

WARHAMMER
40,000



JOSH REYNOLDS

A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

A SPACE WOLVES STORY

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A TRICK OF THE LIGHT

Josh Reynolds

Lukas was tired.

Exhaustion had become the sum totality of his existence. Fatigue-poisons pumped through his system, slowing everything to a glacial pace. More than once, he stumbled, nearly losing his footing on the ice. The palms of his hands and the soles of his feet were raw and bleeding, where they were not numb.

Everything hurt.

Not just from the cold and the effort. The ache he felt went deeper than that, into the very marrow of him. His gut churned, as if something sought release. A gout of breath escaped his lips, and a groan. A laugh pursued the groan. The laugh circled like a scavenger bird, before dissolving into agonised chuckles.

Everything hurt.

Lukas looked at his hands, to make sure that they were still his. They were bigger than he remembered, thicker. Patches of red – some of it hair, not blood – marked his bare arms. He curled his fingers into fists, and his knuckles popped like shifting ice. Something inside him shifted, changing position, growing larger. Nausea ripsawed through him.

He stumbled and sank to one knee, head bowed against the wind sweeping down from the north. The cold thrummed through him, teasing every nerve. His skin was thicker now, but the cold was as sharp as a serpent's fang. He could see farther, but his eyelids were crusted with ice. His lungs were bigger, but they were filled with the cold. Nonetheless, a fire burned in him.

They called it the Canis Helix, those priests in the great mountain. But he knew it was the blood of the gods. A red, wet wolf, let loose inside him, hollowing him out and filling his empty skin with its strength. A spasm of pain rippled through him, as his spine realigned.

‘Click, crack, pop,’ he grunted, mimicking the sound of shifting bones. His jaw sagged and something that was as much a moan as a laugh slipped out, to dart from rock to rock until it was swallowed by the vast, white emptiness which surrounded him.

The wilderness into which he had been abandoned was a labyrinth of ice and occasional spurs of stone, of flurrying snow and arctic mist and freezing temperatures. The thick packed ice shifted underfoot, cracking and reforming. High above, great trees clustered against the jagged fangs of rock, marking the border between sky and earth. Past this border, the great peaks of Asaheim. And at their heart, the Fang – the greatest of them all, stretching upwards into the eternal night-sea where the stars floated, like a dagger driven up into the belly of the sky.

‘Or maybe it’s just drool dripping down from the Star-Wolf’s muzzle,’ he muttered. His fingers ached. He looked down. ‘Ha,’ he said, wonderingly. Curved splinters of bone had pushed through his fingertips. Those were new. He laughed and then winced, clutching himself with his new claws.

It hurt to laugh. Lukas did it anyway, forcing the sound out. Laughter was a weapon. His only weapon. The ice, the cold, the gods and their priests, even his own people at times, all wanted him dead. He’d nearly died on the day of his birth, when he’d been cut from his mother’s belly, blue-faced and silent. His father had almost cast him to the waves then, but even dying, his mother had been as fierce a she-wolf as ever trod the deck of a raiding ship. And so little Lukas had survived. Had grown, and learned the truth of life, from a broken father and a dead mother, and a tribe which gave little thought to either.

And so, he laughed. The wind howled, and he laughed. He forced himself to his feet, and the cold lashed at him. Trying to knock him down. Trying to make him bow. The world, and its men and gods, had always sought to make him bow.

Instead, Lukas laughed.

And when he could no longer laugh, he slumped. He was tired. He wanted this to be over. One way or another. He sat on his haunches, waiting. His least twitch was echoed and redoubled, swelling to fill the emptiness. He turned, studying the way he’d come. The path he’d taken was clear, his deep-set tracks marring the snow. Sweat steamed on his body, filling the air with his scent. His trail was obvious. Even a blind man could follow it.

‘I know you’re there,’ he said, softly.

Knowknowtherethere came the echo. It mingled with the fading echoes of his laughter, to give the impression that something, somewhere, found this situation

amusing.

‘Push on, boy. Push on, before it catches up.’

He turned, listening. There were many voices on the wind. But this one was familiar. He shook his head. ‘Kveldulf – go away, you’re dead.’

‘Do I look dead, boy? On your feet, we’ve leagues to go yet, and this meat won’t carry itself. Up. Up!’

He scraped the ice from his eyes. Kveldulf was as he remembered, tall and iron-haired, with his plaited beard and hauberk of dragon-hide. Kveldulf, who bore the scars of a troll’s claws on his face. Kveldulf, who’d been ripped open and strung like a red trail across the white by a trick of the light. The phantom crouched, blood from his wounds pooling beneath him. Kveldulf grinned. Bone shone through the ragged tatters of his cheek. ‘There, boy. Pick it up.’ A gore-stained finger pointed. The elk lay on the ice, steam rising from it still. ‘Get that on your shoulders and let’s go. The others are waiting.’

He remembered the elk. He remembered tracking it, with Kveldulf and the others, for three rises of the moon, into the north wind. Following spots and splashes of blood. ‘It ran us a good race, boy, but nothing escapes us,’ Kveldulf said. ‘Up now. The tribe needs meat. Can’t let them starve, boy, even if they do throw rocks at you on occasion.’

‘You never threw rocks at me.’

‘No. But I thought about it. Up.’

He pushed himself up. Kveldulf was right. The tribe needed meat. They had been counting on the hunters. The season had been bad for them. The sea ate their island home bite by bite as the weather turned and the waters rose. No man knew how much the landscape would change with the turning of the season, and solid ground was an illusion. The sea had its due eventually, and inexorably.

His childhood had been spent aboard ship, as the tribe navigated across the icy waters. It had been a savage, sea-borne existence – grinding, deadly tedium, broken by moments of sheer terror. When they’d finally found a scrap of rock to call their own, little had changed. They’d exchanged many-tentacled things with razor-beaks for ice trolls, and drowning for starvation. It was all faintly ridiculous. Lukas had learned to laugh early, and often. The others hadn’t understood. They hadn’t got the joke.

‘We fought so hard, and for what?’ Lukas said. ‘A bit of rock that will sink into the sea sooner or later, and carry all of us with it, that’s what.’ He looked around. The elk was gone. So was Kveldulf. ‘You weren’t here,’ he said. He wanted to howl. Kveldulf was dead. They were all dead. Killed by a trick of the light, with

only him to tell the tale.

And that was the cruellest joke of all. Because no one would ever hear it, and even if they did, no one would believe him. He'd told too many stories, made too many boasts, to ever be believed in anything he said. Lukas Lie-Tongue. The son of a witch and a pickled corpse. Fit only for bedding women, avoiding work and being pelted with stones.

'Not a bad life,' he said, half-hoping Kveldulf would come back to tell him how wrong he was.

When no reply came, he shook his head and pushed on. The only sound was the crunch of snow. It echoed strangely, hesitantly. *Crunchcrunch*. As if someone were stepping on his shadow. He wanted to turn, but he didn't want Kveldulf to yell at him again. The tribe was counting on them. They needed meat. It was soon to be the Time of Ice and Fire, and they would have to move, to flee the rising waters and seek higher ground.

Only the tribe had already moved. And Kveldulf was dead. It had been months since the others had died. Months into the season of upheaval, when the ice melted and the seas rose. He clutched at his head, trying to shake his thoughts into coherency. What was the past, and what was the present? The wolf in him growled. For beasts, all time was the present.

'But I'm not a beast, am I?' he said. 'Not yet.' His grip tightened, drawing blood. The pain was good. It brought clarity with it.

He knew who he was, where he was. And he knew why. This was a test of worth. The second test of Morkai, the great two-headed wolf who guarded the gates of the underworld. The Sky Warriors were testing him. To see if he deserved a place among them. And so they had forced a wolf into his belly, and cast him out into the wilds of Asaheim, to see if the beast chewed its way free of his flesh.

'Those the Canis Helix does not kill, it transforms forevermore.'

A rough voice, like the crash of waves against the hull of a ship. He looked up, into the wise, ancient eyes of the Rune Priest who had overseen his first test, when he'd first stepped through the Gates of Morkai. The Sky Warrior loomed over him, taller than even Kveldulf and thrice as broad in his frost grey war-plate and thick robes of wolf-fur. Bone fetishes and runestones were set into the crannies of his armour, and each one crackled with untold power. A face like carved wood, inset with gleaming yellow stones for eyes, glared down at him, in judgement.

'There is a shadow on your trail.'

Lukas looked down at his shadow. ‘So I see.’

‘No, you don’t. Your mind is strong, though your body is frail. But what good is strength against the fire inside? For that is what we have awakened. Will you walk free, or be consumed?’

‘And who asked you to stir it up?’ Lukas spat. His jaw ached. He could feel the bones warping and thickening. His teeth split and flowered into fangs. He closed his eyes, trying to force down the rising heat. ‘I was quite happy to die on the ice.’

The Rune Priest frowned and leaned on his staff. The runes etched into its length blazed like thousands of tiny stars. ‘That is not your decision to make.’

Lukas stopped, swaying. ‘That’s where you are wrong. I can die here if I wish.’

The Rune Priest didn’t answer. He wasn’t there any longer, if he ever had been. Lukas pawed at his face, trying to resist the urge to simply... sit. Sit and wait. ‘Death will be along, by and by,’ he murmured. A saying of Kveldulf’s. Very fatalistic, Kveldulf. Lukas could see the appeal, just now. He looked towards the horizon, and the distant stretch of rock that was the Fang. Were his tormentors watching him? He wanted nothing more than spite them, to show them the folly of forcing their demands upon him.

‘I’ll just sit here and freeze,’ he said. ‘If you want me, you’ll have to come and get me.’ An empty threat. They wouldn’t come. They didn’t care, not really. The old wolf had explained that much, at least.

Thought of the Wolf Priest made him snarl again. That grim ancient, with eyes like fire, made Lukas want to keep going, if only so he could spit in the old wolf’s face. Memories burst across his mind, like barely healed scars tearing open. Of lying in the snow, his blood pumping from deep wounds, his mind slowing, drifting into the mists of death.

It had all gone wrong. From the moment that they had set out, their luck had been bad. The elk had proven stronger than their aim, and had led them a faltering chase across melting ice and up into the wild places. They’d followed, because what else could they do? They’d tracked it to its place of dying, only to discover that another hunter had beaten them to it. One who’d been in no mood to share.

Egyl had died first. Killed in the moment of discovery, his screams cut short as the snow swallowed him up. The others had followed, one at a time, until only Lukas remained, struggling on, fleeing south to the imagined safety of the tribe. Their killer had stalked him for days, following as close as his own shadow, until, at last, it had struck – and he had struck back. He’d sworn to whatever

gods might be listening to take its pelt, if they would just give him the strength to do so. His blood and that of the beast had mingled on the snow as they fought, and it had fled, leaving him where he lay. He had been unable to move, for the pain. Things had been broken in him, or else torn loose from their moorings.

It had been a good death. Not the sort he would've preferred, but a fine death regardless. A worthy passing, if unseen. Only it hadn't been unseen. There had been an observer to the entire ordeal, from EGYL's passing to Lukas' last stand. As he'd lain there, leaking out his life, he'd felt a tremor pass through the ground. The crunch of ice and rock as something heavy strode towards him, out of the snow. Something black and massive, like a shard of night made flesh.

Red eyes had glowered down at him. Red eyes, set into a helm of bone and metal, a helm in the shape of a wolf's snarling muzzle. A gauntlet of black metal had reached down and caught up his broken body, despite his weak protests. A Chooser of the Valiant, claiming his soul. 'You could have chosen any of them,' Lukas said, to the snow. 'Instead, you chose me. You must be feeling very foolish, just about now.'

As if in answer, the wind rose, blistering his flesh. Shards of ice pricked his eyes and stung his breath from him. His shadow stretched back for leagues, drawn out by the sun. For the moment, he fancied he had two shadows. He listened to the wind and his breath, and the echoes of his movements. *Crunchcrunch.*

'Why are you stopping, Lukas?' Gunnhild hissed, so close he almost jumped out of his skin. Her face was red, worn raw by the cold and wind. Her eyes were wide. Scared. They were all scared, though he was the only one to admit it. He laughed about it, but the others didn't. They couldn't see the humour.

'I heard it,' he said. 'It's behind us.'

'It's been behind us for days. We have to keep going.' Gunnhild spoke forcefully. She was forceful in everything she did. Older, sweeter memories slipped to the surface, and he brushed them aside. Now wasn't the time.

'If we could just *see* it...'

'Keep moving.' She grabbed one of his plaits and yanked on it. 'We have to keep moving or we'll wind up like Kveldulf and the others. The blink-devil will take us too.' Lukas looked at her, trying to focus. There was blood on her furs. There was blood everywhere. On her face. She was still talking, but he couldn't hear her over the wind. But he could hear the echoes of his footsteps, and he could hear his second shadow.

When Lukas looked back, Gunnhild was gone. He almost called out for her, as

he had then. And like then, it would have been wasted breath. The blink-devil left no survivors. Those it hunted, vanished. All save him.

Why had he alone survived?

Unseen, something snarled. He turned. His heart – his hearts? – thumped and rattled against his ribs, like a wild beast in a cage. The sound might have come from beside him, or many miles away. Volcanic fury welled up in him, savage and insistent. He scanned the white, hunting his second shadow. Wanting to leap, to tear.

But there was nothing, save the wind and the light of the sun on the snow and the ice. He closed his eyes, trying to still the rage, to calm himself. He laughed. It was more like a growl. That only made him laugh harder. Lukas wondered what Gunnhild would make of him now, naked and laughing in the snow?

‘She’d throw a rock at me,’ he said, as he turned back.

It wasn’t his fault that he had a sense of humour. If the gods did not expect him to make use of it, why give it to him? Unless they too liked a good joke.

‘No, that’s not it,’ he mumbled. He’d met the gods, and they were a humourless lot. He had seen the halls of Russ, and the high crags of Asaheim, though he’d never dreamed of, or wanted, such a thing. He was not the stuff of sagas. He was not a hero, not a Sky Warrior, no matter what the old wolf believed.

He was Lukas Lie-Tongue. He was boastful and foolish. He was a champion of japes and jests, not war. He had only been on the hunt because he’d infuriated one husband too many, and needed some time away. Kveldulf had dragged him by his ankle out of bed – not his own – and through the snow, lecturing him the entire way. The older warrior had taken Lukas in hand after his parents had died, reasoning that someone needed to. He hadn’t done a very good job, but at least he’d tried. It was more than Lukas could say for some.

‘You hear me, old wolf?’ he growled. ‘You made a mistake.’ Lukas did not know the Wolf Priest’s name, and he was certain that the old wolf didn’t know his. Nor, he suspected, did the old wolf care. What did the gods care for the names of mortal men? ‘You’ll know my name before I’m done, though. Whatever comes.’

As if in reply to his boast, the white wavered. The ground was shaking. A tremor. Not unusual for this time of year. Lukas heard ice grinding and water sloshing. He leapt an instant before the ground split, and slammed into the fang of ice as it pierced the way ahead. Water spewed upwards with a crackling roar, and a blanket of cold enveloped him. He sprang for stable ground. He would have to run.

Despite his fatigue, he moved fast, springing from ice-chunk to ice-chunk until he was within sight of solid ground. The last spar of ice began to crack under him, and he prepared himself to make one final leap. His hearts were hammering. It wasn't fear. Not really. It was frustration – the thought of dying here, like this, drove him on. Maybe that was why the old wolf had left him out here – to die.

The ice exploded upwards, ejecting a profusion of slippery tentacles, encrusted with barnacle-like growths of bone. They snagged him as he leapt, tightening about his limbs. He was jerked down into the water with bone-rattling force. The cold water hit him like a fist, and then he was twisting down, caught in a deadly net of flesh.

Kraken mostly kept to the depths of the sea. But sometimes, when the waters rose, one swam inland, only to become caught in whatever shallow basin or lake it found itself in when the waters inevitably receded. These unlucky beasts often starved, unless they were fortunate enough to happen across prey. Like, say, a lone warrior stumbling across the ice, distracted by memories and ghosts.

Lukas cursed, filling the cold water with a flurry of bubbles. He tore an arm free of the thrashing coils and grabbed hold of a bone spur, holding it back from impaling him. His blood billowed, clouding the water. Through the veil of red, he saw a razored beak roughly the size of a man rising towards him. Eyes like torches flickered greedily in the depths. It was a small one, thank the Allfather. If it had been full sized he would have had no chance at all. A tentacle coiled about his throat, bone hooks digging painfully into his flesh. He lashed out with his feet, first jerking them free and then kicking away the slashing tentacles. A blow caught him on the back of the head and sent him spinning.

For a moment his mind turned to broken glass. Memories pricked at him, overwhelming him. Gunnhild laughing, screaming... dying. The feel of hard rocks against his back as the old wolf dragged his bloody carcass to the foot of the Fang and left him there for the thrall-servitors to collect. Even then, he'd been underestimated. They had expected him to expire before his training could begin. But he lived, if only to spite them. Lukas had never done as others expected, and he wasn't about to begin now.

A coil tightened convulsively about his other arm, and he felt his bones creak in protest. The pain startled him from his reverie. Snarling, he ducked his head and buried his fangs in the tentacle. Bilious ichors flooded his mouth and throat as he savaged the unnatural flesh. As he'd hoped, it released him. But not for long. Bone hooks slashed down, tearing at him. Kraken were relentless, once

provoked. They would cheerfully fight larger monsters, just for a scrap of flesh.

Lukas kicked and flailed, trying to thrash a gap in the weaving thicket of tentacles that sought to bar his escape. His much-enlarged lungs strained as bludgeon-like blows struck him from all sides. He needed to get clear. He caught a blow on his forearm, letting the hooks dig into the meat and muscle, and sank the newly grown claws of his free hand into the tentacle. He braced his feet against the serpentine length and bit the kraken again. The wounded limb spasmed and swept out, carrying him with it.

Lukas snapped loose of the tentacle and tumbled slowly through the water. The kraken undulated after him. He began to swim for the dim light above, as quickly as his aching limbs could manage.

The kraken rose beneath him. The tips of its beak touched the soles of his feet, and he braced himself as its momentum carried them both out of the water. Lukas flipped through the air as the kraken twisted in its frenzy. Its beak snapped shut, just shy of his torso. He plummeted back down towards the ice. The kraken fell after him.

The ice nearly buckled beneath them. Lukas rolled aside as a tentacle slammed down over the spot where he'd landed. Out of the water, he could more easily discern the kraken's shape, and the squirming mass of its body. It was a yellowish colour, stripped with jagged markings of bluish green. Panting, he cast about for a weapon. He spotted a sliver of ice, as long and as thick as a spear, jutting up nearby. It would have to do. He sprang towards it, hoping to reach it before the kraken recovered.

The monster was wheezing like a bellows, its eyes rolling wildly in their filmy sockets. It heaved itself towards him, beak snapping. Bone-hooks thumped down, anchoring it as it hauled itself along. The ice was splintering beneath its weight. Lukas knew that if he didn't act soon, he'd be right back in the water, at the creature's mercy.

His hand closed around the splinter of ice and he wrenched it up, turning just as a trio of tentacles slapped down at him. He dodged one, rolling, and backpedalled away from the second, fighting to hold onto his makeshift spear. The third snared his ankle and jerked him into the air.

The kraken made a sound like the shriek of tearing metal and forced itself up, triangular head rising, beak wide open. It intended to swallow him before it slipped back into the water. He twisted in its grip, nearly popping his trapped leg from its socket. It released him, and he tumbled towards its open mouth. As he fell, he hurled the splinter of ice at one of the lamp-like eyes with all the force he

could muster. Then the beak was closing about him, seeking to grind and pierce him. He caught the dorsal mandible on his palms and managed to brace his feet against the ventral, holding them open. The saw-edged inner curve of the beak bit into his flesh, eliciting fresh agonies. The kraken was thrashing about, squealing in what he hoped was pain. Its muscles jerked and the pressure on his limbs increased.

Strong as he was, he wasn't capable of holding the monster's mouth open forever. Already, the beating he'd taken was wearing him down. Sweat stung his eyes. Lukas swung his head, looking for an escape route. Only one presented itself. With a curse that was almost a howl, Lukas thrust his arms and legs out to their fullest extension, momentarily dislocating the kraken's jaws. He seized the opportunity to throw himself down its gullet. He could've risked heading for open air, but the chance of the beak snapping shut on him was too great to ignore. This way, he at least had a hope of staying in one piece.

The kraken's throat was a narrow tube of rigid cartilage, lined with curved blades of bone. Lukas snapped several of these off as he slid down, inflicting more damage on himself as he did so. He wrenched one free of its mooring and began to hack at the cartilage with increasing desperation. The kraken was writhing in agony, and gusts of hot air rose up from beneath him, bathing him in an oily stench. He knew that he had to tear himself a hole before the monster managed to heave itself back into the water. When he'd succeeded in creating a crack, he forced the spine of bone into it and levered it into widening further.

He sank his fingers into the wound and began to pull. A low, throbbing sound pulsed upwards, like the reverberations of some unseen bell, and he began to wrench and jerk at the cartilage, until the gap was at last wide enough to accommodate his shoulders. Burning torrents of ichor poured over him as he forced himself into the gap. Rubbery purple flesh lay beyond and he tore at it with his teeth and fingers. There was a sound like sailcloth tearing, and then a blast of arctic cold washed over him.

Lukas, accompanied by a gout of ichor, sprawled on the ice, gasping. Behind him, the kraken made a choked, gurgling sound that resonated through his bones, and then collapsed. Its tentacles squirmed, striking at everything in its death throes. Lukas scrambled out of the way, lungs heaving.

'Bit off more than you could chew, eh?' he said, falling onto his back. He watched the kraken's final moments with dull interest. When it at last grew still, he realised that his stomach was rumbling.

It wasn't an elk, but it would do.

The change his body was undergoing was akin to a fire that needed constant fuel. He tore a tentacle free of the carcass and began to gorge on the rubbery, possibly toxic, flesh. As he assuaged his hunger, he noted that his spear of ice had struck its target – one of the creature’s eyes was gone, burst in a welter of gelid muck. But so too was the other eye. Something had torn the semi-luminescent orb from its socket and left it squashed on the ice. There were gouges on the kraken’s skull and what looked to be bite-marks on its tentacles.

Something had attacked the monster, even as it tried to devour him. The marks were familiar – indeed, he had similar scars on his own hide. Lukas grinned around a mouthful of kraken. ‘So that’s the way it is,’ he mumbled. He snatched a handful of snow from the ground and thrust it into his mouth. As it melted, he swallowed it, enjoying the soothing coolness. He’d screamed himself raw, fighting the beast. He sniffed the air, scenting nothing but the ichors of the kraken.

But the creature was nearby. It had been on his trail all along, following him at a careful distance. He wondered if it had been surprised, when it had caught his scent. Probably. He chuckled. ‘A good joke,’ he said. ‘Dropping me there. A good joke, old wolf.’ The old wolf had left Lukas where he’d first found him. Where the blink-devil had almost claimed him. He looked around, but saw nothing save falling snow and water vapour. ‘A very good joke,’ he said again, more quietly this time.

‘You and your damn jokes.’

‘It’s not my fault you have no sense of humour, Thord,’ Lukas said. Thord crouched in the snow, his intestines pooling around his ankles. Like Kveldulf and Gunnhild, Thord was dead. Meat for the beast, his complaints stifled by crushing jaws.

‘Quiet, Smiler. It’s out there... watching us.’ Thord didn’t look at him. Lukas was thankful. No one should have to see his cousin’s face stripped to bloody bone. Thord’s wounds were dripping, turning the white snow pink.

‘Let it,’ Lukas said, still chewing on a mouthful of kraken. ‘Let it watch, let it follow.’

‘If not for your jokes, we would not be here, Smiler,’ Thord said, accusingly. Smiler. The name some of Lukas’ kin had given him. They spat it like a curse. As if a smile were a weakness. As if good humour were the flaw in otherwise strong iron. Don’t joke, Smiler. Don’t laugh, Smiler. Don’t, don’t, don’t.

His kin had always tried to impose their will on him, to force him into the shape they dictated. And he had ever escaped that fate, if only by the skin of his teeth.

They wanted a warrior, he became a lover. They wanted stern, and he laughed at every opportunity. They thought him a coward, and he fought with animal fury, when pressed. He was not snow, to be packed and shaped. He was fire, rising and falling as it willed. He met Thord's cloudy gaze.

'If not for my jokes, Thord, we would be somewhere worse,' he said.

'We would be home.'

'As I said.' Lukas dipped his head to take a bite.

When he looked up, Thord was gone. Like Gunnhild. Like Kveldulf. Gone. He closed his eyes, remembering. Kveldulf had died third, after Egly and Harada. They had become lost after that. And one by one, they'd all gone, save him. Vanishing into the white, lost to snow and ice. Lost to the blink-devil.

That was what his people called it. Other tribes had other names for the beasts, but blink-devil described it well enough. The beasts were shapeshifters and lightbenders. They were never where you thought, and never looked the same way twice. According to the stories he'd heard as a boy, they were always behind you, no matter which way you turned. They moved in the blink of an eye, and between breaths. They hid in men's shadows, and lurked just out of sight.

Worst of all, they had a sense of humour. They would trail their prey for days, weeks, even months, harrying it to the point of exhaustion and madness before they struck for the final time. The common wisdom was that when one caught your scent, it was best to just cut to the chase and gut yourself.

Lukas had considered that, after it had taken Gunnhild, if only to spite the beast. He'd been alone then. But he'd always been alone, after a fashion. Part of the tribe, but separate. But the blink-devil had taken even that from him. And he'd resolved to take its life, in recompense. A bitter smile crept across his face.

'Only that didn't work out, did it?' he said. His words echoed back at him, and the kraken meat in his belly turned sour.

The ice suddenly dipped, as the weight of the kraken's corpse finally caused it to shatter. The mass slid into the water, nearly dragging Lukas with it. He leapt back, scrabbling for the rising edge of the ice. His fingers and toes found cracks and he pulled himself up, hand over hand, until he was balanced on the edge. He took a steadying breath, and leapt. The reverberations of the kraken's sinking stretched outwards, pursuing him as he dropped to the next floe of ice and began to run.

Head down, Lukas pelted for solid ground. His limbs pumped, carrying him to safety. The cracks pursued him for longer than he liked to think about, zigzagging in his wake. He leapt over them when they crossed his path, and tried

to outpace them.

When the ground at last stopped trembling and the ice subsided, he allowed himself to sink down, panting. He could barely hear the wind over the rushing of his blood. He looked up, trying to spy the way ahead. The snow was falling more thickly now. A black shape watched him from a ridge of ice and stone many leagues away. He blinked. He could see further now, but even so, he could just barely make out the hulking shape, clad in thick furs, standing amongst the scrub trees. He recognized it regardless. The old wolf was watching him. He forced himself to his feet, chest heaving.

‘Feel free to applaud,’ Lukas shouted, casting his voice into the teeth of the wind.

Snow swirled, obscuring his vision. When it cleared, the shape was gone. He threw back his head and laughed. ‘You’ll miss the best part.’ His words did not echo. The snow swallowed them up. He took a step.

Crunchcrunch.

Lukas shifted, tensing. ‘Is this it, then?’ he said. ‘Kraken not to your taste, perhaps?’

Crunchcrunch.

He whipped around, bare fist hissing through snow. He thought – just for a moment – that he’d touched something. Then it was gone. He could hear the sound of ice cracking. And voices on the wind. He clutched himself, as the thing inside him surged up, rocking his frame with its exertions. It wanted to be free, to hunt.

‘Can’t hunt what you can’t see, fool,’ he hissed, through clenched teeth. He’d learned that the hard way. They all had. One by one, the blink-devil had taught them to fear the unseen. All except him. He’d taught it to fear *him*.

It came back in a rush. The stink of blood, the too-sweet odour of its oily hide. A glint of fang. The sound of claws sinking into flesh, tearing. And the weight of his knife. He’d let it get close, let it show itself, thinking him worn down. And then he’d seen the colour of its blood, spattering the snow. How it had shrieked!

It had underestimated him. It wasn’t alone in that. Everyone underestimated him, even the gods. They’d left him out here, naked and alone. His hands flexed. He wished he had his knife, something, anything to cut with. Claws were fine, but he wasn’t yet a beast...

Out in the white, wolves howled. Or maybe not wolves. He wasn’t alone out here. He wasn’t the only one being tested by the Allfather. Part of him wanted to join them, to throw back his head and howl. Howl until the ghosts left him alone.

Howl until there was nothing left of him but the red wolf nestled in his gut. But he still had a hunt to finish. He set his feet back on the path to the Fang and began to walk.

‘That’s what this is all about, isn’t it?’ he muttered, talking both to himself as well as the creature lurking just out of sight. He remembered the heat of the great fiery rivers which ran to either side of the Gate of Morkai, down in the roots of the Fang. He remembered the apprehension which had gripped him, as he looked up into the dual muzzles of the wolf-god carved there over the portal; the worry that he was truly as unfit as he believed, and that all his days were done. That he’d been saved from certain, if honourable, doom only to meet an ignoble end in the kingdom of the gods.

He laughed. ‘And wouldn’t that have been the perfect end to a perfect life?’ But it hadn’t ended there. Determined to be done with it all, for good or ill, he had braved the gate, and found the Rune Priest waiting for him there. They had spoken at length, in the dark and quiet. About what, Lukas could not fully recall. And then had come the final test. The old wolf had come for him, and dragged him away. Had taken him out of the Fang and into the wilds and thrown him down onto the ice without a word.

‘Right back where we started. And what’s the point of that?’ Lukas continued on, cursing the old wolf the entire time. He owed the old wolf, for taking him into the blizzard, to Asaheim. Owed him and hated him in equal measure. If he hadn’t been watching...

‘You would have died,’ Kveldulf said, striding along to the right of him, one arm holding in his torn guts. ‘Just like us, boy.’ He gestured, blood dripping from his fingers. Lukas didn’t have to look around to know Kveldulf hadn’t come alone, this time. ‘And wouldn’t that have been the joke of a lifetime?’

Lukas stopped. ‘You never really understood what a joke was, did you?’

‘Too late to learn now, I suppose,’ Kveldulf said.

Lukas looked away. ‘He should have saved you.’

‘Too old,’ Kveldulf said. He looked down at his stomach. ‘Who knew a body had so many guts in it? Like a coil of rope, unspooling across the snow.’

Lukas grimaced. ‘Then he should have taken Thord, or Eglyl, or Gunnhild...’ He glared at the snow. ‘One of the others.’

‘And when have the gods ever chosen a woman to journey to Asaheim, you great dunce?’ Gunnhild said, appearing to his left. She didn’t sound bitter, merely amused. ‘Outside of those vulgar stories of yours, I mean.’

‘I’d have gone, but you got me killed,’ Thord said. He stood in Lukas’ path,

flanked by the others; indistinct faces blotted out by the snow and his own failing memories. The tribulations he had undergone had weakened his recall, layering new lessons over the old. Lukas glared at his cousin.

‘Go to Hel, Thord.’

‘Already there, Smiler.’ Thord held his hands out, letting his wounds gape open and his insides bulge out like startled serpents. Lukas laughed.

‘You dropped something.’

Thord grimaced. Then he was gone. Lukas wondered if ghosts sulked.

Behind him, something growled. Softly, softly. A susurrus of intent. Lukas crouched, muscles tensing, teeth bared. No wonder Thord had left. Something slunk through the snow, circling him. Keeping its distance. How long had it been following him? Hours? Days? He shook his head. How long had he been out here?

‘Not long enough.’

The voice was guttural, like ice floes colliding in a storm-tossed sea. The old wolf stalked beside him, war-plate creaking. He left no prints in his wake, despite his weight. ‘Not long enough to learn respect. To learn that you are nothing but what the Allfather chooses to make of you, pup.’

The Wolf Priest had refused to call him by name, as if Lukas were not worthy of such familiarity. ‘You’re not worth anything,’ the old wolf said, reading the look on his face. ‘Not yet. Not until you join the pack.’

‘Who says I want to join?’

The old wolf grunted. ‘The Allfather.’

‘Your Allfather watched them die,’ Lukas said, his fingers curling into fists. His new claws gouged wounds in his palms. He knew the old wolf wasn’t here. He was just another trick of the light, like Kveldulf and Gunnhild. A phantom sent to torment him. To test him. Regardless, he would say his piece. ‘You watched, and they died. You could have done something.’

‘I did.’

‘Besides that,’ Lukas growled.

‘I am not your nursemaid, pup. I did my duty. I am a Chooser of the Valiant.’

‘Then you chose poorly.’

The old wolf was silent. Then, ‘Maybe so. But we will not know until you fail.’

Lukas smiled. ‘I’m tempted to let it kill me, just so I can see the look on your face.’

‘If you are dead you will see nothing at all, save the jaws of Morkai as he feasts on your soul,’ the old wolf said, his voice as deep as the sea, from shore to shore.

Lukas stepped back, unnerved despite himself. 'I don't understand this.'

'You do not have to understand.'

Lukas felt he'd had this conversation before. He shook his head. 'Shut up. You're not here. Just a trick of the light. A trick of my weakness.' He laughed and closed his eyes. 'For that matter, am I even here? Perhaps I still stand in the Gate of Morkai, dreaming, as the Rune Priest digs through my mind.'

When he opened his eyes, the old wolf was gone. Lukas snorted. That was gods for you... never around when you needed them. But now that he'd made his appearance, perhaps this saga was coming to its close. Behind him, something growled softly. He heard the whisper of heavy paws, treading on his tracks. He was hurt. Bleeding. Weak. Lukas smiled thinly. The blink-devil was clever. It had been waiting for him to tire, to grow weary. The kraken must've surprised it. It had thought the creature was stealing its prey, and had attacked like any enraged predator. The way it had attacked Eglyl, at the beginning of all of this.

'And here is the lesson,' Lukas said. 'All of it – an accident. A mistake from beginning to end.'

'And thus you betray your foolishness.'

Lukas turned. A different Sky Warrior now. Not the old wolf, but the Rune Priest again in his bone charms and rune-etched war-plate, a stern look on his ancient face. Lukas grinned.

'Come back for another chat?'

'There is a spark in you, pup. A spark which may yet be fanned into a flame of greatness.'

Lukas laughed. 'No one has ever accused me of being great.' This was the same conversation they'd had beneath the Gate of Morkai, he thought, though he couldn't be sure. Were these hallucinations, or memories? Or maybe both. Maybe this moment and that were all one. Wolves experienced only the present. For them, past and future blended into an eternal now. Why should it be any different for these wolves, though they walked on two legs rather than four? What did time mean to an immortal, after all?

'No, I expect not.' Thin lips twisted in a mirthless smile. The Rune Priest shook his head. 'Then, in the eyes of the Allfather, even the least of us might yet prove our worth before the Wolf Time.'

Lukas stopped. He could feel the sea surging deep beneath the ice. 'And is that what this is all about, then? Me proving my worth?'

'It is a test. All of it. From the moment of your birth, to the method of your dying.' The Sky Warrior stared down at him. 'That is what you do not

understand, pup.'

'I understand,' Lukas said, resisting the urge to snarl. 'But I don't like it.'

'It is not up to you to like it. Merely to accept it, and persevere. Such is the will of the Allfather.'

'How do you know?'

'He speaks to us.'

'He must do so very quietly, because I've never heard him.'

The blow came so suddenly, that Lukas was on his hands and knees before he registered it. He wheezed and clutched at his chest. His palm came away bloody. The skin of his torso was marred by claw marks. The Sky Warrior was gone. Something else, infinitely preferable for all its hostility, was in his place.

'Well then,' Lukas growled, thrusting himself to his feet. 'Finally.' He lunged. He was off-balance, and the movement was awkward.

Even so, he got a handful of greasy fur. Claws tore along his ribs and back as the blink-devil leapt on him, biting and tearing. He couldn't see it properly. It vanished, spilling his blood and dancing away with an eager whine. His nerves caught up with the damage and he staggered. Vibrant streaks of red sluiced down his shoulders and flanks, staining the snow.

'You remember me, don't you?' he gasped. 'I've only ever been hit like that by people I've personally offended. You must have taken that stabbing personally.'

All was silent, save for the susurrus of the snow. But it was still there, still circling him, watching him, jaws sagging. It had a taste of him now and wouldn't flee again. He was grateful for that – for a chance at a proper ending to things. 'Yes, you took it personally, didn't you? They always take it personally.'

Suddenly dizzy, he sank to one knee. The ice spun about him. His limbs felt like leaden weights and his blood made rosettes on the snow. 'Just like before,' he said, chuckling harshly. 'Only no knife, now. And I've been chewed up and spat out by a kraken.' He ducked his head, and peered surreptitiously at his shadow. Just the one, for the moment. That would change. 'But you're still afraid, aren't you? That's why I'll have the last laugh – that's why I survived, when the others died. Someone has to laugh over your lonely grave, beast, and who better than me?' He turned in place, arms spread, inviting attack. Hoping for it. 'The gods interrupted us last time. They bought us both a little time to prepare for this moment, but that's done now. So let's get to it.'

Out in the snow, something snarled. He fancied he heard an element of frustration in that sound. Of gratification long-delayed. How long had it hunted him? How long had it lingered here, with the taste of his blood in its mouth and

the ache of his blade in its flesh? It had followed him across cracking ice and through frost-shrouded forests, down valleys and up mountains. And for what? Had the gods truly known, or was this simply fate? Was it truly the same creature, or was he simply deluding himself into seeing an end to his story where there was none?

‘No,’ he said, smiling. ‘Not even the gods are that cruel. To deny one of us, certainly. But both – never.’ His smile vanished as the blink-devil lunged at him again, vaulting out of the snow onto his back. He was knocked flat by its weight. Teeth dug into the back of his neck, but only for an instant. He threw his head back, and felt bone crunch. His attacker yelped and retreated, too swiftly for him to follow.

Lukas rolled to his feet. He touched his neck, and felt wetness. He was a mass of wounds, none of them debilitating as yet. But each one slowed him down just a bit more. And the creature was fast. Faster than him, even if he hadn’t been injured, and maybe stronger. It was hungry, and hunger lent it ferocity. He knew the feeling. Whatever strength he’d drawn from the kraken was almost used up.

He tried to spot the blink-devil in the snowfall, but it was impossible to focus on for any length of time. He couldn’t see it clearly, no matter how much he squinted. There were three of it, and then five and then none. It flickered in and out of sight, becoming snow, rock and other things. It was disorientating, like trying to fight a nightmare. Every blow he launched passed through where it had been. It wasn’t changing shape – not really. It merely reflected your perceptions back at you. It showed you what you expected to see.

Claws tore furrows in his back, and he stumbled forward, cursing. It had got behind him, somehow. He was stronger than he had been, and tougher. But the creature was stronger still. Jaws fastened in the meat of his calf, and he was yanked off balance. He fell face down, busting his nose. He kicked out with his free foot, and felt something give beneath the wild blow. The blink-devil rolled away, yelping.

Lukas dragged himself to his feet, limping now.

‘Come on,’ he growled. ‘Is that it? You got a taste before. Come have the full meal.’ He could smell its stink on the air, growing stronger and fading away again, as if it were drawing close and then retreating. It was a wary beast. Even now, drawn by the scent of his familiar blood. He wondered if his blows had hurt it – or maybe it had been injured by the kraken, earlier. ‘Here I stand, beast... alone, bleeding, freezing. I’m here. Come and get me.’

Out of the corner of his eye, he glimpsed familiar faces. The dead were

watching him. Kveldulf, Gunnhild... even Thord. They had all gathered to watch this moment, their faces set, grim. Even now, they refused to laugh. Lukas shook his head, trying to clear it. 'Let's give them a show, shall we?'

'This is not a joke,' the Rune Priest said. Lukas couldn't see him, but heard his voice as if the Sky Warrior were looming just behind him. Lukas licked his teeth, tasting his own blood.

'I disagree,' he said, simply. Another test. It was all a test, of him, of his worth. Perhaps, as he'd joked, he was not on the ice, was not truly facing the creature that had killed his friends and kin. Perhaps it was all in his head. He laughed. 'No. If this were in my head, you'd be a woman, old devil. Or a table, groaning with food and drink. And I'd have trousers on, at least. But it's the same test, isn't it?'

The Test of Morkai. Two tests in one. 'Two heads, same wolf,' Lukas said. He laughed again, relishing in the sound. 'That's a good joke, isn't it?' He tapped the side of his head as he turned, trying to follow the blink-devil's movements. 'They make you think it's two, but it's all the same test, to see if you're worthy. And it never ends, does it? They keep testing you, keep trying to make you fit, to force you into the grave they dug for you before you were even born. But I refuse to lay down for anyone but myself...'

The blink-devil came at him in a rush. *Crunchcrunch*. The sound of its footsteps, in the echo of his own. It moved with him, breathed with him, growled with him. It was his shadow. Lukas blinked. He glanced down. He had two shadows now. He smiled. *Crunchcrunchcrunch*. He spun, hands extending to catch hold of a hairy throat as something launched itself at him, out of a snow flurry.

'There you are,' he spat, as its momentum carried them both backwards. The ice cracked beneath them, and he rolled over, dragging the beast with him. Its fangs pierced the flesh of his forearm, and he tightened his grip on its throat, trying to throttle it. It had him pinned, its weight almost equal to his own. Even now, it could kill him, if he didn't kill it first. And even now, part of him hesitated. To kill it was to do as the gods wished, and he desperately wished to spite them, to show them that he was not their puppet.

The blink-devil snarled and the bones in his forearm cracked as its jaws tightened. Up close, he could see that it resembled a wolf, but only in the sense that it had four legs and a tail. It was as much a kraken, or an elk, as a wolf, as if some mad god had taken the most unpleasant bits from all of the other animals and tied them together with strings of malice. It was a shadow on clear ice, a

shape seen out of the corner of the eye, a nightmare of fangs and claws and shimmering fur.

He felt no fear, staring into its mad, yellow eyes. Only a sense of purpose, of satisfaction long delayed. Here was the last, best moment of an ill-starred life. The gods thought this moment theirs, but it was his. They had given him the tools for victory, but it was still his hand which wielded them. He would kill the beast, but not for the Sky Warriors in their icy fastness. He would do it for Kveldulf, and Gunnhild and even Thord. He owed them that much. But mostly, he would do it for himself.

‘You can’t kill me, old devil... I was born dead,’ he snarled. He jerked his bitten arm aside, yanking it off balance, exposing its neck. He buried his new-sprouted fangs in its hairy throat. It struggled, whining, and he wrapped his legs around its middle, trapping it. No more running. Its blood tasted bitter, and he drank deeply of it. Claws dug canyons into his chest and sides. It kicked at him, trying to disembowel him. He took the pain as he continued to savage its throat, tearing flesh and muscle, cracking bone. Laughing as he did so.

With a final kick, the blink-devil died. A shudder ran through its frame and it became a dead weight, pressing him against the ice. Lukas shoved the limp carcass aside and spat out a lump of gristle and sinew. Panting, he stared up at the sky.

‘Did I win?’ he said. ‘I hope so, otherwise I’ll never get to see the old wolf’s disappointment.’ He looked over at the blink-devil. It lay still and stiff, frost already collecting on its matted fur. Even dead, it was hard to perceive. Soon, it would vanish forever, and take his triumph with it.

He was tired. And cold.

Lukas rolled over, and crawled towards the creature. The wolf in him wanted to feed, to gorge on the cooling meat of his kill. But he had other priorities. ‘I swore to the Allfather that I’d take your pelt, beast. Even I wouldn’t go back on such an oath. So, off it comes. Now, hold still, eh?’ Lukas caught a handful of the beast’s pelt and began to slice it free from the body with his claws. It was rough going, but he managed.

‘I feel as if there were easier ways of doing this,’ he said, as he worked. ‘A drinking contest, perhaps? Last man to the bottom of a cask loses. Or an eating contest. We always said that a man who could stomach Gunnhild’s cooking was worthy of joining the gods.’ He ignored the flash of pain her name caused. Gunnhild was dead.

‘And you are not.’

Lukas looked up. The voice echoed in his head like distant thunder, and drove out the cold that clung to his bones. A golden figure, shining like the sun at the height of summer, was watching him. He could not make out its features, such was its radiance, but he recognized the being regardless.

‘No, I’m not,’ he said, his voice hoarse with fear, or perhaps hope. ‘Why? Why choose me?’

The Allfather said nothing. Lukas peered up at him, waiting for him to do something. Anything. Then, softly, slowly, like the rumble of a distant avalanche, the Allfather chuckled. Turned away. Vanished. As if he had never been. And maybe he hadn’t. With such a being, it was impossible to say. Either way, Lukas had his answer.

His gods might not laugh. But their god certainly did.

Lukas’ grin almost split his face. He bent to his task, and finished stripping the blink-devil of its fur. He stood and swung the dripping pelt over his shoulders. He looked down at the carcass. It was shrunken, somehow, in death. A thing broken by its own hubris. It had assumed itself the stronger, and seen him as prey. As the kraken had. But he had proven it wrong, even as he had proven his people wrong.

As he had proven the old wolf wrong.

Lukas looked around. The dead surrounded him, watching as the Allfather had. Then they too faded, one by one, until he stood alone on the ice. He missed them, but he was alive and they had gone somewhere he had no intention of going until the time of his choosing. He still had so much to do.

Wrapped in the skin of his shadow, Lukas continued his journey. And when he at last reached the base of the Fang, the old wolf was waiting for him, skull-helmet tucked beneath one arm.

‘You still live,’ the old wolf said, looking down at him.

‘I do.’

‘Mayhap your survival is a credit to me then, as well as yourself.’ The old wolf grimaced as he examined the pelt Lukas wore. ‘You slew the doppelgangrel, then.’

Lukas didn’t have to ask what the Wolf Priest was referring to. ‘You knew it was out there,’ he said, without rancour.

‘It was—’

‘A test, yes,’ Lukas said, his grin tight. The wolf in him snarled with fury, but he forced it back into its cage. ‘To see if I was worthy.’

‘Even so.’

‘And I passed. The question I have now is... are you worthy of me?’ Lukas was gratified to see a look of incomprehension pass over the old wolf’s face. He pulled the blink-devil – no, the doppelgangrel – pelt tighter about himself, and he realised that it still held its glamour. The old wolf squinted at him, trying to focus.

‘I saw in you the spirit of the wolf, and you have not proven me wrong.’ One black gauntlet gestured to his trophy. ‘Toss that filthy pelt aside. You no longer require it.’

‘I think it suits me,’ Lukas said. The gods saw the world in grey absolutes, but the world was more like the stinking fur he wore – ever changing. He wondered if perhaps that was why he had survived – not for vengeance, or to prove his own worth, but to test theirs. Perhaps that too was the Allfather’s will.

Or maybe, he simply had a sense of humour.

The old wolf’s grimace slid into an uncertain frown. ‘Then keep it. And keep your scars as well. You’ve earned them. The Allfather welcomes you, pup.’

Lukas met the Wolf Priest’s gaze unflinchingly.

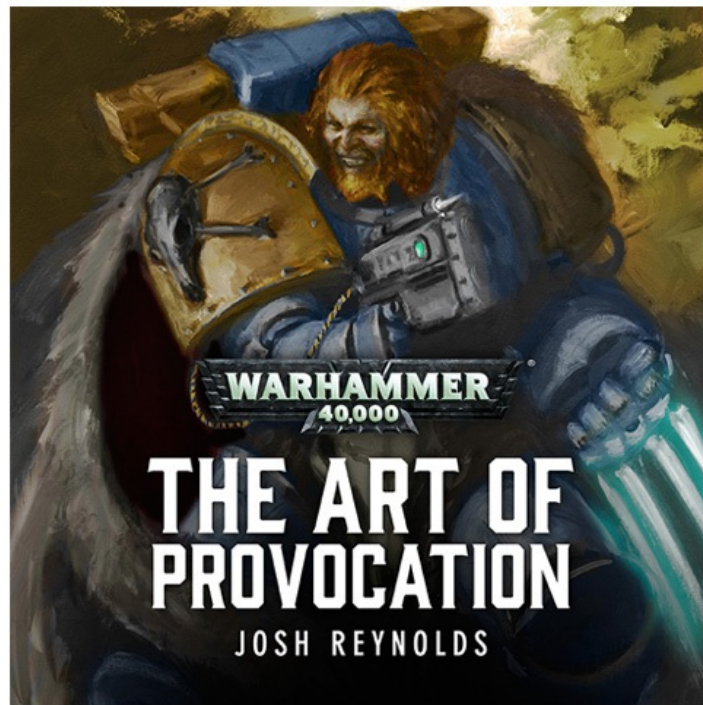
‘My name is Lukas,’ he said.

And he laughed.

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Josh Reynolds is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio drama *Master of the Hunt*. In the Warhammer World, he has written the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He has also written many stories set in the Age of Sigmar, including the novels *Nagash: The Undying King*, *Fury of Gork*, *Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He lives and works in Northampton.

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