

BEN COUNTER

**Twelve Wolves
Thunderwolf**

THUNDERWOLF

Arjac led them into a valley where the worst of the blizzard winds could not go — here they could hear his voice. There were a dozen of them, their young faces burned by the frozen wind. They wore thick furs because they had not yet begun the transformation into warriors who could weather the raw Fenrisian winter.

‘Some of you,’ said Arjac Rockfist, ‘will one day walk these snows as Space Wolves. How many I cannot say. But I can say that all of you will walk them on the day of your Bleeding.’

These novices had been taken from their tribes by the Wolf Priests to undergo the ordeals that would mark some out as potential Space Wolves. They were the fiercest and bravest of their peoples. All of them had killed already, and well. Some of the dying had been carried from a battlefield atop a mound of enemy dead and made well again by apothecarion technologies that seemed magic to the nomads and hunters of Fenris. But now apprehension showed on their faces for they faced two legends. First, Arjac Rockfist, the Mountain, mighty in his Terminator armour. And second, the Bleeding.

One novice stepped forward. ‘I will walk it this day,’ he said, throwing back his fur hood to reveal a face lined with the marks of war in spite of his youth. ‘I know how to survive. My people brave the wilds of Fenris before we can walk!’

‘You will have your chance soon, novice Alaf,’ said Arjac. ‘You will all be taken to a place some distance from here, alone, naked save for a wolf’s skin and a knife. You will make your way back to the Fang by whatever means you can. Some die, many are maimed, but all must undergo the Bleeding’s trial before they can aspire to enter the Fang as a Space Wolf.’

‘Then why can we not take the Bleeding now?’ demanded Alaf. ‘We are ready. Or rather, I am ready, and these other whelps who are not shall die in the attempt as they should!’

‘The first lesson I have to teach you,’ said Arjac, ‘is that you do not know everything. Even you, Alaf. I have chosen this place for the second lesson. Novices, speak of the dangers you will face.’

‘The cold,’ came one voice from the back of the pack.

‘The first among them,’ said Arjac. ‘The cold will kill you. By staying calm, seeking shelter and building a fire, you may survive the hour.’

‘Ripworms,’ came another voice. ‘Venom blooms!’ cried another.

‘I thought you said “dangers”,’ said Alaf. ‘I strangled a ripworm in my crib.’

‘All must be overcome,’ said Arjac. ‘Predatory eyes watch us even now. But think on a question. Why are we hunted?’ He was answered by uncertain glances from the novices. ‘Another way to put it, perhaps. Why does Fenris want us dead?’

Arjac walked on and the novices followed. Ahead, the dark maw of a cave yawned open.

‘Some of you rode with the horselords across the equatorial tundra,’ said Arjac as he walked. ‘Some sailed with the Kraken tribes. Some fought over the mountain passes with the Vulture and Bear tribes. You are all strong. If you were not, you would not be here. But there is more to a Space Wolf than strength.’ Arjac turned to the novices just as he reached the threshold of the cave. ‘On my Blooding, I faced a thunderwolf.’

The novices would not show their fear, but Arjac could taste it on them. The thunderwolves were powerful, fabled, murderous creatures, born predators. They could not be tamed — some permitted a Space Wolf rider, but they remained individual and strong-willed. They would consider a human being, especially a near-naked novice dying from the cold, to be thoroughly edible.

‘I faced it with a spear,’ said Arjac with a faint smile. ‘Let that be some free advice, brothers. Tie your knife to a branch. Make a spear. Do not tell the Wolf Priests I told you.’

‘Did you kill it?’ asked Novice Alaf.

‘I asked you,’ said Arjac, ignoring the question, ‘why Fenris wants us dead. Fenris is our father and our mother, and the crone who watches our

fates. Why does this world try so hard to kill us?’

From the cave came the sound of great paws padding on frozen stone, and a deep, chill breath. A yellow eye glinted in the darkness. The novices would not run, but every instinct told them to and they braced like animals catching the scent of a predator.

The thunderwolf emerged from the darkness. It was twice the height of a man, an alpha, with grey fur, pale as the moon, and black streaks along its flanks. One eye was missing, and a deep scar ran from snout to brow. Its sabre teeth were crusted with frost from its freezing breath. Ice crystals formed on the stone under its claws.

Arjac held out a hand. The thunderwolf sniffed it, then nuzzled up against the breastplate of Arjac’s armour, a deep and satisfied growl shuddering the ground.

‘I went for the eye,’ said Arjac. ‘It was the only weak spot I could think of. And I struck hard, and well. And thus my Bleeding was survived. But no, Novice Alaf, I did not kill her. And from that day, when I come down to this valley, I know I will find a friend.

‘Why does Fenris try to kill us? Why does she put beasts like this thunderwolf in our way? Because Fenris wants to respect us. Yet it cannot grant us respect if we have not earned it, and so it tests us that we might win that respect honestly, as warriors and as men. That was what my Bleeding taught me. I pray that you will learn as valuable a lesson.’

The thunderwolf returned to its lair and Arjac led the novices back towards the Fang. The next time, there would be no one to lead them. Not all of them would make it. But if they learned, and craved the respect of this cruel world, then perhaps one of them would eventually stand as a Space Wolf.

TWELVE WOLVES

Why is it Arjac Rockfist that speaks to you now? You are used to the Wolf Priests sitting here in the saga teller's place, or perhaps one of the thralls who keeps the many tales of the Fang to be recounted on the longest Fenrisian night. And true enough, I speak rarely enough, for our Wolf Lords are masters of war and I will only offer them my counsel if they seek it out. But those same Wolf Lords bade me take my place here before you, for they would have you listen to others you would not.

For good or ill, with justice or not, I am ascribed a weight of authority among you young ones. I cannot say I have sought it, nor that I believe it really exists, but perhaps the great size for which I am inevitably famed gives my words greater weight. The Terminator armour of a Wolf Guard, such as I wear, itself lends me the gravity of its age and bulk. Whatever the case, there is a tale that would be told to the Blood Claws among you, and it is a tale that must be understood. You are less likely, I am told, to squabble and heckle if I am the teller. True or not, here I sit, as I am bidden.

I hear you now, throaty and raucous, demanding to hear a saga of some great battle or feat of arms that will fill your hearts with fire. Lord Russ fighting the One-Eyed traitor, you cry! The many crimes of the Dark Angels, you demand, so that we might feast and drink and remember our grudges! But my purpose here is not to serve this feasting throng with whatever bloody tale they desire. No, I have gathered you by this roaring fire, in the Great Hall of the Fang where generations of Space Wolves have celebrated their victories and toasted their dead, because there is a lesson I have to impart.

You forget I can hear your sighs! I have the same predator's senses as you. What use, you whisper, is a saga not dripping with the blood of foes and thundering with the sound of chainblade on heretic flesh? Arjac Rockfist is not such a fool that he thinks he can keep the attention of wayward pups like you with a tale free of bloodshed and glory. My tale is from the Wolf Priests themselves, the guardians of your spirits, and they know better than to impart lessons that will not be heeded.

It is in a great battle of the past, then, that my tale takes place. Those attentive young wolves will know of the Age of Apostasy, one of the direst lessons that mankind has ever had to learn, during which the corrupt clergy of the Imperial Creed sought to seize power for themselves. It is a long and grim story in its own right that I will not tell here. Suffice it to say that it was a time of blindness, fear and chaos, when the Imperium of Man sought to crumble in a way not threatened since the dark times of Horus. Among the many tales of sorrow in this time, I speak of the Plague of Unbelief, when a wicked man named Cardinal Bucharis carved out an empire of his own, throwing off Imperial authority to rule as a king!

Bucharis, while a bold and cunning man, was a fool. For as his empire grew, conquered by renegades of the Imperial Guard and armies of mercenary cutthroats, he came to the threshold of Fenris. Arrogant in the extreme, Bucharis did not halt there and turn back, afeared of the Space Wolves who called it their home then as we do now. No, he sent his armies to Fenris, to conquer its savage peoples and force the Space Wolves to cede their world to him!

Ah, yes, you laugh. Who could have thought that an Apostate Cardinal and a host of mere men could defeat the Space Wolves on their home world? But it happened that at this time very few Space Wolves were at the Fang, with most of them having joined the Wolf Lord Kyril Grimblood on a crusade elsewhere in the galaxy. The Space Wolves left there to face Bucharis's villains numbered little more than a single Great Company, along with the newly-blooded novices and the thralls who dwell within the Fang. Bucharis, meanwhile, bled the garrisons of his empire white to flood Fenris with soldiers and lay siege to the Fang. Do not think that the Fang was impregnable to them! Any fortress, even this ancient and formidable mountain hold, can fall.

In the third month of this siege two Space Wolves were abroad in the valleys and foothills around the Fang. They were patrolling to disrupt and observe the enemy forces, as the sons of Fenris were wont to do at that time in the battle. One of them, and his name was Daegalan, was a Long Fang such as those battered, leather-coloured brothers who watch us even

now from the back of the hall. They have heard this tale many times, but take note, young Blood Claws and novices, that they still listen, for they understand its lesson well. The other was much like you. His name was Hrothgar, and he was a Blood Claw as most of you are. Daegalan was wise and stern, and had taken Hrothgar as a student to teach him the ways of war that, with the Fang and the Chapter in great peril, he had to learn very quickly.

Imagine a mountain ridge at night, bare flint as sharp as knives clad in ice that glinted under the many stars and moons of the Crone Fenris. It overlooked a wide, rocky valley, cleared of snow by tanks and shored up by engineers, like a black serpent winding between the flinty blades of the Fang's foothills. Now you are there, the story can begin.

Two Astartes made their way up to the lip of this ridge. One of them wore a wolf skin cloak about his shoulders, and across his back was slung a missile launcher. This was Daegalan. His face was like a mask of tanned leather, so deeply lined it might have been carved with a knife, his grey-streaked hair whipping around his head in the night's chill wind. He wore on his shoulder pad the symbol of Wolf Lord Hef Icenheart, who at that time was directing the defence of the Fang from its granite halls. The other, with the red slash marks painted on his shoulder pad, was Hrothgar. The scars, where the organs of an Astartes were implanted, were still red on his shaven scalp. His chainsword was in his hand, for it rarely left, and his armour was unadorned with markings of past campaigns.

'See, young cub,' said Daegalan. 'This is the place where our enemy creeps, like vermin, thinking he is hidden from our eyes. Look down, and tell me what you see.'

Hrothgar looked over the edge of the ridge into the valley. The night's darkness was no hindrance to the eyes of an Astartes. He saw a track laid along the bottom of the valley, along which could be wheeled the huge siege guns and war machines which Bucharis's armies hoped would shake the sides of the Fang and bring its defences down. Slave labour on the worlds the Cardinal had captured had created countless such machines and they filled the bellies of spacecraft supplying his war on Fenris. Indeed, it

was the mission of the two Astartes to locate and disrupt the bringing of these war machines to a location where they could fire on the Fang.

Many Guardsmen, from the renegade Rigellian regiments who had thrown their lot in with Bucharis, guarded the tracks, knowing that soon the precious war machines would come trundling along it.

'I count twenty of the enemy,' said Hrothgar. 'Imperial Guard all, they are reasonably trained - not the equal of a Space Wolf, of course, but dangerous if they can fire upon us in great numbers. See, Long Fang, they have assembled defences of flak-weave and ammunition crates, and they seem ready for an attack by such as us. They know the importance of their mission.'

'Good,' said Daegalan, 'for a first glance. But our task here is to destroy these enemies. What can you see that will ensure they fall?'

'This one,' said Hrothgar, 'is the officer that leads them. See the medals and badges of rank on his uniform? That silver skull on his chest is granted by the heretic Cardinal to followers who show great ruthlessness in leading the troops. Upon one sleeve are the marks of his rank. In his hand is a map case, surely marking out the route of these tracks. This man must die first, for with their leader dead, the others will fall into disarray.'

Daegalan smiled at this, and showed the grand canine teeth that are the mark of a true Long Fang. May you who listen to this one day sport such fangs as these, sharp and white, to tell the tale of your years spent fighting with the Sons of Russ!

'Young Blood Claw,' said Daegalan, 'can it be that even with the eyes of an Astartes you are so blind? You must learn the lessons of the Twelve Wolves of Fenris, those great beasts who even now hunt through the mountains and snowy plains of our world. Each wolf is taken as the totem of one of our Great Companies, and for good reason.' Daegalan here tapped the symbol of his Great Company on his shoulder pad. 'I wear the symbol of Wolf Lord Icenheart. He took as his totem Torvald the Far-Sighted, the wolf whose eyes miss nothing. This wolf of Fenris teaches us to observe our enemy, much as we would love to get our claws around his

throat first, for it is in looking ahead that the victory can sometimes be won before a blow is struck.

'Look again. The man you see is indeed an officer, and no doubt a ruthless one at that. But there is another. There, seated on an ammunition crate, his lasgun propped up by his side. See him? He is reading from a book. Even these old eyes can read its title. It is the Collected Visions, a book written by the Apostate Cardinal himself, serving as a collection of his madness and heresies. Only the most devout of his followers, when the night is this cold and the mission is this crucial, would read it so earnestly. This man may not be the officer who leads these soldiers on paper, but he leads them in reality. He is their spiritual heart, the one to whom they turn for true leadership. This man must die first, for when it is shown that the most devout of them is no more than meat and bone beneath our claws, then all their hope shall flee them.'

Hrothgar thought upon this, and he saw the truth in the Long Fang's words.

'Then let us fight,' said the Blood Claw. 'The reader of books shall die first, beneath these very hands!'

'Alas, I have but two missiles left,' said Daegalan, 'otherwise I would sow fire and death among them from up here. I shall fight alongside you, then. When you tear the heart from them, I shall slay the rest, including that officer to whom you paid so much attention.'

With this Hrothgar vaulted down from the ridge and crashed with a snarl into the heart of the enemy. He charged for the spiritual leader, and was upon him before the other Guardsmen had even raised their lasguns! At that time the Space Wolves were sorely lacking of ammunition for their guns and power packs for their chainswords, and so it was with his hands that Hrothgar hauled the reader of books into the air and dashed his brains out against the rocks.

'He is dead!' came the cry from the Guardsmen. 'He who assured us the divine Cardinal would deliver us, he whose survival proved to us the sureness of our victory! He is dead!' And they wailed in much terror.

Daegalan was among them now. He was not as fast as the Blood Claw, but he surpassed him in strength and cunning. He fought with his knife, and plunged it up to the hilt in the skull of the first Guardsman who faced him. Another died, head cracked open by the swinging of his fist, and then another, speared through the midriff. The officer, who was shouting and trying to steel the hearts of his men, fell next, knocked to the ground and crushed beneath Daegalan's armour-shod feet.

It was in but the space of a few heartbeats, as a non-Astartes might reckon it, that the enemy were torn asunder and scattered. Those that were not dead cursed their fates and fled into the snowy wilderness, eager to face the teeth and claws of the Crone Fenris rather than spend another moment in that blood-spattered valley.

The hot breath of the two Astartes was white in the cold as they panted like predators sated from the hunt. But this hunt was not finished. For from down the tracks came the sound of steel feet on the rocks, and the roaring voice of an engine. And before the Astartes could ready themselves, from the frozen darkness lumbered a Sentinel walker.

Many of you have seen such a thing, and perhaps even fought alongside them, for they are commonly used by the armies of the Imperial Guard. This, however, was different. Its two legs were reinforced with sturdy armour plates and its cab, in which its traitor driver cowered, was as heavily plated as a tank. It had been made with techniques forgotten to the masters of the forge worlds today, and it bore as its weapon a pair of autocannon. This was no mere spindly scouting machine! This was an engine of destruction.

'Despair not!' shouted the headstrong Hrothgar as this monster came into view. 'You shall not have to face this machine, old man, wizened and decrepit as you are! I shall ensure this traitor's eyes are on me alone. All you need do, venerable one, is fire that missile launcher of yours!'

Daegalan had it in mind to scold the Blood Claw for his insolence, but it was not the time for such things.

Hrothgar ran into view of the Sentinel. He fired off shots from his bolt pistol, and the Sentinel turned to hunt him through the valley's shadows. But Hrothgar was fast and valiant, and even as the Sentinel's mighty guns opened fire he sprinted from rock to rock, from flinty fissure to deep shadow, and every shell spat by the Sentinel's guns was wasted against unyielding stone. At that time it happened a flurry of snow was blown up by Fenris's icy breath and Hrothgar ventured closer still, diving between the metal feet of the Sentinel, knowing that he was too fast and his movements too unpredictable for the machine's pilot to fire upon him with accuracy.

So infuriated was the pilot of the Sentinel that he forgot, as lesser soldiers than Astartes are wont to do, the true threat he was facing. For Daegalan the Long Fang had indeed taken aim with his missile launcher, the only weapon the Astartes had between them that might pierce the machine's armour. With a roar the missile fired, and with a vicious bark it exploded. The rear of the Sentinel was torn clear away, and the pilot mortally wounded. Exposed to the cold night, the blood from his many wounds froze. But he did not have long to suffer this fate, for Hrothgar the Blood Claw climbed up the legs of the Sentinel and tore out the traitor's spine with his bare hands.

'You may think,' said Daegalan, 'to have angered this old Long Fang with your insolence, but in truth you have expounded the lesson of another of Fenris's wolves - or rather, two of them, for they are Freki and Geri, the Twin Wolves who were companions of Lemman Russ himself. See how this enemy, a match for both of us, was destroyed by the fruits of our brotherhood! When wolves fight as a pack, as one, they slay foes that would confound them if they merely attacked as individuals. You have learned well, though you did not know it, the lesson of the Twin Wolves!'

With that, the two Astartes set about destroying the tracks, and for many days as a result the walls of the Fang were spared the bombardment of Bucharis's war machines, and the lives of many Space Wolves were surely spared.

Now, it was about this time that the Apostate Cardinal, accursed Bucharis himself, was upon Fenris directing the siege of the Fang. You already know that he was a man possessed of great arrogance and blindness to the rage he inflamed in those who suffered under his conquest. He was also a wrathful man, much given to extravagant punishments and feats of cruelty when angered. Having heard from a subordinate that his war machines (which he expected to shatter the Fang and slay all those within) would be delayed by the actions of the Astartes, he flew into a rage. He supposed that a great host of Space Wolves had done this deed, and that with their destruction the defenders of the Fang would be greatly weakened in number. A foolish man, I hear you cry!

Indeed he was, but he was also a very dangerous man, whose foolishness lay not in an inability to achieve his goals but in ignorance of the consequences his cruelty would have. You know, of course, that Bucharis was eventually to meet an end as befits a man like him, but that is a story for another time.

Many units of the Imperial Guard were sent to punish the host of Astartes that Bucharis believed to be abroad in the foothills of the Fang. They were men picked by Bucharis's warmaster, the renegade Colonel Gasto, from the regiments of Rigellians he commanded. They had been well versed in the beliefs of Bucharis, which were heretical in the extreme and shall not be spoken of by this humble tongue. They believed Bucharis's lies that the Imperium had fallen and that only by obeying Bucharis could they hope to survive its collapse. Gasto gave them tanks and heavy weapons, and the kind of murderous cutthroat mercenaries that Bucharis had swayed to his cause to lead them.

These men and machines left the great siege encampment of the Rigellian Guard and headed for the Fang, ordered on pain of death to destroy the Astartes.

Meanwhile, Daegalan the Long Fang and Hrothgar the Blood Claw were making their way back to the Fang, for their mission was completed. Though it was now daylight a storm had fallen over the area and Fenris was breathing ice across the flinty hills. Terrible gales blew and showers of ice fell like daggers.

'Remember,' said Daegalan as he led Hrothgar up the slippery slope of a barren hill, 'that cruel weather such as this makes every blasted and inhospitable place the domain of Haegr, the Mountain Wolf. For he endures all, indeed, he thrives in such inhospitable climes. It is to him that we must look, for is it not so that the physical endurance of an Astartes is a weapon in itself, and that by taking this hazardous path we make better time towards the Fang and further confound our enemies?'

Hrothgar did not answer this, for while he was young and vigorous, the Long Fang was so much inured to hardships and gnarled by Fenris's icy winds that the old Astartes did not feel the cold as much as the Blood Claw. But he did indeed recall the Mountain Wolf and, knowing that the sons of Fenris are made of stern stuff, he shrugged off his discomfort and the two made good speed over the hills.

It was at the pinnacle of the next hill that a break in the storm gave them a glimpse of the Fang. It was the first time they had seen it in many days. Daegalan bade his companion to stop, and look for a moment upon the Fang itself.

'This tooth of ice and stone, this spear piercing the white sky, does this not fill your heart with gladness, young Blood Claw?'

'Indeed,' said Hrothgar, 'I am now struck by the majesty of it. It gladdens me to think of the despair our foes must suffer when they see it, for those are the slopes they must climb! Those are the walls they must breach!' And all of you have looked on the Fang and imagined how any foe might hope to silence the guns that stud its sides or climb the sheer slopes that guard its doors more surely than any army.

'Then you feel,' said Daegalan, 'the howl of Thengir in your veins! For he is the King Wolf, the monarch of Fenris, and everything under his domain

is alight with glory and majesty. So you see, ignorant and insolent young cub, that another of Fenris's wolves has a lesson to teach us today.'

Hrothgar did indeed hear Thengir, like a distant howl, speaking of the kingly aspect of the Fang as it rules over all the mountains of Fenris.

'And mark also the Wolf Who Stalks Between Stars,' continued Daegalan, 'as you look above the Fang to the moons that hang in the sky. The Stalker Between Stars was the totem of Leman Russ himself, and even now his symbol adorns the Great Wolf's own pack. Our pawprints may be found even on distant worlds and the farthest-flung corners of the Imperium. So long as we, like that wolf, hunt abroad among the stars, then Fenris is not merely the ground beneath our feet but also any place where the Sons of Fenris have trod, where the Space Wolves have brought fang and fire to their enemies!'

Hrothgar's hearts swelled with pride as he thought of the mark the Space Wolves had left upon the galaxy beyond Fenris. But the Astartes could not tarry for long, and quickly made their way on.

Soon Daegalan saw the white tongues of engine exhausts nearby, and knew that the traitor Guard were close. He led Hrothgar into a winding valley, deep and dark even when the sun broke through the blizzards. Many such valleys lead through the foothills of the Fang, chill and black, and within their depths lurk many of the most deadly things with which Mother Fenris has populated her world.

'I can tell,' said Daegalan after some time, 'your frustration, young Blood Claw. You wish to get to grips with the foe and cover your armour with their blood! But remember, if you will, that another wolf stalks beside us. Ranek, the Hidden Wolf, goes everywhere unseen, silent and cunning. In just such a way do we also stalk unseen. Do not scorn the Hidden Wolf, young one! For his claws are as sharp as any other, and when he strikes from the shadows the wound is doubly deep!'

Hrothgar was a little consoled by this as he listened to the engines of the enemy's tanks and the voices of the soldiers raised as they called to one another. They could not traverse the foothills of the Fang as surely as a

Space Wolf, and many of them were lost as they stumbled into gorges or fell through thin ice. Driven by their fear of Bucharis they made good time but paid for it in lives, and with every step the force became more ragged. Hrothgar imagined slaying them as he emerged from hiding, and he smiled.

'Now you think of killing them by the dozen,' continued Daegalan, for he never passed by the opportunity to instruct a younger Astartes. 'But ask yourself, in this butchery you imagine, is there any place for me, your battle-brother? You need not reply, for of course there is not. I do not admonish you this, Blood Claw. Quite the opposite, I commend you to the spirit of Lokyar, the Lone Wolf. While the Twin Wolves teach us of brotherhood, Lokyar reminds us that sometimes we must fight alone. He is the totem of our Wolf Scouts, those solitary killers, and now he may be your totem, too, for it is Lokyar whose path you tread as you imagine yourself diving into our enemy alone.'

Now our two Astartes came to the head of the valley, where it reached the surface. They espied before them fearsome barricades set up by the traitor Guard, the bayonets of the heretics glinting in the sun that now broke through the storm clouds. Dozens of them were waiting for the Astartes, and they were trembling for they believed that a host of Astartes would stream from the black valley.

'Ah, may we give thanks to Mother Fenris,' said Hrothgar the Blood Claw, 'For she has guided our friends to meet us! What a grand reunion this shall be! I shall embrace our friends with these bloody hands and I shall give them all gifts of a happy death!'

'Now I see the battle favours the youthful and the heedless of danger,' said Daegalan in reply, 'and is content to leave the old and cunning behind. Go, Brother Hrothgar! Bestow upon them the welcome your young wolf's heart lusts for! And remember the Iron Wolf, too, for he watches over the artificers of our Chapter forge wherein your armour was smelted. Trust in him that your battlegear will turn aside their laser fire and their bullets, and run with him into battle!'

Hrothgar recalled, indeed, the Iron Wolf, whose pelt can turn aside even the teeth of the kraken who haunt the oceans of Fenris. And he ran from the darkness of the valley. The soldiers opened fire as one and bolts of red laser fell around the Blood Claw like a rain of burning blood. But his armour held firm, the Iron Wolf's teachings having guided well the artificers of the Fang.

Ah, how I wish I had the words to describe Hrothgar in that bloody hour! His armour was red to the elbow and the screams of his enemies were like a blizzard gale howling through the mountains. He leapt the barriers the traitors had set up and even as he landed, men were dying around him. He drew his chainsword and its teeth chewed through muscle and bone. One heretic he spitted through the throat, throwing him off with a flick of a wrist, and a heartbeat later a skull was staved in by a strike from his gauntleted fist. He cut them apart and crushed them underfoot. He threw them aside and hurled them against the rocks. He took the lasgun from one and stabbed him through the stomach with his own bayonet. Some traitors even fell to their own laser fire as the men around them fired blindly, seeing in their terror a Space Wolf charging from every shadow.

Daegalan followed Hrothgar into the fray. Some leader amongst the traitors called out for a counterattack and bullied a few men into charging at Hrothgar with their bayonets lowered. Daegalan fell amongst them, his combat knife reaping a terrible toll. He cut arms and heads from bodies, and when he was faced by the officer alone he grabbed the heretic fool with both arms. He crushed the life out of the man, holding him fast in a terrible embrace.

The Guardsmen fled, but Hrothgar was not done. Some he followed behind outcrops of rock where they sought to hide. He hauled them out, as a hunter's hounds might drag an unwilling prey from a burrow, and killed them there on the ground. When they tried to snipe at him from some high vantage point he trusted in his armour to scorn their fire and clambered to meet them, holding them above his head and throwing them down to be dashed to pieces against the rocks below.

When the traitors bled, their blood froze around their wounds, for the Crone Fenris had granted the Space Wolves a day bright yet as cold as any that had ever passed around the Fang. Blood fell like a harvest of frozen rubies. Now Daegalan and Hrothgar rested in the centre of this field of bloody jewels, as bright and plentiful as if our world herself was bleeding. They were exhausted by their killing and they panted like wolves after the kill, their breath white in the cold. They were covered in blood, their faces spattered with it, their pack emblems and Great Company totems almost hidden. Silently, each gave thanks to Fenris herself for the hunt, and even to Cardinal Bucharis for his foolishness and arrogance, for it was he who had sent them such prey.

Above them loomed the Fang, wherein their battle-brothers waited to receive the news of their success. Prey lay dead all around them, and the majesty of Fenris was all about. What more could a Space Wolf ask for? It was indeed a good day, and may you young pups have many such hunts ahead of you.

'Well fought, my brother,' said Daegalan. 'It is well that the Apostate Cardinal stumbled upon Fenris, for without his ill fortune we would not have such hunts upon our very doorstep!'

'He should have a statue in the Hall of Echoes,' agreed Hrothgar. 'Was there ever a man who did more for the glory of the Space Wolves? I think I shall toast him with a barrel of mead when we celebrate this hunt.'

They laughed at that, and it was to this sound that the rumble of engines grew closer and a shadow fell over them. For the mercenaries who led the Guardsmen were hardbitten and foul-minded men, well versed in the low cunning of war, and they had prepared a trap for the Astartes.

The force the Space Wolves had slaughtered were just the vanguard of the army sent to punish them. Bucharis had sent in his fear ten times that number, sorely stretching the forces that besieged the Fang elsewhere. They had with them tanks: Reaper-class war machines such as can no longer be made by the forge worlds of the Mechanicus. Six of these machines had survived the journey, and they all rumbled into view now, their guns aiming at the place where the two Astartes stood.

The Guardsmen, though sorely pressed by the harsh journey through the foothills, still numbered hundreds, and they had brought many heavy weapons with which to destroy the Astartes from afar - for they feared to face the claws and teeth of the Space Wolves up close, and rightly so. Their leaders, Bucharis's chosen mercenaries, were strong and brutal men who wore pieces of uniform and armour from a dozen places they had plundered, and all wore the scars of war like banners proclaiming their savagely. They, too, were afraid of the Astartes, but they turned their fear into brutality and so the men under them obeyed them out of terror.

One such man addressed the two Space Wolves through the vox-caster of his tank. By the standards of such men, it was a bold thing to do indeed!

'Astartes!' he called to them. 'Noble sons of Fenris! The honoured Lord Bucharis, monarch of his galactic empire, has no quarrel with the Space Wolves. He seeks only to grant protection to those within the fold of his generosity. For the Imperium has fallen, and Terra lies aflame and ruined. Lord Bucharis promises safety and sanity for those who kneel to him!

'But we do not ask you to kneel. How could we, mere men, demand such of the Adeptus Astartes? No, we ask only that Lord Bucharis count Fenris among the worlds of his empire. What do you care for this grim and frozen place, its savage peoples and its bitter oceans? To the Space Wolves, of course, we shall leave the Fang, and the right to rule yourselves, excepting a few minor and quite necessary obeisances to Lord Bucharis's undoubted majesty. So you see, there is no need for you to fight any more. There is nothing left for you to prove. Stand down and place yourselves within our custody, and we shall deliver you safely unto the Fang where you can pass on word of Lord Bucharis's matchless generosity.'

The two Space Wolves, of course, saw through these lies. They knew the Imperium was eternal, and had not fallen, and moreover they believed no more than you do that Bucharis meant anything but destroy the Space Wolves and take the Fang for himself. No doubt he wished to install himself in our great fortress, and to use as his throne room the hall wherein Leman Russ himself once held court! The only answer to such a speech lies at the tip of a wolf's claws, or in the gnashing of his fangs!

'Now, young wolf,' said Daegalan, 'we face our death. How blessed are we that we can look it in the face as it comes for us. And moreover, we die on Fenris, on the ground upon which we were born, and first ran with our packs in the snow. This is the world that forged us into the Space Marines we are, that gave us the strength and ferocity to be accepted into the ranks of the Space Wolves. Now we shall repay that honour by choosing this very ground for our deaths! How blessed are we, Blood Claw, and how blessed am I that it is beside my brother that I die.'

'And do not think that we shall die alone. For I hear the snarling of Lakkan, the Runed Wolf, upon the wind. Once Lakkan walked across Fenris, and wise men read the symbols he left in his footprints. These men were the first Rune Priests and those who still follow the path of Lakkan even now watch us from the Fang. They scry out our deeds, and they shall record them, and give thanks as we do that we die a death so fine.'

Daegalan now drew his bolt pistol. He had but a single magazine of bolt shells, for at that time the Sons of Fenris were sorely pressed for ammunition with their fortress besieged. Hrothgar, in turn, drew once more his chainsword. Its teeth were clotted with the frozen blood of traitors, but soon, he knew, he would plunge it into a warm body and thaw out that blood so its teeth could gnash again.

'I do not seek death,' said the Blood Claw, 'as easily as you do, old man.'

'Your saga shall be a fine one,' replied Daegalan, 'though it is short.'

'Perhaps you are right,' said Hrothgar, and in that moment the guns of the tanks were levelled at the place where they stood in the field of blood rubies. 'You are a Long Fang, after all, and wise. But I fear that in all you have taught me you have made a single error.'

'And what might that be, Blood Claw?' said Daegalan. 'What omission have I made that is so grave I must hear of it now, in the moment of my death?'

Now a strange countenance came upon Hrothgar the Blood Claw. His teeth flashed like fangs and his eyes turned into the flinty black orbs of the hunting wolf. 'You have spoken of the wolves of Fenris that follow us and

impart to us their lessons. Twelve of them you have described to me, each one mirroring an aspect of Fenris or of the teachings the Wolf Priests have passed down to us. These lessons were well earned, and I thank you for them, Brother Daegalan. But I am wiser than you in but one aspect.'

'Speak of it, you cur!' demanded Daegalan with much impatience, for the guns of the traitor tanks were now aimed at them, awaiting the order to fire, as were the heavy weapons of the Guardsmen.

'I have counted twelve Fenrisian wolves in your teachings, each one taken as the totem of a Great Company of the Space Wolves. But here you are mistaken. For I know that in truth, there are not twelve wolves. There are thirteen.'

It is time, I fear, for this old tongue to lie still. The night draws on. Time stands not still and we shall all have our duties in the hour before dawn to attend to, be they in the sparring-hall or among the forges. So raise a drink, brothers, to Daegalan and his teachings!

Ah, so you wish the story to continue? I have no doubt you foresee great bloodshed of the kind you love to hear. And there was bloodshed after that moment, it is true. Terrible it was, perhaps worse than any that fell upon the face of the Crone Fenris during the besieging of the Fang. But it is not for me to speak of it. I hear you groan, and a few even flash your fangs in anger! But look to the Long Fangs who sit at the back of the hall. Do they growl their displeasure? No, for they know the truth. A Wolf Guard I may be, but it is not my place to speak of what happened in that place. Even the most ancient among the children of Russ, the mighty Dreadnoughts who have marched to war for a thousand years or more, would not speak of it.

There is, however, a legend told among the people of Gathalamor, the world where the Apostate Bucharis first came to prominence. They are a fearful and religious people, for upon them has fallen the burden of redeeming their world from the stain the Apostate left upon it. But

sometimes they speak of legends forbidden by the cardinals of their world, and among them is this one, brought back, it is said, by the few survivors of the armies who fought on Fenris.

Once an army was sent by Bucharis to destroy the Space Wolves who had been sowing much death and confusion among the besieging forces. The army cornered their but found, much to their delight, that they faced not a Great Company or even a single pack, but a single Space Wolf.

In some versions of the tale there was not one Space Wolf, but two. The difference matters not.

Now the soldiers drove their tanks into range and took aim at this Space Wolf. And they awaited only the order to open fire, which would surely have been given but a moment later. But then they were struck by a great and monstrous fear, such as rarely enters the hearts even of the most cowardly of men.

The Space Wolf was a Space Wolf no more. In fact, he appeared as nothing that could once have been a man. A bestial countenance overcame him, and the winds howled as if Fenris herself was recoiling in disgust. Talons grew from his fingers. His armour warped and split as his body deformed, shoulders broadening and spine hunching over in the aspect of a beast. The soldiers cried that a daemon had come into their midst, and men fled the sight of it. Even the gunners in their tanks did not think themselves safe from the horror unfolding in front of them.

And then there came the slaughter. The beast charged and butchered men with every stroke of its gory claws. It tore open the hulls of their tanks and ripped out the men inside. In its frenzy it feasted on them, and strips of bloody skin and meat hung from its inhuman fangs. Men went mad with the force of its onslaught. The leaders of that army fired on their own men to keep them from fleeing but the beast fell on them next and the last moments of their life were filled with terror and the agony of claws through their flesh.

The soldiers were thrown to the winds of Fenris and scattered. Some say that none survived, either torn down by the beast or frozen to death as they

cowered from it. Others insist that a single man survived to tell the tale, but that he was driven hopelessly mad and the legend of the Beast of Fenris was all that ever escaped his quivering lips.

But this is a tale told by other men, far from the Fang and the proud sons of Fenris who dwell therein, and I shall dwell upon it no more.

Now it came that many days later, when the battle had waxed and waned as battles do, a pack of Grey Hunters ventured forth from the Fang to drive off the traitor Guardsmen who were thought to be encamped in the foothills. There they came across a place like a field of rubies, where frozen blood lay scattered across the snowy rocks with such great abandon that it seemed a great battle had been fought there, though the packmates knew of no such battle.

'Look!' cried one Space Wolf. 'Someone yet lives! He is clad in the armour of a Space Wolf and yet he is not one, for see, his bearing is that of an animal and his face bears no trace of the human we all were before becoming Space Marines.'

The pack leader bade his battle-brothers to cover him with their boltguns as he went to see what they had found. As he approached he saw countless bodies torn asunder, many with the marks of teeth in their frozen flesh, and still others dead in the ruins of their tanks.

The figure in the centre of the battlefield indeed wore the power armour of a Space Wolf, but split apart and ruined as if rent from within. He crouched panting in the cold, as if fresh from a hunt. His form was not that of a human, but of a beast.

'He is touched by the Wulfen,' said the pack leader. 'The Thirteenth Wolf of Fenris has walked here, and its inhumanity has found a place to dwell inside this Blood Claw. Some flaw in his gene-seed went unnoticed during his novicehood, and now it has come to the fore in this place of bloodshed.'

Another Space Wolf cried out. 'There lies another of our battle-brothers, dead beside him! What appalling wounds he has suffered! What monstrous

force must have torn his armour so, and what claws must have ripped at his flesh!

'Indeed,' said the pack leader, 'this noble brother was a Long Fang, one of that wise and hardy breed, and he shall be borne by us to a proper place of resting within the Fang. Alas, I knew him - he is Brother Daegalan, I recognise him by his pack markings. But see, the claws of the survivor made these wounds! His teeth have gnashed at Daegalan's armour, and even upon his bones.'

The pack was much dismayed at this. 'What Space Wolf could turn on his brother?' they asked.

'Mark well the path of the Wulfen,' said the pack leader sternly. 'His is the way of deviant and frenzied bloodshed. He cares not from whom the blood flows as long as the hunting is good. This ill-fated Long Fang is testament to that - when this Blood Claw ran out of foes to slay, under the Wulfen's influence he turned upon his brother.'

The pack spoke prayers to mighty Russ and to the ancestors of the Chapter, and all those interred in the Fang, to watch over them and protect them from such a fate as suffered by the two battle-brothers.

You might think that a beast such as they found should have been put down, but imagine for a moment you were confronted by such a sight. It would surely be impossible for you to kill one such as Hrothgar, for though a warped and pitiable thing he was still a Son of Fenris and to slay him was still to slay a brother. So the pack brought Daegalan's body and Hrothgar, still living, to the Fang. I have heard it said they led him by a chain like an animal, or that they called upon a Wolf Priest to administer a powerful concoction that sedated him long enough to be carried to the Fang.

And so it came to be that Daegalan the Long Fang was given his rightful place among the packmates who had fallen over the decades, and there he lies still. As for Hrothgar, well, he was interred in a similar way, this time in a cell hollowed out from the rock of the Fang's very heart where from the lightless cold none can hope to escape.

Hush! Cease the sound of clinking tankards. Ignore the crackling of the fire. Can you hear it? That scratching at the walls? That is Brother Hrothgar, scrabbling at the boundaries of his cell, for he is now but an animal and yearns to run in the snows of Fenris, hunting beast and brother alike. But sometimes he remembers who he once was, and the Long Fang who fought alongside him, and then he lets out a terrible mournful howl. You can hear it in the longest of Fenris's nights, echoing around the heart of the Fang.

Now, my tale has come to an end. Perhaps now you understand why I have told you this, why the telling of it was entrusted to Arjac Rockfist. None but a Space Wolf may know of it. In tales such as this is a power than cannot be entrusted to any soul but a battle-brother of Fenris.

And perhaps a few of you have even understood the lesson that lies at its heart. The rest will have to listen for Hrothgar's claws, for Hrothgar's howl, and perhaps the truth will come to you.

Remember always, whether you hunt in the wilds that the Crone Fenris tends, or you stalk between the stars, the thirteen wolves hunt beside you.