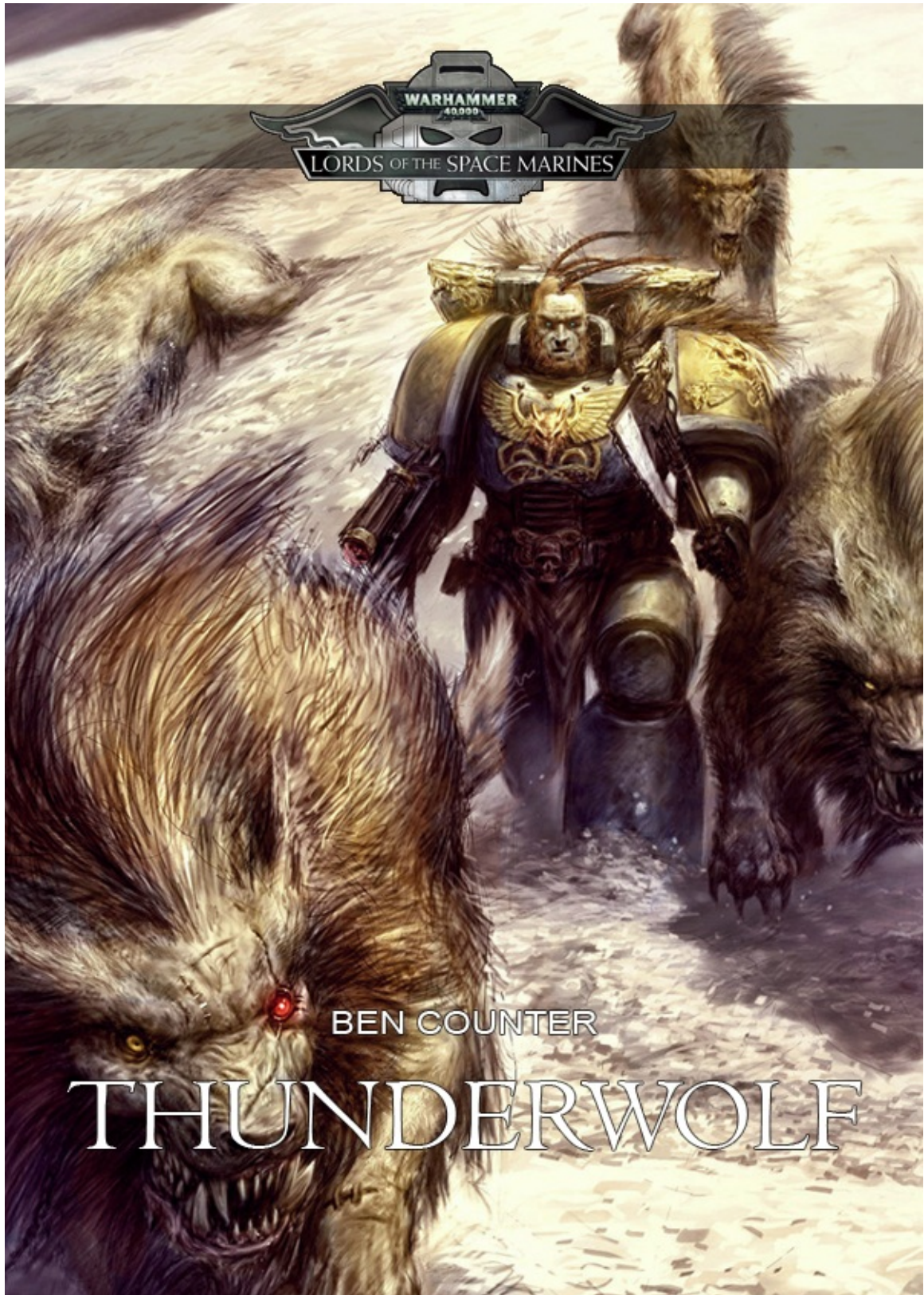




BEN COUNTER

THUNDERWOLF



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A WARHAMMER 40,000 STORY

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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 Bleeding, 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 Mac. ‘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.

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BEN COUNTER is the author of the Soul Drinkers and Grey Knights series, along with two Horus Heresy novels, and is one of Black Library's most popular Warhammer 40,000 authors. He has written RPG supplements and comic books. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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