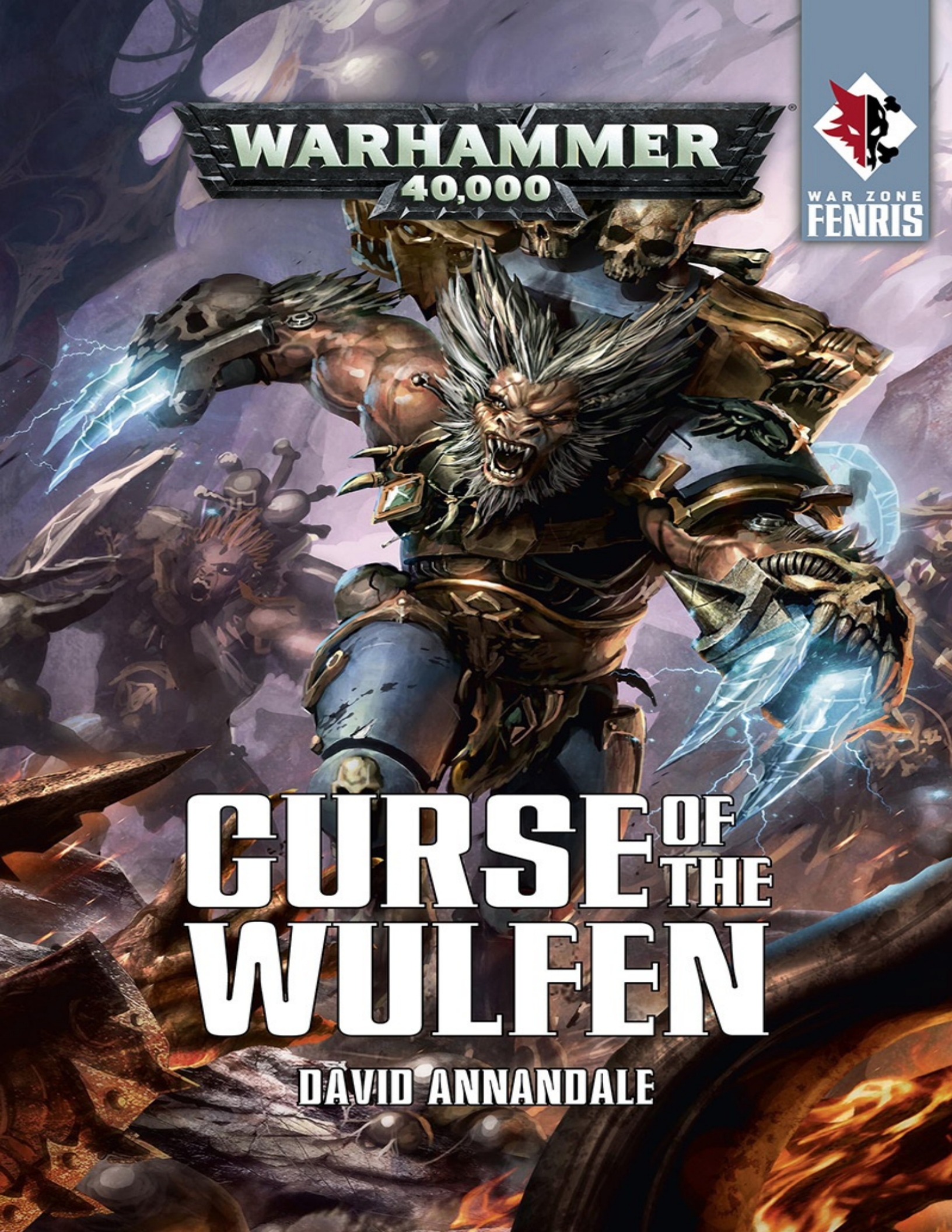


The background of the cover is a dynamic illustration of a Wulfen warrior, a creature with a bestial, feline-like face and a long, flowing mane of white fur. He is depicted in a powerful, lunging pose, wearing intricate golden armor. His right arm is a mechanical prosthetic that emits a bright blue energy beam, while his left hand is a large, clawed gauntlet. In the background, other Wulfen warriors are visible in a chaotic battle scene, with one being thrown through the air. The overall color palette is dominated by purples, blues, and oranges, creating a sense of intense action and conflict.

WARHAMMER
40,000



WAR ZONE
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CURSE OF THE WULFEN

DAVID ANNANDALE

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



CURSE OF THE WULFEN



DAVID ANNANDALE



BLACK LIBRARY



PROLOGUE

They met in the dark of the mountain's roots. Here the night of stone was endless. It was not silent, for things of fur and fang and steel prowled, growling warnings to each other. It was not empty, for within it lay the tombs of legends. The tombs were unquiet. The legends they enclosed were granted only a provisional death. These sagas had not ended. One was ten thousand years old, and its thread carried on.

Three warriors met in the dark, in the tombs. When they saw each other, they were startled. When they saw where they had come to, they were disturbed.

The warrior whose mane and beard were as coarse and grey as a wolf's pelt spoke first. 'Brothers,' Harald Deathwolf said, 'you are well met. I did not expect your company.'

'Nor I,' said Krom Dragongaze. Even in the gloom, his eyes glittered with dark light.

'Nor I,' Ulrik the Slayer echoed. The ancient of the Chapter shook his head. His hair was as white as his gaze was dark. His eyes were shadows that watched and judged. He pointed at the vault door by which they stood. 'There is a purpose in

this,' he said.

'The purpose is not mine,' said Harald. 'I did not intend to come here.' He looked at the name inscribed over the door, and was uneasy.

'You did not choose to come to the vaults?' the Slayer asked.

'I did,' said Harald. 'But with no clear design. That is...' he hesitated.

'You walked as if in a trance,' Dragongaze said.

'Yes.'

'So we all did,' said the Slayer. 'But not as we believed.'

'No.' Harald tried to see the last few hours clearly, but it was as if he had only just awakened, a sensation itself almost unknown to him in his centuries as a Space Marine. He had been conscious, yet his perception had narrowed to nothing except his next footstep. He had moved through tunnels and shafts, down and down and down, deeper and deeper into the dark, into the night of stone. 'I had a destination,' he said. 'Though I did not know why I went. The need to be there was absolute.' He could not look away from the inscription. 'My destination was not here.'

'You thought to stand before Bjorn the Fell-Handed,' Dragongaze said.

'I did.'

'And yet we are here,' said the Slayer. The Wolf Priest rested a gauntlet against the vault door, gently, as if not to wake the legend inside. 'We marched to one goal, and arrived at another. This is a powerful omen, brothers. We must take heed.'

'An omen of what?' said Dragongaze.

'I will think upon it,' the Slayer said. 'This much is clear. Something is coming. The force of our compulsion speaks to its magnitude. And when the event arrives, we three must be mindful of the roles we will have to play.'

'It is a warning,' Harald said. 'An omen of doom. How can it be otherwise? We sought Bjorn, but we came here.'

The other two said nothing. They all gazed at the inscription. They stared at the runes of warning and the name of the mad legend, and felt a shadow deeper yet than the night of stone fall over their souls.

Beyond me lies a restless sleep, said the door. Beyond me lies the madness of wrath.

Murderfang.

The future stalked towards them, jaws agape.

PART 1: THE RETURN



CHAPTER 1

The Dooms on Nurades

‘The sky is blue today, governor.’

Andras Elsener, Lord Governor of Nurades, looked up from the sea of parchment and data-slates on the vast iron table before him. Everything was a priority, and everything had to be decided *now*. And this was merely what he had to wade through for the next hour. It was early in the day yet. The interruption was welcome, though he knew he would pay for the break in his concentration later.

Klein, his major-domo, stood at the chamber window. Elsener’s quarters were high in the spire of Hive Genos. The view from his office looked out across the spires of the hive from a point that was frequently, although not always, a little below cloud cover. Sometimes Elsener could see many kilometres of the sprawl of the hive. Sometimes he saw nothing but a choking, industrial grey-brown. Twice in his life he had witnessed the weak disc of the sun visible through unusually thin clouds.

He had never seen a blue sky.

Elsener approached the window in wary awe. Klein seemed just as uneasy. He

was about to open the door to the balcony but Elsener stopped him.

‘No,’ said the governor. ‘Wait.’

The sky was clear. The blue was startling. It was searing. As Elsener watched, the last of the cloud cover peeled away like burning paper. The blue became brighter and brighter, though Elsener could not see the sun. The colour became painful. Elsener squinted. Klein shielded his eyes.

And then, though the colour still grew more intense, it also became darker. Blue became violet.

‘The Emperor save us,’ Elsener muttered.

Violet turned to a dark, grimy crimson. The colour of rotting blood stabbed at the back of Elsener’s eyes. He could not look away. At the height of the searing, the sky ignited. Flames burst across the firmament. They were huge, arcing, roiling, as if Nurades had been pitched into a molten cauldron. The sky burned all the colours of the spectrum at once, destroying them with fury. As they died, the colours gave birth to other things, things that existed instead of colours, things that bled the eyes and tore at the mind.

The ground heaved. The central spire of Genos swayed back and forth. Narrower towers collapsed. But new spires rose, piercing up through the layers of the hive, thrusting towards the sky like monstrous daggers, and they were towers of bone.

Elsener saw dots appear in the sky. They fell – dark, tumbling, blazing orbs. Closer, and he saw they were skulls. They were a laughing, screaming hail. Jaws agape, they smashed onto the roofs and walkways and roads. They shattered on Elsener’s balcony. Where each landed, its fire spread. It grew taller. It took on a shape. Now it had arms, legs. Now a head. Horns.

Muscle and sinew and blood-red flesh. It carried a sword.

Elsener cried out and hurled himself away from the window. He must not look. He must not see. Already he could feel his brain squirming as if it would change into an animal inside his skull.

Klein shrieked. He clawed at his face hard enough to tear open his cheeks. He clutched at his ragged flaps of skin, then ran at the governor, howling and drooling. Elsener drew his personal laspistol and shot the major-domo through the neck.

Then he ran. He did not look back, not even when the window smashed, and a snarling abomination called out to him in a voice of rattling bone. He knew what would happen if he looked. Perhaps he would die in the next few seconds, but if he did not look, he might yet retain his soul.

He prayed to the Emperor as he charged through the door and down the halls of his residence. He prayed the Father of Mankind would grant that he reached the astropathic choir in time. He prayed someone would hear Nurades' cry for help.

The next time Lord Governor Andras Elsener dared to look at the sky, it was weeks later, and he saw the cry answered.

He saw salvation slash through sky with bloody claws.

In the strategium overlooking the bridge of the strike cruiser *Alpha Fang*, the great predator leaned over a hololith map of Nurades. A mantle of troll hide was draped over his armour, a trophy made of the prey itself. His gestures suggested contained force. At any moment, they could turn into the strike of a hunter. And moment by moment, he chose restraint. His calm was that of a wolf that had already chosen when and how to attack.

Harald Deathwolf pointed to the sigil for Hive Predomitus.

'We begin there,' he said. The hive was located at the base of a high mountain chain dividing the Lacertus Peninsula from the rest of the continent. 'We break the daemons' hold.' He moved his hand south-west, passing over Hive Genos. 'And push them into the sea.'

Canis Wolfborn looked from the map to the oculus. It showed the void riven by the mad flares of the warp storm, and the planet turning in agony. The atmosphere quivered like maggots. The Deathwolf champion grunted. 'Saving that?'

The huge warrior was more restless than Harald. His mane and beard were a lighter shade and longer, more unruly. If Harald was the wolf assured of closing its jaws on its prey, the Feral Knight was the beast barely held back. The bridge was not his natural domain. He belonged in the field, unleashed and roaring.

'Mistress of the vox,' Harald called without looking up from the map. 'Any traffic planetside?'

'Some, lord,' Giske Ager replied. 'Fragments only. There are brief bursts of coherent data. Orders perhaps. There are many cries.'

Harald nodded. He addressed the assembled Wolf Guard, not just Canis. The Deathwolf huscarls varied widely in age. But whether they counted themselves among the Riders of Morkai, the Thunderclaws or the Redhowl Hunters, they were all riders of wolves, and there was a kinship in their countenance – a narrowed, farseeing, predatory gaze.

'We have answered a plea for help,' Harald said. 'We have not come to enact Exterminatus. This planet will not be lost. I will see it returned to the embrace of

the Allfather.'

'A hunt then,' said Vygur Helmfang.

'A great one.'

'Good.' Canis growled in satisfaction and anticipation. His question, Harald understood, had not been an expression of doubt in the mission. Canis wanted reassurance that he would not be cheated of prey by cyclonic torpedoes.

The assembled Wolf Guard also sounded pleased with Harald's deployment strategy. The Lacertus Peninsula was the most densely populated and industrially active region of Nurades. When the Space Wolves took it, they would hold the key to the rest of the world.

Harald wondered if it might also unlock something else. The encounter before Murderfang's vault troubled him. He was waiting for whatever event it heralded to make itself manifest. He did not know if the plight of Nurades meant more than it appeared, but there were unusual circumstances. From what had been gathered from the astropathic shriek that had reached Fenris, the coming of the warp storm had been extremely sudden. A matter of seconds. There was something about that arrival that did not seem like the result of the vagaries of the warp and a chance weakness in the materium.

Harald sensed a larger game behind the incursion. He could not guess what it was, nor what, if anything, it portended for the Space Wolves.

No matter, he tried to tell himself. His Great Company would stamp out the daemonic taint, and end the game before it began.

The Deathwolves fell upon the daemonic hordes much as the warpspawn had attacked the people of Nurades – with sudden, lightning violence.

The drop pods came first, streaking through the tormented sky in a cluster towards the plain between the mountains and the gates of Hive Predomitus. The Stormwolf gunships followed in their contrails. They hammered the landing site with twin-linked lascannon and heavy bolter fire, annihilating daemonkind in the vicinity.

The flanks of the pods slammed down and the Space Wolves stormed out. Grey Hunters howled their eagerness for war. Their helms bore totemic skulls and tails. Some were fashioned into snarling lupine form. They thundered away, in pack after pack. They hurled frag grenades ahead of them, then followed up the blasts with a stream of bolter fire. Monstrosities disintegrated. The Deathwolves pushed the enemy further back, allowing the gunships to land. Caught in the heat of first blood, the Grey Hunters would have followed their instincts to charge on

if their pack leaders had not held them back long enough for the rest of their brothers to disembark.

The wait was a short one. Harald's full company launched a blistering assault on the enemy within seconds of having their boots on the ground.

Before the gates of Predomitus, a mass of horned, scarlet-scaled abominations rioted.

'Swordlings of Khorne.' Canis spat his contempt. His breath came in low growls.

'They have not been idle,' Harald said.

In the midst of the daemons rose tall hills of blackened skulls. Millions of Nuradeans had been sacrificed to Khorne, but the hunger of the god and his servants was unending. From the open gates of the city, the daemons dragged thousands upon thousands of howling victims.

'I can see the hills growing,' Canis said. His face was dark with horrified fury.

'So vast a slaughter,' Harald growled. 'Let our answer be more terrible still.'

The Stormwolf squadrons took to the air, pounding the warpspawn with guns. Lasbeams and shells burned daemons and blew them apart. They cut a seared, smoking furrow through the mass of wyrdflesh.

'The hunt is on, brothers!' Harald called. His roar was a clarion call to war, and Grey Hunters and Wolf Guard answered with a roar of their own. The battle cry thundered from the throats of men and beasts, and the thunderwolf cavalry led the charge into the furrow. Harald was at the front atop Icetooth, with Canis at his shoulder, as the immense Fangir shook the earth as he loped forward. Alongside the cavalry sped the Huntbrothers and the Frostrunners, Fenrisian wolves, some pure animal, others cybernetic hybrids, all of them monsters, flesh with strength of steel and steel with the wrath of flesh.

The cavalry slammed into their lines with the force of a nova cannon. Tens of thousands of daemons massed on the plain. They were hatred embodied. But they fell back, trampled into oblivion by the wolves, blasted apart by bolter fire. Harald felt the exultant ferocity of war flood his veins. The vastness of the enemy army meant nothing except a near-inexhaustible supply of prey. His view turned from the hills of bodies and the burning towers of Predomitus to the horrors that surged, grasping for him. He swung his right arm out. The storm shield on his forearm smashed horns and skulls. He relished the impact. The jar was solid, crunching. He fired his bolt pistol as he swung. Wyrdflesh erupted before him. With his left hand, he wielded the frost axe Glacius. Its huge, wedge-shaped blade was a single crystal shard. It glinted the blue of razored cold. The

edge was as long as Harald's arm. Daemonic flesh and muscle and bone ruptured at its strike.

Moments into the charge, Harald's senses were filled with the stench of roiling smoke and spraying ichor. Daemons howled with unnatural voices. The air shook with the clash of rages.

The swordlings tried to surround the charge and bring the cavalry down in a tide of blood. No matter how many of them rushed in, they could not stop the Deathwolves' momentum, although they exacted a toll. Harald heard the agonised snarls of a thunderwolf and the growls of Rangvald, its rider. He heard the crash as Wolf Guard and beast hit the ground under a mass of clawing, slashing daemons. There was an explosion of bolter fire as the brothers nearby sought to blast the swordlings away from the fallen rider.

'Ride on, brothers,' Rangvald shouted, fighting to the last.

And they did. The charge could not slow for anyone. Its success against such a vast horde depended on relentless violence and speed. With each fallen brother, the wrath of the Space Wolves and the thunderwolves grew, and they smashed the daemons with ever-greater ferocity. Harald saw only red – the red of the abominated flesh, the red of flame, and the red of his anger. Icetooth crushed daemons in his jaws. He smashed them to nothing beneath his enormous claws.

At Harald's shoulder, Canis' snarls were expressions of wrath and laughter. He swept his huge wolf claws back and forth, embracing the enemy with destruction. Every blade was as long as a gladius. Harald glanced to the right in time to see Canis slash a daemon's spine into sections with a single swipe.

'A good kill, brother!' Harald called.

The champion grinned, his yellow eyes blazing. He shouted something back, but all Harald heard was an inarticulate snarl. Canis was already deep into primal ferocity. He was in the realm of the beast now.

It would be easy to join him. Already Harald growled with triumph at each of Icetooth's kills. They were as one alpha predator in the field of battle. The bloody charge was exhilarating. The smoky wind blew back Harald's hair and beard. The beat of his hearts matched the pounding of Icetooth's paws. The thundering anger of bolters, wolves and men carried him forward. Even the stench of ichor, a miasma both clutching and jagged, was a goad.

The call of absolute frenzy was strong. He held back, though. Not much, but just enough to hold on to his awareness of the wider field of battle.

The Deathwolves battered their way forward to victory and slaughter. The thunderwolf charge blew apart the lines of the Khornate abominations. It

reduced hundreds of them to a thick sludge of ichor. The power of the wyrd crackled over them, and the foul liquid did not dissipate. Icetooth's paws splashed through a deepening mire. Their anger could not summon the strength to meet the challenge of the Deathwolves. Without pause, without mercy, Harald cut through the daemons and reached the wall of Predomitus.

He did not lead the charge through the gates. Instead, he turned right along the ramparts, then turned again to smash back down through the horde. At his back, he felt the blasting wind of two gunships. They made low passes before the gates, hammering the ground with heavy bolters and lascannons. The gap in the wall became an inferno. Harald looked back to see volcanic destruction, the earth and bodies heaving skyward. Daemons burned as they flew. The horde within the city could not break out. The other Stormwolves flew in from the rear of the lines to meet the advancing cavalry, scything a swath of annihilation as they came.

A daemon leapt high over Icetooth's jaws. It came down directly at Harald, its sword descending to cut his head in two. He brought up the shield and smashed it aside. He finished it off with a bolt shell to the skull. Icetooth seized another abomination by the neck and bit through with a single clamp of his jaws.

Harald seized the moment to look left. In the wake of the cavalry charge, the infantry was advancing, the speed more deliberate but the destruction no less total. The Grey Hunters were still moving towards the gates, cutting an even wider swath. Harald heard their massed war shouts over the cries of the daemons.

Behind the gunships and infantry came the tanks. Predators, Vindicators and Land Raiders in tight formation became a giant grinder, an unstoppable mass of metal and cannon fire. Icetooth ran towards the explosions. Purifying flame pushed back the wyrd-light.

'Riding close!' Canis yelled, coherent again, his voice still guttural. He impaled a swordling through the throat and hurled the creature away to the right, into the blades of its kin. 'Straight to the blasts?' he asked.

Harald could almost believe Canis was ready to pursue the slaughter right into the tank fire.

'Not quite,' he said. But he grinned at his champion. 'Close though.'

He waited until the smoke was choking, shattered stone was raining down on the field, and the concussions were deafening then swerved off to the right, clearing the way for the tanks. The clanking, booming vehicles moved past the cavalry, rolling over the daemons that had been in pursuit.

Canis growled in disappointment. The field before the Thunderwolves was almost empty of daemons.

‘We aren’t done, brother,’ Harald said. ‘We’re a long way from done.’ He turned Icetooth back towards the wall, and they rode a short distance to the flank of the armour. They came around a hill of skulls, and fell upon another horde.

The abominations were in disarray. They could not mount a counter attack. Their numbers worked against them as they tried to respond to the sudden changes in the Deathwolves’ vector of destruction. All the thousands in the plain became fodder for the claws of the Space Wolves. The daemons could not attack at once. They hindered each other’s movements as Harald triggered conflicting currents of attack. In their rage and frustration, the creatures fell to fighting each other.

The cavalry charge was unrelenting. Hours into the battle, the Deathwolves raced with the same speed and fury as their initial assault. And when at last Harald called a halt, the nature of the plain had changed. The sky overhead remained a storm of dark, mad flame. Smoke rose from the hills of skulls, and blood pooled at their bases. But the cracked earth was barren. The enemy was gone.

Slaughter and victory. So often, they were the same thing. On this day they were. While the gunships continued to pound the gates of Predomitus, Harald regarded the dead land with satisfaction. This much of Nurades was purged.

Beside him, Canis said, ‘A good start.’ He was hungry for more.

We all are, Harald thought. His blood was up. The annihilation of the enemy in this first encounter, and the imperative to keep up the pressure pushed the concerns of the war’s significance to the back of his mind. The plan of a foe was meaningless if the foe was exterminated. And Harald felt the strength of extermination in his hands. He was a predator unleashed, and there was prey on the other side of the walls.

‘Yes,’ he said to Canis. ‘A good start to the hunt. Let us continue.’

The battle for Predomitus took days. Days of unending massacre. In the stages of the purging, the Deathwolves broke through a crush of daemons at the gates, then moved up the primary thoroughfares of the hive. The war was an interior one now. Only rarely did the company emerge into open air, though the pilots of the gunships kept as close to the position of their brothers as possible, strafing the exposed positions of the hive. They blew up towers where the concentration of daemons was so great that the buildings themselves had begun to distort,

rockcrete walls turning into scaly flesh.

In the hive, the daemons answered the challenge of the Deathwolves. They poured in from halls and chambers. They crashed through skylights and ventilation shafts. They erupted from the floors of the route. The Great Company cut them down. Harald kept up the speed of the attack, moving almost as quickly as the initial charge. There was no chance of surprise when the battle was continuous, as unbroken as the flow of a burning river of blood.

The Deathwolves moved fast, with the savagery of the beasts they rode. But Harald chose the path of their assault with care. Aboard the *Alpha Fang*, he had studied hololithic schematics of Nurades' hive cities. The frenzy of his hunt was tempered by strategy. He embraced the wolf. He fought as if he were one. *As if* he were one. There was a difference. Never to be forgotten.

Once the gate was taken, Harald began the second stage of the assault on Predomitus. He split his forces to take the cavalry and infantry down the narrower passages, while the tanks moved implacably down the main arteries. The smaller routes were large enough to permit rapid deployment, but not so wide the daemons could mass sufficient numbers together to slow the advance. The daemons took the bait, and Harald exterminated them.

'This is the long charge, brothers,' Harald voxed the Great Company as the Wolf Guard and Grey Hunters slaughtered daemons, rejoined the tanks on the great avenues, then split off to repeat the pattern. 'This is how we will take back Predomitus. Our victory rests on momentum and speed. Depend upon that.'

Canis tore a swordling in half then gestured at the vista of towering walls and branching avenues lying ahead. 'This is a vast hunt,' he said.

Harald switched to a private channel. 'We do not seek a complete purge,' he said. That would be impossible. 'It will be enough to break the daemons' grip.' He pointed up and to the left, where the upper storeys of a spire flashed with lasbeam fire. 'Nurades still has uncorrupted defence forces. We will give them the means to mount their war of reclamation, then move to the next target.' He thought the prospect of an unending, savage advance would please Canis.

He was right. The champion howled as he and Fangir hurled themselves at the next group of daemons.

The course of the war took the Deathwolves deep into the underhive. There the concentration of daemons was immense. And in the Industrium Sub-terranal, the abominations mounted a challenge to Harald's advance.

The Industrium was a tangle of passages. Machinery was piled upon machinery

in a gloom lit by fiery outgassing, and centuries of construction and decay had created jumbled layers of manufactoria. The millions of serfs who worked the Industrium were gone, transformed or dead. Many regions of the steel maze were ruins, and the dead metal was changing into hungry flesh. But much of the machinery was still active, gears turning, jaws grinding ore, forges pouring out molten metal with the mindless persistence of titanic servitors. The passages here were short, broken, unpredictable. Machinic walls rumbled towards each other, then parted. Angles were sharp, and speed was dangerous, difficult, and still necessary. And here, there were other daemons.

Until now, the Deathwolves had fought only Khornate abominations, howling embodiments of rage. In the Industrium, they encountered daemons of Tzeentch. Instead of roars, mad laughter echoed down the passageways. Voices intoned sentences that hovered on the edge of human meaning. The words scratched at the back of Harald's eyes.

'Silence the tongues of the wyrd!' he yelled, his voice ringing off the iron walls. The lead Thunderwolves trampled the daemoniac, misshapen horrors of glistening pink muscle. They came apart beneath claws and chainswords. Flesh parted, darkened to the blue of contusions and reformed. The daemons multiplied in their destruction, but were hammered into oblivion by the bolter fire of the Grey Hunters.

Sudden, inhuman shrieks split the air apart. Airborne daemons, things that were little more than wings and horns and whiplash tails, came screaming around the sharp turns, and flew out from between dark crevasses in the machinery. They were mindless but agile. They fell upon the Deathwolves, lunging in with their horns or slashing past with their spiked tails. They came from all directions, attacked and flew off, then came back.

Harald trusted to the predatory instincts of Icetooth to deal with the daemons that scampered forwards on the floor of the Industrium. He kept his focus on the air, drilling bolt shells into the screaming daemons that swooped his way, raising Gladius to cleave their undersides open if they got by his barrage.

The struggle was composed of moments as disjointed as the space of the Industrium. A war of reckless speed. The pistoning, clanking, smoke-spewing masses of machinery rising hundreds of metres on either side. The ceiling just above Harald's head one moment, invisible in the dark heights the next. No way to prepare for each jagged intersection – nothing for it but to race deep into the whirring saw blades of war. The Deathwolves and the screamers streaking past and through each other, ichor and blood a thick spray in the gloom. The shrieks

of the abominations entwined with chants and laughter. The howls of the thunderwolves and snarls of their riders cut through the foul braiding of Chaos with the purity of savagery. War turned into a blur of slashing lethality.

In the depths of the Industrium's maze, Harald became aware of a stronger presence. The attacks of the screamers were too precise for mindless daemons. They were directed by a powerful will. Its whisper travelled through the clamour of battle, slithering worm-like through the interstices of cackle and growl and roar. It spoke to the Deathwolves. It would not be ignored.

Another attack, more insidious, more dangerous.

Slithertwyst welcomes you. Slithertwyst has been waiting. You have been long in coming. Will you make the path interesting? Chains and ropes, manacles and webs, such rattling and struggling and twisting and twisting and twisting. Do you see? You do not see. Hurry, playthings. Hurry and see.

Hissing with secrets, dark with knowledge.

'Shut out the lies!' Harald called to his riders.

But in his heart, he dreaded that somewhere in the daemon's blandishments was a truth more corrosive than any lie.

Shut out Slithertwyst? Silence Slithertwyst? Will you silence fate? Will you shut out your days and ways to come?

On the right, dying metal shrieked. A chain of collapses smothered explosions and a stream of incandescent gas flashed overhead. Harald hunched beneath it. On instinct he turned towards the falling wall. Millions of tonnes of metal toppled towards the Deathwolves. Disintegrating machinery threw out spinning shrapnel. The collapse stretched ahead and behind the cavalry. There was no evading the avalanche – Harald raced towards the certainty of crushing oblivion and it parted before him, a conglomeration with the mass of a hundred Stormwolves tearing to either side like a shredded curtain.

Harald and Canis rode head-on at the daemon that whispered in their souls. Slithertwyst stood astride a screamer. The herald of Tzeentch was a being of limbs and horns and teeth, a huge pink abomination draped in robes of shifting, oily blue. Things sprouted from its body that changed from tentacles to horns from moment to moment. It raised a twisted blade, laughing and whispering at the same time, three more arms spreading wide in welcome to the Space Wolves.

Harald urged Icetooth into a leap. The thunderwolf sailed upwards and came down on the head of the winged daemon, slamming it to the ground. The herald leapt from its wounded steed and flailed at Harald's storm shield with claws and tentacles. The power of the wyrd was in its strength. It hit with serpentine speed

and the force of a battering ram, forcing Harald and Icetooth back. The other daemon rose to the aid of its master, and Canis and Fangir fell upon it. Canis slashed the winged monster with his wolf claws, his attack as ferocious as Fangir's, while Harald blocked Slithertwyst's blade thrust with Glacius and fired a sustained volley with his bolt pistol into the daemon's face.

The mass-reactive shells exploded inside its skull. The herald was not a thing of true flesh, but here on Nurades it had a physical reality, and the blasts blew its head into two halves. They hung, deflated sacks of flesh, to either side of the body. The claws scrabbled blindly for Harald, and Icetooth snarled in pain and rage as they dug furrows into his hide. The thunderwolf leapt again, away from the screamer as Slithertwyst's shredded body crashed into the wreckage of burning machinery. The cavalry attacked the thrashing daemon with chainswords and bolt pistols, shattering its body even further. Eldritch flame erupted from where Slithertwyst had fallen. There was a sudden blast, and a foul wind, strong as a hurricane howled through the ruins to batter the Deathwolves.

As they rode through the collapse to the next open passage, Canis said, 'Easy prey.'

The champion was right. They had hit Slithertwyst hard, but Harald had not expected the battle to be so brief.

'Too easy, do you think?' he asked.

'No,' Canis grinned. 'Just poor prey. At least they are many.'

Harald glanced back. The glow of the daemonic fire was fading, the wind dropping. He saw no hint of a resurrection. The whispers had stopped. But for a moment, in the curls of the wind, he thought he heard serpentine laughter.

Canis was satisfied to view the daemons as outmatched, but Harald was not. 'Yet the wyrd is strong on this world,' he said.

Canis didn't answer. He was riding towards his next kill, shouting with feral eagerness.

Doubt gnawed at the edges of Harald's war lust. *There is something I am not seeing.*

Ahead, a swarm of the pink daemons squeezed through a narrow passage. There was no time to contemplate the nature of the herald's demise. The slaughter called, and could not be ignored.

Onwards, then, and onwards, the Deathwolves forever charging, forever cutting through daemonic bodies, ending laughter and chants, purifying every corner they passed in the Industrium's maze.

Taking back Predomitus.

At last, the Deathwolves came through the hive. Their assault, a single run lasting many days, left behind a swath of scoured ruins. The war for the hive was not over, but the balance had tipped towards the mortal defenders. The abomination and the heretic were being burned from Predomitus, and the work would go on until none remained, even if every spire of the city was toppled in the process.

The tide had turned. Harald's cavalry, joined by the heavy armour and the gunships, moved on. Before them, the land between Predomitus and Genos seethed with daemons. They came down from the higher ground, a frothing wave of monstrosity.

'All kinds of filth,' said Canis.

Harald nodded. The alliance of daemons had been hidden by the initial encounter with the swordlings. The presence of the Tzeentchian daemons in the Industrium Sub-terranean had been an ill omen. Now it was confirmed. Wrath and change and plague and excess rampaged over the tortured earth of Nurades. All the shades of the Ruinous Powers were united. 'This does not happen without great cause,' Harald said.

'They want this world badly,' Canis said.

'Do they?' Harald wondered. He thought about the relative ease of Slithertwyst's defeat again. He shook off the speculation. Whatever the purpose of Chaos, the Space Wolves were here to end it.

Though he and his brothers had just come through an exhausting campaign, he rose on Icetooth's back as if fresh to the battlefield, Glacius held high.

'Brothers!' he called. 'Let us hunt again!'

The Emperor's predators tore over the land to slake their thirst for war.

Weeks, then. After Predomitus, weeks of battle across the length of the Lacertus Peninsula. Always forwards, never retreating, cutting through daemons, and pushing them towards the sea, taking back the world they had stolen. The grind of battle in the hive now expanded to an entire region, with kilometres gained each day, but so many more to go, and an entire world infested.

Harald did not look towards an end of the campaign. He concerned himself with the victory of the moment, and of the steps necessary to reach the end. In seeking to counter his strategy, the daemons aided him. They brought more and more of their forces to bear against the Deathwolves, and so they hurried their extermination.

Forty days after the siege of Predomitus, the Deathwolves crested a ridge and

caught their first glimpse of the sea, still hundreds of kilometres away. Below, the land dropped away gradually into an arid, rolling plain. It was a cauldron of daemons. Harald paused. He looked upon a heaving mass of beings, a nightmare drawn for the darkest sagas.

‘A fine hunt,’ Canis said. His face and beard were matted with ichor, and his armour was scored with burns and the marks of otherworldly blades. ‘Glorious.’ He looked towards the daemoniac legions, his hunger for battle as strong as ever.

‘Can a hunt be too glorious?’ Harald said.

Canis turned to him in disbelief. After a long moment, he laughed, as if deciding Harald was joking. ‘Never,’ Canis said.

At the moment the champion’s laughter ended, Harald thought he heard the echo of another, sibilant voice. Harald glanced around. Slithertwyst’s final mockery haunted him.

Every day of the campaign, he watched for the daemon’s return. In the corner of his left eye, he saw a dark pink movement. He looked. There was nothing there.

‘What did you hear?’ Canis asked.

‘I thought I heard the daemon who taunted us in Predomitus.’

Canis looked puzzled once more. ‘That cannot be. We banished it. Tore it apart.’

Yet it laughed. ‘And why Nurades?’ he said, finally asking the question out loud. ‘What is the meaning of this incursion?’

‘Its meaning?’ Canis said. ‘What does it matter? The daemons’ purpose dies with them.’

Does it? It must.

Yet it laughed.

He shook his head. ‘You’re right, Wolfborn,’ he said, trying to convince himself. ‘Deathwolves!’ he voxed to the company. ‘We push to the sea! Leave only death in our wake!’

They poured down the slope. A storm of claws and guns descended on the daemons.

Harald was unable to savour the taste of the victories as they came. The questions gave him no peace. Even in the thick of battle, as he roared and slew, they lingered, as insistent as they were half-formed.

Onward. Forwards. Weeks of war. Weeks of slaughter. The beasts forever unleashed, claws and fangs ripping the unholy foe apart. The infinity of the enemy merely an infinity of prey.

Canis exulted.
Harald doubted.
On and on. Endless.
Until there was an end.

The Lacertus Peninsula came to an abrupt halt. The restless sea hurled itself against sheer basalt cliffs hundreds of metres high. Caught in the tormented energy of the warpstorm, the waves rose to half that height, battering the cliffs with such force the spray drenched the land above. The wind howled with voices. It raged against the Space Wolves as they cornered the daemonic hordes. The abominations of the Ruinous Powers shrieked and gibbered, their voices entwining with the wind and waves.

They fought in vain. The true tempest came from Fenris.

Harald turned his doubts into rage as he and his brothers crashed into the final hordes. On all sides, the Deathwolves howled with triumph. After weeks of incessant battle, they attacked as if fresh to the battlefield. Their prey had nowhere to turn. They tore into the daemons with furious joy. Ichor and spray drenched Harald as he and Icetooth savaged them, and Glacius seemed to sing in his hand. He barely felt the impact of his blows. He cut through skulls and chopped torsos in half. He crushed spines with his storm shield. He fired into explosions of disintegrating wyrdflesh.

Canis laughed with merciless ferocity. Harald joined him. So did the entire cavalry, and then the infantry. The cliffs resounded with the terrible laughter of alpha predators.

Harald and Icetooth plunged forwards, and forwards again, until there was no forwards any longer.

The shattered daemon army plunged over the edge of the cliffs. Monstrous forms struggled through the air. Waves like mountains rose to swallow them, Nurades in its anger taking its tormentors into the violent depths of the sea.

The Deathwolves' laughter rode the thunder of the surf.

Lord Governor Elsener met with Harald Deathwolf and Canis Wolfborn in one of the defence spires of Hive Genos. Elsener's quarters had been destroyed early in the incursion. He had barely escaped the tower's fall. None of the astropaths lower down had been as fortunate. Their cry for help had been their last act, and it had opened them fatally to the power of the warp. Elsener had witnessed their daemonic transformation. He had witnessed much since the start of the war. He had seen thousands of hive militia and all but a handful of his Tempestus honour

guard give their lives in the defence of a chapel redoubt in the centre of the hive. He caught sight of his reflection in a glassteel window as he approached the chamber. What he had seen was branded on his face. His eyes were sunken and his skin was grey and lined with the deep scars of a soul's trauma. He saw the face of a man who would not live long past the end of the war.

The Emperor grant I see the liberation of Nurades, he thought.

He entered the room, leaning on a rough cane he had fashioned from the shaft of an ornamental pike. The chamber was a turret emplacement midway up the tower. It was large enough to serve as a command centre, and it was intact. Heavy bolters stood in the vaulted apertures facing north, south, east and west. They guarded the approaches over the rooftops of the lower hab complexes. Or the ruins of those complexes. Much of Genos was a smouldering ruin. But it had been cleansed.

The sky was dark with the smoke from the fires. It was free of the lunatic brilliance of the warp storm. As the war swept upwards from the Lacertus Peninsula on the inhabited northern land mass of Nurades, the strength of the storm faded. It had been many days now since Genos and Predomitus had been free of the terrors of that light and its rains.

Waiting for the lord governor was the liberation of Nurades. Elsener's breath caught. Two colossal warriors faced him. Their armour carried the stench of war. There was the acrid sting of fyceline, and the disturbing trace of slaughtered abominations in the streaks of ichor. And the aura of dangerous animals. They were human, yet their features were so rough-hewn, their hair so wild, that Elsener felt he had stepped into the presence of massive beasts.

He feared them almost as much as the things he had been fighting for weeks.

Elsener bowed, eyes averted. 'My lords,' he said. 'Nurades thanks you for the salvation you bring.'

Deathwolf grunted. 'Your survival does you credit, Lord Elsener.' He turned to the hololith table that had been brought to the chamber. 'We have some questions for you.' The table displayed a map of Nurades' polar regions. 'The war grows fiercer the further north we go,' Deathwolf said.

With an effort, Elsener forced himself not to imagine a plague of horrors even worse than that which had attacked Genos.

'The abominations are more numerous, and more resolved to prevent our advance,' Deathwolf continued. He tapped the map where runes indicated some form of complex. 'What is this? I have found no records about it.'

'Borassus,' Elsener said. He swallowed and leaned more heavily on his cane.

‘We expunged the records, but we have yet to erase its memory from our culture. It is a fortification. It is cursed.’

Wolfborn snorted. ‘What on Nurades is not?’

‘Borassus has been a place of shadows for centuries. It has been shunned since long before the warp storm came.’

‘So it will be all the worse now, you believe,’ Deathwolf said.

‘How can it not be?’

Deathwolf nodded. ‘We take note of your warning. No son of Fenris takes the word *curse* lightly. So Borassus is where we must go. If the Ruinous Powers seek to prevent us from reaching it, its importance is clear.’ He spread his hand over the polar regions. ‘There are no settlements for over a thousand kilometres in any direction. No prey for the daemons. Borassus is their anchor point on this continent. From what you say, it may also be a gateway for them. We shall take it, and cleanse this world.’

The skies were clear over Borassus as the Stormwolves arrived. There was no smog of heavy industry in this empty region, a land of barren rock and deep cold. Nor were there the unholy flames of the warp storm. Even as the Deathwolves had prepared their assault on the fortifications, the convulsion around Nurades had subsided. The storm had passed. The materium was reasserting itself. The night of the Nurades’ pole was a clean black and the stars were jagged silver. Twice the size of Luna, Nurades’ moon cast a light heavy with silence over Borassus.

A hundred kilometres to the south, the heavy armour of the Deathwolves battled a massive surge of daemons in the mountain pass that was the primary access point to the Borassus region across land. With the attention of the forces of Chaos drawn to that struggle, Harald ordered an air insertion into the target zone. Now the Space Wolves came in waves of gunships, disembarking on a wide plain before the main gate of the fortifications.

As his cavalry and infantry assembled, Harald eyed the battlements, outlined in black by the vast sphere of the moon. The complex of bunkers, towers and ramparts made him think of broken tusks and fangs. Borassus hulked, quiet and black, waiting. The main gate was a ruin. The way in was clear. He saw no movement.

Standing beside him, Canis said, ‘This place is not dead.’ His fangs were bared. Icetooth and Fangir growled. Their hackles were raised.

‘It waits for us,’ Harald agreed.

The cavalry of the Deathwolves advanced with caution. Harald could not lead a charge with no enemy in sight.

The Space Wolves passed through the ruined gate. Beyond was a large staging ground. Some of the barracks surrounding it had fallen in on themselves. Rockcrete walls had tumbled as if smashed by a huge fist. Bunkers were squat shapes, at regular intervals in the space between the walls and the great hulk of the central keep. Cold light and deep shadow washed over them. Their doorways and turret apertures gaped, idiot mouths and blind glares. Harald sent squads ahead to check the nearest buildings. They found only darkness inside.

The Deathwolves moved deeper into Borassus. Wind whispered over the ground, cold with loss. The tread of thunderwolf paws and ceramite boots echoed against the walls, and desolation embraced the company.

The door to the keep had fallen too. Harald slowed when he saw the entrance was blocked with rubble. The interior of the keep appeared to have collapsed. He scanned the upper levels of squat towers. Rows of apertures stared back at him; more dark, empty eyes.

The eyes blinked and snarling light burst from them. It lit the ramparts of the keep. On the roofs of the bunkers, as if a concealing curtain had been ripped away, flame daemons of Tzeentch now whirled their mad dance and hurled daemoniac fire at the company. *They've been there all along*, Harald realised. Some great sorcery had kept them hidden.

The blasts hit everywhere across the Deathwolves' formation. A fireball of coruscating blue streaked past Harald's shoulder. It hit Aluar, enveloping the Grey Hunter. Power armour, flesh, bone and muscle mutated and fused with such explosive energy that he passed from a thing of bleeding angles and howling mouths to ash in a fraction of a second.

On all sides, reality cracked. An army appeared in mid-charge, tearing through the brittle veil of the real. The staging ground was empty and then it was full. A stampede of juggernauts barrelled into the Deathwolves' flanks. They were massive beasts of crimson hide and crimson armour with horns that were as long as their jaws. Some horns were spikes, while some were in the shape of serrated axe blades, and behind each was the force of a speeding tank. They pierced ceramite. They chopped through ribs. They impaled thunderwolves through the throat.

Riding high on their monstrous steeds, Khornate swordlings swung their blades down onto damaged armour. They exulted with each skull they severed, holding high their crimson offerings to Khorne.

Slower and more numerous than the behemoth cavalry, thousands of daemons of Nurgle closed in. They were a sea of droning, chanting pestilence. Weeping sores covered their bodies and maggots dropped, squirming, from their blades. They came to smother the Deathwolves in the embrace of the grandfather of disease.

‘Form up!’ Harald voxed. ‘Push them back!’ Icetooth and Fangir lunged towards the stampeding Khornate daemons.

‘Cowards, depending on surprise,’ Canis snarled.

It worked, Harald thought. ‘Then we’ll render their tactic futile,’ he vowed. The trap had been sprung. He would take the Deathwolves out of it now. The beast in his heart swore this, though the cold tactician reckoned the odds and knew how this night would end.

The scarlet behemoths attacked the Space Wolves flanks. There was no way forward. The ruined keep was a cliff wall. The only chance was to break the brunt of the assault and reclaim mobility.

‘We must push to the rear,’ Harald said to Canis. He poured bolt shells into the skull of a leviathan until its head burst. It fell heavily, carving a furrow in the stony ground, rolling over and crushing its rider.

‘A retreat?’ Canis asked. Fangir dodged a charge and dug his claws into the monster’s scales. Canis decapitated the swordling with a swipe of his right hand and impaled the behemoth’s neck with the wolf claws on his left.

‘A manoeuvre,’ Harald said. ‘With a change of prey.’

‘Brothers!’ he shouted into the vox. ‘Rend the daemons of plague apart!’ He began to turn Icetooth around. A juggernaut launched itself at the thunderwolf. Icetooth twisted around, brought his head down and latched his jaws onto the beast’s throat. He bit with steel-crunching force. Daemoniac ichor poured to the ground as the juggernaut bellowed and tried to shake free. Harald batted aside the sword daemon’s weapon with his bolt pistol and slammed Glacius into the abomination’s midsection, cutting it in half. It dissolved into steaming, scarlet foulness. Icetooth tightened his grip on the juggernaut. His claws smashed through its armour. Harald turned his axe at the exposed flesh, hacking deep into the body of the monster. It reared backwards with a strength born of its impending doom. Icetooth rose on his hindquarters with it. The juggernaut tried to roll over and crush its tormentors, but it was evenly matched with the thunderwolf. As if he was as furious with the ambush as his master, Icetooth refused to release his prey. The juggernaut fell back on all fours and Icetooth tore its throat out. It slumped down, and Harald cut off its head.

The huge daemon's body collapsed in on itself. Its scales rusted, then flaked to dust, and its flesh melted into a foul muck. As its mass disappeared, Harald had the room to manoeuvre. Beside him, Canis and Fangir finished the other behemoth. Fangir clawed all the way through the flank, loosing a flood of snapping, shrieking, burning viscera. Canis cut deeper with his own blades until he severed the skull. The daemon's roar of pain and rage choked off and the monster vanished in an explosion of ichor. Moving to the left and right flanks, Wolf Lord and champion barrelled down the line of the Deathwolves, adding their might to that of each brother locked in a struggle, blunting the assault of the daemon cavalry.

'Back to the walls! Back to the plain!' Harald ordered. 'There we will run the abominations down!'

The Great Company changed its direction. The Deathwolves fought through the jaws and crush of the Khornate monsters. They fought through the barrage of warp flame that fell in their midst, destroying their brothers through lethal metamorphosis. And they moved against the plaguebearers.

Overhead, the Stormwolves strafed the ramparts with helfrost and las. Stormfang gunships punished the daemons on the ground. Great beams created swaths of absolute zero temperatures. Some of the daemons caught in the fire managed to move, their unnatural being performing the impossible, yet they crumbled apart as they advanced, reduced to dust before they could be free.

The Tzeetchian flame daemons retaliated in force. Across the fortifications, half of them redirected their fire at the gunships and assault craft. Warpfire engulfed engines. It turned wings into fangs. Before Harald could reach the rear lines, multiple volleys of the unholy flame gripped the fuselage of a Stormfang, transforming it into something scaled and flexible. Engines screamed and the gunship whirled. Its sudden flesh changed again. It became glass. The forces of its violent movement shattered it. Ship and crew vanished in an explosion that lit the dark with light natural and unnatural.

Harald and Canis rejoined each other as the Deathwolves struck hard against the plague daemons. The abominations at the front disappeared in mid chant, annihilated by the massed rage of the Space Wolves. The cold polar air became dank and humid with rot. Even as they disintegrated, the daemons fought back, releasing a wall of noxious vapour ahead of them.

The Deathwolves advanced into the sea of disease. Though the behemoths continued their attack, they had lost the advantage of speed. They were bogged down as they waded through the plague daemons. The Great Company drew

closer to the gate, and the freedom of movement beyond.

Warpflame surrounded the Stormwolf *Guard of Frostheim*. A score of flame daemons hit it at the same time. Its frame subjected itself to conflicting forces of such power it froze in mid-flight. Madness held it suspended over the gateway. It bulged and contracted. It writhed. Eyes tore open and bled along the fuselage. The underbelly split wide. Its teeth gnashed, and then it screamed.

‘*Back!*’ Harald roared.

The company’s movement stalled. A mass so great could not reverse course that suddenly. The Space Wolves reacted with perfect discipline, yet for fateful seconds they neither advanced nor retreated.

Guard of Frostheim fell. A combusting assemblage of metal and flesh crashed into the ground before the gate. The incinerating blast washed over the Deathwolves. There could be no turning for Harald, and he leaned into the explosion, fastening his grip on his mantle as Icetooth crouched low, howling at the destruction. The cowling of an engine cartwheeled over Harald’s head. It came down in the Grey Hunters behind him, both blade and meteor. A wind of ignited plasma and burning immaterium raged around him. It sought to devour him. It failed, repelled by his cloak. Made from the hide of the ice troll king he had slain, it defied all flame.

The sound of the explosion was so huge that it drowned out the cries of the dying, yet Harald knew his brothers were being consumed. He could feel the loss in his soul. In grief and rage, he rose before the gale of *Guard of Frostheim*’s death had fully abated. Icetooth’s hide smouldered. Patches of fur and flesh had been burned down to muscle. Matching his rider’s fury, he answered Harald’s command and lunged upward.

‘With me, brothers!’ Harald voxed. ‘Gather and face the foe together. Let the abominations break against the rock of our strength! Cavalry, prepare to rush the enemy towards the keep! Infantry, break with us and scale the walls.’

The gate was rubble. There was no egress from Borassus. Scores of daemons had vanished in the crash, for all the difference that made. The tide of plaguebearers still ran high.

The beast in Harald could not silence the tactician. The breakout attempt had failed. The last chance to escape the trap had fallen with *Guard of Frostheim*. One last charge, then. One last bellow of rage against the enemy. If the cavalry drew the greater part of the daemons away from his brothers on foot, perhaps the Deathwolf infantry would survive to rejoin the heavy armour to the south. If the saga of the company’s thunderwolves ended here, let it be a fitting conclusion, a

song echoing with the death of countless unholy foes.

Sensing vulnerability, the daemon horde redoubled its attack. The roaring beasts shook the ground in their raging hunger. A clamour of tolling bells urged the plague daemons on. Blades of disease and blades of wrath hacked at the Space Wolves. Harald's warriors gathered around him forming a wall of snarling beasts and ceramite-clad giants. The constant barrage of warpflame struck more down with every second. The daemons of Khorne and Nurgle pressed in, the closing of a vice.

Canis Wolfborn had come through the explosion with his face a single massive burn. His armour was scorched black. His eyes shone with proud anger. 'Predators to the last,' he said to Harald.

Harald nodded. Canis was ready for the inevitable, eager for the kills he would yet be granted this night. This was good, it was right. Harald raised Gladius in his last defiance.

'For Russ!' he called.

'For the Woldtime!' the company answered.

For us, it has come, Harald thought.

He felt the hair on his arms rise. He was surrounded by foulness that would drive mortals insane, but something else in the night made him react as if to an unknown threat.

A flicker rippled over the daemons. It looked like uncertainty.

Shadows streaked across the rooftops before huge silhouettes struck the flame daemons and tore them apart. The warpfire barrage came to a sudden end. In its wake came a deluge from the air. It was ichor. So many daemons were destroyed in a matter of seconds that their end was a rain upon the battlefield. Harald blinked. The shapes were monstrous, but not as strange as they should be. He heard growls, deep and ferocious, and his blood stirred with recognition.

His olfactory senses responded to the scent of kinship.

'Brothers...' Canis said with stunned awe.

'How?' said Harald. This isn't possible, he thought. The shapes were too big. Too misshapen.

And yet...

He would wonder later. On every roof of Borassus, the daemons were being exterminated.

Harald signalled the charge, and already it was no longer desperate. The Deathwolves howled their challenge as they attacked.

The figures on the roofs howled back.

No, Harald thought again. He cracked the skull of a behemoth wide open, stitched a swordling from head to belly with bolt shells, and again he thought *no*, torn by hope and unease before the impossible.

Now the ramparts of Borassus were free of daemons. The figures that could not be familiar leapt to the ground. They attacked the rear ranks of the daemons, butchering their way towards the Deathwolves. They used no firearms. Some had punch-daggers. They attacked with the pure savagery of the animal, shredding the enemy with their hands. Their clawed hands.

A greater monstrosity overwhelmed the daemons. The Deathwolves fought with the boiling rage of near defeat. Their every howl was answered by the giants approaching them. Now the momentum was with the thunderwolves. Now it was the daemons who were surrounded.

Now it was the daemons who were doomed.

The end was inevitable. It came quickly. And when the last daemon remains were dissolving in their foulness, Harald faced the creatures who could not be there.

The heavy moonlight reigned over Borassus again. Its quiet was broken by the predatory breathing of giants.

The monsters were hunched as if ready to spring. They did not. They held back – for the moment.

Canis was growling in unison with the thunderwolves.

Harald looked at him. ‘You called them brothers,’ he said.

Canis nodded, shook his head. He grimaced in confusion. ‘They are, but... their scent is strange. It is *old*.’ His fists opened and closed. He was caught between the signals of kin and threat. He was on the threshold of attacking.

‘Hold fast, brother,’ Harald said. His weapons held low but at the ready, he advanced towards the creatures who had saved his warriors. With every detail he took in, the vertigo of unreality grew stronger. They were huge. Very tall and massively broad, they dwarfed Harald. They were beasts.

They were wolves.

They hunched forwards as if running on all fours came naturally to them, and indeed their arms were long. Their faces too were elongated and hirsute. Their fangs were huge, and their maws so lupine Harald wondered if they could speak. There were still aspects of the human in the monsters though; he saw in those faces the thing he had tried to deny but could no longer. He saw the familiar. He saw *kinship*. He smelled it too, beneath the tang of combat stimulants and thick bestial musk.

The wolves wore armour. How did the firmament not crack wide open to see such armour in this place and in this time? It was battered, patchwork, barely held together by rough welds, damaged almost beyond recognition. Almost. It was a faded slate grey, the colour of ancient history. The insignia were visible, though close to vanishing beneath battle scars. They were Fenrisian. They were known to Harald. They were known to every Space Wolf. Their memory had been faithfully preserved.

They had not been seen for ten thousand years.

‘This cannot be!’ a Wolf Guard shouted. For a moment, Harald thought the words were in his head.

No, he thought. This cannot be.

The 13th Great Company. Lost to the warp in pursuit of Magnus after the fall of Prospero.

The immense warriors grouped around the largest of them all. The night rumbled with low, wary growls. Harald maglocked his weapons. He held his hands open and away from his sides. He approached the alpha. The great beast watched him with amber eyes. He was so huge that his mooncast shadow swallowed the Deathwolf.

Harald held the gaze of those eyes, even as he had to crane his head back. I do not come to attack, he thought, but I do come to command. He knew this was necessary. Yet he was closing in on a myth. It was an effort to keep the awe he felt from his face.

He was only a few steps away now. He saw the beast’s features in more detail. The traces of the human were clearer. The shape of the eyes, of the brows – more and more he saw the lineaments he knew in his brothers, and in his own reflection.

He accepted the truth of what he saw. The murmurs and warning growls of the Deathwolves behind him were an assurance he was not hallucinating.

Harald stopped before the alpha. He stood straight, his gaze unwavering. The great beast’s chest expanded as it took a breath. The alpha rumbled.

Harald braced.

The beast lowered his head and dropped to one knee. So did all the others. The threat of the moment passed as they acknowledged a new alpha.

Though he dreaded what these revenants portended, Harald was mindful of the debt he owed them too. He placed his hand on the giant’s shoulder and bid him rise.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

The monster's jaw struggled to shape a name. 'Yngvir,' he said.

'Are you loyal to the primarch?' Harald asked.

'We... are... brother.' The rasp was entirely animal. Only the words were human. 'We... are... Wulfen.'

Why Nurades? Harald thought again. Now you know. He looked at the ranks of the Wulfen, and felt he was gazing into a future seized and made bloody by the jaws of the past.



CHAPTER 2

The Council of Wolves

Dark Angels Company Master Araphil came to Borassus to hunt for truth. A war had come and gone, and it had left behind shadows. Summoned by Scouts, his company had pierced the warp storm and entered orbit over the polar circle of Nurades. At that moment, the world had still been overrun with daemons. By the time the landing was complete, the daemons were gone. How?

The marks of battle were everywhere amid the ruined fortifications. The struggle here had been ferocious. The buildings and the ground were scorched and blasted. The walls were pocked with the distinctive impact craters of bolter shells. Other Space Marines had been here. Who?

Until a few moments ago, the most urgent question had been where Sergeant Arhad and his Scouts had gone. They had vanished from all vox and auspex readings before Araphil's company had arrived at Nurades. Now Araphil had partial answers, although dark ones. The shadows were deep, but he would hunt out what they concealed.

He stood in a bunker, surrounded by the remains of the Scouts. The bunker had become an abattoir. The bodies were dismembered, heads torn in half. Viscera

had been thrown against the walls and hung over the ledges of gun apertures. Even in the cold of this region of Nurades, the atmosphere of the chamber was clammy with the stench of blood. The Scouts' armour had long, parallel rents. The sign of claws.

Who has done this? That was the urgent question. The obvious answer was *daemons*. Araphil mistrusted it. For all the savagery, for all the butchery, the kills were too clean. Where were the signature desecrations of the Ruinous Powers? It was conceivable that the sheer brutality was a form of Khornate rage. Araphil was unsatisfied with that answer too. He sniffed. His neuroglottis detected the faint trace of animal musk beneath the overwhelming odours of vitae and of bodies turned inside out. Araphil could believe animals had been at work here but he could think of none native to Nurades capable of overcoming even a single Scout.

Outside the bunker, squads moved through the wreckage of Borassus, seeking truth and secrets. After he had been called here, he had commanded the scene be left to him alone. He wished to commune with the space and the dead on his own. He moved deeper into the bunker, taking in each corpse, recording each name with a prayer and a promise of vengeance, eyeing the wounds and the manner of death. He kept his emotions in check.

Observe. Judge later. Observe now. Let the shadows speak. Let the dead give their answers.

To his right, there was a mound of body parts. Were there three victims there, or five? Perhaps portions of more. Something inside the mound moved. The motion was slight, a weak spasm. It was enough to dislodge a hand. Araphil knelt. He cleared away the fragments of corpse until he found the whole body beneath. It was Brother Dolutas. He was difficult to recognise: his face had been clawed to the bone. His armour was peeled back over his ravaged chest and broken ribs. Araphil looked closely, and Dolutas took a breath. It was weak, shallow. It could have been a sigh before dying. Then it came again.

'You have been strong, brother,' Araphil said softly. 'Apothecary!' he voxed. To the Scout he said, 'Be content. We are here to give you strength now.'

A blinking light midway down Dolutas' right flank drew Araphil's gaze. A servo-skull lay there. Its lower half was smashed and its gravitic impellers were wrecked, but one eye blinked red, red, red. The memory light. The servo-skull had preserved a recording.

Red, red, red, the eye blinked.

Answers, answers, answers.

‘There are other wyrdstorms,’ Logan Grimnar announced. ‘Storms with the same empiric signatures as the one over Nurades. The astropaths are emphatic. Some died as they confirmed the nature of the storms, and their flesh was marked by the same wyrdflame burns in each case. The storms are scattered, yet they are unmistakable.’

Silence fell over the Wolf Lords of Fenris as the implications of those words sank in. Around the periphery of the Hall of the Great Wolf, heroes of the Chapter stirred. Serfs froze, sensing a rise in tension. It was, Harald thought, as if a great wind were gusting through the Hall. The totems and pelts on the walls did not stir, but the thunderwolves crouched at their masters’ feet raised their hackles. A raven took to the air above Ulrik the Slayer. Its caw echoed across the hall.

In the centre of the vast space was the Grand Annulus. Set into the floor were thirteen wedge-shaped stone slabs, each marked with the runes and insignia of a Great Company. The Wolf Lords stood upon the territorial markers of their authority. One of the slabs was obsidian. It bore no markings. It was the painful absence on the Annulus, the break in the circle. It was the place belonging to the lost 13th Company, and so it represented all the lost. Only now the lost had been found. Harald’s gaze kept returning to it. So did the eyes of the other Wolf Lords.

Krom Dragongaze broke the silence, speaking the question on every mind. ‘What do the storms portend?’ he asked.

Grimnar turned to Ulrik the Slayer, standing at his side. He nodded. The Wolf Priest advanced to the centre of the Annulus.

‘I have spoken with Yngvir,’ he said with a voice ancient yet strong like grating stone. ‘Though his speech is difficult, he was clear that there are more of his brothers coming. *On the wings of storm*. Those are his words.’

‘And this return,’ Dragongaze said before anyone else could respond, ‘if these Wulfen are indeed the Thirteenth, why now? How has it happened? What does it mean?’

The Slayer waited several beats before answering. Now the silence in the Hall was total. ‘The omen of the Wulfen is clear,’ he said. ‘If they have come back, can Russ be far behind?’

The Hall of the Great Wolf erupted.

‘How can we be sure?’ Gunnar Red Moon demanded. ‘Where is the proof? How do we even know the Wulfen are what they claim to be?’

‘Their existence speaks for them,’ Sven Bloodhowl answered. ‘As do their

deeds. They saved Lord Deathwolf.’ He looked at Harald. ‘You who are brother to more wolves in your company than any of us must feel the truth of our kinship with the Thirteenth.’

Harold gave Bloodhowl a long look. The other Wolf Lord was much younger than he was. His hair and beard were a rich brown, and cut short. His symmetrical, rock-jawed features were indeed much further from the lupine than Harald’s. He would feel the complexities and risks of the warrior’s relationship with the beasts less acutely.

‘We are kin to wolves,’ Harald said. ‘We are *as* wolves. We are not wolves. You can see what they have become.’

He kept his tone moderate, but his words enflamed tempers even more. The Wolf Lords moved towards the centre of the Annulus as they shouted at each other. Harald held back. He had expressed his doubts, said what he had to say. The monstrosity of the Wulfen gave him pause, and there were too many unanswered questions about what had happened on Nurades. He could not easily accept the Slayer’s pronouncement, though he could not dismiss it either.

The other Wolf Lords were far more vehement.

‘Lord Deathwolf is right!’ Kjarl Grimblood said. ‘Look what they have become! An omen indeed! A dark one!’

‘How do we know they are really Wulfenkind?’ said Egil Iron Wolf. ‘Why not mutations? After so long in the warp, their Canis Helix could have suffered terrible damage.’

Erik Morkai snorted. ‘Monsters or not, what does it matter? They fight well. They’re good weapons.’

‘Nothing more?’ Bran Redmaw rounded on Morkai. ‘Is that the depth of your thought and honour? And my war packs, are we the same to you? Savages to be used up as needed?’

‘You hot-blooded fool, did I say that?’

‘You as good as did,’ Redmaw told Morkai. ‘If that is all you can see in the Wulfen, you are more blind than I ever imagined!’

The voices rose in anger. Harald looked to the Slayer. The Wolf Priest was regarding him silently. Harald thought of the meeting in the vaults. That was the first omen. How did the Slayer interpret that night? How did he believe it linked to the return of the Wulfen? Harald was convinced the link was there. He could not divine its meaning, nor could he shake his unease.

‘The Fell-Handed!’ Krom was saying. He said it again, cutting through the shouts. ‘We must consult Bjorn the Fell-Handed. He *knew* the Thirteenth. He

was there before the company vanished.'

All eyes turned to Ulrik the Slayer. He shook his head. 'Bjorn will not awaken,' he said.

'Good omen or ill,' said Ragnar Blackmane, 'we must find the others.'

No one disagreed.

Grimnar strode forward. The Wolf Lords stood still. They waited for the Great Wolf to speak.

'Our task is clear,' he said. 'We will seek out and return our brothers to Fenris. Whether they are cursed, or whether their arrival means Russ will soon be at our side again,' he nodded once to Ulrik, 'we will know in the end. And know we must.'

Harald nodded at this.

'Brothers, make ready. We sail the Sea of Stars with the Wulfen to gather the Thirteenth Great Company!'

As the Wolf Lords left the Hall, Dragongaze drew Harald aside. 'You're worried,' he said.

'I believe the Slayer and I see very different omens in the Wulfen. He sees what we lost, and what we hope to have again.'

'And what do you see?'

'What we might become if we are not vigilant. I see what we might lose.'

'You think the Wulfen are harbingers of disaster?'

'I'm sure they are harbingers. I don't know of what. That is my concern.'

'Our meeting before the Murderfang...' Dragongaze began.

'Yes,' said Harald. 'I was thinking of that too. It is linked to Nurades. But how? What drew us there. Krom, a daemon laughed at us as we vanquished it.'

Dragongaze was silent for a moment. 'Yet you purged the daemons,' he said. 'You defeated the Ruinous Powers.'

'Even so, the daemon laughed.'

'Daemonic malice?' Dragongaze suggested. 'It sought to sow doubt.'

'Yes,' said Harald. He met Dragongaze's eyes squarely, and did not hide the depths of his concern. 'It succeeded.'

At war in the world beneath sleep, above death. The struggle eternal. Ten thousand years now, fighting from plane to plane, an unending march.

I tarry until you come again, father.

The loss of the body is no loss of self. The agility of youth forgotten in the great hulk that fights in the kingdom above sleep. But here, in the land between, there

is speed again. The fury of spirit matched to the echo of form. The echo of a sarcophagus, a coffin of false death and infinite war.

All echoes here. Shadows of form and thought, cast by the weight of things in the other realm, the one above sleep. The roots run deep. The war runs deeper. So long without surcease, but what need for rest here, in the kingdom beneath?

None.

Only battle.

On the echo ramparts of the echo fortress, fighting an enemy who are not echoes, whose flesh is the stuff of echoes.

I must wake. I must speak to my brothers.

A flood of daemons, a sea lapping at the hexagrammic shadow.

There can be no waking yet. The sea is rising.

The daemons must be fought.

The prey tried to fight back. Lasgun fire struck the Wulfen. The beasts ran directly into the fire, roaring. They were twice the size of the puny human figures, and much faster. They ripped arms from torsos and heads from necks. Blood fountained across the scene of the massacre and paving stones shook under one monster's feet as he rushed an opponent. He wielded an immense frost axe. He sliced the body in half with a stroke so powerful the blade buried itself in the wall behind then freed it and held it aloft with both hands. The slaughter was complete. The Wulfen pack howled as one.

They looked up to the gallery where Logan Grimnar stood with the Iron Priest Hrothgar Swordfang. The Wulfen panted, their breath steaming, blood coating their muzzles and armour. They were surrounded by the torn flesh and scattered viscera of the training servitors. They were the image of mindless savagery.

The beasts lowered their heads and took a knee, bowing to the supreme alpha.

'Good,' Grimnar said.

That was enough. The Wulfen rose and loped from the training arena.

'Their new armour looks well,' Grimnar said to Swordfang.

'Thank you, Great Wolf,' the Iron Priest said. 'Their Mark II relics were beyond repair. We completed the Mark VIII size modifications four days ago. They were reluctant to part with their remnants, but they have adapted.'

'Has communication improved?'

Swordfang's servo-arms moved back and forth equivocally. 'A little,' he said. 'Serkir, the one with the frost axe, is interesting. He is volatile. He can be almost articulate in short bursts. At other times, language escapes him completely. He

understands more than most of the others, I think.'

'A leader?'

'He is subordinate to Yngvir. He might do well with his own pack, though.'

Treaded servitors entered the arena from low access doors. Their arms had been replaced with floor-scraping blades. Blank-eyed, unemotional, they began the disposal of the bloody remains.

'The weapons the Wulfen were using,' Grimnar said. 'I saw no firearms.'

'No,' said Swordfang. 'They appear to have no aptitude or taste for them.'

'Those swords and axes, they look familiar. But I don't recognise them from our arsenals.' They were too huge. They were impractical for any warrior who wasn't as outsized as the Wulfen.

'They are from our walls, Great Wolf.'

Grimnar blinked, surprised, as he realised what Swordfang meant. Immense relic weapons had hung on the walls of the Fang for millennia. Grimnar had regarded them as he did the heroic tapestries. They were heraldry, ornamentation, ancient objects to be honoured.

'What inspired you to take them down?' he asked.

'Serkir seized the axe himself as we crossed a hall to the training grounds,' Swordfang said. 'He cut a statue in half with it. He seemed familiar with its balance. So did the other Wulfen when I ordered the gathering of other such weapons. They wield the weapons as if the blades were forged for this express purpose.'

'What are you suggesting? That they were already in their current form ten thousand years ago?'

'I do not think so. The remnants of the power armour they wore show signs of stress, suggesting they burst through it when they changed.'

Grimnar frowned. 'I do not understand.'

'Nor do I. Then there are the grenades. I instigated a full search for all relics scaled to the proportions of the Wulfen. We found many swords and axes. Enough for the entire company, should all the brothers be found. The grenades, however, are not just suited to the hands of the Wulfen. They are suited to their brains.'

'What do you mean?'

'I was not sure the Wulfen would be capable of using explosives. Firearms are too complex. Nevertheless, we included the grenades in the trials. We discovered they are not on timers.'

'Impact fuses?'

‘No. An impulse trigger.’

‘Those are very rare,’ Grimnar said.

‘These are rarer still. I attempted to operate one. I cannot. But the Wulfen can do so without difficulty. The triggers associated with these grenades are attuned to the specific neural patterns of the Wulfen.’

Grimnar digested this in silence for a long moment. ‘What do you conclude?’ he asked Swordfang.

‘I cannot conclude anything,’ Hrothgar answered. ‘We are faced with two possibilities. Either the phenomenon of the Wulfen existed in our deep past, though there are no records or tales of their existence, in or out of the Thirteenth Company...’

‘Or?’

‘Or these weapons were forged in *anticipation* of the coming of the Wulfen.’

The thought stole Grimnar’s breath. Had this moment been building for ten thousand years? ‘They were foretold?’ he asked.

‘I know of no such prophecy.’

‘Nor do I.’ That did not mean none existed. So much had been forgotten over a hundred centuries. If in some way the Wulfen were not just returned but long awaited, then Ulrik the Slayer’s interpretation of the omens must be correct.

Grimnar did not want to contemplate the implications if the Wolf Priest were wrong.

The launch bays of the Fang vibrated with the roar of gunship engines. Squad after squad embarked in the assault craft. The bays were open and the wind of Fenris shrieked inside, freezing the skin, biting deep, stirring the blood to the hunt and to war. The sky beyond was streaked by the contrails of the gunships that had already left, ascending to the strike cruisers waiting at low anchor. One Great Company after another departed Fenris to set sail on this most portentous of hunts.

All but the Tenth. The Drakeslayers would remain.

Krom Dragongaze stood on an observation platform above the bay, unblinking in the backwash of motors and the merciless fangs of the wind. He stared into the bay. He did not turn his head until, in the corner of his eye, he saw Grimnar approach. Then he faced the Great Wolf.

‘The Fang is yours,’ Grimnar said.

‘While all the other Wolf Lords depart on this most vital of missions.’

‘Fenris cannot be left undefended.’

Krom lowered his head in acknowledgement. There is no need for a Wolf Lord to remain as castellan, he thought. Or for an entire company to be sidelined.

As if reading his mind, Grimnar said, 'I gave this task to you and the Tenth for a reason.'

Krom waited, saying nothing.

'You were reckless on Alaric Prime,' Grimnar said.

So this is punishment for the Sanctus Reach, Krom thought.

'I need to know you will keep faith in your oaths,' said Grimnar.

Krom bristled. He struggled to remain silent. He succeeded. Just. Grimnar continued, 'There is no question of loyalty or ability. The issue is discipline.'

The urge to protest was strong. Krom's frustration was motivated by more than slighted honour. The meeting at the Murderfang's vault haunted him; the portents were multiplying. Though the Slayer's talk of Russ' return was compelling, it did not satisfy Krom. Harald's part in the unfolding saga was already fateful. Krom had no doubt that more was to come. He and the Slayer had yet to learn their roles. The Wolf Priest would find the thread of his destiny in the Sea of Stars while Krom would remain here and wait. There was something he must do. There was a reason he had been among the three to be led to that encounter. It must have something to do with the Wulfen. How could he do what fate required of him, whatever that was, if he was cantoned on Fenris?

No matter. There was no choice. The Great Wolf had spoken and Krom's path was clear. He quashed his protestations and nodded once, his face immobile as stone.

'I make my oath that Fenris will be secure,' he said. 'The Drakeslayers stand fast.' He was called to this task, and he would fulfil it. Glory was as nothing compared to an oath and redemption.

'I am pleased to hear it,' said Grimnar. 'A pack of the Wulfen will remain with you. Iron Priest Swordfang will continue his examination of them. There are many questions that need to be answered. We will not learn all of them on the Sea of Stars.'

Krom nodded once more. He wondered how he should interpret the news that not all the Wulfen would depart. He watched Grimnar walk away. A minute later the Great Wolf appeared in the bay below, surrounded by Ulrik the Slayer, the High Rune Priest Njal Stormcaller, and the champion Arjac Rockfist. The legends marched up the assault ramp into the Thunderhawk that would transport them to the battle-barge *Allfather's Honour*. The roar of the transport's engines built to deafening levels, then it shot out of the launch bay.

The fiery wind of its departure was the last one. Krom remained as he was, watching the final Stormwolves climb while the bay doors rumbled together, shutting out the gale of Fenris. Premonition crawled over his flesh. His hackles rose. When the doors clanged, the ring of iron against iron was the doleful slam of a sarcophagus lid.

He knew then that fate would still find him.

PART 2: THE HUNT



CHAPTER 3

Whitestalker

The mechanism had not moved in centuries. It was inert, an assemblage of cold shadow and utter immobility. Nonetheless, its daily care was observed as a duty sacred and vital. Armatures and spheres of brass and silver and gold gleamed in sepulchral perfection. Its gears were anointed with holy oil. In all the millennia of its existence, there had never been a single moment when it had been left unobserved.

On this day, the Speculum Infernus moved.

A data-servant called out in alarm at the first sight of action. A single cogwheel, a few centimetres across, stirred. Within seconds, its revolutions were a blur. Larger and larger nested wheels began to turn. From the eight corners of the great device, tall sceptres crackled with eldritch lightning. Inside the periphery, spheres rotated and travelled along complex, elliptical, intersecting revolutions. Fluted bronze pipes released scalding steam, giving voice to a hissing choir.

An alchemy of movement, an omen of metal.

On the north side of the Speculum, gargoyles of gold perched on a cluster of silver pedestals. Mechanical wings unfurled and jaws opened wide in

expressions of blind hunger. Data-parchment streamed from between the fangs. The servants gathered the parchment, averting their gaze from its runes and sigils. The dooms inscribed thereon were not for them to understand.

This was a mercy.

In the Citadel of Titan, the Prognosticators of the Grey Knights gathered to read the dooms. The sanctified mechanism of the Speculum Infernus shook and scribed, steamed and prophesied. It told of warp storms. It revealed connections.

The Grey Knights beheld the terrible confluence of events. They were forming a single immense shape, its meaning as unspeakable as it was inescapable.

And then, even as the Great Companies of the Space Wolves spread out across the galaxy to gather their lost kin, the Brotherhoods of the Grey Knights departed Titan on quests just as grave and urgent. The Space Wolves travelled the lines of a pattern. The Grey Knights sought to arrest its manifestation.

Elsewhere, darkness laughed.

Fimnir. Spartha IV. Dragos.

The sites of the hunt. World after world engulfed by the sudden warp storms, their empyrean signatures so distinct and so identical that they seemed to be the flowerings of a single tempest.

Hades Reach. Atrapan.

The Great Companies fell upon worlds tortured by the revels of daemons. On every planet, billions of subjects of the Imperium had no hope until feral salvation dropped out of the skies, and rioting madness gave way to war.

Suldabrax. Emberghul.

Grimnar assigned strike force names to the companies. Sagablade. Whitestalker. Iron Hunt. Kingsguard. These were not individual crusades. They were the stepping stones of a single mission on a scale rarely mounted in the history of the Chapter. The struggle on each world was enough to inspire legends in the local cultures that would last until the Wofltime. The victories were the stuff of sagas on Fenris, but they were important only in the measure of the totality of the hunt's success. The Space Wolves came to find the Wulfen. The crushing of the Ruinous Powers was a means to an end.

The surviving populations who found themselves returned to the Emperor's Light were fortunate bystanders. Had the storms that blighted their planets been of a different nature, their help would have had to come from other sources, if it came at all.

On one world after another, the Space Wolves pushed back the armies of

Chaos. The splintered 13th Great Company was gathered up. The Wulfen were transported to the rallying point in the Anvarheim system. Aboard the strike cruiser *Coldfang*, under the command of Battle Leader Hjalvard, the beasts were prepared to re-enter battle, integrated into the other Companies. The 13th, for now, could not function as a unified company.

News of each success reached the other companies quickly. The Wolf Lords learned of the growing numbers of Wulfen in the ranks of their brother commanders. The victories urged Wolf Lords to greater feats.

On the *Alpha Fang*, as Strike Force Whitestalker prepared for its campaign, Harald received the reports of the hunt. He watched the tally of Wulfen warriors climb, more of them all the time, their presence growing in the martial body of the Space Wolves.

His unease grew.

‘We will find every Wulfen brother before any other Imperial force,’ Grimnar had declared.

‘This we swear,’ all the Wolf Lords had answered.

If we succeed, Harald wondered, what then?

He did not speak the question aloud. He had taken his oath.

He came close to voicing the question once. During the *Alpha Fang*’s transit through the immaterium, he asked Canis, ‘What do you make of the Wulfen?’

‘Strong warriors,’ said the Champion.

Canis was the most feral of the Deathwolves. He was perhaps the closest of Harald’s brothers to the Wulfen. Harald wanted to know if Canis felt more distance or kinship to the monsters.

‘Anything more?’ he asked.

‘The beast is strong in them.’

‘Too strong?’

Canis did not answer right away, his heavy features deep in thought. That he had to think before answering, that he seemed uncertain, was disconcerting.

‘They control their frenzy,’ he said at last.

‘Aye, they do,’ Harald said.

The conversation went no further, then. But as Harald was heading to the bridge to make ready for the drop back into the materium, Vygur Helmfang caught up to him and raised the question himself.

‘Lord Deathwolf,’ said the Wolf Guard, ‘I understand there is no question of the Wulfen’s loyalty.’ *For now*, hovered unspoken in the air between them. ‘But their nature...’ He groped for words. ‘Their form and their actions do not always

coincide.’ Vygat grimaced, displeased with his own formulation.

Harald understood what he meant. Any brother he had known who had even come close to resembling the Wulfen’s physical form had been completely consumed by battle frenzy. He could think of no case where a Space Wolf had been capable of anything approaching calm while in that state.

They control their frenzy. Canis’ comment took on greater weight.

Vygat was one of the oldest of the Wolf Guard. In the field, he fought with tenacious ferocity. He was also one of the best strategists in the company. Centuries of battle had tempered him into a warrior who understood the value of forethought. His experience and his caution were the qualities Harald prized in his strike force. And Vygat’s concerns were dovetailing with Harald’s own.

‘You believe their nature is much more complex than some might think,’ Harald said.

‘I believe we know very little about it, yet are acting as if we do.’

‘We are being watchful, brother. All of us.’ He had faith that this was so. Even Ulrik, in his enthusiasm, was vigilant. He clapped Vygat on the shoulder plate. ‘We will be vigilant together.’

Vygat nodded that he had understood. Harald was agreeing with the need for great care.

And so the *Alpha Fang* came to Svardeghul, a world of ore, an industrial cinder transformed into a malignant tumour.

The strike cruiser and its escorts translated from the immaterium into the midst of the warp storm surrounding the world. The crews of the vessels were braced. Even so, the shock struck hard. The tempest shrieked through the wounds of reality. It strained the Geller fields to breaking point. Madness found its way through fissures in the defences. It shook the hulls and laughed down corridors. Two frigates were lost. One, the Gladius-class *Roar of Asaheim*, passed before the *Alpha Fang*’s oculus. It had turned to glass. The entire vessel was a crystalline sculpture thousands of metres long. It reflected and refracted the convulsing light of the storm. Hull and weapons, decks and crew, all were translucent. The engines were silent. The vessel moved forwards with the momentum of its death.

Harald’s lip curled in anger as he took in the malign beauty of the lost frigate. The doom was insidious in its art. He could not but see an ill omen in the spectacle. Then the energy of the storm took the ship. The *Roar of Asaheim* shattered, vanishing in a glistening shard cloud.

On the bridge of the *Alpha Fang*, consoles melted. A weapons-system servitor's head exploded into a mass of writhing tendrils. Feingar, pack leader of the Coldeye Scouts, stood over a hololith map with his counterpart Lokyar Longblade. The tendrils reached for Feingar, tangling around his arm. Cursing, he ripped them from his armour and crushed them to white pulp beneath his boots.

Damage reports from the fleet flooded in. Static and the sounds of claws against bone disrupted the vox transmissions.

It was several minutes before there was enough order restored on the vessel for auspex scans of Svardeghul to be possible.

'Anything?' Harald asked the mistress of the vox.

'Nothing coherent at all,' said Ager. She stood straight and to attention, but her face was grey. She alone had heard what came from the planet. She had not relayed any traffic through the vox-speakers, shielding the bridge from further madness.

She confirmed what Harald already knew from the view in the oculus. Svardeghul's only remaining ocean, remade into sludge by millennia of manufactoria effluence, was now flesh. Maws thousands of kilometres long opened and closed. This world was lost to the Imperium forever. But somewhere below, there were brothers to rescue.

Harald watched Svardeghul's agony, doubting the wisdom of his mission, but he gave the orders for it to begin.

Before the storm, Svardeghul's cities had walked. They were rigs the size of mountains. Supported by eight immense pistons, they walked the planet with seismic steps, transporting their tens of millions of workers. They moved from one ore deposit to another, sucking the planet dry of its resources and sending them off-world to feed the unending hunger of the Imperium's machinery of war. Some of the cities still walked. Augur scans revealed they had come to life. Their inhabitants had been crushed into the vitae circulating through the arteries of blind, howling monsters. Others were tottering ruins, making their slow march across the blasted land while the last of their shrieking populations were consumed by the daemons.

Wherever the augurs picked up even a semblance of conflict, Harald sent elements of Whitestalker to search for the Wulfen. He had assembled the strike force from his most experienced warriors. Even the Blood Claw band, the Deathhowls, were veterans compared to their brothers of the same rank. It would not be long before they ascended to become Grey Hunters.

‘Our target is Rig Delta,’ Harald told the Riders of Morkai, the Wolf Guard who would accompany him. ‘It is the capital, and it has fallen silent.’

‘No others have done so?’ Vygur asked.

‘No.’ His hunting instincts were pricked by the anomaly. ‘I would know why.’

‘So great a fall,’ said Lokyar, awed.

Harald would have marked the rare occurrence if he had not felt a chill silence in his soul. He had seen vistas of destruction beyond counting. He had seen few where vastness and suddenness were so conjoined.

The Deathwolves had made their landing before the ruins of Rig Delta, and found that it too had made a landing. Against the north end of the wreckage, a vertical precipice three thousand metres high rose above the rocky plain. Lokyar gazed back and forth from the top of the cliff to the titanic wreck. The city was so huge, even its broken corpse was almost as high as the fall it had taken.

‘All the controllers of the city’s march must have been killed,’ Lokyar said. ‘There was no one to stop it from walking over the edge.’

‘Or it was made to do so,’ Harald said. What daemon would not have rejoiced at causing such a catastrophe?

Portions of the great pistons still jutted skyward, driven through the base of the rig by the impact. Broken into jagged shafts, they fell away from each other, funerary columns of ruined, industrial majesty. Mining drills, refineries, manufactoria and habs were smashed into an indistinguishable mass, a hill of twisted, compacted metal. The city slumped away from the cliff, a leviathan spilling its machinic body across the plain. Promethium burned, filthy pyres lighting the contours of the rig, pooling at the bottom of the ruins into a lake. Black smoke roiled upwards towards a sky in the grip of the warp storm. Crimson and violet clouds formed into daemoniac visages, their laughter tainting the air with a sick, clammy thunder.

Blood mixed with the promethium. It fell in cascades from the sharp angles of the city and flowed across the plain. Its stench was greater than the fire. The Space Wolves’ nostrils were filled with the death of millions. Bodies were everywhere, burned and crushed. They spread out for many thousands of metres on all sides of Rig Delta, a great scattering of leaves hurled to the winds when the fall came to its terrible end. There was the stink of the daemon too. Ichor dripped from collapsed frameworks. It coated the sides of machines turned into abstractions of iron and plasteel.

There was no war here, though. The event had come, and the fate of Svardeghul

had moved on.

The Deathwolf drop pods had come down on the west side of Delta Rig, three quarters of the way down the length of the ruin. While the Deathwolves mustered, the Wulfen moved a short distance away and gazed off to the south. The wind blew in ever-shifting gusts, pushing the flames first one way, then the other. When it began to come from the south, the Wulfen set up a howl. They hunched further forward, as if preparing to run prey to ground. Yngvir loped back to Harald.

He stopped a respectful distance from the Wolf Lord. He lowered his head, a gesture of deference to his superior, but still Harald had to look up to meet his eyes.

‘Brothers...’ Yngvir said, pointing south.

‘You have their scent?’ Harald said.

Yngvir grunted. ‘And daemons... War.’

‘Lead us, then. We will follow.’

Harald, Canis and the Riders of Morkai mounted the saddles of their thunderwolves. Lokyar’s Stalkers headed off close behind the Wulfen, a lethal and silent advance guard to scout the terrain ahead and report back by vox. To Norvald Iceflame, sergeant of the Deathhowls, he said, ‘Take *Runeclaw*. I want the Blood Claws held in reserve.’

Norvald’s eyebrows rose. ‘As you will, Lord Deathwolf.’ He glanced towards his band, waiting a short distance away.

‘They can rest assured that they’ll get their fill of enemy blood,’ Harald said in answer to the unspoken question. ‘But I want cooler heads at the tip of the spear. Some... difficult decisions may lie ahead.’

‘They’ll understand,’ Norvald said. ‘The promise of battle is enough.’

‘Good. And vox the other hunting parties. Have them converge on our position.’

‘Aye, Lord Deathwolf.’ Norvald marched towards the Stormwolf, gesturing for the Deathhowls to follow.

The core of Strike Force Whitestalker began its advance. Behind the Riders of Morkai marched the Nightwolves and Morkai’s Hunters – Harald’s most battle-hardened Grey Hunters. Behind them and on the flanks, giving themselves a clear line of fire, were the Icefangs. They were Long Fangs of the Deathwolves. Veterans and marksmen, though the spirit of the wolf was strong in their souls, so too was the ice of Fenris in their blood. Their judgement was as sharp as their lack of mercy.

The Wolfkin ran along the entire flank of the company. Some packs of Fenrisian wolves ranged further ahead with Lokyar's Stalkers. Whether augmented with cybernetic limbs and jaws, or still in their natural state, they were all monstrous predators. They were the true beasts of Whitestalker, brothers to the Space Wolves but still a species apart. When Harald looked ahead to the baying Wulfen, he saw the line blurred, and it troubled him.

The Deathwolves left the ruins of Rig Delta behind. They travelled fast over the barren landscape. Nothing grew. There was only the rocky plane, broken by jutting outcroppings. Above, the air twisted with warplight, and sigils formed, conjuring madness. They dissolved into howling faces. All were monstrous, distorted, yet they also bore traits that were familiar, as if the souls of fallen comrades were trapped in the sickened skies of Svardeghul.

The Deathwolves ignored the faces. They ignored the attack. They were on the hunt. Nothing would divert their course.

'The scent so soon,' Canis said as they rode. 'A good start again.'

The champion did not often initiate conversations. 'Too easy, you think?' Harald asked.

Canis shrugged, but his eyes were shrouded, uncertain.

Too easy, Harald thought again. An entire world to search, and the Deathwolves were on the trail of their quarry on the first attempt, almost as soon as they had landed. He had followed his intuition, guided, he wanted to believe, by some sound reasoning. Even so, he did not rejoice in the sign of quick success. He distrusted it.

Why have we found the scent so easily? He was suspicious of his own intuition.

The hunt had travelled fewer than ten kilometres when Lokyar voxed Harald that the quarry was in sight, locked in combat with a daemonic host. '*The Wulfen are eager to aid their brothers.*'

'They must hold until I give the order,' Harald said. He urged Icetooth to greater speed. The rest of Whitestalker kept pace. Soon they reached the top of a ridge, where the Scouts had managed to hold the Wulfen back from engaging.

Harald looked down the slope to the region designated on the Svardeghul maps as the Shatterfields. The land the Deathwolves had just crossed was desolate, but it was a region that had yet to be scoured of its ore. Now they had reached the border of a vast area that had been worked to death. The Shatterfields had once been plains but now the surface was broken by a cracked-glass network of ravines. Between these, slag heaps reared their blackened heads. Isolated from one another, an army of sullen hills stretched to the horizon.

The ridge sloped down to a large plain flanked by heaps to the east and south, and a zig-zagging line of ravines to the west. The ground resembled the cracked, disintegrating skin of an enormous reptile. It was here the Deathwolves found the war. A large band of Wulfen fought an army of daemons. Outnumbered many times over, the Wulfen had retreated to the base of a slag heap in the south. They were partway up the slope, surrounded by jagged monoliths of discarded rock. Their position was strong; the daemons could not rush them in a mass. The Wulfen held them at bay. Hordes of pink Tzeentchian nightmares clambered over each other and the rocks only to be torn apart, each broken daemon reforming into two blue abominations. The Wulfen hurled the new, wailing creatures into their kin, knocking them back further.

‘Like Nurades,’ Canis said.

‘Indeed,’ said Harald. The daemonic horde was as varied as it was vast. ‘I do not like this unity.’

Moving up through the pink horrors were daemonettes and creatures of Slaanesh. The daemonettes’ strides were long and graceful, while the fiends leapt and galloped. As agile as the Tzeentchian abominations were clumsy, the Slaaneshi daemons crossed the battlefield in a feral joy of dance, their song turning slaughter into dark pleasure. They were fast, and the obstacles of the ruined earth could not slow them. They pounced on the Wulfen, trilling their chorus of exquisite murder. Their pincer limbs struck at the throats of the 13th Company. The fiends jumped over the stones, their long stinger tails stabbing through ancient, disintegrating armour. The Wulfen hit back with claw and blade, with frenzy and rage, dismembering and cutting daemonettes in half. Ichor coated the stones as broken monsters dropped back down the slope, dissolving. Yet they kept coming, more and more joining the attack, and they were taking their toll. Severed Wulfen heads arced through the air, raining blood.

Attacks from the air were just beginning. Burning chariots of Tzeentch swooped over the hills. Pulled by shrieking winged abominations, mounted by huge flame daemons, their edges scorched and sliced, while the flame daemons poured wyrdfire over the Wulfen, seeking to incinerate their reality.

‘Our brothers stand strong,’ Canis said. He looked at Harald expectantly.

‘They do,’ said Harald. He saw in the 13th Company the indomitable spirit of true Space Wolves. And he saw the unrestrained savagery of monsters.

‘If we do not act...’ Canis began.

‘I know,’ Harald said. ‘They will fall.’ The Wulfen could not withstand the sustained assault from land and air much longer.

Yngvir and his brothers were straining to tear down the slope. Harald did not give the order.

He hesitated. He was torn between two duties – to his oaths, and to his Chapter. He had sworn to rescue the Wulfen. But the more he saw of them, the more he dreaded what their ultimate impact on the Space Wolves would be. And again, there was the ease with which they had been found. The victories on Nurades sat less and less well with him. At the back of his mind, the laughter of Slithertwyst echoed still.

Harald felt Canis' eyes on him. He glanced at the Champion. There was no judgement there. Canis was waiting to see the path the Deathwolves would take.

All Harald had to do was nothing, and this splinter of the 13th Company would cease to be. If the Wulfen were a threat, it would diminish now by this much.

His instinct was to turn away. Against all his practice, against all his history of war, against everything he had been commanded to do, this was what his spirit urged him to do.

Then Harald looked at Yngvir, and thought of the debt his company owed the Wulfen.

His oaths were sacred. The Great Wolf had spoken. This was the path upon which the Space Wolves had embarked. It could not be changed at this juncture. Harald would travel it with all his brothers, and do what he must.

He raised Glacius. He said nothing, and his silence itself was a command. Even the Wulfen understood, and their growls quieted. Then he slashed down with the frost axe.

Strike Force Whitestalker charged down the slope with the Riders of Morkai in the lead. The only sounds came from the pounding of ceramite boots and wolf paws, and they were drowned out by the singing and chanting of the daemons. The horde was unaware of the destruction that streaked across the broken landscape towards it. Fifty metres from the daemon ranks, the enemy was a wall of unnatural bodies – heaving, writhing, ululating. The singing filled his mind with images of excess and disease. The stench of open wounds, rotten meat and sickening blooms filled his senses. Harald snarled, hurling the foulness from his lungs. He raised his bolt pistol.

Another signal. All along the lines of the wedge-shaped phalanx, gun barrels pointed in the same direction.

Harald fired. So did all of Whitestalker. The air around Harald went dark, the dread light of the warp storm suddenly cut off by the immense hail of bolter shells. The hammering concussion of thousands of barrel reports overwhelmed

the daemonic choir. The shells slammed into the mass of pink daemons and they exploded into smaller blue twins. The barrage tore these apart just as quickly. The mass-reactive shells punched through the slender forms of the daemonettes and fiends, exploding their silhouettes.

The Space Wolves stormed into the fray. Moments after the gun fire, the jaws of wolves and the chainblades of Space Wolves shredded the abominations. The Wulfen bayed their challenge, and it was answered by their brothers under siege. Yngvir's pack struck with the ancient weapons gathered from the Fang. Swords as long as spears and axes with blades as wide as a mortal human cut an ichor-spraying swath through the daemons. Harald saw the enemy destroyed as thoroughly as if the weapons had been sanctified power blades. Yngvir eviscerated a brace of pink daemons with slashes of his twin frostclaws. He wielded the relic blades with a perfect savagery. Ichor fountained over him. His jaws were agape in bestial delight.

The Wulfen slaughtered the forces of the Ruinous Powers with a force that stirred Harald to awe. The light of explosions and energy bursts flashed off their new armour. They embodied a terrible glory. However monstrous they were now, they had fought alongside Russ. Warriors from ten millennia past had returned to the battlefield. Their mere presence was an echo of the Imperium at its height.

And of the height of its agony.

Whitestalker took the daemons by surprise. Harald roared with brutal satisfaction as he saw the enemy react with disarray to the attack. Creatures of nightmare confronted a nightmare of their own. The Deathwolves barrelled through the rear lines, spreading their destruction outwards, striking out from the flanks while the front of the wedge pushed deeper and deeper into the daemonic ranks. Advancing more slowly, the Icefangs kept up the punishing barrage of heavy weapons fire. Lascannons incinerated abominations in blasts of searing white, leaving nothing behind but foul ash and dissipating sparks of wyrd energy. Heavy bolters punched through the pink daemons with such explosive force that the shattered bodies could not reform into their blue counterparts.

As if the World Wolf itself had seized the enemy host within its jaws, Whitestalker cut the daemon numbers in half in a matter of seconds. All the Deathwolves joined the Wulfen in howls of war and triumph.

The daemons responded. While their ground forces fell and dwindled, the aerial assault intensified. The skies filled with burning chariots and a swarm of screamers. The chariots flew along the flanks of the Space Wolf phalanx, huge

flame daemons unleashing streams of wyrdfire. The Deathwolf advance slowed as the warriors jinked from side to side, seeking to avoid the blasts. Some did not. As Harald and Icetooth raced between two parallel explosions of flesh-corrupting fire, he heard a shout of soul-torn rage, and was engulfed by a sudden cloud of grey ash. The particles that had once been brother warriors settled on his armour and in his beard. Icetooth howled in distress, shaking it off. Harald beat his fist once against the totems on his chest, willing the souls of his lost brothers a swift journey to the land of the dead, and promising them vengeance.

The winged, screaming abominations cut back and forth across the Space Wolf lines. They flew low, hunting together. As if lured by the great spiritual strength of each warrior, they clustered their attacks around a single victim. Their shrieks pierced ears and souls, horns stabbed into the seams of armour and spiked tails whipped in with severing force. Arterial blood shot skyward, mixing with ash and corrupting flame. Heroic sagas snapped to an end as heads bounced off shoulders to be ignominiously trampled to mulch on the ground.

‘Now, Norvald!’ Harald voxed. ‘Tear this foulness from the air!’

Runeclaw roared into the Shatterfields. It flew low, its engines shaking the battlefield. Lascannons and heavybolters streaked fire and destruction over the heads of the Space Wolves and a storm of energy and explosions shredded the flying daemons. The gunship’s embarkation ramp dropped open and the Deathhowls hurled themselves down into the battlefield. They bayed their eagerness to be at the enemy’s throat and hit the ground running, tearing along the flanks. Half the pack savaged the daemons on the ground while the other half turned their fire on the chariots and screamers. They were joined in the effort by the Icefangs. The Deathhowls’ skill with their bolt pistols was lethal, but the impact of the shells was dwarfed by the cataclysm of plasma and lascannons. The air over the Shatterfields burned. It hurled daemons to the ground, their bodies blown apart, their materiality evaporating.

Harald was deep in a maelstrom of annihilation. He and his Deathwolves were the anger of the storm. Abominations swarmed over each other in the effort to halt the advance. They rushed to their extermination. The blue crystal of Glacius’ blade flashed through scale and flesh. Every swing was more savage than the last, and Harald poured his fury into the weapon. Every impact and slicing crunch was vengeance and justice. He destroyed with every blow. Whatever his doubts about the wisdom of the mission, his hunger to destroy the daemon was as furious as ever. His charge was destruction made absolute. As he witnessed the supernova rage of the Wulfen, he drew upon it, and his own ferocity climbed

to new heights.

The daemons fell, and fell, and fell. They were nothing but meat in the jaws of the wolves of war. Their numbers dwindled. The Deathwolves approached the base of the slagheap. The besieged Wulfen were still taking casualties, but they fought with the spirit of imminent victory. Many of the daemons attacking them turned back down the slope in an attempt to stop the crushing, devouring storm.

They were trying to stop fate itself. They failed.

A pair of flame daemons, caught up in a paired whirlwind dance, rose in a spinning leap from the rocky slabs below the Wulfen's position. Their jump took them over Harald, and just below the lethal barrage of *Runeclaw* and the Icefangs. They came down on either side of Vygur Helmfang. He tried to retaliate, but as he lashed out with his wolf claws, bellowing defiance, his armour and his flesh deliquesced. They dripped from his bones together, a mass of pink and blue-grey and frothing blood.

'Lord Deathwolf!' he cried. 'Preserve our Chapter!' His voice disappeared into the gargling coughs of a drowning man. His beard and face flowed together and poured off his skull. His skeleton burst into terrible growth. Serpentine clusters of bone spurs struck out of his frame with the speed of a scorpion's tail. They plunged their barbed ends into the neck and spine of his thunderwolf. The beast howled with its master. They collapsed to the ground, rolling and fusing into a mass of brittle, self-constricting tentacles and organic sludge. The cries of agony went on much longer than should have been possible.

Vygur was avenged before he truly died. The other Riders of Morkai fell on the flammers, their blades hacking the daemons apart in seconds. Fury unslaked, the Deathwolves attacked the rest of the daemoniac horde with grief transmuted to devastation.

The daemoniac army dwindled even further.

A solitary screamer flew high above the fray, dodging the fire of *Runeclaw*, dropping lower only for brief moments. On it stood a herald of Tzeentch. Harald only had momentary glimpses of it. The daemon controlled the actions of the army below with gestures and calls whose syllables thundered and hissed at once. The words coiled at the edge of Harald's consciousness, and he could not decide if they were familiar or not. He did not want to believe this was Slithertwyst again. The Deathwolves had destroyed the material form of that daemon fully. And yet... And yet...

It did not matter, Harald thought. Not here and now. All that mattered was the destruction of the enemy.

The air around the herald cleared again, and the daemon reached out to the east, its claws splayed. It pulled at the air as if hauling in chains. From the other side of the slagheaps came a huge clanking of gears, and the pounding of great masses. Over the peaks came four towering daemon engines. Arachnid limbs of iron punched craters into the earth with each step. Their upper bodies were behemoths of twisted, bulging muscle, devastation made flesh; they were machines of war and they were beings of hatred. Their colossal limbs wielded claws that could crush a tank, and swords the height of a Space Marine. They stuck to the high ground, looping around to the south, then descended, spreading out to surround the Wulfen. The engines stepped over the broken monoliths without noticing their presence. Swords crackled eldritch energy as they came down, cutting through rock and flesh with equal ease. The daemons moved with the majesty of death. There was no rush to their attacks. They were ponderous but inevitable.

The siege was over. The enemy was larger than the fortress. But the Wulfen were fast. They ran at the monsters, dodging the blows, although some were crushed to pulp between claws. One of the possessed walkers was armed with a monstrous cannon. It fired, and the concussion almost knocked Harald from Icetooth's back. Huge shells thudded into the ground, erupting with fire that burned the materium and the wyrd. Wulfen and daemon alike vanished in the explosions.

The devastation could not stop the Wulfen. Their brothers died, but as the daemon walkers focused on their victims, the rest of the pack shot between the legs and leapt up to slash the torsos and arms of the daemons.

The cannon-wielding behemoth reared back. It clawed at the beings who dared attack it. It bellowed like a wounded bull pulling one of the Wulfen from its chest. Ichor poured to the ground in a flood. The possessed walker sank talons half a metre long into the torso of the warrior. It aimed its gun at the lupine blur on the ground, disdaining the two Wulfen stabbing punch daggers into the metal of the barrel.

They jumped away the moment before it fired. Multiple shells surged through a barrel punctured and no longer true. The daemon stalker's material reality turned against it. The shells exploded at once and the daemon's arm and head vanished in the blast. The body weaved back and forth until it collapsed against the monoliths at the base of the heap.

The Deathwolves broke through the last of the daemons between them and the Wulfen. Pink horrors and daemonettes and flamers were still on the attack, but

there was little they could do now. The Space Wolves dominated the field, and now they roared over the wall of debris and joined the fight against the daemon engines.

Harald and the Riders of Morkai attacked the legs of the nearest colossus. Thunderhammers chopped and battered the limbs while Harald and Icetooth smashed at a right foreleg. The limb rose high over Harald's head then stabbed down. Icetooth leapt aside as the leg pulverized rock. Harald swung Glacius, and the force of the blow reverberated through his arm and down his spine. The frost axe bit deep. Metal buckled. The monster stamped and circled, sweeping its claws after the Wolf Guard. Iron shrieked, and one of the legs tore away. The daemon stumbled to the side and its aim went wide. Its head leaned forward, a huge, skinned beast shrieking its outrage. Harald met its eyes. He answered its roar and emptied his bolt pistol's clip into the monstrous face.

The shells punched through the daemon's skull. Geysers of flesh shot out the back of its throat and neck. Its roars turned into gurgles of agony. The impacts jerked it backward.

Battle on all sides of Harald exploded at once. The world was fractured by the pounding pillar-sized limbs and the booming of sorcerous cannons. Yngvir's Wulfen swarmed over another daemon engine with their relic weapons, overwhelming it with their fury and opening molten wounds in its body with their great blades. The largest of the new Wulfen pack, standing on the shoulders of a possessed walker, tore the daemon's head from its body. Two of the great daemons fell. Anger, grief and baying triumph surged as one through Harald's spirit. The events at the periphery of his awareness were sudden and vast enough to pull a small portion of his attention away from the leviathan he fought.

Only a fraction. He never turned from the abomination's wrathful eyes.

It was enough. The claw came in from his left, a blur he turned too late to face. It closed around him and jerked him aloft, off the back of Icetooth. His arms were trapped in the daemon's grip. He could not move. The daemon walker lifted him high. Now its eyes shone with malevolent triumph. Its shattered jaw streamed ichor and its mutilated visage contorted in a snarl as it rejoiced over the downfall of its tormentor. It began to squeeze.

It spoke, somehow forming words despite the canyons of its injuries.

'You will not behold the game's end, Harald Deathwolf.'

Mountains pressed in on Harald's chest. His armour cracked. It split. Blades of broken ceramite cut through his carapace and into his flesh. His fused rib plates splintered. He could not breathe. Pain was a blackness spreading from his core,

seizing his consciousness, splintering his thoughts.

‘You will never learn your purpose.’

The full length of his frame cracked. He felt a more terrible crushing take place as his internal organs began to rupture. The blackness crept over his vision and the world receded behind a thickening veil. Only the terrible fire of the daemon walker’s gaze penetrated it.

The slow, inexorable constriction paused. It relaxed by a fraction. With a supreme effort of will, Harald pushed the blindness away. One of the Wulfen had leapt up and seized the end of the daemon’s claw. Through sheer bodily strength and mass, he was holding the arm down and pulling the tips of the claw apart. The daemon walker growled in disbelief. The Wulfen’s ancient, ruined armour was little more than scraps now. The muscles of his arms bulged with strain and his fangs gnashed. He was beast far more than human, yet he acted with selfless heroism. Bit by bit, the halves of the claw began to part.

Denial, anger and disbelief twisted through the hollow thunder of the daemon’s words.

With a sudden jerk, the Wulfen opened the claws wide. Harald fell to the ground. On his knees, his vision streaking with red and grey, his breath whistling as he dragged oxygen in over floating ribs, he saw the Wulfen twist the claw clockwise. Metal groaned, then screamed, and so did the possessed walker. The Wulfen kept turning the claw. The daemon tried to pull away but sparks and ichor cascaded over the Wulfen and, with the grating of flesh and the ripping of metal, the entire forearm came away. The daemon stalker howled, its black essence jetting out of its stump. The Wulfen turned, spinning, gathered huge momentum, and flung the claw with the force of a meteor into the daemon’s head. The edge of the claws smashed the skull between the eyes. A mindless cry rose from the colossus. A sulphurous stench, the death rattle of a volcano, wafted across the battlefield. The daemon smashed the stones beneath it with the force of its fall.

Harald struggled to his feet. He spat blood. His arms were numb, but he had not lost his grip on his bolt pistol and Glacius. He straightened, ignoring the flashing agony throughout his body. The Wulfen warrior howled over the body of his titanic foe. He turned to face Harald. He nodded, acknowledging his debt and his gratitude, and the Wulfen loped away in search of more prey.

Harald followed. He could still raise his frost axe, and as Icetooth came to his side, he waded into the last of the battle. There was little prey now to find. With the great daemons destroyed, the remaining daemons were badly outnumbered,

their struggle hopeless. They fought on, as if their purpose had been to die at the hands of the Space Wolves all along.

Harald looked up. The air battle had ended. There were no more flying daemons and no sign of the herald. Harald listened intently, trying to hear past the clamour of final slaughter for the echo of dark laughter. He could not find it. Perhaps there was none to hear.

He was not convinced.

The silence of bloody peace at last came to the Shatterfields. Harald watched the Wulfen of Whitestalker reunited with their brothers. Twice now, he thought, the Wulfen have saved your life twice. The debt is a heavy one, and you thought about leaving them to the daemons.

Yet he felt no shame. He mistrusted the impulse to gratitude.

Twice. Such a great debt. Can this be fate? Coincidence?

More and more traces of a pattern. He could see fragments, but he could not link them. The pattern refused to shape itself into meaning.

Harald looked upon the scene of victory, feeling the cancer of unease gnaw at his soul.

At war, beneath sleep, above death.

I must wake.

But no. The daemons climbing the wall. Leading them, a giant, a vastness of rage and wings. Landing blows in the psychic wall of the Fang.

I must wake.

But not now. Turn the fury against the daemons. The shadow of an assault cannon firing, firing, firing.

The dream-echoes of daemons exploding to nothing under its power.

The giant climbing against the hexagrammic shells.

There is no waking yet.

Only the battle beneath sleep, above death.

The pict screen was black. Vox traffic had fallen into a silence deep as the void. It was as if Krom was trying to communicate with a tomb. He put the earpiece down and looked down at the huscarl.

‘How long?’ he asked. Around him, the activity of the Fang’s augur and vox complex had acquired a troubled intensity. Kaerls struggled in groups at their stations. While one fought with controls, others waved totems and made signs of warding, seeking to banish the disruptive spirits.

‘We lost contact with Frostheim ten minutes ago,’ said Albjorn Fogel. The

overall supervision of the facility was his responsibility. He was an old man, and the skin of his face was like thick leather. It barely moved. But his forehead was creased now with concern. 'Before that, it was Svellgard. It fluctuated in and out of contact for an hour.'

'The problems have been system-wide?'

'Yes, lord. They were so momentary and scattered at first we did not think this was anything more than aetheric flaws in the vox.'

Krom pointed to the pict screen. 'Not just the vox now,' he said.

'That is so. In the last hour, we have begun to experience outages of all auspex readings as well.'

'Is there a pattern?'

'None beyond increasing frequency and duration. When the blackouts end, the vox operators at the other end report no malfunctions with their equipment. They believe we are the ones shut down.'

'No reports of possible enemy activity?'

'None at all, lord.'

Krom worked to keep the frustration from his voice. 'Very well,' he said. 'You will update me every hour of the situation.' He thought for a moment. 'You say Frostheim's silence has been the longest yet?'

'That is so.'

'I wish to be informed the instant vox is restored.'

'Yes, lord.'

Krom left the chamber. He was near the peak of the Fang, and he followed a gallery that led to a turret platform. He pulled back the iron door, then stepped into the howling wind. He looked up through rarefied air into the night sky. The stars were dagger points of cold light.

The cold numbed his exposed skin but could not numb his frustration. Duty held him on Fenris, and the links to the other worlds of the system were fraying. The rise in the incidents had the earmarks of an attack, but it was one he could not counter. There was no provenance and no enemy. As long as the worlds and moons of the Fenris system came back into contact, signalling nothing amiss, his hands were tied.

Even if the news from the system was bad, his oath held him to the Fang. Should Frostheim or Midgardia or any other Fenrisian world go dark, should they fall to enemy hands, the attack would almost certainly be a diversion. Fenris would always be the real target. To break his oath and take the bait, leaving the Space Wolf home world defenceless, was a crime too monstrous to contemplate.

And yet. He stared into the unforgiving black of the void above, and knew that something worse than his most dire speculations was approaching. His fists tightened in frustration. A low growl rumbled in his chest.

He stood on the turret platform for a full hour. Then two.
Frostheim remained silent.



CHAPTER 4

A Symmetry of Blood and Storm

The battle-barge *Allfather's Honour* was at low anchor over Vikurus. It had translated from the immaterium three hours before, holding a stationary orbit over the city of Absolom. Aboard, preparations for invasion reached completion. The Kingsguard were about to descend.

Ulrik entered the bridge's strategium, where Grimnar sat in a throne carved from a single block of Fenrisian granite. 'An astropathic message from Sven Bloodhowl,' Ulrik said.

'Strike Force Sagablade was successful on Tranquilatus?' Grimnar asked.

'They were. They also encountered Dark Angels.'

Grimnar muttered a curse. 'Many?'

'A company's worth. They were already at war with the daemons when Sagablade arrived.'

'So they saw the Wulfen.'

Ulrik nodded.

'The fates have been kind to our hunt thus far,' said Grimnar. 'But the Dark Angels... That is unfortunate. There was contact?'

‘Yes. With the Ravenwing. Bloodhowl reports the Dark Angels demanded our Wulfen brothers be turned over to them. Daemons attacked before shots were exchanged. Sagablade extracted the Wulfen during the battle.’

Grimnar’s slow intake of breath was as close as he came to wincing. ‘To depart in the midst of a struggle is hard. Bloodhowl acted wisely.’

‘The Dark Angels would not agree,’ said Ulrik.

‘No, they would not,’ said Grimnar. ‘We will deal with those consequences in due course.’ He paused, thoughtful. He looked at Ulrik, his eyes troubled. ‘A well-timed daemonic attack,’ he said. ‘I know what Lord Deathwolf would say about that.’

‘And that is?’ Ulrik asked.

‘That it could be interpreted as daemonic intervention on our behalf.’

Ulrik shook his head. ‘That interpretation would be mistaken.’

‘So I would prefer to believe, Slayer. Convince me. Was the fortunate event chance?’

‘It was the chance created by inevitable fate.’

Grimnar’s eyes burned in the shadows of the chamber. He leaned forward. ‘Say on, old one.’ For a moment, he was once again the young warrior eager for the veteran’s insights.

‘The Thirteenth Company has returned to the materium. That event itself is so great, it has convulsed the warp. It is so great, it cannot transpire without leading to events just as great. The Wulfen come to us in advance of Russ. They will reclaim their rightful place on the Grand Annulus. Nothing can stand in the way of this resolution, and certainly not the Dark Angels. If agents attempt to stop fate, chance itself will be forced to intervene. Do you see?’ Ulrik asked Grimnar. ‘If it had not been the daemons, it would have been something else. Fate cannot be denied. The abominations were pawns of destiny on Tranquilatus.’

‘It is true our course is clear here too,’ Grimnar said.

‘Aye. The Stormcaller was unequivocal.’ The High Rune Priest’s scryings had allowed no uncertainty. The Wulfen would be found in the shrine city of Absolom. None of the other strike forces had had targets so precise revealed to them. One after the other, they had triumphed, and Wulfen packs were being transported to the Anvarheim system and the waiting *Coldfang*.

The Kingsguard strike force had had far to travel, and was among the last to arrive on station. The string of successes before immense odds were still more evidence, as far as Ulrik was concerned, that he was correct in his interpretation of the portents.

Grimnar stood. 'To battle, then, Wolf Priest.' He bared his fangs in an eager, predatory grin. 'To battle.'

'Are you sure about this?' Sammael asked. Standing in the antechamber to the astropathic choir of the strike cruiser *Silent Oath*, the Grand Master of Ravenwing stared at the parchment in his hand.

'We are certain of its recipient, yes.' Master Astropath Asconditus raised a cautious hand. The old man was bowed, his gaunt, sallow face deeply shadowed by his cowl. 'Not as to its meaning. The message is open to multiple interpretations.'

'This message is ambiguous,' Sammael said. 'It can be interpreted many ways.'

'None, with your pardon, are good,' Asconditus said.

Sammael did not reply. He looked at the message again. Transcription, already subject to the vagaries of the warp and astropathic interpretation, was rendered even more doubtful by the message's fragmentary nature. '*Leave no sign*,' he read.

Asconditus spoke up again. 'A question? A statement? An order? All are damning, Grand Master. There are only shadows here.'

'And there is no doubt about the provenance?'

'None. It was sent by the battle-barge *Allfather's Honour*.'

The Space Wolves' flagship was communicating with the Wolf Lord Sven Bloodhowl on the *Bloodfire*. Sammael was not inclined to think well of the Space Wolves. For that reason, he was wary of his instincts. He had to be sure of the truth before acting. But after *Tranquilatus*, he was finding it difficult to disagree with Asconditus.

The antechamber was dark, its vault invisible in the shadows. Even so, Sammael saw light dawning on the situation that had been developing since Nurades. The light was cold. What it revealed was unclean.

The bestial slaughter of the Scouts who had been stationed to protect the Dark Angels' interests on Nurades. The pict from the recovered servo-skull revealing a massive shape with the Fenrisian insignia on its armour. The presence of the mutated beasts on *Tranquilatus*. The craven behaviour of the Space Wolves, escaping with their monsters during a daemonic attack.

'We bear witness to an accumulation of damnation,' Asconditus said, as if reading Sammael's thoughts.

'We must be cautious,' said Sammael.

'But if the Space Wolves have mutated...'

Sammael shook his head. 'We must be sure.'

Asconditus' voice dropped to a whisper. 'With respect, Grand Master, aren't we?'

Sammael did not wish to be. Whatever he thought of the Space Wolves, they had been fierce warriors for the Imperium. If they had become unclean, the loss would be terrible. The cost of dealing with the fallen Chapter would be even worse.

'What news from the Rock?' he asked. Perhaps new truths had been unearthed, ones that would point away from this dark path. 'Has Scout Dolutas been located?' The survivor of Nurades had disappeared before regaining consciousness.

'Not according to the last report.'

'He must be found!' Sammael said. It was impossible that a Dark Angel could vanish on the Rock. Not by accident. And if it were not an accident, then there was an enemy who had penetrated the citadel, and *that* fact led to its own set of terrible implications.

'There is something else I must ask,' Asconditus said.

'What is it?'

'I have heard that on Tranquilatus, daemons attacked at just the right moment to benefit the Space Wolves.'

Sammael hesitated, but Asconditus' train of thought was growing harder and harder to resist. 'In effect, that is so,' he said. 'I consider that a coincidence.'

Asconditus bowed his head. His silence was sceptical.

Sammael left the antechamber and made for the bridge. The *Silent Oath* was already making all haste for the Rock. The thought ate at him that darker shadows had already reached it.

And that his worst surmises about the Space Wolves still fell short of the truth.

The Kingsguard came to Absolom. Logan Grimnar's strike force descended in squadrons of Stormwolves and Thunderhawks. As the gunships approached the shrine city, they split up, the flights heading for their designated target zones. Each warrior-band had its contingent of Wulfen to help track their kin.

Ulrik watched Absolom grow larger through a viewing block of the Thunderhawk *Helwinter Judgement*. Despite the smoke billowing upward from hundreds of blazes, at first the city seemed almost intact. The glory of its architecture had not been destroyed. Absolom was a shrine city; the placement of every stone had a religious purpose. The veneration of the Allfather was made

manifest in cathedrums built for hundreds of thousands, in mile-wide processional avenues of gleaming marble, and in colossal statuary. Many times larger than an Emperor Titan, the statues were both monuments and habs. They were human in form, some robed, others armoured. They were the qualities of the Emperor given solid form. The Guardian of the Imperium, the Master of Mankind, the Destroyer of the Heretic and the Xenos, the All-Seeing, the Exterminating Sword. Before the warp storm, their limbs and torsos had housed tens of thousands. Their skulls were the chapels where worshippers would look out with the eyes of a god, and contemplate a yet greater one. The upturned palms were landing pads, which now received one squadron of Stormwolves.

Helwinter Judgement led its flight of gunships between the shoulders of the colossi. Closer up, Ulrik could see the damage. The face of one statue had been utterly destroyed, and its skull was now an eerie, hollow darkness. Flames licked from the eyes of another. As *Helwinter* flew past, he had a brief glimpse of ongoing slaughter inside the great habs. Mortals were hurled from shattered windows. Things of horn and claw rioted through the fires.

‘The daemons have not overthrown the towers,’ Njal Stormcaller said. He sat next to Ulrik in the Stormwolf’s troop hold. The High Rune Priest glared at the vista of the tormented city. In the rumbling, shaking hold, the air crackled with ozone. Pressure built around the Stormcaller. His rage was building.

‘It pleases the daemons to keep them intact,’ Ulrik said. He gestured at magnificence turned malignant. ‘The place of highest worship turned to unholy purposes.’

‘Aye. The desecration is all the more complete.’

‘Foulness from within the sacred,’ Ulrik said.

Stormcaller nodded, as if coming to a new understanding. ‘And the Wulfen are our great hope fighting within the foul,’ he said. ‘A striking symmetry.’

Ulrik waited.

‘The omens multiply,’ said Stormcaller. Though his anger at the daemons did not diminish, his eyes shone with anticipation. ‘Surely Russ *is* coming,’ he said.

Good, Ulrik thought. It was clear the High Rune Priest saw the truth of the Wulfen.

‘They shall rise from the daemoniac maelstrom as they tore away from the grip of the immaterium,’ Ulrik said. ‘There is repetition here. The Wulfen bursting through one threshold after another.’

Lower now, roaring through more densely interlaced structures. Arched bridges traced delicate paths through the air between cathedrum towers and free-standing

prayer galleries. Ulrik caught more impressions of Absolom's pain. The city's defenders had lost, but some still lived, and fought on. At the peak of one narrow arch, a trio of Sisters of Battle was surrounded by plaguebearers. The daemons of Nurgle slowly trudged up from both ends of the bridge. There were hundreds. The Sisters cut them down with bolter and flamer as they came near. There was space for no more than two or three of the daemons at once. The heroines of the Imperium could hold out as long as they had ammunition, but the stream of plaguebearers was unending.

Helwinter Judgement strafed the east side of the arch with its lascannons. It burned away a huge swath of the abominations. Then it left the bridge and the struggle behind.

'That bought them a little time,' said Stormcaller.

'Aye,' said Ulrik. 'No more than that, though.'

Lower still. Now the Stormwolves slowed as they made their final descent into the Grand Assemblis. The square was a few thousand metres on each side, the parvis of four grand cathedrums. Statues of the saints were scattered about it, their placement and orientation given the appearance of chance, as if they were living pilgrims making their way towards the houses of worship. They were an illusion of calm in the midst of nightmare. Blood daemons of Khorne rampaged through the square, cutting down desperate squads of militia. The mortals fought, but there was no hope for them. They were now only prey for the swordlings, slain for sport.

There were many mortals present in the Assemblis, however, many tens of thousands. They lay in mounds a score of metres high. Some of the heaps were on fire, bodies slowly turning to ash and smoke. Others squirmed and heaved. The dead flailed their limbs as if struggling against a new pain, one worse than any they had known alive. Wyrdfire skittered over the mound, running like water, destroying the lines between rot and metamorphosis. Around the periphery of the square were pict screens. Once they would have broadcast images turning officiating ecclesiarchs into heroes twenty metres high. Now they screamed madness.

The gunships came down into the square. Their lascannons and twin-linked heavy bolters scorched the Assemblis, blasting the landing area clear of the swordlings. Assault ramps dropped, unleashing the Kingsguard before taking off once more to continue their purging assault.

Ulrik charged into the square, part of the collective howl of rage. Grimnar led the charge aboard *Stormrider*. The thunderwolves Tyrnak and Fenrir pulled the

war chariot, as eager to lay waste to the foul enemy as their master. With a roar, beasts and warrior fell upon the blood daemons. In Grimnar's left hand was his storm bolter. He attacked with such ferocity that it seemed the enemy exploded into body parts and a deluge of ichor on all sides of *Stormrider*.

The paving stones shattered beneath the tread of the Venerable Dreadnoughts Haargen Deathbane and Svendar Ironarm. Daemonic forms vanished in the heat of Haargen's multi-melta. Svendar lumbered forward, a mountain of walking death, his great axe and blizzard shield striking down the daemons with the force of a rockslide. Where he walked, he left a wake of crushed, disintegrating bodies. The crushed forms of the abominations sank slowly into the pools of their liquefying essence.

And there was Murderfang.

The Stormfang *Drakesbane* shadowed the advance of the Kingsguard. Its heavy bolters chewed through the mobs of swordlings, but they were incidental targets. Its helfrost destructor was trained on Murderfang, ready to fire if needed. The Dreadnought's rage was absolute, a thing of shredding madness. The warrior was as unpredictable as a rabid wolf. There was always the danger that the path of its rampage would take it through the bodies of its brothers.

On this day, Ulrik did not believe that danger existed. He followed close behind Murderfang. He saw a purpose now in his meeting in the vaults with Dragongaze and Deathwolf. The feral Dreadnought was himself an omen of the Return, and here he led the charge to recover more of the 13th. Even the Great Wolf followed Murderfang in this charge.

Ulrik brought his crozius arcanum down with exterminating force, banishing the unclean with the symbol of Fenris' spiritual strength. Ichor splashed against his totems. Swordlings snarled, but the snarl of the Wolf Helm of Russ was greater than theirs, and their anger turned to agony before they fell. Ulrik fought with wrath, in the name of what was to come. He had lived so long, and perhaps it had always been decreed that he would live to see these great moments arrive for the Space Wolves.

The return of the 13th Company. The return of Russ.

Events were aligning. The portents were clear. The future was unfolding as it should, as it must, and Ulrik rejoiced to bear witness to it.

The vox speakers of the sarcophagus distorted Murderfang's howl. The rage rattled and shrieked across the Grand Assemblis. The Dreadnought pounded forward, his terrible gauntlets reaching for the sword-wielding Khornate daemons. The abominations attacked, swords clanging against the sarcophagus.

They were rushing to their doom, but they were the essence of rage given bodily form, and they could do nothing else. The beast met them with his murderclaws. Blades the crystalline blue of xenos ice crackled as they slashed through daemonic flesh. The daemons came at Murderfang by the score but he tore them apart without pausing in his battering run. He turned to wherever he saw the greatest concentration of abominations. His momentum was relentless. He was a machine of perpetual slaughter.

There were thousands of the swordlings in the Assemblis when the Kingsguard descended. Shortly, only stragglers remained. Then there were none. Daemons shrieked from the galleries and spires of the cathedrums, but the square was purged. The few surviving mortals clustered together, staring at the Space Wolves with awe and caution. Even the ruinous shrieks coming from the pict screens could not tear their attention from Murderfang. They regarded him with terror. They could barely walk, yet it was clear they would attempt to flee if they came within the Dreadnought's gaze.

Deprived of foes, Murderfang paused. The Wulfen of the Kingsguard gathered near him, as if sensing kinship. Ulrik moved to the front of the Dreadnought. The face visible within the sarcophagus was contorted by a rictus of eternal rage. The eyes were wide, glassy, bloodshot, agonised. There was no personality there, yet for the first time in his memory, Ulrik saw Murderfang blink. He sniffed the air. So did the Wulfen.

Stormcaller joined Ulrik. The High Rune Priest's psyber-familiar, Nightwing, landed on his shoulder. It shook its feathers free of gore and cocked its head, training its bionic eye on Murderfang.

'He senses more Wulfen,' Stormcaller said.

'As you predicted,' said Ulrik.

'I have never known him to stop of his own accord before.'

'Nor have I.'

A change came upon Murderfang's eyes. Something more than bloodthirst entered them. There was recognition. Ulrik's soul was elated at that sign of consciousness.

Everything aligns, he thought. The chapters of the great saga unfold before us.

Murderfang and the Wulfen turned to face south, then thundered towards the cathedrum named the Dome of Penitents.

Ulrik raised his crozius and howled in triumph. A short distance away, *Stormrider* followed the feral pack. Tyrnak and Fenrir were eager to follow the baying of the Wulfen. Over the triumph of the wolves, Grimmar's voice called to

the Kingsguard. ‘Our kin await us, brothers!’ He pointed forward with the Axe Morkai. ‘Forward! We shall be reunited amid the destruction of the daemoniac foe!’

The strike force followed in the wake of Murderfang. The Space Wolves passed between the screaming pict screens, then beneath the towering arch that marked the processional ramp to the cathedrum. The gunships broke away as they approached the entrance. *Drakesbane* and the Stormwolves flew higher. They strafed the open platforms and stained glass windows of the dome wherever daemons dared to show themselves.

The ramp was wide. The golden doors were colossal, monuments in their own right, so that hundreds of penitents at once could pass through them. There would be room enough for *Morkai’s Howl* and *Fire of Fenris*. The Land Raider and Redeemer rumbled up behind the Kingsguard, tanks of legend adding their ferocity to the hunt.

Murderfang slammed into the doors. The impact threw them back. The Space Wolves stormed into the Dome of Penitents.

Just before he crossed the threshold, a flint of silver high in the air caught Ulrik’s attention. He paused and looked up. The gunship assaults sent dust and smoke bursting from the dome. The sky was obscured. He faced ahead once more. He could not shake the impression of having caught a glimpse of something dangerous yet sacred.

Inside the dome, the legions of the Ruinous Powers awaited the Space Wolves.

A space of glittering sanctity had become a cauldron of violence, massacre, sacrilege and madness. The floor of the cavernous auditorium was heaped with the bodies of worshippers, ecclesiarchs and Sororitas. Shrines lay overturned and shattered. The frescoes of the dome had been defaced with blood, entrails and fire. Cherubim had become disembowelled corpses. Stars were now the blazing eyes of warp-born behemoths. Beneath the centre of the dome, a golden figure of the Emperor, over twenty metres tall, still stood, sword raised as if in defiance of the storm of abominations that rioted through the cathedrum.

The sounds of two greetings washed over the Space Wolves. Daemons roared, hissed and gabbled. Plague, wrath, excess and change fused into a choir of evil, a noise damp yet burning, powerful yet diseased. The second greeting was no less triumphant. Howls of war came from high above, in the Celestium Galleries. At the level of the Emperor’s sword, walkways cut across the width of the dome, gossamer-thin in the immensity of the space. Suspended on those iron threads and leaping between the archways of the galleries, Wulfen battled daemons.

They moved constantly, speed and slashing fury keeping them from being overwhelmed by the flood of abominations.

In the auditorium, the daemons surged forward. Murderfang was already deep into the rising tide. He trampled scampering daemons of Nurgle and the pink creatures of Tzeentch. His claws dismembered sword daemons of Khorne and the fiends of Slaanesh. The wave foamed around and past Murderfang, surrounding the Kingsguard as the strike force charged deeper into the cathedrum.

A vast shape landed before the statue of the Emperor with cratering force and filled the air with marble shrapnel and dust. The walls of the cathedrum shook with the impact. The horned daemon stretched to its full, towering height. It spread its wings. It raised an axe large enough to cut through a tank and a monstrous serpent of a whip. The axe blade dripped blood. Bits of flesh clung to the barbs the length of the whip. The colossus of rage bellowed, and its roar was the sound of worlds drowning in the blood of mindless hate.

It had already reduced much of the Celestium Galleries to ruin. Columns and walkways were shattered. The bodies of Wulfen lay in the wreckage and blood rained down upon the Emperor, streaking his visage with red tears.

The huge daemon strode towards the Space Wolves. Its footsteps boomed. The lesser abominations intensified their attacks. Creatures of the four Ruinous Powers revelled in the approach of the greater daemon, the Khornate abominations most of all. Their infernal cannons fired from the far side of the dome. Burning, laughing, flaming skulls bombarded the Space Wolves. The bones exploded, spreading streaming fire over the hulls of the advancing Land Raiders. *Fire of Fenris*' twin-linked heavy bolters churned the air with exploding stone and fountains of ichor. *Morkai's Howl* attacked with its own flames, sending a stream of purifying fire over scores of daemons.

Ulrik gathered a sense of the full battle in quick, frozen glimpses. The daemon wave was massive. There was no possibility of grand strategy, only the struggle against the nearest foe, survival measured from one second to the next. He buried the crozius in the skull of a blood daemon at the same moment as he incinerated the torso of a fiend of Slaanesh with his plasma pistol. A wall of evil pressed in, reaching for him with claws and talons. Tongues of wyrdfire fell on him, but he was strong in faith and anger. His wolf amulet blazed and an aura of pulsing red and blue surrounded him. The blows of the daemons could not land on him. He waded deeper into the horrors, laying waste to the creatures of the warp. The baying and snarls of the Wulfen fired his blood. He killed with the

furious abandon of a Blood Claw, yet he remained conscious of the weight of history on every moment of the struggle. Thousands upon thousands of years had worked towards this battle, itself one more step towards the fulfilment of a greater destiny.

‘Strike the daemons down, champions of Fenris!’ Ulrik shouted. ‘For Russ! For his return!’ He howled, and his cry was taken up by the rest of the Kingsguard. The Space Wolves surged forward, feral, annihilating.

Did the daemons before him hesitate before Ulrik’s savage joy? Did they wonder at the bone snarl of his helm and the power of his shout?

He thought they did, and well they should. He butchered his way forward, determined to reach Grimnar’s side and face the huge daemon together.

The giant came closer, its eyes fixed on Logan Grimnar. It snarled in anticipation. Caught up in the battle frenzy, the Wolf Guard Drengir charged the daemon. Without taking its gaze from the Great Wolf, the Khornate horror smashed Drengir aside with its axe. The Wolf Guard flew backwards, colliding with the statue of the Emperor. Marble, armour and bone broke together. Drengir landed on the flagstones, motionless, and disappeared beneath the claws and hooves of the lesser daemons.

Bellowing vengeance, Grimnar leapt from *Stormrider*, the Axe Morkai raised high, a challenge and answer to the daemon’s weapon. The instant Grimnar’s boots hit the flagstones, other daemons rushed him. Arjac Rockfist and the Wolf Guards punished them for the temerity of their interference. They cut a swath through the abominations, clearing the path for Grimnar. A new page in the saga of the Great Wolf was about to be written.

Lightning exploded between Ulrik and the scene of the approaching duel. Njal Stormcaller was moving forwards too, summoning an electrical storm, burning the daemons to ash.

A shriek came at Ulrik from above and behind, the high pitch carving the sound from the deeper, deafening clamour of the war. His reflexes responded before his conscious mind understood the nature of the threat. He turned in time to see a burning, airborne chariot pulled by two of the shrieking winged daemons.

A Tzeentchian herald rode the chariot. The pink-hued abomination was robed. In its left hand, it clutched a black tome that burned with blue wyrdfire. Its right hand held a staff whose head was an edged, twisted crescent, the symbol of its dark god. From the herald’s chest came a third hand, which pointed mockingly at Ulrik. The daemon laughed at him. It lowered its staff as the screamers angled in for their attack. It shouted in its unholy tongue. Ulrik rejected the words, refused

to let them take on meaning. He understood well enough why the herald laughed, though. It was pointing the staff at his crozius. In its form, the Tzeentchian daemon was a hideous parody of his own sacred role.

Ulrik made ready to silence that laughter. Behind him, Grimnar and the great daemon traded blows, Axe Morkai and axe infernal clashing with such force they unleashed blinding flashes of eldritch power.

The winged horrors dived. A coruscating nimbus formed around the pink daemon's third hand.

Ulrik waited until the chariot's infernal steeds were committed to their angle of attack before he moved. At the last second, he ducked low and ran forward, firing a plasma salvo upward. He passed under the winged creatures as his bursts melted through their underbellies. Their shrieks became stuttering wails. They crashed to the floor, dragging the chariot down with them.

The rapid thunder of Grimnar's storm bolter boomed from the centre of the cathedrum. Shells exploded against the Khornate daemon's breastplate. The colossus staggered back a step.

The daemon was raising its axe to counterattack when the upper portion of the dome exploded. Tonnes of rubble fell, smashing walkways. Galleries collapsed. Wulfen and daemons fell with them. Two gunships in silver-grey roared into the cathedrum, heavy bolters and assault cannons pounding the abominations, and descended to where Grimnar and his foe reeled under the rockcrete avalanche.

They were Stormravens. The Grey Knights had come to Absolom.

Ulrik felt his eyes widen. The eruption of the sons of Titan into the battle had the quality of a fevered vision. In the fraction of a second, his reaction passed from stunned surprise to wariness.

Do they know about the Wulfen?

The herald and the titanic daemon looked up as the Stormravens descended. The giant snarled, but the Tzeentchian abomination laughed. The Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes most fanatically devoted to the extermination of daemons had joined the battle, and the herald laughed.

The chill finger of premonition reached into Ulrik's hearts. Dark portents were taking shape before him. He could not see the pattern they formed. He could only tell it was present. In this moment, all he could do was seek to disrupt it by ending the herald's celebration.

Grimnar acted on the great daemon's moment of distraction. Ulrik saw him run forward and bring the Axe Morkai down against the abomination's whip arm. The blade flashed the blue of purest cold. It cut all the way through the limb.

Ichor jetted from the daemon's stump. The giant roared more in wrath than in pain.

Ulrik reached the herald as it clambered from the fallen, screaming chariot. The daemon hissed in outrage. Its middle hand, glowing with warp energy, struck him in the chest. Daemonic power encountered the ward of his wolf amulet. There was a flash of searingly black lightning, and the blast staggered Ulrik and the pink horror. The daemon retaliated with a second, more powerful blast from its staff. Concentrated wyrd energy hit Ulrik at the same moment as the giant daemon struck Grimnar in the chest with a massive cloven hoof, smashing the Great Wolf down.

A fist of madness wrapped itself around Ulrik and took him to the ground too, assaulting his consciousness with visions of the impossible and monstrous. He fought the sights. Other pink abominations jumped on him. The daemonic mass held him in place while claws battered at him. Witch energy sought to transform his armour into something weak.

Ulrik heard the shouts of his brothers on all sides. They called his name. They trained bolter fire on his attackers. The daemons were too numerous. They came at him faster than the other Space Wolves could destroy them.

Ulrik felt as if the fell beings would shove him through the ground to the molten core of this world. '*Fenris!*' he shouted, calling upon its icy ferocity. He raised his right arm, hurling back a scrabbling daemon and smashing the skull of another with the crozius. The pressure on his chest lessened. He fired a single shot of the plasma pistol. At point blank range, the burst washed over him. Its terrible incandescence burned into his armour. Damage runes screamed red and blinked out. The purity of the fire disrupted the wyrdflame. Agony cut through the visions. The spell of transformation dissipated. Ulrik smashed the crozius back and forth, crushing daemon flesh and form. He rose from the midst of the nightmares, howling a hunter's fury.

Ahead, beyond the herald of Tzeentch, the Grey Knights had dropped from the Stormravens. They surrounded the huge daemon and Grimnar.

'Lord Grimnar!' their captain shouted. One of his paladins blocked the daemon's killing axe blow with his sword. 'I am Stern of the Grey Knights! I demand your immediate surrender!'

Before Ulrik, the herald laughed.

'You are wrong to exult, abomination,' Ulrik snarled. 'You are already defeated.'

Grimnar answered Stern by leaping to his feet even as the daemon killed three

paladins with a single strike of its wyrd-imbued axe. Stern attacked the daemon himself, forcing it back another step with blows from a sword whose power lit the space of the cathedrum with silver lightning. The Great Wolf charged into the fray and buried the Axe Morkai in the great daemon's chest, where ichor from the earlier wound still dripped. The daemon's breastplate collapsed. The monster staggered.

The Tzeentchian herald blocked Ulrik's charge with its staff. It wielded the weapon with two hands while the third held the book aloft. The daemon began to chant. The air snapped. Eldritch energy built up. The colours of the cathedrum smeared. It seemed as though the entire Dome of Penitents was turning around Ulrik, faster and faster, losing all consistency, becoming a maelstrom of stone and glass. The colours interwove, growing brighter, more brittle. Cracks appeared in the air, spreading and connecting. Thin ice was about to shatter. A foul wind blew from the cracks, howling directly into Ulrik's soul.

The pink daemon was opening a portal to the warp.

From a great distance, he heard the baying of the Wulfen. He snarled, becoming one with their savagery. His beast leapt at the throats of his enemy. He brought the crozius down on the centre of the staff at the same moment as he fired the plasma pistol at the book. The staff snapped. The herald's chanting ceased. It screamed. The air screamed. The materium screamed. The maelstrom spin ceased and the colours of madness became an explosion of blood. The cracks in the real became mere scales of illusion, and they flaked away in a storm of ash.

The Dome of Penitents was solid around Ulrik once more. Roaring, he smashed the crozius against the herald's skull. The daemon's body parted with a hideous, tearing crunch. Ulrik sent a plasma blast into the gap between the halves. The herald's ululating babble turned into a duet of pain as the body split all the way, becoming two blue horrors. One jumped at Ulrik and wrapped its limbs around his neck. Wyrd energy lashed down his frame. The other abomination wailed as its twin grappled with Ulrik. It stretched out its arms, seeking reunion.

Ulrik pulled his right arm back, and smashed the crozius into the spongy flesh of the blue horror's head. It reared back, but kept its grip around his neck. It did not see the pleading of the other daemon. Ulrik trained his plasma pistol on the creature's maw and fired a rapid burst. The heat of a sun exploded inside it and its being evaporated.

The remaining blue horror dropped its arms. It regarded Ulrik, its old eyes knowing what would come next. He had destroyed the heralds. This remnant could do nothing against him. The daemon opened its jaw wide as he brought the

crozius in for the final stroke of annihilation. He raised his other hand to block the blue creature's attack, but it did not try to seize his fist and the crozius in its maw. It laughed instead.

He smote the abomination with a single, devastating hit, the crozius crackling with lightning, the very anger of Fenris purging the materium of the unclean thing. And the daemon laughed. It burst apart, spraying liquefying flesh in all directions.

The laughter echoed for several seconds after the daemon was gone.

Harald said the fiend called Slithertwyst had laughed too. The thought was troubling. It was a dark echo.

'This is our saga!' Grimnar was shouting. He severed the other arm of the daemon. The monster collapsed. 'Our fight,' Grimnar said, and sent the gigantic head rolling. 'Our business.'

Ulrik marched through the ruin of the chariot to stand with Grimnar as he confronted the Grey Knights. The struggle against the daemons was ending. With the destruction of the colossus and the herald, the rest of the abominations were vanishing under the firepower of the tanks and Kingsguard elements further out from the the statue of the Emperor. The daemons were disappearing more quickly than they were being destroyed, Ulrik thought. They were abandoning the field. They knew they were defeated.

Or else their work is done.

The Ruinous Powers united. The forces of the Imperium divided. Ulrik saw the catastrophe forming. He saw why the herald of Tzeentch might have laughed in the end.

Stern was speaking of heresy and mutation as Ulrik drew near. Such an old refrain. Such a tedious refrain. Ulrik had encountered versions of the same accusations hurled at the Space Wolves throughout his centuries of service. There was nothing new in them.

What was new was the impasse.

'These things came from the warp, and only my brothers and I are fit to judge if these kin of yours are corrupt. They must be handed over to us immediately, as must any others you have recovered. We will see to it that they reach Titan safely,' Stern said.

'Never,' Ulrik muttered under his breath. His pulse beat in his ears. A growl rose in his chest. He eyed the Grey Knights, and faced the inevitable. They were fanatics. They could not be turned from their path. They had come to take the Wulfen. There was only one way to stop them.

‘Stern, I’m sure you think you’re being very reassuring, but there’s as much chance of you taking the Wulfen as of me giving my crown to a blubber-seal. I’d see our brothers dead before I handed them over to be cut apart and studied,’ Grimnar said.

‘Forcing your cooperation at this juncture would prove costly,’ Stern warned.

Even as Ulrik kept his arms lowered, he adjusted his grip on his pistol and the crozius.

Grimnar and Stern were still speaking. The words were nothing more now than the ritualistic prologue to battle. Around the circle, the stances of the Space Wolves were shifting. In moments, the blood would flow.

‘I would have thought,’ said Stern, ‘considering the current situation around Fenris, you would want all the friends you could get, Great Wolf.’

Ulrik stared at the Grey Knight. His limbs went numb with premonition.

‘What situation?’ asked Grimnar.

Stern answered, and transformed Ulrik’s premonition into horror.



CHAPTER 5

Unveiling

The decks of the *Coldfang* vibrated from the snarls. The walls thrummed with feral rage. The roars were growing louder. Hjalvard pounded down the halls of the strike cruiser, convinced he would find disaster at the guard post. The thought made his lips pull back in anger. His pulses were a double-beat of incipient battle frenzy. His skin crawled. His jaws ached as his fangs pushed further out from his gums. As he rounded the final corner, he was charging to attack.

But the barrier held. Vintir was at his post. The door behind him was sealed. The Grey Hunter raised his power sword, but he did not run to meet Hjalvard's rush. 'Battle leader!' Vintir shouted.

Stop! Hjalvard thought. His rational mind wrestled with the beast. *Stop!*

He turned at the last moment and slammed his fist into the wall, cracking the stonework. He breathed through his nose, forcing himself to move slowly, to be still. If his body calmed, perhaps his spirit would too.

He had headed here merely on an inspection. He had almost precipitated the very disaster he had dreaded.

The contagion is growing, he thought.

When he felt he could speak without snarling, he faced Vintir.

‘All is well,’ he said, hands up as if it were Vintir and not he who had needed placating. ‘Have they tried to come through?’ he asked. Above all else, he had to keep the Wulfen off the main decks.

‘They are remaining below,’ said Vintir. ‘I think there have been some fights for dominance, but I believe the pack leaders are keeping them in their quarters.’

‘For now. And you, brother? How are you faring?’

Vintir grunted. ‘As long as I’m not challenged...’

Hjalvard nodded. ‘I’ve issued standing orders. No access to the Wulfen quarters, and no access to this corridor. We will keep the situation contained.’ *For as long as possible*, he almost added. He could only trust his coolest-headed warriors to be outside their own quarters now, let alone stand guard on this choke point. He could barely trust himself now.

His vox bead crackled for his attention. ‘What?’ he snapped.

‘*There are ships translating into the system, lord,*’ an anxious huscarl said. ‘*The Allfather’s Honour, the Alpha Fang, the Bloodfire and the Wolfborn. The Great Wolf is hailing us.*’

‘I’m on my way,’ Hjalvard said. He looked at Vintir. ‘The fleets are returning.’

‘Is the hunt finished?’

‘Pray that it is, brother.’

The hold below was more filled than the rest of the Space Wolves knew. It held more than just the Wulfen now.

In the *Alpha Fang*’s hololith chamber, an encrypted channel opened to the five strike cruisers. Harald Deathwolf and Canis Wolfborn watched the flickering image of Hjalvard describe the situation aboard the *Coldfang*. The battle leader’s every word was dreaded confirmation. Harald grimaced. He had never before felt such pain at being proven correct.

‘*We are overtaken by madness,*’ Hjalvard said. ‘*Already seven Grey Hunters have fallen to the curse. The transformation has taken them. They are Wulfen now.*’

‘*The mark is upon us all,*’ Ulrik put in, the ancient voice hard and rasping as a glacier’s crawl. ‘*The change can come to us at any time.*’

‘*In combat!*’ Hjalvard protested. ‘*In the heat of battle! The only struggle on the Coldfang has been between brothers! The more Wulfen come aboard, the worse it has become. Tempers are explosive. The training cages are wet with blood. I*

have restricted almost my entire force to quarters. My ship is a tinder box. It will take very little for it to explode.'

Hjalvard's tones were harsh with strain. His breath kept turning into a growl. There was a softness to some of his consonants, as if he was finding it difficult to close his lips over his fangs.

'This is what I feared,' Harald said. 'The Wulfen are a curse.'

There. He had made his declaration. It was no longer a supposition, no longer a warning. The danger the Wulfen presented was clear. What had yet to be revealed was the full extent of the threat.

At his words, the hololithic figures burst into static, reformed, and burst again as the Wolf Lords shouted over each other. Ulrik the Slayer's image remained still, dark with intensity. Egil Iron Wolf and Sven Bloodhowl, bloodied from their struggles on Mygdal Alpha and Tranquilatus, sided with Harald.

'Aggression is spiking on my ship,' Iron Wolf said.

'And mine,' said Bloodhowl.

Grimnar spoke, silencing the others. *'The Stormcaller subjected our kin to every test he knows, Deathwolf. I insisted on it. There is no Chaos taint here. None!'* he said.

The image of Ulrik the Slayer nodded once, as if that was an end to the matter, but Harald had noticed a sliver of doubt in Grimnar's voice.

'Perhaps not,' said Iron Wolf, *'but there is something amiss. Some sickness, perhaps? My optic augurs read biochemical hyperactivity in my warriors. Their blood stirs...'*

'We make warp for Fenris at once,' Grimnar thundered, cutting him off. *'And upon our arrival, the Wulfen will fight at our side. The Space Wolves will defend our home world, and we will do so together! Do you mark that ship that has joined our formation?'*

'I do,' Harald said. The grey hull of the battle-barge reflected the light of Anvarheim with a bleak purity.

'Our fleet is accompanied by the Grey Knights,' Grimnar continued as if Harald had not spoken. *'Will you trust the encryption of this channel when the likes of them are present? Will you call our brothers cursed when they might hear? They demand we turn the Wulfen over to their tender mercies.'*

'Then we should do so, and excise the curse from our ranks,' said Harald.

Hjalvard had kept out of the debate of the Wolf Lords, but he grunted now in agreement.

'No,' said Grimnar, more quietly now. *'We need them. Fenris needs them. Even'*

the Grey Knights have agreed to suspend their demands for the time being.'

'Then why are they here?' Lord Iron Wolf asked.

'They have offered their aid. I have accepted.'

'The threat is grave then,' Harald said. He knew it was, since Grimnar had sent the order to all vessels to return to Fenris. Harald, Iron Wolf and Bloodhowl had already been making for Anvarheim when they received the message. The rest of the Wolf Lords had to cease their hunts and return. For Grimnar to accept the Grey Knights' offer of aid, the crisis must be extreme.

'Captain Stern's astropaths intercepted a message from the Fang,' said Grimnar.

'They did?' said Harald.

'Only they could have,' Grimnar replied. *'So little was left. Listen.'*

The recording played over the vox feed. The message was garbled and broken. The fragments were insufficient to permit a transcription into written language. Instead, the voices of the astropaths summoned portents through sound. They conjured symbols through the phrasing and tone. That was enough. In his mind's eye, Harald witnessed visions of storm and collapse, of fire and of an infinity of rioting, inhuman forms.

'And we would bring the Wulfen back with us?' he protested. 'Don't you see, Great Wolf, the role they have played in this disaster? Fenris is attacked while we have been scattered over the Sea of Stars, in pursuit of beings who bring out the most uncontrollable side of ourselves. Will we compound our folly now?'

'They saved your life, Lord Deathwolf,' Ulrik said.

Yes, Harald thought. Twice. He was mindful of his debt. Each word he spoke against the Wulfen felt like a frostblade plunging into his sense of honour. There is no debt to the unclean, he reminded himself. There is no debt to the cursed. There was no comfort in those words. Even so, his greater duty was to the survival of the Space Wolves, and he would not flinch from the path he must walk. 'What better way to be introduced to the heart of our Chapter?' he said.

'You are wrong,' said Ulrik. *'They are the necessary counter to the threat. If we abandon them, we abandon Russ. If we fight without them, we invite disaster.'*

'Enough,' Grimnar said. *'The decision has been made.'*

Harald shook his head. He muted his vox bead and looked at Canis. The champion shrugged.

'They fight well,' Canis said.

'They do,' Harald agreed. *But for whom?* he added silently.

'There is more,' said Grimnar.

More? Harald thought. This isn't enough?

'I am unencrypting the hololith transmissions. Brother-Captain Stern warned me of something else on Vikurus. Prepare to receive pict data from the battle-barge.'

A few moments later, Stern said, *'You have been speaking a long time under encryption.'*

'We have,' said Grimnar. His tone dared Stern to object.

'The attack on Fenris is not the end game,' Stern said, as if Grimnar had not spoken.

The electro-missive from Stern arrived. The pict screen above the tactarium table displayed a schematic of the galaxy.

'The warp storms associated with your... kin... are not random occurrences.'

'We never thought they were,' Harald said.

'You misunderstand me. Their locations are not random. The afflicted worlds were chosen for a reason.'

The warp storms appeared on the schematic, a disease of whirling sigils.

'Look,' Stern said.

More data was added to the maps. With the exception of the warp-struck worlds, the galaxy faded into the background. Lines appeared, connecting the storms. Harald squinted. Even in this form, the pattern was an assault. A coil of tendrils looped from Atrapan to Hades Reach, split to grasp Irkalla and Dragos in jagged talons, fused once more to pierce Spartha IV. On and on the lines went, from world to world, a foul unveiling. A symbol came into being on the pict screen. The image shook. Static ate into the galaxy, though the lines remained strong. They vibrated. They began to pull free of the screen itself.

Then the data feed terminated. The pict vanished.

'The complete symbol is dangerous even as the most basic schematic,' Stern said. *'And it is being drawn over the breadth of the galaxy.'*

'What is it?' Harald asked.

'It is vengeance.'

'You've encountered it before?'

'Records of it. No one in the Imperium has seen it for ten thousand years.'

Ten thousand years. The past again, forever reaching out, forever clawing the present.

'And when was it seen then?' said Harald. The question was ceremonial. In the depths of his soul, he knew the answer.

'It was only ever used by the sorcerers of Prospero.'

Harald reached out to the blank screen. He slashed a finger across it as if he could disrupt the vanished pattern. As if he could destroy the pattern coming into being across the Imperium, and even now devouring the worlds of Fenris.

The symbol was the signature of the Crimson King.

PART 3: THE RITUAL



CHAPTER 6

Planetfall

Frostheim and its moon, Svellgard.

Midgardia.

And then Valdrmani, the Wolf Moon. The enemy was on the doorstep of Fenris itself.

The system cried out for its saviours. Krom heard. Held by his oath, he could do nothing.

Frostheim fell into its infernal silence, but Svellgard howled before it followed. The vassals garrisoning the World Wolf's Lair saw the seas vomit up millions of daemons. They had a brief moment to call out to Fenris, to give voice to their horror, before they were swallowed up.

Krom heard. He could do nothing.

Midgardia was the inverse twin of Fenris. Where Fenris was glacial, Midgardia was a hothouse. Fenris' winds blew with bone-scraping purity, whereas Midgardia's air was foetid and thick with spores. Fenris permitted only the hardiest, most brutal of life forms to survive on its surface but Midgardia was a lush, fungal jungle, an explosion of life in such super-abundance that it was a

riot of all-consuming competition. The population of Fenris was sparse. The people of Midgardia were many. When the warp rifts opened in the air and below the ground, unleashing the daemonic hordes on the surface of the cities and in their subterranean warrens, the massacre was not over in an instant. There was time for the Ruinous Powers to savour their work. There was time for Midgardia's militia to attempt a defence, and so there was time to experience the death of all hope. The population of Midgardia screamed as it was overcome. The scream was the death cry of millions. It resounded across the Fenris System. It was compounded of such horror and agony and fear that it seemed as if it should send the very Wolf's Eye into eclipse.

Krom heard. He could do nothing.

And Valdrmani. Like Frostheim, it fell quiet. There was a different quality to its silence, however. Frostheim went down first, and when the rifts opened across the system, it was clear the ice world had been the start of the attack. Valdrmani went down at the same time as Svellgard and Midgardia. There was only the briefest of cries, suddenly cut off. Or, it seemed, contained. Communications were dead between Fenris and Frostheim. But the astropathic choir of the Fang detected something in the aether of Valdrmani. The silence was tense, stretched to the breaking point. Something was building up, and when the silence could no longer contain what grew, the scream would dwarf all others.

Verthandi, mistress of the astropathic choir of Fenris, came to Krom and told him what was sensed, and what was to come.

Krom heard. He could do nothing.

He patrolled the defences of the Fang. The Drakeslayers stood on high alert, ready to destroy the enemy when it came to Fenris. They longed to take the battle to the daemons, but to where? To which world first?

No rifts had opened on Fenris. Krom saw, in the sparing of the Space Wolves' home world, the lineaments of a trap. The agony of the other worlds tested him. The need to storm to their aid threatened to tear him in half. But his failure on Alaric Prime held him to his oath; he would not abandon his post and see Fenris devoured by the daemonic as the rifts opened, mocking his pride and his arrogance.

He pushed the astropaths beyond their limits. It was the only action open to him. Grimnar and the other Wolf Lords must know what had been heard on Fenris. They had to be recalled. The choir sent out the call. It was torn to shreds by the rifts. No aetheric communication could leave the system. Even vox transmissions no longer worked, except over limited distances.

Impossibility was a poor excuse. The message must be sent. Astropaths died, the blood of their minds pouring from their eyes and ears.

‘We cannot,’ Verthandi told Krom. She could barely walk now. She was supported by serfs on either side.

‘You must,’ Krom told her. ‘You will.’

When he was not on the ramparts, he stood in the shadows of the stone gallery above the choir, bearing witness to their efforts. He saw the cost of what he demanded. He saw a form of heroism different from the battlefield glory he and his brothers knew. It was no less real. The astropaths were the only active combatants on Fenris. He watched them with respect and envy.

There was no way to know if any of their efforts were successful. There were no messages that arrived from outside the system. There was only the wait for the return of the hunters. The hope they would hear. And the endless, grinding frustration.

Krom waited. He stood fast. And while he kept faith with his oath, the worlds of the Fenris System screamed.

The wolves returned to the fold in fury. The individual fleets had purged world after world in the hunt for the Wulfen. Now they arrived as one, descending with all their might on a single system. Their own home.

But the Fenris System was no longer theirs.

The ships translated from the warp, yet the warp did not leave them. It was here, in the rifts unleashing infinite foulness on their worlds. The fleet emerged from the Mandeville point at the edge of the system. Even with the ships in close proximity, vox communication was growing difficult. Attempts to make contact with the home world failed. Assembling a coherent picture of the situation was difficult. It was not impossible, however. The aetheric disturbances caused by the rifts over the occupied worlds were so severe that there was no doubt where the fury of the wolves would be directed.

‘We shall make simultaneous strikes,’ Grimnar announced in the hololith chamber of the *Allfather’s Honour*. ‘The Firehowlers will retake Svellgard. The Deathwolves, Frostheim. Lord Iron Wolf, together your company and the Kingsguard are bound for Midgardia.’ Every sentence the Great Wolf spoke resounded in the chamber like the beat of a huge war drum. The Great Wolf’s frame seemed to vibrate from the horror and rage within.

Ulrik shared the wrath. No words could encompass the crime that had occurred. No words could describe the punishment that was coming.

The Great Wolf paused. He exchanged a look with Ulrik. The High Wolf Priest knew what Grimnar would say next. All the Wolf Lords did. Their hololithic images were still. They waited for the blow to their pride.

When Grimnar spoke again, his voice was no less resonant than it had been before. If he must make this request, it would be done with power. ‘Brother-Captain Stern,’ Grimnar said. ‘We would be grateful for your aid in purging Valdrmani.’

‘It shall be done,’ Stern voxed.

‘And the Wulfen?’ Lord Deathwolf asked.

‘To each strike force, a murderpack.’

‘We risk having our companies consumed by frenzy from within.’

‘It is done!’ Grimnar roared. ‘We will use every weapon and every warrior to reclaim our worlds. Chaos seeks to weaken us. We will counter it with unity. We will not deny any brother the honour of fighting to reclaim our system.’

‘Lord Deathwolf,’ Ulrik said. ‘The Wulfen have not been brought to us by Chaos. They have returned to us to fight this greatest threat.’

‘I hope you are right, Slayer,’ Deathwolf replied. *‘We will know very soon.’*

Beneath sleep, above death, the giant daemon on the ramparts.

Its sword high in hunger and triumph.

No. You come no further.

A duel of thought and dreams and lightning. The sword striking through the echo-sarcophagus. The assault cannon shadow pounding nightmare flesh. The noble savagery of Fenris stronger than the abomination’s wrath. The fell hand seizing the daemon’s limbs.

The crushing of wrath’s form.

The daemon broken, the wave hurled back.

Only for a moment. The wave rising again, and with it a terrible shadow. An echo of a scream not yet heard. It has the shape of doom.

The daemon laughing in defeat. Taunting. Revealing a horror all the worse for its truth.

The silver templars will die. Their death is your end.

The doom gathering definition.

I see it. I see it!

They must be told.

Wake! Wake! Wake!

Two summons came for Krom within seconds of each other. Albjorn Fogel

voxed from the augur complex. The fleet had returned. Multiple ships had translated into the system. Contact was impossible, but their radiation signatures and warp displacements were unmistakable. Krom raced from the astropathic choriatrium.

'One vessel is unknown,' Fogel was saying. Before he could continue, the second summons overrode the first. It came from deep in the roots of the Fang.

'Lord Dragongaze,' Hrothgar Swordfang voxed, *'Bjorn the Fell-Handed is awake!'*

Krom felt the winds of fate howl around him. A culmination was at hand.

'On my way,' he told Swordfang. To Fogel he said, *'Keep trying the vox.'* He changed direction, heading for a grav-lift. It dropped him thousands of metres, accelerating to near free-fall in seconds, then gradually slowing in the final minute, depositing him in the centre of the mountain's ancient labyrinth. In the only vault that still held a Dreadnought, he found Hrothgar Swordfang and other Iron Priests, along with a group of Wolf Priests. *'You finally succeeded,'* he said. They had been trying to wake Bjorn since Harald had returned from Nurades.

'No,' said Hrothgar. *'This is not our doing. He woke of his own accord, and called for you.'*

Krom approached the enormous war machine. The oldest hero of the Space Wolves did not move. There was no sign of consciousness until Krom was a few metres away. The monolith lowered slightly. Optic augurs regarded him, relaying his image to the mind inside.

'Krom Dragongaze,' said Bjorn. The voice seemed as old and deep as the Fang.

'You wake to aid us in our hour of great need, venerable brother.'

'No. I sleep still.' Bjorn spoke slowly. His words seemed to come from a measureless distance. *'I must sleep. There is war there that only I can fight. The threat is dire. We stand on the brink of destruction. You must go to Valdrmani.'*

'I am bound by my oath to remain,' said Krom. *'The Great Wolf and our brothers have returned from the hunt. They will drive the abominations from our system.'*

'They have not come alone.'

'That is so,' Krom said, startled. *'A battle-barge we have not identified.'*

'Silver,' said Bjorn. *'Grey Knights.'*

The priests stirred in surprise and anger. Those warriors were not welcome on Fenris.

'They make for Valdrmani,' Bjorn continued. *'They will die on Valdrmani. Their fate will determine ours. You must go, Dragongaze. Warn them. Save*

them. Save us.'

'I have sworn an oath,' said Krom.

'Break it, or doom us,' Bjorn told him.

'What awaits them?' Krom asked.

The Dreadnought was still. Krom sensed his consciousness recede to a place beyond reach. The vault was again filled with the silence that lived between sleep and death.

Krom realised he didn't need an answer. It was enough to know the Grey Knights would fall into a trap. *Their fate will determine ours.*

The fleets led by the *Allfather's Honour* and the *Wolfborn* entered low orbit over Midgardia. Its atmosphere was thick, forever clouded. The surface was invisible. To the eye, there was nothing to announce its taint. The vox was more revealing – faint traces of human screams mixed with the monstrous howling of inhuman tongues.

Ulrik stared at the cloud cover through the oculus. Anger at the desecration suffused his blood. He was eager to be on the ground. Eager to eradicate the abomination. Eager, too, for the Wulfen to prove their worth, to at last assume their proper role amongst the Great Companies. They would be fighting for something much more than the recovery of their kin. They would be fighting for the salvation of Fenris and the Space Wolves.

The Wolf Lords were increasingly wary of the Wulfen. The spreading aggression was a challenge. What they did not understand, Ulrik thought, was the nature of the test. Fury was in the blood of the Space Wolves. They were stronger with the return of the Wulfen. So was the fury. We must learn to channel it, he thought. We must remake ourselves. Then we will be ready for Russ when he comes again.

'Augurs,' Grimnar said.

'Readings confirm two rifts,' the vassal officer answered. 'They are located near the Magma Gates. One above ground, one below.'

'Good.' Grimnar touched the vox console beside the command throne. 'Is Strike Force Fenris ready?'

'*We are,*' said Egil Iron Wolf.

The last of the ship-to-ship transfers had taken place just before the battle-barge and strike cruiser reached their positions. Grimnar had sent his heavy armour to join the Ironwolves, while Egil's Terminators and recovered Wulfen had come aboard the *Allfather's Honour*.

‘Good.’ Grimnar stood. He joined Ulrik at the rail overlooking the bridge. ‘Let it begin!’ he roared. His wrath was a storm. It held and expressed the rage of every Space Wolf. ‘Strike Force Fenris, you are the hammer that shatters the enemy’s skull. Strike Force Morkai, we are the frostblade between the ribs. Now, let thunder fall!’

‘Well done, lad,’ Ulrik said quietly. ‘Well done.’

The orbital bombardment began. The lance batteries of both ships fired into the atmosphere. The target zone was before the walls of the Magma Gates. The enormous fortress complex would withstand the attack. Anything outside on the walls or on the ground within several thousand metres would not.

Spears of lasers plunged through the cloud cover. The air heated to red. A fierce wound appeared on the shifting, opaque face of Midgardia and fury seared the planet. The attack was continuous. The view in the oculus shifted to display the *Wolfborn*. Along the length of the hull, shafts of concentrated destruction lashed the world below.

We are bombarding our own worlds, Ulrik thought. It has come this far. The pattern has ensnared us this far. But no longer.

With the purifying destruction of these strikes, the Space Wolves were breaking the snare. Dark machinations had created the vulnerability of the home system. The wills behind the warp storms had used the Wulfen to lure the Great Companies away. Ulrik would grant Harald that much. That lure, though, would be the seed of the foe’s destruction. No one could use the brothers of Fenris against each other.

This is our trial, he thought. There is yet another pattern at work, a glorious one, and we approach its culmination. We are being tested. We must prove ourselves worthy of Russ and of the saga into which he will lead us.

He stared at the lance fire so fiercely, his vision contracted to the blaze of those vertical suns. He blinked, jolted from his reverie of faith when half the batteries ceased fire. The *Wolfborn*’s bay doors opened. Stormwolves launched. They flew down in formation, their dives so steep they were almost in parallel to the lasers. A new series of short bursts lit the hull. The drop pods plunged into the atmosphere. They too were a bombardment, a living one, and their reach would be far greater and more destructive than that of the batteries.

Grimnar clapped Ulrik’s shoulder. ‘Fenris has begun its work,’ he said.

‘It’s time Morkai was about its own,’ Ulrik growled.

The Great Wolf and the High Wolf Priest left the bridge. They took a grav lift down through the towering superstructure of the battle-barge. On the same level

as the launch bays, they entered a huge chamber amidships.

The Terminators of the Kingsguard and the Ironwolves stood along the periphery of the teleportarium's platform. The rest of the Great Company formed concentric rings of Grey Hunters, Long Fangs, Blood Claws and Scouts. Inside those rings were the Lone Wolves. At the very centre were the Wulfen of two companies, and in their midst were the massive sarcophagi of Haargen Deathbane and Svendar Ironarm. The Venerable Dreadnoughts stood guard over Murderfang. He had been subdued with helfrost after the departure from Vikurus. Wrapped in adamantium chains, he was conscious once more. The presence of the Wulfen appeared to have the same effect as in Absolom. Ulrik thought Murderfang was calm, but perhaps it was the patience of a predator about to spring. Whatever the truth, it was possible to bring him here.

The teleportation was risky. Only Terminator armour had homing devices. The Iron Priests had communed with the machine spirit of the ancient teleportarium. With the Terminators' homers marking the full spread of the strike force, the Iron Priests believed it would be possible to send the full complement of warriors into the subterranean warren of Morkai's Gate with an acceptable degree of safety. Most of the complex's population lived below ground. The tunnels and caverns were large. The maps were detailed and accurate. There was no uncertainty to the coordinates. The risk came from the turbulence created by the warp storms.

Grimnar and Ulrik strode across the teleportarium platform to the centre. The Wulfen watched their approach. They dropped their heads before the Great Wolf, acknowledging the supreme alpha. Their battered armour and punch daggers had been replaced using the stores of new, Wulfen-adapted equipment aboard the *Coldfang*. They were restive, clawed hands opening and closing. Their jaws were wide, lips curled back over their gums. The tension of such a large murderpack bled into the rest of the strike force. Ulrik felt the contagion. He could not dismiss it. His heartbeats accelerated. His teeth were on edge and saliva flooded his mouth. His righteous anger over the daemonic incursion lost some of its focus, becoming a beast of its own. He needed to fight. He needed the warm spray of his prey's blood.

He clutched the totems hanging at his waist and fixed his gaze on the crozius arcanum. This is the trial. This is our truth. The rage is ours. It is mine. There was no curse here, only the reality of the Space Wolves, the truth of the spirit that had grown larger and more ferocious with the return of the 13th.

'Let the enemy feel our claws at their throats!' Grimnar called.

In the control gallery in the upper reaches of the chamber, the Iron Priests

saluted and began their task.

There were pylons at each of the four corners of the platform. They were tall, engraved with sigils holy to the Omnissiah. They curved inwards, their tips pointing towards the centre of an invisible dome over the strike force. The pylons came to life, energy spiralling up their height, building to a blinding intensity at their points. The air grew taut. There was the sharp smell of ozone. The Wulfen howled, their manes bristling.

The shift happened.

A split in the materium.

The eyeblink of reality.

Ulrik experienced the jolt of being and non-being. He was in the *Allfather's Honour*, and then he was in the high cavern before the great underground gates of the fortress.

And the Wulfen were maddened. Maniacal howls filled the cave. The monsters of the 13th Great Company leapt forward, claws out, fangs gaping.

In their midst, Murderfang exploded into violent movement, a thunder of frenzy and war.

In the *Alpha Fang's* strategium, Harald gathered the Wolf Guard, Feingar of the Coldeyes and Norvald Iceflame around the hololithic display of Morkai's Keep.

'The ship we detected in orbit translated into the warp before we could identify it,' Harald told his officers. 'However...' he tapped the vox. An auspex recording played back. The vox traffic on Frostheim was active. It was scrambled by the proximity of the rifts. Enough was intelligible, though. Dark, twisted voices emerged from the speaker.

'Traitors,' Canis spat.

Harald nodded. 'There are more than daemons below. Our true enemy begins to show his face.'

'Who are they?' Feingar asked.

'Still unidentified.'

'Just one ship,' said Canis.

'Yes,' said Harald. 'They have Morkai's Keep, but we are many.'

'What about the defences?' said Norvald.

'Inactive.' Harald distrusted the new turn of luck, but the readings were clear. Fate was at last favouring the Space Wolves. 'Sensor auguries have detected no energy readings from the gun emplacements. The wyrd stirs in the heart of the keep, but its outer walls are dead.'

‘If that is true,’ Feingar said, ‘the attack must have occurred very recently. A poor strategy to leave yourself vulnerable to retaliation.’

Harald agreed. His loathing for the Traitors did not mean contempt for their skill in the battlefield. They were not fools. It would not do to treat them as such. The assumption that the Traitors had only just taken Frostheim troubled him, even though it was the only plausible deduction. He did not second-guess the augur readings. He had to act based on the information he had.

And he needed to act. The idea of Morkai’s Keep in traitorous hands was insupportable. The enemy was forcing the Space Wolves to attack their own fortifications. Harald’s limbs thrummed with anger. He would fall on the Traitors and make them curse their own existence. Every second of waiting was indefensible.

He saw the same furious anticipation in the faces surrounding the tactarium table. The bloodiest, most violent retaliation imaginable was required.

Harald made a claw of his hand and held it above the centre of the hololith. ‘We drop into the heart of Morkai’s Keep,’ he said, ‘with the full fury of Whitestalker. They would use our walls against us. So we will ignore the walls. Drop pods first, Stormwolves following in a steep descent, providing covering fire for the drop pod troops. Our primary target is the command chamber. Retake it and exterminate the Traitors.’

There was nothing subtle about the strategy. It was designed as a brutal hammer blow, fuelled by rage. Harald’s anger was too great for anything else. So was that of his brothers. The Wolf Guard roared as one, and clapped their fists to their pauldrons.

Revelation hovered before Harald’s eyes. He saw the salute as a thin veneer. The truth was the roar. The truth was the beast. He saw the mark of the wolf on all his brothers, and in himself. He saw the division between human and animal vanish altogether. He saw what he had been warning against, and fighting against.

He saw that the contagion had reached him too. The insult of the Traitors was too great. The war anger was too strong. The beast was claiming him.

He saw all this, and then he didn’t. The revelation sank beneath the red sea of wrath.

He answered his brothers with his roar, and then he marched from the strategium.

A few minutes later, Harald and one pack of Thunderclaw Wolf Guard with their thunderwolves were aboard *Runeclaw*, streaking through the frigid

atmosphere of Frostheim. He looked through one of the forward viewing blocks. The air was clear. Visibility was excellent. He could already see, on the plane of white below, a small shape, barely more than a dot, but jagged, clearly artificial: Morkai's Keep. Ahead of *Runeclaw* and the other Stormwolves, the drop pods left contrails of fire in their wake. Searing claws stabbed towards the fortress.

Harald felt calmer than he had aboard the *Alpha Fang*. The hunt was on, and soothing the rage of frustration. His earlier revelation rose in his mind. He pushed it aside, consciously this time. Those thoughts were useless to him now.

The surface of the planet drew closer and the uniform white acquired texture. The cracks of crevasses and the shadows of mountains appeared, outlined by the reflected light of Svellgard. Morkai's Keep grew. Its blocky form gathered strength.

Harald's calm bled away again. His senses sharpened. The hunger built.

Closer. The distant mountain ranges cleared. The mesa of the keep filling the view. The concentric walls of the keep marking the target.

Strike Force Whitestalker fell towards the silent fortress.

Silent no longer.

The walls of Morkai's Keep erupted with light, the barrel flashes of dozens of guns. Lascannons and vortex missiles struck at the drop pods. The lethal flowers of flak blossomed in such density that the keep vanished beneath their blackened crimson. The huge shells of macro cannons roared through the squadrons. Drop pods exploded, vanishing in expanding fireballs. Other pods had their sides sheared off and were sent into uncontrolled, tumbling falls, shedding wreckage and warriors as they spun.

Proximity alert klaxons shrieked.

'*Turn that off!*' Harald shouted over the clamour. The alarms were pointless now.

In the cockpit, Iron Priest Veigir obeyed. The klaxons fell silent. Now Harald could hear the uproar on the vox. Curses mixed with snarls and electronic shrieks.

'There were no energy readings!' Veigir shouted. 'How can the guns be active?'

'What matters is they are,' Harald said. 'Stormwolves, provide covering fire for the drop pods,' he ordered. 'There is no evasive action to be had. We are committed.'

Straight down, into the cauldron. The anti-air fire was so intense that the sky was a single explosion. The Space Wolves had designed the armaments of Morkai's Keep to annihilate any attack by air or by land, and now it fulfilled its

duty. Other, darker weapons added their destructive force to the las and missiles and flak. Wyrdfire billowed and writhed between the explosions. Harald saw a drop pod fall into a concentrated burst of the mutagenic horror. The pod collapsed in on itself, crushing its occupants, then turned itself inside out, becoming a thing of giant, bulbous organs. It continued to change as it fell. It had no form any longer. It was a constant flow of transformation.

The Stormwolves sent out a stream of lascannons and heavy bolter fire. They sought to take out the turrets, but they were firing blind through the storm of flame. The drop pods were in the direct line of fire, hampering the gunships' retaliation, and even they were disappearing from sight. There was only the cauldron, the roil of the air tearing itself apart.

The vox traffic was a cacophonous litany of disaster, of drop pods blasted from the sky, of shells and las punching through the hulls and wings of the Stormwolves.

'Hold fast, brothers,' Harald exhorted. 'We are still hunting! Our claws will tear the enemy from the sky!'

There was nothing else he could do. He was helpless until the gunship reached the ground. He bit back his curses. His fury was indeed strong, but it had nowhere to strike as he gazed at the unfolding of a rout.

Runeclaw dropped below the flak barrier. Morkai's Keep came back into sight. It was unbreached. Only a few drop pods had landed within the ring walls. They were isolated. Their surviving Deathwolves were being chewed up by ground-defence turrets. Beyond the walls, the rest of the pods were spread out across the glacier.

The configuration of the battle changed again. Winged shapes burst from the flanks of the glacier and screamed upward to meet the Stormwolves. They were armour-plated predators, both engines of war and yowling daemon.

'Machine drake!' Veigir shouted.

Angular jaws parted to reveal autocannons. They added their fire to the anti-air guns, flying in towards the Stormwolves on the flanks. Their shells cut across the deadly stream from Morkai's Keep. At the very moment the Space Wolves attempted to change their angle of approach, veering away from the fortress to defend the scattered troops, they were caught in a shredding, interlocking barrage.

Once again, there was no chance of evasion.

The turrets below ceased shooting as the machine drakes screamed into the midst of the Stormwolves. The blistering rate of fire from the six-barrel

autocannons pummelled ships already battered by the descent. Vessels that had been the subject of song for millennia turned into meteoric balls of flame. The death of heroes roared over the landscape, shedding wreckage and bodies. The squadron turned its guns on the daemonic engines. They took their toll. *Runeclaw* unleashed a coordinated burst of las and bolter, both twin-linked pairs pulverizing the gunship's target at the same moment. The blasts decapitated a flyer. Its head plummeted towards the ground. The body careened off in a wild, whirling spin. It collided with another corrupted flyer, tangling their wings. Both fell, flames erupting from the body and ruptured engines.

Harald punched the bulkhead and snarled as he saw the enemy bleed at last. Then huge talons plunged through the roof. Wyrd energy crackled around them as they contracted and crumpled ablative ceramite and adamantium. The machine drake peeled the roof back and screamed in triumph. Entwined with that shriek were others, the souls of a crew long succumbed to damnation howled pain and terror and rage. The scream slammed through the troop compartment of *Runeclaw*, overwhelming even the roar of the invading wind.

Iceetooth and the thunderwolves howled. They struggled against the harnesses bolted to the deck. Deathwolves fired upward, bolter shells by the score punching into the blue, glowing armour of the machine drake. Explosions rippled along its underbelly. It shrieked again, with anger now, and opened one of its talons, releasing the sheared roof and reaching into the hold to crush the tiny warriors who dared cause it harm. Harald brought up his storm shield and smashed it into the leading claw. The shield's energy field exploded with a rage of its own. The impact jolted down the length of his frame, hard enough for the deck to crack beneath his boots. The talon jerked, momentarily halted, and Harald spun, bringing Glacius against it with a blow to shatter mountains. He severed it and ichor and promethium flooded the hold. Now the flyer screamed with its own pain. The sound ignited the air and a firestorm engulfed the Deathwolves. Contemptuous of the flames, Harald struck again, hitting the centre of the talon, opening a split that travelled up the side of the monster's limb. Energy lashed out in every direction. Fire raced into the engine's wound.

Pain engulfed the sentient machine. It yanked its wounded limb from the gutted Stormwolf, and, still clutching the hull with one talon, folded its wings and dropped into a vertical dive. The sudden shift in mass turned *Runeclaw* over in the air. Harald jammed the storm shield into the torn bulkhead and held on to keep from plummeting through the gap in the roof. Most of his brothers were still in grav harnesses. They dangled upside down, shooting at the machine

drake. *Runeclaw*'s engines thundered with strain as Veigir fought against the pull. He slowed the drop, but could not right the ship. Another flyer streaked past on the port side, autocannon shells puncturing the wing and engine nacelles.

The flight surfaces were all but destroyed. Two of the engines had exploded. The gunship's fall was accelerating as the machine drake pushed it down to an annihilating smash.

Bolter shells dug into the daemon ship's plating but it kept its grip on the Stormwolf. The talons were out of reach of Glacius. He could not attack without slipping his arm from his shield and falling from the gunship.

In the midst of wind and flame, the Thunderclaw Kollungir dropped his bolter and yanked off his helmet. His eyes were wide and red and mad. He howled, insensate with rage. The howl went on and on. Harald could not hear it over the whine of the remaining engines. He could feel it though. His blood pounded in answer. Kollungir's jaw lengthened and his hair and beard coarsened. He shook his head back and forth, snapping with lethal fangs, and his face projected forward until it was no longer human – it was a muzzle. He struggled with his gauntlets until they too fell away, revealing fingers that ended in huge claws. He tore his harness apart. Still howling, his body transformed by a frenzy that went beyond war into the most primal being of the Space Wolves, he leapt through the roof. He fell on the daemon's clutching talon and attacked it with stabbing, slashing, biting fury.

The contagion spread to a second Thunderclaw. Leifir ripped himself free as well and followed his brother. As he jumped, Harald saw there was nothing left of the rational in his eyes. He was lost forever to the beast within.

Leifir and Kollungir were flesh. They attacked a thing of metal and wyrd-born sorcery. Yet they drew blood. They pierced the hide of their prey. The foul mix of ichor and fuel sprayed into the hold. Fire bellowed. The daemon engine roared in outrage and released *Runeclaw* before peeling off to starboard.

Two figures fell, clawing at air.

Freed, *Runeclaw* went into a spin. It tumbled and rolled, a ruin in free-fall. The wind at last put the fire out. Harald held tight to the wedged shield as he was thrown back and forth. He caught glimpses of the ground through the open roof. Once again helpless to act, he damned the decisions that had brought Whitestalker to this point, ambushed and blasted from the sky.

We rushed.

We did not stop to think we might be deceived.

We only listened to the fury of our beasts within.

We are falling to the curse.

Twisting, falling end over end. The glacier rushing up.

The engines stuttering, firing in bursts as Veigir struggled to slow the descent.

The world a maelstrom.

Wind and speed and fury.

A sudden, terrible crash.



CHAPTER 7

Nova

Krom stood with Hrothgar Swordfang at the entrance to the Wulfen quarters. Serkir faced them. He held his frost axe with both hands. There was an eager glint in his eyes, but his hackles were not raised. His stance was not aggressive.

‘Take them,’ Hrothgar urged. ‘Use their strength. Seeing them in combat will be invaluable.’

‘There are more urgent considerations,’ Krom reminded the Iron Priest, who nodded in acknowledgement. Krom would have hesitated to stop here, however briefly, if not for two reasons. The *Winterbite* would not yet be ready for launch. And there was fate. Even now he worked to divine the meaning of that gathering before Murderfang. The Wulfen had a role to play in the events unfolding in the Fenris System. He could no more deny that than he could the coming of winter.

Serkir focused his gaze on Krom. He struggled to form words. ‘We... must... go...’ he said, the final word trailing off into a growl, one that was not a threat, but instead a shudder from his deep being, a response to the call of destiny. He shook himself, then repeated, ‘We... must... go... to Valdrmani.’

Krom gave Hrothgar a sharp look. ‘What have you told them?’

‘Nothing.’ Hrothgar was startled too.

Krom turned back to Serkir. Fate had spoken to the Wulfen too, then. Serkir knew what he must do. His words were so close to Bjorn’s. Krom’s decision was clear; there was no choice at all. For the first time since the departure of the hunt, he breathed more easily. The fate that had been closing in was here, and he was free to take up arms against it.

Krom made for the grav lift with Hrothgar at his side and Serkir leading the pack behind. They rose to the peak of the Fang. In the final stages of the ascent, the walls of the lift shaft vibrated with the deep thrum of the *Winterbite*’s engines powering up. The vibration became thunder when the doors opened and Krom entered the space dock.

The crew of the *Winterbite* had begun a crash preparation for lift-off the instant Krom had given the order. Anchored to the dock, the Nova-class frigate was small and light as warships went. It was still a mountain tethered to another. It rumbled now like a volcano on the verge of eruption. It too was eager for the battle to be joined.

Waiting for Krom were the warriors of Fierce-eye’s finest. They had assembled as soon as Krom had given the order for mobilisation: Beoric Winterfang and the Wolf Guard in terminator armour, Hengist Ironaxe at the head of the Grey Hunters, Egil Redfist and his Blood Claws. They were the elite of Krom’s Great Company. They were a pack of hunters hungry for war. The icon of the sun wolf on their pauldrons seemed to snarl in frustration at having been held back so long.

‘The Great Wolf has unleashed us?’ Beoric asked.

‘No,’ said Krom. ‘He has returned, but we still have no contact. Bjorn the Fell-Handed sends us to the rescue of the Grey Knights.’

‘*What?*’ said Egil, astounded.

‘They are heading into a trap on Valdrmani,’ Krom told him. ‘If they fall, our Chapter will suffer a mortal blow.’ With that he crossed the dock at a fast march, past vassals and servitors completing the final tasks before the launch. He strode up an embarkation ramp into the mustering bay of the *Winterbite*. The ramp rose behind the last of the warriors, slamming shut with a reverberating clang.

‘Beoric and Hengist, you are with me on the bridge. The rest of you, remain here with our brothers of the Thirteenth Company. The journey will be brief. Action will be immediate.

‘Shipmaster,’ he voxed as he strode from the bay. ‘We are aboard. Is the ship ready?’

‘Just now, lord.’

‘Then launch.’

He broke into a run. He felt the power of the engines run through the halls of the frigate like fire through his blood. The decks trembled, then his weight multiplied, g-force pressing down as the ship hurled its great mass towards the sky. Krom did not slow. He and his brothers charged towards the bridge as if reaching it would bring them to their target sooner.

The *Winterbite* did not have far to travel. Merely the distance from Fenris to its moon. But Krom had been conscious of time flowing away from the moment Bjorn had returned to the silence of his war beneath sleep. No seconds had been wasted. The frigate had departed the moment it could. But for every one of those seconds, the Grey Knights had drawn closer to Valdrmani, and none of the hails from Fenris had been answered.

The Grey Knights could not be warned. The only hope was that they could be stopped.

Not enough time, Krom thought. Not enough. It was as if he could picture the Grey Knight ship knifing through the system, approaching the moon while he still had not left the upper atmosphere of Fenris.

He burst onto the bridge. The oculus showed the void and the face of Valdrmani. Already the moon was visibly growing closer. Its fall into silence had been a special torture for Krom. There were hundreds of thousands of citizens in the Longhowl domeplex. They were on the threshold of Fenris. Krom should have been able to reach out from the peak of the Fang and strike at the daemoniac foe.

‘How close are the Grey Knights?’ he demanded.

The augur officer looked up. ‘They have already arrived.’

No time.

The distress call was clear now. The signal the astropaths of Titan had so painfully pieced together from the shreds that escaped the warp was whole. Precise, focused, it came from Valdrmani, not Fenris, broadcast from Longhowl. The cry went out on sub-warp frequencies too. When Stern switched to its channel on the vox, he could listen to the full message. He did so again as he boarded the Stormraven *Deimos Glaive*.

‘They’re still calling?’ Brother-Librarian Carac asked. The shadow of his psychic hood accentuated the angles of his long, sharp features.

‘They are.’

‘It isn’t automated?’

‘No.’ Stern drew the grav harness over his shoulder. ‘The words repeat, but there are variations in the voice.’ It was hoarse, exhausted, sometimes almost inaudible.

‘Don’t they see us?’ said Xalvador.

‘The speaker is not a Space Wolf,’ said Stern. ‘These are mortals. I doubt they will believe in their salvation until it is upon them. So let us be about it.’

The Stormravens launched. They shot away from the bays of the battle-barge. Below, Valdrmani awaited. Stern knew that Chaos rioted on the moon, though it presented a face of emptiness and silence. The surface was a desert of red dust, never to be moved by a wind. There was no atmosphere. The domes of Longhowl became clear.

‘No breaches,’ Carac said.

‘So it would seem,’ said Stern.

There was no vapour of escaping air from the domes. Their forms were intact.

‘Strange the daemons should take such care,’ Carac mused.

‘Deaths by sudden cold and asphyxiation are too merciful to be enjoyed,’ Stern said. ‘If the incursion began inside Longhowl, the enemy would not need to force an entry.’

Even as he spoke, his answer dissatisfied him. Another reason came to him in the next heartbeat. If there were corrupted mortals in the enemy ranks, they would need air. And if that were true...

The signal, he thought.

In that moment, the signal changed. It became a single word.

‘*Welcome*,’ the voice said.

Then it laughed. Well it might. The subterfuge had been perfect. In an instant, Stern beheld the enormous implications of what had been done. The enemy had simulated a broken distress call that had passed every test of authenticity the Grey Knights had used on it. Worse, he now saw dire purpose in the fact that *only* the Sons of Titan had succeeded in intercepting it. The signal had been imperceptible to the Space Wolves because it had been aimed specifically at the Grey Knights.

The Space Wolves were not countering the enemy’s plan by returning to the Fenris system. They were fulfilling it, lured by means of the Grey Knights to arrive at the appointed time.

We were lured too, Stern thought. The enemy wants us here.

Now.

At this very spot.

The laughter became a maniacal howl. The signal cut out.

In the centre of Longhowl was a huge cylindrical tower. It stood higher than any of the domes. It split open, revealing the barrel of an immense gun.

The nova cannon fired.

Destruction had a royal majesty. The eternal night of Valdrmani exploded into ruby-coloured day. A multitude of energy columns shot out of the barrel at once. They lanced into the void, and into the core of the Grey Knights vessel sitting in low orbit.

The battle-barge was still fully visible through the Stormravens' viewing blocks. Now it was lit by the terminal beam. Stern watched the display in horror. He watched annihilation unfold in silent grace.

The light seared so brightly, it seemed to burn the void itself. It sliced through the battle-barge from underbelly to superstructure. The ship held its form for a long, slow moment that was less than the single beat of a heart, then the bow began to dip. The stern moved forward.

The battle-barge became two. The light between its identities expanded, becoming brighter yet, becoming the cry of plasma, the wail of a sun's birth and of a sun's death. The shockwave rippled over the length of the vessel. The wave travelled outwards. It reached Valdrmani. The Stormravens were beyond its greatest force. Even so, it hammered them with its passage. The engines of *Deimos Glaive* howled in protest. A great fist shook the gunship, blurring the view of the battle-barge, then passed. The fire from the heart of the ship blossomed. It swallowed the halves before they could begin to tumble. They disintegrated in its jaws. The light hurled the pieces away.

A monstrous dawn flared over the face of Valdrmani, then faded. The nova cannon ceased fire and night returned, illuminated by a sombre fireball in the heavens. And then the rain came. The broken, burning pieces of the vessel began their fall to the surface. Flung with the force of the battle-barge's death, many streaked moonwards at immense velocity. They were comets of broken vaults, vast marble columns becoming broken spears, meteors of adamantite slag. A head ten metres across, from the bow's statuary, smashed through *Bane of the Magi*. The gunship exploded, becoming more of the rain of wreckage.

The domeplex would survive. It was designed to withstand such impacts. The Stormravens were not.

'Get us down!' Stern ordered. He stared at the domes, willing the gunships to descend faster. The Grey Knights were exposed to the hurtling debris of their

ship. Longhowl would give them the necessary shelter.

And the even more vital chance at revenge.

The Wulfen leapt towards Ulrik and Grimnar. They were a mass of fangs and blades. They were larger than any other Space Wolf. Ulrik saw what only their enemies had witnessed until now. The utter madness of violence coupled to an unparalleled physical force of war. The Wulfen were a fury that could not be stopped.

Ulrik did not blink. He kept faith with the 13th Company.

The Wulfen leapt over his head. Murderfang stormed after them, his vox speakers shrieking, overloaded by the howling insanity within. On instinct, Ulrik and Grimnar moved aside to let him pass.

Two seconds had passed since the teleportation.

The last of the disorientation leaving him, Ulrik turned in the direction of the Wulfen charge. They had passed through the ranks of Strike Force Morkai like a clawed wind.

‘They are frenzied,’ said Grimnar.

‘The teleportation process,’ Ulrik surmised. There was nothing but the animal in them now. Yet they knew the enemy, and fell upon the abominations.

The Space Wolves had arrived on target. The cavern was the grand entrance to the underground settlements of Midgardia. Behind, the ground sloped gradually back up to the surface. Ahead, huge iron doors engraved with the two heads of Morkai opened onto the warren of tunnels. From the dark within came daemons. The unholy unity that had prevailed upon the other worlds beset by the warp storms held true here – daemonettes, plaguebearers, pink horrors and the swordlings rushed out together. The Wulfen tore into them before the first Terminator opened up with storm bolters.

Two seconds, that was all. Then the rest of Strike Force Morkai joined the assault.

The fire of the Wulfen was among them all. Ulrik felt it in his blood and in his bones. As he drove a plaguebearer’s head between its shoulders, he could feel the pull to the feral, stronger than it had ever been. His jaws ached as his fangs sought to push out from his gums. Every breath was a snarl.

‘The gift is upon us, brothers!’ he shouted. ‘Rejoice! We are among the blessed of Russ!’

The flood of daemons was immense. They attacked with a lethal unity. The speed of the daemonettes and blood daemons was a distraction, demanding a

response to their attack while the plaguebearers closed in with inexorable patience to deliver their heavy blows. The pink horrors kept their distance. They hurled sorcerous bolts into the fray. Mutating light struck the Space Wolves.

Brothers died. Some went down to scores of wounds inflicted by blade or claw. Others collapsed with their lungs foaming out of their mouths and nostrils. And there were those who succumbed to the mutagenic fire. Their armour became a gnawing cartilage. Their flesh became a vortex of change that ended only with death, when it slid off their skeletons to pool on the cavern floor.

Ulrik heard the cries of sagas cut short. And he raged.

Far more sagas grew longer in deed and glory. For every brother who fell, dozens of daemons were rent asunder, blown apart and crushed. The battle was ferocious. It was also brief. His armour covered in ichor, his breath turning into a snarl, Ulrik suddenly found there were no more abominations to destroy. The cavern was awash with foulness. Bodies lay in heaps. Their forms were slowly melting into nothing.

Inhuman whispers and babbling came from deeper in the tunnels. The Wulfen and Murderfang were about to run through the doors after their prey.

'Halt!' Grimnar roared.

The Wulfen stopped in their tracks. The slaughter of the daemons had eased the confusion caused by the teleportation. Killing was something they understood, and this had been a good hunt. Ulrik saw traces of rationality return to them. They bowed to Grimnar. Murderfang, still under the influence of their presence, waited also. Unintelligible mutters growled from his vox speakers.

'The enemy is on the run, Great Wolf,' Njal Stormcaller said.

'And we will keep him running. Our wait will be short.'

Volkbad Wulftongue stepped forward. *'Indeed,'* he said. *'I am in vox contact with elements of the defence forces. The Midgardians are coming to join us.'* The leader of the Shieldbrothers spoke approvingly. The Terminator pack dwarfed any mortal, but they could appreciate valour even in that humble form.

'They are still fighting?' Ulrik asked.

'Barely. What remains of their units are converging on this point.'

The mortals arrived a few minutes later. Some found their way down from the surface. Most came from the tunnels. They were ragged from battle. Their uniforms were torn and caked in mud, dust and blood, and their eyes were haunted. They had beheld sights no mortal should even imagine.

Their exhaustion fell away as they entered the Space Wolves' presence. Their determination was renewed, though they gazed fearfully at the Wulfen.

While the mortals gathered, forming themselves into something like squads, Grimnar spoke over the vox with Egil Iron Wolf. Several times, Ulrik heard him ask the Iron Wolf to repeat himself. Communications were going to be difficult even over these relatively short distances.

When Grimnar was done, he asked Wulftongue, 'Are you able to track the teleportation homers on the surface?'

'There are some fluctuations of the signal,' Wulftongue said. 'It is strong enough for now.'

Grimnar nodded. 'Well enough,' he said. He raised his voice to speak to the full company. 'Strike Force Fenris has taken the Magma Gates,' he announced. 'The Iron Wolf is ready to advance. Now we will reclaim Midgardia. As above, so below. We advance together, scouring each zone of the abomination. The daemon will find no refuge, nowhere to regroup. Brothers, *to war!*'

With those words, he loosed the Wulfen. They ran into the tunnels, Murderfang close behind. The tunnels were barely wide enough for the passage of a Dreadnought, and his roars were bounced around the narrow stone confines, echoing ahead, a horn blast of doom.

The Space Wolves followed. Past the doors, there were three tunnel entrances. Rather than reduce the effectiveness of the company by restricting his warriors in tight confines, Grimnar divided the strike force between the three passages.

'All must be cleansed,' he declared.

Ulrik moved with Grimnar and his Wolf Guard down the central tunnel. He was one step behind the Great Wolf, ahead even of his champion, Arjac Rockfist. The Wulfen were howling much further ahead. Ulrik needs to have them in his sight. He needed to bear witness.

They encountered no daemons for the first hundred metres, only their bodies, shredded by the Wulfen. Then the tunnels branched again. And then again. And again. At each intersection, Grimnar divided the strike force further. The smaller squads could advance more quickly. The Space Wolves spread through the caverns of Midgardia. The great scouring had begun.

Daemons lurked in the darkness. They attacked from the shadows, lunging out from side passages, ventilation shafts and crevasses in the walls and cave roofs. They were scattered. They stood no chance. Flamers, bolters, thunderhammers and the Stormcaller's conjured lighting burned them to ash or smashed them to pulsing flesh in pools of ichor. They barely slowed the advance.

'Where are they all?' Arjac asked as he smashed a plaguebearer against a wall with Foehammer. The daemon slid to the ground, its upper torso and skull turned

to mush. 'Not all at the surface, I hope. No sport in that.' The Man-Mountain marched by himself just behind Grimnar. His huge frame filled most of the tunnel.

'They will be closer to the habitation zones,' Ulrik said. 'Where there is prey.'

The tunnels thus far were access routes, exhausted mining seams, and maintenance shafts. The few larger caverns the Space Wolves had passed were warehouses and turbine rooms where huge fans created wind for the underworld, circulating the air. They had seen a few mutilated remains, but very few signs of the citizens of Midgardia. Ulrik presumed they had sought shelter in their homes. Concentrated together, they would have presented desirable targets for the daemons – so many victims, so many to suffer and to see others suffer in turn.

Massacres that would now be avenged.

More tunnels, more divisions, more speed. The Wolf Guard caught up to a pack of Wulfen. Daemons appeared and died in seconds.

Hours into the advance, Ulrik heard Grimnar call Egil Iron Wolf's name several times, then curse.

'What news?' Ulrik asked.

'None now,' Grimnar said. 'Not for some time.' He cursed.

'They were advancing well.' The Iron Wolf's forces were moving entirely in armoured vehicles. The mist at the surface was so corrosive it could dissolve armour.

'Until they reached a swamp. The daemons have been hitting them hard.'

'They can't free the tanks?'

'This is what I hoped to learn. I've heard nothing for almost an hour. In his last vox transmission, the Iron Wolf was cursing about spores eating through armour and flesh. Now he doesn't answer. We have no vox contact with the surface.'

'How far have we come without their cover?' Ulrik asked. If the tandem advance had broken down, Strike Force Morkai would be much more exposed to a counter attack.

'Wulftongue has lost the signal,' said Grimnar. 'We cannot tell where Strike Force Fenris is.'

'If we purge...' Ulrik began. He was interrupted by the angry growls of the Wulfen. 'The enemy is close,' he said.

They heard the daemons before they saw them. There was a rasping sound, as though the tunnels had begun to breathe. The noise grew louder, becoming the skittering of claws, the dragging of blades, the snarls and chanting of thousands of abominations. A great tide was coming in from all directions.

The tunnel ahead of Grimnar's squads curved to the left. The air filled with a cloying odour. It worked its way through the rebreather of Ulrik's helm, reaching behind his eyes. It sought to lull him. It invited him to lay down arms and surrender to a dream of excess. He snarled, shaking free of the unclean illusion. The Wulfen howled and raced forward, enraged by the malevolent scent.

Grimnar raised the Axe Morkai. 'Rend the abomination limb from limb!' he shouted. The Space Wolves charged as one. They rounded the corner and barrelled into a huge cluster of Slaaneshi fiends. The daemons lashed out with pincers and stingers and ceiling vents disgorged flamers. They fell in the midst of the Space Wolves, the fire of change washing over the warriors.

Bells began to toll. From behind came the monotone chants of the plague daemons. They hacked at the Grey Hunters bringing up the rear. Fell blades cut through ceramite. Disease ate at the souls of heroes.

The Space Wolves hit the daemons with fire and blade. The Wulfen cut abominations in half with single blows of their relic weapons. Mounted on their backs, the stormfrag auto-launchers responded to the neural impulses of the Wulfen. The grenade explosions were huge in the tunnel. They blasted craters of flesh, splashing the cavern walls with wet, broken chunks of daemon.

A daemon dropped in front of Ulrik. His momentum carried him through the full burst of its wyrdflame. Change seized him. It sank claws into his being and sought to remake him. It fought with another force of transformation. The gift of the Wulfen was there. He felt the beast rage against the daemoniac influence. Its hold on his soul was deeper. The flames could not touch him. He retaliated with a different flame, incinerating the form of the daemon with plasma.

The wrath of wolves overwhelmed the plague of daemons. Grimnar's squads stormed over and through the enemy. The more daemons there were, the more prey there was. The advance did not slow. It accelerated. A cleansing flame of bestial rage swept through the tunnel.

Ulrik emerged from the wave of daemons covered in ichor. He paused for a moment to take in the state of his brothers. There had been losses, and there were serious injuries. These were only fuel for anger. Terminators and Wulfen thundered on. On the squad channels, Ulrik heard how easily breathing turned to growls. The gift was growing stronger. So were the warriors.

He ran on forward again, catching up to Grimnar. 'The spirit of the wolf burns high in our brothers,' he said. 'We cannot be stopped.'

The Great Wolf's face was grim. 'I fear the Iron Wolf has been, or worse,' he said. 'The daemons have had the opportunity to mass a counter attack.'

‘What of the rest of Strike Force Morkai?’

‘Stymied, I think. I cannot reach all of them. Those who answer cannot yet break through the ambushes.’

‘So only we are advancing.’

Grimnar nodded. ‘So it would seem. We strike on,’ he said. ‘We will plunge our claws into the enemy’s heart and rip it out.’

‘The others will triumph too.’

‘They will,’ Grimnar affirmed. He growled with such conviction, it seemed to Ulrik the words themselves had the power to shape reality.

Though the tunnels continued to branch, Grimnar no longer divided the force. The squads plunged down the larger passages. Here they had liberty of movement along with the power to smash the foe. The daemons attempted repeated ambushes. They were torn to pieces for their pains.

The temperature climbed as the Space Wolves moved deeper and deeper underground. They reached settlements built into large caverns. Streams of lava flowed across the floors and interconnected walkways and living platforms hung from the ceilings. The people of Midgardia had lived inside their forges, suspended above a killing heat and had braved molten death the way the people of Fenris confronted the cold. The mining and manufacturing communities were small. Each had been home at most to a few thousand. They were all empty now, broken tombs. Pieces of bodies littered the platforms. Flesh without bones was draped across thresholds and hung from windows. Flayed skeletons were suspended from metal frameworks, still dripping blood. They were coated with oozing, viscous slime and buzzed with otherworldly insects. The metalwork on the walls of the suspended habs had been defaced and the engravings of wolf heads and hammers had been gouged by claws. The new markings formed runes that writhed in the corner of the eye.

The deeper the Space Wolves went, the worse and more elaborate the desecrations became. Bodies were fused together into altars of bone. On the central platform of one settlement, a dozen mortals had been assembled into a single rune. Ulrik smashed the sculpture as he marched past. The violence he did to the dead was a necessary evil to free their souls of these new, cursed bonds.

He could not read the runes. No human could without suffering moral damage. Even so, the traces of meaning scraped at the edge of consciousness. The same four runes kept repeating. These were names. Their frequency was increasing, as was their size, as if the names were being shouted louder and louder.

A summoning.

‘We are seeing pieces of a ritual,’ he told Grimnar.

‘Ongoing?’

‘It has been completed,’ Stormcaller answered. ‘The energy of the wyrd is present, but fading. Something grave has already transpired.’

They went through more settlements, deeper beneath the ground, the air wavering in the heat, the tunnels flickering orange, lit by lava now always close at hand. There were more ambushes. The daemons attacked now at wherever the passages were at their narrowest and movement most restricted.

There was blood. Brothers fell. But so did each wave of abominations, utterly extinguished.

Settlement 529 was larger than the others the Space Wolves had traversed, though it too occupied a single cavern. A fallen sign by the access walkway read *Deepspark*. The citizens had given 529 a name. There were none now to speak it. The community was another grave. There were fewer bodies here and none were intact. All were burned, as if the cavern had become a giant crematorium.

The Wulfen moved cautiously along the wide metal walkway. They growled warnings, their hackles up. There was no threat visible, but Ulrik could feel the imminence of presence. Something pressed hard on the air, stretching the membrane of reality.

‘The foe is close,’ Stormcaller said.

‘From what direction?’ Grimnar asked.

‘I cannot tell. From the wyrd.’

Ulrik glanced over the railing of the walkway at the floor of the cavern. He hissed at what he saw.

‘That is why,’ he said, and pointed. The lava channels had been altered. They had become the four runes. Molten rock flowed through unholy names.

‘The four runes are joined,’ Stormcaller said. ‘Four names have become one. We approach the heart of Midgardia’s torment. The great powers of Chaos have united. The hordes we are fighting are commanded by a unity of daemon lords.’

‘Then their destruction will be Midgardia’s liberation,’ said Grimnar. ‘Do you hear, craven scum?’ he bellowed. ‘The sons of Fenris have come to rip you from this realm! You do well to hide, but do not think you will escape us!’

The squads reached the centre of Deepspark. The platform was large and had acted as a town square. A chapel to the Allfather and hall of sagas were built on opposite sides. Walkways and metal suspension bridges converged onto it, creating a nexus point in the web of iron paths.

The membrane tore.

Warp rifts opened up over four major walkways. Behind the Space Wolves and ahead, to the left and the right, reality wailed and disgorged a legion of abominations. This was more than an ambush. Daemons bounded and lurched over the bridges, clamouring for the blood of heroes.

Four hordes. Four armies of the Ruinous Powers. Towering over each were four princes. The rifts tore wider at their arrival and the cavern trembled with the sounds of their names, becoming a volcanic fanfare. Lava erupted from the runes. Tongues of rock licked up towards the walkways. The edges of the channels contorted into lips. Grinding voices paid tribute to the forces that gave them life.

Mordokh.

Arkh'gar.

Tzen'char.

Malyg'nyl.

The names were attacks. Each syllable stabbed behind Ulrik's eyes. And though he had escaped the meaning of the runes, their constant repetition had left its residue on him. When the names sounded like the tolling of granite bells, he knew what they were. He knew the daemons. They insisted upon it. They marched to collect their choice prey, and they would have their victims die in the knowledge of what great being had brought them low.

Grimnar laughed. He raised the Axe Morkai with both hands. It flashed with its own wyrd energy, hungry to punish the daemons with the same force that embodied them.

'Good sport at last, brothers!' he roared. 'For Russ! For Fenris!'

'*For the wolftime!*' came the answer. It turned into a howl that shook the cavern to its roots. From vox speaker and bestial throat, the howl went on and on.

Rage and animal hunger were one.

Ulrik rode the fury of the gift. Its fire consumed his thoughts. At the Great Wolf's side, amidst brothers who had fought for ten thousand years, he charged towards the princes of damnation.

Anger. Instinct. Reason.

Harald acted on all three in the moments after *Runeclaw's* crash. The gunship hit with brutal impact, but there was no time to recover. Anger gave him the impetus to leap to war. Most of his Wolf Guard had survived. So had their mounts. They battered their way out of the ruin.

Instinct had him lead his brothers to the side of the gunship facing away from

the fortress walls and gun emplacements.

Runeclaw had landed on a ridge a short elevation above the battlefield. Harald followed reason and climbed onto the roof to see the extent of the disaster. Instinct again granted him speed. He was exposed for a few seconds only, and they were enough. What he saw made the anger burn ever higher.

Reason held him back from pointless recklessness.

Instead, he saw the need for the meaningful kind.

The Deathwolves had lost the coherence of any formation. They were in scattered squads at best. Some fought on their own, the only survivors of the drop pods destroyed in mid-flight. He saw two other things, which his reason seized upon.

He saw the enemy. There were Khornate daemons, but it was not those fiends who held the redoubts and turned their huge batteries on the Deathwolves. It was not daemons who had concealed the energy signatures of the defences. The enemy who used human weapons was on the field now, picking off the individual Space Wolves, eroding the strength of Whitestalker. Mobs of mortal cultists were loose upon the glacier, harassing Wulfen and Deathwolves. They were the thralls of vicious masters in horned, distorted power armour. The Traitors were clad in blue and green.

Alpha Legion.

Traitors and worse than traitors. Beings so consumed by deception there was nothing left. They defiled the honesty of war.

He felt the revulsion, the hatred. Instinct and anger sought to hurl him roaring from the roof. Reason prevailed. And it was thanks to reason he understood the other crucial sight: another stricken Stormwolf streaking overhead, its engines burning. It left a contrail of black smoke as it came in at an angle over the battlefield, overshooting Morkai's Keep. Harald made out its markings. It was *Sigurd's Might*, carrying Feingar's Coldeyes, one of the packs of Wolf Scouts.

The gunship disappeared beyond the fortress. Harald dropped down from *Runeclaw's* roof. As he leapt onto Icetooth's back, he pictured the geography of the glacial mesa. The fortress did not rise from the centre of the plateau. It was built at the edge of the glacier's flank. Where *Sigurd's Might* had gone down, there was only the greater drop to the wastes below.

Unless...

There was an ice ledge that jutted out partway down the ice cliff. If fate had smiled and the gunship had come to rest there...

Harald switched the vox to a private channel. 'Feingar,' he said.

In the background, he heard groaning metal. Then Feingar said, 'Yes, Lord Deathwolf.' His voice was calm, assured. The voice of a warrior who knew exactly what his task was. 'We have already begun.'

'Good,' Harald said and ended the communication.

The Thunderwolves awaited his orders. He said nothing about Feingar. The Alpha Legion were masters of misdirection and deception. To deceive them, there could be no communication with the Coldeyes. He had to keep the knowledge of what might happen from all. Even from himself, if he could.

Meaningful recklessness.

'We storm the gates,' he told the Thunderwolves. 'Take the field, and call our brothers to us. We will gather our strength once more, and our hammer will batter the foe to extinction.'

Do not think about Feingar, he told himself. Do not speculate. Ride to destroy the Traitors. Let it suffice, and it will do more than that.

He turned Icetooth and charged down the slope from *Runeclaw*. Canis and the others followed. They joined in his war cry. The wolves bayed, as enraged as their riders.

Harald rode hard for the centre of the plain. Turrets turned his way. Shells chewed up the glacier, stitching a line of craters as they sought the Thunderwolves. Ice exploded in dagger shards. But Harald's pack was fast. It defied the gunners and barrelled towards the Traitors. The shelling veered away towards other targets, avoiding the new masters of Frostheim.

The Thunderwolves fell upon a squad of Alpha Legion warriors who had surrounded a wrecked drop pod. They were pouring bolter fire into three Grey Hunters struggling from the ruin. The Space Wolves still fought, but their wounds were crippling. Two more of their brothers lay motionless beside them, their blood staining the ice crimson. The clamour of the shells covered the approach of the Thunderwolves. One of the Traitors turned at the last moment and received Gladius full in his helm's grille. Harald's strength and Icetooth's speed drove the blade through the armour and out the back of the Traitor's skull.

The Thunderwolves cut through the squad's line, killing three upon the instant. They turned and circled the others, strafing them with bolt pistols. The Alpha Legionnaires were caught between the fire of the riders and their former victims. They fought back with bolters millennia old. At the sight of the archaic models, Harald thought again of the Wulfen's ancient weaponry. His mind saw dark connections to be made, but he rejected them for now. All that mattered was to kill and to fight on.

As the Thunderwolves cut down the squad, the battlefield responded. Using his peripheral vision, Harald saw many brothers struggling to converge on his position. The Wulfen fought with blind rage. There was no order there.

Not all Deathwolves were making for him. Lone figures loped across the ice, howling and changing, consumed by the curse.

So many dead. So many transformed.

He rounded on the Alpha Legion with renewed fury. He let his anger strike for him. He did not let it become him. His anger was human, and so it must remain.

As the last of the Traitors went down, Harald turned to find the next kill. It found him instead. With autocannons blasting, a daemon engine emerged from behind the ruins of the drop pod. The round-bodied monster walked on two legs, had arms and a thing that might have been a head – Harald could not imagine what machine it might once have been before corruption and possession had transformed it. Now it was walking destruction, a thing with the drake's maw and autocannon limbs. The head dug its teeth into the buckled hatch of the pod and tore off a chunk of metal as if it were flesh, before devouring it. At the same time, its arms opened fire. Shells of phosphor blazed across the ice and into the Thunderwolves. Brother Onarr and his wolf blew apart. The flaming remains pattered down to the glacier. Harald and Icetooth tore through the falling flames, heading down and left, towards the other side of the drop pod.

The dire engine devoured more wreckage, then took a heavy step forward. Its feet punched deep holes into the ice and the surface melted from the monster's infernal heat. It did not let up in its fire, turning the area around the drop pod into a storm of phosphor and exploding ice. The Grey Hunters saw their rescue turn to their destruction. They turned their guns on the monster. It turned its attention to them. They disappeared in the hail of autocannon shells, their armour vaporised.

Harald rounded the drop pod and came up behind the beast, leaping from Icetooth and landing on the engine's back. The monster's carapace was a heavily shielded sphere. The beast responded to his presence by turning sharply to the left and the right, trying to shake him off. Harald hung on, grasping the grille of one of the vents. A searing wind blew from the internal furnace, scorching his face. The monster's arms and neck flailed, but Harald was out of their reach. He lunged forwards and grabbed hold of the edge of the carapace from where the plated, articulated neck emerged.

The other Thunderwolves circled the engine. Two more packs had joined the fight and their bolt pistol fire hammered against the carapace. The explosive

shells did no more than crack the surface. The fiend stamped and roared, firing in a circle. Incandescent death pursued the Thunderwolves. It found two more.

Cursing, Harald held on to the carapace with his left hand and, with his right, he pulled krak grenades from his belt. He thrust them into the join between the neck and body, fixing four grenades to the beast, clustering them on the same point. Then he jumped away from it.

He landed on his feet. He was inside the circle of the monster's fire. Its blind maw craned down at him, inorganic teeth snapping.

The grenades went off, one after the other, melting through the plates of the neck, tearing open the beast, reaching its burning core. A geyser of flames shot out from the base of the neck. The daemonic engine staggered. A machinic scream of pain tore itself from its throat. Its autocannons fell silent. Then it fired again, without a target now, blasting at the entire world in its agony. The shells were of its body, and it consumed itself in its pain. The fire jetted higher, pushing the wound wider, until the monster cracked in half. Harald shielded his gaze from the searing light. The beast disappeared into its own pyre.

Iceetooth bounded over the crevasses opened by the shells. Harald climbed onto his back once more. He led the charge anew. There could not be pause, no chance for the turrets to acquire the Thunderwolves as targets.

Harald became the gravitational pull of the battlefield. Riding down the centre of the glacier towards the gates, he was visible to all, and he pulled his scattered brothers towards him. The enemy sought to block their gathering, the keep's batteries and daemonic cannons smashing Deathwolves to pulp and ashes. Cultists swarmed over them. Traitors picked off lone figures with cold precision, but they too were caught by the gravity. They responded to the threat of the Thunderwolves, and closed in.

The Wulfen and the Deathwolves who had fallen to the curse were nearer too. They followed the path of frenzy. It led them to the groupings of prey.

Batteries on the left and right converged fire, two gatling cannons and a battle cannon creating an impassable curtain of shredding, pounding shells before the gates of Morkai's Keep. There was the line, Harald knew. If the Thunderwolves reached that point, they would go no further. Even so, he urged Iceetooth to run faster. Keep up the pressure, he thought. Keep the enemy's focus.

He had stolen the battle's momentum from the Alpha Legion, despite their massive advantage in armament and position. The advantage was temporary. The Alpha Legion had time. Stalemate would result in the Traitors' victory.

Meaningful recklessness, he thought. And so he led the charge as if the artillery

barrage meant nothing.

There were enemies still to kill before the terminal point. Ahead of him was a band of elite Traitors butchering Long Fangs. Off to the right, a lone Alpha Legion warrior moved through the struggling Deathwolves like a serpent of lightning. He was a blur. In the rush of his own speed, Harald could not catch more than a brief glimpse of the warrior. He left a wake of blood, Grey Hunters and Blood Claws falling to his assault. A handful of Wulfen and Blood Claws, enraged by this viper of war, abandoned the effort to reach their Wolf Lord and turned on the nearer foe. Turret fire dogged their movements. They were wounded and slowing as they tried to surround the Traitor. He welcomed them to their end. Harald saw the circle tighten. He looked away at the nearer band of Traitors, coming into reach within seconds. When he checked again, severed heads lay on the glacier. Only two Wulfen still fought, and one had lost an arm.

The sight of that single killer spiked Harald's rage. There, he was certain, was the lord of the Traitors, and the cause of Frostheim's suffering. Harald's rage urged him to turn Icetooth from his path and hunt the warlord down.

Reason held him back.

His place was before the gates. There were more of his brothers fighting their last here. And these Traitors were closer.

'Fenris!' Harald roared as the Thunderwolves raced through explosions of ice shards. He pulled Glacius back, preparing to pay the Alpha Legionnaires in kind and decapitate the first warrior in his path.

He swung. The axe blade whistled through empty air. His target had moved with sinuous grace. The entire band shifted their focus as if the Thunderwolves had been their goal all along, and the Long Fangs merely bait. Harald's foe was suddenly at Icetooth's left flank. His bolt pistol cracked. Shells slammed into Harald's shoulder plate and ceramite splintered. The impact knocked him from Icetooth and onto his back. A Traitor aimed a power sword at his neck, the weapon flashing with *wyrd* energy, but Harald rolled to his right, firing his bolt pistol to the left. The glacier hissed where the sword struck. There was no sound of his shots finding their mark. He leapt to his feet and the sword was in front of him, plunging towards his chest. He knocked it aside and sidestepped, and a bolt shell exploded against his left shoulder.

A sudden fog surrounded him. It was a smear of jagged black and white. He could not be sure how many Traitors he fought. They moved like a single being, one opponent always in his weak spot. From some unknowable distance, he heard Canis call his name, then snarl. Weapons clashed on all sides, invisible

beyond the wall. The sword, one or many, stabbed and slashed. He blocked most of the strikes, but the Traitor, one or many, had the advantage of speed. Blows hit home, cutting through the seams of his armour. When he struck back with Glacius and bolt pistol, he attacked nothing but air.

One or many, they were wearing him down.

In the distance, a bellow of pain that descended to a gurgle.

Feingar, make your move, he willed.

A blinding flash of energy. Silver pain sinking between his ribs.

Feingar, we are out of time.



CHAPTER 8

Ritual's End

Flies.

Flies and blood.

Blood and change.

Change and pain.

The daemons' gifts to the mortal realm filled Deepspark. Four princes of Chaos marched to war, and there was no aspect of the cavern that was not one with their corruption. The floors of the walkways squirmed and bit. The rails rotted and burst with sprays of venomous spores. The walls of hab-huts ran with smoking blood. Death sang its music of seduction, inviting the mind to the contemplation of the sensuousness of blood, the decadence of severed limbs, the headiness of butchered meat.

And in the midst of the manifold tortures of corruption, there was the gift. The purity of the hunting animal. The total abandon of bloodletting, yet bloodletting not without purpose. Threats must be extinguished. Prey must be run to ground. There was no corrupt pleasure in the kill. There was no shrieking, mindless vengeance. There was necessity. There was instinct.

The arm of the warrior and the fury of the beast.

Ulrik saw and understood all this. The war in Deepspark was an avalanche of sensation and revelation. He fought through walls of daemonic flesh. His body acted on instinct so rapid and urgent that his mind barely registered his actions. In his left hand, his plasma pistol fired and fired and fired, the rhythm of the bursts stopping just short of the critical overheating – blast after blast of destructive light, incinerating the skulls of abominations, melting their torsos. His crozius smashed form and devastated flesh. Plague daemons, Khornate swordlings, the clawed dancers of Slaanesh and the pink nightmares of Tzeentch pressed in on him, struggling against each other to strike the killing blow. He waded deeper and deeper, cursing them in the name of Fenris and its spirits. His voice was raw with the power of his anger.

He bellowed, though he did not hear his own words. No speech could be heard over the fire of storm bolters and white-noise roar of flammers, echoing and building against the cavern walls. Ulrik reacted to the daemonic strikes, countering them and retaliating with killing force, yet the eyes of his spirit looked past the immediate foe. His struggle was to reach the daemon prince ahead of him. It was the one embraced by the runic, soundless cry of Tzen'char. It had a form. It was winged. It had limbs. It towered over the lesser daemons of its horde. But its form seemed contingent on the whims of its will and the moment. Its movements had a swift, stuttering quality, as if fragments of time kept falling away. Its arm was raised, and then its talons were impaling one of the Wulfen without it ever bringing the arm down. As Ulrik drew nearer to its position on the platform, he saw an impossible depth to the daemon's shape. To stare into its being was to see an existence stretching far beyond this place and time. The depths twisted and coiled and branched. Each flicker of its being brought a different version of the daemon from elsewhere. The closer Ulrik came, the more he had a sense he was approaching an incarnated labyrinth.

He had to reach the daemon. He had to fight alongside the Wulfen, who had surrounded the abomination. This struggle was a fulfilment of destiny. This was what the Wulfen had returned to fight. The gift of their bestial fury was the answer to the curse of the daemons. They had clawed their way through and over the lesser foes, straight to the creators of the madness.

And they were being cut down.

No, Ulrik thought. No.

He would not let them fall. He howled, and the beast raced through his veins. He would tear through the abomination before him with his bare hands.

At his shoulder was an even greater roar. Logan Grimnar barrelled into the horde. His face was contorted. His eyes were red and blazing. His fangs were bared.

The way forward became clear to Ulrik. The frenzy of the Wulfen must not be contained, but embraced and channelled. It was spreading now, and it would destroy the abominations before them. It would be Midgardia's salvation.

Ulrik's howl became a cry of savage joy.

The blow hit the side of his head. It was so powerful it seemed to strike his entire frame. It knocked him to the floor of the platform. He fell on his back and darkness crept in at the edges of his vision. It withdrew, but the cavern spun. His limbs did not obey his commands.

The daemon prince of Nurgle loomed over him. Beneath a faceplate, its mouth gaped in a leprous, contemptuous grin. Flies poured out from beneath its teeth. It lurched away from him, its jaw unhinging to spew a vast swarm of insects over the Space Wolves.

Ulrik struggled to clear his vision. Feeling was returning too slowly to his arms and legs. The blow from Mordokh had been more than physical.

Rise. Rise and hunt.

The beast gave him strength. He started to move. He still could not see clearly. The war was a dizzying vortex. The platform rocked and suspension cables parted with a vicious twang and a walkway covered in struggling Space Wolves and daemons fell to the lava below.

A lithe, reptilian presence stood over him. The Slaaneshi prince held the eyes of Ulrik's brothers in one hand. It reached towards his helm with the other.

And then its face split in half. The Axe Morkai was deep in its skull.

Grimnar, baying his wrath, struck faster than Ulrik had ever seen. He moved with the speed of the unleashed predator.

The change was taking hold.

Rise.

Hunt.

Ulrik snarled. Crimson fury flooded his mind. He lurched to his feet. His vision at last began to clear, and Grimnar had already moved to a new target. Malyg'nyl was on its knees, elegant claws struggling to hold its head together. The Khornate Prince Arkh'gar clashed with Grimnar. Already the daemon was bleeding.

Yes, Ulrik thought. He staggered forward to the Great Wolf's aid. The gift takes us to victory. 'We will open the way for Russ!' he shouted. 'We shall—'

Laughter cut through his words. Tzen'char spread its wings. It spoke a sentence that flickered and looped through the labyrinths of existence and madness as the daemon's form did. A scream of the immaterium howled from the centre of the cavern. A flash of unlight cut through Ulrik's armour and slashed his flesh. Bleeding from a hundred cuts, he kept his feet. He blinked his eyes clear.

The daemons were gone.

On the platform and walkways, Terminators and Wulfen stopped in mid-strike.

The shriek of the wyrd passed. It was replaced by the rumbling crack of stone. The walls and ceiling of the cavern split. A web of crevasses spread and joined. All of Deepspark shook as the end approached.

Ulrik howled his denial. But the wounded, weakened body of Midgardia did not care for prophecy. The cracks built to thunder, the thunder to a mountain's roar, and then everything fell.

Fell into the crushing dark.

A shape ripped through the fog.

Massive. A thing of sinew and claws and fangs.

A monster of the bloody past and of the uncertain future.

Yngvir slammed an Alpha Legionnaire to the ground. He stood on the Traitor's back and seized his helm then twisted and yanked back, tearing off the Traitor's head. He held his trophy high, blood raining down upon him, and howled.

The fog began to break up. Yngvir lashed out into the fading limbo, and suddenly he was holding another enemy by the arm. The Traitor turned his blade against Yngvir. The Wulfen was the equal in speed to the Traitor. With the fluidity of the perfect kill, he released the Traitor, evaded the blow, and countered with his relic frost claws. He struck with both arms, shattering the Alpha Legionnaire's armour and plunging the huge blades through the Traitor's carapace and into his hearts.

Now the fog was gone. So was the intricate, interlocking choreography of battle that had turned the band of warriors into a single being. Yngvir had broken their unity. Harald struck, and this time he found his target. Glacius severed the sword arm of the warrior before him. The Traitor stumbled back, spraying blood. He raised his bolt pistol. Harald plunged his axe blade through the Traitor's chest.

Around him, the Thunderwolf cavalry brought down the enemy with the full savagery of vengeance. Every blow Harald landed had a richly satisfying impact.

And all the time he thought, three times. Yngvir had saved his life three times. He owed a transcendent debt of honour to the warrior he believed to be cursed.

An explosion shook the upper levels of Morkai's Keep. Armourglass blew outward. The turrets fell silent. At last, Harald heard Feingar's voice on the vox once more. *'The Keep is ours, Lord Deathwolf.'*

Harald stood back from an Alpha Legion corpse. He yanked Glacius from the skull. He looked over the battlefield.

'Your Scouts have given us victory,' he told Feingar.

The elite Traitors were slaughtered. With the artillery down, the superior numbers of the Deathwolves were now turning the tide. A new inevitability had come to the glacier. Harald pushed aside the thought of how many brothers had been lost. There would be time to mourn and celebrate their sagas when the war was won.

He looked for the Alpha Legion warlord. There, a few hundred metres away. He had lost the purpose in his movements. He hesitated, motionless in the midst of the battlefield's eddying smoke.

Are you wondering what has happened to your guns? Harald thought. He pounded across the glacier towards the warlord. Are you wondering what happened to your victory?

The warlord's hesitation was fatal. He was a motionless target. He did not see the enormous silhouette close in on him through the smoke. Icetooth slammed into the Traitor with the force of a tank. The warlord fell, rose again to defend himself, managing to strike the thunderwolf once before Icetooth brought him down with finality. The crack of a snapping spine sounded over the glacier.

Icetooth stood guard over his prey until Harald arrived. The Traitor reached for his lost sword, but he was broken. He could not move. He looked up at Harald. 'The ritual is complete, lapdog,' he said. 'Killing me won't change anything.' Empty insults, empty defiance. The Traitor sought some shred of pride, some measure of dignity at his end.

Harald granted him neither. 'Maybe not, but it'll make me feel better.' With a single blow from Glacius, he decapitated the Alpha Legionnaire.

Harald kicked the head away from the twitching body. He had not lied – the execution was satisfying. It did make him feel better.

Then he looked out across the glacier, at the blood and the cost, at the rampaging Wulfen, and at his transformed brothers. He thought about his debt to Yngvir, and of the contagion that had shut down strategic thinking.

Damnation and salvation. He did not know how to separate them.

Or if there was still time to do so.

The three Stormwolves flew through the tumbling wreckage of the Grey Knights vessel. As they angled towards the surface of Valdrmani and made for Longhowl, chunks of the battle-barge became a hard rain upon the moon. There were few remains of any size. Compared to the vessel that had been, Krom was passing through the ashes of cremation.

On the bridge of the *Winterbite*, he had seen the ruby streak of the nova cannon shot, the flash. By the time the frigate had reached the far side of Valdrmani, the fires had faded. There had been nothing but the night of the void, the ashes, and the terrible absence.

Too late, he had thought. Too late. You held true to your oath too long.

Then the augur array had detected the fading signature of engines on the surface of the moon.

The Stormwolves flew close to the domes and passed over the landing site of the Stormravens. The gunships were intact.

‘Smoke rises from the main gates,’ said Hrothgar, looking through the viewing block.

‘A good sign,’ Krom said. ‘They went in fighting.’

The Iron Priest gestured at the domeplex. ‘A big area to search.’

Krom nodded. ‘We’ll make for the nova cannon emplacement. We can start there. I would want vengeance for my ship.’

‘Aye,’ said Hrothgar.

‘*Lord Dragongaze*,’ Egil Redfist voxed from his Stormwolf. ‘*Bolter flashes three hundred metres to port.*’

Krom had been focusing on the column of the cannon. He looked down in the direction Redfist had indicated. The Blood Claw leader was right – a spot midway down the height of the dome strobed with the distinctive lightning burst of gunfire.

‘Take us there,’ he ordered.

The squadron dropped, closing in until it was flying almost flush with the anti-rad crystalglass skin of the dome. The interior of Longhowl was lit with a sick glow that pulsed slowly from red to green to bone-grey. Monstrous shadows cavorted. They grew in number the closer the gunships came to the flashes.

‘Good,’ Krom said when they reached the position. The word felt strange to utter. When had he last been able to look at anything and declare it *good*? He had just passed through the dust of a Grey Knights battle-barge. He beheld the settlement of Fenris’ moon overrun by daemons. And now he saw a small band of Grey Knights surrounded by daemons led by a bloodthirster. The Grey

Knights were moments from being overwhelmed. Even so, Krom said, 'Good.' The battle was not over.

There was still time.

'On my signal,' Krom voxed to all three Stormwolves, 'breach the dome.' Over an open channel, he broadcast, 'Grey Knights! Incoming! Brace!' Then he said, 'Now.'

Skyhammer missiles and lascannons struck the dome. The battle flashes vanished behind the greater blaze of explosions and the dome wall burst outwards, turned to powder in the violent decompression. The atmosphere of the dome rushed out, carrying with it the daemonic horde. Las and twin-linked heavy bolters pulverised the enemy cloud. More missiles streaked towards the bloodthirster as it sailed out, carried by a wind more powerful than its wings. It disappeared in the multiple blast.

'Take us in,' Krom said when the last of the daemons were scattered over the surface of Valdrmani.

The three Stormwolves flew in through the huge breach. Their assault ramps dropped before they had finished settling. Krom strode down first. His Fierce-eye's Finest followed.

The Wulfen came last.

The Grey Knights said nothing but headed for the nearest exit from the void-struck quadrant of the dome. Even when both armed parties were on the other side of a sealed bulkhead and in a full atmosphere again, they remained silent. Krom eyed them and their captain. He could list a dozen reasons effortlessly why he had contempt for their order, but their actual presence was impressive. It was more than the superlative Aegis armour and the perfection of the Nemesis power weapons. The cold nobility commanded respect.

Krom felt the strength of the captain's gaze even beneath the Grey Knight's helmet. When the captain's attention passed from Krom to the Wulfen, Krom chose that moment to laugh.

'You can embarrass us with thanks a bit later,' he said. 'Once our work is done. I am Krom Dragongaze, Wolf Lord of the Drakeslayers. My men and I are honoured to fight at your side.'

The Grey Knight captain looked a few moments longer at the Wulfen. Serkir held them in order. Low growls issued from their throats, but their attention was focused beyond the Grey Knights. The captain faced Krom.

'Brother-Captain Stern of the Third Brotherhood,' he said, and held out his hand. Krom did the same. They clasped forearms.

‘We have to move quickly,’ Stern said. ‘Whatever the daemons are doing, it is almost done.’

As the tension of the immediate moment passed, Krom noticed the growing pressure behind his eyes. It throbbed with the pulsing of the unnatural light. ‘There is something...’ he began.

‘Yes,’ said Stern. ‘You feel it, then. There is a ritual at work on this moon.’

There were two exits from the storage bay in which the Fierce-eyes and the Grey Knights found themselves. Stern headed for the one on the left.

‘What sort of ritual?’ Krom asked. He signalled for his warriors to follow. The Grey Knights had fought their way this far. They would have done so for a good reason.

‘I do not know, as yet. I believe the destruction of our vessel is part of its work, however. Every event since the formation of the warp storms has been part of a foul pattern. The ritual is reaching the critical point. We cannot permit its completion.’

‘How do you know this? Or that we must go in this direction?’

‘Are you a psyker, Lord Dragongaze?’

‘I am not!’ He made a sign of maleficarum.

‘Yet you can feel the energy. Imagine, then, my experience of it.’

Time, Krom thought. In the end, there was even less than he had dreaded.

Lord Skayle had fallen silent.

In the astropathic choristrium of Longhowl’s command sanctum, Hekastis Nul walked the circumference of the glyph, musing about the silence. The Dark Apostle felt little concern. It did not matter to him whether Skayle lived or died. Nul would be dead himself in a few minutes. But his anticipation of the great moment was acute, and his preparations were complete. He filled the remaining seconds by contemplating the implications of his lord’s defeat. Perhaps the Dogs had reclaimed Frostheim. Maybe Svellgard too, or at least established a foothold there. Unless they had performed Exterminatus on their own moon, it was impossible that they should have banished millions of daemons in so short a time.

‘Did you lose Frostheim, Lord Skayle?’ Nul mused aloud.

Standing around the glyph, his cultists bore witness as it approached its great flowering. The astropaths of Longhowl were alive, after a fashion, but they no longer had flesh or minds. Imprisoned in their cradles, their power, their pain, their sanity and their selves had been siphoned into the glyph. They were melted,

deformed figures, still convulsing in agony, still screaming, kept alive by the hunger of the thing they were feeding.

‘If the Dogs have Frostheim,’ Nul reasoned, ‘they now have hope. If they have hope, what follows will be richer still. Therefore, Lord Skayle, your death is part of our pattern.’

The power in the choriatrium spiked. So did Nul’s anticipation. He stopped pacing and looked at the glyph, standing between two of his cultists.

The glyph was daubed in daemons’ blood. It occupied the centre of the choriatrium, embracing the astropathic cradles. Its light was as painful to behold as a sun’s. The light in the chamber had ceased to shift colours. Now it was a jade of mind-stabbing intensity. Soon the glyph would bring about an apotheosis of pain, and with it, the end of the Space Wolves. The blast that would destroy Longhowl and all within was no more than a by-product of its true goal.

The goal was the vision – the vision that would travel across the galaxy. The vision of Grey Knights murdered by the Space Wolves. The vision for the entire Imperium.

The final moments slipped away. As they did, the Dark Apostle felt another tension begin to fold and cut the air. A being that was many and one was coming from many directions and none. The Living Labyrinth approached.

Nul said, ‘I am glad, master, you have chosen to witness the moment.’

On the other side of the choriatrium, his wards at the entrance collapsed, banished. Their sudden release of energy blew the doors apart. Shredded metal flew across the dome. The dogs who did not understand they were already dead rushed in.

You are too late. I will show you.

Hekastis Nul stepped into the glyph.

Energies erupted around him.

Beyond the doorway, Krom saw the fate of his Chapter reduced to seconds. He charged into the chamber. By his oath, he would prove those seconds to be enough.

‘*Cultists!*’ Stern voxed. ‘*In cover behind the cradles.*’

‘Petty little men,’ said Krom as lasgun fire streaked his way. ‘Drakeslayers!’ he called. ‘Put them down!’

The Space Wolves spread out through the room. Their fire wreaked monstrous havoc on the mortals. The cultists were armed, and shot back, but the effort was futile. They did nothing to slow their execution.

‘Kill them all and kill them now!’ Krom ordered. Faster, he thought. Faster. He streaked around the circumference of the chamber, his axe cutting down another cultist with every step. He was a scythe. He fired into the cradles as he ran, killing the astropaths too. His one thought was to stop the energy flow into the glyph.

‘Commendable vehemence,’ said Stern. *‘Lord Krom, keep them busy. My warriors and I will finish this. Brothers! The Rite of Nullification!’*

The Wulfen and the Fierce-eye’s Finest hit the humans of the choristrium like a cyclone of bolter shells and blades. The air filled with a deluge of blood, but the energy was still building. Green light lashed out from the centre of the glyph. The pressure was so intense, Krom’s ears began to bleed. The dome of the choristrium cracked. The walls and floor vibrated, on the verge of shattering outward. The seconds were falling away to nothing.

The Grey Knights began their counter-ritual, moving into the glyph. Hurry, Krom thought, glancing away from the killing to see their progress. They were moving with deliberation, marching directly into the blazing energy, pushing against it. The wyrd lashed out. It could not keep them away.

Hurry, Krom willed. There is no time.

There was a concussion at the centre of the glyph. For a moment, Krom thought the end had come, but it had not. The pressure still mounted. The light strobed with madness and shrieked with rage. From its blinding core came a Dark Apostle of the Alpha Legion.

Stern plunged into battle with the Traitor.

Krom was less than a quarter of the way through his run of butchery. There were hundreds of cultists, scores of astropaths. His warrior blood cried out to attack the Traitor, but he did not. His oath had kept him inactive on Fenris so he might be here, now, at this most critical juncture. His duty to Fenris now was massacre.

Even the Wulfen did not turn to the greater prey. They understood. Without the energy from the cultists and the astropaths, the Dark Apostle was a single figure, all but powerless.

Drain the glyph.

So much blood. So many mortals dead now, and yes, the terrible light wavered. The rhythm of the searing pulses of jade light slowed. It became syncopated. The light began to fade.

Now the last of the cultists was cut down, and the cradles of the astropaths were all destroyed. The Dark Apostle was on his knees, impaled by Stern’s sword. He

was shouting. He shrieked the name Tzen'char. The sound of the name hurt Krom's eyes.

But the light was fading. The light was...

No...

No!

The energy built once more, faster and more terrible than before. More than blinding. The dome of the choriatrium seemed to melt and shake at once. Reality tore, and the chamber filled with daemons. The air around the contours of the glyph vomited into existence pink horrors and flame daemons by the hundreds. A firestorm of wyrdflame hit the Space Wolves. Blood Claws turned to glass and shattered. Wulfen were devoured by new maws on their own bodies. The daemons fell on the Grey Knights, disrupting the counter-ritual. The Grey Knights cut down the abominations as fast as they attacked, but they attacked without cease. The flood would come until the purpose of the glyph was fulfilled.

The blast was imminent. Krom's mind filled with jagged fragments of betrayal and mutation.

The wyrd roared with awful birth, and the dread owner of the name howled by the Dark Apostle appeared. It stood before Krom at the edge of the glyph. Majestic in triumph, Tzen'char spread its wings.

'Stern!' it roared. The Grey Knight looked up.

Krom charged at the daemon. He rammed his shoulder into the abomination's back. It was like running headlong into a mountainside. The impact stunned him, but the daemon fell. He emptied his bolt pistol into its skull. Suddenly he was staring at the front of the daemon. The maze of its being reassembled its configuration in the blink of an eye. It was prone, and then it was standing, and its sword had pierced Krom's left shoulder. His pistol arm went numb. He stepped forward into the blade, moving to within striking distance again, raising his axe.

The daemon laughed. It raised its right hand. Energy danced from the claws, as blinding as the unholy light of the glyph.

Serkir leapt at Tzen'char. His frost axe came down on that right arm. It bit deep. The labyrinthine being shifted again. Serkir's blade went all the way through and struck the floor. The daemon's arm was untouched. Serkir's attack had gained Krom one second more of life.

And the daemon laughed. The sorcery on its talons became a roaring nimbus as it reached for Krom.

He could see nothing except the light. The burning, destroying light.

Except now the light was filled with prayer. And the daemon was screaming.

The malignant jade shattered, replaced by the purity of silver.

The energy of the wyrd came apart, broken from the inside. Stern was there. Stern had entered the eye of the wyrdstorm. Krom had turned the daemon's attention away, and the Grey Knight had stabbed his holy sword into the centre of the glyph.

Tzen'char screamed. All the daemons screamed.

The build-up of energy was reversed. Even the glyph shrieked.

The light of judgement consumed all that was unholy.



EPILOGUE

It had been Scout Dolutas, wounded almost to death by the savagery of mutated Space Wolves. It had not even had to speak to deliver its message to Araphil, to give him the answers he dreaded. The Dark Angels had seen the images held by the skull. They had been reluctant to draw the terrible conclusions, but their thoughts had been inexorably pulled towards that chasm. They had taken the bait, and the great event had begun.

It had been Master Astropath Asconditus. Into Sammael's ears it had delivered questions and suspicions, all constructed around the tiny fragments of another lie. It rejoiced in the perfection of its art as Sammael, reluctantly, slowly, but inevitably, had walked still further down the path.

Then that form of Asconditus had served its purpose too. Another kill, another disappearance on the Rock. The little touches gave it so much pleasure. It watched the Dark Angels begin to suspect an alliance between the Space Wolves and a daemonic party. It tried to remember when it had last tasted such delight.

Now it was the seneschal Vox Mendaxis, and it waited upon Grand Master Azrael. Events were proceeding so perfectly, it had no need to act for the

moment. There were no messages to twist. No orders to misinterpret. Azrael had the facts: Chaos taint in the entire Fenris system, Space Wolves transforming into Wulfen. Nothing but the truth.

Azrael was still regrettably hesitant. For the moment, though. Only for the moment.

Under the hood of Vox Mendaxis, the Changeling suppressed a smile.

The vox system was working again in the damaged command centre of Morkai's Keep. The unit was a powerful one, and some of the interference had diminished. Harald established contact with Sven Bloodhowl, holding the World Wolf's Lair on Svellgard. The Iron Priests of both companies used the signals from the two fortresses to amplify each other.

And now he heard Krom Dragongaze's voice, too.

Harald stood at the gaping hole in the command centre's wall. He looked up into the night sky of Frostheim while he spoke to Dragongaze.

'Brother,' he said, 'it is good to speak to you.'

'And you. What news of the Great Wolf?'

'None. Communication with Lord Iron Wolf has been fragmentary. The situation on Midgardia is dire. All contact with Grimnar's strike force has ceased.' He paused. 'The Iron Wolf says there was an earthquake...'

'I will not believe it,' said Dragongaze. *'We have hope now. Let us use it well. We purged Valdrmani. We will free our other worlds too.'*

At the augur bank behind Harald, Feingar shouted, 'Vessels translating in-system!'

Harald rushed back inside. 'Who?' he asked.

'Dark Angels,' Feingar said. He tapped the augur network's pict screen. One reading after another appeared. 'Ultramarines. Iron Hands...' More than a dozen different Chapter runes appeared over the vessel signals. Then came those of Knightly houses. Then mass transporters of the Astra Militarum. The fleet was immense.

'Dragongaze,' Harald said, 'Are you picking up the same signatures?' He had so many doubts. There had been so much deception. He had to be sure.

'We are,' the Fierce-eye said. *'It looks like a substantial portion of the Dark Angels fleet before we even count the rest.'*

'It is their fleet,' Feingar said. Then his eyes widened. He pointed to a rune many times larger than the rest. 'Russ,' he swore. 'That's the Rock!'

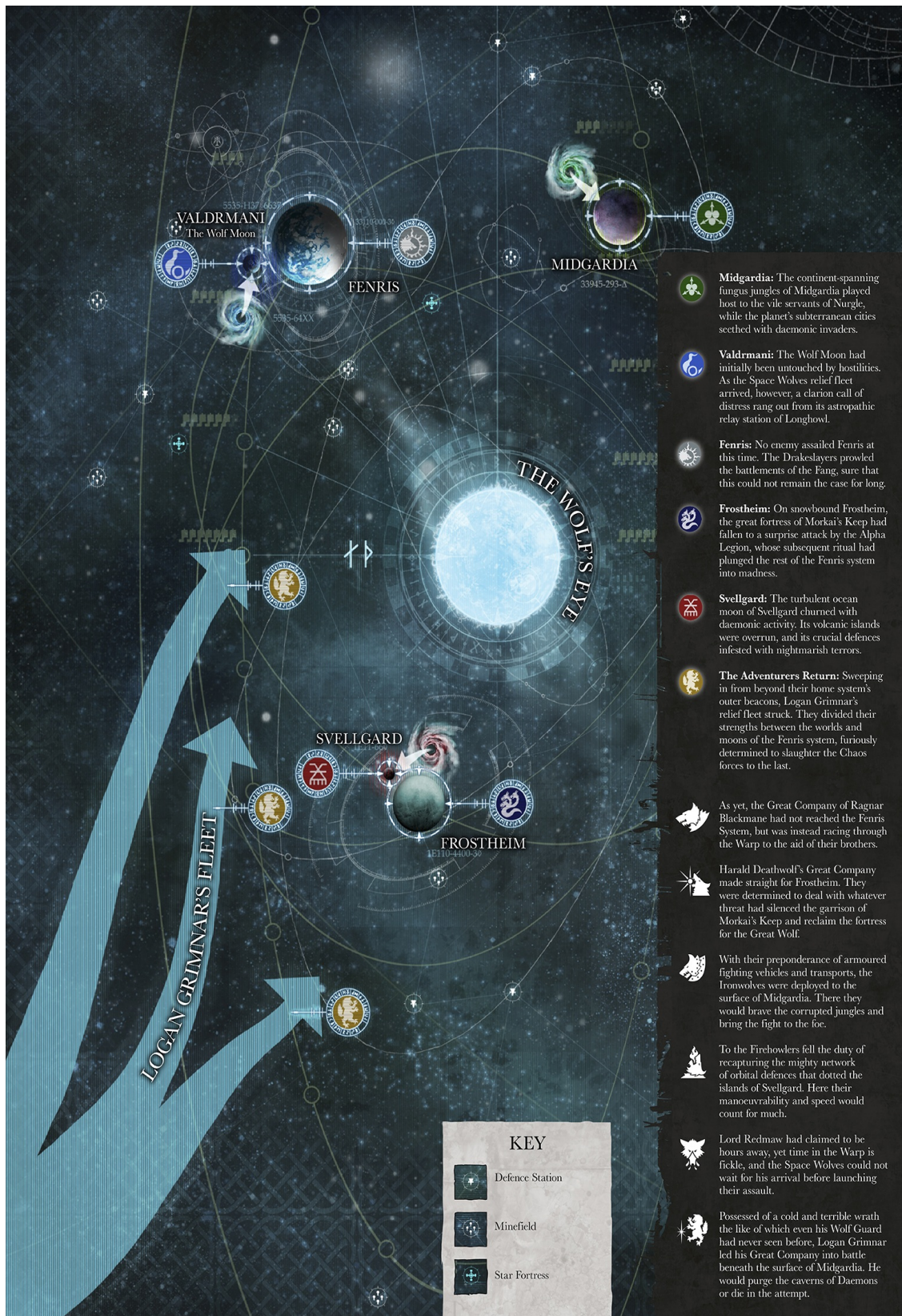
Doubts. Patterns. Dooms within dooms. Harald felt the events click together

like the gears of a terrible machine. As Feingar updated the positions of the fleet minute by minute, Harald returned to the breach once more. He watched the sky.

He witnessed the passage of a moon, one that did not belong in the Fenris System.

He saw the movement of stars he knew to be warships.

He was still watching when the sky flared, and the bombardment of the Fenris System began.



Midgardia: The continent-spanning fungus jungles of Midgardia played host to the vile servants of Nurgle, while the planet's subterranean cities seethed with daemoniac invaders.

Valdrmani: The Wolf Moon had initially been untouched by hostilities. As the Space Wolves relief fleet arrived, however, a clarion call of distress rang out from its astropathic relay station of Longhowl.

Fenris: No enemy assailed Fenris at this time. The Drakeslayers prowled the battlements of the Fang, sure that this could not remain the case for long.

Frostheim: On snowbound Frostheim, the great fortress of Morkai's Keep had fallen to a surprise attack by the Alpha Legion, whose subsequent ritual had plunged the rest of the Fenris system into madness.

Svellgard: The turbulent ocean moon of Svellgard churned with daemoniac activity. Its volcanic islands were overrun, and its crucial defences infested with nightmarish terrors.

The Adventurers Return: Sweeping in from beyond their home system's outer beacons, Logan Grimmar's relief fleet struck. They divided their strengths between the worlds and moons of the Fenris system, furiously determined to slaughter the Chaos forces to the last.

As yet, the Great Company of Ragnar Blackmane had not reached the Fenris System, but was instead racing through the Warp to the aid of their brothers.

Harald Deathwolf's Great Company made straight for Frostheim. They were determined to deal with whatever threat had silenced the garrison of Morkai's Keep and reclaim the fortress for the Great Wolf.

With their preponderance of armoured fighting vehicles and transports, the Ironwolves were deployed to the surface of Midgardia. There they would brave the corrupted jungles and bring the fight to the foe.

To the Firehowlers fell the duty of recapturing the mighty network of orbital defences that dotted the islands of Svellgard. Here their manoeuvrability and speed would count for much.

Lord Redmaw had claimed to be hours away, yet time in the Warp is fickle, and the Space Wolves could not wait for his arrival before launching their assault.

Possessed of a cold and terrible wrath the like of which even his Wolf Guard had never seen before, Logan Grimmar led his Great Company into battle beneath the surface of Midgardia. He would purge the caverns of Daemons or die in the attempt.

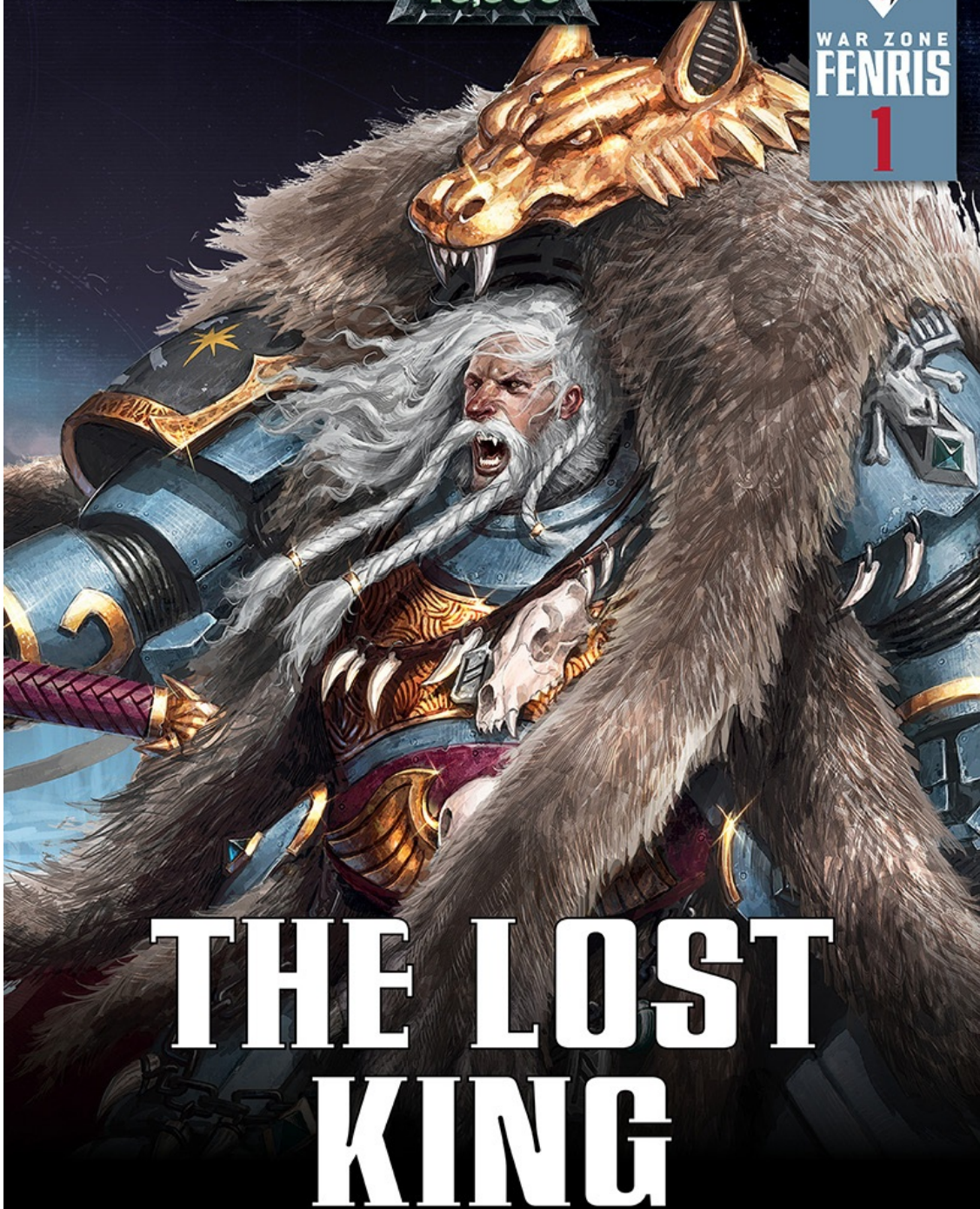
KEY

-  Defence Station
-  Minefield
-  Star Fortress

WARHAMMER
40,000



WAR ZONE
FENRIS
1



THE LOST KING

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

THE LOST KING

Robbie MacNiven

The World Wolf's Lair, Svellgard

Logan Grimnar – the Fangfather, the Old Wolf, the High King of Fenris – was dead.

So the daemons said. They howled and shrieked and gibbered the news from warp-spawned throats that shouldn't have been capable of intelligible words. But the servants of the Dark Gods had never concerned themselves with nature's constraints.

Logan Grimnar is dead!

'They lie,' Sven growled. The young Wolf Lord was clutching his doubled-headed battleaxe, Frostclaw, with such intensity that his whole armoured body was shaking. 'They *lie*.'

'They are warp-scum,' Olaf Blackstone said. 'Lying is the sole reason for their existence.' The white-pelted Bloodguard stood behind and slightly to the right of his lord, yellow eyes surveying the bleak hills that lay barely a mile across the icy sea. Those hills now undulated with a living carpet of daemons, like an infestation of lice swarming over a rotting skull. They had appeared not half an hour before, crawling like primordial nightmares from the depths of Svellgard's oceans. They were massing for an attack, cohorts of lesser daemons marshalling beneath the nightmarish banners of their gods, and as they did so their deranged shrieks carried across the cold waters to Sven and the rest of his Firehowler Space Wolves.

'They're trying to provoke us,' Olaf said. 'Hoping we divide our forces.'

Sven Bloodhowl opened his mouth to reply, then paused as the hammering of bolter fire broke out behind him. His Great Company were still purging the last of the defences at the heart of the World Wolf's Lair, burning the shrieking

daemons from their holes with gouts of blazing promethium before mowing them down with bolter fire.

Progress reports trickled back constantly over the vox as the noose tightened around the last wyrdspawn left in the depths of the fortified missile control nexus. Nine packs, the entirety of Sven's Great Company, were stalking the bunkers, redoubts and weapon emplacements arrayed in concentric circles around the rockcrete keep dominating the island's centre. They would not stop until they had hunted down every last creature from the first daemoniac wave to have overrun the island.

'I'm provoked,' Sven said as the bolter echoes were snatched away by Svellgard's cruel wind. 'What's the status of the Drakebanes?'

'Ten of the pups still able to wield a chainsword.'

'And the Firestones?'

'Only five. Wergid is among the dead. The survivors are still hungry though. As are our Wulfen.'

'Then you shall lead them, Olaf. Vox Torvind, Kregga, Uuntir and Istun. Have them return from the central bunkers and assemble here. And two Thunderhawks.'

'The *Godspear* and the *Wolfdawn* have both refuelled and rearmed. They are inbound from the fleet, expected arrival in ten minutes.'

'Then they shall be the vehicles of our wrath. A wolf should never suffer a liar.'

In truth, Sven had not killed enough today. His heart still raced and his fingers itched. The thought of wyrdling filth defiling not just Svellgard, but all the worlds of his home system, brought up an instinctive urge to lash out. He had not had word from any of the other battle-zones for hours – as far as he was aware Harald Deathwolf was still consolidating on nearby Frostheim, while Egil Iron Wolf and the Great Wolf were engaged on Midgardia. The daemoniac taunts reached him again from across the narrow sea, and he shuddered.

They were wrong. Logan Grimnar was not dead. He couldn't be.

'To attack is unwise, my jarl,' Olaf said, still watching the nearby island. 'There are doubtless more such filth spawning from the rifts below the waves all about us. If we split our forces we invite annihilation.'

Sven turned to face his old packmate, and although rage still burned in the Wolf Lord's grey eyes, his tattooed features and strong, stubble-lined jaw were clenched with a tight smile.

'Are your fangs getting too long for all this, Olaf?' he asked. The Bloodguard champion returned his gaze levelly, without expression, too old to be so easily

drawn.

‘Don’t tell me a hundred-odd kills are enough to sate you for one day?’ Sven pressed. ‘If the Bloodguard aren’t with me I’m sure the Oathbound would take your place? Or the Firewyrms?’

Olaf still said nothing, but there was a chill whisper of naked steel as his wolf claws slid free from his gauntlets.

‘If you wish to teach monsters not to lie,’ the Bloodguard said, ‘then I will be as happy as ever to assist with the lesson.’

Seven miles south of the Magma Gates, Midgardia

‘Logan Grimnar is dead.’

The daemon choked on the words, a flood of writhing maggots spilling from its locked jaw. Egil Iron Wolf slammed his boot down on the fallen plaguebearer’s skull, smashing it to a grey, squirming pulp.

‘Strike Force Morkai, come in,’ the Iron Wolf snapped into the vox. His only answer was static discord. It had been the same for over an hour now. He fought back the urge to stamp down again on the plaguebearer as it sank back into the ooze that had once been the jungle floor.

‘*My jarl, we must return to the Ironfist.*’ The voice of Conran Wulfhide, the pack leader of his Ironguard, cut in over the link. ‘*We can’t stay out here. This entire place is toxic. It will eat us alive.*’

Egil knew Conran was right, but still he hesitated. The purple spore jungles of Midgardia had been transformed beyond all recognition by Nurgle’s rotting touch, once-mighty trunks now swollen with blight and infested by gigantic maggots, their leaves turned black with decay. The ground underfoot had been reduced to a foetid, cloying pus-bog that writhed with worms and sightless, snapping maws. Egil’s Great Company had been battling through the corruption for hours, part of the two-pronged counter-attack designed to sweep the wyrdlings off Midgardia and retake its subterranean cities. The offensive, however, was becoming bogged down in every sense of the word.

Even worse, the runic *Juvjk* script that flashed across Egil’s visor warned him that the poisonous fug clouding the air was rapidly stripping away layer after layer of his power armour. Even reinforced ceramite, sealed by the Iron Priests and blessed by the Wolf Priests, was no match for Midgardia’s acidic air. The rest of Egil’s Great Company was faring no better – howls of agony occasionally interrupted the vox chatter as the nightmarish atmosphere penetrated an

unfortunate warrior's armoured joints or ate through his visor's lenses, causing flesh to blister and slough away in just a few heartbeats. Egil had ordered all packs to withdraw to the sealed interiors of their transports while he continued to try to make contact with Strike Force Morkai. With the Great Wolf, Logan Grimnar.

'Back to the *Ironfist*,' Egil finally said. Around him heavy bolters and lascannons hammered and cracked as the armoured might of the Ironwolves sought to keep the shuffling, slime-soaked Nurgle Tallybands at bay. For the past hour the droning wyrdspawn had showed little desire to close with the spearheads of Egil's stalled advance, apparently content to soak up their firepower among the blighted trees and let the spores of the infested jungle do their work for them. Egil had been forced to halt his grinding offensive when the vox had lost all contact with Grimnar's own thrust, which was supposed to have been keeping pace below, following Midgardia's labyrinth of underground tunnels and passageways. Communication had been intermittent right from the beginning, but now it was gone entirely. And the counter-offensive wasn't even a day old.

Egil was the last member of the Great Company to return to his transport, slamming the sealing rune on the hatch behind him. Within *Ironfist*'s red-lit hold Conran and the five other members of his pack waited, their grey battleplate befouled with a thick layer of pestilential filth. They were all that remained of Egil's Ironguard. His Terminators had been lent to Grimnar when he had descended into Midgardia's depths with the Champions of Fenris. He felt their loss almost as acutely as he did that of the Great Wolf himself. He activated the cogitator monitor bolted above the hold's crew hatch, uploading the latest combat schematics to its gently pulsing screen display.

His Great Company had been divided into four Spears of Russ, one for each point on the map. Fists of Predator and Vindicator battle tanks supported Rhinos, Razorbacks and Land Raiders filled with the foot-packs. They'd punched out from their base at the Magma Gates and swept all before them. Now, they were stalled and separated, the blinking runes representing each Spear static and beset by assaulting icons.

The Midgardian defence forces acting as their reserves were suffering even worse, their fragile human physiologies no match for the deadliest of the Plague God's diseases. Egil watched their casualty percentages for a moment, seeing them tick up steadily with each passing second. Even the most basic military mind would have acknowledged that their position had become an impossible

one. The Iron Wolf activated his vox, blink-clicking to add the Ironwolf pack leaders from all four Spears to the channel.

‘This is Egil,’ he said. ‘Without word from Strike Force Morkai the gains we have made over the past two hours are no longer tenable. We must assume it is possible for wyrdspawn to infiltrate our interior lines through the unguarded tunnels below us. If they successfully break our Midgardian defence force reserves then each Spear of Russ will be cut off from the Magma Gates’ landing zones, as well as each other. I am therefore ordering Strike Force Fenris to withdraw by packs towards the Magma Gates. Once there we will commence a staggered withdrawal into orbit, starting with the defence forces and ending with my own Spear. Pack leaders, acknowledge.’

As confirmations trickled back down the link, Egil had to fight to stay silent. His cold, calculated orders, so characteristic of the Iron Wolf, concealed the war which raged in his armour-plated breast. Logically a staged withdrawal was the only option. Strike Force Fenris had stalled deep inside an utterly inimical environment, was on the brink of overstretching even as it was outflanked, and the enemy’s numbers showed no sign of decreasing. To continue to advance ran the risk of seeing his entire Great Company overrun and annihilated, their remains eaten up by Midgardia’s hideous plague jungles.

But the Old Wolf was missing, somewhere below. If Egil took a backwards step now he knew he would be forever remembered as the one who had abandoned Logan Grimnar. If he saved his Ironwolves by ordering a retreat, he damned himself forever in the eyes of his brothers. He snarled with frustration and keyed the vox again.

‘An addendum to the previous orders. Conran Wulfhide of my own pack will be assuming command of the Strike Force with immediate effect, until my return.’

Conran’s head snapped up, and he began to protest. Egil carried on, speaking over him.

‘I will be taking the remainder of my Ironguard underground, to re-establish contact with the Great Wolf. The evacuation from the Magma Gates is to proceed as previously outlined. Within that framework, all pack leaders are to defer to Conran as though he speaks with my own voice. Is that clear?’

More affirmations, and now complaints too.

‘*Let the Cogclaws come with you, lord,*’ Kjartan Stone-eye said over the vox. ‘*My pack have been firing blind into spore clouds and wading through daemon spoor all day. Let us continue the Iron Hunt, lord, I beg you.*’

‘*Is what the wyrdlings are chanting true?*’ Nokdr Iceclaw of the Snowfangs asked before Egil could respond. ‘*Is the Great Wolf dead?*’

‘That is what I’m going to disprove,’ Egil said. ‘And the rest of you will follow my orders, or Russ help me I will tear the fangs from the jaws of each and every pack leader in this Great Company. Show some discipline, Ironwolves.’

‘Lord—’ Conran began. He’d stood and was facing the Iron Wolf, bowed slightly in the hold’s confined space. Egil raised a gauntlet before he could go any further.

‘I know what you’re going to say, Conran. There are no other options. I cannot let us all die here, and Midgardia’s depths are no place for an armoured column. But nor can I abandon the Great Wolf. You will take the Ironwolves to the Magma Gates, and I will see you all again on the bridge of the *Wolftide*.’

For a moment it seemed as though Conran would argue, but instead he just shook his head, his jaw locked and gauntlets clenched.

‘The nearest recorded entrance to the Midgardian underworld is three hundred yards south-west of this position,’ Egil said, activating a map uplink on his visor’s display. ‘Directly towards the nearest Tallyband. It’s an old mine chute, designate Beta Eleven-Seven. The *Ironfist* will take us that far, and then you will assume command and get my Wolves clear of this hellhole. Understood?’

Conran nodded, saying nothing, no longer looking at the Iron Wolf. Egil knew better than to push his obedience any further. He linked to the Land Raider Crusader’s internal vox.

‘Torvald, all guns live. For Russ and the Allfather, take us forward!’

Morkai’s Keep, Frostheim

Canis Wolfborn crouched, ignoring the ache in his joints. The day’s bloodletting had been long and fierce. His armour bore the scars of daemon blades and bolter rounds alike, and the foul ichor splattering its surface had only just begun to crust. The champion of Harald Deathwolf reached out and grasped the corpse before him by the pauldron, rolling it onto its back.

The body was that of Snorri Redtooth, one of the Grey Hunters belonging to Erenn Frostwolf’s pack. Canis only knew as much because he recognised Snorri’s musk. The Grey Hunter’s head was missing.

Nor had his pack-kin been any more fortunate. Canis had been tracking their corpses deep into the vaults of Morkai’s Keep for almost an hour. The only one he’d yet to find was Erenn himself.

The bodies of the Grey Hunters were certainly not alone down in the keep's depths. Through betrayal and vile maleficarum the forces of Chaos had seized the Space Wolf fortress, presaging the beginning of the daemonic incursions across the system. In the furious battle to recapture the stronghold from the treacherous Alpha Legion, fighting had spilled down into its lowest levels. Canis had counted half a dozen Space Wolf bodies, mostly Blood Claws whose names he'd forgotten, though he recalled their scents. They were outnumbered by the rag-clad cultists that carpeted the vaulted halls and corridors. All around the mark of furious retribution was clear, in the bloody hacking and tearing of chainblades and the vicious, gory detonation of close-range boltfire. There were even three Alpha Legionnaires, the stale stench of ancient corruption coming off their bodies turning Canis' stomachs.

But all of them had fallen at least two hours previously. Snorri and the rest of the dead Grey Hunters were fresh.

Canis carried on down the corridor, noting the location of Snorri's body on his vambrace marker. Behind him Fangir, his loyal thunderwolf, padded silently. Canis could sense the huge animal's tiredness mirroring his own, by its slow, heavy panting. The beast's wiry fur was matted with blood, and not all of it belonged to the enemy. But there was no time to stop. Not yet. Like the thunderwolf, Canis had caught a scent. There was something still down here, something that shouldn't be.

At the end of the corridor open blast doors marked the entrance to the keep's main armoury. On its threshold Canis found Erenn. The pack leader's cuirass had been split by a blow of incredible force, and his breastbone carved open, exposing the bloody mess of the Wolf's inner organs. Inside the armoury more cultists lay butchered, but none of them could possibly have dealt such a wound.

Two other doors branched off from the entrance, one to the left and one to the right. Canis closed his eyes and inhaled, opening his senses. There was still something lurking beneath the acrid stench of weapon discharges, the reek of stale sweat, the tang of blood and the pack musks of his fellow Wolves. Something at once sickly sweet and bitter, wholly unnatural. He had caught it at the entrance to the vaults, as the rest of Harald's Great Company had begun the process of collecting their dead and incinerating heretic corpses. He had slipped away from the grim work, his instincts bristling. The fight was not yet over.

The smell was coming from the right-hand door.

It was the entrance to a munitions shaft, the floor sloping downwards into darkness. The lumen strips overhead had failed. Canis began to descend, trusting

to his sense of smell. Even for a Space Wolf it was keen. Canis was a natural-born predator, the only member of the Deathwolves able to match their lord, Harald, in the Great Hunt. Shadows were nothing to him.

There were no more bodies. It seemed as though the fighting had passed this section of the vaults by, though that didn't explain why the blast door had been lying open. The unnatural smell grew stronger, a wyrdling stench that caused the Space Wolf's hackles to rise.

Ahead he sensed rather than saw the shaft coming to an end, widening out into what he assumed was a munitions bunker. Behind, Fangir began to growl, the throaty noise reverberating through the narrow space. Canis slid his wolf claws free.

There was a noise from ahead, his taut senses making it sound hellishly loud. The skitter of claws on rockcrete. The stench grew even worse.

'Wyrdlings,' he snarled softly to Fangir. His suspicions had to be right. Harald needed to be warned. He keyed his vox.

That was when the first daemon launched itself, screeching, from the darkness.

Longhowl, Valdrmani

For the first time in a long time, Krom Dragongaze found himself on his knees.

It was not an injury that had driven him down, though blood still trickled from the rapidly clotting wound in his shoulder. The daemon prince's blade had bitten deep, but the Wolf Lord had suffered worse. No, it was the realisation of just how close they had all come to annihilation.

Even before he had joined the ranks of the Sky Warriors, death had held no fear for Krom. But there were worse things in the galaxy than death. As the daemonic invasions had spilled out across the system, Longhowl, the primary astropathic beacon on the Wolf Moon of Valdrmani, had come under attack.

The fact that the Chaos-tainted glyph planted in Longhowl's choristorium would probably have obliterated Krom had never figured in his thinking as he'd led the assault to destroy it. What had driven him to his knees was the knowledge that, if he had failed, the sigil's infernal wyrdling power would have lanced a false image of his Space Wolves slaughtering Imperial subjects into the mind of every psyker in the Segmentum. The illusion would have cemented the belief that the sons of Russ had turned traitor, and set the Imperium's might against the whole of Krom's Chapter. The thought made his flesh crawl with disgust.

A silver gauntlet, blackened by fire, appeared before the Wolf Lord. He clasped it and allowed himself to be hauled up by its strong grip.

‘Well met, Dragongaze,’ said Captain Stern. The Grey Knight had removed his helmet, his noble features streaked with sweat. His armour was still smoking from the hellish wyrdfire which had engulfed it, the marks of warding and protection inscribed into the silver aegis plate glowing bright.

‘It is over?’ Krom asked as he looked around. Moments before, the choristorium had been packed with howling daemons and the wailing, melted remains of the station’s possessed astropaths. Now it was a scorched, ichor-splattered wreck, the astropaths reduced to skeletal husks in their burned-out cradles. The Chaos glyph that had been the epicentre of the warp ritual was split and broken, the multihued light that had blazed from it now doused. Krom remembered Stern forcing his way through the icon’s wyrdflame and plunging his crackling force sword into its heart, shattering it. The moments that followed were a blur – blinding light, shrieks of frustration and terror, a splitting pain that still throbbed dully behind Krom’s eyes.

But the daemons were gone. They had won.

‘It is over,’ said Stern. Around the edges of the purged choristorium Grey Knights and Space Wolves alike were picking themselves up. Not all who had fallen rose again.

‘We must establish contact with Fenris,’ Krom said. ‘Send word that the daemons have been thwarted, and that we are both still alive. That should give those who doubt us reason enough to reconsider.’

Stern nodded. The ritual was supposed to have set the Wolves and the Knights against one another, but even with the daemoniac plot defeated there was no telling how the Imperium was responding to the events in the Fenris System. Massive warp incursions, mutation among the Adeptus Astartes, rumours of treachery – something had set out to destroy the Space Wolves, and it had come diabolically close to succeeding.

‘I must return to the Fang,’ Krom continued. ‘I cannot leave it unguarded a moment longer.’

‘Then go with my thanks. Your assistance here was invaluable,’ Stern said. ‘If you had not left Fenris to come to our aid I could never have stopped the ritual in time.’

‘Bjorn the Fell-Handed saw you trapped and killed,’ Krom said. ‘I would not have left the Fang on any word save his.’

A vox blurt interrupted Stern before he could respond. The signal’s ident code

belonged to Krom's flagship, the *Winterbite*.

'My lord, we are receiving a priority message from the Fang,' said the voice of one of the ship's huscarls.

'Patch me through,' Krom ordered, turning away from Stern. After a moment's static the voice of Albjorn Fogel, chief vox huscarl of the Fang's communications array, spoke to him over the link.

'My lord, our long-range augur sweeps have detected a large fleet translating in-system. The signifier codes are all Imperial. Thus far we've identified Strike Cruisers and battle-barges belonging to the Ultramarines, Iron Hands, Marines Malevolent, Doom Griffons and Shadow Hunters, along with capital ships of the Imperial Navy's 32nd Obscurus sub-fleet, Knight carriers from House Mortan and six Astra Militarum mass transporters. We also believe...' Fogel trailed off.

'Go on,' Krom said.

'My lord, one of the signifiers belongs to the fortress-monastery of the Dark Angels. We believe the Rock arrived in Fenrisian real space approximately twenty minutes ago.'

'Hail them,' Krom said.

'We've tried, lord. They refused to even acknowledge the signal connection. Our ships around Midgardia, Svellgard and Frostheim are also reporting no contact.' Krom broke the connection for a moment to look at Stern.

'A crusade fleet has just entered the system,' he growled. *'Led by the Dark Angels.'*

'It's as I feared,' Stern said. *'Supreme Grand Master Azrael has been shadowing your Chapter since he learned of your... genetic anomaly on Nurades. I suspect he believes the Space Wolves to be tainted.'*

'Fogel,' Krom snapped into the vox.

'Yes, lord?'

'Raise all shields and prime defensive batteries. Advise all our fleet assets throughout the system to do likewise. I am returning to the Fang immediately.'

'Yes, lord. Are we on a war footing?'

'Not unless they fire first.'

'You need to take me to the Rock,' Stern said. *'If they won't open their vox-nets to any communications from us I must speak with Azrael directly.'*

'Your battle-barge is ashes, Stern,' Krom said. *'If you wish to leave this moon you are welcome aboard Winterbite, but I am going direct to the Fang. I have already sullied my oath by abandoning it to come here. I will not compound my*

dishonour further by leaving the Hearthworld to the mercy of fools and zealots.’

‘As you wish,’ Stern said. ‘But once there I must request the use of one of your ships.’

‘And you shall have it,’ Krom said. ‘It would be well if you reached Azrael before he reaches me, because Allfather protect him if he launches a single strike against any part of this system.’

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

The primary command bridge of the Rock was a cavernous place, full of faded glory and shadows that had lain undisturbed for ten millennia. At its heart a great tiered dais rose, each stone step carved with intricate figures telling the long history of the First Legion. The top of the ziggurat bore a throne of brass and steel, bristling with data ports and holo-screens, vox uplinks and runebanks. There sat Azrael, Keeper of the Truth, Supreme Grand Master of the Dark Angels and all of the Unforgiven. Face set beneath his white cowl, he surveyed the bridge below without expression.

Serfs, servitors and data-slaves scurried to and fro amidst tiered ranks of cogitator banks and oculus viewscreens, while menials toiled in the communication pits sunk around the dais, backs bent double, blind to the cold stone columns that rose around them to the distant, vaulted ceiling. The air was thick with darting servo-skulls and fluttering auto-cherubim, their censers filling the air with the cloying smell of warpbane and other sacred unguents. The rattle and chime of cogitators, the crackle of vox horns and the throaty machine cant of the bridge’s choir of course-chartists echoed back endlessly from the stained crystalflex of the viewing ports opposite Azrael.

The bridge, in all its cold stone majesty, dwarfed even the greatest ships of most other Space Marine Chapters. Azrael noted a few of his fellow Adeptus Astartes casting glances up at the highest reaches of the ceiling, swathed in darkness far above. They were assembled around a large, circular holochart near the central nave, laid out before Azrael’s dais. The chart itself was beaming a grainy green representation of the Fenris System into the smoky air, the orbs representing Midgardia, Fenris, Frostheim and their attendant moons revolving slowly around the pallid sphere that was the system’s sun, the Wolf’s Eye. As the briefing began the display flickered, overlaid by red and blue sigils and arrows that plotted the arrival of the crusade fleet.

It was an impressive undertaking, Azrael thought. A stark reminder of the

danger that developing events posed to the Imperium. Normally a crusade fleet took far longer to bring together, never mind fully deploy. Azrael recalled the Antarika Crusade, which he had participated in when he had still been a battle-brother in Sergeant Nefalim's tactical squad. It had first been approved by the High Lords of Terra two centuries before Azrael had even been born. It took two hundred years to assemble the full fleet assets, petition the Adeptus Mechanicus and the knightly households for support, and divert Space Marine Chapters from operations elsewhere. The crusade's nominal leaders had died and been replaced three times over, and entire Army Groups of the Astra Militarum had been disbanded and recruited afresh before the vanguard of the battlefleet had even left its docks.

The force Azrael had brought together was smaller than that of Antarika, but it was still fearsome. Contingents from fourteen Chapters, two Imperial Navy sub-battlefleets and three Astra Militarum Army Groups. Further forces had sworn to assist and were en-route, including Titans of the Legio Dominatus. Only a figure of Azrael's considerable standing and experience could have summoned such strength with so little notice.

Below him, that strength was exemplified by the fourteen Space Marines attending the final operational overview. Among their heraldry Azrael could see Howling Griffons and Red Consuls, the vicious yellow of the Marines Malevolent, the grey battleplate of Shadow Haunters and the silver of one of his Chapter's own successors, the Guardians of the Covenant. Besides those physically present, two of the Adeptus Astartes were represented by throbbing blue hololithic displays – Captain Epathus of the Ultramarines Sixth Company and Iron Captain Terrek of the Iron Hands Clan Company Haarmek. They were both already bound for the world of Frostheim, on the far edge of the system, leading a detachment of the crusade fleet's might.

Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar led the briefing. Azrael had given him the task on the advice of Asmodai. The Master Interrogator-Chaplain had been impressed by his apprentice of late, and Azrael knew how difficult it was to earn the favour of the grim Master of Repentance. Even now he towered like a silent revenant beside Azrael's throne, observing Elezar without comment.

'Midgardia,' Elezar was saying, a gesture highlighting the sphere spinward of the Wolf's Eye. 'The second largest of the Fenris System's three planets, and the world we are currently entering high orbit above. Its surface was formerly a toxic jungle, classed as a death world. The Midgardian natives lived below the outer crust, in cavernous subterranean hive cities.'

‘The past tense is noted, Brother-Chaplain,’ Terrek the Iron Hand said, his voice crackling from the vox horn built into the holo-display projecting him. *‘What fate has befallen them?’*

‘Long-range augur scans indicate the surface of Midgardia has suffered a near-total daemononic infestation. Of the situation underground we have no idea.’

‘Haven’t the Wolves tried to purge it?’ Captain Epathus of the Ultramarines asked, his own holo-form flickering.

‘With two Great Companies, including that of Logan Grimnar himself.’

‘And what has become of them? Of Grimnar?’

‘We are still collating information from intercepted vox transmissions and high-yield surface scans, but it seems their counter-attack was a complete failure. The Great Company known as the Ironwolves are currently evacuating the planet, while the fate of Grimnar and the Champions of Fenris remains unknown. They were last recorded battling the infestation in the caverns below the planet’s surface.’

A murmur passed through the Space Marines. Elezar pressed on.

‘Valdrmani, the Wolf Moon, Fenris’ only satellite,’ he said, indicating the orb slowly circling the white-and-blue sphere of the Space Wolf home world. ‘Intelligence reports that a battle-barge of the Grey Knights Third Brotherhood was destroyed in orbit by a nova cannon sited near the astropathic beacon known as Longhowl. Whether that was due to the daemononic incursion, or represents treachery by the Space Wolves, is currently unknown, as is Captain Stern’s status. Pict footage remotely extracted from Longhowl’s databanks shows vessels leaving the battle-barge for the moon’s domeplex before it was destroyed. If daemononic forces have indeed overrun Valdrmani, it may well be that they are attempting to implicate the Wolves for whatever has befallen Stern.’

‘They need hardly try,’ Captain Vorr of the Marines Malevolent spat. ‘If the stories of the Wolves’... mutants are to be believed.’

‘That is an accusation that will be further investigated as soon as time allows,’ Azrael said. The muttering among the assembled Space Marines died as he spoke, his deep voice carrying easily across the hectic bridge.

‘Right now securing the Fenris System against daemononic incursion is our foremost priority. Once it has been purged, we shall hold the Wolves to account for what they have tried to hide from us. From the Imperium.’

The Dark Angel’s cold words left a gulf of silence in their wake. After a moment Elezar continued.

‘Frostheim, the third and final planet of the Fenris System. It is the site of

Morkai's Keep, which was recently seized by heretic forces before being retaken, it seems, by Harald Deathwolf's Great Company.'

'*What heretic forces?*' Terrek demanded.

'We are still gathering intelligence on the matter. Frostheim is orbited by a natural satellite called Svellgard. The moon's surface is dotted with a number of small islands, sites for a powerful orbital defence battery known as the Claws of the World Wolf. These were recently recaptured from a daemonic infestation which appears to be originating from beneath Svellgard's seas.'

'Are the weapon systems still operational?' asked Bohemund, captain of the Doom Griffons Fourth Company.

'As far as we're aware, yes. Brother-Captains Epathus and Terrek are both en-route there with their brethren as we speak, supported by the Imperial Navy's Four Hundred and Eighty-third Obscurus battlefleet sub-detachment and an Astra Militarum Army Group. They will stabilise the situation.' Both Epathus and Terrek's holo-forms nodded their confirmation, the motion causing them to flicker.

'And if the Wolves do not wish to be "stabilised"?' Vorr asked.

'Then they shall be taught a long-overdue lesson in how to cooperate with their brethren,' Elezar replied. Unnoticed, a smile ghosted across Azrael's lips. He could see why Asmodai favoured the young Interrogator-Chaplain.

'Besides their presence on the system's three planets and two moons, sector defence data-files show that the Wolves maintain two Ramilies-class star forts,' Elezar continued, 'designated *Gormenjarl* and *Mjalnar*. Contact was lost with both soon after the incursion began.'

The rest of his words were drowned out by the voice of Azrael's vox seneschal, Mendaxis, speaking in the Supreme Grand Master's ear.

'*Sire, we have just detected a ship signature not registered with the fleet breaking into real space coreward of our position. Initial scans show it was last registered as a private vessel associated with the retinue of Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay.*'

Azrael's expression remained stoic, but his grip tightened fractionally on the skulls carved into his throne's flanks. Beside him Asmodai, listening to the vox exchange, turned sharply to look at Azrael. De Mornay, the Supreme Grand Master thought. So the old fool yet lived. Of course he'd followed them here.

'*He's hailing us,*' Mendaxis said.

'Accept it,' Azrael replied. 'Throne vid only.'

A small screen, framed by the wings of the aquila, rose from the throne's arm.

For a second the monitor fizzed green with static, before resolving itself into a face Azrael had hoped never to see again.

When he had first met Lord Inquisitor de Mornay the man had been a paragon of Imperial strength – young, iron-jawed, steel-eyed, his red hair cropped close, more accustomed to flakplate than the robes of his ordo. But a century had taken its toll, rejuvenat processes or not. Now the face that occupied the screen was sagging into fat, the jaw-line more jowl-line, one eye rheumy with cataracts.

‘Supreme Grand Master Azrael,’ said de Mornay, his deep voice crackling through the vox horn set below the screen. He was smiling. *‘I am glad to see you again.’*

‘I cannot say the same,’ Azrael replied. He didn’t have time for the Inquisition’s games, especially not the ones that de Mornay loved to play.

‘Am I interrupting something?’

‘The crusade fleet is currently preparing to fire-bomb the surface of Midgardia.’

‘May I ask why, aside from the fact that Midgardia falls under the control of the Vlka Fenryka? I’m sure your primarch would be proud, if I recall my Progenium history lessons correctly.’

‘The planet has fallen to a daemonic incursion.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Augur sweeps, vox intercepts, strategic analysis data, the visions of my Librarians and the fact that a Space Wolf Great Company is currently fleeing the surface.’

‘The Champions of Fenris?’

‘No. We believe it to be the Ironwolves.’

‘But the Champions are also on Midgardia, aren’t they? Led by Logan Grimnar himself?’

‘Our vox transcripts report all contact with him has been lost.’ De Mornay was silent for a moment before speaking again.

‘I would like to request an immediate audience.’

‘Your rosette will do you little good, de Mornay,’ Azrael warned. *‘I am not some cowering Militarum general or docile planetary governor. If you wish to speak, it will be on my terms, not yours.’*

‘I see the sons of the Lion are as cooperative with His Holy Ordos as ever,’ de Mornay replied, acid creeping into his voice.

‘I will humour you this one time, de Mornay, as a token of goodwill towards the Inquisition. But don’t expect anything more from me. Few Chapter Masters would grant you the privileges I do.’

‘Expect me within the hour.’

Azrael cut the link without another word. He knew de Mornay well enough to understand that rebuffing him would only heighten his determination. Better to lure the fool into the Lion’s den and show him the consequences of his beliefs first-hand.

Below him Elezar was describing the intention of the Chapter to fire-bomb Midgardia’s surface. The muttering of the assembled commanders showed it was as unpopular among them as it had been with de Mornay. Azrael keyed his personal vox.

‘Dismiss them,’ he ordered Elezar.

Without showing any sign of having heard Azrael over the link, Elezar began to bring the briefing to a close.

‘De Mornay is here because of us, not the Wolves,’ Asmodai said, his voice hissing quietly from the maw of his grim, black skull helm.

‘Without a doubt.’

‘We must keep him at arm’s length.’

‘Have no fear, brother. I intend to.’

Below the dais the thirteen Space Marine commanders were departing, each one bowing briefly towards Azrael before they left. Himmaeus of the Knights of the Covenant was the last to exit the bridge, exchanging a curt nod with his Supreme Grand Master before passing through the blast doors. Azrael rose and descended from the dais, Asmodai following him like a shadow woven from nightmares.

‘Brother Elezar,’ Azrael said. ‘How do you find our brethren’s appraisal of the coming operation?’

‘Approving, for the most part,’ the Interrogator-Chaplain said, stepping away from the holochart and bowing as Azrael joined him. ‘Though our decision to bomb Midgardia met with ill feeling. It does not sit well with them to burn the planet with the Great Wolf still unaccounted for.’

‘Of course. It is not what I would wish to do, but we have no alternatives. Midgardia’s surface is now so infested that only warpspawn could possibly exist down there for any length of time. The entire strength of this crusade would be liquidated if we sought to make planetfall, and we cannot let the warp rifts on the surface grow any further. It must burn, all of it.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ Elezar said. ‘They will all accept our decision, I have no doubt.’

‘Sire,’ Mendaxis interrupted him. *‘Lord Inquisitor de Mornay’s shuttle is requesting docking clearance.’*

‘Grant it,’ Azrael said tersely. ‘And send Brother-Sergeant Elija to escort him personally. Tell him there are to be no deviations, they are to come straight here.’

‘Yes, sire.’ Azrael glanced at Asmodai.

‘A necessary evil, brother,’ he said. The Master Interrogator-Chaplain didn’t reply.

Sergeant Elija brought Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay to the bridge borne aloft on a cushioned vital-support palanquin which was welded to the backs of two tracked servitor units. Behind him came a train of disparate creatures. There was a lithe-looking, black-armoured Sister of Battle, her eyes staring with fiery intensity from a flame-scarred face. Alongside her was a limping, blue-robed lexmechanic, borne down by a great stack of data-slates and scrolls. Tugging on his robe-tails was a long-limbed Jokaero, taking in the grim splendour of the Rock’s bridge with simian fascination. A dead-eyed cherubim wove and darted overhead on buzzing rotor wings, trailing more parchments.

Behind them all shuffled an emaciated figure, naked bar a soiled loincloth, its wiry body stitched with scars and stimm-injection ports. Rather than hands, its arms ended in crudely grafted electro flails, currently trailing inert along the floor. Its head was covered by a red hood and bound by a riveted visor stylised into the shape of the Inquisitorial I. The faint sound of soothing plainsong drifted from its lobe implants.

Azrael grimaced in disgust as he watched the arco-flagellant limping after its owner.

‘Greetings, Supreme Grand Master,’ de Mornay called as his palanquin crossed the bridge, rumbling awkwardly around ranked cogitator pews. As he spoke, the lexmechanic started to scramble for a free slate and autoquill.

‘You would bring an abomination like that aboard the Rock?’ Azrael demanded, eyes still on the arco-flagellant.

‘We all do the Emperor’s will,’ de Mornay responded. ‘And I’ve made poor VX Nine-Eighteen here enact that will in many terrible ways down the years. It’s good for him to get out.’

‘Emperor’s... will...’ muttered the lexmechanic, autoquill now scratching furiously across a data-slate.

‘Your appearance is as sudden as ever,’ Azrael said dispassionately. ‘And unwelcome. Why are you here, de Mornay?’

‘The arrival of anyone bearing a rosette ought to be sudden, Supreme Grand Master,’ the inquisitor replied, palanquin rocking to a halt before the Dark Angels. He shifted his ageing body fractionally, the wires binding him to his

moving recliner's life-support systems rattling. 'And only unwelcome if you have something to hide.' Except for the Sister of Battle, his retinue clustered behind him like a herd of frightened grox calves.

'Something... to... hide...' the lexmechanic repeated, still writing.

Though he remained silent, Azrael could feel Asmodai's anger emanating like the chill of the void beside him.

'That doesn't answer my question.'

'Ah, but I believe it is my prerogative to ask the questions here.'

'The... questions...' the lexmechanic said.

'Hush now, Peterkyn,' de Mornay muttered before continuing. 'I can sense you are going to make this audience both brief and impolite, so I will speak plainly. Firstly, there are loyal subjects of the Emperor still on the planet below us. The planet you intend to incinerate.'

'Massed evacuation is unfeasible,' Azrael replied. 'The populace would need to be quarantined and screened en-masse for warp taint. There is manifestly neither the time nor the facilities for such actions.'

'While civilian losses are regrettable,' de Mornay made a point of glancing at Asmodai, 'I was referring more to the burning of an entire Great Company of your fellow Adeptus Astartes.'

'Fire-bombing Midgardia will not damage its underground habitats,' Azrael said. 'And that was Grimnar's last recorded location. If by the Emperor's will he yet lives, he will be unharmed.'

'And when he emerges he'll be stranded in a toxic ash waste.'

'If you have an alternative suggestion, Lord Inquisitor, by all means share it. I would have thought that as a member of His Holy Ordos you would have rejoiced at the mass annihilation of mankind's darkest foes.'

'Rest assured, nothing pleases me more,' de Mornay said. 'But less so if the victory comes at the price of one of the Imperium's greatest leaders.'

'I never thought I would live to hear the Inquisition praising Logan Grimnar.'

'Times can change, Azrael. As can the topic of conversation. What were you doing on Nurades?'

Azrael's jaw clenched.

'We were purging one of the Emperor's worlds of daemoniac infestation.'

'And just how many daemons did you banish there? Did the Wolves leave any for you? An entire Lion's Blade Strike Force deployed to cleanse an infestation that had been wiped out days earlier?'

'Is this a line of questioning, or just an opportunity for gross insults? Your

grudge-bearing does you no credit, de Mornay. I don't need to humour you, not even for a moment.'

'What were you looking for in the polar ruins, Azrael? What were your Scouts guarding?'

'That squad was inserted ahead of our main strike force. If you have any real questions, de Mornay, I suggest you start by asking the Wolves how they died. That is what we first came here to redress.'

'There is no evidence the Wolves have attacked Imperial citizens. Can the same be said of your Chapter, Azrael?'

'Their monsters butchered a squad of my Tenth Company,' Azrael snapped, his reserve finally eroded. 'We have pict footage of it.'

'Shame you don't also have footage of how the sole survivor of said butchering disappeared,' de Mornay shot back. 'And from within the depths of this very fortress-monastery no less. Something here is not what it seems.' The inquisitor's gaze swung across the bridge, lingering on the communications pit where Mendaxis was bending low to review a spool of data parchment.

'Choose your next words carefully, de Mornay.'

'I smell the reek of the warp here, Azrael.'

Beside him he felt Asmodai shudder at the inquisitor's damning words. Azrael turned and stilled him with a gesture.

'This audience is over,' he said. 'Get off my bridge.'

'You don't end audiences with the Inquisition, Azrael,' de Mornay said. 'And your bridge is as much a part of the Emperor's realm as anywhere else in the Imperium. There are no jurisdictions here, not for one bearing my seal.'

Azrael turned. It was not a sharp movement, neither sudden nor violent, but it was undoubtedly laden with threat. He took a single step forward, so that even on his palanquin the aged inquisitor was dwarfed by the Angel's armoured form. The vast bridge went suddenly quiet.

'I grow tired of your games,' Azrael said softly. 'Your prejudice against my Chapter is well known. The mission that brings us here is not only entirely legitimate, it is desperately vital to the fate of the Imperium. We can do without your pathetic past grievances.'

'I will make my own judgement on that matter,' de Mornay said, putting his palanquin into grinding reverse. 'We shall speak again soon, no doubt.'

'If we must,' Azrael said grimly. 'Brother-Sergeant Elija will return you to your shuttle, immediately.'

As the inquisitor and his retinue retreated the voice of Mendaxis clicked again

in Azrael's ear.

'Sire, we are receiving fresh intelligence from Midgardia.' There was a pause.

'Go on.'

'It would appear that Logan Grimnar...' Mendaxis hesitated again.

'What? Speak.'

'Sire, Logan Grimnar is dead.'

Seven miles south of the Magma Gates, Midgardia

Midgardia's spores had eaten away the external pict recorders, so Egil Iron Wolf was blind to the firepower of his command tank as it rolled towards its objective. He could well imagine it though. A stream of assault cannon rounds kicking up spumes of filth from the milky pus-bog, bursting shambling, slime-slick plaguebearers like overripe fruit. Swathes of bolt-rounds sped from the glowing barrels of the *Ironfist's* hurricane bolters, smashing through spore-trees, lancing plague beasts like boils and cutting giant flies out of the air. The pitch and roll of the heavy transport added a tale of pulped and crushed wyrd-scum, ground beneath aquila-stamped tracks.

Egil had witnessed similar sights many times down the centuries, and still it thrilled him. His brethren in the other Great Companies revelled in the sensation of axe and chainblade chopping meat and bone, and the clash of steel on ceramite. Egil had always considered his passions similar, but for him the glory of battle was not only in the muscle behind a blow, it was in the unbending metal that dealt it. Cog, track, bulkhead and burning engine, in the armour of his Great Company he saw the unstoppable strength and lightning speed of Russ himself. Wrath was so much more potent when it was clad in iron.

Perhaps that was why he was pursuing his current course. Iron did not bend and it did not break, except beneath the most terrible of forces. He would not acknowledge that these wyrdspawn, these beasts bred from a madman's nightmares, were stronger than he was. He wouldn't give them the privilege of forcing him to abandon his Great Wolf. He would not bend, and he would not break.

'Destination reached, lord,' Torvald's voice crackled over *Ironfist's* intercom. 'Ramps ready to drop on your mark.'

'As soon as we're clear, rejoin the task force,' Egil said. He glanced back at Conran. Unlike the rest of the Ironguard, he sat in one of the hold's restraining harnesses, his expression stony.

‘I will see you aboard the *Wolftide*, brother,’ Egil said.

‘With the Great Wolf,’ Conran added, nodding. ‘May Russ and the Allfather be with you.’

The time for words passed. Egil’s servo-skull, Skol, hovered at his shoulder, its tiny antigravitic motor buzzing. He checked his armour was properly sealed and banged the disembarkation rune above the Land Raider’s forward hatch. It flashed from red to green. Wolf claws slid free, a thought sending energy crackling down the wicked blades.

There was a thump of mag-locks and a hiss of decompressed air. The ramp fell forward and light, sickly and pale, flooded the troop compartment. Egil charged out into the rot jungle, a howl on his lips.

Two seconds to assess his surroundings. Skol looked left, the skull’s implanted vid feed uploaded directly to the Wolf Lord’s bionic eye. Egil went right. Ten paces ahead, the corroded remains of the entrance to a Midgardian mineshaft yawned. *Ironfist*’s hurricane bolter sponsons were still hammering.

Only a handful of plaguebearers were between the Land Raider and the mine entrance. One died with Egil’s claws in its throat, gargling on its own ichor. Moln Stormbrow, the first of Egil’s Ironguard to follow the Wolf Lord from the hatch, pulverised another with a swing of his thunder hammer as it made a clumsy swipe for Skol.

‘Into the mine,’ Egil barked, bursting a squealing nurgling underfoot. ‘Now!’

Olaf Ironhide, the final member of the Ironguard, splashed out into the jungle’s quagmire. *Ironfist*’s ramp immediately began to rise, and the tank was reversing before the opening was even sealed, great tracks throwing up fountains of pestilent, sticky spume. The noble war machine was almost unrecognisable from the outside, drenched in oozing filth, its thick armour plating pockmarked by ichor and spore clouds. The pain its machine-spirit must have been suffering caused Egil to bare his fangs beneath his visor as he gutted another droning plaguebearer.

With their lord at the centre, the Ironguard sprinted the last few yards to the mine’s corroded metal overhang. Egil’s auto-senses stripped away the darkness within, picking out dead lumen globes and a rudimentary lift mechanism leading down into the mine proper. Its winch and cables, however, had long been eaten away. A servitor controller hardwired into the shaft’s activation panel was little more than bones and rusted metal, its vat-grown flesh desiccated by Midgardia’s spores.

‘Borgen, hold them off,’ Egil ordered. ‘There must be a secondary point of

access.'

Borgen Fire-eye planted himself at the mine's entrance and unleashed his combi-flamer on the daemons gathering outside, spitting oaths and curses at the wyrdspawn even as he set their rotting flesh ablaze. The rest of the Ironguard spread out around the lift chute, hunting for another path downwards. Egil's visor display was already being lit by red, flashing runes telling him the toxic air was eating away at his armour's sealant, while Skol's gleaming cranium was becoming visibly more pitted and scarred with each passing second. They had to get belowground, and fast.

'Here, my jarl,' Bjorn Bloodfist said. 'A machine-ladder running parallel to the lift.' Egil hurried to the Ironguard's side, and saw that he was right. A smaller shaft entrance, including a heavy ferroplas ladder designed for lowering mining machinery, led down into a darkness so deep even the scans of Egil's augmented eye couldn't penetrate it.

'Will it hold?' Orven Highfell asked as they looked at the ladder, the doubt in his voice obvious.

'It will have to,' Egil said, turning to Moln. 'Collapse the entrance,' he ordered.

'Jarl?'

'Do it! We need to descend, but it will take time. We cannot afford a pursuit.'

Moln hefted his hammer, and replaced Borgen at the mine's entranceway. As Fire-eye checked his weapon's promethium level Stormbrow swung his crackling weapon at one of the overhang's support beams. The decaying timber gave with a splitting crash, and Moln ducked back just in time to avoid the thunderous fall of the mine's entrance.

Egil already had his feet on the machine-ladder's rung clamps. The ferroplas groaned beneath his power-armoured bulk, but held. He began to climb downwards. There was no time to think, no time to assess the situation or calculate risk percentages. They had to get below before Midgardia's corrupt atmosphere poisoned them all.

And besides, every second wasted was another second not knowing the fate of the Great Wolf.

Mouthing a silent prayer to the Allfather, Egil led his pack into the darkness of the underworld.

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

For the most fleeting of moments, when the inquisitor had first arrived on the

bridge, the thing wearing the flesh of Vox Mendaxis had known the closest sensation to fear a creature such as it ever could.

The unsettling sensation was soon replaced by the thrill of a close escape. For a second, as the human's eyes had fallen on it, the creature had fancied its flesh would unravel and its daemon-form would burst into holy flame. The Imperium's storytellers would have enjoyed that. The purifying aura of His Chosen Servant burning away the disguises of the corrupt and scorching their evil plots from existence. The ridiculousness of it almost made the Mendaxis-thing giggle out loud. The inquisitor was just a man, and like all men he had ultimately failed to see what was right in front of him.

It was growing bored in the communication pit. It had been masquerading as the vox seneschal since the crusade fleet had entered the warp, bound for Fenris. But now, with the inquisitor's departure, Azrael had returned to his bauble-throne above while the bridge busied itself with preparing firing solutions for Midgardia. Briefly it had toyed with the idea of following the inquisitor back to his shuttle and killing him and his simpering little herd of sycophants. A void pilot who accidentally opened both airlocks in transit perhaps? Or a tragic carbon monoxide leak in the transport bay?

But no. Of the many, many skeins of Fate that wove themselves around such undeniably titillating acts, none of them furthered the task the Mendaxis-thing was here to complete. It chided itself. There would be time aplenty for such games afterwards. Once the Wolf and the Lion had torn each other's throats out.

Finally, the balance of Fate on the bridge Changed. The one known as Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar turned from the holochart he had been scanning and made for one of the bridge's vaulted exit gangways.

Azrael was deep in conversation with his skull-helmed Master Interrogator-Chaplain, and no one else had the authority to stop the vox seneschal. The Mendaxis-thing rose from the pit and followed lightly in Elezar's wake. As it went it wondered whether any of the labouring menials around it would note that, although it appeared to walk, the body of Mendaxis was in fact floating a fraction of an inch above the bridge's worn flagstones. Such little touches amused it still further. There really was no cure for mankind's blindness.

Elezar passed through hissing blast doors and left the bridge. The Mendaxis-thing slipped after him just before the doors slid shut. Ahead, so real that it seemed to impose itself upon the Mendaxis-thing's vision, Fate's weave spread, a beautiful multi-hued tapestry spun by its master. And all the threads that were tied to Elezar's mag-boots led him to his private reclusiam-cell. That much was

now inevitable, and the Mendaxis-thing felt the gratification of knowing it had locked them both into the correct path.

All that remained to do was pick which body it would greet the young Interrogator-Chaplain with.

The Warp

They would have made him their master. Beastlord. Wolfheart. The Wild King. They would have crowned him with savagery and robed him with hunger. He refused. He was not like them. Not yet.

That truth pained him, he could not deny it. There was something inside, something in all of them, that refused to ever be tamed. While the hearth-fires burned low it would rather be hunting in the snow, while weapons lay at rest it would rather sink fang and claw deep into preyflesh. Even some of those he had known the longest had succumbed to it. Scarpelt and Harok, Haghmund and Olfar. Long-fangs and grey-pelts all, given over to the Beast Within. They said the same thing, each one of them. The Wofltime was coming. Leadership was needed. Would he join them?

That was not his way, he reminded himself over and over. There was savagery, yes, but it was cold, calculated, unleashed only when the moment was right. The savagery the others now possessed burned bright, was blind to reason. It was the hungry rage that flung the wolf into the huntsman's trap.

They were late. The warp was playing its usual tricks, seeking to confound and infuriate them. Fury made the Beast stronger. It made more of his warriors turn. They had been bound for the Fenris System for what felt like a lifetime. The other Great Companies were already there, already fighting, already dying, already writing their sagas on Midgardia, Svellgard and Frostheim. The thought pushed him even closer to the edge. He took a long, shuddering breath, trying to clear his head.

Soon they would be home. Whether it would be as beasts or as men, he did not know. There was only one certainty. He would make all those who defiled Fenris pay.



WARHAMMER
40,000



WAR ZONE
FENRIS

LEGACY OF RUSS 2
THE YOUNG
WOLF'S RETURN

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

THE YOUNG WOLF'S RETURN

Robbie MacNiven

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar knelt, his black power armour's artificial fibre bundles whirring and clicking softly with the movement. The ceramite of his knee plate grated against the stone floor of the reclusiam-cell. Wordlessly, he genuflected to the only object occupying the tiny space except his meditation cot – the winged sword sigil of the Dark Angels, set in brass relief upon the bare wall.

For a moment he was silent and still, the only sensation the distant vibration of the Rock's mighty plasma drives, many levels below. He let conscious thoughts drip from his mind, like the tallow wax from the ten thousand candles flickering in the Basilica of Repentance. He could feel the beating of his primary heart and the hum of his active battleplate, throbbing in rhythmic sympathy with his vital signs. Outside, his genhanced hearing detected the approach of armoured footfalls, but he ignored them. Like a prisoner in the Rock's deepest dungeons, he chained his mind in impenetrable darkness, link by link, seeking the oblivion that would let him give proper and meaningful veneration to the primarch and the Emperor.

Just as words formed on his lips, he heard the hiss of his cell door behind him. In an instant he was back on his feet, but the oaths died in his throat as he turned towards the figure who had interrupted his private worship.

'My apologies, Brother-Chaplain,' Azrael said, stepping into the small space. The door whispered shut behind him.

'Supreme Grand Master,' Elezar said, bowing his head. 'No apologies are needed. You simply surprised me.'

'And that in itself no mean feat, I am sure,' the hooded master of the

Unforgiven said, returning Elezar's bow with a nod. 'I wished to speak with you privately, and I could think of no better place than this. It concerns the nature of our hunt, and the exposed position we find ourselves in.'

'Yes, lord. What do you wish of me?'

'We must remain ever-vigilant, Brother Elezar. Our enemies circle us like wolves, looking for any sign of weakness, waiting for the opportune moment to strike.'

'I understand, lord. My vigilance is unfaltering.'

'That is true,' the Supreme Grand Master continued, pacing behind him. 'You have been chosen for great things, Elezar. You are indeed blessed.' The chaplain turned.

'I am glad you believe so. I live to serve the Chapter and the Emperor.'

'Of course, of course.' Azrael continued to circle him. 'It is decided then. You shall help me to announce it.'

'Announce what?' Beneath the shadows of his cowl, Azrael smiled more broadly than Elezar had ever seen him smile before, spreading his arms as wide as the cell's confines would allow.

'His return, of course.'

'Whose return? I don't understand.'

But Azrael didn't reply. Like a bolt of lightning, he struck Elezar, and the Dark Angel knew no more.

Aalsund Island, Svellgard

The impact of Sven Bloodhowl's boot pulped a daemonette's skull with a hideous crunch. The Wolf Lord landed atop the body as it came apart, the impact grinding the remains into Svellgard's hard-packed tundra.

The counter-attack was going in hard. The wyrdlings were still amassing on the islands around the World Wolf's Lair missile control base, their shrieks and screams vibrating the cold, wind-lashed air. Sven, as ever, led from the fore.

There was no space to swing Frostclaw. They were all around him. The Wolf Lord used his short chainsword, Firefang, to gut the clutch of she-daemons pressing close as lovers, spinning in a tight, ichor-splattered circle. That gave him more room. He choked Frostclaw's grip near the top of the haft, using the frost axe in tight, hard chops. Claws and talons rained down on the Wolf's armour, seeking weak points, scarring the mist-grey plate silver. None found their mark. Sven was a master of this form of warfare; surrounded, he kept

moving, kept killing, until he'd carved out half a dozen yards of space. Enough room to slip his hand further down Frostclaw's slick handle and start swinging it properly.

That was when the real slaughter began.

Sven laughed as he killed. The battle-joy was on him, the axe-song that sung more sweetly than the fairest *skjaldmaid*. Either side of him his Bloodguard matched their lord, each one a blur of controlled, focused fury. They had dropped from *Godspear's* open hold on pillars of fire, their jump packs keening. Together they'd fallen like the warrior-kings of the old sagas, bolts of lightning hammering into the nest of wyrdlings crowning the island's peak. For a few long, bloody seconds, each Space Marine was alone amidst a sea of tentacles, claws and snapping maws.

They relished it.

Olaf Blackstone's wolf claws savaged wyrdflesh left and right, swiftly matting his long, white pelt with stinking ichor. Torvind Morkai, the youngest of all Sven's Wolf Guard, wielded his rune-carved Fenrisian blade in a blinding arc, his swordsmanship so swift that crimson daemons burst apart in fountains of gore before they could even bring their brass-hilted blades to bear. A dozen yards away Kregga Longtooth smashed his crackling power fist into the chassis of a nightmarish Khornate artillery piece, its yawning skull-maw cannon useless at such close range. A single blow sent twisted metal and shattered skulls slamming into the nearest daemons, flinging the entire infernal device onto its side with a shriek of grinding, broken warp-tech.

Nearest to Sven himself were Istun and Uuntir, the former cleaving open the skull of a bloated plague beast with a blow from his twin-headed power axe, the latter using his scarred storm shield to batter a clutch of twisting, writhing horrors back onto the blades of the frenzied swordlings behind them. Any that tried to squirm round his guard were met with efficient blows from the Wolf Guard's thunder hammer, each short strike accompanied by the fearsome weapon's booming discharge.

As he killed, Sven was only half aware of the carnage unleashed by his personal champions. They were his retinue, his chosen, skilled even among the ranks of his Great Company's three Wolf Guard packs. Each was a warrior-king, their flesh and armour inked and carved with runes telling of their numberless sagas, their blades notched but ever-keen. Sven had slaughtered tyrants and broken armies with them at his side for almost a century.

This was merely sport.

‘On my mark, disengage,’ he ordered, grunting as Frostclaw bit through the rotting hide of a plaguebearer, cleaving the shambling monstrosity from collarbone to groin. *Godspear* passed above the melee, bolters hammering death into the undulating sea of terrors surrounding the Space Wolves. The Thunderhawk’s disembarkation ramp was still down.

‘Mark,’ Sven said, activating his jump pack, Longleap. With a burst of supercharged power it slammed him through the downdraft of the Thunderhawk’s turbofans, the sudden acceleration drawing a growl of exhilaration from his throat. The young Wolf Lord angled his leap over the edge of *Godspear*’s ramp, auto-stabilisers thumping as he hit the deck. With a skill that spoke of decades of experience, his Wolf Guard followed him up, directly into the gunship’s hold. He made way for them, keying his vox as he looked down into the swarm of shrieking monstrosities.

‘Drakebanes, do you think you can do better?’

The Sky Claws answered with chainswords and howls rather than words. In twos they pitched over the ramp of *Wolfdawn*, the other Thunderhawk holding station a little further down the slope. Jump packs flared as they neared the ground, only fractionally arresting their freefall. There was a string of brutal crunches as they slammed into the daemons below, the impacts audible even over the scream of *Godspear*’s engines.

Sven watched them closely as the Thunderhawk banked round, its bolters still raking those daemons swarming over the hilltop. As far as the Wolf Lord was concerned, age and experience came a poor second to battle-hunger and skill. The promotion of the likes of the young redhead Torvind to his Bloodguard, straight from the ranks of the Blood Claws, was a perfect example of his philosophy. The Drakebanes had already fought hard today to purge the missile launch nexus that was the World Wolf’s Lair, but beneath the eye of their vigorous young jarl none would tire. The surface-to-orbit weapons silos buried deep beneath the tundra of Svellgard’s islands were vital to the system’s defences. They could not be overrun, especially not the control centre that constituted the Lair.

‘Young Veslar shows promise,’ Olaf said, joining Sven at the open ramp. If it weren’t for the daemoniac gore that clogged his wolf claws and covered him from boot to topknot, there would have been no indication that the old Bloodguard had been locked in furious combat mere moments before.

‘I prefer Mourkyn,’ Sven said, watching as the Sky Claws carved their way through the wyrdlings covering the lower slopes. Mourkyn was using his jump

pack for repeated short combat leaps. Even from a distance his bared face was visibly twisted with battle-glee as he pounded down again and again into the creatures scrambling to get at him, splitting skulls and snapping spines with his armoured weight.

‘He’ll rupture his pack if he keeps that up,’ Olaf said stoically. ‘The boy needs to learn to respect the spirits of his weaponry. And besides, Veslar shows more leadership. The pack follows him instinctively.’

That much Sven couldn’t deny. Veslar was at the heart of a small wedge of three other Sky Claws, the improvised formation forging ahead of the rest of the Drakebanes as they made for the island’s peak. They moved with a natural fluidity, covering one another’s weaknesses, striking together wherever the daemonic tied eddied or parted.

‘We don’t need leadership as long as you or I live, long-tooth,’ Sven joked, straight-faced. The flashing of an incoming transmission rune interrupted his observations. It belonged to Yngfor Stormsson, leader of the Firemaw Long Fangs, currently overseeing the last purging of the Lair from its central control keep.

‘Speak,’ Sven ordered.

‘My jarl, the Lair is under attack,’ Yngfor said. *‘More wyrdspawn are emerging from the seas all around. As many as before.’* The thudding of heavy bolters and the whine of recharging plasma cannons was audible in the transmission’s background. Sven cursed.

‘Assume defensive positions,’ he said. ‘Occupy as many of the bunkers as you can. We are returning immediately.’

‘Yes, my jarl.’ Sven cut the link.

‘Trouble?’ Olaf asked.

‘Just say it,’ Sven replied. “‘I told you so.’”

‘They’re attacking the Lair again?’

‘Yes, again.’ Sven brought up the Drakebanes on the vox-net.

‘Your fun is over, pups. We’re returning to the Lair. It would seem this wyrdling filth doesn’t know when to give up.’

Morkai’s Keep, Frostheim

The wyrdling that came at Canis Wolfborn took the form of a woman. The similarities were only fleeting, for its hands ended in a pair of snapping, crab-like claws, and its flesh was mottled a dark purple. Worst was its face – a fanged,

shrieking visage that twisted with hate as it flung itself at the Space Wolf.

His instincts had been correct. While the rest of Harald Deathwolf's Great Company had been busy collecting and burning heretic dead from the battle for Morkai's Keep, he'd tracked more wyrdspawn into the depths of the ancient fortress. The place had not been fully purged after all.

The thing was fast, but so was Canis. In the tight space of the munitions shaft the daemonette had little chance to use its unnatural agility. The Space Wolf plunged one set of wolf claws into the creature's slender torso, while its own talons dragged jagged scars down his battleplate. The thing's scream turned to a shuddering gasp as it came apart in a burst of sickly sweet smoke, its physical form unmade by the killing blow.

It was not alone.

More daemonettes darted from the shadows of the munitions bunker, the air now thick with the cloying reek of their vile perfume. Canis could only take a couple of steps back up the shaft before they were on him. He sliced off one slender arm where smooth warp-flesh met claw-bone, filling the tight space with a spray of purple ichor.

'Fangir,' he snarled. His thunderwolf was behind him, and in the sloping corridor there was no hope it could get its bulk past Canis, but there was room enough for snapping jaws. It plunged past the Wolfborn, fangs ripping the daemonette's throat to the bone. The kill gave him the split-second he needed. He keyed his vox.

'The vaults of the Keep are overrun. All packs, lock on my position.' Further words were lost in the screaming of another lunging daemonette.

Inch by inch, Canis fought his way backwards. The servants of the Dark Prince threw themselves on him in ones and twos, too fast and frenzied for him to properly disengage. Nor were they just Slaanesh's breed now. Red-scaled swordlings, rancid plaguebearers, gibbering pink and blue horrors – by the time Canis and Fangir had backed their way to the top of the shaft, he knew he had not just stumbled across an isolated nest of daemoniac infestation. There was still a warp rift open, deep in the vaults of Morkai's Keep.

He disembowelled a swordling as it lunged at him, its wicked black blade glancing off his breastplate. The daemon burst apart in a shower of stinking offal. Beside Canis, Fangir snapped off the head of another daemonette as they started to burst out of the shaft's confines.

As he reached the Keep's armoury corridor, fresh howls filled his ears. These, however, were instantly familiar to him. Chainswords roaring, the Blood Claws

of the Deathhowls rushed to his side, the scent of their pack musk instinctively reassuring. At their sides came the lesser wolves – Yorri, Vela, Scarr, three of the many Fenrisian beasts Canis counted as his pack-kin.

‘Stem this tide of filth,’ he barked at them. Neither the Deathhowls nor the wolves needed any further encouragement. They laid in with blade and fang, the confined space resounding with the crunch of torn flesh and bone and roars from throats, both daemonic and mortal.

‘*Canis, what’s happening?*’ Harald Deathwolf’s voice snapped in his ear. The Wolf Lord was still supervising the clean-up operation out on the Keep’s upper walls and surface bastions, ordering the burning of heretic dead and the honouring of the Great Company’s fallen. Canis used the space created by the arrival of the Blood Claws to step back out of the melee and answer him.

‘There are still wyrdlings in the vaults. Too many. If we do not purge them now they will resurface in even greater numbers than before.’

‘I am on my way. Hold firm.’

The scrape and scrabble of more claws behind him made Canis spin, fangs bared, a single savage swipe of his claws shattering the hellsword stabbing at the small of his back. The Khornate daemon hissed, resorting to its talons as it went for his exposed face. Canis leaned back with an agility that belied his armour’s bulk, servos whirring. The daemon’s lunge carried it onto one set of wolf claws, and the strike of the second bisected its horned skull. As it burst apart more of its snarling kin pressed at him, flooding upwards from another munitions shaft opposite the first.

‘Deathhowls, to me!’ Canis roared.

The Blood Claws answered, and Morkai’s Keep shook with the fury of battle. The vaults were crawling with terrors, savaging one another in their desperation to shed mortal blood. Inch by hacking, growling, grunting inch the Space Wolves managed to fight their way to a level higher, into a service corridor, before the press of wyrdflesh around them became too great. That was when Harald reached them.

The Deathwolf’s arrival was announced by Ynvir’s howl. The great Wulfen led his Murderpack into the heart of the monstrosities attempting to overwhelm Canis and the Blood Claws, bursting with frenzied strength from the confines of a grav lift at the far end of the service corridor. Frost claws glittered in the blinking illumination of the plasteel tunnel as they carved a bloody arc through the nearest spawn.

‘Well met, Canis,’ said Harald’s voice over the vox. A moment later the

Deathwolf jarl himself emerged from the lift in the wake of his Wulfen's assault, flanked by his dismounted thunderwolf cavalry, the Riders of Morkai.

'To the Deathwolf,' Canis shouted. With Fangir, the Fenrisian wolves and the surviving Blood Claws by his side, he cut his way towards Harald. The Wolf Lord cleaved his own path with his frost axe, Glacius, chopping down one writhing horror after another or battering them aside with his storm shield. After a few moments of brutal killing, nothing stood between the two brothers.

'The lower levels are infested,' Canis panted, grasping Harald's forearm. 'They are becoming more numerous and powerful with every moment. We must seal them off. Otherwise the whole Keep will fall.'

The Wolf Lord's reply was lost amidst the crash of falling rockcrete and the shriek of rent plasteel. A dozen yards down the corridor part of the wall came slamming inwards beneath the impact of a Khornate murder-engine. The machine, part hell-forged metal, part wyrd-spawned flesh, forced itself through the gap and onto the nearest pack of Wolves, its cog-jaw grinding through power armour as though it were wet vellum.

Canis muttered an oath and spat to ward off the thing's evil, feeling his transhuman body flush with a fresh surge of adrenaline. At last, a beast worthy enough to be hunted.

More daemons followed in the wake of the growling engine of destruction, capering pink and blue horrors that gibbered and brayed with insane glee.

Canis hurled himself at the juggernaut before it could rampage any further, catching it in the flank as its teeth sawed through the midriff of a screaming Deathhowl. His wolf claws jarred off the machine's red-plated side, leaving nothing but blackened scorch-marks. Reeking of burning blood and molten metal, the thing emitted a howl like the scraping of steel on bone. Canis struck again, with all his might. With a crack of discharging energy, the claws extending over his left fist shattered against the juggernaut's armour, their power shorting and sparking.

The machine had difficulty turning itself in the packed corridor, but its sheer bulk forced the Space Wolf back. A snap of its jaws passed inches from his exposed face, the heat that radiated from the thing's infernal maw singeing the blond hairs of his beard.

A familiar snarl sounded beside the Wolfborn, and he felt a weight push him aside. At full stretch, Yorri the wolf lunged down the corridor, leaping astride the juggernaut's spiked shoulders as it ground round to face Canis. Vela and Scarr were behind it, the packmates darting through the melee to savage the

monstrosity threatening their brother. The machine beast roared again, trying to buck Yorri off its back, but with scrabbling claws the wolf held on. And bit down.

The Fenrisian wolf's iron-hard fangs locked around the juggernaut's neck, just above its brass collar. Scarr darted beneath the creature, snapping its own jaws up around the underside of the juggernaut's throat. Cables and tendons snapped, spraying oily ichor and the defiled blood of the thousands sacrificed to summon the daemon engine. The construct's roar was cut off with a gristly snap. The wolves hung on.

Behind Canis there was a howl as Fangir powered into a brace of swordlings, red flesh disintegrating beneath the savagery of the great thunderwolf's assault. He half turned to assist his wolf-brother, but the juggernaut before him was not yet finished. It heaved its bulk forward with a choked snarl, slamming Scarr back against the wall. The wolf yelped as it was impaled by the great blade crowning the machine's snout, leaving both it and the daemon pinned against the wall as they died. Yorri and Vela whined with sympathy, tearing open the remains of the juggernaut's throat.

That was when the horrors following it through the breach leapt for the two remaining wolves, boneless arms flailing wildly as the air ignited around them. A dazzling gout of multihued wyrdflame engulfed Yorri, and it howled as its ichor-matted pelt ignited.

'Yorri,' Canis roared, and threw himself towards his packmate. Laughing manically, the horrors leapt into his path, each one shattering into a million multi-coloured shards as Canis struck at them. Their flames curled and licked around his body like living tentacles, singeing his battleplate black. Mere feet ahead, Yorri writhed in agony, rolling off the top of the defeated juggernaut. Vela added its howl to that of its kinbeast as one of the swordlings battling Fangir slammed its hellsword through its throat, butchering the snarling animal.

The sight of his wolves dying woke something primal inside the Feral Knight. He shuddered as he struck down more of the Tzeentch daemonspawn, a keening, inhuman noise rising in his throat. Agony spiked through his body, aching in his skull, clawing behind his eyes, biting at his fingertips. There was a crunch as he felt the fangs in his jaw distend, ripping his gums and choking his throat with the taste of his own blood. Sweat broke out across his body as his secondary heart kicked in, and his pupils dilated. The sounds of fighting faded into nothingness.

Within him the curse of the Wulfen snarled and snapped, howling to be free.

His fist shattered the last pink horror. He stumbled to Yorri's side, the wolf now

scrabbling blindly across the corridor's floor. It was immediately clear that the creature Canis had once counted as a packmate was no more. The wyrdling flames had not burned its fur and flesh, they had wrought something far worse. Even as Canis watched, the wolf's body split and broke, changing and mutating beneath the kaleidoscopic flames. A new snapping maw tore itself open in the beast's underbelly, and fresh blue eyes stared wide with agony along its flank. Spines burst free along its back and one hind leg bristled with silvery scales. The sickening stench of the warp filled Canis' hyper-sensitive nostrils.

He howled and brought his boot down on what had once been Yorri's skull, even as horns split and distended it. Still the beast twisted and yelped as the power of Chaos tore through its body. No longer thinking, Canis stamped down again and again, then started to tear into his former packmate with his lightning claws, rending open rippling flesh and cutting apart burst organs. He howled again, face and beard splattered with blood and spittle, fangs bared as he ripped asunder the creature he had once called his brother.

Finally the flames died. Finally Yorri's flesh stopped writhing and twisting. Finally the amorphous, bloody thing that had once been the proud Fenrisian wolf lay still, joining Vela and Scarr in silence. Their hunt was at an end. Canis slumped to his knees beside the deformed carcass, and howled his loss.

The howl was answered. In unison the wyrdlings assaulting the Space Wolves from either end of the corridor shrieked, pausing to vent their praise even as they were slaughtered with blade, bolt and fang.

And afterwards, for a few seconds, there was silence. Canis heard the long, slow scrape of claws in the breach behind him. Shivering with bloodlust and pain, he stood.

A swordling, larger than any he had ever seen, picked its way through the rubble of the hole smashed in the corridor wall. Its scaly, gore-red hide was armoured with plates of beaten brass and steel, while around its throat a chain thick with shattered ribs dangled. Skulls hung from more chains hooked into the flesh of the monster's unarmoured back, clattering against one another like some parody of a cloak. In one fist it gripped a jet-black, wickedly barbed hellsword, almost as long as Canis was tall. The rune of the Blood God burned white-hot in the centre of its horned, elongated skull.

'Wolfborn,' the thing hissed, a black, forked tongue darting from between razor-sharp teeth. 'I am Korvak Bladelord, the Red Paladin, Herald of Khorne. I have been sent to claim your skull for the throne of my master.' As it stepped into the corridor the Tzeentchian warpfire left by the banished horrors hissed and

sputtered, cringing away from the bloody aura of another god's champion.

Canis had no words for the creature. All was blood and pain and snarling, unkempt rage. He howled and lunged.

Korvak moved with the speed of a creature born from a killer's nightmare. In a flash its great hellsword was locked with Canis' right-hand wolf claws, energy snapping and crackling up the black blade's length. Canis punched the shattered remains of his left-hand claws into the thing's belly, a blow that had banished more of Korvak's daemonkin today than he cared to count. But the Herald was suddenly no longer there. Its sword was flashing downwards in a great arc, wielded as easily by the red-skinned wyrdmaster as another man would swing a short sword.

Canis dodged, but the blow still cracked off his left pauldron, splitting the ceramite. The Wolf attempted to push forward inside the daemon's guard, shoulder-first, but again Korvak was not where he had been a heartbeat before.

The air itself seemed to be vibrating, and the splitting ache in Canis' skull was getting worse. For a moment reality seemed to shimmer and shift, like a heat haze trapped in the corridor's confines.

'The warp rift is widening,' Harald's voice crackled over the vox. He was back near the grav lift, the press so tight he'd been reduced to using his shield over Glacius to snap bones and break skulls. *'They're growing more powerful. We must withdraw.'*

The words didn't register with Canis. He was hunched over, panting, face contorted by a snarl, glaring at the daemonic Herald which now stood a half dozen paces back through the breach.

'Surrender to the rage that beats through your veins, Wolf,' Korvak hissed. *'You are no less a beast than your fallen pets.'*

Canis lunged again, and again cut only air. The stomach-turning stink of the wyrdrealm was overwhelming now, like burning copper twined around rancid meat. The air undulated, and the realisation that the walls themselves had begun to bleed pierced the fug of savagery clouding his mind. It ran in thick, red rivulets, streaking the pale plasteel and pooling underfoot. Reality itself was unravelling around him.

And suddenly Korvak was behind him. Canis tried to turn, tried to snarl his defiance and spit in the monster's face, but it felt as though he was battling through tar. The hellblade found its mark with an ease that spoke of countless millennia of warfare – parting the armour plating below his backpack as though it wasn't there at all. Searing through him like a bolt of fire, biting deep into his

spine.

The Feral Knight fell to his knees with a grunt, blood pouring from his mouth to stain his beard red. He choked. Korvak was suddenly before him again, skull trophies clattering. Duellist turned executioner, the Herald raised his sword with a small flourish, Canis' blood steaming as it ran off its scorching black surface. He tried to bring his claws up one more time, fangs bared, spitting bloody defiance.

The hellsword fell. And the wolves of Fenris howled.

The Underworld, Midgardia

The first thing Egil's boot touched was bone. There was a snap as he dropped the last few feet down the mining shaft, servos humming. He realised as he landed that he'd splintered the ribcage of a desiccated cadaver, lying directly below the machine-ladder that had led them underground.

How had it all come to this? From spearheading an armoured counter-attack out of Midgardia's Magma Gates, to crawling into the planet's underworld in search of Logan Grimnar and his Kingsguard. Egil spun, claws unsheathed, their actinic energy illuminating a small patch of blue light around him.

Nothing. His bionic eye whirled as it sought to pierce the musty darkness, auto-senses straining. Skol's inbuilt stab-lumen beamed ahead, picking out a low tunnel of heavy metal struts and hard-packed grey dirt. More fresh corpses, clad in the decaying remains of mining overalls, littered the plasboard flooring.

'Clear,' Egil breathed, stepping forward in time for Moln to drop down behind him. The big Wolf Guard landed heavily, grunting as his power armour's servos absorbed the impact.

'This looks like one of the Seven Hells,' he growled as he took in their new surroundings, making way for the next packmate to drop down from the machine-ladder.

'Things are going to get tight,' Egil allowed, stepping over to where Skol had illuminated a patch of wall near the shaft entrance. A plastek-sheathed map had been hammered into the packed earth, along with a slew of yellowing output dockets, tariff chits and work progress schedules. Egil spent a few seconds scanning it all with his bionics, blink-saving the image and analysing its markings.

'This tunnel will slope downward for just under a mile,' he said. 'At its end is a larger service intersection, twenty-nine-B. From there we can pick up one of the

highway transit routes that connect the underground hives.’

‘Where are we taking it?’ Orven, the last of the pack to drop down, asked.

‘The Great Wolf’s last recorded position,’ Egil said. ‘The uplink log had him entering Settlement Five Hundred and Twenty-Nine. The Midgardians call it Deepspark. It lies two miles to the south, and almost a mile deeper.’

‘Deeper,’ Moln growled. None of the Wolves enjoyed the claustrophobia of underworlds like Midgardia.

‘We must find Logan Grimnar,’ Egil said. ‘And as many of his Kingsguard as possible. It is inconceivable that they have all been lost.’

‘Then let’s tarry no longer,’ said Borgen Fire-eye. ‘I shall take point.’

‘With Skol,’ Egil said, a thought-impulse sending the servo-skull humming a few feet down the tunnel.

‘Keep your helmets on,’ the Iron Wolf cautioned as they set off. ‘These bodies can’t have fallen more than forty-eight hours ago, despite the stage of their decay. Even at this level the air is toxic.’

‘At least there’s a good reason to keep going down then,’ Bjorn Bloodfist growled. Low, grim laughter greeted his words, and Egil smiled briefly. Despite the ongoing fear over the Great Wolf’s whereabouts, he no longer felt the doubts that had plagued him above ground, amidst the spore jungles. His Great Company were clear of this hell, and he was doing all he could to find his lord.

Even if they all died down here, alone and forgotten, that had to count for something.

Its True Name was unpronounceable to tongues of flesh and blood, but mortals knew it as Sourgut. Phugulus was a great believer in addressing his Tallyband on a mortal-name basis, so it was Sourgut that the Herald of Nurgle called on as he gestured at the collapsed entrance of the mining outpost.

The great beast of Nurgle dragged itself through the sumptuous pox-bog to the broken timbers, and emitted a pungent belch.

‘Give him room,’ Phugulus ordered, waving his plaguebearers back from the diseased beast. The words had barely left his split lips before Sourgut heaved like some monstrous slug, the daemon’s whole body tensing and contracting. With an ugly bellow, the beast spewed a violent torrent of green-grey sludge, writhing maggots and rotting offal at the shattered entranceway of the mine.

‘Fine work, Sourgut,’ Phugulus crowed, a trio of the puffballs pockmarking his back bursting with delight. The motion set off those members of the Infested Tallyband closest to their leader, swiftly filling the Midgardian jungle air with

yet more daemonic spores. Sourgut warbled contentedly and belched again.

The acidic contents of the bloated beast's stomach worked quickly. In barely a minute it had eaten through the felled timbers blocking the entrance, burning a path into the mine. Phugulus waddled inside without hesitation. They'd need to be fast if they were going to catch up with their visitors. It really was inexplicable, just how fast the wolf-men in their metal boxes had left. Praise be to the Grandfather that at least a few had decided to stay. Why they'd chosen to go down the mine was beyond Phugulus, but he had no doubt that following them was the right thing to do. He'd heard much from his daemonkin of Midgardia's fabled underworld. It would surely struggle to match the fecund glory he and his spore clouds had brought to the surface jungles, but if he didn't see it himself he'd never know.

The interior of the outpost was empty, but the boot prints of the wolf-men in the mulch underfoot weren't difficult to follow. They all lead to a heavy-looking ladder shaft, its depths lost in darkness. As the Tallyband clustered into the mine behind him, Phugulus paused at the shaft's edge, his peeling features contorted by a grimace. Almost absentmindedly, he fumbled beneath a greasy fold and plucked a squirming nurgling from his diseased flesh. The slimy daemonic mite tried to gnaw the Herald's worm-like fingers, but his skin had long ago lost the ability to feel anything, for good or for ill.

'How deep is it?' he asked the creature. It stared at him for a second with wide, imploring eyes. Then Phugulus tossed it over the side. It squealed shrilly as it fell, its own spore-bags popping with fear. The Herald leaned forward, cocking one ear as the noise rapidly faded into the shaft's depths. There was a distant *splat*. He leaned back, grinning.

'Shallow enough! Down we go!'

Wolftide, in high orbit above Midgardia

Conran snapped his fingers at the nearest bridge huscarl and pointed at the open vision port. A swarm of spacegoing vessels filled the crystalflex glass, framed by the blotched, ugly purple orb of Midgardia.

'Hail them again,' the Wolf Guard ordered. The huscarl was no doubt thinking that they'd already tried a dozen times, but he clearly knew better than to question the filth-splattered, grim-faced Space Wolf. He bent to the vox bank, snapping commands at his scurrying kaerls.

'How long have they been here?' asked Kreg of the Ironjaws. The Long Fang

pack leader had accompanied Conran to the *Wolftide*'s bridge as soon as their Stormwolf transport had docked. In truth Conran was thankful for the white-pelt's presence. He had railed against Egil's decision to give him command of the Ironwolves not simply because he'd wished to accompany his jarl on what would surely be a saga-worthy strike into the underworld, but also because of the pressures of command. The knowledge that the fate of the entire Great Company now rested on his actions gnawed at him. That, and the Great Company's fleet, arrayed in a defensive spread around their flagship, the *Wolftide*.

The last aerial transports bearing the evacuated Ironwolves had docked with the flagship minutes before, but what was he to do next? Simply sit and wait for word from Egil, even while Sven and Harald's Great Companies fought the wyrdspawn filth on Svellgard and Frostheim? And what of Midgardia itself? He surely could not compound the shame of the Ironwolves' retreat by having them break from orbit and abandon the world? He'd already ordered the Great Company's ships to open all available holds, hangar bays and storage spaces to as many of the planet's human refugees as could still be evacuated from the Magma Gates. Now that their protectors had left them, the last human settlements would surely fall to the tide of decay sweeping the jungles. The Sky Warriors had failed their vassals.

'The system's augur sweeps report that they broke from the warp a little over six hours ago,' Conran said to Kreg, still glaring at the vessels beyond the vision port. There were dozens of them, great and small – bristling Imperial Navy capital ships, like the spires of great Ecclesiarchy cathedrals cast adrift in space, flanked by the sleek, armoured bulkheads of Adeptus Astartes Strike Cruisers and lumbering, grox-like Astra Militarum mass transporters. And in the midst of them all, the great spire-tipped planet-shard that was the Rock, the mobile, warp-capable fortress-monastery of the Dark Angels.

The sight should have thrilled any loyal servant of the Imperium. Conran felt only uncertainty warring with his rising anger. They hadn't asked for this, and his instincts told him nothing good would come of it. The presence of the Dark Angels alone was enough to make him distrustful. He spat onto the deck, warding off their evil with the old Fenrisian custom.

'We're reading activity among the crusade fleet,' called one of the kaerls manning the *Wolftide*'s cogitator tiers. 'Several of the Imperial Navy's capital ships appear to be diverting power towards their weapon systems.'

'What?'

'They're preparing to fire,' Kreg said. Even the old Long Fang sounded

incredulous.

‘At what?’ Conran snapped. ‘Triangulate their likely targeting coordinates!’

‘There’s nothing...’ the kaerl trailed off. ‘Unless they’re locking onto Midgardia itself.’

‘Vox!’ Conran barked. The huscarl at the communications bank turned to him, face grim. He shook his head.

‘The crusade fleet is still refusing to acknowledge our signal.’

‘Gunnery, all weapons live,’ Conran snarled, turning to the weapons station. ‘I don’t care if you have to drop our shields to do it in time, I want our full arsenal online right now. Vox,’ he turned back to the huscarl, ‘contact the rest of the fleet and tell them to do the same.’

‘Do you have a target designation, sire?’

‘No, just get our weapons red and make sure those bastards see them.’ He snarled at the crusade fleet, fist clenched subconsciously around the hilt of his mag-locked chainsword. ‘This is one message they won’t be able to ignore.’

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

For a rare moment on the primary command bridge of the Rock, nobody knew what to do. After giving orders to the fleet to prepare firing solutions for Midgardia, Azrael had retired to the fortress-monastery’s inner chambers with Asmodai, undoubtedly to deliver final commands to his captains. Normally Vox Seneschal Mendaxis would have spoken on behalf of the Supreme Grand Master, and communicated with him directly in the event of an emergency. But when the augurs reported that the Space Wolf fleet sharing Midgardia’s orbit was suddenly powering up its weapons batteries, there was no sign of the Seneschal.

Brother-Sergeant Naamiel, commander of the bridge’s security detail and the only Space Marine present, sent a flurry of vox messages to the Captain of the Watch, but had no authority to decide whether or not to start a civil war on his own initiative. Messages from the rest of the fleet began to light up the vox banks, reports of Imperial vessels being target-locked by Space Wolf ships sending the communication pits into a flurry of panic-laced activity.

Just as it seemed someone somewhere was going to give the order to fire, Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar strode onto the bridge, skull helm glinting in the green light thrown by the cogitator screens, pict feeds and oculus vidscreens surrounding him.

‘Report,’ he said.

‘Brother-Chaplain,’ Naamiel said, bowing briefly to the grim figure. ‘Our scans show the Space Wolves have started to target elements of the crusade fleet. They are hailing us, however we are still complying with the Supreme Grand Master’s order not to make contact with them.’

‘Where is the vox seneschal?’ Elezar demanded.

‘We don’t know, Brother-Chaplain.’

Elezar seemed to survey the nearest cogitator pews for a moment, inscrutable behind his leering helm. Then he gestured curtly to Naamiel.

‘Accept their signal. Vox only.’ Naamiel hesitated for a moment before nodding.

‘Yes, Brother-Chaplain.’

Elezar strode to the nearest communications pit and accepted a brass-wired vox horn handed to him by a stooped Chapter-serf. A feral voice snarled at him over the link.

‘What are you doing, Dark Angel? Why are your blades drawn?’

‘Who am I addressing?’ Elezar replied.

‘Ironguard Conran Wulfhide, acting pack leader of the Ironwolves. I demand you power down your fleet’s weapon systems immediately, in the name of Russ and the Allfather.’

‘The Wolf has no authority over the Lion,’ Elezar said. ‘You have abandoned Midgardia. We are going to purge its surface before the situation there degenerates any further. The warp rifts deforming the planet cannot be allowed to become any more unstable.’

‘My jarl Egil Iron Wolf is still planetside,’ snapped Conran’s furious, animalistic voice. *‘As is the Great Wolf himself. I swear by every oath ever uttered, if a single one of your ships fires upon Midgardia this fleet will tear you apart.’*

‘We will not fire on you, Wolf, unless you fire on us first. But we have no evidence any of your lords yet live on Midgardia. We cannot wait any longer for them to re-establish contact.’

‘I am going to the surface.’

‘What?’

‘I am taking a Stormwolf to the surface, right now. If you fire-bomb Midgardia, you knowingly kill me, not to mention the tens of thousands of Imperial citizens still trapped there. Your vox banks will have recorded this discussion, as have ours. If you still fire on Midgardia your treachery will be known to all.’

‘Do as you wish,’ Elezar said. ‘Our duty is clear. The bombardment begins in

approximately thirty minutes, and where you are then is of no concern to us. Should your fleet fire on ours we shall respond in kind. It should be clear from our relative strengths that if you pursue such a course of action you will end up losing your fleet as well as your planet.'

The vox horn clicked. The serf who had handed it to him bowed at his feet.

'Lord, they have broken the connection.'

Elezar tossed the horn to the hunched slave and turned to Naamiel.

'Do not accept any more signals from them, or any other Wolf forces in-system. The Supreme Grand Master will return shortly.'

As it paced once more from the bridge, the Elezar-thing shuddered imperceptibly. Hidden behind its false helmet, as though mimicking the skull's leering smile, the creature known as the Changeling grinned from ear to ear.

Longhowl, Valdrmani

Longhowl possessed few survivors. When the daemons had burst into reality on Valdrmani – within the sealed interior of the moon's population domeplex – the human defence forces had been caught totally off guard. It had been murder in its purest and most unadulterated form. Men, women and children had been massacred by blade and fang, claw and warpflame, the habitation blocks running red, the screams echoing back for days off the domed roof high above. When Stern's Grey Knights and Krom Dragongaze's Fierce-eyes had finally banished the daemons back to the warp only a handful of Longhowl's former inhabitants still lived, shuddering in basements and cellar tunnels, half mad with terror and despair.

'They need to be quarantined,' Stern said. He was watching the vid feeds in Longhowl's command sanctum. Across the dozens of screens looped images of the domeplex's interior played out in grainy black and white. The daemons had left the habitation a wasteland of corpse-littered streets and buildings with walls twisted and morphed by warpfire, warm human flesh melded with cold rockcrete. Into the nightmare left in the daemons' wake, the survivors were only now slowly beginning to emerge.

'I know full well what you mean by that,' Krom said, his eyes on Stern rather than the screens. 'You will kill all of them, rather than run the risk that even one may live and bear the taint of the wyrd elsewhere.' Stern turned to Krom, meeting his gaze unflinchingly.

'You are correct.'

‘I will not assist you with murder,’ Krom said. ‘Are you going to do it all by yourself, Grey Knight?’

Stern said nothing. The situation was clear enough to both of them. There were not enough of Stern’s knights to search out and corral Longhowl’s traumatised survivors, and nor was there any time. Those who yet lived weren’t going anywhere.

‘The Stormwolves are here,’ Krom said. ‘If you want to leave this moon I suggest you and your brethren board them with me.’

‘Lord Dragongaze.’ The voice of one of Krom’s Wolf Guards interrupted him. The warrior was standing by the command sanctum’s primary vox banks. ‘The Fang is hailing us.’

‘Give it to me,’ Krom said, taking the vox horn proffered by the Wolf Guard.

‘Lord, it’s Albjorn Fogel,’ crackled a voice over the link. ‘Your vox huscarl on Winterbite told me you were at Longhowl’s command sanctum. I thought communicating there directly would ensure a better connection.’

‘What is it?’ Krom demanded of the Fang’s chief communications officer.

‘I am receiving an urgent transmission from the Wolftide, Egil Iron Wolf’s flagship. Priority black.’

Krom felt his hair bristle at the words. Few situations were dire enough to require the Chapter’s highest encryption level.

‘Is it the Great Wolf?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know, jarl. I thought it best to patch you through direct.’

‘Do it.’

Static flooded the vox horns mounted on the communications array. A voice drifted and wove through it, as though from a great depth, tiny but insistent. There was a louder squawk of distortion, and then the voice cut into audible focus.

‘Lord, it is Conran Wulphide, of Egil Iron Wolf’s pack. I am currently transmitting from his flagship, Wolftide.’

‘Well met, Conran,’ Krom said, making an effort to keep the urgency from his voice. ‘What news?’

‘Lord, Midgardia is lost, and with it my jarl Egil and the Great Wolf. They are both beneath the Magma Gates, cut off from all communication. Do you know of the crusade fleet that has invaded our system?’

‘I have had the huscarls in the Fang and aboard my own ships try to communicate with them for hours,’ Krom growled. ‘They refuse all contact.’

‘I spoke with one of the Lion’s sons on the Rock not twenty minutes ago. They

intend to fire-bomb Midgardia.'

'Those treacherous fools,' Krom spat. 'I knew they intended some sort of madness. Have you tried reasoning with them?'

'Yes, lord. They will not turn from their course. I have told them I am going to Midgardia myself, and if they intend to burn the surface they will burn me with it. I would rather die than abandon those still there to the flames of their own so-called protectors.'

'Do whatever you can to buy time,' Krom said. 'I cannot abandon the Hearthworld, but Captain Stern of the Grey Knights will soon be on his way. He knows of the wyrdlings behind this trickery. He will talk the Lions out of their own stupidity.'

'For the sake of us all, I hope so, lord.'

A claxon suddenly began to wail throughout the command sanctum, and augur lecterns around Krom lit up with insistent lights.

'What in the Allfather's name is that?' Krom snapped. The vox clicked. It was the *Winterbite*, overriding Conran's transmission.

'My jarl, we are detecting more ships breaking in-system. We are still triangulating the coordinates. As of yet, no identifiers.'

'World Wolf's balls,' Krom swore. 'What now?'

The Void, Fenris System Edge

Like a spear tip shattering a shield, the *Holmgang* smashed back into real space, reality buckling and splitting around it. Geysers of screaming, fang-filled light streamed from the ship's Geller field, sucked like scum down a drain as they were dragged back into the immaterium.

The battle-barge was not alone. A heartbeat after its return to reality it was joined by the Strike Cruiser, *Veregelt*. Six smaller escorts of the Chapter Fleet followed, tearing themselves free from the wyrdrealm in formation around the two capital ships.

Shields up and gunports open, the Young King had come home.

'Status,' Ragnar barked from the *Holmgang*'s command dais, gauntlets clenched as his blue eyes swept the bridge below.

'All other vessels are reporting successful re-entry,' shouted an anonymous voice from one of the vox pits. 'They are disengaging Geller fields and standing by for your orders.'

'We are being hailed by the automated system monitors,' said another of the

kaerls, manning the barge's communications array. 'They request immediate ident codes.'

'Transmit them,' Ragnar ordered.

'Augur sweeps are still triangulating,' said a senior huscarl. 'Forty-seven per cent complete.' The Wolf Lord ground his fangs together, trying not to make his need for haste any more obvious.

'Lord, we are being hailed by the astropathic beacon on Valdrmani. The transmission signature belongs to that of Lord Dragongaze.'

'Put it up on screen,' Ragnar ordered. The visual feed hanging above the centre of the bridge flickered into life, the vox horns suspended from the ceiling either side of it hissing with static.

After a moment the stern visage of Krom Dragongaze swam into view. As ever he looked every inch the Fenrisian warlord – his blue-grey battleplate edged with gilt and draped with pelts, his fiery red hair bound up in braid-knots, his bionic optic implant – the so-called 'fierce eye' itself – burning with crimson intensity. Ragnar immediately noted the blood crusting around the rent in the Wolf Lord's right shoulder plate.

'*Ragnar*,' Krom said, voice cut through by distortion.

'Dragongaze,' Ragnar acknowledged, inclining his head.

'*You're late.*'

'The false currents of the wyrdrealm have been confounding my Navigators for days.'

'*We need you, Young King*,' Krom said. His voice sounded heavy. '*We've had no word from Bran Redmaw or his Great Company. They must still be adrift. There is a hell-spawned plot afoot, and I fear it is far from foiled. It has already come too close to succeeding here at Longhowl.*'

'Is the Hearthworld secure?' Ragnar demanded. 'The Fang?'

'*Yes. I am returning there as soon as this transmission is finished. We do not fare so well elsewhere though. The Iron Wolves have been forced to abandon Midgardia.*'

'It is lost?'

'*Along with the Great Wolf himself. Egil has stayed behind to search for him below the Magma Gates, but we have had all communications with both broken.*'

'We will purge Midgardia,' Ragnar snarled, clutching at the wolf-tail talisman hanging from his holstered bolt pistol, 'fight our way into the underworld, and find the Old Wolf. I won't stop until every last wyrd-damned monstrosity has been banished back to their miserable hell pits.'

‘There’s more,’ Krom said, shaking his head at the young jarl. ‘Seven hours before your arrival an entire crusade fleet translated in-system. It is led by the sons of the Lion. Even the Rock is here.’

‘Damn them,’ Ragnar said. ‘Can the fools not see beyond their own petty grudges?’

‘We have identified over a dozen Chapters accompanying them,’ Krom continued. ‘And they are refusing to communicate with us. The majority of the fleet is currently taking up position in Midgardia’s orbit, though we’ve identified vessels belonging to the Ultramarines, Iron Hands and Shadow Hunters en-route for Frostheim and Svellgard. Harald and Sven’s Great Companies are still battling the wyrdling scum there.’

‘We don’t know if this fleet comes as friend or foe?’

‘I have just received a transmission from Egil’s flagship. One of his Wolf Guards claims the Dark Angels are preparing to burn Midgardia from orbit.’

‘With the Great Wolf still unaccounted for? They wouldn’t dare!’

‘There are none to stop them,’ Krom pointed out. ‘Egil is lost with the Great Wolf, Sven and Harald are fully engaged on Frostheim and Svellgard, Bran is still sailing the sea of stars. Grey Knights of the Third Brotherhood under Captain Stern are about to depart for the Rock, but I do not know if they will arrive in time, let alone whether I trust them to fully dissuade the Lions. And I cannot leave the Fang. It was one thing to travel here to the Wolf Moon, but Midgardia’s orbit has put it on the far side of the system. I cannot risk leaving the Hearthworld defenceless, not with so much wyrd trickery afoot.’

‘I will go,’ Ragnar said. ‘And I will tear the throats from anyone fool enough to attack one of our worlds. Once I have stopped them I will descend onto Midgardia and find the Old Wolf and Egil.’

‘Beware, Ragnar,’ Krom said. ‘There is foul play at work. I came to Valdrmani to assist Stern’s Knights despite my oaths. If I hadn’t, a wyrd ritual in this very domeplex’s choristorium would have convinced our allies, and maybe even the Imperium at large, that we had turned renegade. These wyrdling monsters aren’t merely attacking us. They are trying to turn us against ourselves.’

‘They won’t have to try hard if the crusade fleet fire-bombs Midgardia,’ Ragnar growled. ‘I am going there with all speed. I will see you when this is all over, Krom.’

‘Find him, Ragnar.’

‘I will, Fierce-eye,’ the Young King promised. As the screen went dead he smashed one gauntlet into the other, the crack of ceramite bringing the whole

bridge to a standstill.

‘Helmsmen,’ he snarled. ‘Plot a course for Midgardia.’



WARHAMMER
40,000



LEGACY OF RUSS 3

**LYING IN
FLAMES**

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

LYING IN FLAMES

Robbie MacNiven

Morkai's Keep, Frostheim

‘Canis!’

Harald Deathwolf’s roar came too late. Glacius was embedded in the chest of a disintegrating plaguebearer and his storm shield was raised as rusting blades stabbed and slashed. Canis Wolfborn knelt, bleeding his last at the far end of the corridor. Harald saw the wyrd-wrought black steel of his executioner, a Khornate Herald, rise above the press.

Then Fangir struck. The thunderwolf moved like a charge of lightning through the melee, painted red with the gore of the swordlings it had torn apart. As the hellsword fell the faithful beast slammed into its wolf-brother’s side, knocking Canis over. The daemon’s sword struck, and there was a yelp of pain.

‘Canis!’ Harald repeated, shouldering his way through the manic fight, the shock of his storm shield blasting combatants from his path. Ahead Canis lay unmoving, blood pooling beneath him. Fangir writhed beside him, the Herald’s sword lodged deep in its shoulder. With a snarl of fury the Khornate daemon wrenched the weapon free and struck the huge thunderwolf again, cutting into the meat of its flank. Fangir twisted and howled.

Harald wasn’t going to reach them in time. He cleaved apart a brace of capering pink wyrdspawn, grunting as the frost axe carved through their shimmering, ever-changing flesh. They were getting tougher, stronger, faster. Reality in the vaults of Morkai’s Keep was starting to disintegrate, unravelling beneath the sheer, stinking, gibbering weight of the daemononic onslaught.

The Khorne Herald stabbed Fangir again, seeking to lance the monstrous thunderwolf’s heart. Protecting Canis with its body, the huge beast was unable to attack properly. Its fur was dark with its own blood. Harald couldn’t get close

enough.

An explosion rocked the corridor, throwing the Deathwolf into the shoulder plate of one of his Wolf Guards. A section of wall to his right came crashing down, the rubble burying the nearest daemons and splitting the skull of an unfortunate Blood Claw. Harald braced himself, ready for yet another flood of wyrdlings to come bursting through the gap.

But instead of gnashing, shrieking horrors, the swirling smoke of the breach was ripped apart by the thunder of bolter fire. Muzzle flashes and the lightning-crackle of activated power fists lit hulking shapes as they pushed through the rubble, their sheer size knocking the breach wider. Terminators, armoured in black, a white gauntlet sigil adorning their right pauldrons. Iron Hands.

The tide turned. Trapped in the corridor's confined space, the daemons could do nothing but throw themselves at the new arrivals. Standing firm, with legs braced and backs straight, the Iron Hands gunned the unarmoured monstrosities down, the hammering of storm bolters and the whir of assault cannons almost too loud even for Harald's auto-senses to filter.

'Wolf Lord, this is Sergeant Baalor of Clan Company Haarmek. I advise you to fall back to our position immediately.'

'Not without Canis,' Harald snarled at the Iron Hand over the vox. 'Deathwolves, to me! Ravening Jaw pattern!'

His Wolf Guard, the Riders of Morkai, snapped shut around their lord, using the space torn by the Terminators' fusillade to finally establish some sort of cohesion. Like a fang piercing rotting meat, the small wedge of Wolves punched through the last remaining daemons between them and Canis.

The Khorne Herald was waiting. It stood over Fangir's prone body, dripping with the thunderwolf's blood, its guard down and arms outstretched in challenge.

'Face me, Wolf,' it hissed, looking directly at Harald. 'And die.'

'Maybe next time, daemon,' Harald spat. His Wolf Guard stayed locked around him, power weapons crackling with lethal energies, as their jarl knelt beside Canis.

His visor was still reading vital signs. The Wolfborn's hearts were labouring, and his eyelids flickered as his sus-an membrane forced him into a regenerative hibernation. It looked as though the daemon's thrust had severed his spine.

'You need a Wolf Priest,' Harald told Canis, hoping he was still capable of understanding him. 'Don't try to move.'

'Fangir,' Canis murmured, the words barely leaving bloody lips.

'He's coming too,' Harald assured him, and then turned to his Wolf Guard.

‘Send that thing back to hell,’ he snapped, nodding at the breach. But the Khornate daemon had already gone. The rest of its kin were dissolving. Harald slung Glacius across his back and bent to heft Canis across his shoulders, his armour’s strength-enhancing servo bundles whining in protest. ‘Bring the thunderwolf,’ he added. Two of his Riders, Gunnar Felsmite and Denr Longblade, hefted the limp animal between them.

‘We are departing, Wolf,’ the monotone voice of Sergeant Baalor crackled over the vox. *‘With or without you. None of us can remain down here any longer.’*

‘We’re with you,’ Harald growled, grunting with the strain of carrying the Wolfborn. ‘Deathwolves, withdraw to the Iron Hands.’ The Terminators parted to allow the retreating Space Wolves through, never once interrupting their mechanically precise bombardment of the daemoniac creatures scrambling after them.

Outside Morkai’s Keep a storm was building. It had come from the east, heralded by a wind that howled and bit with the feral savagery of the World Wolf itself. Thick, ugly clouds had turned day to night, and snow had started to swirl and eddy across the glacial plateau where the bleak fortress hunched.

Iron Captain Terrek of Clan Company Haarmek stood like a statue forged from black ceramite and silver steel, impervious to the elements that clawed at him. He gazed up at the fortress’s bastions, the lenses of his bionic eyes peeling away the thickening snow to reveal weapons damage and battle scars. Outside the walls the corpses of traitors and heretics had been heaped in dark, rapidly freezing piles, awaiting a flamer’s kiss. The remains of others still lay scattered across the great glacier’s surface, uncollected. The Space Wolves had been interrupted before they could finish their purging.

‘Clan Commander, we have him,’ clicked a voice in Terrek’s ear. It was Brother-Sergeant Baalor, normally commander of Tactical Squad Baalor, now leader of the composite squad of Terminators assembled to retrieve the Wolf Lord Deathhowl. Terrek acknowledged the message with a blink-click of his lenses.

‘You’ve found him?’ asked a sibilant voice. Terrek glanced briefly down at the Shadow Hunter Scout Sergeant, Arro, crouched at his side. He and his four Initiates had drawn their camo capes up over their heads like cowls, leaving only the pallid flesh of their lower faces and the nubs of their nascent fangs visible beneath the snowy folds.

‘We have,’ Terrek confirmed.

The Shadow Hunter infiltrators had returned five minutes earlier, with news that Terrek had already guessed at. The defences of Morkai's Keep were no longer tenable. The Iron Captain had deployed his Terminators on the recommendation of the other Chapter's scouts, teleporting them into the Keep's vaults to retrieve the Wolf Lord. He'd served alongside the Shadow Hunters before, and though their combat doctrines and personal outlooks were inefficient by the standards of the Iron Hands, their disparate approach to warfare had yielded some analytically exceptional results. If his grey-clad allies said Morkai's Keep was lost then it undoubtedly was, regardless of all the fire and fury of the Space Wolves.

The sounds of combat within the fortress reached Terrek's audio receptors, carried by the howling wind. Bolter fire, chainblades, throaty warcries and the unnatural sounds made by the neverborn as they fought, bled and died. The noises were eclipsed momentarily by the shriek of three afterburning turbofans as a black-plated Thunderhawk gunship banked overhead, coming in to land beside the three already occupying the glacier's edge. The warriors of Terrek's strike force – six squads – stood at parade rest in the shadows of their heavy transports, the snow piling up on their towering, immobile frames.

'We are at the gates,' Baalor voxed. Terrek and the Shadow Hunters waited. The main entrance to the Keep lay open before them, the rail lines that would have sealed the huge adamantium blast doors sitting inert. The enemy had come from within.

'I have a visual,' Arro said. The Hunter's advanced eyesight had detected movement – shapes emerging from beyond the gate, striding implacably though the deepening snow. Soon Terrek could discern three of his Clan Company's sergeants – Baalor, Zernn and Haamel – bedecked in the archo-mechanical glory that was Tactical Dreadnought armour. Behind them came a bloody mass of figures in the blue-grey ceramite of the Space Wolves. The three remaining Iron Hand Terminators, Krevvin, Horst and Thall, brought up the rear.

Terrek's steel-plated jaw clenched as he saw the ichor-stained creatures loping in the midst of the Space Wolves. Too savage-looking even for their barbaric Chapter, the animals' distended, muscle-bound frames were clad in archaic scraps of armour and their limbs bristled with dark fur. Even at rest their features were contorted into beastly, leering snarls, their fang-filled maws drooling with spittle. They moved hunched over, stooped like predators, almost as though they mocked the firm and unbending posture of the Iron Hands leading them. These then were the mutants the Dark Angels had warned them about. He fought to

swallow his disgust, and opened a vox-channel with the motley pack.

‘Wolf Lord Harald of the Deathwolves,’ he said. His bionics scanned unfamiliar runic markings and pelt totems, picking out the figure most likely to be the leader. The one he settled on carried one of his pack-kin over his shoulders, the fallen warrior’s blood streaming down the Wolf’s grey armour to leave a red trail in the snow. Behind him two more Wolves hefted the carcass of a huge, furred Fenrisian beast between them.

‘I am Harald,’ the Wolf said, stopping before Terrek as his Terminator sergeants took post either side. ‘And who in the Allfather’s name are you?’

‘Iron Captain Aleron Terrek, Clan Company Haarmek, of the Iron Hands.’ The words issued flat and lifeless from the bionically augmented warrior’s vocaliser. ‘And this is Scout Sergeant Arro of the Shadow Hunters Tenth Company.’

With a grunt of effort Harald laid the body he’d been carrying in the snow before the Iron Captain. A quick optical scan by the Iron Hand revealed, to his surprise, that the Wolf still lived. Just.

‘He needs an Apothecary,’ Harald said. ‘As does his wolf-brother.’ He nodded back at the huge beast being reverently lowered by his packmates.

‘That creature is his brother?’

‘We are all brothers, machine-man.’

‘Where are your own Apothecaries?’

‘My Wolf Priest is with the rest of my Great Company,’ Harald said, his impatience with Terrek obvious. ‘Still fighting inside the keep. I am going to rejoin them.’

‘You will do no such thing,’ Terrek said, his voice remaining monotone. ‘You will vox your squad leaders and order them to withdraw immediately.’

Harald took a step towards him, his visor’s red lenses level with Terrek’s optical hardware.

‘We’ve fought all day to purge this fortress of wyrd-taint,’ the Wolf said, the words a snarl rasping from his helmet’s vocaliser. ‘Morkai’s Keep belongs to the *Vlka Fenryka*, given by oaths and secured by blood. We will not abandon it, not after so many sagas have been written in its defence.’

‘Then you will all die,’ Terrek said simply. ‘Morkai’s Keep has been target-locked from orbit by my battle-barge, *Iron Requiem*. I have instructed its gunnery crew to open fire in exactly... twenty-one minutes and eighteen seconds. The ship’s bombardment cannon will level this glacier, and seal any of the warp filth that survive far below the surface.’

‘You cannot,’ Harald said, turning from the expressionless visor of the Iron

Hand to the silent, cowed menace of the Shadow Hunters. ‘You would not dare strike at the sovereign territory of the sons of Russ!’

‘My Clan’s most senior Iron Father will attend to your dying brother,’ Terrek said. ‘We will make... repairs. But only if you cooperate.’

‘This is outrageous!’

‘This is logical. Your keep has fallen. You require my assistance. I, however, do not require yours. Extracting you was merely a courtesy, and one that I extended with considerable risk. Had my Terminators not successfully teleported into your vaults and brought you clear, my squads would have lost their sergeants at a stroke.’

It was apparent the Space Wolf wasn’t listening. He was pacing in the snow like some caged animal, every distant howl and clash of steel still echoing from the keep attracting his gaze. Terrek had taken more than enough of the hot-tempered warrior’s foolishness.

‘Our fleet intercepted a transmission from this world’s moon, Svellgard,’ he said. ‘It seems the Wolves of your kinsman, Sven Bloodhowl, are also beset.’

Harald stopped his pacing and faced the Iron Hand once more.

‘The World Wolf’s Lair is under attack again?’

‘Yes. Seemingly with even greater force than before. As soon as we have dealt with the incursion here, my Clan Company and I will be bound for Svellgard. There are already other elements of the crusade fleet en-route.’

‘What crusade fleet?’

Terrek’s response formulae faltered, and he glanced at Arro. The Shadow Hunter Scout simply shrugged.

‘Wolf, we have much to discuss.’

The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard

Sven Bloodhowl no longer laughed as he killed. Now he did it with furious intent – not the primal rage of his Wulfen Murderpacks, but with the lock-jawed, stone-eyed determination of a warrior seeking vengeance.

Torvind was dead. When the Thunderhawk *Godspear* had taken them back to the World Wolf’s Lair, Sven had been able to see just how massive the new horde assailing it was. The sea around the missile control complex churned and foamed as ten thousand fanged and clawed nightmares dragged themselves up from the deeps, the wailing cacophony of their voices like a gale battering at the bunkers and redoubts from every side.

As *Godspear* banked round to land, the Wolf Lord had seen the first wave of the daemons' new assault succeed. A cohort of red-scaled swordlings poured up the rocky knoll that dominated the southern tip of the island, flooding towards its fortified vox-mast like a rising, blood-soaked tide. From the open hold Sven had watched the stab of bolter fire and plasma beams as the Grey Hunters assigned to the mast's defence – the Blackfangs – died to a Wolf.

Worse was to come. Emerging from the thrashing waters below came clanking monstrosities – twin Soul Grinders, climbing the craggy cliffs on segmented, arachnid-like mechanical limbs. From the knoll's top their maw-cannons would have an unrestricted line of sight across the whole island.

Sven had led the counter-attack. He and his Bloodguard had dropped from *Godspear*'s hold as they had done innumerable times before, jump packs blazing, power weapons wreathed with disruptive energies. The Soul Grinders had broken and died, one shattered by Kregga Longtooth's power fist, the other by Uuntir's thunder hammer, the enraged daemons possessing the war engines dissipating into the ether.

But it was a trap.

More wyrdlings darted from the waters lashing the crag, these ones impossibly fast. On sleek, lithe-limbed mounts, the Slaaneshi seekers had scaled the rocks in a matter of heartbeats and were upon the Bloodguard before they could rally to their jarl.

Alone, the Space Wolves fought with their customary skill, strength and savagery. This time it would not be enough. Accompanying the mounted daemonettes came a soporific fogbank that rolled in off the sea. Purple-tinted and cloying, the unnatural miasma worked its way through their armour's vents and numbed the Wolves' razor-sharp senses, slowing each thrust and riposte, deadening each blow. Sven had found himself alone in the impenetrable fog, swinging Frostclaw at nothing, the ululating shrieks of the creatures darting around him making him shudder with strange, unnatural gratification.

He didn't see Torvind fall, and perhaps that was for the best. Under such conditions, it could not have been a death befitting such a warrior. When the young Drakebanes powered into the mist with their own jump packs howling, banishing the vile wyrdcraft with fresh blades and bolters, Olaf had discovered Torvind lying prone at the foot of the vox-mast. His helmet was discarded and his white features frozen in an expression of wide-eyed joy, framed by his long red mane. The cut running across his throat, ear to ear, had been made with a blade so fine his flesh had closed shut after its passing, sealing in the blood. As

Olaf, still dizzy from the daemonette's wyrdling musk, probed the wound it had finally come jetting out. He realised the blow had cut the young Bloodguard's throat right back to the bone.

The knoll could not be defended, that much was obvious. Sven, his Bloodguard and the few remaining Drakebanes had withdrawn to the island's interior defences, and the Wolf Lord had ordered his Vindicators to turn their cannons on the vox-mast. A salvo of heavy siege shells had sent the rocks crashing into the sea, denying them as a vantage point for more daemonic artillery.

All that had only been the beginning. The daemons were relentless. From defence turrets and hardened bunkers, rockcrete redoubts and plasteel-plated bastions, Sven's Bloodhowls gunned them down. Salvoes of bolts burst plaguebearers like oversized boils, or reduced swordlings to a red mist. Lascannon beams seared through clanking, whirring daemonic war machines while bolts of plasma vaporised flocks of undulating, manta-like sky-screamers as they swooped down with snapping maws. When the tide rose too high, the stink of promethium vied with the pervasive reek of the wyrdrealm as flamers burned the filth away. The odour of melting wyrdflesh was the worst thing Sven had ever smelled.

And it was all for nothing. On and on the daemons came, cohort after cohort pulling themselves, drenched, from the surrounding sea like some madman's parody of accelerated evolutionary progress. It didn't matter how many were banished back to the wyrdrealm. It didn't matter how long it took them to gain the stony shingle, and then the cold, bare earth between the beach and the outer bunkers. All the spawn from a galaxy-spanning hell were flooding up through the three ever-widening rifts beneath Svellgard's oceans. The Bloodhowls could have fought for millennia and not vanquished a fraction of their attackers.

'Input the missile launch codes,' Sven ordered Yngfor Stormsson, whose Firemaw Long Fangs occupied the keep at the heart of the Lair. 'And rig the central silos for demolition. I am contacting the fleet. We are evacuating.'

'Lord, communications have been intermittent since the vox-mast was felled,' Yngfor reported. *'And it will likely be another half hour before we can even begin to extract.'*

'Then we'd better start now,' Sven growled. 'I'll hold them off.'

And so the jarl led his eighth sally of the day into the daemonic host. Frostclaw keened, reaping wyrdflesh with every stroke, neither warp-forged steel, leathery hide nor hardened scales any protection against its razor-ice edge. In his other fist the whirring teeth of Firefang glowed white-hot, a biting blur of fury that

shrieked as it sawed through chitin and bone.

Sven killed mechanically now, the fires of his battle-song extinguished. Torvind's death, and the deaths of all the others who had been dragged down beneath the maddening tide, counted for nothing. Svellgard was lost. The Firehowlers had failed.

'*Lord, communication from the fleet,*' said Yngfor over the vox. The rest of his words were lost on Sven as he was forced to duck the swipe of a beast of Nurgle's meaty worm-maw, the flailing blow catching the top of his jump pack and causing him to stumble. He righted himself with a snarl and plunged Firefang into the pestilential monstrosity's swollen belly, revving the chainsword violently. Reeking offal, chewed maggots and flayed meat battered at him, drenching him in toxic green sludge. He kept sawing until the beast had stopped squirming, up to his knee plates in eviscerated daemonic guts.

'Repeat,' he snapped into the vox. Then, suddenly, Yngfor's message became irrelevant. He realised what the Long Fang had been trying to tell him.

Their salvation was at hand.

Overhead the blank, slate-grey skies were being inscribed with fiery contrails, like a hundred meteorites burning through Svellgard's upper atmosphere. It was a sight he'd seen many times in over a century of warfare, and yet still it thrilled him. He prayed to the Allfather that there would never come a day when it did not.

Above him, an orbital assault was beginning.

'Yngfor,' he voxed. 'Forget my last orders. All packs are to hold their ground. Help is on its way.'

The Void, Fenris System

The Strike Cruiser's name was *Star Drake*, and its shipmaster was the youngest in the Space Wolf Chapter Fleet. He was called Ranulf, and he was a big-boned, blond-haired warrior who seemed ill at ease in the void, pacing around his bridge like a beast that had not been fed for days.

Captain Stern watched him without comment. The Grey Knight stood immobile beside the Wolf's command throne, hands behind his back, waiting. They had left the upper orbit of Fenris less than an hour ago, Stern's dozen remaining silver paladins occupying the cells reserved for the packs of Wolves that were the *Star Drake*'s usual cargo. Krom Dragongaze's parting words echoed through Stern's thoughts.

‘Ranulf will take you to the Rock,’ he had said. ‘He’s wasted above the Hearthworld, without any foe to face. He hungers for glory.’

‘I seek negotiation,’ Stern had cautioned. ‘Not battle or glory. The last thing we need is to give the Dark Angels any more reason to doubt the loyalty of you or your kin.’

‘He’s simply to transport you to the Rock,’ Krom had said. ‘Then he will join Egil Iron Wolf’s fleet above Midgardia. You are not responsible for him.’

For that, Stern was thankful. The Space Wolf hadn’t stopped moving since they had broken from orbit. He spoke only in grunts, not so much hostile towards his passenger as indifferent. The two other Wolves who commanded the ship’s serf crew seemed similarly distressed. One was overseeing the watch at the enginarium, whittling runes into a wooden token with single-minded intensity. The other stalked the ship’s lower decks, apparently without purpose, snarling at any who got too close.

Stern placed one gauntlet on the hilt of his sheathed nemesis force sword.

‘How is our progress, shipmaster?’ he asked.

Ranulf was down among the cogitator tiers of the bridge’s lower level, momentarily out of Stern’s line of sight. There was a long pause before the Wolf called back up to him, his voice sounding hoarse.

‘Tolerable, daemonhunter. Another three hours will see us within short-range hailing distance of the fleet around Midgardia.’

‘My Brotherhood appreciates your assistance in this matter,’ Stern said, wondering what the Wolf was doing.

‘Anything that lets us strike back at these treacherous fools,’ came the halting reply.

Stern wondered briefly whether Ranulf was referring to the daemons that infested the system, or his supposed brother Adeptus Astartes in the crusade fleet above Midgardia.

‘I will take my leave, for now,’ the Grey Knight said. ‘I must brief the Knights of my Brotherhood on the situation we might expect once we reach Midgardia.’

There was no reply. Stern turned to depart.

Below him Ranulf crouched, hidden between the cogitator banks, fists clenched, eyes screwed shut, his whole body shaking in mute strain. The kaerls around him stared at their lord in silent, wide-eyed terror, edging along their benches away from him.

Slowly, a growl began to build, deep within the Space Wolf’s chest.

Stern was halfway towards his commandeered cell when the inter-ship vox-net exploded.

At first it was just screaming. Stern's sword was in his hand instantly, energy crackling up the blade.

'Brothers, report,' he demanded. All his Knights were still in their cell blocks. None were any more aware of what was happening than he was.

The screaming worsened. It was no longer just a single voice, and no longer just on one frequency. On three separate channels, the sounds of indiscernible Fenrisian pleas drowned out all other communication.

Stern checked the channel sources. The bridge, the enginarium, and sub-deck seventeen, deep in *Star Drake's* bowls. Realisation struck him just as he heard the first feral snarls over the vox. His blood ran cold.

'Artemis, Gideon, Ethold, deploy to the engine deck immediately,' he ordered. 'Simeon, Osbeth and Caldor, track vox-channel nine-eight-two-oh. Everyone else rendezvous on the bridge.'

'What is it, brother-captain?' Gideon asked. *'I sense no warp taint here.'*

'You're right,' Stern said. 'It's worse.'

He sprinted for the bridge, bursting through the open blast doors just as a flood of screaming kaerls poured in the opposite direction. The leadmost scrambled to make way for the silver-armoured warrior as he thrust between them, eyes on the monster prowling the deck below.

The monster that had once been Shipmaster Ranulf.

The Space Wolf had succumbed to his kind's inherent curse. The warrior's armour was now split and twisted around fresh growths of muscle, his gauntlets broken by wicked claws. The shipmaster's face was barely recognisable, a contorted mess of blond fur and fangs. Yellow, lupine eyes stared wildly up at Stern as he sensed the Grey Knight's arrival.

'It's the Space Wolves,' Caldor voxed as the other Knights made the same discovery. *'They've gone berserk.'*

'Don't kill them if you can help it,' Stern said. He slowed as he reached the metal staircase leading from the upper half of the bridge to the lower, deactivating his force sword as he went.

'Ranulf,' he said to the Wulfen. 'Do you remember me, Ranulf?'

The Wulfen snarled. It had killed. There was blood on its claws and matted in its beard.

'I know you do not recognise my scent, Ranulf,' Stern said, spreading his arms, opening his guard. 'I am not one of your pack. But remember my voice. I am

your cousin, Space Wolf.’ He halted a dozen yards from the Wulfen, the beast seemingly frozen to the spot.

A half dozen kaerls, cowering beneath their clattering cogitators, chose that moment to run.

‘No!’ Stern barked at them, but too late. The thing that had been – or maybe still was – Shipmaster Ranulf leapt as they passed, a feral howl tearing from the monster’s throat. Two of the serfs went down beneath its claws, screaming. Blood splattered across their workstations.

Stern activated his sword once more and sprang forward, features set. Lowly Chapter thralls or not, he would not allow any more innocent Imperial blood to be shed.

Ranulf turned with a speed even the Grey Knight captain couldn’t match, claws slashing across his silver breastplate. Stern grunted at the impact, swinging his sword around as he sought to keep the Wulfen at bay. The beast, however, had no time for finesse. Ducking the swing it wrapped two arms around Stern’s midriff and heaved. The Grey Knight found himself going down beneath the creature’s sweat-stinking weight, servos protesting.

The two Space Marines struck the decking grille with a crack. Stern immediately regretted trying to talk to the beast face to face and leaving his helm mag-locked to his belt. The Wulfen pinned his arms and tried to savage the Grey Knight’s skull with its fangs. Stern could only turn his head away, bloody drool splattering him.

Somewhere, a claxon began to wail. Red emergency lighting bathed the bridge. He felt the deck shift fractionally beneath them.

‘Brother-captain!’ The voice of Alacar, one of Stern’s brothers, caused the Wulfen’s head to snap up. Six Grey Knights occupied the upper bridge, force weapons activated, storm bolters levelled.

Stern used the opportunity the distraction afforded him. He head-butted the Wulfen. The creature grunted as its head snapped back, fangs crunching, its grip on Stern’s arms loosening a fraction. The Grey Knight ripped one gauntlet free and, as the Wulfen’s head came back down, eyes filled with raging madness, he pressed two fingers to the creature’s scalp.

‘Enough,’ he enunciated, driving a spike of his will, blindingly bright, into the beast’s mind. His psychic soul flare illuminated more than he’d expected, more than just the animalism displayed by the creature’s behaviour. Fear, sorrow, pain. Above all, awareness, no matter how base. Whether he’d wanted to or not, Stern could not deny that the creature was still a Space Wolf. Ranulf was still there.

And Ranulf now slumped, suddenly limp, across Stern. He was unconscious.

The other Grey Knights reached his side. With some difficulty they dragged the sprawling Wulfen off their captain. Stern found his feet.

‘Brothers, report.’

‘The enginarium is secure,’ crackled Gideon’s voice in his ear. ‘But we had to put the Wolf down. Brother Ethold is wounded, and the engine systems themselves were damaged before we could purge the mutant.’

‘Ethold?’ Stern asked.

‘I’ll live,’ came the big Grey Knight’s response.

‘How bad is the damage to the engines?’ Stern glanced at the red lights still blinking across a slew of the bridge’s cogitator banks.

‘I don’t know, brother-captain. The mutant killed a number of tech-priests. The remainder are assessing the damage as we speak.’

‘Have them shut off those claxons,’ Stern ordered. ‘Caldor, status?’

‘Our Wolf is also dead, brother-captain. He threw himself from a stanchion when we cornered him. Some sort of madness gripped him.’

‘They are cursed,’ Alacar said beside him. ‘We should kill this one, before it awakes.’

‘That is not our decision to make,’ Stern said. He cast around the bridge, his genhanced senses picking out the hiding places of the bridge’s surviving crew.

‘You,’ he snapped, pointing at an old man in the pelt-trimmed robes of a huscarl, trying to cower behind a holochart. ‘Where are this ship’s holding cells?’

‘Deck theta nine, lord,’ the serf stammered. ‘That’s the main brig.’

‘You will lead my battle-brothers there with this prisoner, as soon as you have told me what this means.’ He gestured at the flashing rune banks of the nearest cogitators, and then at the wolf-headed claxon horns that still howled from the bridge’s arching roof.

‘Lord, the enginarium has gone into lockdown,’ the huscarl said. ‘Any weapons fire on the drive deck could trigger it. It will need to be overridden.’

‘You can do so?’

‘With time, lord. But there may also have been damage done to the control mechanisms.’

‘What are you saying?’

‘That without basic repairs our projected course will take twice as long to achieve.’

‘Where can such repairs be effected?’

‘Our enginseers would likely be sufficient, lord. But it may be quicker to seek assistance from the nearest docking station.’

‘And where would that be?’

‘We will need a moment to triangulate our exact location.’

Stern waited in silence as the huscarl bent over a rune bank, wizened fingers tapping away. After a few moments the claxons shut off, though the lights continued to wink urgently. Slowly, more wide-eyed kaerls began to emerge from their hiding places.

‘Return to your stations,’ Stern ordered. ‘Now.’

‘I have our coordinates, lord,’ the huscarl said, sliding a freshly inked data chit from a cogitator’s imprint port. ‘It would appear...’ he paused to scan the slip of paper, then looked at Stern’s boots, uncertainty radiating off him.

‘Speak,’ Stern commanded.

‘The closest station is a Ramilies-class star fort, *Gormenjarl*. It is part of the system’s defence network.’

‘Contact it immediately. Inform them of our requirements.’

‘That’s the problem, lord,’ the huscarl said, still not meeting the Grey Knight’s steely gaze. ‘All contact with both *Gormenjarl* and the system’s other Ramilies, *Mjalnar*, was lost at the start of the daemoninc incursions. Our signals go unanswered.’

Stern gazed out into the star-studded expanse stretching away beyond the *Star Drake*’s open vision port. The problem was clear. They were partially stranded hours from their destination, and time was running out. But everything about *Gormenjarl* boded ill.

‘How big is the Ramilies’ defence contingent?’ Stern asked. The huscarl paused, scanning his cogitator screens.

‘Six platoons of Imperial Navy armsmen and a single pack of Grey Hunters. The ones on rotation when contact was lost were the Redpelts of Lord Kjarl Grimblood’s Great Company.’

It was surely a trap. The onset of the Wulfen curse at such an inopportune moment could not be coincidence. What if the Space Wolves’ genetic instability really was warp-tainted?

But that did not change things, Stern told himself. Not yet. The Dark Angels had to be stopped before they started a full-scale war with the Wolves. The carnage such a conflict would unleash could only serve the Ruinous Powers. Once the situation had been stabilised, then the Wolves and their bestial defect could be subjected to judgement.

Stern had to get to the Rock as soon as possible. And that meant braving a daemon's schemes.

'Chart a new heading,' he said to the huscarl. 'Get the engines back online and divert as much power to them as you think they can handle. Take us to *Gormenjarl*.'

The Void, Fenris System

At times like these, standing aboard the bridge of the battle-barge *Holmgang*, Ragnar Blackmane felt truly helpless.

For a Fenrisian warrior, born and bred beneath clear, cold skies on the banks of icy seas, the confinement of void travel was akin to the worst sort of imprisonment. In his younger years the Wolf Lord had spoken with officers of the Imperial Navy who had relished the endlessness of the galaxy beyond their ships' bulkheads and vision ports. They talked of limitless space, of the ultimate expanse, a wanderer's quest that could last forever.

Ragnar saw none of that in the starry darkness he now gazed upon. Only nothingness. The way his pack brethren referred to it – the Sea of Stars – was a misnomer, a lie told to comfort their instinctive dislike of the void. It was nothing like the beautiful, windswept seas of the Hearthworld. It was worse than desolation, worse than abandonment.

Truly, it was a void, nothing more and nothing less. It trapped him in a box of adamantium, his sword-skill and battle-lust rendered impotent. The killing was done by others, by gunnery thralls and range finders, target locks and servitor breach-loaders, none of it glorious, all of it torpid and impersonal. The Young King's only hope during void engagements was for the savagery of a boarding action. Those, he allowed, were rare, sweet fights. Then a warrior's speed, his strength and his fury meant everything. But even those few seconds of blood and steel couldn't eclipse the shuddering monotony of voidborne travel.

Ragnar hadn't moved from the centre of the *Holmgang*'s bridge since his fleet had translated in-system. After hailing Krom he'd tried to raise Sven on Svellgard and Harald on Frostheim. His efforts to make long-range vox contact had failed, though he'd reached Harald's flagship, in orbit above Frostheim. The ship's chief vox huscarl had reported vessels belonging to the Iron Hands, Ultramarines and Shadow Haunters moving into orbit, making no threatening moves towards the Wolf fleet but refusing all offers to communicate.

Right before the end of the last transmission the huscarl had reported an

Ultramarines Strike Cruiser and a trio of Astra Militarum mass transporters breaking away from the fleet in the direction of Svellgard, orbiting on the far side of Frostheim. At the same time Iron Hands Thunderhawks had been picked up heading for low orbit on a trajectory that would take them to Morkai's Keep. Whether they went to assist Harald Deathwolf's warriors or purge them, Ragnar didn't know. The thought that loyal cousins may at that very moment be tearing at one another's throats because of some wyrd-spawned trickery made his entire body shake with anger.

As far as Midgardia was concerned, information was even patchier. The crusade fleet there, led by the Rock, dwarfed the one taking post around Frostheim and Svellgard. The Space Wolf ships in orbit appeared leaderless – on the rare moments when *Holmgang* was able to establish reliable contact, the reports from the huscarls were conflicting and confused. Logan Grimnar was lost. Seemingly now Egil Iron Wolf was too. There were rumours the crusade fleet was about to unleash exterminatus on Midgardia.

Loudly and without shame, Ragnar damned the waiting to the Seven Hells.

At last, a change in the soul-searing monotony. Augur beacons chimed, and kaerls scurried to and fro beneath the bridge's dais as data was collated.

'What is it?' Ragnar demanded, staring out into the void, the nothingness, as though his keen eyes would have been able to pick something out of the endless emptiness.

'A ship just entered our furthest engagement proximity zone, lord,' said a huscarl, bowing to the Young King.

'What ship?'

'Our cogitators are working to identify it right now, but it appears to be Imperial.'

At the moment that counted for very little. Ragnar bared his fangs in annoyance as he waited for the chattering cogitators to finish their arcane computations.

'I have it,' said a second huscarl, peering at the fuzzy green display of a data-slate. 'The ship is a fast cutter, New Star pattern, but appears to have been extensively modified. It's transmitting an ident-signal...' He paused for a moment. 'But it's blank, my lord.'

Ragnar's expression darkened. He watched the red blip representing the anonymous vessel drawing fractionally closer to the Space Wolves fleet on one of the bridge's holocharts, like a seaborne minnow darting cautiously towards a great Fenrisian kraken. There were few ships in the galaxy that bore blank ident-signals, and fewer still that would dare approach an entire Space Wolf fleet on a

war footing.

‘There are no other ships within striking distance?’ the Young King demanded, eyes darting across the charts and the oculus feeds.

‘No, lord.’

‘Extend the augur range and scan again. I want to be certain.’ Even at the best of times, the appearance of such a vessel didn’t bode well. And these were far from the best of times.

‘Lord, it’s hailing us. Vox only.’ For a moment, Ragnar hesitated. Then he gestured at the communications array.

‘On speakers. Let’s hear him.’

The voice that addressed the crew of *Holmgang* was one Ragnar felt he’d known all his life – firm, uncompromising, self-assured. It was the voice of the Imperium, cracked with age but still smouldering with resolution. It was exactly what the jarl had feared, as soon as he’d seen the blank markers of the mysterious ship’s designation.

‘Greetings, Lord Blackmane,’ it said. ‘My name is Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay of the Ordo Hereticus, Segmentum Pacificus Divisio. Aboard the Allsaint’s Herald.’

‘Lord Inquisitor,’ Ragnar acknowledged. ‘You’ve come from the crusade fleet, I take it?’

‘Not exactly. More like in spite of the crusade fleet.’

For all the voice’s apparent strength, it could not disguise its frailties from Ragnar’s keen senses. The Wolf could detect the slight wheeze that came with aged, failing lungs and the soft, wet slap of fleshy lips. While de Mornay’s tone retained much of what must have once been a considerable will, Ragnar doubted the man’s body had stood the test of time so well.

‘Your ship comes here seeking me,’ the Young King said. ‘Why? What business have you with the *Vlka Fenryka*?’

‘Noble Wolf, I do not know how much you are already aware of,’ de Mornay answered. ‘But time presses, so I will speak plainly. The Dark Angels have not come here to banish daemons. They are here because they are convinced – all of them – that your Chapter is harbouring the curse of a mutation far beyond the limits sanctioned for Adeptus Astartes gene-seed. And, as you can gather from their following, the Imperium at large appears to have been persuaded by them.’

‘The Imperium, but not you, Lord Inquisitor?’ Ragnar demanded. De Mornay didn’t reply, and the young Wolf let the silence stretch. The accusations of mutation had left him pale-faced with anger, but he swallowed it, bit back at the

beast snarling inside him. They were already lacking friends as it was. Cementing his Chapter's isolation would not help any of them.

'Why are you here, de Mornay?' he repeated.

'Suffice to say for now that I believe the Dark Angels' interest in your... unfortunate secret conceals one of their own, one which surely must be far darker than what your wolf-brethren are currently struggling with.'

'You speak in riddles, inquisitor,' Ragnar said. 'I already count Lukas the Trickster among the ranks of my Great Company, I wouldn't want you to give him competition.'

'These channels are undoubtedly being monitored, Wolf Lord,' de Mornay said. 'Yes, even with your ciphers and encryptions. The Inner Circle sees much, and hears even more.'

'You are beginning to sound senile, inquisitor. What is this madness you speak of?'

'I request an audience with you directly, Lord Blackmane. Aboard your ship.'

The sudden demand caught Ragnar by surprise.

'Into the wolf's lair?' he said slowly. 'Don't you believe any of the stories you've heard? Do you think you would be safe?'

'Not safe,' de Mornay allowed. 'But at least certain. Discussing matters face to face would be preferable to this. Your Chapter wards others away with the appearance of savagery, but your souls are not dark. I know Chapters that are.'

'You would rather a wolf's lair than a lion's den,' Ragnar said, smiling grimly. 'Very well, Lord Inquisitor. We will receive you. And perhaps venture into the den together.'

Sub-orbit, Midgardia

Midgardia wasn't hailing him.

Conran was not surprised. Normally a descent upon the Magma Gates would have required dual-level clearance codes and at least one vocal scan. But the only thing that spoke to him now over the vox was static.

The non-encrypted channels were a mess. Control of the airspace above the planet had collapsed completely. There were dozens of fliers aloft, from sleek unicutters to swollen cargo sows. They gave Conran's Stormwolf a wide berth, not merely because of an instinctive fear of the Adeptus Astartes, but because his was the only transport headed planetside while the rest fled.

'This is foolishness,' said Kreg's voice for the eighth time.

Conran didn't reply. The Long Fang had almost physically blocked him from leaving *Wolftide's* bridge.

'What does the lion care for one wolf?' he'd demanded.

'It's not one wolf,' Conran had snapped back. 'Logan Grimnar is down there. Egil Iron Wolf is down there. Our jarls, our champions, the greatest living heroes of our Chapter. I will not be the one to abandon them.'

'You cannot help them down there,' Kreg had said. 'Hail the Rock again. Try one last time.'

But Conran could take no more. He would not scream hopelessly into the void while his packmates died.

The same loyalty clearly did not occupy the minds of the citizens of Midgardia. The landing plates and docking spires of the Magma Gates, rising above the blotched purple canopy of the surrounding spore jungles, were awash with people seeking salvation. Looking to the skies for landers that would never come. The Wolves in orbit had already taken on board what they could. As the Stormwolf banked overhead Conran saw the muzzle-flash of small-arms fire as a mob of refugees attempted to rush an area of the plates cordoned off for upper-spire dignitaries. The guards – privately hired muscle, no doubt – cut down the initial rush, but could not reload fast enough to stop the next. Conran lost sight of them as they were swamped by a sea of scrambling, screaming men, women and children.

The Space Wolf had seen such sights many times before. Civilian panic and disorder had been a feature of almost every warzone he had ever fought in. But this was not some crater-scarred war world in some distant frontier system. This was Midgardia, sister planet to noble Fenris itself, part of the Space Wolves' fiefdom. The thought sickened him.

'*Conran*,' said Kreg again over the vox. Conran cut the channel.

He banked left, angling the transport for the highest point of the Magma Gates, the planetary governor's control spire. Finally, he received a challenge, if only an automated one. A servitor demanded a string of ident-codes over the vox. Conran gave them, and was cleared to land. He noted with surprise that Governor Sandrin's private shuttle, a gleaming chrome autowing, was still sitting idle on its docking strut.

Conran let the hardwired auto servitor pilot the Stormwolf down, releasing his restraint harness and standing by the cockpit hatch. There was no one to greet him at the landing strut. Blast doors led from the plate into the control spire proper. Even this high above the canopy, the corrosive effect of Midgardia's

daemon-enhanced spores was obvious. Metal rusted and flaked and the blast doors opened with juddering reluctance, as though they hadn't been used for decades. Below, the purple jungles stretched in an endless sea, discoloured now with foetid shades of green, a smog of ugly yellow-tinted spores hanging over the deformed canopy. The Wolf Guard didn't linger outside.

He stalked the council chambers and corridors of the spire, his senses on edge. How far had the wyrd-taint been able to spread since they'd evacuated? Judging by the panic being exhibited on the public docking plates he assumed the Tallybands had at least penetrated the Magma Gates' outer bastions.

The control spire, however, seemed utterly deserted. That was until his auto-senses detected the sound of raised voices emanating from Governor Sandrin's personal chambers.

The rooms themselves were not the sumptuous things other planetary rulers might have enjoyed. The Magma Gates were more military garrison and administrative hub than a governor's palace. Sandrin himself was not an Imperial Commander in the true sense of the title. It was the Space Wolves, and not the High Lords of Terra, who had appointed him as Governor of Midgardia, just as it was the Wolves that had appointed every one of the planet's rulers since the Imperium had first granted the Chapter full rights over the Fenris System.

Sandrin himself was a competent enough man, a hard-working, long-suffering administrator who preferred a clerk's ink-stained apron to his fur-trimmed robes of office. Yet it was the latter he was wearing now, standing beside the unmade bed in his private sleeping chamber. His angry words masked Conran's approach.

'I won't tell you again, Melain, I'm not leaving! Take the children and the shuttle. Go straight to the Wolf fleet in orbit, they'll give you sanctuary. But I must stay.'

'Why?' Melain wailed. The governor's wife was knelt before her husband, still in a dishevelled nightdress, face swollen with grief and streaked with tears. Two children, eyes wide with frightened bewilderment, stared on from a chair in the corner of the room. The older of the two, a little girl, was the first to notice Conran. She screamed.

Both parents turned, faces etched with fear. The realisation that it was one of the Adeptus Astartes, and not some foul daemon standing in their doorway, didn't do much to lighten their expressions.

'Governor Sandrin,' Conran said. 'I did not think to find you and your family still planetside.'

‘I-I won’t leave,’ Sandrin stammered. ‘It would be a dereliction of my duties as an Imperial citizen and a betrayal of my oaths to your Chapter and to Fenris. In ten thousand years no governor has abandoned Midgardia.’

‘Your courage does you great honour,’ Conran said. ‘But surely we cannot ask the same sacrifice from your family. I know what is coming through the spore jungles in this direction. I certainly would not wish my kinsfolk to experience it first-hand.’

‘I won’t leave my husband,’ Melain said, defiance hardening her grieving expression.

‘Yes, you will,’ Conran said. ‘For the sake of your children. I will take you onboard my own Stormwolf. You will be delivered safely to the flagship of my lord Egil, in orbit above.’

‘He sent you to retrieve us?’ Sandrin asked.

‘No. He is still deep in the underworld. I came on my own initiative. A misguided faction of our fellow Adeptus Astartes has been threatening to fire-bomb Midgardia’s surface. It seems we cannot stop them without drawing blood. I had hoped my presence planetside would make them reconsider. I cannot simply sit in orbit any longer while this world is burned to ash.’

‘We have been betrayed?’ Sandrin asked incredulously.

‘I fear so, governor, though just by whom or what I do not yet know. Let me escort your family outside.’

‘At least come to the shuttle,’ Melain begged. Conran saw the resistance in the governor’s pinched eyes, but after a moment he glanced at his two offspring and nodded.

‘Hurry,’ Conran said.

Melain gathered the children by her side, and the four followed Conran back to the landing strut, their wiry, pale Midgardian bodies dwarfed by the towering Space Wolf.

‘The atmosphere is becoming ever more toxic,’ Conran warned before the strut’s blast door. ‘The air itself has been infected by the Archenemy’s presence. We must be quick.’

The family nodded. Conran raised a gauntlet. ‘On my mark.’

He hit the door’s release rune. Beyond it, they didn’t get far.

The Space Wolf was only a half dozen yards across the strut’s plate when the little boy’s shriek brought him up short.

‘What’s that?’

The Wolf had seen it too. A spear of light, flickering with the burning of

contrails, stabbing down from orbit. It struck a few miles east of the Magma Gates. Fire blossomed, a conflagration that mushroomed like the jaws of the great Fire Wolf, consuming all around it.

‘Allfather protect us,’ Conran said.

Above, the crusade fleet opened fire.

The Warp

They challenged him. He would not be their king, so they came for him one by one. Old friends and Long Fangs all. He put them down, each in turn, stripped of his battleplate, hair matted, his body streaked with blood and sweat, panting from between bared fangs.

Was he still so different from them? Was there still any point in resisting? Even when they submitted? Even when knees bent, and throats were bared in subservience?

He accepted their fealty, though his whole body itched to join them. Surrender to the gnawing, black, clawed thing inside him.

But no, no. Resist. You are more than a beast, though you may no longer look or think it.

The daemons came for him next. The wyrdrealm knew of their approach, and of the threat they posed. It had already tried to slow them, to delay their arrival in the Fenris System. Now it attacked the fleet’s Geller fields. Things with snapping tentacles and a thousand weeping eyes materialised onboard their vessels. With rending claws and howling beast-oaths, each one was sent straight back to the hell that had spawned it.

The warp could try its trickery for eternity, but fate was inexorable. Nothing would stop the Redmaw now.

WARHAMMER
40,000



WAR ZONE
FENRIS



LEGACY OF RUSS 4
THE BROKEN
CROWN

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

THE BROKEN CROWN

Robbie MacNiven

Exfill Shaft twenty-nine point seven two, the Underworld, Midgardia

Egil and his Ironguard had barely gone a hundred yards before their vox-links picked up a squeal of transmission code. It was gone in a heartbeat, vanishing once more into Midgardia's cavernous depths. Fifty yards later there was another blurt.

'Press on,' Egil ordered, fighting to keep the frustration from his voice. Logan Grimnar was down here somewhere. Some of his Kingsguard had to have survived as well. The Iron Wolf would find them, or his bones would remain beneath Midgardia for eternity.

The tunnel they were taking was painfully low and narrow, requiring the Space Wolves to stoop almost double as their pauldrons ground against its crumbling dirt flanks. The air was close and hot, and the scuffle of ceramite through muck, the hum of power armour and the panting of his packmates filled Egil with a claustrophobic, fang-baring impatience. Until the vox squealed a third time.

'Come in,' Egil snapped, click-cycling through half a dozen channels as he hunted for a solid connection. They could not be alone down here. There had to be survivors.

Ahead, Borgen Fire-eye added fuel to his hopes.

'Bolter fire,' the Wolf Guard said. 'Not far away.'

Moments later the familiar thunder reached Egil's auto-senses, echoing down the tunnel to him.

'Keep going,' the Iron Wolf ordered.

They did so, snarling with the effort of forcing their way along the mining exfill shaft. Egil's dirt-caked armour tracked his rising adrenaline, a growl building in his throat. His decision to come down into these infernal depths had been

justified. There were still fellow Wolves down here. Surely Logan Grimnar was among them.

Finally, the vox made proper contact.

‘Not an inch, brothers,’ came a growl, followed immediately by the crash of more bolter fire. Egil heard the echoes of the shots bouncing down the tunnel ahead. He recognised the voice.

‘Brother Lenold,’ he said. *‘It is Egil, of the Iron Wolves. We are inbound on your location. What’s your current status?’*

‘By the primarch, it’s good to hear you, lord,’ Lenold responded. *‘We’re holding shaft intersection twenty-nine-B. There’s wyrd-scum everywhere.’* The rest of his sentence was cut off by a howl, and the furious revving of a chainsword.

‘Hold fast, Champions of Fenris,’ Egil said, then switched to the inter-pack channel. *‘Borgen, how far?’*

‘I can see the end of the tunnel,’ the Wolf Guard replied. *‘More plague filth.’*

‘Into them, brothers.’

Egil saw the light of lumen strips stabbing around the silhouette of Borgen ahead of him, and moments later the rasp of the Wolf Guard’s combi-flamer and the sickly stench of burning promethium reached him. He followed his Ironguard out into intersection twenty-nine-B.

It was a cavernous meeting point for monorail lines and mining shafts, plasteel beams and bare-wired lumen strips providing a hub for half a dozen separate excavation sites, along with grav lifts to the surface, rappel-lines to lower levels, and rail routes to the nearest of Midgardia’s subterranean hive cities. Egil and his pack burst from one of the smaller exfill shafts running north to south, catching a brace of shuffling plague daemons in the flank as they dragged their swollen, rotting bodies towards the knot of Space Wolves at the intersection’s centre. Skol, Egil’s iron-plated servo-skull, counted two dozen Adeptus Astartes as it hummed overhead, the image from its miniaturised caster transmitted directly to Egil’s bionics.

‘We have you, brothers,’ the Wolf Lord voxed as Borgen’s combi-flamer ignited the nearest plaguebearers, their sonorous chants turning to deep-throated wails as their diseased flesh melted from their canker-ridden bones.

‘It’s coming again,’ Lenold voxed back. *‘Brace yourselves!’*

‘What is—’ Egil began, but didn’t need to finish. He felt the earth around him shudder, dirt cascading from the intersection’s high, steel-ribbed ceiling. Then the ground a dozen yards ahead heaved upwards, splitting apart a monorail track with an ear-shuddering clang. Something surged through the blast of earth and

shattered stone, fang-filled maw agape, dragging its long, prehensile body up through the hole it had burrowed into the intersection.

'Plague wyrm,' Lenold voxed. *'Bring it down!'*

'Borgen,' Egil snapped. The Ironguard was already bringing his weapon to bear, spearing a lance of liquid flame at the huge, nightmarish wyrm as it dragged the last of its fleshy folds from its maw-tunnel. It was at least two dozen paces long, and as thick around its centre as any of Egil's warriors. The parts of it that weren't caked with Midgardian soil were the corpse-white of a creature that had never known sunlight, and hideous, disease-blotched organs were visible pulsing through its membranous flesh. It made a gargling, squealing noise as it cringed away from Borgen's flames, twisting with ghastly speed towards the Wolves fighting back-to-back at the intersection's heart.

'It's headed your way,' Egil voxed.

'Destroy its burrow,' Lenold replied. *'Quickly!'*

Egil saw why moments later. There were things crawling up out of the wyrm's maw-hole – plague beasts and nurglings, clawing arm over arm, scrambling on top of each other as they dragged themselves up from Midgardia's depths.

'Changing canisters,' Borgen said, anticipating his jarl's orders as he screwed a fresh fuel cell into his combi-flamer.

'Grenades,' Egil shouted. He hammered his boot into the spilled guts of the first plaguebearer to stagger up out of the pit, slamming it back down into the yawning, writhing hole. In the same breath he snapped a frag grenade from his belt clamp and pitched it after the wailing daemon. There was a crump and a blast of shredded, rotten meat and black ichor jetted up from the burrow.

'Close it,' Egil ordered. *'Send these monsters back to the wyrdrealm.'* His Ironguard rallied to him, power weapons carving apart the plague daemons even as they scrabbled for a foothold in the intersection. Then Borgen stepped up to the edge, his combi-flamer reloaded. With a *thump-whoosh* he flooded the hole with liquid flame, roasting the things choking it. The sickening stench of burning wyrdflesh filled Egil's nose, penetrating even his armour's filters.

'The hole is losing integrity,' Moln warned.

A second later Egil felt the earth shift beneath him. He threw himself back just in time as the hellish burrow collapsed in on itself, dragging the edges down into a sucking, crushing vortex of grey muck. Borgen, standing close to the centre, was too slow to avoid being caught in the earth's unyielding grip.

'Brother!' shouted Orven, lunging after the falling warrior. He managed to snatch onto the edge of his backpack, but the pull of the collapsed hole was too

strong. It dragged Borgen further down before Orven could get a better hold on him. The Wolf Guard choked on muck as he drew breath to bellow defiance. In just a few seconds he was gone, the settling dirt showing no sign of his passing.

Bjorn and Moln hauled Orven back before he too was dragged down. Egil cursed and spat. It was not the sort of death he'd have wished on the rashest, most obstinate Blood Claw, let alone a warrior whose sagas had filled the halls on many a feast night.

'It's escaping!' Lenold's voice over the vox tore his attention away from the dirt scar that had become Borgen's grave. The wyrm had buried its hardened, fang-filled head into one of the intersection's walls and was rapidly worming its way back into the underground. Egil saw the flesh in its side bulge and twist horribly, and realised that it had swallowed one of the Champions of Fenris whole. The warrior was struggling to escape the creature's gut, even as its bile melted the flesh from his bones.

Lenold and his Wolves pursued it, chainswords ripping at pale flesh and bolt-rounds blowing chunks from its body in bursts of stinking yellow slime. It regenerated every blow, its vile flesh reknitting seconds after each strike. With horrific speed, it had twisted itself into its fresh tunnel, leaving the Champions of Fenris behind.

'That is the third time that infernal beast has struck,' Lenold snapped. 'I cannot say if it was the same one, or whether there are many. Its wounds heal as soon as we make them.'

'It's how the wyrdlings have been traversing the underworld,' Egil surmised, eyes on the churned earth of the collapsed tunnel.

'Your arrival was timely, lord,' Lenold said, pacing across the intersection to clasp Egil's arm. Around him the Champions of Fenris clustered. They were universally dirt-grimed and bloody, the armour not befouled by Midgardia's depths scarred silver by the strike of blade and talon. Even the half dozen Wulfen slinking among their number were panting and breathless, their tough bodies criss-crossed with fresh wounds.

'Where is the Great Wolf?' Egil asked. 'Where is Logan Grimnar?'

'We do not know,' Lenold said. 'He pressed too far ahead with his Kingsguard and the Slayer. Going by his last vox transmissions he had penetrated Deepspark and engaged a large infestation of wyrdspawn there. Then the lower tunnels collapsed and we lost all contact.'

'The surface is even worse,' Egil said. 'We could not hold what ground we gained. I ordered my Great Company to withdraw to the Magma Gates and then

into orbit.'

'Yet you are down here with us?'

'Just my Ironguard and I. Would you have abandoned the Great Wolf in a place such as this?'

The question required no answer.

'At least the air isn't befouled down here,' Bjorn observed. 'Not yet, anyway.'

'Where are the rest of the Champions,' Egil asked Lenold, 'if Grimnar was only with his Kingsguard?'

'Lost, scattered. The vox-links are almost useless this far down. What you see here are the remnants of three packs – my Wulfborn, Korvald's Fangbrothers and Fjyr's Stormbringers. We've been getting scraps of transmission from Tormund's pack to the south. We were on our way to link up with them when that damn wyrm struck. The daemons follow in its wake.'

'You've tried all available routes into Deepspark?' Egil asked. 'Are all the tunnels collapsed?'

'All on these levels, and the lower ones. We hoped to try higher once we had consolidated our strength.'

'I fear we will grow weaker rather than stronger the longer we delay,' Egil said. 'I have never seen wyrdlings attack with such relentlessness.'

'They sense their victory is close,' Lenold growled.

'Then let us prove them wrong. Where is the nearest tunnel to the upper levels?' Lenold pointed at a grav lift at the far end of the intersection.

'This far down most of the mechanisms still seem to be intact,' he said. 'It will be faster than trying to take the tunnels, and risk the plague wyrm striking again.'

'We will use the lift then. Will you and your pack come with me?'

'Without a moment's hesitation, Jarl Iron Wolf. I will not see the light of the Wolf's Eye again until the Great Wolf has been found.'

Low orbit, above Frostheim

Fire parted Frostheim's storm-clouded heavens, its light reflecting back from millions of snowflakes as they swirled and eddied around the bleak crags of Morkai's Keep. It fell not as an inferno, not indiscriminately like a shower of blazing meteorites. It was a single beam, a lone rapier thrust of crackling power delivered from low orbit by ancient targeting savant-engines and warriors who were now more machine than man. It struck the uppermost towers of Morkai's

Keep and split the ancient, frozen citadel right down to its casements.

Harald Deathwolf watched the destruction in silence. He had raged and snarled enough, firstly to the impassive black visor-plates of the Iron Hands, then via vox to the Ultramarines Captain Epathus, the Shadow Hunters Captain Slythe, and an Astra Militarum general whose name he didn't remember. All in vain, the Wolf Lord reflected as he watched the Iron Hands battle-barge, *Iron Requiem*, destroy his Chapter's fortress from orbit. The ancient vessel's lance strike pierced Frostheim's cloud cover, and in his mind's eye Harald saw bastions melting and explosions blossoming through the ancient bulwarks with fiery finality. He saw daemons incinerated and charred to ash, burned in the keep's collapsing vaults in their thousands. It was not enough. Grimacing, he turned away from his flagship's viewing port.

'Put me through to Stolvind's lair,' he ordered the vox huscarl.

'*Lord?*' asked Stolvind the Wolf Priest over the link.

'How fares Canis?'

'*He is stable, my jarl. His wounds are grievous though. Considerable augmetic surgery will be required if he is to walk again, let alone fight.*'

'Is he awake?'

'*Intermittently. His sus-an is flickering between wakefulness and a catatonic state. All he has done is ask about his thunderwolf.*'

'How fares Fangir?'

'*He lives too, though it will be a long time before he is healed enough to bear his wolf-brother into battle again.*'

'Your skills do you credit, Wolf Priest,' Harald said. 'We were right to refuse the Iron Hands' help. Keep me informed.'

'*Yes, lord.*'

'Sire,' called another huscarl from the communications pit beneath Harald's bridge throne. 'The crusade fleet is beginning to break from orbit. Their projected destination is Svellgard. It would seem the Ultramarines and elements of the Astra Militarum mass transporter fleet are already in orbit above the moon.'

Harald bared his fangs in anger. Svellgard. Frostheim's moon and the location of the World Wolf's Lair, the control hub for the orbital defence batteries buried among the satellite's many bleak islands. The last transmissions from the moon's surface had suggested Sven Bloodhowl and his Great Company were still locked in a brutal battle with the invading wyrdspawn there.

'*Vox Iron Requiem,*' Harald ordered.

‘We’ve tried, lord. No response.’

‘Any other ship in the crusade fleet then. Adeptus Astartes, Imperial Navy, Astra Militarum, Imperial Knights, I don’t care. Get me someone.’

‘Lord, they have all locked us out of their communications channels again. They won’t even receive our incoming signal code.’ Harald cursed.

‘Set a course for Svellgard immediately,’ he ordered. ‘And try to raise Lord Bloodhowl. We must not let what has happened on Frostheim repeat itself there.’

The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard

‘Harakonari an tellika regala!’

The Konndar-dialect battlecry of the 51st Harakoni Warhawks rang out across the vox-nets of the Space Wolves and the bleak skies of Svellgard as they began their airborne assault. It had been preceded by twenty minutes of fury – carpet-bombing by Marauders of the Imperial Navy’s 111th Segmentum Obscurus Atmospheric Fleet and ground attack runs by Vulture gunships of the 88th Tactical Wing. By the time the Harakoni Warhawks had started to jump from their Valkyrie transports, there were few daemons left on the islands surrounding the World Wolf’s Lair.

Still, the soldiers of the Astra Militarum met bloody resistance. Warhawks died, ripped apart by claws and talons, run through by warp-forged steel, ground beneath iron-spiked wheels or disintegrated by gouts of bile, boiling blood and molten metal. Others fell by the hands of their own comrades and commissars, minds shattered by the horrors they found themselves facing. But the hammer of the Emperor, once swung, could not be prevented from falling. Some of the platoons among the first drops – the one-way ticket boys – survived long enough to create little las-studded bastions of resistance among the tide of insanity. The aircover focused on these defensive points, strafing the monsters around them before they could amass the numbers needed to overrun the Warhawks’ positions among the crags and tundra of the islands.

Then the second wave made their drop, grav-chutes flaring, las-carbines snapping bolts of crimson death at the warpspawn. Less than an hour after Sven Bloodhowl had first spotted the beginning of the assault in Svellgard’s skies, the Lair’s three surrounding sister islands were declared secure.

Reinforcements continued to arrive. The gunners and equipment of the 155th Royal Cantabrian Light Artillery were dropped via Valkyrie as the Warhawks started to dig in. In a matter of minutes six batteries of fixed-position

Earthshakers had been assembled on the peaks of the islands, creating concentric points of fire support for each neighbouring landmass. The air shuddered with percussive thunderclaps as they began to shell the beaches of the Lair, still awash with daemoniac invaders.

‘Keep up your fire,’ Sven snarled at his Great Company over the vox. ‘Drive them back into the sea.’ The Firehowlers obeyed. Caught between the pounding bolters, plasma guns and streaking missiles of the Space Wolves and the shuddering explosions of the Astra Militarum’s heavy artillery, the daemoniac assault disintegrated. Earthshaker strikes sent up great gouts of sand and grit, laced with burning globules of warp-flesh and ichor. The air shimmered as whole cohorts of wyrdlings were unmade, vanishing from reality with howls of fury, pain and hungry denial.

Finally, the big guns fell silent. Sven ordered his packs to cease fire moments later. There were no more daemons left on the beaches of the World Wolf’s Lair, the stony stands shimmering as their corpses vanished back into the immaterium.

‘Raise them on the vox,’ Sven ordered, gazing out at the neighbouring islands. More aircraft were arriving, bigger transports carrying light armour, sentinel walkers and prefabricated flakboard bulwarks. A wing of matt-grey Thunderbolt heavy fighters streaked low overhead, banking south as they scanned the choppy seas for the next assault.

‘They’re not responding,’ Olaf Blackstone growled. ‘All vox-channels have been closed and locked since they landed that artillery.’

The euphoria of a battle won cooled rapidly. Looking out at the distant barrels of the Earthshakers studding the islands’ ridges, Sven felt a sudden foreboding creep over him. There had been no Astra Militarum elements in-system last he’d heard. Where had they come from?

‘Raise the fleet,’ Sven said. ‘They must know more than we do.’ The vox squawked in his ear.

‘*Lord Bloodhowl*,’ said a familiar voice.

‘Lord Deathwolf,’ Sven replied, scanning the transmission’s source. ‘You’re no longer on Frostheim?’

‘*No. Morkai’s Keep has fallen. I am bound for the World Wolf’s Lair.*’

‘Fallen?’ Sven echoed, disbelief warring with sudden anger. ‘How can that be? I thought you’d purged the Alpha Legion traitors and their wyrdspawn allies?’

‘*It was not the heretics who took it,*’ Harald Deathwolf replied. ‘*Do not communicate with anyone until I arrive. And maintain your defensive positions.*’

‘What is happening, Deathwolf?’ Sven demanded.

‘I will explain in person, Bloodhowl. There is maleficarum trickery at work.’

Star Drake, the Void

Gormenjarl. A mountain cast from plasteel and adamantium and set adrift in the void. It filled the viewing ports of the *Star Drake*, the light of the Wolf’s Eye glinting from its gargoyle-edged bulkheads and the gaping maws of its defence batteries. Those weapons could blaze with enough firepower to decimate a fleet, yet now they lay inert, as silent as the star fort’s vox-channels.

‘Still nothing?’ Captain Stern demanded. The huscarl shook his head, eyes not leaving his blinking instrument displays. Stern watched *Gormenjarl* through the *Star Drake*’s open ports, imagining its defences flaring with sudden life. Their shields would hold for less than a minute, and the weight of ordnance would leave the proud Space Wolf Strike Cruiser a listing, gutted wreck in the time it took for them to fire a single salvo.

But the guns stayed silent.

‘Maintain the docking vector,’ Stern ordered. ‘And inform me of any contact. I will be with my brethren in bay alpha one.’

As Stern strode from the bridge he keyed his personal vox, opening a private channel with Brother Theo. Alone among the Brotherhood, Stern had ordered him to remain aboard the *Star Drake* and guard the unconscious Wulfen confined to the ship’s brig.

‘Any change?’ Stern asked.

‘None, brother-captain,’ Theo replied. ‘*The beast still slumbers.*’

‘You are to ensure that remains the case,’ Stern said. ‘And if you do not hear from me within the next hour, you are to take this ship to Midgardia and demand an audience with the Dark Angels. Do not let this madness continue, brother.’

‘I understand, brother-captain.’

Stern closed the channel, confident Theo would carry out what may be his final orders. The other eleven Grey Knights were waiting for him in the cavernous corridor that acted as the *Star Drake*’s primary docking bay, standing in a tight circle with heads bowed and force weapons held at rest. Brother Latimer was leading them in the Canticle of Absolution, the Six Hundred and Sixty-Six Secret Words, the High Gothic cant ringing back eerily from the bay’s ceiling. The Space Wolf Chapter-serfs manning the bay hung well back, staring at the huge silver-plated warriors with undisguised fear.

Stern took his customary space within the circle, taking the lead from Latimer

with practised ease.

‘No despicable trickery will thwart us, no Damnation will bring us low.’

‘There is no peace for us,’ the rest intoned as one. ‘For an eternity we strive.’

‘Though mere mortals in His service, everlasting shall be our True Duty.’

‘Et Imperator Invocato Diabolus Daemonica Exorcism!’

Stern finished the oath-prayer of the Grey Knights with the Benediction of the Third Brotherhood.

‘Itur in fauces iumentorum. In os gehennae. Imperator dei estis lux. Vestri sumus foedus inite gladio. Gloria tibi in saecula.’

Into the jaws of the beast. Into the mouth of hell. God-Emperor, you are our light. We are your sword. Glory to you forever.

The chant finished, its echoes rebounding one last time from the ship’s walls before they too fell silent. As one, the Grey Knights raised their heads and came to attention.

‘Brothers,’ Stern said, addressing them without his helmet. ‘We are about to walk into a trap. Beyond those blast doors is a Ramilies-class star fort dubbed *Gormenjarl*. No communication has been received from its crew since the outbreak of the first daemonic incursions in this system. We must assume the worst. Our objective is to secure this docking spine and protect *Star Drake* while its crew effect repairs. If possible, we will then attempt to purge any taint that may have manifested within the star fort.’

‘Brother-captain, isn’t our objective to reach Midgardia?’ asked Brother Gideon. ‘If the star fort is infested then purging it will slow us down considerably.’

‘Which is why we will only go on the offensive if it is practical,’ Stern replied. ‘*Gormenjarl*’s current trajectory is taking it past an extensive asteroid field known as Alpha Eleven-Nineteen, lying spinward of Fenris itself. If the opportunity arises I will attempt to storm the fort’s command deck and reroute it into Eleven-Nineteen. If a real-space collapse has occurred onboard *Gormenjarl* then we cannot afford to leave it open, regardless of the situation on Midgardia.’

‘*My lord.*’ The huscarl’s voice blared over the bay’s vox rig. ‘*We are moving into our final docking position. You will be able to break the atmospheric seal and board Gormenjarl within the next five minutes.*’

‘Brothers, make ready,’ Stern ordered. ‘Wrathhammer formation. I will take point.’

His Grey Knights assembled in a wedge around him, standing before the heavy, wolf-stamped blast doors of the docking bay, snapping home storm bolter clips

and murmuring prayers to the spirits of their armour and weaponry. Stern pulled on his helmet, clamping and locking it with his gorget seal. A blink and the retinal visor display of his auto-senses came online, filling his vision with targeting reticules, vox-channels and vital signs. Around him he felt *Star Drake* shudder, its adamantium hull groaning and straining as its helmsman eased it into contact with *Gormenjarl*'s main docking spine. It was almost as though the venerable Strike Cruiser had no wish to touch the foreboding, silent star fort.

One last long, agonising moan rose from the ship's metal, and there was a distant, shuddering thump that reverberated up through Stern's boots. Then all was still.

'*Stand by,*' the huscarl's voice crackled over the vox.

'*Post tenebras lux,*' Stern said. After darkness, light. His Brotherhood echoed him, and as one they activated their nemesis force weapons, holy energy surging and sparking up glaive, sword and halberd.

A warning claxon shrieked. The light above the blast doors blinked red. Stern's grip on his force sword tightened. There was a thump of disengaging magnetic seals, a pressurised hiss, the grating of autobolts and servo-locks. The light above the doors blinked green.

The blast doors rolled back, and Brother-Captain Stern led his paladins' charge. Straight into the mouth of hell.

The Void, Fenris System

'Are you sure this is wise, lord?' asked Sister Marie. Her hawkish features – scarred by the flamer burns so common among members of her Chamber Militant – were set in a familiar expression of disapproval.

Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay shifted fractionally on his auto palanquin, the vitae cables plugged into his flesh flexing with the movement, and tugged the trapped hem of his dark red robes out from underneath him. The deck beneath his recliner's tracks shuddered as the shuttle clamped onto the hull of the larger vessel beyond the docking bay's blast doors.

'We should have activated the mark seventeen exo-plate,' Marie continued. 'At least then you would have rudimentary protection from these animals.'

'The Wolves are not our enemy here, Marie,' de Mornay said, his voice chiding. 'Many wish us to believe they are, but we must not be swayed by their lies. Do not allow them to influence your judgements of these warriors.'

'They are harbouring mutants,' Marie pressed, unable to even utter the last

word without her features twisting with disgust. ‘The Dark Angels do not lie about that, and you know it.’

‘The genetic heritage of the *Vlka Fenryka* is a complex one, that I grant,’ de Mornay said. ‘But we must examine the outcomes of actions, regardless of what we perceive their intent to be. Thus far the Wulfen seem only to have acted alongside their battle-brothers, and exhibit very little animosity towards the God-Emperor’s servants. They are fighting as hard as any of us to rid this system of daemonic taint. That in itself must count for something.’

‘I merely worry about my ability to protect you in a ship full of beasts,’ Marie said. ‘We should have brought VX Nine-Eighteen as well.’

‘Sometimes a subtler touch is required,’ de Mornay said. He had ordered the rest of his in-field retinue to remain aboard *Allsaint’s Herald*. ‘The last thing we need right now is to antagonise our hosts. We require them if we are to make progress, after all these years.’

Marie said nothing, but de Mornay could feel the distaste radiating off the Adepta Sororitas. He could not wholly deny that he didn’t share that disgust. Genetic impurity, especially amongst the hallowed ranks of the Adeptus Astartes, was something he’d struggled to uproot for decades. To wilfully overlook evidence of mutation went against his instincts as a member of the Ordo Hereticus. But for now there were greater matters at stake – and darker secrets to unravel – than the curse of the Wulfen. In their eagerness to persecute their old rivals the Dark Angels had left themselves exposed. De Mornay had waited a long time for such an opportunity to present itself. All he needed now was muscle.

Hydraulics whined and thumped, and the blast doors leading from his private shuttle’s docking strut into the Space Wolf battle-barge ground open. A single figure waited for them on the other side, wreathed in decompression steam. He towered in the blue-grey power armour and furred pelts of the Space Wolves, and though his unhelmeted head was a latticework of old scars and blue knotwork tattoos, his eyes were disarmingly calm and grey. Seeing de Mornay’s cable-covered servitor-palanquin rolling through the venting steam, he bowed.

‘Lord Inquisitor, well met. I am Thierulf Bloodhanded. I have been sent by my jarl, Ragnar Blackmane, to escort you to the *Holmgang*’s bridge.’

‘The pleasure is all mine, Thierulf,’ de Mornay said, making the sign of the aquila. ‘By all means, lead on.’

He had heard it said that every Wolf Lord shaped his Great Company to his own dominant personality. Travelling through Ragnar Blackmane’s flagship, de

Mornay could well believe it. The Space Wolves he passed were more often than not young, armour and blades inscribed with new kill markings, and had that hungry look about them that had Sister Marie's hand fixed to the hilt of her holstered combi-flamer almost every step of the way. One snarled at de Mornay as they passed, holding the inquisitor's gaze long after most would have flinched away. As they neared the upper decks he became aware of an ever-increasing pack of Wolves following them. Despite his outward confidence, he felt cold sweat pricking across his body, anticipation setting his pulse racing. His fingers brushed his plasma pistol in its ornate leather holster, strapped to the palanquin's flank.

'Pay the pups no mind,' Thierulf said, as though reading de Mornay's thoughts. 'They've just been caged for too long. The currents of the Sea of Stars have been fickle of late. I was starting to think we'd never make it home.'

'You're aware of what's happening throughout the system?' de Mornay asked.

'Aware enough. Wyrdling scum are attacking everything bar the Hearthworld itself, and the sons of the Lion are trying to intervene with a crusade fleet. Meddling where they're neither wanted nor needed, as ever.'

'I'm here to try to do something about that,' de Mornay said.

Thierulf made a growling noise. After a second the inquisitor realised he was laughing, albeit mirthlessly.

'All depends what you want out of it in return, pyre-builder.'

'Who ever said anything about wanting something in return?'

'It's always so with your kind. Here, we've arrived.' Thierulf came to a halt before a wire-mesh grav lift, and entered a string of codes on the rune lock.

De Mornay spent a moment looking at the jagged lines of the Fenrisian *Juvjk* script on the lock. He had to remember to have Peterkyn create an auto-upload file for that language. An understanding of it was looking increasingly useful.

'I should return to my pack,' Thierulf said. 'They are grown restless in this torpid transport. Take the lift to the bridge level. My jarl Ragnar will meet you there.'

'My thanks, Wolf,' de Mornay said, rolling onto the lift platform as its grille door juddered open. 'We will doubtless both do the God-Emperor's work again soon enough.'

'Allfather be praised,' Thierulf grunted, and hit the activation rune. The doors snapped shut, and the lift began to rise with a low whir.

'If they mean to slaughter us, now is when they'll do it,' Marie muttered.

De Mornay allowed himself a smile, glancing briefly up at the pict feed

monitoring the lift's occupants.

'Your suspicions make me think you've served in my retinue for too long, honourable Sister,' he said. 'Regardless, we shall soon discover whether your beliefs are well-founded. Into the wolf's lair...'

The grav lift chimed as it reached *Holmgang*'s highest level, the bridge that lay at the top of the ship's command spire. The doors opened once again, and the hubbub of an Imperial warship's control nexus washed over the two Inquisitorial operatives. It was stilled by a deep growl, a growl that became words.

'Welcome, Lord Inquisitor de Mornay. It's rare to have a visitor from the ordos aboard my ship.'

De Mornay rolled his palanquin onto the bridge, assuming the mask of haughty indifference he had relied upon for so long. In his profession it did no good to show weakness or fear, either to friend or foe. But beneath the dozen predatory eyes that observed his arrival, indifference was a difficult appearance to maintain.

The bridge of the *Holmgang* was a cavern-like space, its walls and high ceiling cast from Fenrisian stone, carved with intricate scenes of the battles and the mythic adventures that the Space Wolves knew as sagas. Lumen globes flickered in alcoves or hung suspended from chains overhead, their light battling the green glow of cogitator screens and augur arrays. Chapter-serfs in plain blue-and-grey shifts bent over their workstations, fingers tapping at rune banks or adjusting heavy brass levers and gauges. Huscarls, their robes trimmed with fur, paced the walkways between the stations, monitoring the ship's vital signs and its progress through real space and relaying pertinent information to the command dais. That raised platform of seemingly primordial rock dominated the bridge's centre, the rune-carved stone throne at its top draped with heavy pelts. Upon it, like a techno-barbarian warlord from the darkest days of the Age of Strife, sat the figure that could only be the Young King. Ragnar Blackmane.

His grey battleplate was trimmed with gold, and hung with fang tokens. A dark wolf pelt was draped over his right pauldron, while a green gem glittered at the centre of his Belt of Russ, the relic that marked out all Wolf Lords. He wore no helmet, his long, black hair and sideburns lending his features a wild look. The appearance was only accentuated when he grinned, revealing vicious canines.

'You are a bold one, witch hunter,' he said as de Mornay ground to a halt before the throne, Marie at his side. 'I like that. But will I like the reason you are here?'

Ragnar was not the only Space Wolf on the bridge. Half a dozen of his pack leaders stood around his dais, their pelts grey, their eyes surveying de Mornay

with something akin to hunger. Native Fenrisian wolves also prowled the bridge, seemingly at liberty to come and go as they pleased. They sat and watched the two interlopers with as much restrained savagery as their transhuman wolf-brothers.

‘Any true son of Fenris would approve of the reason that I am here, my lord,’ de Mornay said to Ragnar. ‘Defending your Chapter’s honour, recovering your Great Wolf and purging your native system of daemonic infestation. That is what I am here to request your assistance with.’

‘That may be,’ Ragnar said. ‘But I doubt that’s the only reason you have sought out my fleet.’

‘Why else would I seek an audience in person?’

‘To discover if the rumours are true.’ Ragnar grinned again, a savage expression that carried with it little warmth. ‘I can tell you now, they are. Sverri!’

A low growl answered the Wolf Lord’s summons. De Mornay followed the sound to the far side of the bridge. Emerging from the shadows of a strategium cell came a creature seemingly born from the wildest and most savage of imaginations.

It bore only a passing resemblance to the other Space Wolves on the bridge. It was larger, and its iron-hard muscles bristled with bestial black hair. It wore less armour, what battleplate it did possess appearing archaic and timeworn. Its lower limbs were more like those of the Fenrisian wolves that padded around the bridge, distended and claw-toed. Its features were even more terrible – they were no longer recognisably human. Its nose was flattened and nostrils flared, while its predatory yellow eyes were sunk into a heavy brow. Its hair was long and matted, and its thick jaw was studded with rows of fangs that jutted out over its lower lip. As it moved towards Ragnar’s throne it adopted a loping, hunched gait, claws scraping on the bridge’s stone floor.

De Mornay felt Marie freeze beside him. He held up his hand, afraid the Adepta Sororitas would be overcome by disgust and draw her weapons. He was in no doubt that such a move would spell immediate, bloody death for both of them.

‘My lord,’ the thing Ragnar had addressed as Sverri snarled, struggling to form the syllables between jutting fangs and heavy, panting breaths. With some difficulty, it knelt before the throne.

‘Sverri, this is Lord Inquisitor de Mornay of the Ordo Hereticus,’ Ragnar said, looking at de Mornay. The inquisitor could sense the Wolf Lord studying his reaction, searching for the revulsion he expected. Sverri also turned to look at de Mornay, in a half crouch, watching him with the wary caution of a beast sizing

up an enemy. Judging whether it was predator or prey.

‘Lord Inquisitor, this is Sverri, pack leader of my Great Company’s newly adopted Wulfen Murderpack,’ Ragnar finished the chill introduction.

De Mornay held Sverri’s calculating, lupine gaze. It was the oldest law of nature. To look away would be to show weakness, and weakness was more often than not fatal.

‘The Wulfen are not my concern,’ de Mornay said slowly. ‘Not yet, anyway.’

‘So why are you here?’ Ragnar demanded. ‘I do not have time for the Inquisition’s games. As you yourself have said, my home system is beset and my lord Grimnar is missing. Speak plainly or get off my ship.’

‘The Dark Angels above Midgardia intend to fire-bomb its surface,’ de Mornay said. ‘They must be stopped before they go any further. Azrael and his Inner Circle have remained unaccountable to the Imperium for too long.’

‘So your hand is revealed,’ Ragnar said. ‘The lion is the one you’re hunting, not the wolf.’

‘After a manner of speaking, yes.’

‘But why?’

‘It is a grim tale,’ de Mornay said, ‘and we have little time for it.’

‘You will get nothing from me unless you explain yourself,’ Ragnar said. De Mornay sighed and nodded.

‘Then I will be brief. Fifty years ago I was bringing word of a greenskin invasion to the Calva Senioris System, in the Narthex Nebula. The foul xenos struck before a defence could be organised, and I was left leading an underground resistance. The Dark Angels and Silver Eagles were dispatched to spearhead a liberation, but one of the Angels, an Interrogator-Chaplain named Asmodai, received word of my resistance movement. He attacked our camp, slaughtered loyal Imperial citizens, and would have killed or captured me had I not proven my membership of the ordos before his battle-brothers.’

‘Why?’ Ragnar asked. ‘Why would he attack you?’

‘I have spent the past five decades asking the same question,’ de Mornay said. ‘You may scoff now, Wolf, but once I was a fine young warrior, active on the God-Emperor’s front lines, striving to enact His will and banish the darkness that forever threatens our Imperium. After Asmodai’s atrocity I went directly to the home world of the Silver Eagles and told their Chapter Master everything. That the Dark Angels had butchered fellow servants of Terra, and that many Silver Eagles had also fallen after Asmodai abandoned their fight against the orks to pursue me.’

‘And what did the Silver Eagles do then?’ Ragnar asked. He was leaning forward in his throne now, eyes fixed on the inquisitor. The Wolves, de Mornay remembered, loved their sagas.

‘The Silver Eagles did nothing,’ he said, letting the bitterness in his voice show. ‘Or next to nothing. They would not confront the Dark Angels. They merely petitioned Supreme Grand Master Azrael. He claimed he would censure Asmodai. I doubt any censure was ever carried out.’

‘The sons of the Lion have always been a secretive brotherhood,’ Ragnar said. ‘They have little honour, and I would not trust one of their battle-brothers as far as I could throw him. That being said, you are the inquisitor, not I. If you cannot bring the Angels to justice yourself I do not see how I can help. I have a war to fight.’

‘Our paths are linked now, Lord Blackmane,’ de Mornay pressed. ‘And they have been ever since the Dark Angels decided to invade your system. I believe they are not only here for your...’ he hesitated, glancing at Sverri, who seemed to be following the discussion with a silent, animalistic understanding.

‘I believe they are trying to misdirect the Imperium,’ de Mornay continued. ‘They were hiding something on Nurades, a relic perhaps. If your Chapter hadn’t purged the daemons infesting that world we may never have realised it, but I have never seen the Dark Angels move with such decisiveness unless the Inner Circle felt threatened. I want to end the insanity that infects this system. I want to confront Azrael, and I’m not strong enough to do that alone.’

‘You will start a civil war,’ Ragnar said doubtfully. ‘I would not listen to a wyrd-damned word uttered by one of the Lions, but nor would I expect them to listen to me. I would add nothing to your negotiations bar the threat of my Great Company’s presence.’

‘Then let me do the talking,’ de Mornay said. ‘I simply wish your fleet to accompany me to Midgardia. Unless I’m badly mistaken, that is where you’re headed anyway.’

Ragnar exchanged glances with his Long Fangs. Sensing his opening, de Mornay kept speaking.

‘In ancient times the sons of Russ were the Emperor’s executioners. All Legions feared you. The same cannot be said today. The Dark Angels treat you like animals, to be baited, trapped and shamed. They may well have already opened fire on Midgardia. They will not stop until the Fenris System is nought but ruins and ash.’

‘We are indeed bound for Midgardia,’ Ragnar allowed, again fixing de Mornay

with his unsettlingly bestial gaze. ‘And you may accompany us. I do not know what we will find there, but it seems as though the rest of the Imperium has turned its back on us. I would be a fool to scorn an inquisitor offering an alliance during such times.’ De Mornay bowed his head.

‘If it is any consolation, I do not believe your Wulfen are warp-tainted, Lord Blackmane,’ he said. ‘And regardless, their judgement can wait. For now, we have to stop this madness of Angels, before we slaughter each other at a daemon’s behest.’

The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard

Harald Deathwolf’s Thunderhawk put down on the landing pad jutting from the Lair’s central control keep. Sven’s Bloodguard joined Harald’s own Riders of Morkai, forming an honour guard as they led the Wolf Lord into the command chamber. Sven Bloodhowl was waiting for him.

‘Lord Deathwolf,’ he said as Harald stepped into the room. Low and plated with plasteel, its illumination pulsed dully from emergency lumen strips lining the walkways, from the monitors of vox arrays and from the Lair’s missile targeting systems. A holochart dominated the centre of the chamber, currently deactivated.

‘What in the name of Russ is happening?’ Sven went on as Harald joined him at the edge of the chart.

‘Wyrd-damned treachery, that’s what,’ Harald growled. ‘We were locked in battle with wyrdling scum in the vaults of Morkai’s Keep when a strike force of Iron Hands made contact with us. Their captain told me he would destroy the keep from orbit, whether my warriors still garrisoned it or not.’

‘What sort of madness is that?’ Sven growled. ‘Did they succeed?’

‘Morkai’s Keep is a ruin,’ Harald said. ‘Resisting would have resulted in the annihilation of my Great Company. Believe me brother, I considered it. I have tried to raise the Fang, and the Great Wolf on Midgardia, but I have heard nothing. I can only assume this fleet is but part of a larger incursion.’

‘Are they here for the Wulfen?’ Sven asked darkly.

‘I can see no other motive. They are too numerous to be a response to the daemoninc incursion. Such a force must have been gathering for weeks prior to the invasion. Have they tried to contact you?’

‘I’ve heard nothing,’ Sven said. ‘The Astra Militarum have occupied the nearest islands. Their artillery is zeroed in on us, but they won’t communicate. The daemons have been driven back, but they will soon return. Their numbers are

unending. I fear the warp rifts below the oceans are widening. The scans say there are at least three down there.'

'I am going to order my Great Company to deploy here, in full strength,' Harald said. 'I have given up enough of our Chapter's territory today. I will not evacuate again.'

'Won't they repeat what they did on Frostheim?' Sven asked. 'An orbital bombardment would achieve two objectives for them. It would wipe out both us and the wyrdlings.'

'If that's to be our fate I will die with my boots in the dirt of one of my Chapter's worlds,' Harald said. Sven looked him in the eye for a moment, before a fanged grin split his tattooed features.

'And if need be the Bloodhowls will burn alongside you, brother. Whatever is to happen, we will make the Saga of Svellgard one that will be sung in the feast halls of the Fang for millennia to come.'

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate **Gormenjarl***

Stern's worst fears had been realised. *Gormenjarl* had become a gateway to hell.

Mankind's collective nightmares had been made manifest onboard the star fort. The walls of the docking bay had twisted and melted like candle wax, plasteel and adamantium now studded with fleshy maws that snapped and spat, or clusters of eyes that wept black ichor. The decking underfoot flowed and shifted like quicksand, the metal molten and writhing, or plated with fresh growths of chitin. The air was heavy with sweat vapour, and vibrated with some gigantic, hellish heartbeat.

'Brothers, purge this filth,' Stern roared as he swept through the *Star Drake*'s blast doors, his nemesis force sword inscribing a crackling white arc through the shuddering air. The first daemon to meet his blade, a red-skinned bloodletter, disintegrated beneath the blow, its hellsword shattered into a hundred black shards.

The Grey Knights stormed what had once been the star fort's docking spine, storm bolters hammering death into the warpspawn packing the arching corridor, the roaring flames of Brother Tomaz's sanctified incinerator torching the tainted walls and filling the air with the stench of roasted daemonflesh. Stern led his brethren in the Chants of Admonishment, the strength of their hatred and the purity of their faith like a physical force that sent daemons shrieking and scrambling back down the corridor.

‘To the far end,’ Stern voxed. ‘Secure the junction.’

At the end of the corridor the spine split into two sub-routes, both leading deeper into *Gormenjarl*’s guts. There the corruption was even worse. The floor, walls and ceiling now resembled the tract of some foul creature’s intestinal organs, carpeted with flesh that throbbed and pulsed with unnatural life. Stern stamped down on a bloodshot eye that glared up at him from what had once been the deck, bursting it in a spray of milky ichor. Around him his brothers stood firm, the protective wards edging their silver aegis armour blazing white with heat. The very air of the star fort pulsed and bent around them, as though the tainted atmosphere was seeking to avoid contact with the holy paladins.

‘We hold here,’ Stern ordered. ‘Bulwark formation.’ He blink-changed channels. ‘Huscarl, how long before *Star Drake* is void-worthy again?’

‘*We are reactivating the engine blocks right now, sire,*’ the Space Wolf thrall replied, voice choppy with static. ‘*After that we will need to couple with the star fort’s external coolant array. The systems estimate fifteen minutes.*’

‘Make it ten,’ Stern ordered, and cut the link.

The level of *Gormenjarl*’s infestation was worse than even he had expected. There had to be a warp rift open at the star fort’s heart. That meant another front in the war for the Fenris System.

‘We must seal away this filth, before it can spread any further,’ he voxed to his brethren.

‘If we are to seize whatever remains of the bridge, it will take all of us to get that far,’ Gideon replied. ‘We would leave the entrance to *Star Drake*’s docking bay undefended.’

‘Besides, if we adhere to our previous plan, I doubt we would find any way to redirect the star fort into the asteroid field,’ Tomaz added as he jetted a fresh gout of blessed promethium into a clutch of squealing horrors. ‘If the level of corruption on these external levels is this bad, I assume the inner command centre is completely lost.’

Stern impaled a lunging daemonette, banishing the creature in a blaze of light. He knew his brethren were right. They were too few to fight their way to the root of *Gormenjarl*’s infection. Even holding the docking spine looked like a desperate task.

‘But if the star fort’s directional controls no longer work,’ Brother Artemis voxed, ‘then will its targeting systems? Or its shields?’

The thought was interrupted before it could gain traction. A terrible sound bounced down the flesh-corridors towards the Grey Knights. It was a howl, at

once chillingly familiar to Stern, and yet horribly different. It was distorted, as if by vox interference, rising to an unnatural pitch before diving to throaty depths. The eerie sound sent the daemons ahead of the Grey Knights into a frenzy, throwing themselves onto the Space Marines' blades and bolters. Not in rage, Stern realised, but in desperation. In fear of whatever was coming down the twin corridors behind them. The words of the huscarl earlier, aboard the *Star Drake*, came back to him. A pack of Grey Hunters, the Redpelts.

'Brethren, brace!' he shouted.

Gormenjarl's complement of Space Wolf defenders still lived, but in the most nightmarish way imaginable. And now they were coming for the silver-armoured interlopers.

Transit line four hundred and three, the Underworld, Midgardia

Transit line four hundred and three was the primary level-one subsurface route into Deepspark. The grav lift took Egil and his ragged retinue to a maintenance station half a mile from what had once been the subterranean hive's entrance. As he stepped into the wide, tracked tunnel, the vox display on the edge of Egil's visor uplink finally showed signal connectivity.

'All Imperial forces, come in,' he said, setting the vox tuner to roam.

'We should be able to make contact with the surface this high up,' Lenold said.

'That's what I'm attempting to do,' Egil replied. 'It may take time to lock onto a signal though. We should proceed.'

The Wolves set out, following the dual rail lines that wound their way through the dirt-walled tunnel. Skol buzzed ahead, its pict feed relayed directly back to the Iron Wolf's bionics.

'Signs of fighting,' he said as he walked, scanning the walls with his remaining unaugmented eye. 'Recent. Also, the air is showing higher spore toxin content.'

'The nearer to the surface we are, the higher it'll be,' Bjorn said.

'Even more so if plague wyrdlings passed this way recently,' Lenold said darkly.

'And they may well have,' Egil said. 'Skol has found something.'

It was a body. A Grey Hunter, slumped across one of the tracks, fingers frozen in claw-like rigor mortis. The blood from the wound piercing his breastplate still glistened red.

'Dredwulf,' Lenold said grimly, kneeling beside the fallen Hunter. 'From Storrie's pack. They were the nearest to catching up with the Great Wolf before

he was cut off.'

'The body is not old,' Egil said, eyes scanning the dark shadows that flickered beneath the tunnel's wan lumen globes. The keen senses of the Wolf Lord, even enhanced by his augmetics, detected nothing. 'They must be close.'

'We should press on,' Lenold said.

'Agreed.'

Further down the tunnel, Egil's vox finally picked up something. A blurt of signal code cut across the long-range frequency.

'I've detected an Imperial transmission,' he said, coming to a halt. 'From the surface. I'm locking on now.'

'I'm getting it too,' Lenold said. 'Seems to be coming from the Magma Gates.'

'Conran,' Egil said as his Ironguard's identifier rune lit up on his visor. 'It's a looping non-verbal distress code.'

'You still have part of your Great Company on the surface?' Lenold asked.

'I shouldn't,' Egil said. 'Conran was ordered to lead the withdrawal of the Ironwolves in my absence. He shouldn't still be on Midgardia.'

'Or transmitting,' Lenold noted. 'Do you think something has befallen the Magma Gates? Can it be possible that they are already overrun?'

Egil snarled with annoyance. Surely Conran would not have disobeyed his orders to lead the retreat? If more of his Great Company were still on Midgardia wouldn't he pick up their vox transmissions as well? But if only Conran had come back, then why? And what fate had befallen him if all that remained was a distress transmission?

A growl from ahead broke his train of thought. While the rest of the makeshift pack had halted, the remaining Wulfen had slunk further down the line. Now their bestial warnings echoed back up the tunnel.

'They've found something,' Lenold said. Egil felt his pulse quicken, hairs bristling with a sudden sense of foreboding. He led the pack at a run along the tunnel.

The Wulfen had discovered more bodies. Four of them, more of Storrie's Grey Hunters. Dismembered, still bloody. If they had taken any wyrdspawn with them, the creature's bodies had already melted back into the immaterium. The Wulfen were clustered in a tight circle at the centre of the group of bodies, crouched over something, snuffling and growling in obvious distress.

'Stand aside, wolf-brothers,' Lenold commanded, parting the circle. They scrabbled back in the dirt, letting out a low, mournful moan.

'What have they found?' Egil demanded, reaching Lenold's side. Skol darted

overhead, stab-lumen picking up the object the Grey Hunters had died defending. The Iron Wolf caught his breath as the light shone back off gilded metal.

It was Fellclaw. The huge thunderwolf's plated skull, the one that had been borne aloft on Logan Grimnar's back ever since he had slain the mighty beast during his Trail of Morkai almost a millennium ago. Its gilding was battered and befouled with muck and blood, and a number of fangs had snapped off.

'The Great Wolf's crown,' Lenold muttered. 'Then he's been this way.'

'Or Storrie's pack found it elsewhere and were carrying it with them,' Egil said.

'Either way, he is not lost. Surely he lives.'

Egil said nothing. Lenold bent to retrieve the gilded skull, lifting it with reverence. 'He is close. I can feel it.'

'Something else is closer,' Egil said as his visor lit with warning runes. 'The toxicity levels in this tunnel just rose threefold.'

'*Lord,*' Moln voxed. '*We are detecting movement back down the tunnel.*'

'I can smell them,' Lenold snarled. 'More plaguespawn.' Around them, the Wulfen began to howl. Egil's wolf claws slid free.

'Brothers, to me!'

WARHAMMER
40,000



LEGACY OF RUSS 5

INFURNAGE

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

INFURNACE

Robbie MacNiven

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate **Gormenjarl***

They had been Wolves once. Grey Hunters, experienced warriors, their pelts flecked with silver and their armour etched with runes that told of great and bloody sagas. But they were Wolves no more. The things that came at Brother-Captain Stern and his Grey Knights down the flesh-corridors of *Gormenjarl*'s primary docking spine wore only a semblance of their old selves, a mocking half-facsimile. Blue-grey battleplate was now bent and twisted around fleshy growths and scarred with the runes of an altogether darker tongue.

The transhuman physique of the Space Marines had been similarly bent, changed to better suit the purposes of the insane things that now wore the Wolves' flesh. Arms ended in bony claw-growths, snapping maws or spine-rimmed tentacles. Vox grilles had become slaving jaws, and visor lenses blinked with raw eyelids. Lower limbs were double-jointed or cloven-hoofed. One beast's bare arms were covered in a million tiny chitin spines that gave the appearance of a bony fur pelt, while another had atrophied, leathery pinions sprouting grotesquely from the seal of its backpack.

They had once been the Redpelts, *Gormenjarl*'s Space Wolf garrison. Now they were monsters, possessed by the daemons that infested the star fort, their bodies broken and abused, refashioned with no heed to nature's constraints.

And they came straight for the Grey Knights, slaving, snapping and howling.

'Stand firm, brethren,' Stern shouted, raising his nemesis force sword. 'Suffer not the unclean to live!'

The two sides, silver paladins and possessed warp-wolves, met with a crash of ceramite and snapping bone. The foremost daemon, a thing with a red-pelted wolf's head and crab-claw arms, went straight for Stern. The Grey Knight

captain met it with a downward slash of his force sword, silvered steel cleaving through warped plate to hack off one of the monstrosity's snapping limbs. The thing didn't even flinch, latching the other claw around Stern's right fist. The vice-like grip sheared cleanly through his wrist-mounted storm bolter and bit through his vambrace, drawing blood. Stern grunted and lunged forward, driving his blade into the creature's abdomen. The combatants locked. Even after running it through, the possessed Wolf still fought, lupine jaws distending with unnatural ease as they snapped and slavered at Stern's helm.

Stern spat strings of words from the Rites of Exorcism, channelling the holy willpower of his collected Brotherhood into his blade's psyker-sensitive steel. The stab of energy was infinitely more potent than the physical edge, tearing deep into the daemon wearing the Space Wolf's flesh. Like shadows ripped apart by a sudden flood of light, the warp creature was banished back to the immaterium. The defiled body of the Wolf slumped against Stern, dead, infected blood pattering down the daemonhunter's silver armour. Stern pushed the body off, commending its lost soul to the Emperor.

Around him, his brothers fought for their lives. They had been trained almost from birth to destroy warpspawn. From their blades – adamantium-tipped, forged from blessed silver and blessed by holy water – to their aegis armour – inscribed with catechisms of hatred and wards of faith, and anointed with sacred oils – every inch of their being was repellent to the creatures that scuttled and crawled in the darkest corners of mankind's imagination.

But the things they fought now were not purely daemonic. They were an unholy melding, a dark union between the physical and that which should only have existed in nightmares. The flesh of the possessed Wolves did not cringe from purifying silver, and it did not vanish back to the warp when pierced by righteous steel. The speed, strength and savagery of the Space Wolves, itself a match for the battle skill of Stern's brethren, had been augmented a hundredfold by the dark cunning and unholy vigour of the things that had come from the warp.

The Grey Knights struggled to match them. Force weapons clashed with chitin and twisted steel, and claws raked at silver power armour. One of the possessed had locked multiple jaws around Brother Lucan's gorget, tearing open the ceramite with unnatural ease and gorging itself on the flesh of the Space Marine's throat. Brother Wilfred slammed his force glaive into the creature's scaled flank, bellowing in High Gothic. Still it hung on. Lucan was on his knees, blood jetting from the savage wound. Wilfred rammed his storm bolter into the

side of the thing's skull and fired, disintegrating it with a blast of hexagrammically inscribed bolts. Beside him Brother Tomaz had wreathed another of the former Space Wolves in the white flames of his incinerator.

The thing howled, the sound more like four voices than one, all shrieking together. Even as the flesh melted from its deformed bones it came on, clutching Tomaz in a fiery embrace. The Grey Knight kicked the charred remains away in time to take a blow from another possessed Wolf's hammer-like bony appendage. The impact dented his helmet and slammed him back into the fleshy walls of the docking spine.

Stern parried the chainsword of another possessed. The weapon had melded with the Space Wolf's arm, black ichor now oiling the spinning saw-teeth. Stern's sword locked with it, the tendon-rotor screaming, the teeth jammed as they tried to chew through the blessed steel. The possessed thrust forward, using its unnatural strength to drive Stern back, vox grille snapping with freshly sprouted fangs.

'Brother-captain!' Alacar bellowed from behind Stern. 'Down!'

The Grey Knight reacted without thinking, going on one knee with his sword still locked. He felt the weight of Alacar's charged force hammer swing overhead. The crackling weapon struck the possessed squarely in the face, pulverising its horned skull and slamming the body back down the corridor with a concussive blast of released energy.

There was no time for thanks. Stern turned his rise into a lunge that impaled the two-headed horror leaping at him. More daemons were attacking in the wake of the possessed. A back-cut cleaved apart another of the Tzeentch horrors in a blaze of multi-coloured light. A hellsword caught him in the thigh plate, scoring a shallow wound above his cuisse's seal. A second hacked deep into his right pauldron, scarring the book-and-sword sigil of his Chapter. Stern parried another blow, his sword a silver blur as he kept two hissing bloodletters at bay.

'*We're losing ground,*' Gideon shouted over the vox, moments before a hellsword punched into his gut.

'Tomaz, ignition pattern,' Stern snapped, throwing Gideon back with a thrust of his pauldron. 'Scourge formation. Slowly.'

Tomaz adopted a braced stance and unleashed his flamer in a wide arc, covering the corridor from one side to the other. The walls themselves shuddered and writhed beneath the purifying heat. The warp-wolves howled and shrieked as their flesh ignited, while the flames licked harmlessly across the armour of Stern's paladins. As one the Grey Knights stepped back, heeding their brother-

captain's orders to disengage. Artemis, Alacar and Wilfred snatched the fallen bodies of Lucan and Gideon as they went, the remaining six knights closing protectively around them.

Tomaz's flames didn't check the possessed for long. If anything, it only drove the daemons into a greater frenzy. They tore through the docking spine, bodies still wreathed in fire. The Grey Knights opened up at point-blank range, hammering them with mass-reactive bolts.

'Report?' Stern snapped into the vox.

'*A few moments more, lord,*' came the strained voice of *Star Drake's* huscarl.

'You don't have them,' Stern said, parrying the raking claws of a burning, bolt-riddled possessed with a sucking maw for a head. 'Open the blast doors.'

Pace by pace the Grey Knights continued to retreat. When the warpspawn pressed too close, the supportive fire of Wilfred, Alacar and Artemis from the rear ranks cut them down, while Stern, Osbeth, Simeon, Caldor, Tomaz, Ethold and Latimer hacked, slashed and stabbed unceasingly at the frothing, snarling tide. Behind him, Stern heard the grate of the docking blast doors rolling open.

'Tomaz, burn them again,' he ordered. The fact that the possessed were still clawing at them showed how powerful the warp rift at *Gormenjarl's* heart was. They had to close it, and there was only one way to achieve that now.

'*My last canister,*' Tomaz voxed, before stepping up once more. The roar of holy flames and the shriek of warpspawn filled the corridor once again. The Grey Knights used the precious few seconds to turn, dragging their wounded back into the *Star Drake*.

'Hold them here,' Stern ordered as he reached the doors. 'We can give the crew a few moments more.'

As Tomaz backed through the opening, jetting the remains of his incinerator's promethium canister after him, the other nine Knights halted at the blast doors and unleashed a hail of silver-tipped storm bolter rounds. The corridor immediately in front of the door disintegrated in a hail of torn, burning flesh and detonating shells.

'*We've done all we can, lord,*' the huscarl's voice crackled in Stern's ear.

'Disengage from the docking spine,' Stern ordered. 'Now.' He slammed the sealing rune next to the blast doors. The heavy adamantium juddered shut just as Tomaz stepped inside, his incinerator sputtering a few last drops of liquid fire. Moments later there came the hammering and shrieking of things on the other side, furiously attempting to claw their way inside the *Star Drake*.

'Caldor, Osbeth, take Lucas and Gideon to the medicae bay,' Stern ordered.

‘Everyone else remain here, overwatch pattern. Ensure there is no breach. I am going to the bridge.’ There was a thump and a moan of metal as the Grey Knight spoke, and the sounds of pounding from the far side of the blast doors trailed off.

‘We’re retreating?’ Ethold called after Stern as he strode towards the docking bay’s grav lift. The big paladin was slicked with dripping, stinking ichor, fists locked around the haft of his force glaive. Stern didn’t look back.

‘No.’

The *Star Drake*’s bridge was a hive of activity. The huscarl Stern had given temporary command to was standing atop the command dais, snapping orders to his kaerls. In the open vision ports Stern saw *Gormenjarl* hovering into view as the ship detached itself from the docking spine and swung about to face it.

‘Were repairs completed?’ Stern asked as he strode onto the bridge. The huscarl bowed hastily.

‘We still cannot route full power to the plasma drives for fear of overloading them, lord, but to all intents and purposes, yes. The coolant coupling was eighty-five per cent complete when we detached. We should make far better time now. Do you have a heading?’

‘Not yet,’ Stern said. ‘Reroute power to the forward bombardment cannon. Lock onto the star fort, I don’t care where. Just hit it.’

‘Affirmative, lord,’ said the huscarl, before barking orders to the gunnery station. Deep in the *Star Drake*’s bowels whips cracked and chain gangs heaved in the hellish half-light as they dragged a vast bombardment shell into the breach of the Strike Cruiser’s primary cannon. The ship’s machine-spirit, manifest in the probing of its sensory arrays and augur masts, easily acquired the huge target presented by *Gormenjarl*.

‘Bombardment cannon loaded and locked, lord,’ a gunnery kaerl called.

‘Fire,’ Stern said.

Swallowed by the void, there was no sound of any discharge, but the flash of the mighty weapon reflected back from the fort’s gleaming bulkheads, and the tremor of its recoil reached the bridge’s decking plates. Seconds passed. Then part of the star fort’s gaping docking space blossomed outwards, eerily silent, the armour plating blown apart by the point-blank shot and spinning away with a curiously majestic slowness.

‘You were right, Brother Artemis,’ Stern said, smiling grimly. ‘*Gormenjarl*’s shields no longer function.’

He turned to the gunnery station. ‘Huscarl, direct all firepower at the structural weak points. I want to have dealt it crippling damage within the hour. And have

your communications pit patch me through to the Fang immediately.'

The Fang, Fenris

Lord Krom Dragongaze's footsteps led him into darkness.

A part of him knew he should not venture into the Vaults. It was a cursed place, an icy shaft buried deep into the roots of the mountain. A place of cracked, worn statues and sealed doors, their mechanisms frozen solid with ice. The power had long ago failed, and even the great geothermal reactor coils that helped keep the Fenrisian death-chill from the Fang's corridors had never reached this deep. This was beyond the Underfang and the Halls of the Revered Fallen, a place marked on few maps, and remembered in even fewer living memories.

Krom trod the rock-carved corridors with care, the active hum of his power armour painfully loud in the stony depths. He held a lumen orb in one hand, its pale light picking out the graven alcoves and craggy stairways before him. In a place like this, even the Fierce-eye didn't want to trust to his senses alone.

He passed three ward-doors before he reached the chamber he sought. He had to search the depths of his long memory to conjure up the correct pass-codes, and he felt the static buzz of hexagrammic wards and power shields as he passed through each one. Beyond the last lay a great, vaulted room. Krom's orb failed to even pick out its ceiling. The stony glare of a hundred forgotten Wolf Guard stared down at Dragongaze from their plinths lining the chamber's walls, while row after row of metal caskets filled its open floor.

Krom glanced at his visor display, but it told him little. The vox, the chrono counter and his tracking signal had all failed him. He could have passed into another dimension as far as his auto-senses were concerned. All he had was a temperature reading well below freezing, his spiking vital signs, and targeting reticules continually flashing a warning red as they picked up the false outlines of the ancient statues. He deactivated them with a blink, trying to ease his jagged heartrate.

'Why are you here,' he growled to himself. Even though he hadn't vocalised it beyond his helmet, the words seemed to echo about in the frozen, lost chamber. There was no reply, but he knew the answer anyway. He could not sit and wait in the great halls of the Fang while the rest of his Chapter fought and bled across the other home worlds of the Fenris System. He had to try to learn the truth. Perhaps, down here, there would be an insight into the curse that plagued them.

The casket he was seeking was the nearest to the ward-door. It was the last one

to have been brought to the haunted depths, laid to rest less than four centuries earlier. Krom approached it, his lumen orb flickering, as though reluctant to go any further. The casket was large – steel bound in brass and big enough to hold Snegga the Giant, the broadest warrior in Krom's Great Company. Its flanks were inscribed with ancient, intricate runic script while a carving of the World Wolf was inlaid on its lid. Krom brushed his fingers against it, and felt the throbbing power of an active stasis field within.

The Wolf Lord set his orb down beside the casket and unlocked the gauntlet from his left hand, laying it beside the orb. Then he drew his combat knife, and nicked the razor steel against the back of his hand. A single line of blood ran down his forefinger. He held it against the gene-lock panel set into the casket's flank. There was a whir as the mechanism matched and confirmed the genetic heritage of the sons of Russ. Then there came a thud of bolts, and a hiss of pressure sealant as the casket's heavy lid slid slowly back on auto-hinges. Krom kept his combat knife out.

At first, with the lumen orb still on the ground next to it, the casket's interior was just a well of power-charged darkness. Krom's auto-senses were stripping the shadows away when a single small lumen in the casket's top blinked on. What it revealed inside was a horror.

The Great Wolf had saved it four centuries earlier, on the frigid world of Lumerius. The vile traitors of the Black Legion, led by the insane butcher Fabius Bile, had been hunting for it, desperate to seize its genetic material and fashion an army of nightmares to augment their dark strength. Grimnar and the Champions of Fenris had gotten there first, putting the traitors to the sword and rescuing the casket. It had been taken here, to the deepest vaults of the Fang, and here it had lain undisturbed ever since, sleeping the ages away in the frozen darkness. Fang-brother, the Lost, Herald of Russ. *Wulfen*.

The creature had been locked in the casket's inbuilt stasis field, its claws out, features twisted in an eternal, bestial snarl. Krom bent forward to look into its eyes, seeking something more than animal hunger in them. As his shadow fell across the Wulfen he got the distinct sense that the thing was looking back at him, aware, every muscle silently straining against its enforced paralysis. The Wolf Lord straightened hastily.

It was not a Space Wolf. Perhaps it had been once, but the heraldry of its ancient power armour belonged to the Wolf Brothers. Theirs was a tragic tale. The only Successor Chapter ever founded by the VI Legion, the genetic legacy of Russ had proven to be too volatile to be replicated beyond Fenris. According

to half-remembered, half-believed legend, the Wolf Brothers had been riven by the curse of the Wulfen. Those not killed had been scattered by the tides amidst the Sea of Stars. The few that still survived were hunted, whether by a misguided Imperium, or darker powers.

Grimnar had gotten to this one just before the forces of Chaos had latched their claws around it. The thought of the warped geneticist Bile capturing a Wulfen for his experiments was a terrible one. Looking down at the stasis-frozen body of the feral creature, Krom sought reason in its form. Legend held that the Wulfen's return presaged that of the primarch himself. Certainly the old Wolf Priest Ulrik had thought as much. Others had been less certain.

It had long been feared that evidence of the instability of the Canis Helix within the genetic code of the Space Wolves could be used by other Imperial factions to damn the Chapter. Now just such a scenario was playing out, with the Lions occupying the system. What had brought the Wulfen back? Had they returned to combat the daemons infesting the system, or were they in fact a part of the Dark Gods' schemes, unwitting pawns in a plot to annihilate the Rout once and for all?

'Lord,' said Vox Huscarl Fogel, transmitting from the Fang's communications hub. Krom started, taking a step back from the casket. His vox had re-established a connection. Sudden anger flushed through him. What had he hoped to achieve by coming down here? There could be no insight into the curse. The Wulfen were animals, pure and simple.

'Speak,' he ordered Fogel.

'Lord, Captain Stern is on the long-range vox. He has urgent news.'

'I'm on my way.'

He looked down one more time into the Wolf Brother's eyes. They glared back at him. He wondered for a moment whether, in truth, his own gaze was any less unsettling. Then he hit the sealant rune, and watched the casket's heavy lid lock back into place. The thud of the internal clamps echoed through the chamber. Krom refastened his gauntlet, picked up the lumen orb, and left.

The Fang's primary communications array was hushed when the Wolf Lord arrived. He was handed a vox horn and receiver by Fogel.

'Stern,' Krom said into the horn. 'Report. What's happened?'

'Grim tidings,' the Grey Knight replied. 'I am aboard the star fort Gormenjarl. We have recently discovered a full-scale daemoniac infestation. My brethren and I are too few to purge it, so we are currently bombarding the fort from afar. The infestation has disabled the structure's weaponry and shield capabilities.'

‘Has Shipmaster Ranulf consented to this?’ Krom demanded.

‘No,’ said Stern. *‘That was the second matter that needed to be discussed. Your shipmaster has succumbed to your genetic... curse. I’ve had to confine him to his own ship’s brig. His two crewmates also turned, at the same time. We had no choice but to slay them.’*

Days earlier news that the Grey Knights had killed his brethren – Wulfen or not – would have sent spikes of rage stabbing through Krom’s thoughts. Now though, he felt nothing. He had fought tooth and nail alongside Stern’s silver paladins, saved the soul of his Chapter with their help. The blank, feral glare of the Wolf Brother had held nothing of the *Vlka Fenryka*’s martial upbringing and nobility, only its darker, more bestial side.

‘We need more men,’ Krom said. ‘If what you say is true, Stern, then we must ensure control of *Gormenjarl*’s twin, *Mjalnar*. We cannot afford to leave it infested with wyrdlings.’

‘Aren’t all forces engaged, besides your own?’

‘Not all,’ Krom said. ‘Not quite.’

The Void, Fenris System

‘Do you trust him?’

Ragnar sneered. ‘I’d as soon trust one of the wyrdlings. He’s a member of the ordos. He exists to persecute and lie. Have you ever heard of one of his breed who didn’t despise our Chapter, and all because we strive to protect mankind? Because we dare to honour the reason for our very existence?’

Olvec the Wise, Ragnar’s Wolf Guard Battle Leader, nodded. ‘He seemed open enough with his motives though. If his tale was true, he despises the Lions. He would use us as a weapon against them.’

‘And well he may, if they burn Midgardia. If they want a war, they’ll have one.’

The two Wolves were conferring privately in *Holmgang*’s shrine to Morkai. The place of worship, like much of the ship, recalled the Chapter’s primal roots – though the decks and ceiling were plasteel plate and iron mesh, the walls were clad in rugged, dark grey stone, mined from the flanks of Asaheim. The lumen strips, running down the length of the room’s edges, were dimmer in this less-visited part of the ship, with much of the power rerouted to the plasma drives. They threw long shadows over the pelt-heaped stone altar, and cast the features of the two Wolves into jagged contrast. Ragnar’s eyes gleamed coldly.

‘Do you believe the inquisitor’s tale,’ Olvec asked, ‘about Interrogator-

Chaplain Asmodai?’

‘There are many such stories about the sons of the Lion,’ Ragnar said. ‘They are a dark brotherhood. It is little surprise that they should clash with the ordos. And now the ordos have come to us. Clearly this de Mornay knows the value of his enemy’s enemy.’

‘He was a warrior once,’ Olvec said. ‘He has the bearing still, despite his age. I smell blood and steel about him.’

‘That is at least to be commended,’ Ragnar allowed. ‘Regardless of whether he intends to use us or not, any who wield a blade in the Allfather’s name are useful at a time like this.’

‘We are beset,’ Olvec agreed. ‘And the packs are hungrier than ever. Wyrdspawn or the Lions, whoever we next bare our claws against will suffer.’

The *Holmgang*’s intercom command channel clicked in Ragnar’s ear. Olvec watched as his jarl received the vox huscarl’s message.

‘To the bridge,’ he said after breaking the link.

‘Trouble?’

‘Dragongaze is hailing us again. Perhaps he’s grown bored, sitting alone in the Fang.’

The half-jest fell flat. They hurried to the command deck. Krom greeted them from the static-washed display of its main vid feed.

‘*It’s the Grey Knights,*’ he said.

‘What of them?’

‘*Captain Stern has just sent me a transmission. Our Ramilies star fort, Gormenjarl, has been infested by wyrdlings. His Brotherhood is too few to purge it, so he’s destroying it from afar with one of my ships. We believe Mjalnar may also have been overrun.*’

‘Have you hailed *Mjalnar*?’ Ragnar asked.

‘*There’s been no contact made with it since the incursions began,*’ Krom said. ‘*I fear the daemonhunter is correct, and if he is we cannot afford to leave a mobile warp rift open in the heart of the system.*’

‘My fleet is the nearest to *Mjalnar*’s current location,’ Ragnar said, glancing at one of the bridge’s glowing holocharts. ‘But it would delay our arrival at Midgardia.’

‘*We have no choice, Blackmane,*’ Krom said. ‘*There is still no word from Bran Redmaw, and all our other forces are fully engaged. You alone can meet this threat.*’

Ragnar grimaced, but nodded. ‘Very well, Fierce-eyes. My packs will purge

Mjalnar. Pray to the Allfather its communications have simply failed, and our brethren yet garrison it.'

'I shall,' Krom said. *'But there is other news from Stern. He discovered Gormenjarl's plight after he went there seeking repairs. Apparently Shipmaster Ranulf, of the Star Drake, succumbed to the curse along with two others. They damaged the ship before they could be stopped.'*

'Are you telling me not to trust my own Wulfen?'

'I'm telling you to be mindful of those who have not yet turned, Young King,' Krom said. *'Whether we accept them into our ranks afterwards or not, having experienced warriors devolving into half-beasts only weakens us.'*

'I have more than just the curse to be mindful of, Dragongaze,' Ragnar said. 'Have you heard of a Hereticus inquisitor by the name of Banist de Mornay?'

'I have not, why?'

'His ship has joined my fleet en-route to Midgardia. He seeks to enlist my help in bringing the Lions to heel.'

'The last thing we need now is the Inquisition's meddling,' Krom growled.

'He claims to believe our Wulfen are free of warp taint. That could make him a valuable ally.'

'Or he could turn on us as soon as he's used us to settle whatever grudge he has with the Dark Angels,' Krom said. *'Tread carefully, Blackmane.'*

'Don't I always, Dragongaze?' Ragnar smiled grimly. Krom didn't respond. The transmission ended.

'Get me the inquisitor's ship,' Ragnar ordered his vox huscarl. 'Tell him I am changing course.'

Svellgard

Wrath had arrived. It burst into existence in the depths of Svellgard's oceans, tearing itself free of one of the warp rifts that had pierced the moon's seabed. For the first time since creation, it brought light to the icy deeps. It burned white-hot, the fury of its god made manifest. Blood and screams and war-steel had drawn it here, a memory of the fury of Wolves, and now it would do its god's bidding.

The waters around it began to churn and boil. Already billions of gallons from Svellgard's seas had plummeted through the warp rifts and into the madness of the immaterium. The islands that housed the Claws of the World Wolf were growing steadily larger, the waters receding from the shores and exposing fresh, jutting rocks, gleaming like bone spiking out from desiccated corpses. Through

the flushing tides the monstrosity known as Infurnace blazed. Ahead of it lay the World Wolf's Lair, and a fight worthy of the Blood God.

The Void, Fenris System

Mjalnar was transmitting. It was not, however, an intelligible signal. The Wolf fleet circled the unresponsive Imperial star fort like a pack sniffing at a frozen corpse, hackles up and fangs bared, wary.

'Boost the audio,' Ragnar ordered from *Holmgang*'s bridge throne, leaning towards the vox array. The noises emitting from *Mjalnar* came through more clearly. Except they were not really noises at all. The Wolf Lord was reminded of being plunged underwater, and having crushing pressure reduce everything to a sort of constant, muted rumble. It set his hairs on end and sent a strange, icy chill creeping along his shoulders.

'Cut the link,' he said. 'And pull alongside. I want to board immediately.'

Mjalnar filled *Holmgang*'s viewing ports, a mountain of silent adamantium threat. Transmission lights and guidance beacons still winked from its crenelated masts and spires, and the star fort's great guns had been run out. Of actual life, however, there was no sign.

'Lord, Inquisitor de Mornay is hailing us,' a vox kaerl said.

'Speakers,' Ragnar ordered.

'*What happened to our need for haste?*' de Mornay demanded.

'There are some duties even the Inquisition cannot countermand,' Ragnar replied. '*Mjalnar* is a mighty battlestation. If it has fallen, it must be retaken. If it is overrun, it must be destroyed.'

'*Every second we delay, Midgardia burns,*' de Mornay said.

'Do you think I don't realise that?' Ragnar snarled. 'Do you think I don't ache to close my fist around the throats of those threatening my Chapter's worlds? My Wolves have waited too long to pass this kill by. If you wish to face the Lions alone then by all means, carry on to Midgardia. But my packs are my own, and we are boarding *Mjalnar*. Are you still with us, *inquisitor*?'

There was a long pause. Ragnar sneered. Then the reply crackled over the vox, heavy with finality.

'I will see you onboard the star fort, Lord Blackmane.'

The World Wolf's Lair, Svellgard

The seas were retreating. Sven watched them rather than the Thunderhawks and

Stormwolves of Harald's Great Company as they landed amongst the bunkers, bastions and turrets of the World Wolf's Lair. He had already transmitted data links pinpointing where his lines were weakest. Harald's warriors would fill the gaps accordingly, Firehowlers and Deathwolves manning the parapets and fire slits side by side. But the joy such a gathering of Wolves would normally have brought Sven was eclipsed by the mystery of Svellgard's receding seas.

'The wyrdling rifts must be widening,' Olaf Blackstone said, pointing at the expanse of sodden wet sand that now stretched away from the Lair's shingle. 'The water is disappearing into the immaterium.'

'At least we'll see the bastards coming,' Sven growled. He pointed to a patch of ocean further out, a choppy channel that ran between two of the Lair's neighbouring islands. It looked as though a bank of fog or steam was rising from the waves, creating a swirling cloud on the near horizon. 'And what about that?'

'Russ only knows,' Olaf replied. 'Send the *Godspear*?'

'Agreed. Have the area scanned. We've enjoyed enough wyrd-damned surprises.'

'Affirmative.'

'*Lord, I'm getting movement,*' said Yngfor the Long Fang over the vox. 'Contacts coming ashore from the south.' Sven opened a channel to Harald.

'Are your packs in position, Deathwolf?'

'*They are, Bloodhowl. Let the wyrdlings come.*'

'We'll make them regret the day they sought to claim Svellgard,' Sven said, switching to the company-wide channel.

'All packs, fire at will.'

*Boarding Torpedo Fifteen-B, approaching **Mjälmar***

Ragnar flexed his arms and shoulders. He felt the servo bundles that gave life to his power armour whir in response to the motion, while the true flesh and muscle of his transhuman physique stretched. He had been trapped in the voidborne prison of his flagship for too long. The hunt called to him. He could already feel the wyrdling scum snapping in his grasp, shrieking as he sent them back to the empyrean. He realised his gauntlets were clenched, and let out a long, slow breath. The chrono display counting down in his visor's top-right corner still read over a minute before the boarding torpedo impacted into the star fort's flank.

He finished recounting the names of his dead pack-brothers. It was a ritual he

had observed for a long time, and he knew it gave comfort to his Great Company as well as to himself. To know their jarl valued their lives, counted them as true kin whether amidst the fires of battle or the feasting halls of the Fang, hardened the bonds of pack loyalty. The Blackmanes were all as one.

He drew *Frostfang*. The ancient chainsword felt like an extension of his physical form, his fist closing with familiar certainty around the worn handle. His fingers itched to flick the activation stud. Hidden beneath his helmet's faceplate, he grinned.

'You're grinning, aren't you?' said Tor Wolfheart.

'And you're not?' Ragnar replied. 'I have ached for this, brother. At last we will join the other Great Companies in the defence of our home worlds.'

Twenty seconds. He knew he needed to say nothing to the Blackpelts, his Wolf Guard. They understood what was coming. Like the Allfather's burning warspear, they would plough into the diseased heart of wyrdspawn infestation, banishing it from the material universe, utterly wiping away the taint of their existence.

Five seconds. The boarding torpedo shuddered as it impacted into *Mjalnar's* flank, latching on with razor limpet clamps. There was a muffled *whoosh* of heavy meltaguns, followed by the thud and whirl of disengaging locks. The pod's assault bay was bathed in bloody red light. Ragnar released his restraint, feeling his adrenaline spiking, breath coming in pants through his armour's filtration systems.

The blast doors opened, revealing a circular hole that dripped with molten steel, the edges still glowing from the melta blasts. Ragnar triggered *Frostfang*, his vox-amplified howl blending with the chainsword's savage roar. He leapt through the boarding hatch, fangs bared. Straight into a deserted service corridor.

And not a daemon in sight.

The World Wolf's Lair, Svellgard

This time, the creatures of Chaos assaulting Svellgard's beaches struggled. With the addition of Harald's packs to Sven's defences, the weight of firepower had doubled. The receding tides had left the dark cohorts with more open ground to cross before they could reach the outermost defences of the Lair. Squealing and roaring wyrdlings were cut to pieces even as they dragged themselves, dripping, from the icy waves. The Earthshaker artillery added their firepower from the nearby islands, their strikes sending up great plumes of water and brine as they

shelled the gradually expanding southern edge of the Lair. Fifteen minutes into the assault Sven's biggest concern, watching from the ramparts of the Lair's central keep, was monitoring ammunition expenditure.

That all changed with a message from *Godspear*.

'*The island channel is experiencing a huge temperature spike,*' the pilot voxed. '*Something in the water is giving off an energy signature. And it's moving towards the Lair.*'

'What fresh maleficarum is this?' Sven growled. 'Keep tracking it.'

'*Lord, it seems to be rising to the surface. I—*' the pilot got no further. The water beneath the vapour fog heaved. Something vast powered from the sea and into the steam-wreathed air. Great, bat-like pinions unfurled, and black coal-flesh that smouldered with hate-fuelled heat burst into white flames.

With a roar that shook the rockcrete beneath Sven's mag-boots, a burning Bloodthirster lunged upwards at *Godspear*.

Sven could only listen to the pilot's startled, frantic oaths as he tried to evade the Greater Daemon. He watched the Thunderhawk bank desperately, but the fire-wreathed monstrosity was infinitely lithier in the air. The huge axe it wielded inscribed a fiery arc through Svellgard's grey sky, and smashed into one of the *Godspear*'s wings. The single blow cut clean through its armour plating, throwing out a spray of fat sparks. The gunship immediately lurched to one side, its servitor-controlled bolters blasting wildly into the air in all directions. It started to spin out of control amidst a plume of fire and black smoke.

'Infurnace,' Sven breathed. He recognised the Greater Daemon. All the Wolves did. Its crude, fiery likeness could be found carved across the saga knotwork in four of the great halls of the Fang, recounting the epic battle between it and the Wolf Lord Kjarl Stormpelt, many millennia past. Infurnace was a tale every Blood Claw knew, one of the near-mythical monsters that reared its head from the depths of the Chapter's glorious past. And now it had returned, to help write new sagas with fresh blood.

The Greater Daemon had only just begun. It lashed out with a chain-whip grasped in its other fist, the heavy, white-hot links snagging the damaged Thunderhawk's remaining wing. With a roar like a forgesmith's hammerstrike, it twisted its mighty body in mid-air, directing the *Godspear*'s erratic plunge towards the shoreline of the closest island.

Sven made out the tiny figures of Astra Militarum troopers vainly attempting to scatter as the Thunderhawk's burning shadow screamed over them. The Bloodthirster's chain snapped free, and the *Godspear*'s wrecked remains

hammered into the island shingle. It ploughed a deep furrow in the shore, obliterating a section of makeshift flakboard barricades and wiping the platoon manning them from existence. Then the gunship exploded, a blossoming fireball that blazed across the island's beach, as though in sympathy with the fiery monster that had caused it. The blast took more troopers with it, demolishing the western side of the island's defences.

Infurnace didn't even pause to survey its handiwork. Wings beating, it launched itself through the air, straight towards the World Wolf's Lair.

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate **Mjalnar***

Ragnar and his Blackpelts stood just beyond the hatch of their boarding torpedo, weapons drawn. Nothing moved to oppose them. The service corridor was old, and quite clearly deserted. The ceiling was a mass of bared coolant piping, and the walls were naked plasteel, inset with cobwebbed lumen orbs. Rust discoloured every surface, and there was a distant hissing where steam escaped from a ruptured pipe. Although the corridor was clearly timeworn and abandoned, there was no wyrdling stench about it.

'Morkai's heads,' Ragnar spat, feeling his system flush with rage. 'Where are they?'

No one answered. The old lumen orbs flickered once, but remained mute.

'Maybe the star fort is free from taint,' Uller Greylock growled. 'Maybe the Grey Knights were wrong.'

'Then where are the crew?' Ragnar asked. 'Why haven't they been responding to our transmissions?' He blink-clicked his visor's vox display. 'All boarding packs, come in.'

'Hostor's Spears, here.'

'Maegar's Pack, affirmative.'

'Asgeir's Allslayers here, my jarl.'

'Contacts?' Ragnar demanded. Negatives crackled back at him, the Blood Claw pack leaders sounding as confused as he was. A rune in his visor lit up, and Ragnar switched channels to accept de Mornay's incoming transmission.

'A trap,' the inquisitor said. *'It has to be.'*

'What makes you so sure?'

'The crew surely wouldn't have simply abandoned the station.'

'We will soon find out,' Ragnar replied, switching back to his pack-wide channel. 'Hostor, take your Claws to the escape shuttle bay, it should be a

hundred yards down the corridor on your left hand.'

'Yes, lord, on our way.' Ragnar switched back.

'De Mornay, what's your current location?'

'It appears to be an outer munitions shaft for the spinward-facing weapons batteries,' de Mornay replied. *'It's deserted though.'*

'Hold there,' Ragnar said. 'My Blackpelts and I will join you.'

'Affirmative.'

Ragnar met de Mornay at a junction leading to the weapons batteries. The inquisitor was still mounted on his palanquin, but his ageing body was now armoured in flakplate, and an archaic-looking brass-cased plasma pistol rested in one hand. Alongside him stood his grim-faced Adepta Sororitas bodyguard, clad in the midnight-black purgation-pattern power armour of the Order of Our Martyred Lady.

'You know the star fort's layout?' de Mornay greeted the Wolf Lord.

'It falls under the auspices of the Chapter Fleet,' Ragnar replied. 'It's part of the system defence network. All pack leaders have access to its schematics.'

'So what do you propose we do?' de Mornay asked. 'There's something wrong about all this.' He gestured with his pistol down the deserted corridor behind the Blackpelts.

An update from Hostor clicked in Ragnar's ear before he could reply.

'Lord, only half of the escape shuttles are accounted for. Six have jettisoned.'

'There are shuttles missing,' Ragnar told de Mornay.

The inquisitor frowned.

'The riddle grows more complex. If they were all present I would assume the crew have been slaughtered. But if they evacuated, this place may genuinely be deserted.'

'But why would they leave?' Ragnar asked aloud.

'The central command deck may tell us,' de Mornay said. 'It must have audio and visual logs?'

'And more. It should have recorded the escape shuttles' projected routes. And from there we can set the fort on a more useful course than its current trajectory. Towards Midgardia, for example.' He opened a channel to the three Blood Claw assault packs that had boarded with him.

'Converge on the command deck. I want this riddle solved.'

Transit Line four hundred and three, the Underworld, Midgardia

They'd found them. Phugulus emitted a blast of noxious spore clouds and pointed excitedly down the rail tunnel. The little pack of Wolves had led them to a larger one, and now they'd combined into a single force. Truly, the Grandfather was good.

Behind the daemonic Herald his plaguebearers were dragging themselves from the tunnel burrowed by Garr'nokk, the Great Plague Wurm. Garr'nokk himself was writhing down the rail line towards the Wolves already, his many maws snapping and drooling hungrily. Chewing dirt was clearly not enough – the noble beast was desperate for flesh and blood. Phugulus waved after it.

'Let us bless these great warriors with diseases befitting their might,' he bellowed at his chanting plaguebearers. 'Onwards, dear friends, onwards!'

The plague-recitals of the Infested redoubled in volume and urgency as they set off in Garr'nokk's wake, Phugulus struggling to keep his diseased bulk near the head of his Tallyband. He could see more than just a fortunate gathering of soon-to-be-blessed wolf-men ahead. He could see the whole glory of a new realm ripe for the Grandfather's benedictions. The Midgardian underworld was overly humid, yes, but it was certainly earthy, dark and dank. All manner of mould, fungi and rot could be cultivated in its depths. By the time he returned to his Grandfather's garden he would have a host of wondrous specimens to present.

The possibilities jostled for attention in the Herald's thoughts, so much so that he barely even noticed when the Tallyband crashed into the howling Space Wolves.

The knot of Wolves gathered around Logan Grimnar's fallen crown turned, weapons revving to life. The air was thick with spores, misting their view further back up the transit tunnel. Shapes were limping through the rancid smog, shuffling and moaning with throaty, bile-choked voices.

'The wurm,' Lenold snarled. Egil followed his gaze, and saw that the huge daemonic wurm had returned. It writhed down the tunnel with a hideous peristaltic motion, its blind maws agape. And, once again, a clutch of rotting lesser daemons were following in its wake, using the tunnel gnawed by his multi-fanged jaws to traverse Midgardia's underworld.

'Take the beast,' Egil said. 'We'll close the tunnel again. Then we can purge that foul thing together. It must not be allowed to escape this time.' Lenold only nodded, already moving to meet the wurm head-on.

Egil launched himself into the plaguebearers crawling through the tunnel in the rail highway's wall, his Ironguard beside him. They had to be quick. The counter

on his visor showed the toxicity levels in the air rising rapidly. This Tallyband had clearly brought the surface's corruption with it into Midgardia's depths.

The Iron Wolf's power claws shredded the first plaguebearer he reached for, its rancid form disintegrating into a puddle of decomposing sludge. Egil went through a second and a third, snarling with rage. The memory of the Great Wolf's broken crown lent every blow a furious, unstoppable strength. How dare these weak, putrid monsters threaten his Chapter with destruction? How dare they seek to turn and warp everything the Wolves had defended for so many millennia?

The plaguebearers parted before him, their endless, maddening chants for once falling silent. One of their number pressed to the fore. This one was larger, standing a head taller than the things around it. Its frame was bloated and riven with suppurating sores, its lone, cyclopean eye blinking with an unnatural intelligence from beneath one curling horn. It gripped a pockmarked broadsword in its fist, worm-fingers writhing around the hilt. It was a Herald, a leader of the Tallybands. Egil raised his wolf claws, their power snapping, acknowledging the challenge.

The Herald struck.

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate **Mjalnar***

'The fastest route to the command deck from here is via the barracks blocks,' Ragnar said. 'Kraken formation, don't hesitate to engage if you make contact. Inquisitor...' He turned to face de Mornay. 'Stay close, but don't get in the way.' De Mornay simply shrugged.

'Lead on, Lord Blackmane.'

The Blackpelts set off, Ragnar at the fore. They followed the service chute to a side door that led to a mesh walkway, passing over a vast set of throbbing coolant spheres, used to douse the star fort's heavy artillery when it glowed hot from repeated use. Beyond it lay a communications sub terminal. The vox banks had been shut down, their screens blank, horns silent.

'That explains why we've not been picking up a signal,' de Mornay said. 'But why deactivate them?'

'We'll find out soon enough,' Ragnar growled. He was following the heads-up schematic display of *Mjalnar*, overlaid with the three runes representing the other boarding packs. The system was suffering some sort of interference – the runes showing the locations of the Blood Claws kept blinking from existence,

then reappearing nearby, yet only fractionally closer to the command deck at the star fort's heart. Ragnar voxed them, but all reported good progress. And still there was no sign of life, wyrdling or otherwise.

Beyond the vox terminal was the barracks block. Ragnar glanced into one of the cells as they passed. Its bunk beds were pristine, and kit bags still sat in files along the floor. It was as though *Mjalnar*'s crew were all still present, but had simply become invisible. The Wolf Lord snarled with frustration.

The vox transmissions from the other packs were similarly unhappy. Maegar reported he'd come up against a dead end that didn't exist on the schematics, and had been forced to turn back. Asgeir made a similar report moments later – he'd found himself in a medicae bay that supposedly didn't exist. The pack leader's voice was strained, and Ragnar caught the sound of snarling in the background. The noise shook a growl from his own throat, and his Blackpelts responded in sympathy. They were all hungry, all frustrated.

They passed through the barracks, the command deck just ahead. Ragnar punched in the runes on the security doors, haste forcing him to re-enter them twice. His grip on *Frostfang* tightened. The doors slide back to reveal...

The outer service corridor. The same one they'd first entered *Mjalnar* through. The hole bored by their boarding pod's meltas still gaped in the far wall, its molten edges now jagged and hardened. Ragnar just stared.

'The schematics must be wrong,' Tor said, voice choked. 'Outdated.'

Ragnar realised he was panting. His vision flickered, colours flashing in and out of focus, like a pict caster switching between high and low resolution. He could smell blood, coppery and insistent. His jaw ached, and his fingers itched. Anger flooded his mind. This wasn't what they were here for. This wasn't what he'd endured the Sea of Stars for. Fenris was beset and his warriors were wandering the corridors of some damn, deserted star fort. He needed to kill, now. They all did.

'It's a trick,' de Mornay was saying, attempting to penetrate the fug of bloodlust that was gripping the Wolves. 'They're trying to confound you. Trying to trigger your curse. This star fort is as infested as the one the Grey Knights purged.'

'A... trick...' Ragnar grunted, shaking his head slowly. No. Blood. He needed to spill blood. He could taste it in his mouth. His fangs were starting to distend. *Frostfang* was screaming at him to kill.

'They're here!' de Mornay shouted, plasma pistol whining with charge. 'All around!' The sudden crackle and the scent of ozone cut through Ragnar's consciousness. The Young King gasped and blinked, as though only just waking

from a long, dark nightmare. He realised ozone was not the only thing he could smell. The unmistakable stench of wyrd-taint was suddenly everywhere.

Shrieking with rage, the daemons broke their illusion and flung themselves upon the Space Wolves.

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

Far below, fire billowed and spread. The Elezar-thing, the Changeling, watched it from the Rock's vast, stain-tinted bridge viewing ports. From so far away, it looked like an insignificant thing at first. The deathstorm missiles unleashed by the Imperial Navy's capital ships were like little shards of starlight, quickly lost on their way to the surface. They bloomed again amidst Midgardia's purple shades, little pricks of light set against the diseased darkness. Only when those pinpricks eventually began to meet and cluster did they truly start to spread. The Changeling didn't bother to control its grin, masked as it was by Elezar's skull helm.

The flames grew and flourished, until they had embraced a third of Midgardia's visible surface, black ash clouds starting to obscure the upper atmosphere. A part of the Changeling wished it could be down there, experiencing the raw, chaotic annihilation in person. Perhaps, in a different existence among one of Fate's many other paths, it would walk the surface of Midgardia during its fiery execution. It would see the inferno devouring the planet's diseased, infected foliage, bursting blighted bark and setting light to the surfaces of the pus-bogs. It would see Tallybands sent blazing back to the warp, just as the fires roasted the human people of Midgardia and gutted the spires of the Magma Gates. Only into the underworld would the flames fail to reach. That did not concern the Changeling. There would be more than enough time to deal with those lost Wolves.

Grandfather Nurgle would be infuriated by the torching of his new possession. The thought only fuelled the Changeling's delight. In all of Creation and Uncreation, only its master knew the final form of the tapestry it wove from Fate's threads, but even the small patch the Changeling saw before it was glorious to behold.

The Elezar-thing snapped its gaze away from the sight of the burning world. It had let its thoughts drift. There was still work to be done. Swiftly, it turned from the viewing ports and paced from the bridge, back towards the Interrogator-Chaplain's cell.

Midgardia was only the beginning.

Iron Requiem, in high orbit above Svellgard

Iron Captain Terrek reached out and touched the soul of the machine. The Clan Commander felt the spirit of his battle-barge rise up from the depths as he finished plugging himself into *Iron Requiem's* command throne, neural links, spine cords and gene-coils, draped with purity seals, binding him to the centre of the bridge. Terrek always found it a thrilling sensation, to commune so directly, so intimately, with something that had never known the weak constraints of the flesh.

Iron Requiem was ancient. It had forged through the stars and brought the Emperor's light to the darkest reaches of the galaxy for almost eight thousand years. Yet the soul of the machine was anything but old and sluggish. It spoke to Terrek freely, as an old friend, of its pride at the successful lance strike against Morkai's Keep, twinned with its shame at unleashing its weapons upon brother Adeptus Astartes. Terrek quietened its fears. The Space Wolves were at best mutants, and at worst traitors. They were barbarous savages who had run rampant through the stars, unchecked by any authority, for far too long. Now the Iron Hands would help bring them to heel.

Terrek had deactivated his bionic eyes. Now he saw directly through the *Iron Requiem's* augur arrays, the data fed back to him in a steady stream through the throne's many ports. Svellgard hung below them, a little blue-grey orb framed by the vast, icy sphere of Frostheim behind it. Around the orb clustered what looked from a distance like swarms of airborne insects. With a thought Terrek increased the augur magnification, picking out individual ships from among the fleet that hung around the moon. Most were Astra Militarum mass transporters and Imperial Navy battleships, but Terrek also noted the proud blue heraldry of a sleek Ultramarines Strike Cruiser.

As per the agreed plan, the sons of Guilliman had not yet committed any of their squads to Svellgard's surface, allowing the Astra Militarum and the atmospheric aircraft of the Imperial Navy to secure the island beachheads. They would be sufficient to assess the threat, and from there decide whether to reinforce the Wolves or destroy them with their moon. Only once the enemy's main strength had been pinpointed would the Angels of Death commit themselves. As a strategy it was both simple and logically optimal. The Clan Company's Iron Father had gone so far as to compute an eighty-seven per cent

likelihood of success.

Such figures brought Terrek as close to pleasure as was possible nowadays, but unknown factors still remained. One of those was playing out even as *Iron Requiem* joined the rest of the crusade fleet around Svellgard. Terrek noted multiple sensors tracking a powerful energy signal on the surface below. Visual scanning was struggling to map a reliable image of the thing causing the disturbance. Whatever it was, it appeared to be neverborn in nature. Terrek filtered the garbled Astra Militarum vox messages being translated back to their commanders in orbit. Fire. Death. Rage. Terrek assessed and dismissed each keyword in turn. Wings. Axe. Blood. Daemon.

Greater Daemon.

Bloodthirster.

He felt even the mighty spirit of *Iron Requiem* shudder as they made the joint realisation of what was attacking the Claws of the World Wolf below. One of Khorne's mighty champions had burst into being beneath the moon's cold waves. That could only mean the warp rifts were even more unstable than they had initially calculated. The sooner he acted the better.

His implants calculating range, azimuth, diffraction and speed projections, the Iron Hands captain began to plot another firing solution for his battle-barge's lance battery.



WARHAMMER
40,000



LEGACY OF RUSS 6

**WOLF
TRAP**

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

WOLF TRAP

Robbie MacNiven

Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjarnar

The very walls of *Mjarnar* shuddered and shifted, plasteel plating suddenly as insubstantial as a heat mirage. Through the haze came wyrdlings, their blades and claws reaching for Ragnar and his Space Wolves.

‘Blackpelts, to me!’ Ragnar roared. Normal forces would have been annihilated by so sudden and horrific an ambush. The Blackpelts, however, were far from normal. Back-to-back they fought, Tor Wolfheart and Alrydd the Bard, Uller Greylock, Hrolf Longspear and Svengril the Younger. With bared fang and wild eye they smote the creatures of Chaos, the warped corridor ringing with Fenrisian steel and crackling disruptor fields, snapping bone and snarled oaths. They were the Young King’s most favoured warriors, chosen as much for their brutal sword-skill as for their combat experience. Against them the lesser daemons of the wyrdrealm, for all their rage, could do little.

And they were as nothing compared to their lord. Ragnar was a blur of unrestrained, natural-born violence. He’d abandoned the protective knot of the pack, striking out further down the corridor. Normally a Wolf Lord’s personal retinue would have striven to defend their leader, adopting a formation that covered his back and protected his blind spots. But the Blackpelts knew better than to try that when the battle-joy had taken hold of their Young King.

Ragnar killed. It was simple. It was brutal. It was a terrible thing to watch, something that even his Wolf Guard treated with reverence. He was a blur of perpetual motion, never hesitating, never stopping, not even thinking. It was instinctive, deadly, the result of transhuman genetic engineering and the warrior conditioning of an already martial race, combined with over a century’s bloody battlefield experience. *Frostfang*, Ragnar’s ancient chainsword, was a blur, a

halo of tearing teeth that left a haze of viscera hanging in the air around the lunging, spinning shape of the Wolf Lord. He danced the warrior's dance, darting death that sawed through limbs and skulls and torsos and sent clutches of nightmares tumbling back to hell together.

Inquisitor de Mornay was only half aware of him. His plasma pistol was in one fist, venting steam from its coolant valve as he fired down from his palanquin. Sister Marie stood behind the rocking platform, hammering her combi-flamer into the mass of bug-eyed, snapping monsters clawing at them. Her black power armour was pitted and scarred, its holy surface befouled with a sheen of dripping ichor. She was reciting the Thirty-Third Prayer of Revelatory Salvation in low, hard tones as she killed, eyes gleaming with the fires of a warrior given sacred purpose. When the tide rose too high she triggered the flamer, and the corridor was filled with the stench of roasting warspawn and the dancing light of blazing promethium as it ate hungrily at the shrieking creatures.

Subconsciously, the inquisitor was regretting not bringing the arco-flagellant, or donning his exo-plate. A part of him had hoped the rumours of *Mjälmar's* corruption would prove to be unfounded, and the last thing he'd wanted was VX Nine-Eighteen rampaging through the star fort's narrow corridors. That was a mistake he wouldn't make again.

The daemons screamed with fury, enraged at the fact that their trick had been discovered. Without the intervention of de Mornay they would have driven Ragnar and his packs to the brink of turning, the Wolves' frustration with the star fort's seemingly endless, deserted corridors leading to the triumph of the Canis Helix. The Young King would have become the Young Beast.

And then, as sudden as it had begun, the ambush was over. The last daemons flickered and vanished with fading howls. The walls were whole once more, painted with dripping slime and riddled with bolt-rounds. Ragnar twisted to a stop in a low crouch, *Frostfang* held upwards, its kraken teeth still revving. The Wolf Lord remained frozen for a second, fangs bared, a single twitch all that was needed to trigger another killing spree. But none came. He stood and deactivated the chainsword, wiping a globule of shorn wyrdmeat from the casing.

'I needed that,' he growled.

'We can't stay here,' de Mornay said. His plasma pistol whined as it recharged, hot in his gloved grip.

'We aren't going to,' Ragnar said. 'Pack, on me.' He keyed his vox.

'Report.'

'*It's an ambush, lord!*' shouted Hostor over the link. The sounds of fighting

were clearly audible in the background.

‘The whole station is a trap,’ Ragnar replied. ‘Objective remains the same. Secure the command deck.’

‘*Understood*,’ said Hostor, the word underpinned by the sound of a revving chainsword.

‘The other packs?’ Uller asked as Ragnar broke the link.

‘Unresponsive,’ the Wolf Lord said grimly. ‘World Wolf pattern. We have an objective to secure.’

‘Where are you going?’ de Mornay demanded as the Wolves moved off down the corridor.

‘The command deck, of course,’ Ragnar called back. ‘Via the nearest vox terminal. Someone has to warn the rest of the Chapter that those Grey Knights were right.’

‘The place is infested,’ de Mornay said. ‘We’d be better off evacuating and bombarding the station with your fleet.’

‘I’ve seen worse cases of corruption,’ Ragnar said. ‘Haven’t you, inquisitor? Besides, do you think that little scrap was enough to satisfy me?’ The Wolf laughed.

Glowing, de Mornay rolled his platform in the pack’s wake.

The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard

‘All packs, focus fire!’

Sven didn’t need to clarify the target. The burning Bloodthirster was hurtling through the air like a comet, aimed unerringly at the heart of the World Wolf’s Lair. It roared a challenge as it came, the sound seeming to shake the whole moon to its core. The receding waters around the island churned as yet more daemons joined the assault, answering the great slaughter-lord’s defiance. For a moment, just a split-second, Sven thought he understood what it meant to be a mortal, armoured only in plates of metal, facing down the molten, white-hot fury of a god’s avatar. He wondered if Jarl Stormpelt had known the same feeling when he had duelled the same monster, all those centuries ago.

Bloodhowlers and Deathwolves opened fire as one, filling the air with death. Bolter rounds, streaking missiles, spears of plasma and heavy las hammered at the greater daemon, ordnance enough to decimate an army in seconds.

It didn’t even slow. Missiles burst in the air before they could strike, detonated by the thing’s infernal heat. Hard rounds became molten spray that pattered from its craggy black hide. A demolisher cannon shell detonated in front of it, the

shrapnel barely touching it. The daemon burst through the smoke with its roar still ringing through the fire-streaked air, its blazing eyes fixed on the control keep. On Sven.

‘Leave me,’ the Wolf Lord said. Olaf looked at him, saying nothing.

‘Do not question my orders, long-tooth,’ Sven growled, turning to face him.

‘Do not question our loyalty, pup,’ Olaf replied, unsheathing his wolf claws. Around him the other Wolf Guard activated their own weapons, the air filled with snapping blue energy.

‘I will not have the greatest of the Firehowlers die here,’ Sven said. ‘I am going to order Yngfor to target this keep and launch one of the World Wolf’s Claws.’

‘It would be minutes before it struck,’ Olaf countered. ‘You’re a tolerable fighter on a good day, pup, but do you really think you can keep that piece of wyrd-dung busy for that long?’ The rest of the Bloodguard growled their agreement.

‘Bloodhowl!’ The voice interrupted Sven before he could respond. He turned to see Harald Deathwolf pull himself from the access hatch up onto the keep’s battlement. The big Wolf Lord was grinning.

‘Not you too,’ Sven said.

Harald just laughed and slammed a hand into his pauldron. His Wolf Guard, the Riders of Morkai, were following him out onto the parapets.

‘That’s one big beast,’ Harald said as he watched Infurnace’s fiery approach. ‘I want its skull for my hall. Maybe I’ll take the name Stormpelt, eh?’ The Riders of Morkai snarled and beat fists against their breastplates. The Bloodguard responded in kind, the two grey-pelted packs facing one another down like feuding Blood Claws.

‘Yngfor,’ Sven snapped into the vox, linking to the depths of the keep, where the Long Fangs were helping to coordinate the fire support.

‘We can’t stop it, lord,’ the Long Fang said over the background thunder of heavy bolters. *‘Nothing can touch it.’*

‘Cease fire,’ Sven ordered. ‘And launch one of the Claws. Lock onto this keep’s coordinates.’

‘But lord—’

‘Don’t argue,’ Sven said. ‘Just do it. Then get to the secondary command bunker.’ He cut the link.

Harald had activated his frost axe, the disruptor field snapping along Glacius’ twin heads.

‘It will kill us all,’ Sven said.

‘It’ll kill you, Bloodhowl, you fangless pup,’ Harald said. ‘Not me. I told you, I want its head.’ He pointed Glacius at the oncoming daemon, and howled a challenge.

Despite himself, Sven grinned. He activated Frostclaw.

Infurnace struck. Its great, cloven hooves slammed into the keep’s parapet. Rockcrete crumbled, slamming back into the Wolf Guard. Sven bowed into the wave of debris, auto-stabilisers struggling to keep him upright, feeling the wreckage hammer and score his armour. The daemon found purchase on the edge of the battlements and cracked its whip, the chains rattling. It roared its defiance in the Wolves’ faces, the heat like a melta’s passing shot. The air shimmered and wolf pelt tokens singed and caught light.

Harald struck first. Glacius was an arc of ice carving through a furnace’s heat, straight towards the daemon’s head. The blow never landed. The Bloodthirster moved with a speed that should have been impossible for a creature of its size, smashing aside Harald’s blow with the spiked haft of its own burning axe. The Wolf Lord stumbled, and a strike from the creature’s whip slammed him down onto his back.

Gunnar Felsmite was the first to die. The Wolf Guard threw himself at the monster, his claws sparking. One set buried in the thing’s thigh, cracking the black skin. Flames burst from the wounds. Gunnar twisted the claws free a split-second before the daemon beheaded him. The jetting blood steamed in the super-heated air.

Denr Longblade was next. He swung his longsword up in a parry, but the axe simply carved through the steel and then down through ceramite, flesh and bone, cutting the Space Wolf in half.

Nils Ironclaw and Fior Frostmane died together, both gutted by a single vicious swing. The blow struck Sven too, meeting the head of Frostclaw. The force of it rung down through the axe, throwing it from the Wolf Lord’s numb grasp.

A single second’s opportunity. A moment amidst the fire and blood. Fangs bared, Sven threw himself inside the greater daemon’s guard and thrust Firefang up. The chainsword’s teeth bit deep into its lower torso, chewing through brass plate and wyrdflesh. Sven thrust harder with both hands, roaring as he forced the blazing sword up to its hilt.

‘I am a Firehowler,’ he snarled. ‘I am a son of the Fire Breather. You cannot burn me.’

Infurnace backhanded him, the blow sending the Wolf Lord grinding across the parapet’s bloody rockcrete in a shower of sparks. He came to a stop next to

Frostclaw. He managed to get a hand on its haft again before the Bloodthirster's whip lashed out, chains snapping around his outstretched vambrace. With a grunt Sven found himself dragged up onto his knees. The rockcrete beneath him cracked and split as the beast dug its hooves in.

'*Sven!*' Olaf's wolf claws slammed down on the whip's taut length. The chains shattered and Sven slumped back, hand still on the haft of his weapon. Infurnace roared as Istun swung his power axe at the beast's back, hacking into flesh that had the consistency of coal. It spun with its terrible speed, and the Bloodguard narrowly ducked a swing of its axe.

'You've done enough,' Olaf snarled, dragging Sven to his feet.

'Yngfor,' Sven voxed.

'*Still inputting the coordinates, lord,*' the Long Fang replied.

'Then do it faster!'

'*Lord, you'll destroy half the island!*'

'You have to go,' Olaf snarled in Sven's face. 'Some of the Great Company must survive.' Behind him Istun bellowed with pain as the Bloodthirster's huge axe cleaved through his right arm. Uuntir slammed his thunder hammer into the beast's knee, but even that mighty weapon did little more than crack its dark skin. Flames licked from the wound as Infurnace shattered the Bloodguard's storm shield with a single stroke.

'Firehowler!' It was Harald. The Wolf Lord's nose was bloody and broken, and his eyes blazed with battle fury. But instead of pointing at the greater daemon, he gestured upwards. Sven followed his finger.

Directly overhead, a patch of Svellgard's slate-grey clouds was flaring with a blood-red light. A second later the voice of his flagship's vox huscarl, in orbit above, crackled in his ear.

'*Lord, a ship of the crusade fleet has just launched a lance strike against Svellgard's surface.*' Suddenly it made sense. Sven looked at Harald.

'Run.'

*Transit line four hundred and three,
the Underworld, Midgardia*

The transport tunnel resounded with screams and the tearing of flesh. Around Egil Iron Wolf his brothers fought, back and forth across the rail lines of the subcrust highway, hacking and chopping into the resilient, dead flesh of the plaguebearers. The necrotised daemons felt nothing, and hacked back at the Wolves with their own rusting blades, trying to drive them against the packed

earth of the tunnel wall.

The Nurgle Herald that challenged Egil was no warrior. The Iron Wolf realised that, to his surprise, as he darted back from the daemon's first clumsy swing of its pitted broadsword. It was obese and rotten to its core, reduced to shuffling after the Wolf Lord as it tried to swipe at him. Its blade would not kill Egil. But the miasma of filth that surrounded it might.

The Iron Wolf lunged, razor-fast, the wolf claws of his right fist blazing with power. They punched through the daemon's breast with ease, four points searing through pox-scarred flesh, yellow fat and cancer-gnawed bones. Egil ripped downwards, spilling a slew of vile innards, seething with fat maggots.

The Herald laughed.

Egil's visor was awash with red runes. The air around the Herald and his infernal Tallyband was hyper-toxic. Pulsating puff-ball growths infesting the plaguebearers' skin were bursting and popping all around the embattled Space Wolves, clouding the air with a noxious fug of green daemonspores. His auto-senses told him his armour was literally disintegrating, layers of ceramite being eaten away every second. When it was gone, he'd be a puddle of rotting matter in the time it took to draw breath.

Egil thrust desperately at the Herald with both fists, its broadsword clanging uselessly off his pockmarked breastplate. The wolf claws tore deep again, carving up its engorged folds, spilling pus-blood and writhing worms. The thing just tried to stab him again. It was impervious. A movement flickered through the spore cloud behind it.

'Go back to the wyrdrealm, you rancid scum,' Egil snarled as he embraced the Herald, both sets of claws locked deep inside its noxious body. A warning sound wailed in his ear as his armour lost integrity, the ceramite gone, the shaped plates of adamantium and plasteel beneath stripped almost to their servos. His breath caught, intake filters clogged with green slime. The Herald was laughing again. It leaned into Egil's helm, worm-tongue caressing his audio receptors.

'I am Phugulus, wolf-man,' it croaked. 'And I come bearing a message.'

Egil buried his claws deeper, trying to find something vital, pushing against a seemingly impervious mountain of decay. The daemon's phlegm-choked words echoed around his skull.

'Logan Grimnar is dead.'

'Moln!' Egil roared, and flung himself backwards, claws sliding free of the weeping flesh. The daemon stumbled, and a bolt of blue lightning split the green smog behind it. It struck the Herald's horned skull with a thunderclap that

echoed back from the highway tunnel's sloping walls.

Phugulus exploded. Moln's charged thunder hammer, swung two-handed, burst the bloated monstrosity like a huge ulcer, sending out a shockwave of gory pus and burning meat so thick that it physically drove Egil back a pace. The Herald's demise was met by a wail from its plaguebearers.

'Krak grenades, collapse the hole,' Egil snapped, slashing down the nearest lesser daemons as they tried to recover. He was rewarded seconds later by a trio of splitting detonations as anti-tank grenades collapsed the maw-tunnel the plaguebearers had crawled in through. He shouldered another daemon to the ground and stamped hard, snapping first its ribs and then its neck. More fungal balls burst as the daemons died, but without the Herald the air's toxicity readout on Egil's visor had already begun to drop. He swung at another plaguebearer that had buried its blade in Olaf Ironhide's knee joint, cutting its head from its shoulders as Olaf ripped the blade free.

'It's nothing,' the Ironwolf grunted as a scream split the tunnel's choking air.

The plague wyrm still lived. It was being hammered by the Champions of Fenris, its loathsome white flesh riddled with bolt-rounds and torn by chainswords and wolf claws. Yet still it healed, its unnatural physiology impervious to even the most violent blows of the enraged Wolves. Its fang-ringed maw snapped hungrily at them, driving part of the pack back. Judging by the shape bulging grotesquely halfway down its gelatinous gullet it had already snapped up one of the Space Wolves, his scream now silenced.

'That thing must die,' Egil said. 'We cannot let them infest any more of the underground. On me.'

The Ironguard fell upon the wyrm's twisting, writhing length. Their power weapons carved out great chunks of flesh and stinking, misshapen organs, cursing the thing back to the wyrdrealm as it splattered them with sizzling yellow slime. Egil aimed a strike for the folds beneath the Wolf who was being slowly swallowed, slicing the membranous skin open. Like some foul parody of a birth, the remains tumbled from the wound in a cascade of steaming digestive juices.

The Wolf started screaming again.

Egil stabbed down without hesitation, piercing what remained of his skull and ending his blind, acid-melted agony.

'In the Allfather's name, die!' came a shout. Throwing caution aside, Lenold had flung himself directly towards the wyrm. As it reared before him he emptied his bolter on full auto into its maw, howling as he blasted apart fangs and flesh in

a storm of mass-reactive shells.

The wyrm struck, snaking down beneath Lenold's barrage to snap at his legs. The sudden, sinuous strike pitched the Wolf from his feet. In an instant the Champion of Fenris was half locked in the thing's shattered jaw, bolter falling from his grasp as he sought purchase on its slippery skin. He grunted in pain as its sucking maw grated through his power armour.

'Lenold!' Egil threw out both hands, claws retracting as he grasped onto the Wolf's vambrace. His armour hummed and whirred as he dug his heels in, battling the daemon's strength. It twisted and shook its head like a hound, dragging Lenold a foot deeper into its acidic gut.

'Give... me... a grenade,' Lenold managed between clenched fangs.

'I'll have to let go,' Egil snarled.

'Do it.'

Egil released Lenold's vambrace. In an instant the Champion of Fenris was dragged down by the thing's horrific peristalsis, but not before the Iron Wolf was able to smack a primed krak grenade into his gauntlet.

'Back!' Egil barked. He threw himself away from the wyrm, dragging the nearest Champion with him. The tunnel highway echoed with the thunderclap of a detonation, and once again a jet of stinking offal splattered the Wolf Lord. He scrambled back to his feet, wiping yellow viscera from his visor's lenses.

The wyrm was headless, but still far from dead. It writhed madly in a pool of its own effluvium, as though still seeking bodies to devour. Even as Egil watched he could see its flesh growing and reknitting, the nubs of half-formed fangs sprouting around the decapitated skin.

'Focus your attacks,' he ordered. 'Start fighting like one pack and we may finish this damned thing.' He triggered his claws again and swung for the daemon's gaping wound.

Together Egil, his Ironguard and the Champions of Fenris ripped into the plague wyrm's remains, hacking and stabbing and slicing at the wound torn by Lenold's sacrifice. Beneath the savage fury of the Wolves, even the daemon's powers of regeneration were not strong enough. The sons of Russ fought on, drenched helm to boot in wyrdling filth, ripping the thing apart with their gauntlets, ploughing waist-deep through pulsing, sucking flesh. Egil's claws finally tore through the last hunk of its meat, splattering it in dripping chunks against the tunnel's wall. He spread his arms and loosed a rare howl, turned mechanical-sounding by his vox amplifiers. The Ironguard and the Champions joined him, united in their slaughterous exaltation. The noise echoed eerily down

the tunnel as the stinking remains of the wyrm shimmered and, finally, flickered from existence.

The hunt for the Great Wolf would go on.

Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjalnar

Ragnar beat the horror's head against the side of the vox station. The thing simply giggled, gibbering some arcane nonsense. With a snarl the Wolf Lord swung *Frostfang*, splitting apart the amorphous pink flesh and revving the weapon until the thing imploded into nothingness. From the nothingness, popping into being like a conjurer's trick, two lesser blue horrors lunged at him. He beat them both down with his chainsword, spitting on their shifting remains. Finally, they too vanished from reality.

'Room secured,' Ragnar growled, panting.

With the maleficarum trickery broken the vox terminal hadn't been far from their boarding point, but nor had the way been easy. More daemons had dropped from a service hatch, mottled black furies with fluttering wings. Confined to the corridor, they'd been butchered in seconds. The beast of Nurgle in front of the terminal's doors had been a more difficult challenge. De Mornay had eventually vaporised its bloated skull with a plasma bolt after Sister Marie's combi-flamer had set it alight.

The vox terminal beyond had been filled with capering horrors, who let out an almighty cacophony when the Wolves blasted their way in. Ragnar had kicked the first in the face as wyrdfire had begun to coalesce around its flailing arms, smashing it into a hundred glass shards that reflected back crazed images before they vanished.

The rest of the horrors soon followed. Svengril and Tor secured the far door while Ragnar activated the star fort's vox uplink. After a moment the monitors blinked into life, and a low hum permeated the room. The glow underlit Ragnar's smile.

'This is Ragnar Blackmane to all *Vlka Fenryka*. The Ramilies-class star fort designate *Mjalnar* is currently subject to a daemoniac infestation. It is being cleansed. Repeat, it is being cleansed. All forces take note, but no reinforcements are required.' He ended the recording and waited while it uploaded to the beacon, the transmission cogitator rattling.

"No reinforcements are required",' de Mornay echoed. He sounded incredulous.

Ragnar shrugged.

‘The corruption isn’t as bad as Krom made out it would be.’

‘You nearly tore each other apart,’ de Mornay said, looking from Ragnar to the Blackpelts who crouched tense, silent, waiting for his next order.

‘That was before we found an enemy to fight,’ Ragnar said, without a hint of irony.

‘Give me the vox horn.’

‘What?’

‘I said give me the vox, I need to send a transmission.’

‘To whom?’

‘You forget yourself, Wolf,’ de Mornay snapped, his voice suddenly loud. ‘I am a member of the God-Emperor’s Holy Inquisition. The sum total of those I answer to in this galaxy is nil, bar Him on Terra. Now *give me the warp-damned vox horn!*’

One of Ragnar’s Wulfen growled at him. De Mornay turned to the bestial warrior, eyes blazing.

‘Be silent!’ he barked. The Wulfen took a crouched pace backwards, eyes wide. Its packmates whimpered.

Ragnar stared at the inquisitor. For the briefest moment, he could see the fiery young warrior that had resisted the Dark Angels on Calva Senioris, still bloodied, still unbowed. Wordlessly, he passed the vox horn to him. The disparity in sizes between the towering, armour-plated, ichor-streaked Wolf Lord and the old, palanquin-bound mortal only emphasised the latter’s strength of will.

‘This is Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay, Ordo Hereticus, Divisio Segmentum Obscurus, ident code four five seven, seven three eight alpha. Voice scan initiate.’ Ragnar looked at his pack-kin, all staring at the glaring inquisitor. The voice scan must have come back positive, for de Mornay continued.

‘Requesting clearance to all data files on ordo forces currently operating within the Fenris System, priority A-one.’ He entered a string of galactic coordinates and location tag-codes. ‘Combat group Omicron, Ordo Malleus Chamber Militant Third Brotherhood. Establish link.’

Ragnar’s surprised expression was replaced by a frown as de Mornay spoke again.

‘Captain Stern, this is Lord Inquisitor Banist de Mornay of the Ordo Hereticus, currently transmitting from the star fort *Mjälmar*.’

‘What’re you doing?’ Ragnar demanded, but de Mornay ignored him.

‘Yes, we’ve met resistance. Corruption level three beta or kappa, no higher. But

I suspect it will grow worse the deeper we get.'

Ragnar turned his back on the inquisitor and gestured to Tor. 'Take point, we're moving on.'

The Blackpelt nodded eagerly, punching the door's activation rune. Beyond it lay another empty corridor. Ragnar scowled.

De Mornay caught up with them quickly, palanquin grinding and juddering on its servitor tracks.

'What was that?' Ragnar said without bothering to look at the inquisitor.

'I called in reinforcements.'

'I told you we don't need any. I have six more packs waiting with the fleet, they only need a word from me to board and storm this accursed place.'

'Then forgive me if the thought of being surrounded by your Wolves isn't the comfort it was before I saw you nearly turn into ravening monsters,' de Mornay said. Ragnar snarled, but the retort died in his throat as the walls shuddered, and a fresh wave of wyrdlings launched their ambush.

The Void, Fenris System

Stern cut the vox-link and turned to the *Star Drake*'s gunnery huscarl.

'That's enough. I have new orders. Helmsman, set a course for *Mjälmar*'s last recorded location. I shall provide more detailed coordinates momentarily.'

As the Space Wolves serfs scurried to do their new masters' bidding, Stern returned his gaze to the strike cruiser's viewing port. Beyond it *Gormenjarl* drifted through the sea of stars. The mighty Ramilies was no more. It listed, oxygen venting from its shattered spires and bulkheads, surrounded by a halo of burned, broken debris. Its gun decks lay blown apart and its docking spines twisted, while a single ruthlessly accurate, point-blank strike from *Star Drake*'s main cannon had demolished its command deck and whatever slinking, squirming horrors had lurked in the darkness within it.

The star fort was still far from completely annihilated, but it was badly wrecked. Stern had tagged it with a priority beacon, forbidding entry to it by Inquisitorial mandate. When time allowed, the Emperor's servants would return to finish the job he had started. For now, though, he was needed elsewhere.

'Brethren, perform the Rites of Cleansing and rearm. We are not done yet. Give thanks and praise to the Emperor that He has blessed us with further purpose this day.'

The World Wolf's Lair, Svellgard

Like a spear cast by the Allfather from distant Terra, a lance of fire fell from

Svellgard's heavens and destroyed all it touched. The pillar of flame ignited the grey clouds, burning them away and leaving a halo of radiance around its crackling shaft. It struck the very heart of the island housing the World Wolf's Lair, slamming down onto the parapets of the central fire control keep.

Infurnace burned. The monstrous greater daemon had proven impervious to every hard round and munition fired at it. Against the force of a concentrated lance strike, however, even it was not untouchable. The ultra-heavy energy beam caught the Bloodthirster at its heart. As the battlements around it shattered, Infurnace stood transfixed, hooves braced and arms spread wide, its roar of fury melding with the thunderous crack of the beam's impact. The daemon began to disintegrate, flesh turning brittle, bursting apart, wings snapping and becoming ash. The light of the lance strike engulfed it, as the walls of the keep melted and collapsed.

As swiftly as it had come, the pillar of energy blinked from existence, its thunderclap rolling across the ever-receding sea and echoing back from the nearby islands.

The noise woke Sven. For a moment the impact with the dirt had combined with the sensory overload of the lance's strike to short out even his enhanced senses. His chrono display told him he'd been unconscious for a little over thirty seconds. In that time the keep had gone, replaced by a crater of fused rockcrete blocks and melted plasteel girders.

The Wolf Lord dragged himself to his feet. Beside him Harald stirred, blinking in the aftermath of the strike. Clotting blood on his brow had joined that of his broken nose, matting his hair. Sven had grabbed him when he'd realised what was happening and triggered his jump pack, Longleap, driving the modified dual-vector thrust Valkyris pattern to full turbo. According to his visor display the strain had momentarily shorted out the pack's lift capacity. Kregga and Olaf had both leapt clear as well, dragging a pair of Harald's Riders of Morkai with them. Of the rest of the twin packs, however, there was no sign.

Frostclaw was embedded in the stony earth a few yards from the deep furrow that marked Sven's brutal landing. The Wolf Lord limped to the axe and tugged it free, absently noting the injuries scrolling across his visor. A twisted right calf and two fractured ribs, along with a sprained left hand. He tried to flex it but could not. Pain flared momentarily before it was overwhelmed by the stimms pumping through his body. He gritted his fangs. Focus.

The edge of the crater where the keep had once stood was smoking. Sven

hefted his frost axe and limped towards it. He heard Olaf call out behind him as the Bloodguard gathered his wits, but he ignored him. His wounds throbbed, but he ignored them too. He had to know.

His jump pack recharged with a ping, its rune blinking green again. He reached the crater's lip, mounting the rubble of its outer edge with some difficulty. Beyond, he found himself looking down into a tangled bowl of wreckage, the keep's remains melted and fused together by raw heat.

At its centre stood Infurnace.

At first Sven thought the daemon had been petrified. It stood with its arms wide, its flesh now ashen and stiff, its wings gone. Like some nightmarish statue, it reigned in silence over the devastation surrounding it, a testimony to total annihilation in a galaxy of eternal war.

Then it moved, its horned head turning fractionally to face Sven, ash drifting from it. The Wolf Lord saw the fires that still smouldered, deep in the cracked pits of its eyes.

Sven howled, and triggered Longleap. The pack flared in harmony with the Firehowler's rage, launching him at full turbo into the pit on a pillar of fire. Infurnace moved, but only slightly, as though battling its own paralysis, parts of its burned form breaking and crumbling. It could not stop the Wolf, not now. Sven struck it from above, boots-first, the impact shattering whatever remained of the daemon's spine. In a great cascade of ash and sparking embers he crashed through the greater daemon, and Svellgard's cruel wind finally whipped its remains away. For a moment, the Wolf Lord's advanced hearing detected the distant echo of an angry roar. Then the last of the dust settled, and all was still.

Sven rose from his crouch amidst the wreckage, and turned slowly back towards the crater lip. The crack in his fused ribs ached. Harald, Olaf, and the surviving Bloodguard were standing looking down at him, splattered in grime, blood and ichor. Sven bared his fangs.

'Find out whose ship did this,' he snarled, pointing at the rubble beneath him.

Iron Requiem, in high orbit above Svellgard

The machine-spirit of *Iron Requiem* thrilled with the knowledge of another successful strike. Hardwired into the ancient warship via his command throne, Iron Captain Terrek felt the ship's exaltation as his own. It brought joy to a soul that had not experienced such an emotion in over a century, momentarily warming cold synth-skin and making the Iron Hand's autoheart thud a little faster. For a moment – just a fraction of a second – the Iron Captain remembered

what it had been like to be human.

And then the moment passed, a statistical anomaly, subsumed and made irrelevant by the cold, hard reality of the present. The Space Marine shifted in his throne, data cables rattling. It would not do to become so engrossed in the triumphs and failings of his own flagship, no matter how tempting. As much as it vexed him, his duties demanded more than a purely machine instinct.

Still, the exhilaration was not entirely misplaced. The lance strike had been accurate to a thousandth of a degree, a noteworthy achievement even for the *Requiem's* venerable targeting systems. It had also resulted in the annihilation of the target. The heat signature being emitted by the neverborn entity no longer registered on the *Requiem's* powerful augurs. The flow of information Terrek was constantly receiving via his auto-senses estimated that fatal collateral damage consisted of no more than two to three dozen individuals and some rockcrete and plasteel command structures. Again, for a lance strike into the heart of a contested battlefield, it was an excellent final result. One to be replicated, and swiftly.

Terrek requested further data. It flowed to him without hesitation, ramping up his sensory input, his mind a blur of scrolling, ever-changing digits and statistical readouts. Beneath the frenetic activity of his neural nodes, his deeper consciousness swam, torpid, heavy and cold. He would like – it considered – to petition the Iron Council for a transferral to the position of Master of the Fleet. The current Master was reaching the end of his independent productivity, weighed down as he was by almost half a millennium of augmentations. Given his experience and machine-bred aptitude in the field, Terrek considered the likelihood of the success of his application to be as high as seventy-eight per cent.

Such thoughts did not register with the main thrust of the Iron Captain's attention. He was busy communing with the other ships of the fleet, touching upon their machine-spirits directly without having to waste time going through the tedium of vox-channels and the sluggishness of fleshy minds, so prone to misunderstanding and obstinacy. There could be no delay. They had to strike, as the old Medusan phrase went, while the iron still burned. He estimated a window of opportunity no wider than a few minutes, after which the optimality of a full-scale orbital bombardment would begin to decrease.

As though in answer to his thoughts, a worrisome miscalculation reared its ugly head amidst the stream of data codes. Something nagged in the Iron Captain's ear. It took him a moment to realise it was the click of his personal vox. A

transmission.

As though from a dream, the drifting, distant voice of his vox seneschal reached him. He dismissed the tiny man with a single, raised silver digit, already aware of the contents of his message.

‘Epathus,’ Terrek said, his voice, for a moment, indistinguishable from that of a mind-wiped translation servitor.

‘*Iron Captain,*’ the Ultramarine replied. He was currently onboard his own flagship, now holding station on the other side of Svellgard, between the moon and Frostheim. Even over the vox, he managed to somehow sound altogether more human than Terrek.

‘I am preparing firing solutions, brother-captain,’ Terrek said, struggling to draw his mind far enough out of the machine cant to formulate a diplomatic response. ‘I must not be disturbed.’

‘Firing solutions for targets on the surface of Svellgard?’

‘Your logic is flawless on this occasion, brother-captain.’ The last word bore a suffix of binary code, a sudden blurt that Terrek had to clamp down on, like a tick. A shadow of discomfort passed through his thoughts, soon gone.

‘With respect, such a course of action has been advised against by the rest of the crusade fleet, including Supreme Grand Master Azrael,’ Epathus said. *‘Except in the direst of circumstances.’*

‘I compute the three identifiable warp rifts below Svellgard’s oceans to constitute dire circumstances,’ Terrek replied.

‘But shelling the Wolves from orbit on one of their own moons would represent another,’ Epathus countered. *‘They will already be furious at the damage your first strike has caused.’*

‘The damage may have included as few as two-dozen casualties.’

‘Two-dozen too many in their eyes, I assure you.’

‘Four times as many are likely to have perished at the hand of the greater daemon assailing them had I not struck.’

‘A fact that will only antagonise them even further. I have served alongside the Wolves before, Iron Captain, on Granthia Nine. Depriving them of a great kill is considered a grievous insult.’

‘That is wholly illogical,’ Terrek said, feeling the faintest stirrings of anger flicker in the depths of his neuro-circuitry.

‘But it stands,’ Epathus said. *‘If you want an unchecked bombardment now, you risk initiating a full-scale civil war. Their twin fleets in orbit alongside us will retaliate, and that will only be the start.’*

The numbers had stopped. They hung in their thousands in the air around Terrek, blinking insistently. An algorithm left incomplete did not portend to good things, and the Ultramarine's interruption had pushed his calculations beyond their time threshold. By now it was likely that the Space Wolves had sought shelter in their lair's subterranean bunkers. Casualty ratios from an orbital bombardment would be slashed by over two thirds.

Terrek could no longer destroy both the neverborn and Svellgard's Space Wolf defenders at a single stroke.

Why he would want to do so was not entirely certain, beyond the fact that his logic engines had traced the reason for the crusade fleet's existence back to the persecution of the sons of Russ. Terrek was simply attempting to cut out the wasteful intermediary experience. The Ultramarines, however, clearly possessed less foresight. He scratched at one of his few remaining patches of human flesh, white and scarred beneath the housing of his right cranial bionic optic.

'Very well, Epathus,' he said. 'I commend myself to your alternatives, whatever they may be.'

'Not an orbital bombardment,' the Ultramarine said. 'But an orbital assault. Let us demonstrate to the Wolves the power of the Imperium, and what happens to the enemies of that power. That will show us where they truly stand.'

*Transit Line four hundred and three,
the Underworld, Midgardia*

Egil wiped green daemonspoor sludge from his helmet's vox grille and the thermal waste dissipaters on his backpack, switching to his armour's internal oxygen reserve with a thought-impulse.

'If more of them carry their infections down here we won't be able to continue our hunt for the Great Wolf,' Moln said grimly. Like all the Space Wolves still with Egil, the few scraps of his armour not coated in a crusting layer of slime shone scarred silver, stripped to the lowest layers by the nightmarish atmosphere.

'I agree,' said Orven. 'If the surface has been completely overrun we do not have long before they begin to infest these tunnels as well.'

'But is it overrun?' Bjorn wondered out loud. 'What of Conran's signal? It comes from the Magma Gates, does it not?'

Egil nodded, but stayed silent. Conran's distress transmission had been weighing on him since he had detected it. Suddenly things had grown complicated again. Had his Great Company evacuated Midgardia as he'd ordered? Or did Conran's presence point to a larger contingent of Ironwolves? If

not then why was he here? And what had caused him to loop a remote distress pattern from the peak of the Magma Gates?

Suddenly, his quest for the Great Wolf did not look so noble, or quite as selfless. He had abandoned his own Great Company, his own pack-kin, during a difficult and dangerous operation. He had left them leaderless. Such an act harmed the integrity of the whole strike force. Even now he could feel the distress of the surviving Champions of Fenris as they sought guidance following Lenold's demise. When pack leaders died and the links in the chain of command were shattered, the warriors of Fenris returned to their instinctive state, giving deference to the alpha. Until one established itself, a leaderless pack could be prone to prevarication and ill-considered decisions. Egil could feel just such uncertainty creeping through the Wolves now, in the Champions and even among his own Ironguard.

He glanced at Grimnar's battered, gilded thunderwolf skull. It was cradled in the claws of a crouching Wulfen, the beast looking up earnestly at Egil. For a moment the Iron Wolf considered the paradox, of the symbol of one of the greatest Wolves ever to have lived being held in the malformed hands of something that they couldn't even be sure wasn't wyrd-tainted. Egil realised, however, that it had taken a moment's introspection to come to that conclusion. When he had first seen the Wulfen with the Great Wolf's broken crown, he had seen only a wolf-brother guarding one of their Chapter's sacred relics. The other Wolf Lords could yet disagree, but Egil knew he had come to accept the place of his cursed brethren within the ranks. They were all one.

The thought made up his mind. He addressed the combined pack.

'We are returning to the surface,' he said. 'If only momentarily. We must discover what is occurring there, how we might be of assistance, as well as resupply and receive reinforcements. If the situation is stable, we shall return here immediately to resume our hunt.'

As he'd expected, there were some growls of challenge. He faced them down, as unbending as the iron that marked his crest.

'I am a Wolf Lord, leader of eleven packs. Honour demanded I come here seeking our lost king. I do not deny, I desired it in my own hearts as well. But I cannot spurn my duties any more. I must see to my Great Company and coordinate the defence of this world, or whatever remains of it. I have promised to return here as soon as I am able, and I cement that now with an oath, before you all. I swear I will find the Great Wolf.'

The growls became more approving, and there were nods, even among the

Champions of Fenris.

‘Those who wish to stay here can remain, and continue the hunt,’ Egil went on. ‘But I shall be taking the thunderwolf’s skull. I will keep it safe, until I can give it back to Logan Grimnar in person, and tell him the saga of the brave Wolves who fought and died to preserve it.’ More approval. Egil knew from long experience that now, more than ever, it was time to show strength and certainty. He turned away from the pack, drawing up a chart of sub-level one on his visor. The nearest route to the Magma Gates began at a tunnel branching eastwards from the highway, a hundred and fifty paces back up the rail line. Egil began to walk.

Behind him, the entire pack followed.

Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjalnar

Something terrible had taken up residence in what Ragnar’s visor schematics called Strategorium Six-A. Before hell had overturned reality onboard *Mjalnar* the room had served as a small strategic amphitheatre, plasteel tiers lined with cogitator lecterns encircling a large, central holochart.

What had once been a space reserved for grave military discourse was now a playground for creatures with no fixed form. Horrors of Tzeentch leapt, skittered and cartwheeled around the buckling chitin plates that had been the strategorium’s seat tiers. Above the holochart, like a nightmarish projection, a more powerful daemon had manifested in the shape of a huge, disembodied eye – a throbbing, lidless, veined orb with an iris that shimmered and changed with kaleidoscopic intensity, passing through every colour in the spectrum in a matter of heartbeats. The jet-black well of the slit pupil at the heart of the storm of colours seemed bottomless, fathomless, as equally impossible as both finite and infinite realities. Even just glancing at it, Ragnar felt a splitting migraine burst and flare behind his own eyes.

De Mornay was right. The nearer they drew to *Mjalnar*’s tainted heart, the worse the corruption was becoming.

‘Blackpelts, into them!’ Ragnar roared.

His Wolf Guard needed no encouragement. Howling oaths and spitting for luck, they flung themselves into the strategorium, slaughtering the nearest horrors without hesitation. Ragnar made straight for the wyrdling eye at the centre of the chamber, not meeting its gaze, focussing on each individual creature in his path as he split and carved and cut them into shards of riotous colour.

‘Ragnar, wait!’ shouted de Mornay from the chamber’s entrance. His warning

came too late. Over the now-familiar stench of the wyrd, Ragnar caught the distinctive, chlorine-like smell of ozone. A second later a thunderbolt of purple lightning snapped up out of the daemon eye's pupil.

The bolt struck Tor Wolfheart square in the breastplate, slamming him back into the side of the tier behind him. The Wolf slumped, his armour smoking, and for a moment Ragnar thought the Blackpelt was dead. Then he stirred, and Ragnar felt a rush of relief. It was short-lived.

Tor began to scream.

The Wolf Guard lurched forward onto his knees, his bolt pistol and power axe clattering to the deck. Gauntlets scrabbled at the breastplate where the lightning had earthed itself. Then the metal armour cracked, splitting the plate's embossed wolf's head. Tor's screaming grew worse.

Ragnar could only watch as something that looked like a fleshy maw ripped itself open in the Space Wolf's chest. The power armour cracked further, and the Wolf's organs began to thrust up out of his broken chest bones in a wash of blood. The terrible wound seemed to spread, ripping its way from Tor's thorax to his groin, the armour peeling back grotesquely. The Wolf Lord realised the Blackpelt was literally being turned inside out.

It was Sister Marie who ended the Wolf's misery. She engulfed Tor in a jet from her combi-flamer. The Wolf's screaming as the fire roasted his deformed body sounded almost relieved compared to what had come before. Finally he stopped, the once proud warrior reduced to indiscernible, burned flesh.

The daemon eye unleashed its lightning again. The purple bolt cracked into the chitin flooring a yard to the left of Svengril the Younger. Fleshless, raw hands burst up out of the smoking impact, grasping at the Wolf's boots. Snarling, Svengril stamped them to a bloody mulch.

'Take cover,' Ragnar shouted, dropping down behind one of the cogitator lecterns ringing the strategorium's centre. The Wolves and Marie did likewise, de Mornay rolling his palanquin back out of the chamber.

'We need reinforcements,' the inquisitor voxed.

Ragnar didn't respond.

The horrors capering around the eye shrieked and bawled with insane laughter as their master fired again. A third bolt hammered the lectern Uller Greylock was crouched behind. In an eyeblink the cogitator was transformed into a cloud of multi-coloured butterflies that dispersed into the wyrd-charged air. Uller, wide-eyed, found himself sheltering behind nothing. The power of the daemon eye's mutating energies crackled and snapped around it, and the horrors laughed all the

harder, like children delighted with their parent's trick.

Howls interrupted them. The sound came from two of the four corridors branching off from the chamber, bouncing and echoing back from its high dome. Ragnar felt a thrill of relief, and rose in time to see his Blood Claws bust into the strategorium from two opposite sides.

Except they were no longer his Blood Claws.

What had once been Maegar's Pack and Asgeir's Allslayers were now something else. The mark of the Wulfen was unmistakably on them. They'd discarded their helmets and much of the armour plating on their legs and forearms, revealing wicked claws and bristling fur. They ripped into the strategorium like a primal tide, fangs bared, muscles straining as they savaged the horrors around the eye.

The thing attempted to defend itself. More lightning snapped from its centre. Wulfen convulsed, one collapsing with a howl as its bones were transformed into jelly, another choking as both arms ran and melted together into a fleshy tentacle that then proceeded to strangle the writhing Wolf to death. Another bolt struck like a chain, bouncing between three of the former Blood Claws. One was turned instantly into a frozen statue of glittering, multi-coloured gems, another collapsed as its blood was transformed into amasec, and the third simply vanished, leaving behind a small silver eye token.

Such warping, unnatural powers would have broken the sanity of most attackers instantly. To the Wulfen it only served to heighten their instinctive blood-fury. The two Murderpacks hit the centre of the chamber at the same time, leaping up onto the holochart from all sides. The eye managed one last bolt – turning a Wulfen into an open book that caught light and blazed away to nothingness – before their claws reached it. The thing deformed and burst with stinking, clear liquid as the Wolves' talons raked its cornea, ripping into the retina, gouging down to the vitreous centre. The daemonic pupil dilated, the slit of black nothingness widening, and with a wet thud it detonated, showering the chamber in gelatinous chunks.

The Wulfen howled their victory. Ragnar dropped down into the holo-pit, approaching them tentatively. The murderlust was still in their lupine eyes, and he knew himself how difficult such passions made it to differentiate between friend and foe, or understand when the battle was over.

One of the Wulfen on top of the chart, still splattered in the daemon eye's viscera, leapt down to face Ragnar. For a second, the beast held his gaze. Then it bowed. Only then did Ragnar recognise pack leader Maegar.

‘Lord,’ the transformed warrior managed to grunt from between its fangs. Ragnar felt an unexpected upsurge of remorse. This was his fault.

‘Well met, Brother Maegar,’ he said quietly, putting a hand on the Wulfen’s slime-slick shoulder. It seemed to shudder, but maintained its deferential pose.

‘Could not... control pack...’ Maegar growled. ‘Asgeir dead. One pack now.’

Ragnar understood. Beneath the strain of being led in circles through the infested star fort, Maegar and Asgeir’s Blood Claws had succumbed en-masse to the curse. In the fighting to reach the strategorium Asgeir had fallen, and now the Wulfen had instinctively banded together into a single Murderpack.

Ragnar realised they were all staring at him, suddenly silent. It was no different to meeting the glare of a pack of wild Fenrisian wolves. Ragnar let his own gaze slowly travel over them, grip tightening fractionally on Maegar’s shoulder.

‘It is good to see you again, brothers,’ he said, slowly and clearly. ‘Now on, to the heart of this place. The wyrdling stink is still strong in the air. I would see it purged.’

As one, the Wulfen snarled their approval.

The Magma Gates, Midgardia

Egil reached sub-level seven before Olaf Ironhide collapsed. The pack assumed defensive positions as the Iron Wolf moved back down the transit line to the fallen warrior’s side.

‘The rot,’ the Ironguard growled between gritted fangs. He nodded down at his leg. Despite the enhanced clotting agents in Space Marine blood, the injury dealt behind his knee plate by the plaguebearer’s sword was still leaking a discoloured, yellowish fluid.

‘Skol,’ Egil said, supporting Olaf up into a sitting position. The servo-skull buzzed over the Space Wolf’s leg, the bio-scanner implanted into its left eye socket bathing the scarred silver plates in a wash of green light. After a moment it blinked out, and the results uploaded to Egil’s bionics.

‘The organics of your left leg are severely infected,’ he said after a moment.

‘I know, lord. The damn spores got in.’

Egil nodded. ‘I’m no Wolf Priest, but the limb is ruined and the infection will spread if we don’t remove it. If it hasn’t already.’

‘You do it, lord,’ Olaf said. He thrust his Fenrisian rune sword towards the Iron Wolf. Egil took it.

‘Bjorn, help me with the plate,’ he said. The two Wolves stripped the remains of the power armour from Olaf’s leg. The stink of rotting meat filled the air as the

final part was lifted away. Skol's stab-lumen lit up the ruin that had been the Ironguard's limb. The flesh around the initial wound had completely sloughed off, revealing yellow bone pitted with infection. The rest of the leg was rotten with fast-working decay. Some skin came off along with the power plates, revealing the dark-veined muscle beneath. Pus welled up from the injury, and the skin further up the limb was as white as a Fenrisian helwinter.

'Do it,' Olaf urged. 'Quickly.'

Egil didn't hesitate. While Bjorn lifted the leg, the Wolf Lord slid Olaf's combat knife in a circular motion around the Space Marine's upper thigh. Dark, infected blood pattered on the tunnel transit's dirt floor. The flesh parted, and Egil began to cut into the meat of Olaf's limb with his sword. The Ironguard grunted, hands clutching handfuls of dirt. His body would be flooded with stimms and counterseptic while his secondary heart kicked in, countering the bloodloss. It would all be in vain if Egil didn't finish the amputation before the infected leg corrupted the rest of the Space Wolf.

He felt the Fenrisian blade grate as it struck Olaf's femur. He triggered the weapon's disruptor field, blue energy wreathing it and cutting through the bone in a heartbeat. Olaf gasped, but still didn't cry out. Egil cut the power to the blade, not wanting to further widen the wound, and cleaved through the remaining muscle with a grunt. Olaf slumped back.

'Let it clot,' Egil said. 'Moln and Orven will help you.'

'One will do,' Olaf growled.

'Orven.' Egil gestured at Highfell, who bent to help Olaf onto his remaining leg. The blood from his stump had already slowed to a trickle, the flow stemmed by the Space Marine's Larraman cells.

'We go on,' Egil said.

The grav lifts into the Magma Gates' depths were no longer functioning. The pack was forced to go from one supply transit to another, entering the surface settlement through a network of low service corridors and forgotten storage bunkers. By the time they reached sub-level one the signs of burning were obvious.

The pack slowed as it reached the surface level, becoming more cautious. The vox offered no inkling as to what awaited them beyond the underworld. All the channels were dead, a wall of static. All that existed was Conran's remote emergency beacon, blinking from somewhere in the Magma Gates' command spire. A grim, sinking feeling settled over the Wolves as they began to climb

through the Gates' main levels.

Everything had suffered fire damage. Walls, floors and ceilings were blackened, and smoke still rose from twisted, melted machinery that occupied the service levels. Fire smouldered in places, and the air was dark and heavy with a pall of ash. They started coming across bodies too – at first just a few blackened bones, but more the higher they went. Soon the corridors of the Magma Gates were wall-to-wall with blackened skeletons, their contorted, grasping death-postures speaking of the agony and desperation of their final moments. They had been burned alive, en-masse.

‘Something terrible has happened here,’ Moln growled as they climbed a blackened stairwell towards the higher levels. Egil didn’t reply. The air was thick with burned flesh, but the stink of wyrdlings, that sickly smell that had invaded his senses for hours, was suddenly absent. The only occupants of the Magma Gates were the sightless, scorched skeletons of thousands of its citizens and defenders.

‘Conran’s signal is near,’ Egil said. ‘Two more levels up.’

‘If he was caught in this damnable fire we’ll find only ash,’ Moln grunted.

‘I pray to Russ you’re wrong, brother.’

They passed through a council reception chamber, elegant rustbark furniture reduced to charred stumps, the formerly plush carpet now a few fused strips around the flaking walls. Overhead, a ceiling fresco representing the Fenris System had been darkened by smoke, but had remained otherwise miraculously untouched. Egil blink-saved an image of it on his bionics as they passed underneath and reviewed it as they climbed to the next level.

He lingered on the blue-and-white orb of Fenris, and then on the sky-blue of Frostheim, and its darker attendant, Svellgard. Finally, the purple orb of Midgardia, occupying the centre of the painting. Classification *Terrum Mortis*, death world. Six and a half billion souls, eight hundred and ninety-two settlements, a production output of timber, toxins, minerals and, of course, warriors. Wolves had died defending it many times before, and each time the invader had been defeated. The Magma Gates, the greatest above-ground settlement, the conduit between the underworld and the surface and one of the planet’s bastions of Imperial authority, had never fallen.

Until now. Even if no attackers stalked the hallways, corridors and sleeping blocks, it was apparent that the Magma Gates were only a husk, gutted by whatever infernal fire had been unleashed upon them. It would have been easy to ascribe the grim destruction to foul maleficarum, but the accusation didn’t sit

well with Egil. The creatures of the wyrd loved to corrupt, to twist and defile. They loved perverting the order of mankind, loved mocking it with their insane parodies. They were bred from humanity's greatest fears and insecurities, and from such things they drew strength. Destruction – at least the unthinkingly total, undiscerning, anonymous ruination Egil saw around him – did not befit the servants of the Dark Gods. There was no defilement here. Death alone reigned, a charred ash-spectre.

They found Conran. His remains were in one of the Planetary Governor's apartments, adjacent to a shuttle landing strut. His armour was singed black. Egil broke the neck seal, and found badly cooked meat within. The emergency beacon was still transmitting from his gorget. Egil cancelled it.

The body was not alone. Cradled between Conran and the wall were a jumble of bones. Skol's scan showed four distinct sets of remains, male and female, of varying ages. It looked as though Conran had been attempting to shield them when the firestorm had rushed down the corridor.

'Take him,' Egil said to two of the Champions of Fenris, pointing at Conran. He looked at the bones the Wolf was cradling. A glance at the planetary overview files saved into his auto-sense data backup showed that the current Governor of Midgardia, Wellim Sandrin, had a wife and two children.

Moln's shout from the far end of the corridor broke the Wolf Lord's pondering. The Ironguard had stalked to the blast doors leading out onto the spire's landing strut. Finding them half open and the mechanism burned out, he'd stepped onto the platform.

'Morkai's heads,' he swore loudly as he saw what lay beyond. Egil joined him, checking his armour was still properly sealed as he stepped outside of the Magma Gates' shell.

He didn't need to ask the reason for Moln's curse. What had happened to the settlement became suddenly clear. What had happened to all of Midgardia became clear.

The planet burned. From horizon to horizon a towering black thunderhead – like an endless mountain range – blossomed up into the sky. Between it and the spire, a vast plane of grey stretched – ash, bristling with the stubs of a million burned and charred trees. The wind that whipped at the two Space Wolves shifted vast dunes of ash and filled the air with thick, swirling dust and sparking embers. The sky overhead was as choked as the ground below, creating a ruddy twilight underlit, in the distance, by the inferno that continued to consume the rest of the planet.

Midgardia's spore jungles – tainted or not – were no more. An irradiated, windblown desert now surrounded the Magma Gates. The daemons were gone.

Without a word, Egil sent a hailing message to the *Wolftide's* vox array, now blinking green in the top left of his visor.

Iron Requiem, *in high orbit above Svellgard*

The Wolf wanted to talk. In fact, judging by a scan of the stress levels in his voice, he wanted to kill.

Terrek wasn't listening to him. Key words pinged in the Iron Hand's backup mem-bank, logged for later review: *outrage, revenge, traitor, betrayal*. Beyond that, the Iron Captain had only briefly recorded that he was talking to Sven Bloodhowl, Wolf Lord of the Firehowlers Great Company. One day it may be relevant. Just not now.

Terrek's primary concern was for his deployment schematics. The entire might of Clan Company Haarmek was to be combat-dropped on Svellgard within the next hour. Current strength stood at ten squads, besides his own – six tactical, two devastator, two assault, along with another of bikers and the supporting armour. The venerable Dreadnought elders, slumbering in the battle-barge's hold-sanctums, would not be awakened for so simple an operation.

It had already been planned out in detail. Terrek had spent the time in-transit to the Fenris System with a choir of stratego-servitors, assessing all the potential war zones, the likely opposition, and deciding upon the best means of engagement. Now he aligned the preparation matrix for the moon of Svellgard with a high-priority neverborn incursion. Only one element required the reanalysis he was currently undertaking – that the Space Wolves were now to be considered non-hostiles. Despite what the Wolf was saying to him over the vox.

The orbital assault algorithm was almost complete when a wailing intrusion snapped at his attention. He was dimly aware of bridge serfs scurrying and shouting around him, beyond the ghostly vision of his machine self. His probes located the problem without their garbled messages, shouted over the screaming of proximity alarms.

There was another fleet translating in-system.

They were home.

WARHAMMER
40,000



WAR ZONE
FENRIS



LEGACY OF RUSS 7

THE WILD KING

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

THE WILD KING

Robbie MacNiven

The Void, Fenris System

In a surge of shrieking wyrd-light, Bran Redmaw and his Great Company returned to Fenris. The warp spat them out off-course, dangerously deep inside the system, trailward of Frostheim. As his flagship's kaerls sought to triangulate their exact location, transmit ident codes and establish vox contact, Bran paced his bridge from one end to the other, bare, blood-encrusted fists clenching and unclenching.

He had thought they weren't going to make it. The wyrdrealm's maddening waves had mocked them, tossing and turning his fleet's vessels with bows of gibbering insanity, scattering them and ripping them away from their destination. As his Navigators had battled to hold on to the beacon of the Astronomican, Bran had been engaged in his own fight, with those he'd once counted as brothers.

They were still his brothers, he reminded himself. Regardless of the wounds they'd dealt him. Regardless of how they now looked, thought and acted.

'Lord, we have established a vox connection with Lord Deathwolf,' called a vox huscarl. 'His signal is currently being rerouted from Svellgard via his flagship.'

'Accept it,' Bran said, pacing to the communications station. Harald's lagging voice came through on a tide of static.

'It's good to see you on our sensors, Redmaw.'

'And good to be home, Deathwolf,' Bran replied. 'How goes the fight?'

'It stinks. Young Bloodhowl and myself are on Svellgard. The place is crawling with wyrd-dung. Fenris is quiet, and we've heard nothing from Midgardia.'

'My scanners are reading a large non-Chapter fleet in orbit above you,' Bran

said, glancing over the readouts flooding back on the monitors and oculus vidscreens from his fleet's augur probes.

'Aye, and that's only the half of it. It's a crusade fleet, elements from fourteen different Chapters along with Russ-knows how much Militarum and Navy support, all come to call us to heel. A lance strike by one of their ships nearly ended both Bloodhowl and myself. They refuse to communicate with us.'

'They're here for the Wulfen,' Bran surmised, fists clenching harder.

'And more than reluctant to help with our little wyrdling problem. We're hard-pressed down here, Redmaw.'

'My warriors are hungry for a kill,' Bran said. 'If Fenris is indeed secure we will deploy in full to support you.'

'That may turn the tide,' Harald said. *'Hurry.'*

As the connection ended Bran gazed out of the viewing port. Its blast shutters were rattling back, exposing the glittering expanse of the Sea of Stars beyond. The ship's bridge was reflected back in the thick layers of crystalflex, and Bran caught sight of himself towering beside the brass-edged vox banks. It was not a vision he was familiar with. His helmet was off and his dark hair lay unclasped, thick around his shoulders. He'd stripped off his pauldrons, rerebrace, vambrace and gauntlets, revealing thick arms that were criss-crossed with a latticework of fresh cuts and sheened by a slick of sweat.

They only respected strength. Bran had shown it. Even that would not be enough though, if they were not released to the hunt soon. Bran had promised to reinforce Svellgard as though he had a choice – the packs would demand he struck out at the nearest enemy, whether he'd wanted to deploy them to the moon or not.

A crusade fleet. That made matters even worse. How his brothers would react to his return had been worrying enough. He hadn't dared consider what the wider Imperium would do when they discovered what had become of Bran's Great Company during their warp transit. Confronting the wyrdspawn would surely mean confronting those who had come to accuse the Wolves too.

But that was a risk he was going to have to take eventually. Battle called, and with it a release of the primal hunger that had been building among the Redmaws. He called up his helmsman, eyes still locked on his own savage reflection.

'Set a course for Svellgard.'

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate **Mjalnar***

The Wulfen had caught the scent of the wyrd just beyond the command deck's blast doors. They howled and gnashed their fangs as Ragnar entered the rune lock code, their eyes wide and wild with murderlust. The Young King turned to face them as the door rumbled open.

'Kill them,' he said. The Space Wolves charged.

The daemons answered the Wulfen's howls with ones of their own. *Mjälнар*'s command deck was crawling with them, the star fort's cogitator control tiers – divided into gunnery, docking, directional, enginarium, vox and shield bays – playing host to cohorts of capering blue and pink horrors. The air was filled with the snap and crackle of changing, wyrdling energies, and shoals of undulating Tzeentch sky-screamers circled in the vaulted dome above. At the heart of the bedlam rose the primary control platform, the air above it rent and shimmering around a writhing portal that resembled the scaled form of a great, coiling fish. Lightning whipped and lashed from the warp rift, and even as Ragnar watched, more cavorting pink wyrdlings materialised beneath it with a crack of incandescent light.

At the centre of the control platform a large figure sat, occupying the station commander's throne. Ragnar tried to focus on him, but the air around the figure, seated directly below the warp portal, seemed to bend in on itself, like a mirror repeating its own reflection endlessly. It confounded Ragnar's eyes and made his headache redouble.

'Kill them,' he repeated through clenched teeth.

The Space Wolves stormed the deck, setting upon the Tzeentch wyrdspawn standing between them and the portal. Ragnar led his Blackpelts, cutting left and right with *Frostfang*, heedless of the claws that scraped and scratched at his scarred battleplate.

Behind the rush of Wolves, de Mornay hauled his palanquin to a halt and slotted a vox antennae back into his platform's chassis. It was time.

'And this is why we didn't bring the exo-plate, Sister,' he said to Marie. 'Deploy the beacon.'

The Adepta Sororitas reached into an alcove beneath the palanquin's recliner, set back from the engine unit that powered the servitor's treads. The device she pulled out resembled a small metal casket, easily held in two hands, with a key panel and a blinking input system inset on one side. She activated it with a mem-code and a small rod extended from the top with a click.

'Place it there,' de Moray said, pointing his plasma pistol at the area of decking just beyond the blast doors. Marie put the device down on the ichor-slashed

grille carefully, and stepped well back. A light beamed from the las-scanner on top of the casket, momentarily covering the space around it in a green grid. De Mornay's grip on his pistol tightened, and he found himself mouthing a prayer he hadn't uttered in a long time.

The las-scanner blinked red two, three, four times, and then became a constant green. The grid vanished. De Mornay waited, breath held, trying to ignore the howls and shrieks of the combat raging all around him.

And then, with a crack, Brother-Captain Stern and his Grey Knights arrived.

Stern had cleared de Mornay en-route to *Mjalnar*. As was so often the case with representatives of the Inquisition, even the encrypted information available to the Chamber Militant was fragmentary and incomplete. Banist de Mornay had been an operative under the late Lord Inquisitor Sebastian Cornwel for seven years, his interrogator for nine, and a full inquisitor for almost fifty. He'd held the rank of Lord Inquisitor for the past dozen. His data entries spoke of strenuous, unstinting service. Malar Nine, the Crusius Campaign, the Delphoid Purges – de Mornay had served on the front line in almost as many cleanse operations as Stern in the past six decades.

The data logs also hinted at more unsavoury activities. The incident files had been wiped, but following a period stationed in the Narthex Nebula fifty years previously de Mornay had spent a great deal of time seemingly operating alongside the Dark Angels. Formal complaints from the Chapter to the Segmentum's Inquisitorial Divisio headquarters seemed to show that the sons of the Lion were less than happy with his presence. For whatever reason, de Mornay appeared to have an obsession with them.

That, however, was not Stern's concern. For a moment the after-memory of the teleportation overcame him – the sucking, gelatinous grasping of tentacles against his silver armour, the searing bone-chill of the void, the stomach-knotting sense of dislocation. He'd always hated teleporting. De Mornay's homer had guided them true though, from the pentagram-inscribed, energy-charged chamber aboard *Star Drake* to the bloody, battle-rent command centre of *Mjalnar*.

The Grey Knights were moving the moment they snapped into existence onboard the star fort, spreading out in an Exodus offence pattern from around the teleport beacon. Stern analysed the situation in a heartbeat. The command deck was awash with Tzeentch warpspawn, their corruption emanating from a crackling silver split above the chamber's control platform. A powerful

daemonic entity dominated the same platform, its warding trickery so strong even Stern's aura was unable to pierce it and discern its true nature.

The Wolves battled their way towards the creature and its portal, most of them transformed mutant beasts. Stern saw immediately that they were fighting their way into a trap. In their haste to storm the platform they'd exposed their flanks. Shimmering, shapeless things riven with unholy light were drifting to envelop them, while a shoal of blue sky-screamers detached from the flock circling above to swoop down on the Wulfen's heads.

'Brethren, split and cleanse.' Stern ordered. He went right with Caldor, Alacar and Latimer, while Tomaz, Wilfred, Artemis, Ethold and Osbeth went left.

The flamers of Tzeentch met them. From their many sightless heads, from gaping maws and from the flaring ends of quad-jointed limbs, multi-hued warpfire spewed to engulf the charging Knights. The flames themselves screamed as they flowed around the silver paladins, grasping and snapping at them like the sinuous appendages of a living creature. Such an inferno would have reduced unwarded mortals to gibbering hunks of twisting, mutating flesh and blasted bare the sanity of the most devout Imperial servant. Stern felt the warding aegis engraved into his armour vibrate as it turned the daemonic energies aside. He spat one of the Prayers of Contrition as he thrust through the warpfire, nemesi sword a scything white arc.

The first flamer came apart beneath the holy steel, its own fires turning in on it and eating it up. Stern's brethren were beside him, their anointed weapons crackling with power as they cut apart the ever-changing monsters. They closed around him, united in a recital of the Cantic of Absolution. Stern threw a glance at the centre of the chamber.

The Wolves' advance had stalled.

Ragnar cursed when he saw the Grey Knights materialise amidst a flare of teleportation lightning. He'd known the inquisitor would go behind their backs at some point. There would be a reckoning with him when this was all over.

If any of them made it off the command deck alive. The sky-screamer came at him from above, filling the energy-charged air with the shriek of its passing chitin spines. Ragnar met it with an upswing of *Frostfang*, the chainsword's scream matching that of the airborne daemon as it sawed the thing in two, spraying the Blackpelts with stinking purple viscera. More of the creatures dived down at them, their manta-like bodies rippling on the invisible currents of the warp.

The Space Wolves' attack was blunted. Horrors pressed in from all sides, splitting and multiplying, bathed in hellish wyrdlight that threw crazed shadows across the embattled chamber. The sleek sky daemons above them struck in shoals, swooping at an angle so that their frills of spines and drooling maws skimmed the top of the melee. The Wulfen paid for their feral desire to remove their helms, their unprotected faces gouged and torn by the passing screamers.

'Stay tight!' Ragnar bellowed at the nearest Wolves, slashing through another blue horror that leapt at him, all flailing arms and yawning mouths. 'Aim for the platform!'

Behind him he heard a grunt, and half turned to see Hrolf Longspear stumble, blood spilling from where a horror's claws had succeeded in breaking the thigh seal of his armour. Uller Greylock was also injured, his helmet buckled where a screamer's passing blades had hammered into him. The Grey Knights were on their flanks, wreathed in wyrdflame as they hacked at the sea of madness. It would not be enough.

It was Hostor who saved them. His Blood Claws, the only one of the three boarding packs to have resisted the curse of the Wulfen, burst onto the command deck from the far side of the melee. Their howls joined with the pounding of bolt pistols and the roaring of chainswords as they speared into the fight around the control platform. Almost immediately Ragnar felt the shuddering press of morphing wyrdflesh around him lessen as the Tzeentch daemons turned to face the new threat.

'Blackpelts, forward!' he barked, shouldering his way through the fight. The platform's stairs lay directly ahead, devoid of enemies, the eldritch energies of the silver warp portal coruscating above. Behind him he could hear his Wolf Guard struggling to keep the way clear, a fresh tide of wyrdlings breaking against their blades and armour as the creatures realised the Wolf Lord's intentions.

Ragnar parted a final horror with a swing of *Frostfang*, stamping on the thing's dissipating remains as he lunged for the stairs. He took the metal rungs three at a time, alone now, his fangs bared. The air ahead shimmered and warped, images repeating themselves, patterns shattering and reforming around the faceless, dark thing that sat beneath the warp portal's swirling quicksilver centre. Ragnar flung himself at the twisting barrier with a howl.

And stopped. Silence gripped him, sudden and complete. The frenetic bloodletting of the command deck was gone. Here, in a perfect sphere of unreality centred beneath the portal, all was calm and still.

The star fort's command throne lay before him. A figure sat upon it, huge, brooding, clad in baroque power armour and a horn-crested helm. The blue battleplate was trimmed with gold and inscribed with hundreds of leering daemonic heads, the eyes regarding the Wolf Lord with a mocking glint as he stumbled to a halt.

As Ragnar stopped the figure spoke, voice silky and slick with ten millennia of vile deeds.

'Hello again, Young King,' said Madox.

Iron Requiem, in high orbit above Svellgard

More Wolves.

The augur arrays of the Iron Hands battle-barge had detected another fleet moving in-system. Their projected course took them to Svellgard, and the section of the crusade fleet surrounding the moon. Data logs showed the ships as belonging to the Wolf Lord Bran Redmaw's Great Company.

Terrek scanned the information, noting the class and size of each approaching vessel. With the fleets of three Wolf Lords combined above the moon their voidborne assets would outnumber those of this portion of the crusade fleet. And that was without factoring in the destructive power sitting dormant in the silos buried beneath the craggy tundra of Svellgard's islands. The Iron Captain cut the link with Sven Bloodhowl – who was still raging impotently at him from the moon's surface – and opened a channel to Epathus, back aboard the Ultramarines flagship.

'We should petition Grand Master Azrael for reinforcements,' he said.

'Perhaps,' Epathus allowed. *'But I have just explained the situation to Harald Deathwolf. He is in agreement with our projected assault plan.'*

'I do not trust the Wolves,' Terrek said, his flat machine tone giving the statement no inflection.

'We have little choice other than to seek their assistance, for now. The forces at our disposal are insufficient for purging Svellgard alone.'

'No force need be exerted if we destroy the moon from orbit.'

'Such an act will not be sanctioned by the rest of the crusade, Terrek. It would mean the destruction of the Wolves' orbital defence systems, and would likely cause catastrophic damage to Frostheim as well.'

The Iron Hand felt a surge of annoyance throb through his circuitry. He suppressed the unworthy emotion. The Ultramarine's words had some merit.

Regardless of where their loyalties lay, the Space Wolves currently occupied a powerful system-defence nexus. Destroying it would mean destroying valuable Imperial facilities whose ancient, sacred mechanisms ought to be recaptured intact.

‘I will transmit a request for reinforcements to the Rock,’ he said. ‘Then we shall begin planetfall, as per the prearranged assault plan.’

‘I shall see you on the surface, Iron Captain,’ said Epathus.

The World Wolf’s Lair, Svellgard

‘Machine-loving, cogbrained, traitorous wyrd-scum,’ Sven spat. ‘I hope your servo-loving mother burns in the Seven Hells for the rest of eternity.’

The vox-link to the Iron Hands battle-barge had been cut over a minute earlier, but that didn’t stop the Wolf Lord’s invectives from echoing around the bunker. Eventually, Harald placed a hand on his fellow jarl’s shoulder.

‘What?’ Sven snarled, rounding on him in the confined, red-lit space of the Lair’s secondary command bunker.

‘I’ve just spoken to the Ultramarines captain, Epathus,’ the older Wolf Lord said. ‘He’s uploading a planetary assault overview to our systems right now. They’re going to spearhead a counter-attack.’

‘Yngfor is dead,’ Sven said. ‘And his pack with him. I’ll kill that Iron Hand traitor myself!’

‘Afterwards, Young Wolf,’ Harald said. ‘Right now we have more pressing concerns than vengeance.’

The thudding of bolter fire from outside the bunker’s reinforced walls underscored his words. Since the destruction of Infurnace the daemonic assaults had only increased. The outer bastions were hard-pressed and the combat channels were overwhelmed with reports of rising casualty rates and unsustainable ammunition expenditure. The ocean-eating warp rifts were still widening. If left unchecked, Sven knew they would swallow the whole moon, and create a cataclysmic rent in reality that would surely rip apart the entire Fenris System.

‘What do the sons of Guilliman want?’ he asked eventually.

‘They’ve identified three primary warp portals from orbit. They’ll attack one, the Iron Hands the second and we’ll strike at the third. An orbital bombardment will help seal them and clear us a path.’

‘They’re as likely to try to wipe us out as seal the rifts,’ Sven snarled.

‘That may be, but at the moment we have no choice but to trust them. As long as we try to hold the daemons, their numbers will only multiply. We have to go on the offensive. Also, Redmaw is on his way.’

‘He’s finally arrived in-system?’

‘With all his fleet. Now is the time to strike.’

‘And afterwards, hold these misguided fools to account for what they’ve done,’ Sven added.

‘Aye, that we shall, brother.’

Wolftide, in high orbit above Midgardia

The Wolf Lord had returned to the iron-clad bridge of his flagship, boots ringing from the metal underfoot. Kreg bowed, eyes averted. ‘I could not stop him, lord. I tried.’

Egil didn’t respond. He was looking past the Long Fang, out of the *Wolftide*’s viewing ports. At the crusade fleet, clustered around the brooding, tower-studded bulk of the Rock. The Iron Wolf’s expression was dark.

He had returned minutes earlier, retrieved along with his pack by one of his flagship’s Stormwolves. They’d brought Conran’s remains with them, and the Great Wolf’s battered crown.

‘Conran tried to reason with the Lions,’ Kreg explained. ‘He believed if he proved there were still Wolves on Midgardia they wouldn’t burn it. He went himself.’

‘They know he went?’ Egil asked quietly. ‘They know he was on the surface when they began the bombardment?’

‘Yes, lord, he told them. We have the vox transcripts.’

‘And they knew I was still planetside as well? That I was hunting for the Great Wolf?’

‘Yes, lord.’

‘Gunner,’ Egil said to one of his huscarls. ‘You have a lock?’

‘We do, lord,’ the huscarl said.

‘Conran ordered us to load and lock all batteries before he departed,’ Kreg explained. ‘It was how we convinced the Lions to talk to us in the first place.’

‘Hail them again,’ Egil ordered.

‘We cannot, lord,’ the vox huscarl said, shaking his head. ‘The entire fleet has sealed us out of its channels.’

‘Gunner, what are you locked onto?’ Egil asked.

‘An Imperial Navy Lunar-class cruiser, lord. *Wrath of Man*, part of the 483rd Obscurus battlefleet sub-detachment.’

‘Message from bridge command to the forward bombardment cannon,’ Egil said. ‘Maintain current target. Open fire.’

Ramilies-class star fort, designate Mjarnar

Ragnar said nothing. Madox laughed, an oily, chilling sound that filled the bubble of unreality occupying the centre of *Mjarnar*’s command deck.

‘You seem surprised, Wolf,’ the Thousand Sons sorcerer said. ‘Is it really so strange that you should find me here, at the heart of all your frustrations?’

‘You’re dead,’ Ragnar said, pointing *Frostfang*’s idling blades at him. ‘I drove the Spear of Russ through your faceplate.’

‘A fine strike,’ Madox said, laughing again. ‘I remember it well!’

‘This is a trick. An illusion.’

‘Existence itself is an illusion. Life is a trick.’

‘I’m not here to bandy words with bad memories,’ Ragnar snarled, striding towards the Chaos Space Marine.

‘Of course. You’d be in danger of actually learning something if you did.’

‘You have nothing to teach me, wyrdling.’

‘What about the fate of Midgardia? I could tell you that it burns with fires set by Angels.’

‘Be silent.’

‘I could tell you the Lion’s son dances on the end of a daemon’s strings. I could tell you the Iron Wolf has turned his guns on the Corpse-Emperor’s warships.’

Ragnar raised his chainsword, snarling.

‘I could tell you he’s coming back,’ Madox said, but Ragnar wasn’t listening. *Frostfang* fell, a planet burned and died, and darkness took the Young King.

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

Azrael sentenced Vox Seneschal Mendaxis to be auto-scourged, when time allowed. The punishment made the Changeling grin privately, for the fate that had already befallen the Supreme Grand Master’s real vox seneschal was far worse.

The Mendaxis-thing had returned to its communications pit, suitably penitent. Its inexplicable disappearance earlier had infuriated the normally detached Dark Angel. None thought to wonder where Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar had now

gone. He was surely in his reclusiam-cell, praying.

The Changeling was glad of the change of flesh. It provided the perfect opportunity for more distractions.

‘The captain of *Wrath of Man*, lord,’ it called up to Azrael, seated on the Rock’s bridge throne. ‘He’s been fired upon by the Space Wolves battle-barge *Wolftide*!’

‘A warning shot?’ Azrael demanded.

‘It struck him amidships, lord. His port shields have taken damage.’

‘What of–’

The Supreme Grand Master’s question went unfinished. Auspex arrays across the Rock’s oculus viewscreens and the ranks of cogitator pews lit up with a storm of warning symbols. Somewhere a claxon began to wail.

‘Sire, the entire Space Wolves fleet has just opened fire!’ shouted an Augur Chief. ‘Imperial Navy assets are reporting direct hits!’

‘Message to the entire crusade fleet, all ships are to hold fire,’ Azrael snapped. ‘And open a channel with the *Wolftide*.’

‘Yes, lord,’ the Mendaxis-thing said. ‘I shall see to it personally.’

He turned in the bottom of the communications pit and snatched a vox horn.

‘Patch this through to crusade fleet elements,’ he ordered the communications serfs hardwired into the stations around him. ‘All ships be advised – they may fire at will.’

Wrath of Man, in high orbit above Midgardia

The *Wrath of Man* rocked like an Old Terran ship in a sea swell, its shields flaring around it with vigorous blue light.

‘Another hit, captain!’ shouted Lieutenant Renmann. ‘Port shields reporting thirty-one per cent integrity!’

‘I can see that Lieutenant, thank you,’ Captain Krief said through clenched teeth. ‘Kindly reduce your voice to a level befitting that of an officer of His Divine Majesty’s Imperial Navy, and then get me a secure channel with the Rock.’

The reprimand barely had an effect on his wide-eyed subordinate. The young Third Lieutenant scampered across the bridge to the vox bank, where communications deck officers in pristine white uniforms were scrambling to acknowledge the flood of engagement data coming in from the rest of the fleet.

‘Sir, signal from the Rock!’ he shouted, waving a comms chit at the captain. ‘Fleet assets are to engage at will.’

‘God-Emperor preserve us all,’ Krief said, leaning against the brass railings of his control platform and staring out of the viewing ports at the Space Wolves fleet. Had it really come to this? Even as he asked himself the question another bombardment cannon strike impacted against the *Wrath of Man*’s shields. He felt the deck shudder beneath him, and the bridge’s lumen globes blinked dangerously.

‘Sir, port shields at nine per cent integrity!’ Renmann squealed.

‘Hard to port,’ Krief said heavily. ‘Gunnery, man the forward lances, and prepare torpedo bays one through six.’

Wolftide, in high orbit above Midgardia

‘Lord, all ships are reporting successful hits,’ said the vox huscarl. The bridge of Egil’s flagship was thick with the backdraught of weapons discharge and the stench of macrocannon propellant.

‘Have them cease fire,’ Egil said, eyes scanning the readouts of the bridge’s oculus viewscreens. ‘And check that link with the Rock. Tell me they’ve opened communications.’

‘Lord, scanners report incoming fire,’ shouted a frantic kaerl from the augur bay. ‘Lances and torpedoes!’

‘No change with the Rock,’ said the vox seneschal. ‘The channel remains closed.’

‘May the Deathwolf devour them all,’ Egil snapped. ‘Message to all ships, resume fire. And have all hands brace for impact.’

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

‘Lord, our Imperial Navy assets are returning fire,’ said the Augur Chief.

‘What?’ demanded Azrael. His voice carved through the hubbub of the Rock’s bridge. ‘Order them to cease at once. Mendaxis, link to me directly.’

‘Of course, sire,’ the Mendaxis-thing said, no longer even bothering to hide its grin from the dead-eyed serfs around it. It coupled the Supreme Grand Master’s throne vox cord to the broadcasting terminal, taking its time about it.

‘There appears to be a transmission fault, sire,’ it lied.

‘Secondary vox then,’ Azrael snapped to one of the communication sub-pits. ‘Link me!’

It was all the Changeling could do to stifle a laugh.

Wrath of Man, in high orbit above Midgardia

‘Sir, communication from the Rock!’ shrilled Lieutenant Renmann. ‘All ships are to cease fire immediately!’

Captain Krief looked up from the damage readout on his control lectern, peering through the organised chaos that dominated the Imperial Navy bridge.

‘Clarify,’ he ordered.

‘Order clarified,’ Renmann replied after a moment. ‘All ships cease fire!’

‘Have the Adeptus Astartes taken leave of their senses?’ First Lieutenant Oppen asked. His words were punctuated by another shuddering impact. Krief’s eyes darted back to the damage readout scrolling across his lectern’s monitor. The shields were on the brink of shorting out. Like the other half-dozen Navy vessels nearest to the Space Wolves fleet, his ship was now fully engaged. To break the firing cycle and power down or even stall the targeting sequences would guarantee defeat, should the Wolves maintain their fire. By the time they were fully operational again, the fearsome armaments at the Space Marines’ disposal would have already transformed them into a listing, burning wreck.

‘We are not subordinate to them, captain,’ Oppen pressed. ‘The Imperial Navy answers to none but—’

‘I’m aware of the hierarchy of the fleet, thank you, First Lieutenant,’ Krief snapped. ‘Now kindly return to your post. You too, Mister Renmann.’

Another strike rocked his ship. His soul groaned in counterpoint to the agony of the overburdened shields. He’d captained the *Wrath* for the past twenty-five years, Terra-standard. When the venerable Lunar-class cruiser suffered, he suffered, and its triumph was his own. To take her out of what was on the brink of becoming a life-and-death fistfight with what could surely now only be a band of renegades and traitors went against every Navy-given value ingrained in him.

But ignoring orders also went against his nature, and regardless of Oppen’s bombast, Krief was under no illusions as to the position he occupied within the crusade fleet. Oppen could answer to the Angels of Death if he wanted.

‘Message to gunnery,’ Krief said. ‘Ceasefire, effect immediate. And pray to Him on Terra that those warp-damned Wolves do the same.’

Wolftide, in high orbit above Midgardia

‘Lord, they’ve ceased fire.’ The huscarl’s voice was breathless. Egil’s flagship seemed to have gone quiet, still and silent like a weary predator, waiting to see if the killing was done.

Egil watched the bridge's blinking auspex displays and the oculus visuals, expecting them to flare red and furious once more with interstellar ordnance. He felt the deck beneath him shudder with release as *Wolftide*'s bombardment cannon fired again. The monitors, however, remained a sterile green.

'Lord,' said the vox huscarl. 'The Rock... is hailing us.'

'Order to all ships,' Egil said slowly. 'Ceasefire. And accept the link. Bridge speakers.'

The *Wolftide*'s command deck was overlaid with static as the vox horns came online. After a moment a voice, hard and cold as a basilica's keystone, broke through the interference.

'Do you want to die, Wolf?'

'Supreme Grand Master Azrael,' Egil said. 'I see you've finally found the transmit button on your vox set.'

'Choose your next words carefully. Why did you just open fire on an Imperial fleet?'

'Why did you just fire-bomb one of the Allfather's worlds?'

'I am not here to chase your tail, mongrel. You have two hours to withdraw your fleet from orbit and proceed to Fenris, where you shall await the Imperium's judgement for what you have done here.'

'The Imperium's judgement, or the Lion's?' Egil demanded. 'Withdraw your forces from this system within the next two hours, and we will discuss your actions from a less fatal distance.'

Egil was aware that they were mirroring each other. Near annihilation would be mutual. The Iron Wolf had opened fire not just because Conran and the murdered citizens of Midgardia had been crying out for vengeance, not just because the Lions had violated their sovereign territory, and not just because they had put the Great Wolf in danger. He had done it to buy time. He had no idea how large the crusade fleet was, or whether it had engaged other Great Companies elsewhere in the system. Until Azrael had said it, he didn't even know that Fenris hadn't suffered the same fate as Midgardia.

The Iron Wolf, logical as ever, had seen the Wolves under attack, and he had responded. Now that he had checked them, the time had come to discover who the real traitors were.

The Lions, or the Wolves.

Svellgard

From the grey heavens, the weight of the Imperium's wrath fell upon Svellgard.

First it was firepower. The precise strike of *Iron Requiem* had been nothing next to the weight of ordnance unleashed by the combined fleets in Frostheim's uppermost orbit. Lance strikes, melta torpedoes, augur-guided macrocannon shells – they ripped and shredded Svellgard's clouds and shook its islands to their bedrock.

The bombardment was centred on three different sectors, around the edges of the warp rift anomalies pinpointed by the fleet's scans. There the corruption was at its worst, the sucking, swirling oceans seething with nightmares of blubbery flesh and grasping tentacle-limbs. Cohorts of lesser daemons pushed their way through the morass of submerged warp-flesh, all massing in the direction of the World Wolf's Lair. Until the orbital barrage began to annihilate them, splitting apart the ocean waves and flinging great pillars of evaporated water skywards.

As the great guns of the Imperium's fleets continued to hammer Svellgard's deformed deeps, more contrails filled the air. The objects fell with almost as much force as the macroshells, but their payloads were considerably more deadly. They struck in clusters near two of the three portals, hammering the exposed seabed close to where the receding waters still lashed and foamed.

Drop pods. Their flanks fell, armoured figures deploying from their cramped interiors with experienced ease. To the north of the World Wolf's Lair, the blue battleplate of the Ultramarines, to the east, the black and silver of the Iron Hands.

Thunderhawks followed the drop pod assault down, leaden with armour support. Bolters flashed and barked as the Space Marines secured their landing zones, the concentrated firepower more than enough to banish the daemons dragging themselves from the surf towards them.

The world the Adeptus Astartes found themselves fighting in was a strange one. Even as the oceans retreated they left behind hundreds of choppy micro-oceans in the lower depths of what had once been the seabed. An advance route was planned out across uplands of craggy exposed bedrock, thick with dripping growths and writhing aquatic life.

Few of the growths of life were without the hideous stigmata of Chaos.

The Space Marines cleansed as they went, the Ultramarines with a Codex-approved combination of pre-planned advances and individual unit flexibility, the Iron Hands with remorseless implacability. All the while, the capital ships maintained their bombardment from above, hammering the things crawling up out of the rips in reality, searing away Svellgard's seas with fiery wrath.

The Space Wolves were the last to join the assault. Harald and Sven waited. When Epathus asked why, Harald claimed they were giving Bran Redmaw more time. In truth, they wanted to ensure the crusade fleet deployed its strength to attack the warp portals, and not the World Wolf's Lair. Only when heavy Astra Militarum troop shuttles had started to plough through the lower atmosphere did the Wolf Lords give the signal.

'I'll see you afterwards, Deathwolf,' Sven said, clasping his brother's vambrace.

'Enjoy yourself, pup,' Harald replied, returning the warrior's grip. 'For Russ and the Allfather.'

The Wolves went on the offensive. The weight of daemonic attackers around the Lair's shores had slackened considerably as the wyrdspawn turned to protect the rifts. Harald and Sven led their packs from the defence networks and bunker tunnels with vengeful howls, thundering out into the cloying wet sand. Only then did the Wolves' ships in orbit join the bombardment, hammering the wyrdlings around their objectives – the largest portal, south of the Lair.

The Astra Militarum were joining the attack against the other two. Valkyrie airborne assault carriers picked up the Harakoni Warhawk detachments defending the islands around the Lair and deposited them via short grav-chute drops onto the new front lines. The Ultramarines and Iron Hands found their gradually ever-more exposed flanks bolstered by platoons of airborne infantry in black combat fatigues and tan-coloured carapace flakplate, salvoes of semi-automatic lascarbine fire snapping out from the rugged shoals and dunes that had once been the seabed.

Heavier ground troops were landed behind the front, around the drop zones initially secured by the Angels of Death. To the north, the 443rd Adraxian Legion and the 15th Naimen Armoured, to the east, the 16th Kattak Grenadiers and the Sixth Virillion Steelborn. The Guardsmen followed in the wake of the Space Marines, burning and slaughtering remaining pockets of infestation with the application of massed, point-blank firepower.

Above them, the Imperial Navy added yet more weight to the fight. Thunderbolts and Lightnings screamed from the fire-scarred skies, peeling off from their squadrons one by one to strafe the never-ending hordes shuffling from the receding deeps. Higher up, wings of Marauder bombers rumbled, their payloads pockmarking the already-ragged landscape.

The Navy did not enjoy air superiority for long. The clouds soon played host to rippling shoals of blue and purple sky-screamers and flocks of black-fleshed

furies, as well as bigger, indefinable things with beating or buzzing pinions and darting talons. They latched themselves onto wings and fuselages, claws splitting open cockpits and hauling pilots, screaming, out into the air, to be devoured or thrown to their deaths. The fighters closed around their bombers in response, painting the sky with beams of las and thudding trails of autocannon rounds that bisected the daemonic flocks. The Adeptus Astartes joined the battle for Svellgard's skies as well, Thunderhawks and Stormtalons churning out bolter fire in support of the Navy formations.

Beneath, like reflections in a bloody river, the battle raged. Only in the south did the Wolves remain unsupported, fighting on with only the orbital strikes of their fleet to help clear the way. Sven led from the head of his Skyclaws, his face a rictus of ichor-splattered determination. Gone was the laughing warrior who thrilled at the roar of his chainsword and the crackling power of his frost axe. Gone was the young Wolf who staked a battle's success on the number of heads taken, and struggled to outdo the antics of his youngest, most savage pups. Now he killed in near silence, grunting with each powerful swing of Frostclaw, ignoring the ache of his split rib-plate or his useless left hand.

Olaf Blackstone fought at his side, lightning claws a blur of charged razor-steel, finishing anything his Wolf Lord didn't send screaming straight back to the immaterium. The Skyclaws pressed into the heart of the wyrdling legions, chainswords howling and flamers roaring, infected by the grim, killing fury of their jarl. The daemons parted before them.

'Not too far, pup,' Harald said over the vox. He was astride Icetooth once more, the huge thunderwolf slick with wyrdling gore, snapping and snarling through a clutch of wailing daemonettes. Around him the remainder of his Riders of Morkai had also mounted their Fenrisian war beasts, the savage fang at the tip of the attacking Deathwolves. The Firehowlers, however, were pulling ahead.

Sven didn't respond. He hit the turbo on Longleap, letting the jump pack slam him almost horizontally across the slime-slicked seabed. He struck a brace of horrors as they tried to summon their mutating flames to stop him, the things disintegrating beneath the impact of the power-armoured warrior. Frostclaw lashed out – a glittering, icy arc in the ichor-misted air – to reap more wyrdling un-lives. A moment later and Olaf was at his side once again, slamming down on his pack amidst the melee. Still the Firehowlers pressed on.

And around them, stronger than the rising tide, the daemons surged.

Terrek slammed his power fist into the snapping, living jaws of the skull

cannon's chassis, feeling the warp-forged steel buckle and split beneath his energy-wreathed gauntlet. The discharge of the disruptor field tore through the neverborn engine, blasting it apart in a blizzard of burning metal and shattered bone.

'Status,' the Iron Captain demanded as his squad pulled apart the screaming construct's remains.

'The machine-spirit is in pain, brother-captain,' came Morex's reply over the vox. *'I estimate the supplications will take five minutes more.'*

'You have them,' Terrek said, inputting the delay into his visor's combat matrix and switching to the Clan-wide channel.

'This is Terrek to all squads. Hold.'

The Iron Hands stopped as abruptly as deactivated servitors, before automatically taking up defensive positions along the exposed reef they found themselves straddling. Behind Terrek the Clan's Iron Father, Morex, was applying his cog glaive to the disabled tracks of Land Raider serial two-one-one-six-A, designate *Black Vengeance*. The blazing daemoniac skulls fired by the living cannon just destroyed by Terrek had dented the tank's adamantium hull and shattered the links of one of its heavy tracks. Bolters and lascannons still blasting, it had slewed to a ponderous halt atop the reef's crest.

'Captain, what of the humans?' Sergeant Baalor voxed. *'They are still attempting to advance.'*

'Let them,' Terrek said after a split second's analysis. 'If they make headway now they may be able to keep pace with us when we resume the advance.'

'Acknowledged, Clan Commander.'

Terrek could well imagine the frantic vox calls inundating the Guard officers, and their uncertainty over whether to halt alongside the silent, black-armoured automata, or whether to press on unsupported. Terrek would not permit them to halt. Pausing to maintain the integrity of his Clan's advance was imperative, but stalling the entire offence against the eastmost warp portal would be wasteful.

While he waited, the Iron Hand reviewed the progress of the other counter-attacks. The Ultramarines were lagging, too focussed on maintaining contact with their supporting units. Epathus' squads had interspersed themselves among the Militarum, bolstering the width of their thrust towards the northern portal whilst weakening the tip of the spear, centred around Epathus and his Sternguard. That was the difference between Guilliman's offspring and those of the Gorgon – the former always engaged with at least two objectives: to win, and to minimise the losses of their allies. The machine-minds of Iron Captains like

Terrek were unhindered by such dangerously indulgent concerns. Without victory, the lightest losses were damning. With it, any losses were acceptable.

The Wolves were doing no better. Though their progress towards the southern portal was impressive, the sigils blinking across Terrek's visor were without any form of coherence. The savages were launching a blind, all-out charge towards the largest of the three warp rifts, plunging through a veritable sea of neverborn. Even the most favourable analysis had them being cut off, surrounded and annihilated long before they reached their objective.

'*Praise the Machine.*' Morex's monotone exaltation interrupted Terrek's assessment. '*The iron is willing, brother-captain.*'

Terrek glanced back to see *Black Vengeance* rolling forwards once more, greasy smoke churning from its rear exhaust ports.

'All squads, resume,' Terrek voxed. Like a pict feed that had been unpaused, the Iron Hands rose and went forward once more.

*Ramilies-class star fort, designate **Mjalnar***

A world burning. Darkness.

Ragnar's eyes snapped open. There was a face above him, square-jawed, scarred, the eyes a stony grey-blue. The Wolf Lord's hand came up instinctively. It was intercepted by a fist of silver steel.

'Daemonhunter,' Ragnar said, snarling up at the Grey Knight kneeling over him. 'Where are my Wulfen?'

The Knight said nothing, but released his hand, and offered an open palm. Ragnar took it, and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet.

'Safe,' the Knight said. Ragnar gazed around, blinking. His packs were clustered around him – Blood Claws, Wulfen and the Blackpelts, watching their lord attentively. For the first time since boarding *Mjalnar* he realised his head was clear. The throbbing ache that had split his skull was gone.

As were the daemons.

'Where is Madox?' Ragnar demanded.

'Who?' the Grey Knight responded. Ragnar looked up at the control platform. The command deck was slashed with ichor and littered with Space Wolves dead, but of the Tzeentch wyrdlings there was no sign. The platform itself was deserted, the command throne empty, and only a livid scorch mark on the domed ceiling told of the former existence of the warp rift.

'What happened?' Ragnar asked.

‘When you stormed the platform you broke the daemon’s glamour,’ said the Grey Knight. ‘You fought and slew the Tzeentch Herald at the heart of the corruption. When you banished it the warp portal collapsed in on itself.’

‘I saw a vision,’ Ragnar said, staring up at the empty throne. ‘Someone I have not seen in a very long time.’

‘Lies and deceit,’ the Knight said. ‘Even more than his brothers, the Changer loves trickery and illusion.’

‘Madox said Midgardia is burning,’ Ragnar said. ‘I saw it. Fires set from orbit, eating up everything. He said a daemon is behind the Lion’s actions.’

The Grey Knight exchanged a glance with de Mornay. The inquisitor’s face was grim.

‘Regardless of the daemon’s trickery, we must press on to Midgardia,’ he said. ‘For all our sakes. Brother-Captain Stern, will you take passage on my vessel?’

‘Gladly, Lord Inquisitor,’ the Grey Knight said. ‘Once we have retrieved our two fallen brothers from *Star Drake*. Lord Blackmane may also wish to take custody of the Wulfen we’ve left locked in the brig.’

‘You truly mean my Murderpacks no harm?’ Ragnar asked, not bothering to mask his suspicion. The surrounding Wulfen watched with silent, rapt intensity, like children observing an Emperor’s Day ascension play.

‘There are more pressing matters at hand, Lord Blackmane,’ Stern said.

‘And when there aren’t?’

‘I cannot promise you won’t hear from me again.’

‘We can discuss such delicate matters en-route.’ De Mornay said. ‘*Mjälmar* is cleansed. I will set an Inquisitorial quarantine marker, and then we must be on our way. Before the situation in this system deteriorates even further.’

‘I fear it already has, witch hunter,’ Ragnar said, seeing again the fire-wreathed world the thing disguised as Madox had forced into his mind. ‘I fear it already has.’

Svellgard

The Wolves died.

They did so in ones and twos. They did it well, fighting their way towards the southernmost warp rift with gore-streaked weapons in their fists and oaths on their lips. But they died all the same. Swordlings matched Blood Claws blade for blade, power armour little defence against the wicked edges of their scalding black weapons. Purple-skinned daemonettes danced between the packs, ducking

and weaving with preternatural grace around the clumsy swings of chainswords before darting in to slide claws and slender knives through the weak joints between ceramite plates. Limping Tallybands of rancid Nurgle wyrdspawn soaked up the thunderous firepower of Grey Hunters and Long Fangs, shuffling onwards even as bolt-rounds burst their necrotised flesh apart.

A trio of juggernaut-mounted swordlings hammered over a reef outcrop, shattering the exposed, growth-covered bedrock before slamming into the ranks of the Nightwolves. The Grey Hunters went down, innards pulped by the colossal impact of warp-forged steel or gored on the spikes and wicked blades covering the monstrous daemon machines. To their left, a pack of red-skinned Khornate hounds clashed with Harald's Fenrisian wolves. Iron-hard jaws locked around the frilled throats of the flesh hounds, while the daemons' savage claws raked through tough grey pelts. Yelps, snarls and howls ripped apart the ragged air of Svellgard.

Above the swirling pack battle, a burning, spinning bladed disc shackled to two undulating sky-screamers tore through the Stormbringers as the Skyclaws were mid-leap, bisecting a trio of the young Wolves. Their jump packs detonated, the burning remains plummeting back down to the exposed seabed. Floating a foot above the disc's spinning, sigil-etched surface, a Herald of Tzeentch cackled and wove its long, charm-hung arms in an indecipherably complex pattern, spitting pink and blue wyrdfire indiscriminately into the fight below.

The Space Wolves offensive buckled, but it did not break. It fought back. The melta and plasma guns of the Nightwolves hummed and spat, searing molten holes in the plate armour of the juggernauts and vaporising their red-scaled riders. Harald led his shock cavalry back to support their packmates, Space Marines and wolf-brothers fighting side by side, the thunderwolves snatching up Khornate death hounds in their great maws and savaging them. Bloodhowl's Ravens, Sven's twin Land Speeders, swooped in behind the flying Tzeentch chariot, rune-etched hulls glowing in the after-burn of the unnatural flames that trailed behind its spinning form. Their multi-meltas found a target lock, and the strange sky chariot and its daemoniac rider detonated like an exploding firework, punching a glittering cascade of colours across the battle-wrought sky.

'Deathwolves, rally!' Harald shouted, turning Icetooth in a tight circle and swinging his ichor-splattered frost axe above his head. Beside him Vygarr Helmfang hefted high the Great Company's Wolf Standard, the Ravening Jaw rampant on its rippling field of red silk. The Deathwolves fought their way to their lord, bolters hammering, chainblades a frenzy of ripping, cutting teeth as

they sawed their way through the wyrdflesh tide.

‘Pup, bring your packs together,’ Harald growled over the vox. ‘We need to consolidate before we–’ the Wolf Lord was interrupted by a hammering discharge. Something slammed into Rudr the Black’s thunderwolf, Stonejaw, blasting it apart in a shower of bloody meat and burning fur. As the Rider of Morkai scrambled to find his feet amidst the steaming viscera of his mount, another projectile slammed low overhead, nearly cutting the Wolf Standard in half. Harald’s keen eyes caught a split-second impression of it – a brass-plated skull, jaw agape, trailing wyrdfire.

‘Skull cannons,’ the Wolf Lord barked, following the missile’s trajectory. Atop a spine-studded shoal a hundred yards ahead, a battery of daemonic artillery had ground up from the surf, the maws of their bone barrels flaring with bloody light. Another of the living guns fired, smashing apart a shaft of barnacle-encrusted rock just to Harald’s right.

‘Grolf,’ Harald voxed. ‘Bring those things down.’

‘*No, lord,*’ came the response from the Long Fang Ancient. ‘*We’re too hard-pressed.*’ Harald spotted his two heavy weapons packs, the Stormbrows and the Icefangs, off to the right fighting hand to hand with a clutch of gibbering, mutated spawn. Grolf’s snow bear cloak picked him out at the centre of the melee, the white pelt matted black with ichor.

‘Ynvir!’ Harald bellowed. The huge Wulfen was at the head of his Murderpack, dripping with wyrdling viscera as he ripped into a fresh cohort of horrors. At the sound of his lord’s voice he turned, his pack thrusting past him with savage hunger. Harald pointed Glacius’ dripping head at the battery of cannons as they fired again, shattering the air around him with burning, cackling skulls.

‘Silence those engines!’ Harald shouted.

Ynvir moved off immediately, his pack moving to protect him with the feral instincts of bonded hunters.

‘Vygar, Rudr, keep the company together,’ Harald ordered his two remaining Wolf Guard before urging Icetooth forward. The thunderwolf plunged through the combat, forcing its way to the Wulfen’s side as they ripped a path towards the skull cannon battery.

The hellish weapons fired again, their living, daemonic projectiles splitting apart a trio of Wulfen, splattering the rest of the Murderpack with their gore. Harald roared and swung Glacius again and again, cleaving apart the swordlings at the base of the shoal. Around him Wulfen fought and died, impaled on black hellswords even as they ripped open red, scaly flesh with claws and fangs. Ynvir

pushed the furthest, his frost claws a blur of primal fury. Again, with a shrieking discharge the cannons fired, and more Wolves died. Harald howled.

Then the shadows struck. They flickered from the darkness of what had once been an underwater cavern, bored into the shoal's flank. Silver steel flashed in the grey light, and the hissing swordlings manning the skull cannons died. The machines, sentient and savage, ground round on spiked wheels, maws snapping, but the shadows darted back out of reach. Melta bombs flared, and the daemon engines came apart, blasted to molten slag, the skulls embedded in them split and shattered.

The Wolves pressed forward. The swordlings around them shimmered and blinked like a faulty viewfeed, the dark will binding them to the material plane fading. As the Khornate cohort finally vanished Harald found the shadows at his side. He recognised them.

'Bloody work, Space Wolf,' said Scout Sergeant Arro. His camo cape, pulled close around him, was slick with steaming strings of gore, and his alabaster features were streaked red. Harald recalled the Shadow Hunter Scouts from outside Morkai's Keep.

'What are you doing here?' Harald demanded. Beneath him Icetooth growled, wary of the cloaked figures crouched around them.

'We were sent to track you,' Arro said. 'But Corax forgive me, I cannot stand by and watch brothers dying like that.'

'The Iron Hands sent you?'

'Crusade command sent us. But they don't understand the extent of the incursion here. Consider us at your disposal, for now.'

Harald grunted. Before he could respond, Sven's panting voice broke in over the link.

'Deathwolf. They're behind us. Soul Grinders. We need you.'

'Brothers,' Harald snarled. 'On me.'



WARHAMMER
40,000



LEGACY OF RUSS 8

**FATE
UNBOUND**

ROBBIE MACNIVEN

FATE UNBOUND

Robbie MacNiven

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

The bridge of the Rock was a scene of chaos, and the Changeling rejoiced. It had done its work well. Azrael was locked into a dead-end argument with Egil Iron Wolf, and his underlings were at his mercy. Or, more accurately, the mercy of the bridge's comms chief, Vox Seneschal Mendaxis.

The communications pits heaved with activity as vox serfs attempted to contact the crusade fleet, the channels overlaid with orders to cease fire and demands for clarification. The augur banks were still picking up the occasional lance strike as Navy captains continued to respond to the Space Wolves barrage, in defiance of the confused messages emanating from the Rock. Amidst the disorder the Changeling sent out codes that further distorted what was happening – little blurts of static that cut up vital messages, contradictory targeting data-speech, new heading requests.

Through it all he listened to the conversation crackling back and forth between Azrael and Egil Iron Wolf. Each was demanding that the other stand down, the Dark Angel ordering the Wolves to withdraw to Fenris, while the Wolf was ordering the crusade fleet to disengage and leave the system. Neither appeared to be listening to the other. The Changeling cut and chopped the link at opportune moments, fighting furiously not to burst into laughter.

Such games amused it. They were a distraction, it was true, but for now the thing wearing Vox Seneschal Mendaxis' flesh had nothing better to be doing. The plans were in motion, turning and changing within themselves. The actors necessary for the play to begin were on their way, but until they arrived the Changeling would have its idle fun. It sent fresh firing coordinates to a squadron of Navy Sword-class escorts, locking them onto their Wolf counterparts. A flurry

of clarification requests came back. Grinning, it ignored them and broke the data-link.

The air around the figure of Mendaxis shimmered for a moment, the blemish on reality visible only to those with attuned warp-sight. The Changeling shuddered in its false skin, feeling the swirling skeins of Fate around it constricting. Of the thousandfold paths laid out by its master, more and more were slipping away, the few that remained yawning like the maws of hungry parasites as they sought to latch onto the present and take their place as the future.

The air shuddered again. It was drawing nearer. On a distant world, a ritual the Changeling had first set in motion a century before was reaching its climax. The Rock was bound with powerful wards, but the Changeling had done its work well, breaking the necessary ones with the help of its master. The fortress-monastery was still a difficult place to be, the sacred seals long ago woven by the Lion's Librarians, making the daemon's borrowed flesh crawl, while the incense that filled the bridge's air caught in the back of its throat. The games were a pleasing distraction from such discomforts. Soon, however, its patience would be rewarded. Soon they would be here – the Silver Fool, the Young King, the Angel Hunter – and then the real games could begin.

Svellgard

Svellgard's oceans died, and its islands churned with battle. As the three Imperial strike forces forged towards the trio of warp rifts sucking away the moon's seas, only one faltered. The Wolves were alone.

Sven's jump pack carried him up onto one of the Soul Grinder's segmented, arachnid-like limbs. His auto-stabilisers whirled as he cut the pack's turbo, using its momentum to throw himself along the twisted warp-steel and up towards the daemon engine's cockpit. The metal there was bent and deformed with growths of pulsing purple skin, sprouting at the top into a mouth-like cannon. The war machine's fleshy upper arms snatched for him, one vast meat-fused mechanical claw carving overhead. Sven ducked the swing and then triggered Longbound again, bounding up onto the top of the machine's pulsing turret.

His boots dug into skin as he landed, the thing's pistons shrieking like tortured voices as it attempted to twist its bulk and throw him off. Face contorted with hatred, Sven began to hack at it with Frostclaw. He started with the maw cannon, the axe's ever-keen edge hewing through metal and the meat entwined around it. The engine emitted a machine roar, trying to reach him with its vast claws, but the Wolf made the angles impossible. He began to beat at the top of the turret

itself, hacking through thick folds of muscle and chitin growths to reach the corrupt metal beneath.

The rest of his Skyclaws were assaulting the Soul Grinder simultaneously, chainswords striking sparks from its mechanical limbs. One of the young Wolves was snatched up in its claws, his scream cut brutally short as the huge blades scissored shut, bisecting him. Sven hacked harder, a howl building in the back of his throat.

Below he was dimly aware of the arrival of the Deathwolves, Harald's ichor-soaked warriors pitching into the melee alongside his own. A second Soul Grinder took a Vindicator's demolisher shell to its turret, blowing out in a blizzard of twisted wreckage. Below Sven Frostclaw finally bit into metal, scarring the black steel. He swung again, with all his strength, fangs gritted. The frame shattered beneath him, and an ear-splitting shriek, like steel scraping along steel, rushed from the machine's wound. Sven smelled rotting meat and burning copper. He triggered Longbound.

The Soul Grinder stumbled and finally collapsed, its infernal bulk crushing a Skyclaw too slow to leap backwards. The air above the rent in the machine shimmered as the daemon possessing it escaped, vanishing back into the immaterium with one last piercing shriek.

Sven touched down beside the twitching wreckage, shaking and panting. The daemons had recoiled at the engine's death, massing their strength near the foot of the dune the Firehowlers were battling across. Harald pulled Icetooth to a stop beside the staring young Wolf Lord.

'We need to consolidate,' the Deathwolf said. 'Our losses have been too heavy.'

Sven said nothing, still staring into the distance, jump pack idling, streams of black gore slipping down his armour.

'Take up position on the brow of this dune,' Harald said. 'Let the Wulfen and the Claws hold them back long enough to reform the packs.'

'You yourself said we can't hold them,' Sven said. 'If we stop going forward, we die. All of us.'

'But we can buy time,' Harald said. 'And right now, no matter how hard you fight, pup, time is our only true hope.'

The Holmgang, in high orbit above Midgardia

The bridge of the *Holmgang* was hushed and tense. It was immediately apparent the moment vox contact was established with the ships above Midgardia that Ragnar's fleet was too late. Amidst the total breakdown in communications

discipline, one thing was made clear by the fleets anchored in high orbit – Midgardia was burning.

Ragnar said nothing. Madox's vision had been true – before him, beyond the crystalflex ports, the death world was smeared with great whorls of black ash, its once-purple surface now a barren grey shot through with the flickers of fires so vast they could be viewed from orbit. More flames flared nearer, in the void between the ships already clustered above the planet. The crusade fleet and the Wolves defending Midgardia had turned on each other. The realisation made the Young King sick to the pits of his stomachs. He had failed.

'Lord Egil Iron Wolf is hailing us from his flagship, *Wolftide*,' Ragnar's vox huscarl said quietly. He motioned for the Chapter-serf to accept the link, not taking his eyes off Midgardia.

'*Lord Blackmane, well met.*' Egil's voice came through choppy and distorted, the range still extreme for ship-to-ship uplink communication.

'Lord Iron Wolf,' Ragnar said. 'Tell me my eyes deceive me.'

'*They do not, Blackmane. The Lion has burned Midgardia.*'

'And now you burn the Lion?'

'*They must be stopped.*'

'And they will be,' Ragnar growled. 'I swear it to you. But this may not all be their doing. There is dark maleficarum at work here, Iron Wolf. I have seen it.'

'*I have no doubt, Blackmane. There are wyrdspawn everywhere.*'

'And closer than we may think. I have enlisted the help of the Grey Knights. They will put a stop to all this.'

'*You would trust the daemonhunters?*' Egil asked. '*What of our Wulfen? Recall that they sought us out on Absolom not so long ago in order to persecute us.*'

'Krom saved their lives above the Wolf Moon, and I fought alongside them on *Mjalnar* to purge the wyrd-taint that had taken root there. They have had the chance to condemn us, but they have not.'

'*Not yet. Perhaps they are not strong enough to right now.*'

'They could have joined the crusade fleet against us. They know more than just the Wulfen are at stake here.'

'*And how can they be of any help to us?*'

'They will lend weight to our cause when I enter the Lion's den,' said Ragnar. 'Even the Angels cannot ignore the sons of Titan.'

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

Azrael glared down at the holochart auspex from his command throne. For hours

the runes representing the crusade-fleet assets and those of the Wolves had remained largely static, overlaid with intermittent trajectory paths. Now, however, the Rock's augur ports, already busy trying to track the spluttering half-engagement playing out with the Iron Wolf's fleet, were blinking red with warning lights. New sigils were appearing within the chart's sphere, multiplying with each static-wash update. Another Space Wolves fleet was approaching combat-effective range. The initial scans said it belonged to the Great Company of Ragnar Blackmane.

Azrael knew the name. The impetuous young Wolf Lord had encountered the Unforgiven on a number of occasions in the past century. Few of those occasions had been positive in nature. Azrael had read the reports.

Nor was Ragnar's fleet alone. Azrael saw the sigil representing *Allsaint's Herald* blink into existence, and had to suppress a surge of rage. Of course de Mornay would return, with a pack of tamed hounds to do his bidding.

'The meddling fool has brought pups for his dirty work,' Asmodai hissed from beside Azrael's throne, reading his Chapter Master's thoughts.

'I should have known he would. It makes no difference. We shall break from orbit and make for Fenris. That should sharpen the minds of these animals.'

'Lord, we are being hailed by *Allsaint's Herald*,' said Vox Seneschal Mendaxis, cutting in. 'Shall I accept?'

'Negative,' Azrael said. 'We have no time for—'

'Greetings, Supreme Grand Master,' crackled de Mornay's voice before he could finish.

'Mendaxis, I said—'

'Before you break the link, you should be aware I have members of the *Ordo Malleus* Chamber Militant onboard this vessel. Just in case you were considering firing on us as well as the Wolves.'

'We are not the traitors here, de Mornay. You are the one parlaying with mutants.'

'Enough of your thunder, Azrael. Even you can't deny this situation has gotten far out of hand. You have lost control of your own fleet. Let us speak, face to face, and resolve all this before it degenerates any further.'

'I do not see how you can help. You will simply seek to further your own misguided agenda, as ever.'

'You will receive us aboard the Rock, Azrael. I have the power to declare you excommunicate traitoris, you and your whole Chapter. Don't believe I won't use my Inquisitorial edict.'

‘Your threats are as ridiculous as they are ill-conceived, de Mornay. But we have come to expect that.’

‘*Lord Azrael.*’ The voice on the other end of the vox was suddenly different – heavy and leaden with grim, restrained power.

‘Who is this?’

‘*I am Captain Arvann Stern of the Grey Knights Third Brotherhood. I am here on the business of my Chamber Militant. I would speak with you in person, Supreme Grand Master.*’

For the first time since entering the Fenris System, Azrael felt a flash of uncertainty.

‘You are accompanying de Mornay?’

‘*We are with the Lord Inquisitor, yes. He has our protection, naturally.*’

‘You may come aboard, but he may not.’

‘*If we are to resolve this situation without shedding the blood of any more of the Emperor’s servants, I strongly suggest he comes as well. As does a representative of the Wolves. This madness has gone on for long enough.*’

‘They will try to intimidate us,’ Asmodai muttered. ‘It is ever their way.’

‘*We will come alone,*’ Stern said. ‘*No retinues. We seek only to discuss what has happened here.*’

‘If there is any attempt to censure my Chapter—’

‘*There won’t be. The destruction wrought here has been the work of the Archenemy. Together we shall root out their taint and banish it back to where it belongs.*’

Azrael was silent, watching the markers blinking on the holochart below him, and the oculus viewscreens scattered across the bridge’s expanse. Even with Ragnar Blackmane’s arrival, the Wolves above Midgardia were still heavily outgunned by the crusade fleet. The Rock alone would have been a match for them. But the presence of the Grey Knights had pierced the fog of confusion and recrimination that seemed to be shrouding Midgardia’s orbit as thoroughly as the ash clouds now choking its atmosphere. Azrael could not deny that since unleashing the firestorm, matters had been spiralling out of control. The freefall had to be arrested, even if that meant having to court the Wolves and rebuff de Mornay’s latest misguided accusations in person. He keyed the transmission rune in his throne’s armrest.

‘I shall expect you within the hour,’ he said, and cut the link.

Below, the Mendaxis-thing smiled.

Svellgard

It was *Iron Requiem* that struck the killing blow. That, and the combined firepower of two Imperial Navy cruisers, *Reducto Ignis* and *Pride of Galthamor*. Guided by the venerable battle-barge's ancient locking beacons, the three capital ships speared Svellgard's eastern warp portal with a direct orbital bombardment.

Terrek's Clan Company contained the neverborn as the ships rained annihilation on the maw they were clawing up out of. The Iron Hands had formed a cordon of ceramite and steel, bolters thundering death at anything that crawled from the great, discoloured whirlpool that marked the portal's heart. Nor did they stand alone. The Astra Militarum, bloodied but unbowed after their struggle across the bared seabed in support of the Space Marines, added their fire to that of the Angels of Death, a blizzard of fizzing las-bolts finishing anything that managed to breach the curtain of hard rounds laid down by Terrek's automaton-like brethren. Imperial Knights were with them now too, half a dozen striding through the deeper surf, bright heraldry gleaming in the dying light. Their heavy weapons barked and roared, lacerating the daemonic cohorts with irresistible firepower before they could form to attack.

Despite the destruction, the barrage laid down by the ground attack forces was insignificant next to the power of their fleets. The spines and chitin fangs that thrust above the waves, marking the edge of the portal's maw, snapped and shattered. Svellgard's swirling ocean was thrown into further turmoil by each burning lance strike and each super-heavy munitions shell, the waters foaming and erupting in towering columns. The concussive boom and crash of the roiling sea utterly smothered the howling of daemons and the hammering of mortal weaponry. It did not quite, however, drown out the exultations which blared from vox casters, laud hailers and every human throat. The daemons shied away from the holy litanies as assuredly as they did the bolts and las.

Terrek monitored the portal's closing from atop the hull of *Dark Vengeance*, the mighty Land Raider rocking beneath the Iron Captain as it was hammered by surf thrown up by the continuing bombardment. It was perched on a battle-scarred reef jutting above the maelstrom churning through the rift maw. The Iron Hand's bionics scanned the waves, reading the energy output torturing Svellgard's deepest points. The neverborn did not have long, his calculations estimated. Even as he watched, those still flinging themselves on the sons of the Gorgon flickered, their material forms unravelling beneath the twin assaults of fire and faith. They attacked with a frenzied abandon only immortal nightmares could enjoy, but they were banished all the same.

The tactical readout put the Ultramarines on course to close the northern portal

within the next hour. The data from Epathus' assault was ultimately much the same as that transmitted by Terrek, only slight deviations in time and casualty ratios separating the twin strike forces. The same could not be said for the Wolves.

The Shadow Hunter Scouts had stopped reporting back half an hour earlier, but the auspex uplinked to the readout showed their attack had stalled completely. The two Great Companies had merged on top of what looked like an exposed coral dune, the green wolf's head runes on the display surrounded by a thick sea of blinking red contact markers. Estimated losses for the combined force stood at just under half, and the figure rose even as Terrek monitored it.

At the current rate of daemonic incursion, the Iron Captain gave them two more hours before they were completely overrun, give or take a twenty-minute margin of error. And that thought did not worry him in the slightest.

A hellsword punched through Sven's battleplate. The blow was like a spike of fire being driven into the Wolf's side. He grunted with the impact and the sudden rush of pain, his body flushing with painkiller stimms. The swordling tried to claw through his helmet's lenses with its other hand, shoving the blade deeper as it did.

Sven cut its head off. Black ichor fountained across the Wolf, and after a moment the thing flickered and vanished, sword and all. Sven bit back a moan as blood flowed from the wound in his side, battling to blank out the pain.

He was tired. His thoughts, still coloured with the arrogant exuberance of a young Firehowler, railed against the idea of admitting it, but it stood as a fact, incontrovertible despite his own *skjald*-worthy battle-lust. He had been fighting for days without rest or sustenance. His armour was scarred and in need of maintenance, the servos whirring and heaving, the auto-senses lagging fractionally. His body was no better; it was bruised, cut and bleeding, his hand still sprained and his rib-plate now split in two places. A swooping pack of furies had also managed to rake a wound through the seal of his right pauldron. His vital readouts told him the hellsword had just pierced his oolitic kidney. The wound was far from fatal – his genhanced biology was already rushing to clot and reknit the damage – but the sudden pain had brought home the reality Sven had been denying.

They were all going to die.

If Harald knew it he wasn't admitting it. The Deathwolf was marshalling the defence of the northern and eastern side of the coral shoal, directing the

ordnance of the Predators and a trio of Land Raiders at its base as they poured fire into the onrushing wyrdspawn. Sven's heavy armour did much the same on the opposing slopes, while the bloodied packs gathered themselves further up, checking bolt magazines and dragging thick chunks of daemonic viscera from their chainblades.

Sven counted the heads of the Skyclaw pack around him. Four of the youths still stood. Olaf, his brow a crusting mess where a daemonette's claw had caught him earlier, was his last standing Bloodguard. Kregga still lived, but had been almost gutted by a Khornate murder engine. He'd been dragged to the hill's crest where the Wolf Priests were seeing to the Wolves' wounded. The rune on Sven's visor representing his vital signs display pulsed weakly.

The Skyclaws were staring, and he realised abruptly that he'd been clutching the wound in his side, gauntlet slick with his own blood. He snarled at them, like a pack leader, and they averted their gazes.

'Not long now, pup,' Harald's voice crackled over the vox.

'Before the last of us vanish beneath this tide of filth?' Harald didn't respond. The air around Sven throbbed as a macrocannon shell from low orbit turned the seabed two hundred yards south into a roiling ball of flame. The Space Wolves ships had shifted their firepower from the southern portal to the wyrdlings flinging themselves at the stalled ground advance. Even their great weapons would not be enough. Time, the basis of Harald's desperate strategy, was running out.

Then Sven's short-range auspex display lit up, and finally everything changed.

Shuttle Forty-Eight Nine-B, in high orbit above Midgardia

The Rock made *Gormenjarl* and *Mjälmar* look like reclusiam outhouses set alongside a fully fledged Ministorum basilica. It completely filled the pict feeds of the *Herald's* shuttle, a craggy planetoid of black, crater-scarred stone studded with bristling spires. Defence turrets, communication uplinks, augur shafts and the yawning maws of spacedock ports were set alongside the crenelated structures that presumably housed the Dark Angels chapel-barracks, armoury cells and training towers.

A whole fleet could have rearmed and refitted safely within the Rock's bowels. The light of the Wolf's Eye reflected back from a thousand arched, stained crystalflex viewing ports and the barrels of a hundred super-heavy defence-system weapons. Light throbbed from the fortified planet shard too, idling in its vast plasma drives and warp engines, and flickering with actinic energy where its

ancient force shield shorted and sparked. Crowning it all was the Angelicasta, the Tower of Angels, a great bastion-pillar of dark, shattered stone and flying buttresses surrounded by a cluster of cathedral-sized ruins.

Looking upon the ancient spaceborne monolith, even Ragnar felt a pang of doubt. The fortress-monastery of the Dark Angels matched the Fang in its towering, seemingly indestructible bulk. It represented the original might of the First Legion, a throwback to mankind's sundering, the days of wrath and ruin when brother had fought brother and the fate of the galaxy had stood poised on a razor edge.

'Into the Lion's den,' the Wolf Lord muttered.

Neither Stern nor de Mornay answered. Both were watching the visual feeds alongside Ragnar, their faces grim. For the first time since Ragnar had met him, the inquisitor had welcomed them aboard his shuttle standing up, rather than slumped in his palanquin. He was clad in a suit of humming mark seventeen exo-plate, thick with vitae-support coils and strapped-on life pumps. His torso was shielded with reinforced layers of flak, while an energy-conversion pack plugged into his back plates powered the armoured leg callipers and limb braces that held him firm. Though the inquisitor was pale with the obvious strain placed upon his ageing body, he seemed to draw a grim pleasure from Ragnar's surprise when he saw him.

'Try to keep up, Wolf,' he'd said, patting the plasma pistol locked to his hip. Now, as they drew near the Rock, Ragnar noted the inquisitor's knuckles were white beneath the plasteel tendons of his exo-armour, his scarred body clearly charged with anticipation. Once again the Space Wolf wondered at the man's obsession with the Dark Angels. The relationship between the ordos and the Adeptus Astartes was often fraught, but de Mornay seemed to have dedicated his entire life to hounding the Lions. Ragnar wondered how much longer they'd permit him to chase them.

'We go to negotiate, not fight,' Stern said.

'They're often very similar, good captain,' the inquisitor replied. 'Both should be conducted from a position of strength. That's something you learn quickly once you join the ordos.'

The shuttle docked, sliding through a deactivated section of the force shield and into the waiting maw of one of the Rock's ports. Ragnar released his restraining harness as the landing probes brought the transport to a shuddering halt. The main hatch disengaged with a thud of clamps and a whine of hydraulics, venting gouts of steam. Beyond it the docking bay was scattered with dead-eyed haulage

servitors and scampering Chapter-serfs in discoloured white shifts. Gargoyle-headed vox speakers inset into the bare stone walls blared servicing orders and screeds of data updates.

A single Dark Angel waited for the three arrivals, the white cowl of his habit drawn up. He gave a short, stiff bow as they stepped out onto the bay.

‘Lords, my name is Sergeant Elija. If you will follow me.’ He turned without waiting for them, pacing off towards a grav lift. Ragnar glanced at Stern, but the Knight’s face was unreadable. They followed.

If the Fang was a tribal lair carved into Asaheim’s cold stone, then the Rock was an ancient cathedral long abandoned. Elija led them down echoing corridors thick with dust and through antechambers overlooked by the towering statues of hooded angels. The floor beneath was flagged with stones and the heavy brick walls bound with shafts of age-dulled plasteel, while the ceiling overhead was vaulted and choked with deep shadows. Burning, spiked braziers flickered at intervals down the corridor, their light seeming to deepen the foreboding gloom. The only signs of life – though it was a cruel jest to call it such – were the servo-skulls that occasionally hummed past, or observed them with blinking optics and empty sockets from brass charging ports set high on the corridor walls. Until they came to the bridge, they met no one.

Ragnar wondered whether the apparent desolation was just for show. He could feel the humming power of the charged asteroid vibrating through the surfaces around him, and distant booms and clunks occasionally shook pattering motes of dust down from the vaults overhead. He knew there were hundreds of Adeptus Astartes and tens of thousands of serfs above, below and around him. Either the Dark Angels wished to hide their strength, or unsettle their visitors.

And despite Ragnar’s burning dislike for the sons of the Lion, their efforts were not wholly in vain. An air of unutterable melancholy hung over the entire fortress-monastery, an ache of the heart that had gone on for far too long. For the first time, the Space Wolf felt something more akin to remorse rather than spite when he considered the Unforgiven. While the halls of the Fang echoed with exuberant boasts, *skjald*-songs and the sounds of feasting, the Rock lay in cold, sepulchral silence, alone in the void.

The silence at least was banished when they reached the primary bridge. The plainsong chants of course-chartists warring with the crackle of vox horns, the rattling of cogitators, the blaring of alarm systems and the whirl of augur pickups and oculus viewscreens, the scuffle of hurrying feet and the frantic murmur of situation reports finally gave evidence of activity. Elija led the trio through the

feverish workings of the vast, echoing command hub, Stern at the fore, de Mornay limping at the rear in his walking armour.

Their path led them to a great, hooded figure, overseeing the ceaseless work from a throne centred atop a dais that rose from the surrounding communications pits like some ancient ziggurat. Beside the throne stood a second figure, similarly clad in a white habit, the black battleplate and screaming-skull helm marking him out as one of the Dark Angels' Interrogator-Chaplains. Both figures surveyed Elija as he stopped beneath the dais and struck his gauntlet against his breastplate in salute.

'Welcome, Brother-Captain Stern,' said the figure on the throne. He rose and descended the stairs, servos humming. All the while he looked only at the Grey Knight, eyes dark and piercing beneath his cowl.

'Supreme Grand Master Azrael,' Stern said, nodding his head in a brief show of respect. 'My thanks for receiving us here.'

'You left me little choice, Grey Knight.'

'Choice is a luxury few of us possess.'

'That much is true.' The Dark Angel and his Chaplain reached the foot of the dais, facing the interlopers. Throughout the exchange they had pointedly ignored both Ragnar and de Mornay. The Wolf Lord felt his anger spike. He could sense the inquisitor beside him struggling to hold his tongue.

'My Master Interrogator-Chaplain, Brother Asmodai,' Azrael said, introducing the reaper-like figure beside him.

'Explain your presence here, daemonhunter,' Asmodai said, words slipping like serpent's venom from his black, cowl-shrouded helm.

'There is something wrong with this place,' Stern said. 'I felt it as soon as I stepped onboard.'

'Do not abuse my hospitality,' Azrael said. 'I have brought you here in good faith.'

'Then indulge me, lord.' Stern cast his hard gaze across the bridge. 'I have hunted the filth of the warp for as long as you have been Master of your Chapter. My kind are trained to root out taint, and my warp-sight knows when they are near.'

Ragnar noted that the holy etchings on the Grey Knight's silver aegis had started to glow dully.

'Recently there have been a... number of inexplicable incidents,' Azrael said slowly, as though unwilling to admit as much. 'One of our Scouts disappeared from the apothecarion, and a number of the Chapter-serfs have been acting

strangely. Even our Master Astropath is unsettled. My own vox seneschal has been—’

‘Where is he?’ Stern interrupted, hand dropping to the hilt of his force sword.

Azrael glanced at the primary communications pit and frowned. His gaze travelled up, and caught the back of Vox Seneschal Mendaxis, trailing data cables and readout scrolls as he walked brusquely towards the bridge’s open blast doors.

‘Mendaxis!’ Azrael barked. ‘Where do you think you’re going?’

Stern’s blade rasped from its scabbard, and the air was suddenly full of static charge. Mendaxis didn’t look back, but darted through the doors, far faster than any human being should have been able to move.

‘*Daemon,*’ Stern snarled.

Svellgard

Like the Wolf That Stalks Between Stars, the Redmaws fell from the void upon Svellgard. The vox thrilled with howls and snarls, and the words of Bran himself.

‘Hold firm, brothers. The Lost have returned.’

Drop pods struck the seabed to the south of what should have been the site of Sven and Harald’s last stand. Wulfen burst from them as soon as their flanks dropped, driven into a maddened frenzy by the confined spaces. Four Murderpacks ripped into the daemons north of the warp rift, their howls echoing up to their embattled brethren.

The rest of Bran Redmaw’s Great Company – those who had resisted the curse – followed. They fought their way from their pods with savage efficiency, bolters hammering the knots of daemons not already broken apart by their sudden, brutal arrival. Thunderhawks sped low overhead, raking the lesser daemons with more bolter fire, their forward cannons blasting apart the larger engines and writhing spawn. Within minutes the drop zone was secure.

Sven and Harald had no need to confer, either with Bran or each other. Together they ordered their bloodied packs forward, fuelled by the wild strength of warriors who had learned their immediate deaths were not yet inevitable. They led from the front, trying to outpace each other, frost axes an icy blur in the cold, ichor-saturated air. Darkness was falling, and the last gleam of the Wolf’s Eye touched upon the tarnished armour of the three Great Companies as they came together near the rift’s swirling, churning edge.

The killing did not end there. The daemons flung themselves at the Wolves with

even greater fury than before, heedless of their fate, desperate to rip flesh and shed blood before they were thrown from the material universe. But they found their fury outmatched. Bran's Wulfen – almost half his Great Company – were savage even for their cursed kind. They fought on despite the gravest of wounds, seemingly sustained by the purity of their hatred. The legions of the Dark Gods could not stand before them.

As the circle finally tightened around the last rift, the ships of the Wolves' three fleets combined their armaments, raining fire down into the hellmaw. Together Sven, Harald and Bran hurled the wyrdspawn back into their watery abyss, while the colossal tear of weeping flesh and bone that had burrowed from the darkest dimension into Svellgard's reality was unmade by orbital annihilation. On the Wolves fought, killing now on instinct, exhaustion driving out conscious thought and leaving room only for the swing of blade and the slash of claws.

And then, suddenly, Sven found no more wyrdflesh for Frostclaw's slick edge. He spun, snarling, expecting to be struck from behind, fearing some fresh maleficarum.

Instead he realised he was staring back at the remains of his pack – ragged, panting, bloody in twilight's last light. The anger and the hatred that had sustained him was suddenly gone, and he fell to his knees amid the surf, head bowed.

It was over.

And yet, in truth, it had barely begun.

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

The Changeling laughed freely as it fled. It darted down the bridge's main access corridor and then right, through a sub-shaft, the doors sliding open with a flick of the Mendaxis-thing's hand. Around it Chapter-serfs scrambled to get out of the way, wide-eyed with shock.

Throughout the Rock, warning claxons began to wail. The vox piece still fitted to the Mendaxis-thing's ear was alive with frantic chatter. Through it all, the furious voice of Azrael boomed.

'Stop that thing!'

The Changeling managed to control its mirth long enough to spit a string of arcane syllables, grotesquely distorting the Mendaxis-thing's mouth in order to utter the unnatural words. The vox-link clicked and went silent, the channel killed as assuredly as if the transmission stud had been flicked. The daemonic entity bound to the scrapcode virus the Changeling had uploaded from the

primary communications pit had awoken. It would take weeks of machine-psalms and recoding before it was banished and the Rock's internal communications systems were functioning again.

The giggling daemon vaulted down a plasteel stairwell and knocked a serf out of the way. At the daemon's touch the man screamed and convulsed, flesh breaking out into hideous, bloody growths. The Changeling didn't even notice, barging through one door and then down another flight. Around it reality was a blur, a haze of multiple possibilities overlaying and interlocking with each other. Its goal lay down, deep down, amidst the stygian darkness of the Rock's forbidden crypts and vaults.

Soon the distant ritual would be complete, and its master's plan one step closer to glorious, irresistible, ever-changing fruition.

They found Mendaxis in a long-disused venting shaft for a reserve thermal coil. His neck had been snapped and he'd been stripped naked, his wizened body hung upside down from a coolant pipe and carved bloody with dark sigils. The corpse was weeks old.

Interrogator-Chaplain Elezar was there too. He'd been struck so hard that his skull helm had fractured. He still lived, but his sus-an membrane had forced his body into a regenerative coma, and he was immobile. Azrael snapped orders at a train of anxious Chapter-serfs to have him taken to the apothecarion. The hunt resumed.

'This way,' Stern said. He pounded down a flight of stairs, ceramite ringing off steel, the air heavy with the static charge of his force blade's disruptor field. Azrael and Ragnar were right behind him. The Wolf Lord had *Frostfang* out, its rotor idling throatily, while Azrael had drawn the Sword of Secrets, the power weapon's ancient obsidian blade crackling with its own energy field.

Asmodai and de Mornay followed, the inquisitor in front, struggling in his whirring battle-suit. Having the Master Interrogator-Chaplain stalking directly behind him set the inquisitor's whole body on edge, and with every step a part of him expected to feel the Dark Angel's ignited crozius arcanum slam into his back.

Below, Stern pushed deeper, through another set of blast doors that, until recently, had been firmly warded and sealed. There were few warp entities capable of penetrating the psychic defences of a fortress-monastery as ancient as the Rock, and even fewer capable of surviving there for any length of time. Whatever the thing was, it had left behind a trail. Its passing would have been

invisible to untuned mortals; Stern, however, had the witch sight.

A cloud of spores, glowing with a luminous, sickening light, hung in the air before the Grey Knight, marking the corrupting influence of Chaos. Azrael had commanded his Librarians to attend him, but the whole of the Rock's hardwired vox-network had unexpectedly shut down, undoubtedly evidence of further daemonic tampering. The corridors of the Rock would need to be thoroughly cleansed once the threat had been removed, but until then the passing taint was the only way of tracking the daemon.

That, and the scattering of hideously mutated, mewling bodies it left in its wake. Ragnar killed each deformed horror with a swift thrust of *Frostfang*, while Stern and Azrael pressed on. They could hear the thing's laughter echoing up from the levels below, mocking and childlike.

'It's headed for the vaults,' Azrael said. 'We can't let it reach them.'

'What is it trying to achieve?' de Mornay called after him.

'Let's stop it before we find out.'

'Lower your blocking shield, Supreme Grand Master,' Stern said. 'Allow my brethren to teleport aboard. We could cut it off.'

'No. We will find this trickster eventually, with or without your help.'

The trail led them through the Rock's gloomy structures, out into a processional way lined with graven statues of hooded, skeletal angels. The great force shield crackled and spat lightning overhead. At the far end of the way vault doors loomed, just one of a number of entrances leading deeper into the fortress-monastery's hidden depths. The doors themselves were carved in the likeness of more angels, features hidden by their cowls, broken swords in their fleshless fists. Two Deathwing Terminators, looking for all the world like two more towering, bone-carved statues in their off-white Tactical Dreadnought armour, stood either side of the heavy doors. They raised their storm bolters as the party approached.

'Lower your weapons,' Azrael snapped. The Terminators hesitated before doing so.

'Lord, you... only just passed this way,' said one of the hulking Deathwing.

'We have been compromised,' Azrael replied. 'There is a shapeshifting warp entity on the loose. He could be any one of us. No one is to enter or leave here alone, is that clear? Only when there is more than one of us. Even if the Lion himself demands passage, you are to halt him.'

'Yes, lord.' The Terminator's red lenses swung across Ragnar, Stern and de Mornay, lingering on the inquisitor. 'And what of these three?'

‘They are with me,’ Azrael said. ‘For now.’ The Dark Angel pulled his cowl back, stepping up to the door’s retinal scanner. It blinked, and there was a gentle hiss as the great Angel-crafted slabs of adamantium rolled smoothly back.

Beyond, darkness. It took a second for even Ragnar’s advanced senses to adjust. Below, a stone stairway led to a second set of great doors, similarly inscribed with the Chapter’s *angelica mortis* heraldry.

Azrael hesitated at the top of the stairs, a hand snatching Stern’s pauldron before he could descend. He looked back at Stern, Ragnar and de Mornay, his dark eyes holding each gaze in turn.

‘Down here, you must stay by my side at all times. There are places you cannot go.’

‘Wherever the warpspawn are found, there shall I smite them,’ Stern said, reciting one of his Ordo Malleus canticles. Azrael said nothing, but removed his hand. Asmodai leaned in close to de Mornay, words hissing from the shadows of his cowl.

‘I’ll be right behind you, inquisitor.’

Into the darkness they went.

Soon.

The realisation thrilled the Changeling. To an immortal such as it, time was everything and nothing – the warp made it eddy and shift in inconceivable patterns. And to the Changeling, the past century of painstaking preparation had felt like an aeon.

It slid through another ward gate, its muttered incantations burning away the hexagrammic seals. It no longer laughed. Matters had become serious. The games were over. Fate, the very essence of the future, was writhing about it like a great, slippery sea creature. It had to snatch onto it, grasp it, latch its yawning maw to the present, so that its silver tail became the future, stretching out into infinity.

It was deep down now, so close to the core of the Rock that even the throb of the mobile fortress-monastery’s engines was a distant, tiny tremor, fainter than the last beat of a dying man’s heart. The air around it shivered, as though the musty, ancient place found its presence repellent.

It was directly below the Tower of Angels. It passed through mouldering, lightless crypts and ancient armouries, the blades and battleplate thick with cobwebs. Even the Angels dared not tread here, bound up in their own superstitions. The Changeling could sense the revulsion Azrael felt as he

accompanied a trio of outsiders into the most sacred depths of his home, twinned with his fear. He knew exactly what the daemon's intentions were.

A cavernous, bare rock tunnel took the daemon back up a level, out of the Angelicasta's depths. The sweet, slow-burning taste of lingering pain and despair lured it on, filling its warp-flesh with vigour. It would be their salvation. And through them, it would take despair from these few, and give it to the many.

A cluster of dungeon vaults lay ahead, just some of those that pierced the Rock's cold heart. The green ceramite and white cloth that encased the Changeling were serving it well. None dared doubt the veracity of the Supreme Grand Master himself.

More guards fooled. With the entire vox-network disabled it was impossible for Azrael to get news of the imposter to travel ahead of the daemon itself. By the time they realised their mistake, it was already outside the first reinforced hatch. Outside the very first of the cells holding the Fallen. The dungeon's anteroom was circular, two-dozen heavy, barred doors each leading off to an individual holding block. Each one was flanked by graven statues, their broken swords inscribed with active warding runes. To the Changeling's warp-sight, the very stonework bled despair, agony and regret, the tendrils of emotion a delicious aroma to the hungry daemon. Its borrowed hand reached for the gene-lock of the first hatch.

Where it stopped. A shudder – a rare sensation – ran down the Changeling's borrowed spine, the shadow of an instinctive reaction born from its time wearing mortal flesh. Skin prickled and the servos in the illusion of its power armour whirred as its fists clenched. Around it, for the first time since it had set events in motion, Fate buckled.

There was something at the far end of the cell corridor. The Changeling could not so much see it as sense the absence of the aether around it. To the daemon's warp-sight, the thing was really an un-thing, a black void without tangible thoughts or emotions to define it.

The daemon tried to look upon the un-thing with Azrael's flesh-eyes. It was diminutive in size, its form hidden beneath the thick folds of a bone-coloured cloak, as though in imitation of the Lion's sons. The shadows beneath its deep cowl were utterly impenetrable, as dark to mortal eyes as its soul-presence was to the Changeling's warp vision.

It did not move. It did not have to. The Changeling found itself taking a step back, the daemon's flesh quivering. Fear was something the Changeling could not feel, only feed upon, but the sight of the un-thing watching him from the

shadows caused the daemon an indefinable, icy discomfort.

The Changeling could not stay here. It could go no further. This part of the wider plan was unnecessary anyway, a mere addendum to the ritual that would carry the daemonic trickster away, and drag the Lions with it. The Changeling doubled back the way it had come, the cells untouched. Fate's weave morphed, the future a newborn, fresh entity.

Behind it, the Watcher in the Dark remained silent and unmoving. It was still there, unseen, when back within the Angelicasta's depths the Lion, the Wolf, Knight and Angel Hunter finally caught the Changeling at bay.

Svellgard

The madness was gone. The skies above Svellgard no longer blazed with firepower, and the ocean's remains lapped at their new shores, tides calm once again. The great tracts of barren, exposed former seabed steamed in the evening light while the tundra of the islands – now hilltops – gleamed coldly.

'Well met, Redmaw,' Harald said. His fellow Wolf Lord nodded, face and forearms streaked with wyrdling ichor.

'Likewise, Deathwolf. It is good to finally bloody the Murderpacks.'

'The curse has struck you hard, brother.' No comment had been made of Bran's savage appearance. The Wolf Lord merely nodded, looking out over his packs. They still prowled with hungry intent around the crags and shoals of Svellgard's former seabed, their wyrd-hate unsated.

'It was a long voyage here, Deathwolf,' Bran said eventually. 'I am just thankful we made it at all.'

'Our companies owe you life debts,' Harald said, glancing over to where Sven was pulling himself back onto his feet with the assistance of his Bloodguard, Olaf. The vox in Harald's ear clicked.

'*It's Arro,*' said the Shadow Haunter. Last the Wolf Lord had seen of the sinister descendant of Corax, he and his sole remaining Initiate had been battling alongside Feingar and his Coldeyes Wolf Scouts. '*The crusade forces have been ordered to evacuate the surface immediately. You may wish to do the same. I suspect another bombardment is imminent.*'

'They wouldn't dare,' Harald said, fighting to keep the weariness from his voice. 'After all this, they couldn't now strike us from orbit.'

'*I cannot claim to know their minds, Wolf Lord. But your Chapter are the executioners of old. Tell me, if you were loosed upon mutants, would you stop anywhere short of total annihilation?*'

The Rock, in high orbit above Midgardia

‘Brothers,’ said the Stern-thing.

‘Daemon,’ Stern replied, raising his force sword. Ragnar, Azrael, Asmodai and de Mornay came up short behind the Grey Knight, staring at his twin, a perfect reflection dominating the far end of the corridor.

The Stern-thing’s face twisted with a wild grin, an expression that looked utterly unnatural on the Knight’s graven features. Ragnar activated *Frostfang* at the same time that Azrael and Asmodai brought up their own blades.

‘Stay back,’ Stern said, pacing towards the waiting daemon. ‘There isn’t room enough for all of us.’

As much as it pained him, Ragnar saw the daemonhunter was right. The corridor was a narrow one, the paladin’s silver pauldrons almost scraping its stone walls. The grin on the opposing Stern-thing’s face remained fixed.

‘I was beginning to wonder if you would ever catch me, brothers. It was getting lonely down here, amidst the—’

Stern struck. If any of them had expected the daemon’s trickery to unravel, they were to be disappointed. The Stern-thing met the real Grey Knight blade for blade, and both weapons flared with equal force, bolts of lightning arcing and snapping at the surrounding walls. The two warriors drew back as one, the movements perfectly mirrored. The daemon’s mimicry was sickeningly accurate.

‘Begone, foul warpspawn!’ the Stern-thing bellowed, abandoning its grin in favour of a theatrically grim expression. ‘Back to the black pit from whence you crawled!’

‘I have not come here to be mocked,’ Stern snarled, and slashed. Again the blades clashed.

‘Speak not unto the daemon,’ the Stern-thing said, all fake earnestness as the two parted once again. Ragnar was thankful the narrowness of the corridor prevented them from circling one another. He doubted he’d have been able to keep track of the true Stern.

And then, the thing changed. There was a blaze of light, diffracted and kaleidoscopic. Ragnar snarled and averted his eyes. When he looked again, Madox glared back at him over Stern’s shoulder, baroque armour gleaming in the glow of the lumen orbs.

‘Everything I told you was true, Wolf,’ the Thousand Sons sorcerer said, voice dripping with disdain. ‘Why didn’t you listen? You could have saved Midgardia. You could have saved your Great Wolf. And now he’s gone. *Logan Grimnar is*

dead.'

Ragnar took a pace towards the daemon, fangs bared. Azrael snatched him by the shoulder.

'Rein in your savagery, Wolf. It's trying to trick us.'

'Is it, Lion?'

This time the voice was as cold and cutting as serrated steel. The corridor was abruptly plunged into darkness, the actinic lightning of Stern's, Azrael's and Asmodai's weapons the only illumination. When the dull lumen orbs flickered on a second later, the thing had changed once again.

Now it was clothed in a manner not dissimilar to the Dark Angels, white robes hanging over ancient, black power armour. The thing's hood threw its features into deep shadow. An ornate, heavy-looking blade hung from a scabbard, draped from chains behind twin pistol holsters.

'I am here to make you answer for your crimes, Keeper of the False Truth,' the figure said. 'I am here to make you repent. In the name of the Lion—'

Azrael's roar drowned out the daemon's words. The Master of the Unforgiven thrust violently past Stern, obsidian blade lunging for the hooded figure. It darted back, the crackling light of Azrael's sword illuminating a vicious grin beneath the cowl.

'Stop!' Stern bellowed. 'You don't know what you're dealing with!'

Ragnar felt his hairs prick as the Grey Knight thrust a fragment of his will into the command, charging it with psychic energy. Azrael shuddered to a halt, face contorted with fury. Stern pushed him aside.

'I know what you are,' the Grey Knight said, addressing the daemon. 'Even in the realms of the warp it would be impossible for anything else to do what you have done here, Changeling.'

'Don't be so sure, corpse-worshipper,' the hooded Space Marine said. Then, still grinning, he exploded. Bloody meat and shards of ceramite scythed towards Stern, Azrael and Ragnar, evaporating as the illusion came undone. Something unfurled itself from the space where the Adeptus Astartes had been, spreading feathered pinions, its beaked head stooped against the corridor's low arches. It screeched, the sound piercing Ragnar's ears and shaking the rock around him. For a moment even Stern stood transfixed, staring up at the crouching, blue-feathered Lord of Change.

'M'Kachen,' the Grey Knight breathed.

+Who else?+ The greater daemon's words thrust directly into their minds, accompanied by a peal of mocking, avian laughter.

‘No,’ Stern said through gritted teeth. ‘Your lies are at an end, Changeling.’

‘We are buried in lies here,’ the daemon taunted. ‘They’re all around us.’

It made a series of arcane gestures with its claws. There was an ear-splitting crack, and a sudden fissure appeared in the stonework to the right of the greater daemon. Sickly, diffracted light blazed from it, followed by a phantom gale that tugged at the habits and cowls of the Dark Angels. The M’Kachen-thing croaked a series of unutterable syllables and the cracks split wider, bursting apart in a hail of shattered stone. The portal blazed with eldritch energy, the howling of a realm of pure madness grating from the jagged, broken stone like a million razor blades.

Horrors bounded from the infernal light. The dank air filled with their mad gibbering, and warpfire sparked and ignited in the corridor around them.

‘Stop them,’ Stern shouted. ‘I will banish the trickster.’

Asmodai struck first, roused to righteous wrath by the presence of warp filth in the Rock’s most sacred depths. The ghost-wind snapped at his white-and-green habit, making it billow around his black armoured form. He swung his crozius arcanum in a crackling arc, the wings of the holy weapon wreathed in white energy. Daemons disintegrated before him, their unnatural flames breaking and spluttering harmlessly around the Interrogator-Chaplain. The rosarius hanging from an adamantium chain around his neck, crafted in the likeness of the hooded Angel of Protection, blazed with golden energy as it shielded him from the dark warp magics.

Ragnar and then de Mornay fought to join him, pressed against the corridor wall. The Wolf Lord carved through one pink horror after another, *Frostfang* reducing them to writhing ectoplasmic blobs. Even as he killed them their swirling remains reformed into smaller blue horrors, sneering and snapping at him as they tried to claw through his power armour.

De Mornay fired his plasma pistol into the twisted mass coming from the portal at point-blank range, a prayer on his lips. The incandescent bolts of blue energy vaporised the leading clutch of daemons, but still they came. Soon the pistol was burning in the grip of the inquisitor’s exo-gauntlet, steam venting from the carbon-adamant ventilation casing and the magnetic accelerator coils ribbing its spine glowing blue with overuse.

Down the corridor, Azrael and Stern fought the Changeling. It was a blur, toying with reality as it battled the two Space Marines, the borrowed flesh of the greater daemon seeming to shift and twitch like a faulty viewfeed as it phased away from its attackers. The Angel and the Knight rained blows on it, their

weapons wreathed with power, but the daemon matched each and every one with a long silver staff. A riposte dented Stern's pauldron and scarred Azrael's breastplate, ripping his habit.

The thing was fast. Azrael recklessly lunged into its guard, the black obsidian of the Heavenfall Blade punching like a lance towards the thing's shifting core. It moved again, but this time too slow to properly avoid the sudden strike. The Sword of Secrets caught the Changeling in the flank, the ancient weapon searing through feathers and flesh alike. The M'Kachen-thing let out a screech and snatched at the Supreme Grand Master. Left exposed by the lunge, he found his arm gripped in the greater daemon's avian claws. It twisted viciously, and there was an audible snap before it flung the Dark Angel bodily back against the chamber's far wall.

Stern thrust forward, force sword blazing with white light. The winged greater daemon parried the blow with its staff, deceptively spindly arms bolstered by the strength of the warp. Stern locked in place, servos groaning as the two strained.

Azrael found his feet. He took the Sword of Secrets in his left arm, his right broken by the daemon's claws. As Stern pinned the creature's guard the Dark Angel seized the opportunity to lunge in beneath the Grey Knight's raised weapon, but his thrust never connected with the daemon's lower limbs. It spat a string of twisting syllables, and the Dark Angel was forced to his knees by a sudden flood of pain. His secondary heart kicking in with a jolt, he snarled with agony as he tried to force his burning limbs to obey his commands. The Sword of Secrets slipped from his grasp, the obsidian blade clattering and shorting as it struck the dusty stone floor.

Ragnar saw the Supreme Grand Master battling to rise and Stern held in place. He dragged himself free from the press of horrors, gouging a path through their flailing bodies. Asmodai fought on, feet planted before the portal, the Angel of Vengeance that tipped his crozius arcanum dealing death from its deadly wingtips with each stroke. The press of daemons had forced de Mornay up against the wall, his overheated pistol abandoned, servos straining as he sought to grapple with two horrors forcing themselves upon him with their snapping, drooling maws.

'I abjure thee,' Stern was snarling, wreathed in white fire as he pitted his psychic strength against that of the Changeling. 'I banish thee. I cast thee out of His Holy Realm.'

The daemon echoed his words with its own dark litany, the titanic energies building between them threatening to shake apart the whole tunnel. Azrael

managed to force his way back onto his feet once more, teeth gritted against the pain suffusing his body. He clutched the Sword of Secrets in one shaking gauntlet.

Ragnar smashed apart the last horror between him and the Changeling. Stern was still pinning its staff with his own blade. He saw his opening. A prayer to Russ on his lips, the Young King swung *Frostfang* for one of the daemon's straining limbs.

The ancient chainsword bit true. The daemon's shriek matched the weapon's roar as it juddered through warp-woven feathers and flesh. Light blazed once again. The phantom wind redoubled in strength, accompanied by the crash of more splitting rock. His auto-stabilisers activated as he fought to stay upright, a gauntlet going up to shield his eyes.

Through the blaze he saw silhouettes. Stern was standing tall, his sword held high. The greater daemon was gone, replaced by a hunched, multi-limbed figure. Behind it reality had further come apart, the stone of the tunnel wall now disintegrating into nothingness. Beyond it Ragnar caught an impression of tall, broken turrets and snapping pennants. The view seemed to plummet, morphing and changing into a bare stone chamber occupied by armoured figures – unmistakably Adeptus Astartes. They stood waiting on the other side of the rift, their features indiscernible in the blazing light that ringed it.

The lesser daemons howled and shrieked. The invisible wind ripped at them, tearing their coruscating flesh away in great globules, sucking them back into the portal that had birthed them. De Mornay managed to tear himself from them as they were whipped away into oblivion. Asmodai crushed the morphing skull of one more with his fist before it was dragged back into the immaterium.

The figure stepped through after its disintegrating minions, as though struggling in a gale. The portal shimmered. Ragnar managed to take a pace towards it, his howl torn away by the wyrdwind. Stern was at his side, the daemonhunter still bellowing his sacred oaths. Azrael managed to reach out too. The Sword of Secrets lunged, almost piercing the veil of reality as the hunched creature slipped away.

And then it was over. Like wakefulness asserting itself after a vivid dream, both the light and the gale vanished. The momentum of the Space Marines carried them forward, but rather than plunge through the rift and into the mysterious chamber, their gauntlets struck scorched stone. The warp portals were gone, the only evidence of their existence the burn markings on the tunnel wall. And the faintest sound of giggling laughter, echoing away into nothingness.

Stern slumped against the wall, even his prodigious mental strength spent. Azrael grimaced, extending his broken arm until bones cracked and snapped back into alignment.

‘I was blind,’ the Dark Angel said bitterly as the stimms kicked in, as though speaking to the Rock itself. ‘I was fixed so firmly on Fenris I could not see the snares set about my feet.’

‘About our feet,’ Ragnar said, gazing at the burn marks on the wall. ‘We have all suffered from this wyrdspawn’s trickery.’

‘It will pay,’ Azrael said. ‘For such mockery, I will hunt it to the edges of realspace and beyond.’

‘Before you do that, I think we would all benefit if you withdrew your ships from here,’ de Mornay said. The inquisitor was shaking and pale with pain and exhaustion, only held upright by the scarred frame of his armour. ‘There has been enough misplaced bloodshed already.’

Azrael looked at the inquisitor and then at Ragnar, his dark eyes holding the Wolf’s bestial gaze.

‘The Imperium will not allow you to harbour mutants. If we do not call you to task, another will. Then our actions here may seem lenient.’

‘There are proper channels,’ said Stern, sheathing his force sword. ‘A conclave of the ordos should be called and the matter debated openly. I have witnessed the wolf-beasts with my own eyes. Without them, this system would have fallen to daemonic infestation. I can find no trace of warp taint upon them, only grievous genetic anomalies.’

‘I agree,’ said de Mornay. ‘As terrible as they seem, I would be dead without them. They must be judged openly, and with due process.’

Azrael was silent for a moment more. When he spoke again it was with brusque finality.

‘The crusade fleet will withdraw to the system’s edge while the situation is assessed. I will have my Librarians scour this place. If they can pick up the daemon’s spoor, they may be able to track it to wherever it went. I believe it is still within the material plane. We cannot permit its continued existence, and I won’t allow its acts here to go unpunished.’

‘It will lead you on a pointless dance of destruction,’ Stern warned. ‘It is known in our grimoires as one of the most devious of all the Trickster God’s servants.’

‘All the more reason to destroy it,’ Azrael said. ‘Until we can, though, and until the time is right to sit in judgement, I shall order my fleet assets to disengage from Fenris.’

Iron Requiem, in low orbit above Svellgard

The dark bridge of the Iron Hands battle-barge hummed with power, the atmosphere crackling with pent-up energy. The lance batteries were almost fully charged.

Terrek watched the Space Wolves on the moon below, picking out their positional markers with the machine-mind of his hardwired auto-senses. He sat once again in *Iron Requiem's* command throne, linked directly to the ancient warship, his cold steel body inert as his thoughts communed with *Requiem's* spirit. It was tired but exhilarated, the air of the bridge heavy with the smell of discharge and las after-burn, the battle-barge's great guns still glowing hot in their open ports. It had been a righteous hammer today, a purger of the unclean, a destroyer of the impure.

Its holy work was not yet done.

The Wolves below were beginning to evacuate, perhaps sensing what was to come. They were too slow. Terrek had returned to his flagship almost an hour earlier, as soon as his objective on the surface had been completed. There was no time to be lost. While the Wolves were still clustered in battle array, they presented an optimal target.

Epathus had refused to join him in the strike, and there was no word from the Shadow Haunter Scouts still on the surface. It did not matter. Where others flinched, the Iron Hands remained unbending. *Requiem's* firepower would be more than enough, and with their surface assets destroyed the Space Wolves fleets would be left open to his squads' boarding pods and teleport strikes. By the time dawn touched the dark side of Frostheim, Terrek would have reclaimed both the world and its moon for the Imperium.

The iron was hot. It was time to strike.

Terrek realised the bridge serfs were pleading for his attention. He understood why a moment later, as a priority vox signal beamed into his consciousness, flowing directly from the *Requiem's* communications banks into his mind via his cortical plug. He blink-scanned the message.

+ + inter-fleet transmission ref. 97/19/RDM + +

+ + sender: Gloriana-class battleship *Invincible Reason* + +

+ + ident-code 7697: callsign Lionsword + +

+ + *This is Supreme Grand Master Azrael to all crusade fleet elements. All ships are to disengage with immediate effect. New heading coordinates are being transmitted. There are to be no hostilities conducted against the*

Space Wolves from this moment onwards. Repeat, all ships are to disengage immediately. Stand by for further orders. ++
++ message ends ++

Terrek felt a rush of anger even his detached thoughts struggled to suppress. *Iron Requiem* responded in sympathy around him, the engines flaring fractionally as the ancient vessel shared its brother's dismay. The moment was now. The iron burned. The renegades were exposed, their mutants at the crusade fleet's mercy.

More data streamed through his thoughts. The Ultramarines ships were breaking from orbit. Even as he assessed their likely heading, the rest of the crusade fleet began to depart. Terrek buried another surge of anger.

Without the rest of the fleet to support them once hostilities resumed, the statistical likelihood of a decisive victory over the Wolves began to drop. The urge to strike, to purge the foul taint of the unclean, still burned bright, warming his cold augmetics and throbbing through his synth-organs. His own internal logic systems, however, would not permit him to override a direct order from Crusade Command. The judgement of the Wolves would have to wait.

With a thought, Terrek began to power down the lances.

The Fang, Fenris

There had not been so many Wolves on Fenris since the great hunt for the Wulfen had begun. Six Great Companies – even ones as bloodied as the Firehowlers or the Deathwolves – made the halls blaze with life. The warriors feasted and boasted and drank, and tried to forget that Midgardia was ash, and Longhowl an abattoir, and Svellgard a wilderness of rock and mud pools, and Morkai's Keep a ruin.

Their lords could not so easily ignore what had happened in the war zone that the Fenris System had become. They gathered in the Hall of the Great Wolf, in the heart of the Fang. The vast chamber was cold, its craggy, pelt-draped walls only half lit by a few lumen braziers. At its centre lay the great stone slabs of the Grand Annulus, the flickering light picking out the wolf crests of the Great Companies inscribed upon the twelve blocks, and the scorched, unmarked darkness of the thirteenth.

Sven, Harald, Krom, Egil, Bran and Ragnar stood upon their respective slabs. They all still wore their battleplate, the ceramite scarred and pitted. Each tried not to glance at the empty stone bearing the carving of the Night Runner – Logan Grimnar's crest.

‘I request I be allowed to return to Midgardia immediately,’ said Egil Iron Wolf, shattering the chill silence. He held the battered, gilded skull of Fellclaw, the Great Wolf’s crown, in his hands. Skol hummed around his shoulders, the servo-skull’s pict recorder blinking.

The other Wolf Lords were silent. ‘I made an oath,’ Egil went on. ‘To return. The fires set by the Angels did not reach into the subterranean levels. The Great Wolf is still down there.’

‘And we will find him,’ Krom said quietly.

‘So let me go.’

‘We all wish to go,’ Krom said. ‘But we cannot abandon the rest of the system. The crusade fleet remains active on its edges. They are simply waiting for official sanction before returning.’

‘Kjarl Grimblood’s Great Company is projected to arrive in-system soon,’ Ragnar said. ‘Let him go to Midgardia. We cannot forsake it.’

‘I will join Grimblood alone if need be,’ Egil said. ‘My Great Company can remain here in defence of the Fang, if that is what you all wish.’

‘We must secure Svellgard as well,’ Sven said. ‘The Claws of the World Wolf may be needed if the crusade fleet returns. And the vaults of Morkai’s Keep should be scoured.’

‘And what of the doppegangrel-spawned wyrdling trickster that caused all this?’ Krom asked. ‘And the inquisitor you claimed would assist us, Ragnar?’

‘De Mornay departed after the Lions,’ Ragnar said. ‘I do not believe he will ever stop chasing them. As for the wyrdspawn, I saw it with my own eyes. I suspect it was the Changeling, the same filth that infiltrated the Fang after the Great Wolf first disappeared, and impersonated him on Dargur. Russ only knows how long it had secreted itself aboard the Rock. Even the daemonhunter, Captain Stern, could not fully banish it.’

‘The Lions will hunt it,’ Krom said. ‘We have more pressing concerns.’ None needed to say what those concerns were. The Wolf Lords’ eyes were drawn to the single, scarred black slab of the Annulus, the one unmarked by any sigil. That of the Thirteenth Company. The Lost. The Wulfen.

‘Let us not think ourselves so superior to our kin,’ Bran said, looking at each of his fellow lords in turn. He had donned his armour once more, though a wildness still glinted in his eyes, burning yellow in the half dark. ‘Let us not imagine this curse – if we must call it that – is an affliction visited upon our Thirteenth Company alone. Can any of us here deny that we have felt its pull long before the reappearance of our brothers? Would any here face me and claim that this

deficiency has not been with them every day since they first bore our primarch's gene-seed? We do not understand the Thirteenth, so we fear them. But at the same time, we know them, for who among us has not seen our closest brothers join them? Who among us cannot see ourselves mirrored in them?'

'The right and the wrong of it all can be debated with more time than any of us currently possess,' said Harald. They were the first words he had spoken, and all eyes turned to him.

'It is clear we must work to discover a means of artificially restraining the influence of the Canis Helix,' he continued. 'But one thing is certain. We stand at one of the darkest points in our Chapter's history. The greatest powers of the warp have conspired to destroy us. Not only the Imperium at large, but us specifically. A tide of filth fouler than any I have ever seen has engulfed our worlds. We have resisted, as is our way, yet I believe this saga has only just begun. I cannot say whether the Wulfen are our salvation or our doom. Before Svellgard I believed the latter. But since then my mind has been clear. Cursed or not, I would rather die beside my pack brothers – all thirteen companies – than ever raise Glacius against even a single one of them.'

There were growls of approval from the other Wolf Lords. Harald went on.

'Our Chapter has suffered many losses, and those not yet fallen stand on the brink of madness. Morkai's Keep is a shattered ruin, and the surface of Midgardia an ashen wasteland, its population – our own subjects – wiped out. The Great Wolf is gone. Many of our allies believe we are both lost and damned. Treachery stares us in the face, while defeat snaps at our heels. Other warriors would despair. But not us. We are greater than any wyrd-spawned plot or jealous mortal's lies. We are the Allfather's chosen, his rough-pelted warhounds, the scourge of the heretic and the bane of all traitors. Our sagas sing of ten millennia of triumph, and we will be sure to add to them yet. For Russ, and for the Wulftime.'

He looked at the heart of the Annulus, at the spherical stone inscribed with the crest of the Space Wolves Chapter itself.

'Fenris endures.'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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