flame.

'Tell the elders to hurry,' Skaldr voxed. 'The xenos seem to think there are enough of them to take us alive. I would hate to have to prove them wrong.'

'Give us time enough to kill the rest of these vermin,' Anvarr said. 'Just two of them left now.'

A third xenos fighter flashed before him, rocketing up from the station below, forcing Anvarr into a tight swerve. As he swung back to face Varg's besieged gunship, he saw the purple Razorwing break away and race to meet the newcomer, another Razorwing of the same hue. Anvarr braced himself, expecting the pair to collide head-on, but the twin fighters snapped into a climb at the last second, spinning skywards in perfect unison. The other Razorwing joined the greeting display and the three ships peeled apart at the apex of their climb, curling backwards like the petals of a blossoming rose, then dived back down towards the crippled Stormfang.

Anvarr's damaged thruster shrieked as he accelerated, firing madly at the three descending fighters. Kaarle joined the barrage, his own Stormfang closing at Anvarr's flank, his cargo of Long Fangs safely deployed.

Together the Space Wolf ships lanced the air relentlessly, firing bolt after bolt of helfrost above their injured packmate, eventually scattering all three fighters, forcing them to flee like startled crows. A pair of missiles had already sizzled out from beneath one of the Razorwings, but the projectiles detonated either side of Varg's gunship, exploding into haloes of energy that showered the wounded vessel with rocks and dust.

Anvarr and Kaarle had saved Varg's Stormfang from complete destruction, but its thrusters were already ruined, leaking columns of smoke as the vessel lowered majestically. The Stormfang's snout ploughed through the crags in the direction of the dark eldar skiffs, threatening to topple onto its side before eventually grinding to a halt on its belly. Anvarr and Kaarle circled the grounded ship, like wolves guarding a kill. Anvarr targeted the approaching skiffs as Kaarle prowled the air above him, protecting his alpha against the Razorwings' next attack.

Anvarr saw Varg's Long Fangs batter open the rear exit of the crashed Stormfang, their faces streaked with blood. Their life signs scrolled and glimmered in his tac-display. Varg's did not.

The air above him suddenly streamed with heavy bolter fire as Kaarle drove off the weaving Razorwings. Anvarr pummelled the dark eldar skiffs with las-fire, covering the wounded Long Fangs as they limped and stumbled behind the cover of the rocks. His ship's tac-display was a riot of warning runes, while Kaarle's Stormfang appeared relatively intact. But the three Razorwings threatened to slip past them both and turn the advancing Long Fangs into a crater. A xenos skiff exploded amid bolts of heavy las-fire as the Long Fangs claimed their first kill. Anvarr felt a rush of battle-hunger and gained altitude to join Kaarle.

He prayed again, imploring the machine-spirit for forgiveness, turned and was blessed with the sight of the two purple Razorwings nearing his target-lock. He fired helfrost and bolters together, targeting both fighters at once.

His weapons seized once again.

Defiance and rage burned within the Iron Priest as he surged after the fighters. If skill and valour in battle was the price demanded by the machine-spirit, then Anvarr Rustmane, Iron Priest of the Deathwolves, was prepared to give more than suitable tribute.

He voxed his remaining wingman.

‘Our brothers on the ground look bored, Kaarle,’ he growled. ‘Let’s give them a display such as would inspire Russ himself!’

Kaarle howled down the vox in agreement, and the Space Wolf ships loped after the streaking Razorwings.

Skaldr Frostbiter broke cover, several of his packmates howling behind him. As he ran, the Pack Leader emptied the clip of his bolt pistol into the xenos pirates that clustered behind the spent drop pod. He beheaded the last of them with a backhand swipe of his chainsword as he skidded into cover behind the ceramite plating of the downed gunship. His packmates joined him as he looked up at the Space Wolf ships tearing after the xenos fighters above them. White bolts of helfrost and golden spears of disintegrator fire criss-crossed beneath the glaring sun as the Iron Priests fought to prevent the enemy from loosing their missiles upon the Space Wolves below.

More dark eldar pounced upon Skaldr’s men from the nearby crags, wearing horned masks and twirling strange two-handed swords that flashed in the sun. Skaldr’s chainsword sparked as he parried a sweeping blow at his neck, grabbing the creature and slamming his forehead into its mask, shattering the skull beneath. Another blow glanced off his pauldron and he charged at his attacker, aiming to drive his shoulder into the creature’s chest. But the nimble xenos dodged aside, spilling him onto the ground. Before the dark eldar blade could meet Skaldr’s neck, a thick las-bolt exploded from the xenos’ chest, spraying ash and blackened bone.

The pack of wounded Long Fangs who had clambered from the ruined Stormfang were crouched atop a nearby ridge. They pumped heavy las-fire into the retreating xenos swordsmen as Skaldr and his packmates recovered and crouched behind the drop pod, their advance momentarily secure. The Long Fangs turned and directed their fire at the xenos skiffs pinning the rest of the

Wolf Guard within the bunkers. Their las-fire ripped into the jagged craft of the dark eldar, shattering their black carapace and scattering their screaming riders, each of whom was then calmly blasted into smoking pieces. The veteran Space Wolves held the line, shielding their flank with an outcrop of rock, their faces weary, almost bored by their own mastery of battle.

Skaldr needed to order the rest of his Wolf Guard forward to support the Long Fangs, before the xenos could regroup and overwhelm them with their superior weight of numbers. He went to vox his command when he was thrown to the ground by a blast of air. Silence fell for an instant and Skaldr assumed he had been deafened. Then the clamour of rifle and bolter fire returned as he got to his feet and peered through a cloud of glittering dust.

Where the Long Fangs had crouched seconds ago, a deep and immaculate bowl had appeared in the rock, its surface smooth and crackling with residual energy. One of his packmates was pointing at two flyers retreating in the distance. Skaldr's tac-display magnified the image, revealing two black ships fleeing side by side across the shimmering mesa. They were narrower than the broad-winged fighters, with long sharp beaks like those of carrion crows.

Skaldr voxed Anvarr.

'Voidravens!'

'I see them,' growled Anvarr, pelting a Razorwing with las-fire as he glanced at his tac-display. The two bombers were slowing into a climb, preparing to make another supersonic run across the battlefield. Anvarr and his wingman could barely contain three fast-moving ships, let alone five.

The Voidravens curled back towards the battlefield.

Apart from Skaldr and his Wolf Guard, the only other ground troops out in the open were the pack of Long Fangs whom Kaarle had deployed earlier. The veterans were plodding towards the crater to replace their fallen brothers and maintain the line. If the Voidravens hit them, the xenos ground troops would eventually overrun the Wolf Guard pinned inside the bunkers.

Anvarr's Stormwolf shuddered as another blast smashed into his snout. It would be a miracle if there were any Blood Claws left alive in the hold. He returned fire, the fighter swerving to avoid his volley. Anvarr knew that attempting to save his brothers on the ground would mean abandoning Kaarle to the Razorwings. Not even a Stormfang pilot of his brother's ferocity could prevent three agile xenos fighters from tearing him apart.

The Voidravens accelerated, commencing their run towards Skaldr and the

Long Fangs.

Kaarle voxed him.

‘Save them, brother,’ he laughed. ‘And sing them the saga of Kaarle Greywing upon your return.’

‘I shall,’ Anvarr said. ‘Louder than thunder, brother.’

Kaarle’s Stormfang unleashed a stream of bolter fire, herding one of the Razorwings into a sharp turn, freeing Anvarr to plunge towards the approaching Voidravens.

Anvarr circled the research station as Kaarle fought to keep the Razorwings occupied. The bombers were still kilometres away, but their distance to the battlefield was shrinking faster than Anvarr believed possible. He scanned the rocks and bunkers before him with the eyes of a hunter, seeking any elevation or cover that might provide a tactical advantage.

He voxed Skaldr.

‘Do you have any Sky Claws left?’

‘One.’

‘Get him onto the roof of that high bunker to the north-west. And tell those Long Fangs to cover the airspace above that comms relay on the other side.’

Skaldr directed his troops as the Voidravens closed in, hurtling low over the mesa, carving waves of crystal dust in their wake. Anvarr swooped low, grazing the ground as he hid behind a long wall of crumbled rock, rifle-fire scuttling across his Stormwolf’s hide as he calculated the speed of his approach, matching it to the lunatic velocity of the oncoming Voidravens.

He was laughing now, drunk with feral adrenaline as he raced behind the rock wall to meet the bombers. When his Stormwolf lay a shattered wreck, perhaps then the machine-spirit would be appeased by his valour.

As the Voidravens reached the edge of the battlefield, Anvarr raised his Stormwolf from behind the cover of the rocks, spraying las-bolts at the two bombers screaming towards him, seconds from collision.

As the Space Wolf gunship reared into their path, the dark eldar pilots reacted with predictable precision. Performing a miracle of control and timing, they slowed from a scream to a shriek, Anvarr having given them just enough time to bank into a hard turn – one left, the other right. The Stormwolf redirected them like a stone diverting a stream.

Anvarr hit the tail of a fleeing Voidraven, clipping its fins with a stream of las-bolts. The other bomber banked above the station’s shattered comms relay, where waited Skaldr’s Long Fangs. They caught the ship in a web of heavy las-

fire, punching through its exposed belly and driving it into the rocks in a glorious bloom of fire.

Khanvir Marugaard heard his wingman's ship detonate behind him. Khanvir was wrestling with the sticks of his own bomber, struggling to ride its momentum and slow the vessel enough to make another turn. He cruised low across the ground, past a high bunker and felt the bomber rock as if with an impact. He had taken las-fire from that gunship. Perhaps it had damaged a stabiliser.

Khanvir pulled into another turn, steering towards the apes on the ground that had destroyed his wingman. He went to arm his void-lances when something smashed through the canopy, impaling his chest and pinning him to his seat. The dark eldar stared in disbelief at the whirring blade protruding from his body and thought he could make out a face grinning down at him from the other side of the shattered canopy. Then the blade revved faster and a churning fountain of his own blood obscured Khanvir's view.

Skaldr was reloading his bolt pistol when he saw the lone Sky Claw leap from the canopy of the second bomber before it crashed to the ground. The whelp cannonballed into the rocks, rolling several dozen feet before crashing to a halt. Skaldr almost laughed as moments later the battered warrior got to his feet, grinning through a mouthful of blood and twirling the pilot's severed head above his own.

A second explosion bellowed overhead and a shrieking cheer arose among the dark eldar. Anvarr's valiant wingman had finally fallen, his Stormfang a blazing wreck as it slumped into the crags below. The three Razorwings that had torn it apart now circled the battlefield, surveying their outnumbered prey. The replacement Long Fangs were still trudging into position on the rocks nearby, readying their smoking lascannons.

Skaldr activated his chainsword as he voxed what remained of his warriors.

'Advance, Wolves of Fenris,' he howled. 'Better to die with fangs bared than—'

Something struck him in the throat. He grunted and dropped to one knee, his body shivering uncontrollably. Skaldr knew he had been hit by a poisoned shard fired from a xenos splinter rifle. His face contorted into a grimace of agony as the arcane toxin boiled his nervous system. He watched, helpless, as his Wolf Guard scattered from the bunkers and ran towards the dark eldar, bolters blazing. The black-armoured xenos and their craft swarmed like beetles over the crags to meet them, their ghostly faces gleeful. One of the circling Razorwings despatched a missile that exploded amid the ragged Space Wolf vanguard,

expelling a disc of energy that sliced their legs out from under them. The dark eldar still clearly hoped to take them alive. But the xenos were arrogant indeed if they believed a pack of cornered Space Wolves could be rounded up like cattle.

Skaldr rose to his feet, his head swimming, his every nerve aflame as his augmented biology fought the invading poison. A pack of Blood Claws trampled past him, hooting wild battle songs, chainswords in hand. Anvarr's deployment. The Iron Priest's Stormwolf surged into the sky behind them, hurling las-bolts at the circling Razorwings. He caught one of them, punching a black hole in its wing, as all three detached like bats from a cave roof and chased the Stormwolf from the battlefield with spears of disintegrator fire.

The Pack Leader went to murmur private words of thanks after the indomitable Iron Priest, but the words refused to form on his lips. The Stormwolf disappeared into the canyon with the three Razorwings in pursuit. Skaldr shook his head and staggered after his battle-brothers, resolved to meet his death among them.

Anvarr gunned the juddering Stormwolf down the canyon through which he and the rest of his ill-fated assault wing had entered, casting aside sheets of crystal spray as he veered down a fork in the path ahead. The Razorwings raced after him without slowing. The passage ahead was strung with natural arches, sculpted by the crystal-toothed winds. The Stormwolf's damaged thrusters threaded a line of smoke through the rock formations as Anvarr dipped and dodged between them, occasionally scraping a wing or swerving clumsily to avoid a collision. Behind him, the Razorwings swooped and twisted with ease, flowing over the landscape like water.

A bolt of fire flashed past and destroyed a rocky bridge ahead of him. He swerved to avoid a curtain of tumbling stone, dodging deeper into the canyon network before his pursuers could fire again. Anvarr drank in the odour of baking rock cooled by the coursing winds, his mask feeding his predatory senses all the tactical data he required. The smell of hot stone intensified and he broke away down a slot canyon as spikes of fire exploded behind him. The Razorwings stood on their sides as they followed him, one after the other, relentless as the canyon winds that threatened to wrench the sticks from Anvarr's hands and fling his Stormwolf into the rocks. The Iron Priest fled deeper and deeper into the rocky maze, chasing the scent of burning stone carried upon a gathering wind as the dark eldar closed in behind him.

Iruthyr cackled with excitement, nestling in the darkness of his cockpit as he

chased the battered gunship down yet another canyon, this one cradling a wide river of crystal debris that sparkled beneath the blazing sun.

‘Sister, I’ll give you fifty slaves if you can shear off its wing,’ he laughed, his ghoulish features bathed green by the glowing runes on his console. He steadied his fighter against a strengthening wind.

‘Too easy,’ she replied. ‘I would prefer we destroy what is left of his thrusters and when he crawls from the wreckage, then we can play. Disintegrators only. Let’s say sixty slaves a limb...?’

‘As you wish, sister,’ Iruthyr said, his targeting icon hovering into place over the rear of the fleeing ship.

The ape’s gunship suddenly accelerated, the gathering wind snatching away the black smoke now churning from its thrusters as it vanished through a gap in the canyon wall. Focused only upon his prey, Iruthyr dived after it, his fighter shaking. He noticed an air pressure warning flashing on his console.

‘Pull up,’ Izabella screamed through the comm. ‘The savage has led us into a trap.’

Iruthyr pulled up, abandoning the hunt, his fighter convulsing now as a whirling storm of shards raked his fighter like the claws of some ravenous beast, tearing into its hull. He struggled to follow his sister’s Razorwing as she accelerated into a steady climb above him, her wings also ragged with damage.

They rocketed from the canyon and soared side by side above the mesa as chunks of rock streaked across the sky amid a glittering mist of crystal shards. Their wingman’s black fighter was visible ahead, the mercenary evidently seeking to abandon the twin Archons to their fate. As Iruthyr and his sister did their best to dodge the raining debris, a boulder crashed into the black Razorwing like an asteroid, smashing the fighter to pieces. Iruthyr ducked to avoid the oncoming slipstream of debris and saw the pilot himself tumbling towards him as the shard-infested wind whipped the flesh from his bones.

Gore sprayed Iruthyr’s canopy, blinding him, his fighter tipping as something smashed onto his wing. He fought to arrest his spin as dust and wind scoured the canopy clear, revealing sky and earth tumbling one over the other. He managed to level out, his sister still beside him. Together they climbed hard, their engines grinding, until they were free of the sucking wind. He gazed down at a vast twirling column of air, its tail wriggling through the canyon miles below as it rained destruction about the mesa.

Izabella snarled over the comm.

‘A curse on this world.’

Iruthyr glanced at his data display. His hull was in shreds, although both disintegrators remained functional.

‘Agreed,’ he said. ‘Enough games. Let us return to the field, finish the apes and be gone.’

Iruthyr and his sister followed the canyon back to the battlefield, leaving the hurricane far behind them. His tattered fighter trembled as he neared the station where the battle continued to rage. He armed his disintegrators, his sister abeam as they commenced a steady descent.

Las-fire flashed at his back. Checking what remained of his sensor readout, Iruthyr saw the smoking gunship thundering close behind them, as if the storm itself had followed them from the canyon.

Anvarr had followed his hunter’s nose back through the maze of canyons as surely as he had found his way into its boiling heart, luring his arrogant pursuers into the nearest shard-devil. But he had clipped several more rocks on the way back as he squirmed through the canyons, sheltering from the rain of rock and crystal fragments crashing overhead. Entire plates of ceramite had been prised from the Stormwolf’s hull, exposing pipes and cabling to the elements. He was down to two thrusters, one of which threatened to collapse every time he manoeuvred and spoiled his aim when he had tried to take out one of the Razorwings. The xenos fighters did not give him another chance.

As they reached the smoking battlefield, they peeled off either side of him, curling as smoothly as their damaged wings would allow, preparing to fire upon Anvarr from either side as he approached.

His damaged thruster finally surrendered and the Stormwolf slumped to one side, threatening to drop from the sky. The Razorwings fired, their disintegrators slicing the ground as they flew towards him, ready to cut the ruined Stormwolf in half.

The beams flashed before Anvarr’s eyes as he murmured a prayer to the machine-spirit, aiming his heavy bolters to the left, his helfrost cannons to the right. The engine purred beneath him as he fired.

The heavy bolters boomed at his flank as twin spikes of helfrost flashed overhead.

Anvarr Rustmane did not flinch as both weapons hit their marks and the shattered fighters screamed past his canopy, crashing to the ground behind him.

He ignored them and sped towards the battlefield, destroying a dark eldar skiff with las-fire and crushing a unit of squealing xenos beneath the belly of his

Stormwolf as he ploughed the ruined gunship to a stop.

Anvarr detached his helm, sporadic rifle-fire crackling against the buckled hull as he clambered down the cockpit ladder to the hold where Cogfang awaited him, his master's thunder hammer held ready in his slavering jaws. Anvarr slung the weapon over his shoulder as he booted the malfunctioning ramp to the ground, then raised it over his head, announcing his arrival to the power-armoured warriors battling outside amid the sweltering dust.

‘For Russ! For the Allfather!’

He whistled three times at Cogfang, who comprehended his master's instruction and bounded away. Anvarr dared a glance at the embossed wolf's head on the bulkhead behind him, then pounded towards his brothers to join them in glory.

Iruthyr Xynariis limped towards his sister's crashed Razorwing. He had driven his own crippled ship into a deep drift of crystal shards that had worked their way through the plates of his armour and chewed his flesh as he ran. Izabella still lay in her cockpit. He clambered onto the downed fighter and heaved open the broken canopy to find her looking up at him, breathing hard, her legs pinned and broken by the crushed console. He paused for a moment, invigorated by his sister's pain, the shrieks of his dying raiders carried by the hot winds.

She seized him by the collar of his flightsuit and yanked him towards her. Iruthyr realised she had a barbed knife at his throat.

‘The Kabal of the Forked Tongue stands for the two of us,’ she gasped. ‘Or it does not stand at all.’

‘Come, sister...’ he said, reaching for the huskblade at his belt.

A low metallic growl startled the twins. They looked up to see a massive half-mechanised wolf standing on the prow of the ruined Razorwing, saliva leaking from its iron jaw as it watched them.

Iruthyr and his sister faltered, undecided whether to defend themselves or slit each other's throats. The cyberwolf proved more decisive.

The sky darkened into a starfield with the *Ragnarök* visible a short distance away. Anvarr growled into the vox once again.

‘Throne of Earth! Cease your blasted singing, I said!’

The victory songs rising from the hold continued regardless, hardly improved by Cogfang's piercing howls.

Skaldr laughed over the vox from the Thunderhawk that had been sent to pick him up.

‘You had better get used it, brother,’ he said. ‘Tonight the Deathwolves will

honour Anvarr Rustmane with hours of song and oceans of mjod.’

The great blonde Pack Leader had acquitted himself well this day. He had shaken off a dose of dark eldar poison to cut down scores of Kabalite pirates, later joking that his half-drunken state had only served to improve his swing. Skaldr’s deeds would certainly be worth a mention in the sagas, no doubt something else for him to smile about.

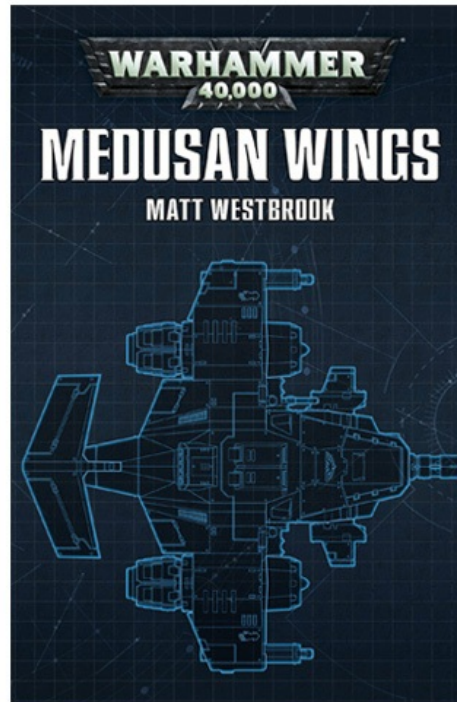
Anvarr scowled as his passengers launched into another song. The Stormwolf’s makeshift repairs were holding up well, but hours more work awaited the Iron Priest upon docking. At least he had found a replacement totem that would properly honour the machine-spirit for today’s blessing.

In the hold below, the three surviving Blood Claws raised beakers of mjod to their grumbling Iron Priest, and to the slack-faced heads of the dark eldar twins pinned to the engine bulkhead by their long black hair. The eyes of the metal wolf’s head gleamed.

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