



WARHAMMER  
40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES SHORT

# DEATHWOLF

ANDY SMILLIE





# **DEATHWOLF**

**Andy Smillie**

Mon-keigh were such easy prey. Gomor's mouth twisted into a grin as he watched one of the pathetic creatures pace around the power hub. He observed it stumbling around, finding its way only by the grace of the torch clasped in one of its weakling hands.

It seemed these mon-keigh were born afraid of darkness. Even the boldest among them were unwilling to bear it for any length. Yet their simple minds could not comprehend the true terror that awaited them within the black folds of the universe.

Gomor detached himself from the mon-keigh's shadow, writhing into real-space with a wet hiss. The human turned, abhorrence etched on his face as he met his killer. Gomor thrust ice-cold talons up into the mon-keigh's abdomen, drawing substance from his terror, feeling the warm touch of his heart before it stopped beating.

The runes covering Gomor's inky skin shivered, invigorated by the kill. He emitted a warped clicking noise and two more of his kind slithered into the corporeal realm. The pair regarded Gomor - their mouths stretching in a low growl as he touched the orb they carried. The silver-skinned device shimmered; ancient eldar rune script flaring into life under his touch. Gomor issued another tortured noise from his throat as black flame seeped from unseen pores to wreath the orb in obsidian fire.

The other mandrakes nodded in acquiescence, and let go of the device. Free of their grip, the smouldering orb rose up into the air. Settling several metres above Luetin Hive's primary power hub, the device continued to burn. Within moments its ensorcelled innards bled into the atmosphere, its metallic shell flaying away until nothing remained.

A fulgurant web of coal-dark energy erupted in the air; its arcing tendrils cutting minute tears in the fabric of realspace. Gomor smiled, a wicked, humourless expression, as he watched the bonds of the linear universe fray away like torn silk. The event was invisible to mortal sight, but the mandrake was born of the otherworld. A child of darkness and implausible reality, Gomor's eyes were accustomed to seeing the unseen. It pleased him that the populace of Luetin would remain unaware of their impending doom. The humans would die as they had lived, ignorant and afraid.

The frayed edges of the vortex crackled and receded as a pall of darkness spilled

from the webway, forcing apart the rift until a swirling portal the size of the power hub it shadowed hung in the air.

Gomor growled, low and soft in satisfaction. His task complete, the mandrake seeped back into the shadows.

'Strike before the prey is roused. Take his heart before the twins of anger and desperation can lend him strength.'

The Shattered Hand were consummate hunters, their every waking moment dedicated to perfecting their murderous art. They had carried out Archon Vranak's orders with brutal efficiency. Luetin's defence force hadn't stood a chance.

The Imperial Guard of the 109th Luetin Rifles and the levied regiments of conscripted workers, who had hastily put down their rock-drills and picked up lasguns, had been overwhelmed without pause. Vranak's Cabal had emerged through the webway portal in a vengeful tide, bursting into realspace in a flash of eldritch flame. Dozens of arrow-swift skimmers and barbed skycraft had soared unmolested across the slabbed expanse of Luetin's defence perimeter to deliver a punishing attack on the hive. Lithe warriors in battle armour and leering female gladiators had dismounted into the streets, stalking and killing with unrelenting malice and vigour.

The hive was burning.

Archon Vranak sat immobile on her flesh-throne as her personal transport glided towards the main spire. Beneath the ghoulish curves of her polished helm, she smiled with both of her mouths. Gomor had done well. The mandrake had disabled the gun towers and energy fields meant to serve as a first line of defence, and murdered several high ranking officers, using their dismembered corpses to spread terror among the Luetin forces. In such a fragile state, the heaving necropolis was a tender target, the hive's innards exposed to the scything attentions of the Shattered Hand.

Luetin's subterranean shafts were rich in dense mineral deposits and precious ores, every iota of which would be mined from the earth and put to use in her weapon shops and forges. But most precious of all the hive's assets, the thing that had drawn Vranak to it like a dying man to faith, were the teeming millions

of indentured miners and their Adeptus Administratum overseers. She would take them as slaves and transport them to Commorragh, where the humans would learn the true meaning of despair. The lucky ones would be rendered down in flesh-troughs to provide sustenance and genetic material for the vile experiments of the haemonculi. Others would be tortured in one of the Dark City's many pleasure palaces, their agonising deaths drawn out to provide soul-fuel for its denizens. Those that could not be captured would be put to the blade. One way or another, Vranak would ensure that the Shattered Hand hunted the populace of Luetin to extinction.

Vranak opened the cabal-wide channel, cautioning her warriors as they boosted into Luetin city proper, 'Mind your surroundings, the distinction between prey and bait is a small one. Through such carelessness have many hunters become hunted.'

'All-Father, forgive us.'

The age-line scoring Erik Morkai's brow deepened at the sound of glass crunching under his boots. The fragments of coloured glass were all that remained of the thousand arched panes that retold the story of the Emperor's arrival on Luetin. But the windows were made to look at, not through, and Erik had needed a better view.

Erik stared down at Luetin's narrow streets. Strong winds buffeted the Wolf Lord's gnarled face, pinning the plaits of his beard to his chest plate. Without the burden of his helm, he could smell the tang of ozone and hear the tortured cries of the populace below. He was a hunter, born of hunters, but gifted with the Canis Helix, the Wolf Lord could embrace the elements in a way his forefathers never had. Standing on the precipice of Luetin Hives parliament building - the grey-blue ceramite of his battle-plate striking against the building's dull pallor - Erik watched his prey. The sleek eldar vehicles sped below him, darting between the jutting columns and protruding spires of the cathedral-like buildings that made up the hive. Erik's enhanced eyes followed every change in their trajectory as they twisted at incredible speeds to avoid the sporadic fire coming from the lower concourses.

'Mark me well brother, they shall sing glorious sagas of this day.' Erik turned to Agmund as he spoke. The Wolf Guard was crouched low, peering over the edge with a critical eye at the eldar transports and slave ships that sped past

underneath them.

Agmund grunted in affirmation, the long scar that ran from his temple to his neck stretching as he grinned.

'Prepare yourselves,' Erik voxed the command to his Great Company. He took a step back from the edge, unsheathed his plasma pistol and flicked the activation stud on his chainaxe. Beside him, Agmund and Ivar readied their weapons. The Wolf Lord rolled his shoulders; they felt light without the hulking bear-pelt. The ancient trophy wasn't fit for what he was about to do.

'Vlka Fenryka!'

The comm-feed in Erik's ear crackled with a chorus of responses as his entire Great Company echoed his call to battle. From the windows and balconies of Luetin's towering edifices, the Space Wolves leapt towards the dark eldar craft, free-falling in a hail of grey armour.

Erik landed hard in the middle of an eldar craft, the enhanced musculature of his legs absorbing the bone-breaking impact. He moved with the vehicle as it rocked under his weight, killing the prow gunner with a backhanded swipe of his axe. A dozen dark eldar stared at the Wolf Lord in frozen confusion as the gunner's head fell amongst them. Erik growled in amusement, opening fire on the tightly pressed xenos. His plasma pistol shone white-hot as he fired, vaporising the eldar cadre.

At the corner of his peripheral vision, Erik saw Agmund and Ivar. The pair were on an adjacent craft, their armour splattered with xenos blood.

A torrent of rounds stung the Wolf Lord's armour, forcing a curse from his lips, 'Alien anzviti.'

He turned, tracking the eldar gunship that was bearing down on him. Crouching low, Erik took cover behind a guard rail as another burst of fire stitched towards him. Pulling a melta-charge from his equipment, he mag-locked it to the skimmers hull and primed its core for a four-second detonation.

One, two, three.

Erik waited as long as he dared, and leapt off. The melta-charge detonated, engulfing the eldar transport in a halo of expanding fire. The shockwave threw Erik towards the oncoming gunship. He swung out with his chainaxe, its teeth

biting into the ship's hull. An instant later the Wolf Lord was on the deck, his axe feasting on soft eldar innards. He slipped left as the last of the crew lunged at him, smashing his forehead into the alien's helm. The helmet buckled under the blow, folding back into the eldar's skull.

'Weaklings', Erik spat.

He flicked the alien blood from his axe and used the moment's respite to assess the situation. Neural implants fed him a slew of tactical data that scrolled over his enhanced eyes in Fenrisian rune-script. A dozen of his brothers had died in the descent, their ident-tags disappearing from his tactical display. Two dozen more had been injured. He growled, banishing the overlay with a thought, and turning his attention to the swarm of single-man craft headed towards them.

'Thorolf...kill them.'

Nestled among the forest of sensorium that grew up from Luetin Hive's highest echelons, Thorolf Icewalker received his Wolf Lord's order.

'For Russ! For the All-Father!'

Without igniting his jump pack, Thorolf leapt from the sensorium stack and plunged downwards. His thirty-strong Sky Claw pack followed, diving with him down through the kilometre-thick layer of smog that had masked their presence. A line of warnings flashed across Thorolf's helmet display as the hive's architecture rushed up to meet him.

He fired his jump pack, gunning it in short bursts to alter his flight path. Gargoyle-encrusted balconies and protruding ventilation ducts flashed by; centimetres from his face. A red rune shone over the Space Wolf's eye. He was falling at such speed that any impact would kill him. Thorolf ignored the warning, blinking it away. A slew of targeting reticules and situational data sprang up in its place, filling his display as he cleared the smog. With a practised ease born of decades of warfare, the Space Wolf sifted through the icons, zeroing in on Erik and the squadron of eldar skimmers.

Thorolf ignited both boosters, keeping one eye fixed on the altitude counter as his jetpack accelerated him downwards. The eldar were almost in firing range. His arms straining against the crushing force of the descent, Thorolf detached his bolt pistol and boltgun from their mag-locks. Thrusting his arms out towards the

approaching skimmers, he looked every bit like the valkyries he'd seen daubed in ancient caves on Fenris. Warriors of myth and legend, the valkyries were often depicted in full battle-armour, descending from the heavens with sword and spear. The comparison drew a smile across Thorolf's face.

*Range.*

The word flashed on Thorolf's display. He opened fire, his muscled forearms unmoving as the bolt weapons barked into life. Behind him, the Sky Claws opened up with their own weapons, sending a hail of explosive rounds into the eldar craft. The skimmers were fast and incredibly nimble but the Space Wolves had taken them by surprise, and the volume of fire pumping towards them was too vast to dodge. The sleek craft were shredded, breaking apart as bolt rounds punished them.

Flames licked Thorolf's armour as he fell through the wreckage of the eldar vehicles, blinding him for a moment as his helmet's optics reset.

'The skies are clear, lord,' Thorolf voxed to his Wolf Lord, firing his boosters intermittently to hold his altitude. 'What would...'

A target swam onto Thorolf's display. It was moving too fast for his helmet's auto-senses to process, appearing as a solid line across his vision.

'Disperse!'

The Sky Claws burst into motion at Thorolf's order. But it was too late. The speeding eldar craft cut through them, leaving a cluster of aerial mines in its wake. The floating charges detonated, spewing flame and shrapnel in all directions.

Thorolf's world went dark.

Thorolf came to with a jolt. Pain flared up his spine, forcing a grimace. He hit the release clasp on his jump pack and rolled onto his front, dislodging a layer of rubble and glass. The pack had saved his life, diffusing the force of the impact as its boosters crumpled inwards. Thorolf's display stuttered, spitting distorted images and tactical data. He snarled, ripped off his damaged helmet and tossed it aside in frustration. His head was ringing from the explosion and his ribs ached. The Space Wolf sat up and examined his surroundings. He'd fallen into some sort of chapel. A cobbled floor lay cracked under his armoured bulk while stone saints stared down at him from plinths. He looked around for his weapons,

cursing when he couldn't find them. Pushing himself up, he staggered to his feet and gazed up at the shattered sky-lights and domed spire that had broken his fall. He cracked his neck, twitching as his enhanced physiology pumped adrenaline around his system.

'Glory find you, Jorik,' Thorolf muttered his thanks to the Iron Priest for maintaining his armour's pain suppressors. Pain focused the mind, made it easier to kill than think. Gritting his teeth, Thorolf stepped out of the chapel and let the sounds of battle guide him towards a ruined street. He paused for a moment, while his eyes adjusted to the relative gloom. Daylight didn't reach the lower galleries of the necropolis, the sun's light blocked by the towering hive and its myriad solar collectors. He sniffed the air, growling at the scent of xenos. They were close, perhaps on the same level. He followed his nose, stepping over the corpses of preachers who'd been gutted by the eldar war-party and left to rot like diseased cattle.

Thorolf crouched low as heavy bolter fire resounded from up ahead. He listened for a moment, pinpointing the weapons location. It was to his left, midway along the next avenue. The Space Wolf advanced, picking up the crack of lasguns and the smooth snap of eldar rifles as he moved to the Administratum building marking the intersection. He pushed his back against the wall and risked a glance around the corner. Three Imperial Guardsmen were holding a sandbagged emplacement against five eldar approaching from the north-west. The rest of the squad lay dead in the road, their bodies torn to ribbons by the aliens' barbed rounds.

Thorolf heard the bolt round slip as it left the magazine; there was no mistaking the crunch of a jammed round. He dashed from cover and ran flat out towards the Guardsmen as the heavy bolter fell silent.

'Keep firing! Keep firing!' One of them shouted.

'I can't! I'm trying...'

'They're coming, fire!' The voice grew desperate.

'Emperor, damn it! The slide's stuck...'

'C'mon, c'mon, let me see that...'

'They're coming! They're coming!' another screamed.

Thorolf backhanded the screaming Guardsman across the face, breaking his jaw and knocking him unconscious. The other two Guardsmen stared up at the Space Wolf, their eyes wide with fear. Thorolf doubted they'd ever set eyes on a Space Marine before. Right now he was more terrifying than the eldar pirates that were coming towards them.

'Give me the weapon,' Thorolf grunted, his voice thick with pain.

The older looking of the two Guardsmen opened his mouth to speak but said nothing.

'Russ's teeth', Thorolf growled in irritation. He pushed past the trooper, reaching down and snapping the heavy bolter from its mount.

The foul scent of xenos flesh choked the Space Wolf's nostrils. The eldar were almost upon them. Grunting with superhuman effort, Thorolf racked back the heavy bolters slide and opened fire. 'Back to the abyss!'

The advancing xenos died in seconds, their frail forms exploding in clouds of red mist. The remainder broke for cover, but Thorolf gave them no respite, blasting apart rubble and wrecked vehicles they sought to cower behind. Formerly a Long Fang, the Space Wolf was as familiar with the subtleties of a heavy bolter as he was with the age lines of his own face. It took him less than twenty seconds to track and kill the eldar cadre. Thorolf sniffed the air, checking for survivors. There were none. A pungent aroma drew a scowl from the Space Wolf. He looked down at the cowering Guardsmen, noticing the expanding wet patches on their trousers, and grinned.

Erik roared as the teeth of his axe chewed apart another of the eldar. He stood atop a mound of its dead kin, his battle-plate swathed in their blood, examining the tactical overlay on his display. The initial ambush had gone well, with over half the eldar force killed or routed. But the attack was at a critical juncture; one mistake and the Space Wolves could lose the momentum. The eldar still outnumbered them dozens to one and his forces were spread the length and breadth of the hive. He could ill afford to let the xenos seize the initiative.

A series of concussive blasts drew Erik's attention to the south-west. A huge eldar craft - larger than any they'd yet encountered - had entered the local air space. Its arrowed-prow scythed through the burning remains of lesser skimmers as it forged towards Ragnavalld and his scouts.

A battery of elongated energy weapons flashed from the crafts flanks. The Wolf Lord gritted his teeth in rage as Ragnavald's ident-tag blinked dark.

'Russ devour them! We must take down that craft...!' Erik cursed as six more ident-tags faded from his display.

'It's wreathed in some sort of energy shield. We cannot board it directly, and we cannot get close enough to plant charges,' said Agmund.

'We must find a way. We...!'

As if in answer to the Wolf Lord's demand, a hail of heavy bolter rounds roared up from the lower hive to hammer the shield. The translucent energy bubble flared and spat as the high-calibre shells found their mark.

'Now! For Russ! Now!'

Erik motioned towards the exposed skimmer with his axe, ordering the attack as the shield overloaded in a storm of disjointed noise. Erik leapt onto the Archon's transport. Agmund and Ivar landed beside him. The Archon's bodyguard attacked without pause, striking at the Space Wolves with crackling halberds. Erik blocked a strike meant to sever his head and shot one of the eldar point blank in the face. The plasma discharge vaporised the xenos' skull and killed another that was moving in behind him.

The eldar were skilled combatants but they fought as individuals, their selfish desire to kill leaving them open to counter. The Space Wolves fought as a pack, each thrust and cut of their blades working in unison with their brothers attacks to plug gaps in their defences and overwhelm the foe.

Ivar gestured with his blade. 'Your left!'

Agmund turned and raised his weapon, parrying the eldar's blow before slashing down into its shoulder. He growled as his chainsword rang off the xenos' armour. The segmented battle-plate worn by the Archon's bodyguard was heavier and more robust than that worn by the other eldar. Coupled with their martial skill and preternatural grace, it was hard to land a killing blow.

'Enough of this dance,'. Agmund ducked his opponents riposte, mag-locked his chainsword to his armour and shouldered the eldar backwards. He stepped in as the eldar tried to recover, pinning its arms and locking a gauntleted hand around its frail neck.

'Russ bring you luck dodging the ground.' With a grunt of effort, Agmund tossed the struggling eldar from the skycraft. Ivar grinned, following the Wolf Guard's example and using his bulk to knock the remaining two xenos to their doom.

'I think Ivar wants your place at the feasting table,' Erik joked with Agmund and turned his gaze on the archon. The sinister figure was still immobile on her throne. Her polished, charcoal armour was in stark relief to the bleeding corpses that made up her nightmarish seat.

'I am Vranak. Remember that name, mon-keigh. Tell it to your corpse-god when you stand at his side.'

The eldar shot from her throne in a stream of darkness to strike Erik in the chest with an outstretched fist. The blow flipped the Wolf Lord, spinning him backwards. Erik dropped his plasma pistol and caught hold of the aft guard rail. Dangling from the edge of the skimmer, the Wolf Lord fought to remain conscious, feeling as though a war mammoth had stepped on his chest. A fissure ran the length of his breastplate, blood running from it.

The Archon moved to finish him, but Agmund and Ivar blocked her path with their blurring chainblades. Vranak ghosted between them, parrying their blows with deft turns of her sword. Agmund cried out as the Archon whipped her weapon round to slice the Wolf Guard's legs off at the knee, the crackling blade passing effortlessly through armour and bone. Ivar died a heartbeat later, Vranak pivoting to thrust her blade through the Space Wolf's primary heart, cleaving his secondary heart with the return stroke.

'Clumsy apes,' Vranak spat as she kicked Agmund's twitching body from the transport.

Erik growled and pulled himself back onto the platform. 'Your death will bring them glory.'

The Wolf Lord gripped the haft of his axe with both hands, separating the twin-weapons that made the whole. Twirling both blades once to gauge their weight, he charged. Erik struck out with all his fury, with all of his skill, but the teeth of his weapons carved only air. In return, the Archon flowed around him, slashing at the Wolf Lord's thighs and cutting open his midriff. Erik roared. Vranak was toying with him.

As his mind raced for a way to triumph, warning runes flared across the Wolf

Lord's retinal display. He ignored them. His body would cope. There was no way to counter the eldar's attacks. She moved too fast, even for Erik to see. But the Wolf Lord could smell her. He could hear the beat of her devil heart.

Vranak sprang forwards, her blade aimed at the Wolf Lord's throat.

Erik heard the excited rush of the Archon's breath as she prepared for the kill. He slipped left, swinging an axe low towards the eldar's abdomen. The Archon darted backwards. Erik tracked her scent, throwing his other axe where his nose told him. The spinning weapon clipped the Archon, unbalancing her for the briefest of instants. Erik seized the chance. He dived forwards, wrapping his vice-like arms around the eldar and dragging her over the edge.

The two armoured figures fell to their doom.

'You kill us both.' Vranak rasped as her lungs struggled against the Wolf Lord's embrace.

Erik smelled the Archon's fear. He listened with grim satisfaction as the eldar's heart-rate continued to speed. His own heart remained slow and steady as his chronometer counted down the seconds to impact. At the edge of his hearing, the Wolf Lord picked up the skimmer he had sensed was coming. He listened to the roar of its engines as it joined the battle, felt the displaced air on his skin as it cut a path towards them. When he had first glimpsed the skimmer it was a tiny dot, a speck on the horizon. Now, metres below him, the sleek craft all but filled his vision. Moments before her death, the Archon realised the error of her assumption.

The Wolf and the eldar slammed into the transport.

Vranak let out a wheezing grunt as every bone in her body cracked under Erik's weight. The Wolf Lord got to his feet and glared at the cadre of eldar warriors surrounding him.

'Who's next?'

A shrapnel-rain doused the lower reaches of Luetin Hive as the eldar raiders burned, their skimmers falling from the sky in droplets of twisted metal.

'Cowards!' Thorolf swung round, bringing his heavy bolter to bear on a cluster of

single-pilot skimmers as they sped past, fleeing the hive and the Space Wolves wrath. He opened fire, stitching a line of destruction through the towering hab blocks as the eldar craft jinked left and right.

Thorolf growled a curse and adjusted his aim, pumping a stream of explosive rounds into the buildings above and ahead of the skimmers. The eldar pilots held their course, blindsided by the debris that tumbled onto them. The lead craft slammed straight into a chunk of falling rockcrete, exploding in a ball of fire. The other two slowed sharply, diving in an attempt to avoid the worst of the rubble just as Thorolf had expected.

The Space Wolf grinned and gunned the trigger, shredding the pair in a barrage of sustained fire that tore through the skimmers' armour and ignited their fuel cells. He kept firing, holding the trigger down until the weapon stuttered and the ammo counter flashed zero.

The Space Wolf dropped the weapon and fell to one knee. His wounds were catching up with him. He felt his muscles weaken as his body diverted blood and nutrients to repair the damage to his internal organs. Thorolf took a long, agonised breath and stopped. Something was wrong. He sniffed the air, analysing every particle for the source of his discontent. He smelled nothing save his own scent, not the smoking shell casings scattered around him or the vapour trail left in the air by the eldar skimmers. Thorolf's muscles bunched in anticipation as he realised that the world had fallen silent.

He could no longer hear the battle raging in the distance, neither the staccato of bolter fire nor the thrum of the eldar skimmers. Thorolf willed himself to stand and cast his gaze around around the street. Darkness spread towards him as one after another, the luminators blinked out. The air turned cold, his feeling of unease intensifying as a thin layer of frost began to rime the edges of his armour.

'Show yourselves, devils!' Thorolf snarled, his murderous gaze fixed on the darkness.

Gomor bled from the darkness, a trio of his kin following him into the corporeal realm in a series of wet, sucking noises.

Thorolf drew his knife and smiled, his long canines glistening under the light of a single flickering luminator as the Mandrakes came for him. Not for the last time, the Space Wolf's world went dark.