

WARHAMMER  
40,000

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by Chris Wraight

He wore their names on his armour. The words had been graven deeply; a parting gift from the Iron Priest before he'd left Fenris. Nearly a centimetre deep, now crusted with the filth of years, just like the rest of him.

Eight names: four on the right side of his dented breastplate, four on the left. One was barely legible, scraped away by some massive, crunching impact a long time ago. The others were all faded, or obscured by burn marks, or bisected with scratches.

He remembered them all anyway. They came to him when he slept, whispering to him in old voices. He saw their faces, looming up out of the dark well of memory, their flesh still marked by tattoos, scars and studs. Sometimes they were angry, sometimes mournful. Their purpose in appearing, so he'd realised, was always the same: to urge him on, to stir him into action.

And so he never rested, not truly. He respected the demands of his vocation and kept moving. Oaths had been sworn, and they bound him more tightly than bands of adamantium. One world after another, blurring into a morass of sense impressions; some cold, some hot, all struggling, all playing their tiny part in the galaxy-wide war that had long since ceased to have boundaries.

It would have been easy to lose his sense of significance in all of that. It would have been easy, after twenty years of it, to give in to the darkness that lurked behind his eyes and forget the faces. He'd seen it happen to mortals. Their mouths drooped, their eyes went dull, even as they still clutched their weapons and made a show of walking toward the enemy. Then, as sure as ice follows fire, they died.

That was why he had the names put on his armour. The carvings would continue to fade or sustain damage, but some mark would always be there, some

small impression to register what had once been lives as vital as his life.

And as long as there were marks to remind him, he would not slope off into despair. He would keep moving, seeking the final trial that would restore lost honour and still the whispers in the dark.

One world after another, blurring into a morass of sense impressions; some cold, some hot. None that made much of an impression on his sullen mind; since their wars gave no opportunity to achieve the goal he craved.

None, that was, until the last of them.

None of those worlds made an impression on Aj Kvara until, following the eddies of fate, he came to Lyses, and the raw beauty of it stirred even his old, cold soul.

Morren Oen shaded his eyes against the morning glare, squinting as the green light flashed from the waves. Fifty metres below him, the downdraft of the flyer's four rotors churned the water.

There shouldn't even have been water down there. There should have been several thousand tons of dirt-grey plasteel, designation Megaera VI, humming with life and machinery. There should have been lights blinking along the smoothly curved tidewalls to beckon the flyer down to land, and the low grind of algal processors working their way through the endless harvest.

Instead there was a thin skin of floating debris bobbing on the emerald water. He saw a plastic hopper tumble by, rolling amid a web of tangled fibres. Below the surface, there were dark shadows, perhaps the outlines the struts and flotation booms, still half-operative even after the main structure had gone down.

'Emperor,' he swore, sweeping the scene of devastation for something, some sign of resistance or survival.

Four other flyers hung low over the water, each one full of men with lasguns. They pointed their barrels uselessly down at the debris. Whatever had happened to Megaera VI had moved on long before they got there.

Preja Eim leaned a long way over the edge of the flyer's open-sided crew bay and took a few more pics. Her auburn hair fluttered in the warm breeze, catching on the upturned collar of her uniform.

'Have enough yet?' asked Oen, turning away from the view and leaning back against the juddering metal of his seat-back.

Eim carried on clicking.

'Information,' she said, her face screwed up in concentration. 'There might be something. Some clue.'

Oen looked at her wearily. She was so young. Her freckled skin looked healthy in the sun, almost translucent. Perhaps, once, he'd been as enthusiastic in his work.

For the first time since joining up, he felt too old. Forty years of service on Lyses, rising steadily through the ranks, had taken its toll. Rejuve was expensive, and he had other commitments that prevented him splashing out. And so he felt the skin of his jawline sag a little and his stomach bulge out over his heavy old regimental belt. Watching Eim made him feel worse. It reminded him of what he had been, and how long ago that was.

'Snap away,' he said. 'Don't think you'll get anything we haven't already scanned for.'

He looked out aimlessly, keeping his hand over his eyes. The curve of the ocean ran unbroken across the horizon, deep green and smooth. The pale rose sky shimmered above it, warmed by the diffuse light of both suns.

Oen was used to the view of open seas. All of Lyses was open seas. All of it, that was, except for the floating hubs, strewn across the endless ocean like motes of dust, separated by thousands of kilometres and gently drifting.

And they were being picked off, one by one. That thought, when he chose to entertain it, was quite thrillingly disquieting.

'Procurator,' came a voice over his earpiece.

'Go ahead,' said Oen, welcoming the distraction. Whatever news there was, it was unlikely to make him feel worse.

'Grid Nine have a comm-signal. Ship entering the orbital exclusion zone. The hails all check out, but they thought you ought to know.'

'Nice of them. Why, especially?'

'It's not in-system, nor Navy. They think it might be *Adeptus Astartes*, but they're not sure.'

At the mention of the magic triplet of syllables, *as-tar-tes*, Oen felt his heart miss a beat. He didn't know whether that was born of fear or excitement. Probably a bit of both.

'They're not sure? What are they not sure about?'

'Perhaps you'd better get back to Nyx, procurator. They're not going to try to stop it, and by the time you get back it'll be in geostat.'

'Fine. Keep them quiet until I get there. We're just about done here.'

The link broke. By then Eim had stopped taking pics and was looking intently at the wreckage.

'No signs of explosions,' she murmured, watching the pieces float by. 'It's like

some giant hand just... pulled it apart.'

'Did you hear all that?' asked Oen, ignoring her. 'We're going back in. You can take another flyer out here if you want to keep at it.'

Eim looked at him, and her freckled face was wide-eyed. There was a strangely childlike look of desolation in them.

'What's doing this, procurator? Why can't we stop it?'

'If I knew that, do you not think I'd have ordered something more potent than overflights?' He smiled, trying to be reassuring, and knowing he'd probably failed. 'Listen, the distress signals have been picked up. Trust in grace, Eim. There's probably a whole company of Space Marines lining up on Nyx as we speak, and, believe me, there's no more impressive sight in the Emperor's own galaxy.'

He slumped in the chair in the reception chamber, leaning both hands on the only table, smelling like old meat. His scraggly beard spilled over the breastplate of his enormous armour, snarled and tangled. Grey streaks shot through it, making him look like an old, sick man.

*Do they get old?* thought Oen, observing him through the one-way plexiglass viewport in the corridor outside. *Would they die of age, if given long enough?*

Accounts of the newcomer's landing from atmospheric control had been garbled. One transmission implied that the newcomer had blasted his way through the upper defensive cordon without warning, while another, from a low-order servitor-controlled station, indicated nothing but impeccable orbital manners.

One way or another, though, he'd gotten through, and his ship, now standing five hundred metres up on the landing stages, was like nothing Oen had ever seen – dirty, angular, covered in plasma burns and with a blocky aquila picked out in bronze on the sloping nose. It didn't look big enough for inter-system travel, though it must have been, since its occupant certainly wasn't from Lyses.

From the look of it the ship's crew was entirely composed of servitors. They were strange looking creatures, with clunking servos and spikes and animal bones hanging from their pearl-white flesh. They'd stayed on board the ship after the pilot had stomped down the landing ramp, which Oen couldn't be too sorry about. Not that the pilot was any less strange.

'I thought you said...' began Eim, gazing through the viewer, fascinated. Her query trailed off.

Oen knew what she meant.

‘I’ve been told they vary,’ he said, rather stiffly. ‘The only picts I saw were from a rogue trader who’d run a squadron out through Ultramar. Those ones were... different.’

Eim nodded slowly, running her eyes over the bulky figure sitting at the metal desk on the other side of the viewport.

His head was bare and bald. A knotwork tattoo ran across the tanned flesh from behind one ear, over the skull and down toward one eye. His face seemed to have several metal studs in it, each one a slightly different shape. His armour was pale grey, like dirty snow, and had carvings all over it. The lettering wasn’t standard Gothic – it was angular and close-typed, covered in marks and bisected with slashes like those made by animal claws.

Oen had imagined the armour of a Space Marine to be clean, polished and flawless, just like the ones in the devotional holos sent out by the Ecclesiarchy’s Office of Truth Distribution. He’d imagined bronze shoulder-guards and bright cobalt breastplates glimmering under the white lumens.

He hadn’t imagined the mess, and the dirt. He certainly hadn’t imagined the smell.

‘Finished gawping?’

Both Oen and Eim jumped. He’d spoken. The words were thickly accented, as if Low Gothic were a foreign language, and muffled by the dividing wall. He hadn’t looked up. His strange yellow eyes remained fixed on his loosely clasped hands.

Oen readied himself, shot Eim a reassuring glance, and went round the corner to open the door. As he entered the room, the newcomer looked up at him.

‘I’m sorry, lord,’ said Oen, bowing before taking a seat opposite. ‘Standard observational procedure. We have to be careful.’

The newcomer, massive in his armour, gazed at him with a profoundly disinterested expression on his savage face. He didn’t smile. His scarred and tattooed features looked almost incapable of smiling.

‘A pointless gesture,’ he said quietly. ‘If I’d wanted to kill you, you’d be dead already. But since you’ve started, observe away.’

Oen swallowed. The newcomer’s voice was worryingly deep, underlined with a permanent, breathy growl and made eerie by the unusual pronunciation.

‘Do you have, er, a designation? Something I can use for the reports?’

‘A designation?’

‘A title, lord. Something I can—’

The huge figure leaned back, and Oen could see the metal chair flex under the

huge strain.

‘I am a Space Wolf, Procurator Morren Oen,’ he said. As he spoke, Oen caught sight of long, yellow fangs flashing out from behind the hairy lips. ‘Have you heard of us?’

Oen shook his head meekly. He felt his heart beating a little too quickly. Something about the man in front of him made it very hard to retain composure.

Except he wasn’t a *man*. Not like Oen was a man, anyway.

‘Good,’ said the newcomer. ‘Probably for the best.’

Oen cleared his throat, trying to remain something close to professional.

‘And your name, lord?’

‘My name is Kvara.’

Oen nodded. He was aware he was gesturing too much, but he couldn’t stop it.

‘I’d expected... more of you.’

That had come out wrong. Kvara looked at him with amusement. His eyes were circles of gold. Animal’s eyes, lodged in a lined, worn and battered face.

‘You do not need more of us. One of us is more than enough.’

Oen nodded again.

‘Quite so,’ he said, casting around for something more intelligent to say.

Kvara stepped in then, tiring of Oen’s stammering enquiries.

‘The data in your sending was clear,’ he said. As he spoke, he lifted a gauntlet and flexed the fingers of it absently. Oen stared at it, distracted by the casual, supple movement. ‘You’ve lost five of your harvester stations in five local months. No survivors, no readings. Nothing but debris. Something is coming out of the water. A beast.’

Kvara let his gauntlet fall to the tabletop with a dull clang.

‘I have hunted beasts before.’

‘We’ve men assigned to this already,’ Oen said. ‘I’d hoped that—’

‘That I might join them?’ Kvara shook his head. ‘No. Tell your men to stand down. In this, as in everything, I work alone.’

Oen looked up into the golden eyes, and thought about protesting. Perhaps this... *Space Wolf* didn’t know how big a hub harvester was. Anything that could take down one of those things must be massive, far bigger than the flyer he’d returned to Nyx in. The security detail he’d had on alert for three months consisted of nine hundred men, and he’d been considering expanding it.

‘I’m not sure—’

‘You’re not sure I can handle whatever it is you’ve got attacking your people,’ said Kvara. ‘You’re not sure something looking as dishevelled and terrible as me

could do much more than get himself killed.'

He leaned forward, and the metal of the table bowed under the pressure of his forearms. Oen recoiled, feeling the hot-meat breath wash over him.

'This is not about you, Morren Oen,' whispered Kvara, taking a cold pleasure in running his tongue around the words. 'This has nothing to do with you.'

Oen tried to hold the gaze from those animal eyes, and failed. He looked down at the rivets on the table, ashamed of himself.

'I need a flyer,' said Kvara, sitting back. 'Fastest you have. Then you can forget about me, and forget about your problem.'

Oen nodded for a third time. Being in the presence of Kvara was intensely tiring. He found himself happy to do almost anything to get the encounter over with.

'It will be done, lord,' he said, knowing that, whatever he'd expected to get out of that first meeting, he'd failed badly. 'I'll get straight on it.'

Eim looked sympathetic as Oen emerged from the room. She placed a hand lightly on his shoulder.

'How'd it go?'

Oen shrugged and smiled wryly.

'Not what I expected,' he said, shaking off the hand and walking down the corridor. He went quickly, keen to be out of there. 'Though I don't really know what I thought would happen.'

Eim trotted after him, looking up anxiously.

'How many of them have come?'

'Just him.'

'You're joking.'

'No.'

Eim snorted.

'I'll get the 'paths sending again.'

'That may not be necessary.'

'Of course it'll be necessary,' said Eim, scowling. 'We need men. There must be Guard somewhere within range – they'd send a whole company soon enough if they thought tithe production was about to fall.'

Oen halted, looking thoughtful. Now that he was out of Kvara's intimidating presence, he was beginning to think more clearly.

'He doesn't think he needs help.'

'That's his problem. I mean, did you see what he looked like?'

‘Right up close,’ said Oen, ruefully. ‘It wasn’t pretty.’

Eim shook her head irritably.

‘One!’ she snorted. ‘I didn’t think they ever worked on their own. I thought they came in squads – you know, like you see on the holos.’

Oen shrugged.

‘So did I,’ he said. ‘Maybe different types have different ways. He’s a Space Wolf. Heard of them?’

Eim shook her head.

‘Nice name,’ she said. ‘Suits his looks.’

‘Careful what you say,’ warned Oen, looking over his shoulder and back down the corridor. ‘His hearing’s very good.’

‘Okay, okay.’ Eim sighed, and ran a weary hand through her hair. ‘But, procurator, this is the last thing we needed. We lose another hub, and we’ll miss the next quota even if I keep the crews on triple rotation. For a minute there I was daring to hope we’d find a way out of this.’

This time it was Oen who put a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

‘You never know,’ he said. ‘He may be more impressive than he looks.’

He leaned closer to her, and lowered his voice.

‘He’s taking a flyer out, soon as I can requisition one,’ he said, covering his mouth. ‘And, whatever he says, I want it tracked and a team placed ready for rapid deployment, just in case he finds anything. Can you do that?’

Eim shot him a tolerant, affectionate look.

‘Sure I can,’ she said. ‘Just in case.’

The flyer skimmed low over the ocean, casting a deep green shadow on the waves. Kvara drove it hard, irritated by the lack of the explosive speed he was used to. One engine was already burning close to capacity, and the dashboard in front of him was active with red warning runes.

Kvara ignored them and concentrated on the view from the cockpit. Lyses stretched away in every direction, formless and empty, a wasteland of pure water and pure sky. The first sun was up, and the arc of the atmosphere was bleached salmon pink. The ocean was calm, veined with lines of white where the massive swells rolled under him.

It was pristine. In an Imperium where the hand of man fell heavily on everything it touched, Lyses was a rare jewel. In its inviolability it reminded Kvara of Fenris. On the death world, everything below the Asaheim parallel was barely touched by humanity. Lyses was more benign, but had the same vast,

untouched quality.

Despite everything, that spoke to his soul. It had been a long time since anything had done that, and he found the experience, on the whole, uncomfortable.

*There is one objective left, one mission, one task. Remember it.*

He pushed the flyer down further, skimming it barely a man's height above the waves. Spray flashed down the sleek flanks of the machine, spinning and frothing as he banked around in a long arc. Then he powered it up, sweeping along the trajectory the procurator had given him. For a moment, just a moment, he could have been back on a *drekkar*, relishing the steep pitch and yaw of the heavy wooden hull as it ploughed through the endlessly violent seas of his home.

But Lyses was too beautiful for that. Too beautiful, and too forgiving.

Below him, the algal blooms began to intensify. Deep green and cloudy, they hung just below the surface, bathed by the light of the sun. They extended for hundreds of kilometres, a vast mat of nutrient-rich matter, stuffed with proteins.

It was for them that mankind had come to Lyses, to suck up the endless stream of life-giving algae, to process it into foodstuffs ready to be transported off-world to the famished hives and forges elsewhere in the sector. Hub harvesters, mobile floating industrial behemoths, prowled the waters endlessly, slowly ploughing furrows through the infinite bounty, dragging it up and packing it into billions upon billions of dried and pressed pellets ready for transport to gigantic processing manufactoria on other planets.

According to the records Kvara had accessed in Nyx, Lyses hadn't had a serious security incident for over five hundred years. The harvesters had just kept on going, criss-crossing the ocean, working the algae and scooping it into their maw-like hoppers, as if it would go on forever.

But nothing lasted forever – everything decayed, everything was tainted.

Kvara allowed himself a grunt of cynical satisfaction. A world without strife was an affront to his battle-hardened sensibilities. All that could exist in such a place was softness, and softness opened the door to corruption.

The blooms grew ever thicker as the flyer sped on. The green darkened, forming a solid mass under the waves. If things had been working properly, he guessed, it would never have been left to become so overgrown.

A green rune blinked on the forward scanner. Kvara sat back in the pilot's seat, cramped in his bulky armour, and watched the ruin of the hub approach. He came in low, observing the way the broken struts still speared up from the waves.

The harvester had been massive. Wreckage littered the surface for a square kilometre or more, floating on the gentle swell or lodged in thick knots of algae. Kvara applied the air brakes, swivelling the engines forward to arrest his speed and achieve a low hover. He flicked a dial on the dashboard, and the bubble-cockpit slid back.

Warm, softly fragranced air rolled over him. The smell of the algae was rich and faintly sweet. Kvara hauled himself out of the seat and leaned over the side. His weight caused the flyer to tip violently and the engines whined as they compensated.

He narrowed his eyes, poring over the debris. No burn marks or signs of explosions marked the surfaces. Where the plasteel was broken, it looked like it had been snapped cleanly. Other pieces had the jagged evidence of claw-rakes on them.

Kvara studied each piece carefully, spending time observing the angle of the impacts, the force used, the frequency of them.

*Is it worthy? Is it enough?*

Early signs were promising. He felt a tremor of excitement in his hearts, and swiftly suppressed it. There had been too many disappointments for him to start thinking along those lines.

Keeping the cockpit-bubble open, Kvara sat back in the pilot's seat and started a slow circle of the wreckage. As he did so, he abstracted his mind from the particular, and drifted into the general.

There were huge channels gouged through the algae blooms, marking the passage of something truly massive. Though there were several of them, Kvara had the sense that only one beast had made them.

*Prey.*

He closed his eyes, just as he would have done on Fenris where the spirits of hunter and hunted intertwined closely, haunting the high mountain airs and staining the unbroken snow.

*I see you. I see your path. I will follow it, and then comes the test.*

He saw the trail of the beast in his mind, just as if it were a herd of *konungur*, twisting away into possible futures. He saw it plunge down into the frigid depths, as dark as the void of space, writhing along the jagged ocean floor.

He opened his eyes. Below him, a wide furrow in the algal carpet stretched off into the distance, jagging back and forth.

*I see you.*

Kvara nudged the flyer after it, following the trail. As he did during every

hunt, he put himself in the mind of his prey, imagining the mental processes of the beast and the strange, sluggish thoughts in that giant mind. He had learned to do it with such acuity that, for a moment at least, he might have been one himself.

As he travelled, his certainty grew. He powered the flyer back into full propulsion.

Kvara sat back, eyes half-closed, the warm wind racing past him. He let his instincts play loose, running down the prey, chasing after it as if a physical scent had lodged in his nostrils.

It was the same then as it had always been. For a moment, the hunt took over, the quest became everything.

In simpler, harsher times, that was all there had been.

In the past that was now faded and hard to recall, he had lived for nothing else.

*I see you.*

The *drekkar* took a heavy hit and buckled over to starboard. It rolled across the heavy, gun-grey sea, lashed by the torrential rain. The deluge lanced down from the low cloud line, spears of liquid that bounced and rattled from the deck.

Everything moved. Waves crashed against the high flanks and cascaded down the deck, as cold as mountain-ice and hard as bullwhips. The masts screamed against the rigging, taut with ice crystals and shivering.

'I see you!' roared Thenge, bounding up to the prow with his long, white pelt in tow.

Olekk and Regg followed him, clasping tight to the railing, their boots slipping on the sodden deck-boards. Each one of them carried a long spear in their hands, crowned with a biting edge ground out of the iron by the priests.

Lighting flickered across the northern sky, followed by the crack, roll and boom of thunder.

Fenrys was angry, just as ever, and the seas boiled with that anger.

Aj Kvara hung from the high foremast by one hand, swaying far out over the water as the ship tilted and tipped. He hadn't seen anything but the driving rain and riot of moving water.

He swore to himself, and hurried down the rigging. If Thenge had seen something from the prow, then his eyes had been the keener. That was bad. Kvara's youth was supposed to be his advantage.

Then, before he was halfway to the deck, the sea off to port boiled up in a

mass of bubbles and lashing, slapping fronds.

‘Here it comes!’ yelled Rakki, his voice high with excitement. From somewhere else in the longship, furious laughter broke out. Kvara dropped to the deck, grabbed a spear and raced to the side.

Ahead of them, breaking the surface a dozen fathoms off, something vast and black slipped above the turmoil of the waves before sloping back down again. Kvara saw a glossy shell, pock-marked with barnacles, rolling away from the pursuing hunters and diving smoothly. A geyser of water puffed up as the beast exhaled and drew in more air.

‘*Hvaluri!*’ roared Olekk, laughing like the others.

Kvara felt excitement spur up within him, and he leaned further over, craning for another glimpse. The *drekkar* carried over thirty warriors. Taking a *hvaluri* would feed them and their families for weeks, as well as providing much else of value to the tribe.

‘Faster!’ Kvara shouted, up at old Rakki who was master of the ship.

The big man, one-eyed and scar-faced, glared back at him from the tiller.

‘You hunt!’ he blurted, outraged. ‘I sail!’

The creature broke the surface again, closer that time, sweeping up through the choppy water and letting out a muffled bellow of anger.

Maggr was still up in the rigging, and was first to throw. His spear shot down through the rain, spinning on its axis. It hit hard, burying the jagged iron blade deep into the *hvaluri*’s armoured hide. The beast roared and went down again.

‘*Hjolda!*’ Maggr bellowed, balling his fists and sending his face red with fervour.

Other spears shot down, missing the target and splashing into the walls of moving water.

Kvara bided his time, waiting for the *hvaluri* to surface again. The ship slipped steeply down a precipitous leading wave, wallowing at the base of it before climbing up the next one. The deck rolled and swung like a berserker’s axe-lunge, testing the warriors’ precarious footing. They braced themselves against the ropes, edging closer to the tilting side of the ship, peering into the storm-lashed murk for a glimpse of the prey they hunted.

‘Round left!’ bellowed Thenge, getting frustrated and reaching for a second throwing spear.

The *drekkar* shivered as its prow came across, buffeted by the crashing seas. The skinsails, those had hadn’t been furled against the storm, stretched out taut, making the ship race through the spray like a loosed crossbow bolt.

‘I have it!’ crowed Olekk, leaping up on to the sharply pitching rail and taking aim.

Something long and sinuous flashed out of the water, lashing across at Olekk with spiked barbs and dragging him over.

There was no scream. He was gone in an instant, pulled down into the icy depths from which no living man ever returned.

Kvara ran across the deck, springing up to where Olekk had been standing. He had a brief glimpse of black tentacles thrashing in the water, covering a foaming patch of dark red before that was swept astern by the racing sea.

He hurled his spear down, but the edge of the ship bucked wildly, sending his aim wide.

‘*Skítja,*’ he swore, jumping down and reaching for another spear.

Then the *drekkar* shuddered heavily, as if something vast had hit it from below. Thenge lost his footing and sprawled across the deck like a drunkard. The whole ship shot up, briefly thrown clear of the waves, before crashing back down again, snapping whole lengths of rigging and making the loose ropes flail like scourges.

Maggr jumped from the broken ropes, still flushed from his success, and barrelled up to the prow, leaping over the grappling form of Thenge.

‘Ha!’ he crowed, grabbing two throwing spears and taking the lead warrior’s place.

Kvara chuckled at the presumption of it, leaping away from the rolling edge and grabbing a fresh spear of his own.

Everyone was still laughing and roaring – the ragged, caustic laugh of hunters gripped by the manic touch of the kill-urge. The whole ship was febrile with it, spilling over with savage, raw energy.

‘I *want* this kill,’ spat Kvara. His blond hair had come loose of its plaits, and lashed round his clean, ruddy face in the wind. He grinned as he spoke, and his white teeth flashed in the storm.

‘Then throw quicker, lad,’ said Maggr, taking up a spearing position and scouring the churning waves.

It came up again then, huge and glistening. Kvara saw a single eye the size of his chest, as round as the moon and grey like an oyster. It glared at them, burning with bestial hatred and fury.

He didn’t hesitate. Fast as a whip-snap, Kvara hurled the spear. It whistled through the air, striking straight through the heart of the eye. The shaft trembled, and it lodged fast.

The *hvaluri* bellowed, its roars making the water drum and vibrate, before rolling heavily away from the boat.

‘It won’t go down!’ shouted Thenge, back on his feet and braced for another throw. ‘Not now!’

Kvara raced to fetch another spear. His heart was thumping with glorious, brutal energy. Every muscle ached, every sinew was taut, but his heart sang.

*I speared the eye! I did it!*

The creature reared up, thundering out of the boiling sea, throwing water across its hunched, gnarled back in huge tumbling sheets.

‘*Morkai!*’ swore Regg, hurling a spear at it and somehow managing to miss.

The beast was massive, at least the size of the *drekkar* and much, much heavier. It thrashed around in a wallow of agony, the spears still protruding from its body. A huge shell of barnacle-cruste blackness rolled around, crowned with spines and bone-ridges. A mass of tentacles flashed out from under the skirts of the shell, twisting and writhing like a nest of prehensile tongues. Spray shot out, splattering against the masts and cascading down on to the warriors.

‘Too close!’ warned Rakki, heaving on the tiller.

The ship came round, but not quickly enough. Tentacles shot out, latching on to the railings and dragging the *drekkar* back. It tilted heavily, listing over nearly to the tipping point.

Thenge lost his footing again, raging and cursing as he slipped down the steeping deck. A tentacle spun out, clamping on to his ankle and gripping tight. He grabbed his axe from his belt and hacked down, severing it cleanly and freeing himself.

Other warriors charged, hurling their spears at the exposed underbelly of the beast. Some of the blades bit deep, disappearing into the forest of thrashing members, provoking fresh roars of pain. The sea frothed with a thick black sludge as the monster began to bleed. Some of it splashed out across Kvara’s face, hot and salty.

‘It’ll drag us down!’ shouted Rakki, toiling uselessly at the tiller.

More tentacles latched on to the ship, some reaching all the way across to the far side. The *drekkar* listed further, and water began to lap across the lower edge of the deck, washing up across the already drenched planks.

Thenge raced over to the nearest tendril, hacking away with his axe. He cut through it sharply, but two more fronds quickly whipped across. All across the ship, warriors swapped their throwing spears for short-handled axes and began chopping frantically at the strangling lengths of tentacle. Even as they worked,

the ship slipped further down, dragged through the mountainous swell by the wounded beast.

Kvara drew his throwing arm back, only to feel a viscous, slimy wall of flesh hit him full in the face. He crashed back heavily, cracking his head on something unyielding on the way down. He had the blurred impression of a black tube the width of his arm snaking across his field of vision and falling over him. A hot wash of pain ran through his skull, and he felt blood running down the back of his neck.

Acting on instinct, he swept up his spear, still grasped in his right hand, shoving the blade of it up through the tentacle. It carved through sweetly, separating it into two pieces. The broken-off end continued to writhe on its own, jerking and spasming across the sodden wood.

Kvara staggered to his feet. The ship was going down. Waves rushed up the tilted deck, flooding into the hold below. For every tentacle the warriors slashed apart, more shot out, wrapping the *drekkar* in a morass of dripping, slippery tendrils.

‘*Hjolda!*’ he roared, grabbing his axe from his belt and throwing his arms back in challenge.

The beast loomed up at him, sweeping up out of the waves and roaring its own booming call of anger.

Kvara sprinted down the listing deck, leaping over the bodies of the fallen and veering past the flickering ends of searching tentacles, ignoring the hammering pain in his head. He ran straight at the huge domed shell, hacking away the snaking tubes of meat as they swept into his path.

It felt like he was running down a cliff-edge, straight into the depths of the bottomless ocean. He could see the bulk of the *hvaluri* below him, wallowing in a messy broth of broken spars and bloody water.

He leapt, flying away from the ship and through the air, plummeting for a moment, his long hair streaming behind him and his axe held high.

Then he landed, crunching on to the shell of the beast, feeling the hard surface flex from the impact.

He nearly skidded straight across it and over the far side, but managed to clutch at a bone-ridge with his trailing hand. He yanked to a halt, nearly blinded with spray and buffeted by the gusting wind.

The creature let out a deafening roar and hauled itself further out of the boiling sea. Tentacles shot up, trailing across its shell, reaching out to rip him from its back and hurl him into the water.

Kvara pulled himself to his knees, balancing precariously on the bucking, rolling curve, hacking at any tentacles that reached him. Blood still ran from his head wound, making him dizzy. Through the clouds of spray, he could just make out the *drekkar* rolling away, righting itself as the hold of the tentacles was released.

Kvara batted away a flailing length of tentacle, then slammed the axe-head down. It cracked open the shell, plunging deep into the translucent, sticky matter beneath.

The beast bellowed, thrashing and yawing in the waves. Jets of black ink spouted up, splashing across Kvara's chest. He pulled the axe free, drew it up and chopped down again. The blade cracked open a new wound, shattering the beast's armoured covering and tearing up the soft flesh beneath. More ink welled up, boiling hot and fizzing.

Kvara kept attacking it, ripping up the outer layers and burying the axe-head deep into the yielding blubber beneath. The tentacles lashed out, feebly now. The cries of the beast became plaintive rather than angry. Gouts of black murk pumped from its wounds, turning the roiling waves dark and viscous.

Kvara heard a heavy crunch close by. He looked up and saw Thenge by his side, scrabbling for purchase on the shell before getting to his knees. The big warrior grinned at him, an axe in each hand.

'Brave work, pup!' he laughed, whirling the blades in his hands before hacking them down. 'We'll make you a man yet!'

Then the two of them got to work, gripping the tilting shell and hacking it open, burrowing down, slicing through the hide of the beast, breaking up what remained of the hard barrier between them and the pulpy mass beneath. Out of the corner of his eye, Kvara saw the grappling hooks fly out from the *drekkar*, latching on the foundering creature, ready to haul it to the side of the ship. Other warriors were preparing to make the leap across, brandishing hooks and cleavers.

Kvara kept his head down after that, working hard. His pain at the back of his head wouldn't abate, though it didn't stop him working.

Amid all of it, he still grinned. He couldn't help himself. The flush of victory ran through his veins, keeping his arms moving and giving his legs the strength to hold him in position.

*This is my kill*, he thought as he hacked away furiously, trying not to let his stupid, childish grin show too much.

*My kill.*

A day later and the storm lessened in its fury, though the seas ran hard for much longer. The *drekkar* made heavy work of it, labouring in the deep swell. The central mast still stood but much of the rigging had been ripped away. Several holes had been punched below the waterline, and no matter how fast the crew bailed it out, the bilges sloshed with seawater where the makeshift repairs had been hammered on.

Aside from Olekk, three other warriors had been dragged over the edge. That was a heavy toll for the tribe, though the scale of the prize compensated for that. The meat of the *hvaluri* would keep them fed for many months once the women had smoked and salted it. The tough shell would provide tools for them and the beast's blood would be distilled into both fuel and food.

The ship ran low in the water, laden down with every piece of hide and blubber the warriors could fit aboard. It stank of the sea, acrid and salty, but no one minded that. It was a good haul, worth setting out across the blade-dark ocean for.

As they neared home Thenge sat with Kvara in the prow, chewing on a long piece of sinew and letting the grease run down his beard.

'Feeling better?' he asked good-naturedly.

Kvara nodded. He'd broken his arm on the leap back to the ship after the *hvaluri* had given up the fight, much to the raucous amusement of the rest of the crew. Even after it had been bound up with a rough splint, it still ached – not that he would ever show it.

His head was the worst of it. He didn't dare to get it looked at by the priests. The blood still oozed thickly from the wound, and the pain grew with every passing hour. His vision was beginning to blur. It wasn't healing.

'I mean what I say,' said Thenge, jabbing his finger at the blond warrior. 'That was brave. The test of manhood awaits, and you're ready.'

Kvara took up a string of sinew himself and chewed on it.

'Not sure?' asked Thenge.

'I'll do it,' he said. 'Not now.'

Thenge snorted.

'Why wait?'

Kvara looked away from him, down the longship where the rest of the crew laboured. They were his people, the ones he'd lived with all his short life. They'd never made him feel anything less than part of their world. The test of manhood – the long, solitary hunt across the icy wastes, daunted him. He didn't fear death, and certainly didn't fear danger, but something about the ordeal made

him hang back.

He would do it, but not soon. The time wasn't right.

'I don't know,' he said, truthfully enough. He took another bite of the sinew, feeling the slippery flesh slide around his mouth. The action of eating dulled the pain slightly. 'I'm not ready.'

He looked up then, up at the grey walls of cloud that shrouded Fenrys. In a rare break, where the sheets of occlusion gave way slightly, he thought he saw something up there, shadowing them. A huge bird, perhaps, but its profile was strangely angular. It seemed to hang motionless in the air.

'Perhaps you're not ready to be out on your own,' said Thenge, resignedly.

Kvara nodded, not really paying attention. His head was getting worse. The clouds closed back together, hiding whatever it was that he'd seen.

'Yes,' he said. 'Perhaps that's right.'

Kvara ran his finger over the names on his armour. The snow-grey metal was softened in Lyses's warm light. Even the blade marks, the scorches and the dents looked a little less jagged.

He didn't need to read the names in order to remember them. They were carved on to his mind just as deeply as they were etched into the ceramite.

Mór, his thick-set face framed by black, dense sideburns. Dark hair, pale skin, like a vision of an underworld spectre with the sardonic humours to match.

Grimbjard Lek, the polar opposite. Sunny, blond, his mouth twitching up into a wicked smile at the first excuse. He'd killed with a smile on his face, that one, glorying the Allfather with every swing of his axe.

Vrakk, the one they'd all called Backhand, bulky and blunt with his powerfist thrumming, a dirty fighter but useful enough to make up for it.

Aerjak and Rann, brothers-in-arms, inseparable and possessed of that uncanny awareness of the other's state. Kvara had always had Aerjak down for the Rune Priests. He'd had a strange way about him, something tied to the wyrd, for all the good it had done him on Deneth Teros.

Frorl, the blade-master, swinging his frostblade with that unconscious, mocking ease, disdaining ranged weapons for the thrill of disruptors and steel-edge.

Rijal Svensson, wiry and fast, quick to anger and equally quick to laugh, his nose broken so many times that it had almost been not worth bothering with. He'd never accepted augmetic replacements, preferring to keep the stub of gristle and bone-shards in place to remind him not to get carried away.

Finally, Beorth, the quiet one. Only happy when hoisting his heavy bolter into position or at the controls of something huge and slung with big guns. He'd have been a Long Fang before he made Grey Hunter, if they'd let him. He'd laughed rarely, never sharing the coarse jokes the rest of them let spill from their profane lips, but when he had done, that rolling, rich, mirthful rumble had made Kvara grin unconsciously along with him.

Beorth had been the hardest, out of all of them. He'd been the one they'd never noticed unless he wasn't there.

Kvara let his armoured finger trace out the names, clicking softly as it passed over the runic grooves.

*Perhaps you're not ready to be out on your own.*

A warning light blinked on the dashboard. Kvara snapped out of his memories and took in the data.

The hub was in visual range and racing towards him fast. It was a small installation, a few hundred metres in diameter on the surface and crowned with a couple of comms towers, a few landing stages and a squat ops centre. Lights still blinked at the summit, flashing piercingly in the heat of day. The algae stretched away from it, sparse in patches and thick in others. Four lines of oily smoke rose from the harvester processing nodes, indicating that it was still working.

Kvara's face wrinkled in disapproval. He could smell the thick stench of promethium already, a low-grade variant, greasy and sour.

His armoured fingers ran over the console, keying in the landing codes from the databank Oen had uploaded to the flyer. A pict over to his left immediately updated with the response. The protective cover of one of the landing stages withdrew, unfurling like an iron rosebud, and he banked the flyer towards it.

*Nothing obviously wrong.*

He touched the flyer down on the platform and jumped down from the open cockpit. Smoke poured from one of the engines, and the others wound down slowly, as if their bearings had been ground away.

Kvara strode across the apron, unconsciously checking his weapons. The bolt pistol at his waist was fully loaded and primed with the appropriate blessing. Blood, his own blood, ceremonially stained the muzzle. Across his back was strapped Djalik, his blade. It was a short, stabbing sword, notched and serrated along one of the cutting edges and with inset runes lodged under the bronze-lined hilt. Over the years the metal had been dulled with burns from the weapon's disruptor field, making it as dark as charcoal.

Kvara sniffed the air, going watchfully. Everything was quiet. The installation barely moved on the placid waters. The warm wind blew across the towers and manufactoria units, washing over the grey plasteel in an endless, placid sigh.

Ahead of him, two doors slid soundlessly open, opening the way into the hub's interior. Orange lights blinked on, illuminating a bare, clean corridor. Everything smelled of the algae – a mulchy, briny tang that lingered at the back of the throat.

Kvara paused before entering, taking a final look across the hub. Aside from the low growl of automating processors, all was calm. The green waters lapped softly at the flanks of the harvester, a hundred metres down from the landing platforms.

*Where are the men?*

Reluctantly, having got used to the clean, unfiltered taste of the air, Kvara retrieved his battered helm from its mag-lock and screwed it in place. The balmy atmosphere of Lyses disappeared, replaced by the filtered, sterile environment of his armour-shell.

Kvara took up his bolt pistol, and breathed a prayer, the same prayer he'd uttered during every quest since Deneth Teros.

*Allfather, deliver me from safety and bring me into peril.*

Then he walked inside.

'Where is he now?'

'Alecto XI. He's landed.'

'That's a long way from the last site. Have we got anything from the crew?'

'Nothing. Not a thing.'

'When was the last transmit?'

'Uh, hang on.'

Eim steadied herself against the sway of the flyer. It was a big one, capable of spending several days out over the water and accommodating a full assault company. She didn't like using craft that big – their judder and yaw, as well as the fuel-tinged air, made her nauseous, and the grunts got restive cooped up in the holds.

'We don't have anything from them for six days, ma'am.'

Eim turned to the comms officer and raised an eyebrow.

'Why wasn't that picked up? They're meant to be checking in daily.'

The comms officer, a grey-faced man with deep-sunk eyes and an unfortunate overbite, shrugged apologetically.

‘There are a lot to monitor.’

Eim swore and rubbed her eyes with the balls of his fists. Throne of Earth, she felt tired. Oen would owe her for this when she got back.

‘Okay, run a scan. Check for anything.’

‘I can’t see... whoa. I really don’t know... what is that?’

Eim pushed him aside and leaned over the augur console. As she watched the shapes clarify, she felt a sudden, cold thrill shudder through her body.

‘How close are we to him?’

‘A long way. Procurator Oen insisted on a range of—’

‘Forget that. We’re going in. Signal Nyx, but don’t wait for a response.’

She turned away from the comms officer and looked out across the cramped bridge space. Other officers looked up from their stations. Their expressions had switched from mild boredom into nervous expectation.

‘Get the men armed and ready to deploy,’ she said, speaking to the company commander, a squat, low-browed man called Frehis Aerem. ‘All squads, assault order, ready to drop on my word.’

Eim looked back at the console before he’d had a chance to respond. As she watched the augur line sweep round for another pass, she felt her heart start to thump faster within her chest.

‘Damn you, Oen,’ she muttered, shaking her head as she watched the data stream in. ‘You let him go out there – this is on *your* conscience.’

The corridors were quiet and lit only by dim orange light. Every metre of them was pristine, scrubbed clean and glistening. Octagonal hatches appeared at regular intervals along the walls, all closed. Kvara tried one of the handles, and it clicked against the bolt lock. He punched through the mechanism, cracking the handle, and the hatch swung open.

The chamber on the far side was empty. There was a desk, two metal chairs, a scale model of the harvester station on a sideboard. More orange light flickered from a semi-functional lumen, catching the jewels in a cheap devotional image of some primarch or other. No one was inside and, from the sterile smell of it, no one had been inside for some time.

Kvara turned back, walking through the network of corridors. Despite his heavy boots, his footfalls were soft. The power armour hummed – a low, grinding noise at the edge of mortal hearing – the only thing that broke the dense fog of silence.

Kvara paused, inclining his head, listening carefully. For a second, there was a

trace sound, right on the edge of his audible range. Nothing he could latch on to, and not enough data for the helm to augment.

He started walking again, keeping his pistol held high. The grey hair along the back of his neck stood erect, brushing against the collar of his armour. He could feel his thick blood pumping vigorously around his bulky frame. His awareness had sharpened up, causing his muscles to loosen and his pupils to dilate. He heard his own breathing resonate within the helm, close and hot.

*I come for you. You know I am here.*

At the end of the corridor was another intersection. He waited again, watching, listening, absorbing.

*Show yourself.*

The lights blew.

The corridor plunged into darkness. Something raced up out of the shadows, phenomenally fast, scabbling on the metal floor as it came.

In the nanosecond before Kvara's helm compensated, it swerved around the corner and out at him. A hellish face, obscenely long and crested, lashed up out of the dark.

Kvara loosed two bolts, aiming fast. They impacted with a crack and flash of light, shattering a brittle shell. High screams, alien screams, echoed from the walls.

More of them arrived, leaping over the fallen outrider. Jointed limbs clattered over metal, flashing ice-white as more bolt-flares lit them up. They came in a tangled rush, jostling each other, jaws wide and biting.

Kvara pulled back, firing all the time. His arm moved only by fractions, picking out target after target, cracking apart the growing swarm of xenos creatures. The intersection clogged quickly with smashed shells and oozing pulp, but he kept coolly firing.

Just as the ammo counter ran down, the onslaught ceased. The last of the chattering screams died away, leaving a pile of twisted, snapped and cracked shells in front of him.

Kvara ejected the old magazine, slammed a fresh one into the pistol housing and drew his blade with his left hand. Djalik's disruptor field fizzed into life, throwing an electric blue aura out from the cutting edge.

He strode out into the intersection, wading through a swamp of broken, twitching carcasses, watching for more of the xenos to come at him.

He knew what they were. He'd fought such beasts on a dozen worlds.

*Hormagaunts*, the Imperium called them.

Kvara liked fighting tyrannids. Unlike Traitors, for whom he could feel nothing but a blind, disgusted fury, or the greenskins, which were contemptible, tyrannids were a force he could respect.

They were pure. They suffered from neither fear nor corruption nor fatigue. Like the native beasts of his own world, they lashed out with an unsullied primal aggression, driven to kill out of hammered-in instinct and never stopping until death took them or the task was completed.

They saw him as prey. He saw them as prey. That made things even.

Ahead of Kvara the corridor opened out into a wide, square room. Banks of equipment were arranged in long rows, all still clean and unsullied. Across them lay the bodies of the hub's crew, very much not clean and unsullied.

They had been ripped open. Their bodies, what was left of them, hung in glistening loops of gristle and sinew all across the room. A few had tried to get out, running for the double doors on the far side of the space. The trails of blood, as thick and dark as engine oil, didn't reach very far. The corpses still had looks of horrified surprise on their faces – those, at any rate, who still had faces.

Kvara swept the room with his pistol. The lights were still down, and his helm picked the outlines of the bodies in fuzzy grey light.

He sensed them coming before his armour's equipment did. A skittering, scraping run, muffled by the closed doors to the corridor beyond, punctuated by the high-pitched rattle of xenos vocal cords. They were racing toward him – dozens of them, maybe more.

Kvara grinned.

The doors burst apart, thrown aside by a press of straining bodies. Blurred xenos outlines, skeletal and reptilian, swarmed through the gap and into the room, screaming at him with stretched-wide jaws, pouring over the surfaces in a rolling wave of needle-teeth and hooked claws.

*'Fenrys!'*

Kvara charged straight back at them, leaping over a slumped pile of eviscerated bodies and bringing his blade round in a wide, blistering arc. He hurled himself into the tide, loosing volleys of bolt-fire that flashed out in the dark like storm lightning.

They came on, lashing out at him, and he shattered their talons. They leapt up to maul him, and he broke their snapping jaws. He spun round, shifting from one foot to another, punching out, slicing back with the blade, firing all the while. Scrawny xenos bodies smashed apart, bursting open and spraying fluid across his whirling, gyrating armour.

More of them poured in through the broken doors, streaming into the chamber and leaping up to make contact with him. They bounded over the bodies of their own dead, desperate to draw blood.

Kvara smashed his pistol-hand round, caving in a swollen xenos skull, before sending two more rounds spinning into two more targets, jabbing up with the blade and hauling it back through the entrails of another flailing monster.

They were all over him, tearing and screaming, but he was faster, bigger and stronger. As they howled with agonised frustration, he grunted with coarse satisfaction. His gauntlets were heavy and sticky with fluids, but he kept them moving. The liquid splattered over his breastplate, dousing the graven names under layers of filth.

He had been bred to do this. There was nothing left for him but this. Only in such work could his soul find a measure of peace even as his body pushed itself to the extremes of performance.

He was back where he belonged. Back in the fight.

‘Kvara!’

Mór’s voice was strained over the comm, broken up by the crackle of ordnance. Huge, thumping crashes distorted the feed.

‘Position, brother,’ snapped Kvara, running hard, feeling the sweat run down his temple.

‘Rann... all gone...’

And that was it. The comm spat a fog of static. Kvara kept running, keeping his head low, weaving through the rubble. Solid rounds fizzed over his head, impacting against the rockcrete and showering him with rubble.

*Blood of Russ – where are they?*

He sensed a detonation to his left, and leapt clear. The already ruined wall exploded, hurling out an orb of fire and rusty shrapnel. The blast wave threw him from his feet, slamming him into the nearside bulwark. His armour crunched through it, tearing up the stone and showering him in dust.

‘Position!’ he spat, righting himself and breaking into a run again.

Nothing but hissing came over the comm. The fractured sky of Deneth Teros rumbled with electric storms, and a fork of violet lightning licked the burning horizon.

‘Lek. Svensson. *Position.*’

He ducked down again and starting to run. Above him, huge artillery trails lanced between the shells of the spires, exploding in a cacophony of overlaid,

shuddering booms.

The static mocked him, and he blinked the feed closed. Far ahead of him, the city core was tearing itself apart. A vast hab-spire, hundreds of metres tall and crested with jagged towers, toppled over with eerie, magisterial slowness. Already broken open by a hundred major impacts, the walls imploded as it crashed down amongst the ruins, throwing up a bow wave of burning dust. The screams of those inside were lost in the ripping, flickering wind, burned away by the igniting promethium in the air.

Kvara raced across a narrow transit corridor, dodging the smoking craters and leaping over the lines of barbed stranglewire. Explosive rounds followed him, puffing up as they hit the tarmac. Since he'd left Vrak, coughing up his own blood in the gutter with his lower body on the other side of the street, Kvara's tactical display had showed nothing but interference. The location runes of his pack all showed blank.

*We're being torn apart.*

He spotted movement, right on the edge of his left visual field, and swerved after it. Something – something big – ducked under a huge, low-hanging metal beam.

Kvara fired. The bolts screamed off into the fire-flecked murk, exploding as they demolished the beam in a cloud of spinning metal shards.

Then he was running again, leaping past smoking mortar holes and sweeping around smouldering heaps of twisted slag. He hadn't killed it. He'd have known if he had killed it.

Warned by some inner sense, he skidded to a halt, dropping down to a crouch.

A ball of plasma seared out of the gloom, missing by centimetres, slamming into the wall behind him. Kvara lurched forward, feeling the heat as another plasma bolt flew across his back.

He rolled to one side, bringing up his pistol and firing blind. The bolts connected with something, there was a shrill shriek, and the plasma torrent ceased.

Kvara sprang up, bounding after the source of the noise, ducking and swooping across the broken ground. As he went, his senses processed a thousand minor events in every direction – Guardsmen howling and weeping with fear and pain, juddering fire from dug-in positions over by the refineries, the grind and crack of armoured formations coming up from the transit hub along what remained of the Joslynssbahn. He processed those sounds, but did nothing about them. Everything was focussed on the elusive shadow, the shape that stayed one

step ahead, the shape that had come among them and summoned blood.

Kvara tore round the shell of a burned-out Chimera, tasting the sweet taste of the hunt in his cloyed saliva.

Ahead, two hundred metres, he saw it again, dark between clouds of engine smoke. Huge, edged with spikes, loping like a maddened devil of the Helwinter. Corruption rolled from its carapace in a stink of oily shadow.

It turned, and eyes the colour of newborn flesh blazed at him.

Kvara fired as he ran, loosing a rolling column of explosive rounds and zigzagging through the broken remnants of the 576th Armoured Falchions.

The bolts connected, and the creature rocked back on huge, cloven feet. It cast aside a charred and broken plasma cannon and reached for a glittering blade. A scream sliced through the air, echoing in nightmarish polyphony.

Kvara didn't slow down. The pistol clicked empty, and he cast it aside, drawing up his blade Rothgeril and activating the lashing disruptors.

The thing he faced had once been a man. After that, it had been a Space Marine. After that, it had become a living altar of sadism, a prophet of the darkest corner of insanity and depravity in a galaxy already drenched in it.

Its armour, a grotesque blasphemy of Tactical Dreadnought plate, had burst out and split from the pulsing flesh beneath. Translucent tumours swelled up in the cracks, glowing and leaking and trembling. A face – part helm-grille, part skeletal rictus – grinned out from under a cowl of whip-curl bronze snakes. Eldritch energy rippled across the warped ceramite like meltwater. Blood flecked and speckled the pale pink tracery, boiling and hissing as the raw ether touched it and recoiled.

Kvara swung the blade low, driving it with frightening speed and precision. He could sense the acuity of his own movements, and gloried in it. Every nanometre of his body was straining for the kill. His hearts thudded, his blood raged, his lungs burned with a cleansing pain.

The blades clashed, and a boom of power discharged, throwing Kvara back and blunting his charge. The monster reared over him, pulling its pulsing sword-edge round for another blow.

Kvara pulled away, opening up a narrow space and spinning round to build up fresh momentum. The creature sliced its own blade across at him, tearing the very air itself asunder and leaving a trail of agonised matter in its wake.

Kvara ducked under it, feeling the charged edge tear a chunk from his backpack. He thrust up, ignoring the sickly stench of filth that poured from the corrupted horror, grabbing the hilt of Rothgeril two-handed.

The sword bit deep, blazing like a field of stars as it crashed through the distorted ceramite and warp-addled flesh.

Then it was hauled away, dragged from his hands by a wrench so hard that Kvara lost his feet and was dragged, face-down, into the ash and dust of the ruined city. He recovered instantly, rolling away to evade the downward killing plunge before jumping back to his feet and backing away, disgusted at how easily his weapon had been taken from him.

Now the creature held two swords. One, its own, blazed with sick, overripe energy. The other, Kvara's, held upside-down by the blade-tip. The beast's long fingers squeezed through the furious disruptor field, bleeding dark purple blood where Rothgeril's biting edge sunk deep into its twisted flesh.

It laughed, and the sound was like the screaming of children.

Weaponless, Kvara clenched his gauntlets and snarled, ready for the onslaught. The creature was nearly twice his height, mutated and imbued with the essence of the Ruinous Powers. The Grey Hunter gazed up at it through red helm lenses, fearless and desperate, judging whether any blow he landed could do any damage to such a monster, tensing to sell his life with as much blood and fire as could still be mustered.

But not yet. A hurricane of heavy bolter fire slammed into the towering monster, smashing up the twisted armour and churning deep into the rose-pink muscle. It reeled, flailing against the bludgeoning hail of exploding projectiles.

Beorth limped out of the roiling clouds, his underslung bolter thundering from his two-handed grip. The comm-link was still a hiss of nothing. In broken bursts, Kvara could only hear a strangled, desperate sound from Beorth's feed.

The man, the big man, was *roaring*.

'A blade, brother!' shouted Kvara, stretching out a hand imploringly.

Beorth ignored him. He strode toward the staggering creature, firing all the while, ripping the armour-shell free of its sickening sigils and unholy signs. His own armour was as black as night, burned and rent open, and blood still poured from a dozen mortal wounds. He walked on regardless, massive and implacable, pouring a steady stream of withering, searing destruction from the red-hot muzzle of his huge weapon.

The monster waded through it, clawing at the bolts even as they punched into it, blowing shards from its armour and spraying plumes of purple. It staggered toward Beorth, screaming the whole time in a paroxysm of outrage and madness.

Then it leapt, streaming out in trails of blood and shell-discharge, arms outstretched and jaws open. It crashed into Beorth, knocking them both to the

ground and rolling over. It savaged at his neck, tore at the cracks in his armour, stamped down with cloven hooves on to his prone limbs.

Kvara raced after them, pouncing on to the back of the creature. He grabbed the ornate lip of its armour and heaved, pulling it away from Beorth. The horror snarled and lashed round, trying to throw him off. Kvara clung on, digging his fingers deep into the exposed flesh under the ceramite, tearing it up and pulling it out in strips.

Beorth clambered back to his feet, drawing his blade. The heavy bolter thudded to the floor, spent and smoking.

The creature of Chaos threw Kvara off, hurling him to one side and swinging the twin swords down at his prone body. Kvara rolled away, evading them by centimetres, before Beorth charged back, slashing with his own combat blade, whirling and dancing with all the skill of Frorl.

Together, the two of them rocked back and forth, hacking and blocking. The Traitor was reeling now, weeping blood in rivulets down its shattered armour. Beorth's left arm hung limply by his side, awkwardly twisted, his every move radiating agony.

Kvara lurched to his feet in time to witness his brother's sword knocked away with a vicious swipe from the Traitor's warp-tainted blade. It spun away, glittering in the firelight, clattering across the stone. Spurred on by desperation, Kvara scrambled after it, grabbing the hilt just as it came to rest.

He whirled back round, only to see the creature break Beorth's neck with a final, horrifying lunge. The huge warrior was hoisted into the air and cast aside with a sickening crunch of bone.

Then it turned to Kvara, and grinned.

Kvara ignited the disruptor on Beorth's blade, barely noticing the runes signifying 'Djalik' along the blade. It felt light in his hand, balanced the way a combat sword should be.

'For the Allfather,' Kvara breathed softly, staring at the murderer of his pack, sensing the death-spirit locked tight in the killing blade.

The creature charged at him, both swords flailing, but its movements were jerky and erratic. Massive wounds had opened out across its body from Beorth's onslaught, all bleeding torrents.

Kvara darted forward, ducking under the first incoming swipe before jabbing up with the point of Djalik, twisting as the edge punched up through the outstretched chin of the Traitor.

The point cleaved cleanly, thrusting up through bone and brain. The monster,

impaled on the lashing, spitting energy blade, jerked like a marionette, lashing out blindly with its twin weapons.

Huge fists battered Kvara, buffeting him from either side, but he remained firm. He fed power to Djalik's disruptors, and the creature's head bulged, cracked, and exploded.

A rain of pulp and bone shot outward, blinding Kvara and sending him reeling backwards again. Disorientated, he stumbled, landing heavily on his back. A sharp pain radiated from his side, and he caught sight of the Traitor's blade lodged in his torso. Runes flashed red across his helm display, giving him a tediously thorough summary of just how badly hurt that made him.

The headless body of the Traitor toppled, thudding dully against the tortured earth of Deneth Teros. Tendrils of warp-matter flickered across its ruined corpse, dancing like grave-sprites.

Still on his back, Kvara grabbed hold of the corrupted blade, gritted his teeth, and pulled. It came free with a wet squelch, dragging strands of muscle and skin with it through the jagged gash in his armour. He could feel the poison in the wound already, hot and boiling away like a swarm of insects. He tried to rise, and failed. Blood was leaking out of him freely, defying the clotting agents in his body. His vision blurred, going black, and his head fell back against the hot soil.

Above him, the sky was scored with trails of fire. As if from far away, he heard the rush and clamour of warfare. The ground trembled underfoot as huge war engines trundled toward one another. High up in the dark skies, black silhouettes of drop-ships hung, shaky in the heatwash from their labouring engines.

Kvara watched it all mutely, feeling paralysis creep up to his lips. He could feel his consciousness slipping away, even as his ravaged body rallied against the poison frothing in his blood.

'Position...' he murmured, automatically, repeating the word he'd used so often over the last hour, feeling the bitter futility of it even as his mind lost its grip on the world of the senses.

Beorth was dead. Vrakk was dead. Rann and Aerjak had died together, just as they had surely been fated to do. The pack – all of them – were dead.

Kvara felt a solitary tear of rage run down his burned cheek. He wanted to take his helm off, to taste the air of the world that had done this, but his hands no longer obeyed his commands.

Night closed in on him, the night of oblivion. The last thing he saw was the helm display, functional and stark. The eight runes, eight identifier marks, were

all blank, like empty holes into the void.

*All dead.*

The thought burned at his mind even as it retreated in nothingness. It stabbed at him, far sharper than the wound in his side, sharper than the many wounds across his battle-worn body, sharper than the knowledge, coming to him even as lost everything else, that he was equal to the poisons, and that this would not be the last fight he would live to see.

That didn't matter. For the first time since coming off the ice and taking the Helix, that didn't matter.

Nothing mattered.

*All dead.*

'This is your choice.'

'I have made it.'

'Not yet. You need more time.'

'My decision won't change.'

'It may. I've seen it before.'

The eyes in the dark were red and slanted. If he had died, he would have expected eyes like those.

But he hadn't died, not physically. The eyes behind those lenses were like his. They were sunk deep into a black wolf skull mask with teeth set around the helm-grille.

Around him, the isolation chamber of the *Vrafnki* hummed with the grind of sub-warp travel. He didn't know where it was going, or how long it would be in transit. Much still had to be explained to him, though he was in no hurry to ask for information.

'It's a privilege, not a right,' said the Rune Priest, though less harshly than he might have done.

Kvara let his head sink back to the metal surface of the medicae cot. Every part of him still ached. His blood felt painfully hot, as if he'd been given a transfusion of molten lead.

'With all respect, lord,' he said, working his swollen lips painfully, 'I don't believe you. It's never been refused.'

For a moment, the skull mask remained static. Then a low, grating chuckle broke out from behind the black armour.

'Maybe.'

The mask drew closer, looming over him, coming to within a few centimetres

of his face. Kvara looked up through the translucent mask of the medicae shroud with the one eye that still worked. He felt the soft pulse of the machinery around him, cycling his blood, working his hearts, filling his lungs, keeping him shackled to life.

‘What do you think taking the lone path will be like, Hunter?’ he asked. ‘How long do you think it will take to find a prize big enough to extinguish your grief? When we pulled you from the ice, as near to death as you are now, you’d killed a *hvaluri*. How much bigger would your beast have to be, Aj Kvara, before its death would be enough?’

Kvara smiled grimly.

‘When I was a child, I dreamed of killing a *krakken*. That’s what I thought it took to become a Sky Warrior.’

‘Then you are a fool. The *krakken* cannot be killed.’

‘But Jarl Engir—’

‘The *krakken* cannot be killed. It will tear at the roots of the world for eternity, weakening them, making them frail.’

The Rune Priest withdrew his skull mask. Kvara closed his eye. He felt the drugs in his system dragging him back to unconsciousness, and fought against it.

‘It can be killed,’ he said, feeling his words slur. ‘I know it, and you know it. Everything that lives can be killed.’

He kept moving, heading down, ever down, fighting through the hormagaunts as they swarmed up from the lower levels, relishing every wave of them as they crashed and broke against his armour. Djalik was slick with their fluid, as was the muzzle of his bolt pistol, now dangerously low on ammunition.

The creatures had come from below. They’d run up the sensor shafts from the underwater sections, fast and silent. The human crew would have had no warning – no time even to send off a panicked transmission before the living wall of teeth and claws ripped into them. Before Kvara had arrived they’d been dispersing again, falling back down in scattered packs, making way for the monster whose appearance they’d heralded. Only his intervention had stirred them again, rousing them back into the slaving, indignant fury they’d shown before.

Now, once again, their numbers had been thinned. Kvara wheeled around smoothly, knocking three of the creatures bodily into the chamber walls. Two thumped wetly against the plasteel, slumping to the floor. The other managed to get up, and he grabbed it, snapping its neck with a contemptuous twist.

The floor rocked as something collided with the outside wall. The collisions were getting more violent, and he braced himself against them. A hormagaunt, one of the last remaining, skittered into the chamber and threw itself at him. Kvara cracked his fist into its oncoming jaws, not bothering to use the blade.

The chamber lurched again, and a crack snaked across the wall. Kvara backed away from it, running a quick check over his armour's integrity seals, knowing full well that he was several hundred metres below sea level.

The structure around him groaned and the walls began to bulge inwards. The cracks grew, as if something huge and prehensile had wrapped itself around the chamber and was pulling tight.

Kvara braced himself, gauging from the creaks and snaps of breaking struts how big the thing outside was.

The walls bulged further, breaking into a lattice of fractures, then broke. Seawater, opaque with bubbles, cascaded in, hitting him hard and knocking him off balance. Kvara thrust himself upward, kicking out against the sudden influx, rotating in the torrent and lashing out with his blade. Its edge connected with something viscous and mobile, snagging on it before cutting through.

He kept moving, pushing out from the rapidly disintegrating walls, powering through the rushing water. More tendrils snaked inside, thrashing after him. As he moved, he fought against a dizzying whirl of disorientation. Everything was in motion, frothing and racing. Water poured rapidly into what remained of the chamber's outer casing, rushing up to waist-height, then shoulder-height, then over his head.

Through a blurred curtain of moving water Kvara saw a huge length of sucker-clad skin race past him, ripping away a length of armour-casing from the hub's exterior. He kicked himself toward it. As he pushed off the crumbling floor gave way entirely, dissolving into a bubbling foam of broken mesh and cladding. More water bloomed up from under it, chasing out the last of the chamber's air in a glistening bubble.

Kvara brought Djalik round in a curve, aiming at the tentacle snaking through the breach. The blade sliced into it cleanly, and a huge cry echoed throughout the water – a shuddering, booming bellow of pain.

Then the last remnants of the chamber caved in, bringing with them a fresh deluge of churning, bloody water from all directions. Kvara ducked down under a collapsing wall section, lurching away from it in slow motion even as he fell down deeper, supported now by nothing but collapsing struts and spars. He tumbled into the centre of the zone of destruction, dragged further into the abyss

as the metal around him was crushed and whipped into nothing more than splinters.

The last of the air shot up in columns of glittering silver, leaving him plummeting through rapidly darkening seawater. His helm-visor partially compensated, rendering the scene around him into a riot of false-colour targets.

Kvara spun away from the forest of needle-thin sensor prongs jutting below the disintegrating harvester, still falling rapidly, still trying to get some kind of lock on the creature that was doing this. He had a vague impression of something vast moving just above him. He spun clumsily on to his back and fired upward. The bolts shot through the water leaving long trails of bubbles. A series of muffled thuds rang out and impact shocks rippled through the water.

Then Kvara hit the algae. He was dragged into a sticky, cloying morass of thick vegetation. It grasped at him, pulling on his limbs. He twisted around again, slicing out with his blade to clear it, still falling deeper. He reached out with his bolter-arm, ready to fire upward again, only to have a tentacle shoot down and lash round his wrist, wrenching it out of position.

With a violent jerk, he stopped falling. The algae rolled away from him and more tendrils snaked down, grabbing him and pulling him back up. He cut himself free, only for more suckers to grab on. Kvara felt his second heart thumping hard. His breath echoed, fast and regular, in the enclosed space of his helm.

He looked up, and saw the creature in full for the first time. A huge serrated crest of armour reared up in the gloom, ridged and pocked with barnacles. Jaws protruded from under the crest, lined with flashing lines of needle teeth. A massive torso, segmented and flexible, hung down from a spike-ringed neck. Tentacles flowed out from joints along the torso, writhing in the water as if they had sentience of their own. A long tail trailed back into the depths, terminated with a scorpion-like sting. The beast's hide was glossy and streamlined, and it moved through the water with a ponderous, muscular grace.

As Kvara stared up at it, struggling against the tendrils that clutched at him, its huge jaws opened to reveal several flicking tongues, each one the length of his forearm. Six multi-jointed arms uncurled out from the forest of tentacles, stretching out to grab at him. As Kvara saw the claws extend toward him, he remembered the shattered pieces of plasteel floating on the water.

He wrenched his bolt pistol free of the tentacles and fired straight at the creature's looming face. The rounds shot off through the water, leaving trails of bubbles in their wake.

With a mighty whiplash movement, the leviathan surged away from them, evading the projectiles with a sinuous ease. While it was moving, Kvara brought his blade to bear, severing the tendrils that still bound him and breaking free of their hold.

He dropped deeper, spinning around as his heavy armour dragged him down. The creature swam around and swept down after him, undulating through the blooms of algae like a colossal sea-serpent of Fenrisian myth.

Kvara tried to control his cartwheeling descent and failed. The thick liquid dragged at his limbs and the turbulence buffeted him. The wrecked hub was now far above him and out of his eyeline. Even with his helm lenses compensating, it was hard to make out much through the murk other than the vast serrated shadow pursuing him.

Then he reached the bottom. The sea floor rushed up at him, dark and jagged. Huge rocks, each as sharp as butcher's knives and many metres high, cut up into the fog of algae. Kvara arched his back, missing the tip of the nearest stalagmite by a finger's width. He spun away from it and collided with the flank of another one. As he rebounded clear, he managed to mag-lock his blade and stretch out with his free hand. His fingers clutched at the sharp edge of another rock column and he clamped his gauntlet tightly over the rock. His body swung after it, crashing into the unyielding stone and grinding to a standstill.

The stalagmite held him, and his boots lodged firm against a narrow ledge on the stone. Locking himself in place with his free hand, Kvara swung his pistol up again and loosed another volley of bolts.

The creature had been close on his tail the whole time – too close to evade the point-blank shots. The bolts span into its bony crest, detonating once they penetrated the hard casing and exploding with a series of blunt thuds. The beast screamed and jerked sharply back up, sending a backdraught of water washing over him.

He spotted the tail sweeping round at him almost too late. Kvara pressed himself back against the rock-edge and the bulbous sting swam past just in front of him, lashing furiously as it passed.

Then the creature was coming at him again, surging through the water, multiple arms outstretched. Kvara squeezed the trigger again, but the pistol jammed.

Spitting a curse, he let it drop and brought his blade up. His movements were as fast as he could make them in the thick soup of algae, but still too slow, too cumbersome. The first tentacles clamped on to his weapon-arm, pinning him

back to the rock. Then more shot out, wrapping themselves around his midriff. They squeezed tight, and Kvara felt his breastplate flex under the pressure.

A clawed hand reached for him, aimed at his head. Kvara managed to pull himself out of its path, wrestling hard against the drag of the tendrils. The beast's talons smashed into the rock behind him, shattering it and sending a cloud of dust floating out and up.

Kvara felt the first crack on his armour even before the warning runes started to flash. It ran transverse across the list of names on his right side, breaking up the inscriptions.

Then the creature went for him again, this time at his torso. Kvara kicked back against the rock, pushing himself upwards. He wrenched his blade-arm free and lashed out at the tendrils around him, briefly clearing a space to operate in. He struck deep, cutting into solid flesh and staining the water with the beast's dark blood, before rolling away and down, sliding down the sheer rock in a flurry of kicked-up dust.

But the beast was far faster, and the abyss was its element. It shot after him, moving with unhurried undulations. The creature's outstretched claws grasped at him, gouging new rents in the ceramite of his backpack where they made contact. More warning indicators flared red across his lens display.

Kvara rolled clumsily on to his back, swinging his blade round and slashing at the scrabbling talons. The beast clutched its claws back up away from the flashing blade before punching them back down after it had swept across. Talons punched down, through Kvara's guard, cutting into his trailing leg like a stud being shot into leather.

Kvara grimaced, wrenching his leg away as the flesh punctured. The leg-plate cracked open, leaving clouds of blood in the water behind him. Valves shut closed at his knee socket and his armour's greave filled with water as the rents in the ceramite spun apart.

The creature swooped in closer, black against the shadow of the deep waters. Off-balanced and unsighted, Kvara crashed and wheeled down the sheer face of the pinnacle. He hit a jutting outcrop in mid-spin that arched his spine and sent him reeling in the opposite direction. Then he collided with another wall of rock face-first, cracking his weakened breastplate further. For a second he could see nothing but flashes of red light. He swung out blindly as he fell further and the sword bit into pursuing claws, darkening the water with the beast's oil-black blood.

Then his boots connected with something solid and his dizzying plummet

thumped abruptly to a halt. His vision cleared, though he could feel blood running down the inside of his helm. The cracks in his plate were leaking water and it sloshed around, freezing and pressurised, in the cavities between his skin and the armour.

He was lodged in a narrow cleft between two sheer peaks of rock. Frustrated for a moment, the beast scratched frantically at the pinnacles above him, pulling them apart to get at him. One elongated talon stabbed down clean through the gap, carving through the protection of his upraised sword-arm and severing it nearly clean through.

Kvara roared with pain, watching helplessly as his blade floated free of his control. Blood ballooned out from the wound, pluming in jets through the water.

Another claw shot down through the narrow cleft, reaching for his head and shoulders. Dizzy with pain and incipient shock, Kvara only just managed to punch up with his good hand. His gauntlet closed over the incoming talons and he twisted, using his whole body to leverage the manoeuvre. The talons ripped free, and the creature roared in turn, sending pulsating shivers radiating through the water.

By then Kvara's armour had sealed off the severed vambrace. His blood had already started clotting, and his vision had cleared. Above him, the huge creature withdrew its tentative strikes and broke into a frenzy of pain-filled destruction. Its tail crashed round, demolishing the fragile peaks of the two pinnacles. Another pass, and the last of his protection would be ripped away. His sword-arm was useless, his armour was compromised, and his weapons were gone.

Kvara pulled two krak grenades from his belt and primed them. He clutched them both in his good hand and crouched down, coiled to spring.

Something like elation coursed through his heavily damaged body – the elation felt by a master swordsman having at last met his match in battle.

The beast had the measure of him. It was worthy.

*I have found it.*

Its tail crashed back across, demolishing the pinnacles on either side of the cleft, exposing him again to the full wrath of the wounded creature. When the debris cleared, Kvara just had time to see an enraged, bleeding face hurtling straight at him. It was obscenely stretched, utterly alien, devoid of anything but animal hatred and a primal lust for the coming kill.

Kvara pounced, propelling himself upward into the oncoming jaws, holding the twin grenades tightly in his one working gauntlet and thrusting them forward. The beast snapped its jaws closed out of instinct, ripping Kvara's arm

off at the shoulder.

He bellowed with pain. Dark stars exploded before his eyes, quickly lost in a blur of shock and agony. He saw his own blood stream out in a long, viscous trail as he fell back, hanging in the water like a slick of promethium. He felt more water rushing into the breaches in his battle-plate, cracking open the ravaged protection and sending him tumbling back down into the shadow of the rock-cleft.

Above it all was the face of the beast, grinning with alien malice, triumphant and malevolent. It came in close, its teeth stained with his blood, ready to finish him.

Then the grenades went off.

Kvara was hurled down against the rock as the twin booms rocked the sea floor. The creature spasmed and bulged as the explosions tore through its innards. A shockwave swept out from the epicentre of the blast carrying scraps of flesh and carapace with it and carpeting the stark rock needles. The swirling mass of tentacles seemed to implode, shrinking back in toward the bony ridge of the creature's spine before going suddenly limp. A long, echoing scream resonated through the water, hanging there until the beast, flailing for a moment longer in a desperate attempt to climb on to life, slumped immobile.

It still hung, buoyant and huge, drifting a little on the cold, dark currents, before beginning to tilt away, trailing lines of gore from its punctured torso.

With what little awareness that remained to him, Kvara gazed up at it. Though wracked by pain and feeling the frigid clutch of unconscious rush up to grasp him, he could still marvel at the beast's size.

*My kill.*

Kvara's head fell back on to the rock. Water had got into his helm, which was slowly filling up. Pain throbbed throughout his whole body, acute and blinding. He felt heady with stimms and adrenaline. Before they did their work, dragging him into the oblivion of the Red Dream, he only had one more thought – a correction –recognising the nature of the beast he had killed and the significance it possessed. The voices no longer echoed in his mind, and he could no longer see them as they had been. Death, next to that, seemed of little consequence.

*Our kill.*

The wound in his head never healed. He became sick, then dizzy, falling over the deck as the *drekkar* pitched with the winter sea. They laughed at him right until the time he couldn't get up.

Kvara saw the world through a mist of confusion, nauseous and slurring. The sea went flat, and the wind came hurling down from the heavens in a blaze of fire and smoke.

He cried out for Thenge, looking for the big man through the rushing noise. Thenge wasn't there. In his place stood a giant wearing a black metal skin and the mask of a wolf. His dried pelt cloak shook in the downdraught and he carried a skull-topped staff.

*I am dead. This is the spectre of Morkai.*

He felt hands reach out for him – human hands. He was pulled on to some kind of stretcher. He recognised the smell of those hands. Preja Eim, perhaps, the human female who had stood outside the interrogation chamber. Where was her superior, the man called Oen? There were others there, clad in environment suits and talking in low voices.

*This is not real. I am not on Fenris.*

The *drekkar* reeled, nearly sending him into the sea. He managed to lift his head, and saw the shaky outline of a huge metal casket in the sky. It was as grey as the clouds, and hung above the ship in defiance of all law. Gigantic rings of bronze thundered with flame, breaking through the storm and making the air shake with heat.

The giant with the black metal skin made a gesture, and more metal-clad warriors leapt down from the hovering casket. They wore snow-grey armour with runes hammered into it and none of their faces were visible. They lumbered up to Kvara, walking smoothly even as the ship plunged through the swell.

*I have killed the krakken, and it has killed me. Now they come to take me to Halls of the Slain.*

Kvara felt the water drain from his helm. In the distance, sounding as if still underwater, drills rang out, removing the surviving sections of battle-plate. Lights flashed painfully in his eyes, surgical and piercing. He heard voices with the accent of Lyses Gothic coming in and out of hearing. A man came to the forefront, his forehead creased with concern.

*That is Oen. He fears me still. What is he doing here?*

They took him up into the hovering casket of fire. The pain in his head grew worse. Kvara looked down from his impossible position for a final time, seeing his own blood on the decks below. Then, at last, he saw Thenge and the others, huddled at the far end of the ship, gazing up, open-mouthed.

They were afraid. He had never seen them afraid of anything before.

Huge doors closed with an echoing clang, sealing him in. The lights dimmed.

He heard the sound of medicae equipment being dragged closer.

Someone leaned over him. It might have been the black wolf-mask. It might have been the man Oen.

It didn't matter. They both said the same thing.

'You will not die, warrior.'

'Could you not have got here quicker?'

'Throne, Preja, I do have other things to worry about.'

'He's scaring the hell out of everybody.'

'I don't doubt it. Is he up and walking?'

'No, he can't get up. But he's still fething scary, procurator.'

Oen walked as fast as he could down the corridors of the medicae unit, ignoring the nervous glances from the apothecary's staff as he went. Eim trotted along at his side, irritable and tense.

'What has he said?'

'He wants his armour. He wants to know what we've done with his ship.'

'And you told him?'

'That he can have it, and that we left it the hell alone.'

'Good.'

The pair of them reached the secure ward. Two sentries in full assault armour stood guard outside. They saluted briskly before opening the metal-banded doors.

The ward was spacious enough, but its lone occupant made it seem cramped. He lay on his back, his huge limbs barely fitting onto the reinforced slab of plasteel that served as a bed. Wires ran from his chest, his face and his limbs. One arm had been severed just below the shoulder and the stump was crowned with a metal cap.

As they entered, Kvara lifted his head. Even after so long, his face was still swollen with bruises. He looked at Oen and Eim with those strange, luminous gold eyes.

'I came as soon as I could, lord,' said Oen, bowing.

Eim stood to one side, chewing her lip nervously.

The Space Wolf took a long time to speak. When he did, his thick, growling voice had gone. His throat shook, and the sound that emerged was little more than a pale whisper.

'How long?' he rasped.

'Two standard months,' said Oen. 'I'm told you've been in some kind of deep

coma. We've done what we can, so I'm glad to see you awake again.'

Kvara ran his eyes over the wires jutting from his body, and grunted.

Oen watched him carefully. Kvara looked even more ravaged than he had done on arrival. His long hair and beard hung in grey straggles over the edge of the cot. His massive barrel chest, covered in scars and tattoos, rose and fell under a thin coverlet. His skin was studded with metal devices, none of which the surgeons had made any attempt to investigate. They'd been terrified of doing anything invasive to him and had been half-appalled, half-fascinated by his outlandish physiology. As far as Oen could tell from their reports, the Space Marine had essentially cured himself.

'You recovered the creature?' Kvara asked. His eyes met Oen's blearily. Even with Kvara in such a state, the procurator found it hard to meet that gaze.

'What was left of it, lord. The remains are preserved.'

'The head?'

'I... er, the what?'

'Did you retrieve the head?'

'We did.'

Kvara let his head fall back. His breath was ragged and shallow.

Oen looked at Eim, who shrugged. He had no idea what to say.

'My armour,' said Kvara. His voice had slurred, as if he were fighting against sleep. 'Where is it?'

'Here, lord,' said Eim, motioning over to the far corner of the room. 'We brought it here, just as you asked, when you were sleeping.'

Kvara lifted his head again with difficulty, screwing his eyes up and peering out as if through a thick fog.

The armour had been hung on a reinforced metal scaffold. Even the broken pieces had been mounted on the rig, each one carefully hoisted into place by a team of engineers who'd been every bit as reverent and afraid as the surgeons.

The breastplate hung in the centre. Where once the surface had been covered in eight lines of runes, it was now almost bare. A series of huge impacts had scoured the surface clear, wearing away the grey paint and boring deep into whatever material it had been constructed out of. The curved surface glistened sharply in the light of the medicae chamber, as raw as newly-tempered steel.

'The names,' whispered Kvara, looking at it intently.

'Your pardon?'

Then the Space Wolf issued a dry, cracking chuckle. It seemed to pain him, and he looked away from the armour and back at Oen.

‘Come here, mortal,’ he ordered.

His throat dry, Oen shuffled closer. Kvara winced as he turned his head, exposing a pair of fangs between chapped lips.

‘How did you locate me?’ he asked.

Oen swallowed.

‘I disobeyed your instruction, and your movements were tracked. By the time our flyers arrived, you’d destroyed the creature.’

Kvara nodded.

‘I should add,’ said Oen haltingly, remembering how he’d felt when Kvara’s body had been retrieved, ‘that we’re sorry. We came too late. But, you should know, we did what we could for you. You were never alone. We couldn’t keep up with you, but you were never alone.’

Kvara smiled at that. Unlike the weary, sardonic smile he’d worn on arrival at Lyses, the gesture was natural, almost human.

‘Never alone,’ he echoed thoughtfully.

Oen swallowed again, uncertain of what to say to that. An uneasy silence fell over the chamber.

‘I don’t expect you to understand the ways of my kind, human,’ said Kvara at last, his voice low. ‘I don’t expect you to understand why I came here, nor why I must take the head of that beast back to Fenris, nor what that will mean for the blood-debt of my pack.’

His bestial eyes shone wetly as he spoke.

‘Their names have been erased, and it eases the torment of my soul. But we’ll remember them in the sagas for as long as such songs are remembered. And among them, in the position of honour, will be yours, human. Take that as you will, but there are those in the galaxy who would see it as a compliment.’

Out of the corner of his eye, Oen saw Eim raise her eyebrows and give a little shrug. He tried to think of something suitably polite to respond with.

It was difficult. For all the reputation of the Adeptus Astartes, the reality of them was hard to come to terms with. Perhaps the Space Wolves were a minor Chapter, a fringe example of the species with more eccentricities than the others. Maybe the other ones he’d seen on the devotional holos with their gleaming cobalt armour and gold-lined pauldrons looked down on them as quaint or inferior.

By the time Oen had thought of something, though, Kvara seemed to have drifted back into an exhausted sleep, and to say anything further felt rather superfluous. For the sake of form, though, Oen bowed courteously and gave his

reply.

‘That’s very kind, lord,’ he said. ‘What a nice tradition.’

He had learned to use his new body out in the wilds of Asaheim, and it gave him the strength and poise of a demigod. Even out of his armour he could withstand the biting air of the Fang with barely a flicker of discomfort. He had been changed, dragged beyond himself and into the realm of legend.

For all that, the first time he met them his tongue felt thick and useless. He’d never been much of a talker, and they already knew one another as well as mortal brothers. He envied the way they were with each other – easy, casual, close.

‘So they’ve sent us a whelp,’ said the one they called Mór, scowling at him as he entered the hearth chamber with his false-confident strut.

The one they called Lek laughed at that, grinding the edge of his axe with a whetstone. He stopped the wheel and pushed a loose strand of blond hair back behind his ear.

‘So they have.’

Vrakk, Aerjak and Rann looked up from their game of bones. Vrakk shook his head wearily and went back to it. Aerjak and Rann exchanged a knowing smile, but said nothing.

‘Can you use a blade, whelp?’ asked Frorl, walking up to him and whirling a practice-sword expertly in his left hand.

‘Of course he can’t,’ snorted Svensson, wrinkling his ruined nose sceptically. ‘He’s just been pulled off the ice.’

He felt his anger rising at that. Since the changes in his blood, he could be made angry so quickly. The Rune Priest had warned him of that, but still he struggled to control it. Perhaps he would never control it. Perhaps, having been shown the realm of the gods and his place within it, he would still stumble at the final hurdle.

‘He’ll learn,’ said the big one, the one they called Beorth.

Of all of them, he was first to clap his hand on his shoulder. His rough palm fell heavily, like a blow, and he staggered.

‘You’ll learn, won’t you, whelp?’

He looked into Beorth’s eyes, and saw the calm, effortless strength there.

‘Don’t call me whelp,’ he said, holding Beorth’s gaze.

‘Oh?’ Beorth looked amused. ‘What do you want to be called?’

‘Brother.’

Vrakk snorted, still engrossed in his game.

‘You have to earn that,’ he said.

Aj Kvara didn’t look at him. He looked at Beorth, whose hand still rested on his shoulder.

The big warrior seemed like he was going to say something, then paused. He looked down at Kvara, who was still bristling with youth and anger and uncertainty.

‘Perhaps you will,’ he said. ‘For now, though, you need to learn to fight.’

Beorth grinned, and pulled out his blade. It was a short, stabbing sword, notched and serrated along one of the cutting edges and with inset runes lodged under the bronze-lined hilt.

‘Let me show you,’ he said.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHRIS WRAIGHT is a writer of fantasy and science fiction, whose first novel was published in 2008. Since then, he's published books set in the Warhammer Fantasy, Warhammer 40,000 and Stargate: Atlantis universes. He doesn't own a cat, dog, or augmented hamster (which technically disqualifies him from writing for Black Library), but would quite like to own a tortoise one day. He's based in a leafy bit of south-west England, and when not struggling to meet deadlines enjoys running through scenic parts of it. Read more about his upcoming projects at [www.chriswraight.wordpress.com](http://www.chriswraight.wordpress.com)

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