

WARHAMMER
40,000

A SPACE MARINE BATTLES NOVEL

BATTLE OF THE FANG

CHRIS WRAIGHT



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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 IMPERIAL GUARD 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.

Here the thread is severed
of Harek Eireik Eireiksson,
called Ironhelm by jarls,
and his debts reckoned

On the World Spine
the Father of Mountains

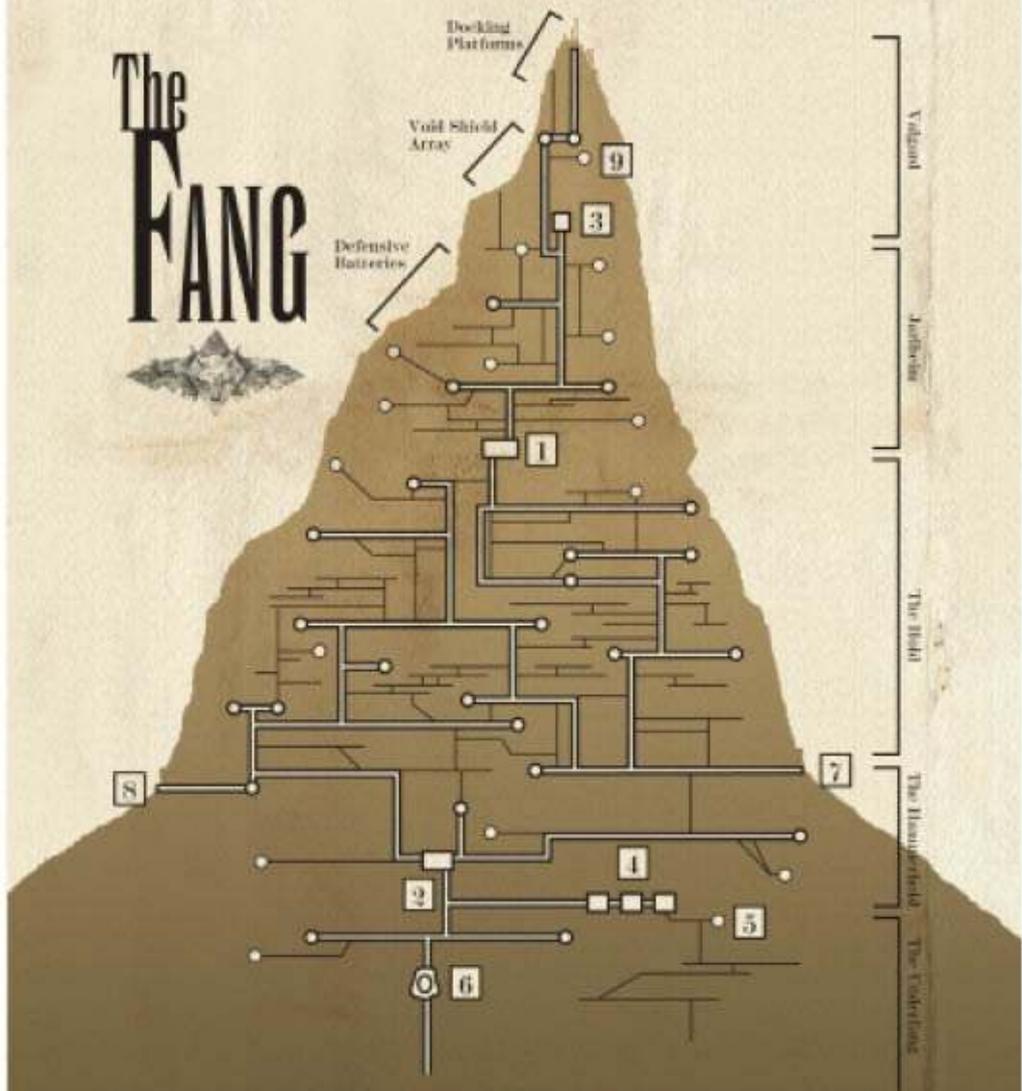
The humbled god comes
hands stretched open
one eye, fire-ringed

And let it be said, brothers
let this be recorded

The betrayer of old
cripple-son of the Allfather
extends his arm
his gaze Helwinter-cold

And Ironhelm
master of the Wolves of Fenris
with fangs bared
laughs like sunrise

The FANG

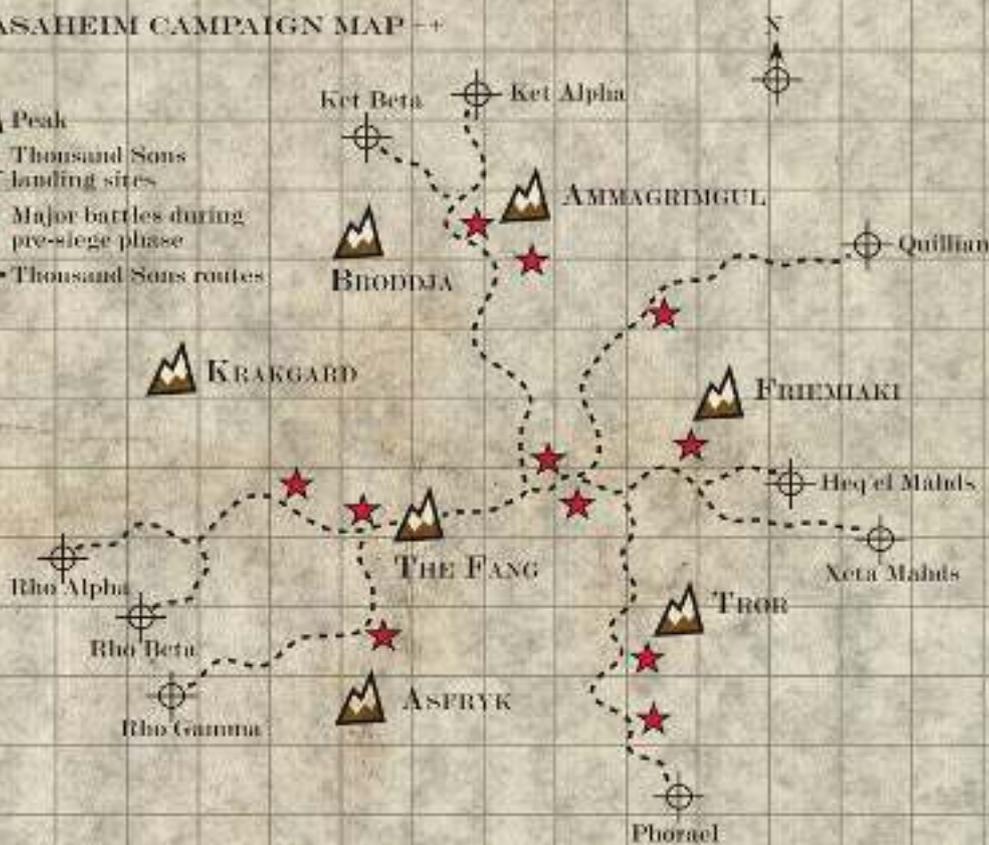


	Arterial Route		Chamber of the Annulus
	Major Route		Forges
	Major Chamber		Halls of the Revered Fallen
	Named Chamber		Geothermal Reactors
	The Fangthune		Sunrising Gate
	Borek's Seal		Bloodfire Gate
			Fleshmaker Laboratorium



++ ASAHEIM CAMPAIGN MAP ++

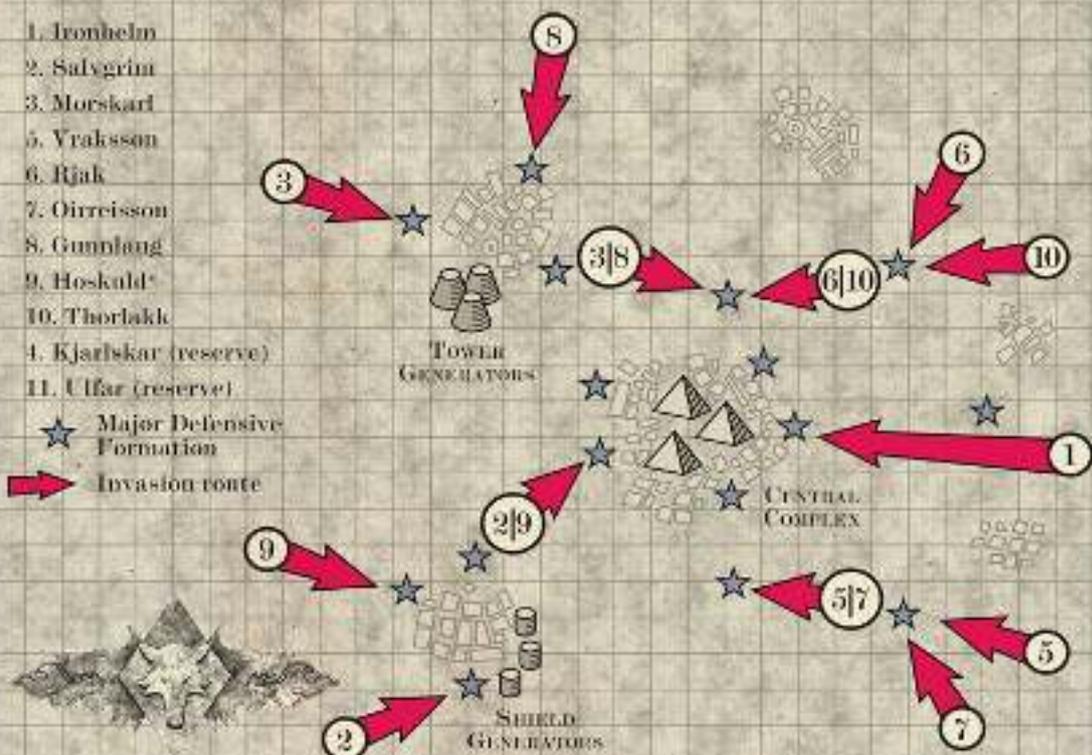
-  Peak
-  Thousand Sons landing sites
-  Major battles during pre-siege phase
-  Thousand Sons routes



++ GANGAVA CAMPAIGN MAP ++

1. Ironhelm
2. Salvgrim
3. Morskarl
5. Vraksson
6. Rjak
7. Oirreisson
8. Gunlang
9. Hoskald
10. Thorlakk
4. Kjarlskar (reserve)
11. Ulfar (reserve)

-  Major Defensive Formation
-  Invasion route



Man is a rope, tied between beast and overman – a rope over an abyss.

Friedrich Nietzsche
Thus Spake Zarathustra



PROLOGUE

Strike cruiser *Gotthammar* powered smoothly through the void, its vast engines operating at less than half capacity, its wing of escorts keeping pace comfortably across the ten thousand kilometre-wide patrol formation. The cruiser was gunmetal-grey against the deep well of the void, its heavily armoured flanks emblazoned with the head of a snarling wolf. It had translated from the warp only hours earlier, and the last residue of Geller field shutdown still clung, glistening, to the exposed adamantium of the hull.

The *Gotthammar*'s command bridge was located near the rear of the gigantic vessel, surrounded by towers, bulwarks and angled gun batteries. Void shields rippled like gauze over metres-thick plexiglass realspace viewers, under which the bridge crew laboured to keep the ship on course and with all its systems working at their full pitch of perfection.

Inside, the bridge was a huge space, over two hundred metres long, a cavern carved out from the core of the vessel. Its roof was largely transparent, formed out of the lens-like realspace portals arranged across a latticework of iron. Below that were gantries ringing the edges of the open chamber, each of them patrolled by *kaerls* hefting *skjoldtar* projectile weapons. Further down was the first deck across which milled more mortal crew. Most were clad in the pearl-grey robes of Fenrisian ship-thralls, though *kaerls* moved among them too, stomping across the metal decking in blast-armour and translucent face-masks.

The floor of the first deck was broken open in several places, exposing deeper levels below. Bustling tactical stations clustered down there, and rows of chattering cogitators, and half-lit trenches filled with half-human servitors. Many of these were hardwired into their terminals, their spines or faces consumed in a mass of pipework and cabling, with exposed patches of grey skin the only reminder of the humanity they'd once enjoyed. Their service was different now, a demi-life of lobotomised servitude, shackled for eternity to machines that kept them alive only as long as they performed their numbing, mechanical tasks over and over again.

Above all those levels, set back at the very rear of the bridge cavern, was the command throne. A hexagonal platform jutted out from the vaulted walls, ten metres in diameter and ringed with a thick iron rail. In the centre of that platform was a low dais. In the centre of the dais stood the throne, a heavy, block-shaped chair carved from solid granite. It was far larger than a mortal man could have sat in comfortably, but that didn't matter much because no mortal man ever ventured on to that platform. It had been empty for many hours, though as the *Gotthammar* closed in on its target, that was about to change. Giant doors behind the throne hissed as brace-pistons were withdrawn. Then the doors slid open.

Through them walked a leviathan. Jarl Arvek Hren Kjarlskar, Wolf Lord of the Fourth Great Company of the Rout, massive in his Terminator armour, strode on to the dais. His battle-plate hummed with a low, throbbing menace as he moved. The ceramite surface was covered in deep-score

runes, and bone trophies hung from his huge shoulders. A bear-pelt, black with age and riddled with old bolter-holes, hung from his back. ~~His face was leathery, glare-tanned, and studded with metal rings.~~ A distended jawline was encased in two night-black sideburns, lustrous and predator-sleek.

With him came other giants. Anjarm, the Iron Priest, clad in forge-dark artificer plate, his face hidden behind the blank mask of an ancient helm. Frei, the Rune Priest, in sigil-encrusted armour, his stone-grey hair hanging in plaits across the neck-guard. The doors slid closed behind them, isolating the trio on the command platform. Below them, the decks hummed with unbroken activity.

Kjarlskar grimaced as he surveyed the scene, exposing fangs the length of children's fingers.

'So what do we have?' he asked. His voice rose rattling from the vast cage of his chest like a Rhino engine turning over. He never raised it, so they said, even in the heat of battle. He never had to.

'Probes have been launched,' said Anjarm. 'We'll see soon.'

Kjarlskar grunted, and took his place on the throne. For such a giant, nearly three metres tall and two across, he moved with an easy, contained fluidity. His yellow eyes, locked deep within a low-browed skull, glistened liquid and alert.

'*Skítja*, I'm bored of this,' he said. 'Hel, even the mortals are bored of this.'

He was right. The whole Fourth Great Company fleet was buzzing with frustrated energy. Thousands of kaerls, hundreds of Space Marines, all chasing shadows for months on end. Ironhelm, the Chapter's Great Wolf, had kept them all busy pursuing the target of his obsession across the fringes of the Eye of Terror. Every system in the long search had been the same: abandoned, or pacified, or home to conflicts too tedious and petty to bother with.

Running after ghosts was crushing work. The hunters needed to hunt.

'We're getting something,' said Anjarm then, his head inclined slightly as he checked his helm's lens-feed. As he spoke, a semi-circle of pict-screens hung around the command platform flickered in life. The incoming data from the probes emerged on them. A brown-red planet swam into view, growing larger with every second. The probes were still closing, and at such vast range the image was broken and distorted.

'So what's this one?' asked Kjarlskar, not showing much interest.

'Gangava system,' answered Anjarm, watching the picts carefully. 'Single world, inhabited, nine satellites. Final node in the sector.'

Images continued to come in. As he watched them, the Jarl's mood slowly began to change. The thick hairs on the exposed flesh of his neck stiffened slightly. Those yellow eyes, the windows onto the beast, sharpened their focus.

'Orbital defences?'

'Nothing yet.'

Kjarlskar rose from the throne, his gaze fixed on the picts. The visual stream clarified. The planet surface was swaying into view, dark-brown and streaked with a dirty orange. It looked like a ball of rust in space.

'Last contact?'

'Before the Scouring,' said Anjarm. 'Warp storm activity recorded until seventy standard years ago. Explorator reports list as desolate. We had this one low on the list, lord.'

Kjarlskar didn't look like he was listening. He was tensing up.

'Frei,' said Kjarlskar. 'Are you getting anything?'

The planet continued to grow as the probes took up geostationary positions. Angry swirls of cloud shifted across the surface. As the Rune Priest looked at the probe-relays, veins began to pulse at his shaven temples. His mouth tightened, as if some pungent aroma had risen, stinking, from the screens

‘Blood of Russ,’ he swore.

‘What do you sense?’ asked Kjarlskar.

‘Spoor. His spoor.’

The clouds were breaking open. Beneath them were lights, laid out in geometric shapes, revealing a city, vast beyond imagining. The shapes were deliberate. They hurt the eyes.

Kjarlskar let slip a low growl of pleasure, mixed with anger. His gauntlets clenched into fists.

‘You’re sure?’ he demanded.

The Rune Priest’s armour had started glowing, lit up by the angular shapes carved into the plate. For the first time in months, the wyrd-summoner looked excited. Probe-auspexes continued to zoom in, revealing pyramids in the heart of the city.

Vast pyramids.

‘There can be no doubt, lord.’

Kjarlskar let slip a savage, barking laugh.

‘Then summon the star-speakers,’ he snarled. ‘We’ve done it.’

He looked from Anjarm to Frei, and his bestial eyes shone.

‘We’ve found the bastard. Magnus the Red is on Gangava.’

PART I:

OLD SCORES



CHAPTER ONE

Greyloc hunched down, keeping upwind, letting his naked fingers graze against the packed snow. Ahead of him, the plain stretched away north, bleached white, ringed by the vast peaks beyond.

He sniffed, pulling the frigid air in deep. The prey had sensed something, and there was fear carrying on the wind. He tensed, feeling his muscles tighten with readiness. His pin-sharp pupils dilated slightly, lost in their near-white irises.

Not yet.

Down below him, a few hundred yards away, the herd huddled against the wind, stepping nervously despite their size. *Konungur*, a rare breed. Everything on Fenris was bred to grip on to survival, and these creatures were no different. Four lungs to scrape the thin air of Asaheim of every last molecule of oxygen, huge rib-cages of semi-fused bone, hind-legs the width of a man's waist, twin twisted horns and a spiked spine-ridge. A kick from a *konungur* could take the head off a man.

Greyloc stayed tense, watching them move across the plain. He judged the distance, still down against the snow. He had no weapon in his hands.

I am the weapon.

He wore no armour either, and the metal-lined carapace nodes chafed against the leather of his jerkin. His mouth stayed shut, and only a thin trail of vapour escaped from his nostrils. Asaheim was punishingly cold, even for one with his enhanced physiology, and there were a thousand mutually supportive ways to die.

The *konungur* paused. The bull at the herd-head stopped rigid, its majestic horned profile raised against the screen of white beyond.

Now.

Greyloc burst from cover. His legs pumped, throwing snow up behind in powdered blooms. His nostrils flared, pulling air into his taut, lean frame.

The *konungur* bolted instantly, rearing away from the sprinting predator. Greyloc closed fast, his thighs already burning. His secondary heart kicked in, flooding his system with adrenaline-thick blood. There was no *mjod* in it – he'd been fasting for days, purging the battle-stimulant from his frame.

My pure state.

The *konungur* galloped powerfully, leaping high through the wind-smoothed drifts, but Greyloc was faster. His white hair streamed out over his rippling shoulders. He outpaced the slowest, tearing alongside the herd, fuelling its panic. The group broke formation, scattering from the bringer of terror in their midst.

Greyloc fixed his eyes on the bull. The beast was two metres high at the shoulder, over four tons of pure muscle moving at speed. He plunged after it, feeling his legs sear with the sharp pain of exertion. The fear of the beast clogged in his nostrils, fuelling the blood-frenzy pumping through his system.

It veered suddenly, trying to shake him off. Greyloc leapt, catching the creature's neck with his outstretched hand and swinging round to grapple it. The bull bucked, trying to break the hold, kicking out with spiked hooves and bellowing a series of echoing, coughing distress calls.

Greyloc pulled back his free fist and sent a punch flying at the konungur's skull. He heard bone crack, and the creature staggered sideways. Greyloc dug his claws into the ice-hard flesh, pulling at the cords within and dragging the beast to the ground.

The konungur screamed, collapsing in a flurry of limbs. Greyloc bared his fangs and buried his face in the animal's throat. His bit down, once, twice, ripping and shaking like a dog. He sucked in the hot blood, feeling it wash over his teeth, and the kill-pleasure poured into him. The body beneath him spasmed, kicked a final time, then shuddered still.

Greyloc flung the limp head of the bull aside and let his own fall back.

'Hjolda!'

Still pumped from the chase, Vaer Greyloc roared his triumph into the empty air, spitting out flecks of blood and hair. The rest of the herd were far away by then, bolting across the ice for higher ground.

'Fenrys hjolda!'

His cry echoing around the plain, Greyloc looked down and grinned. Endorphins raged through his bloodstream and his hearts hammered in a heavy, thrilling unison.

My pure state.

The carcass began to steam as blood welled up from its flank. Greyloc ripped the shoulder open with his bare hands, feeling the hot, wet slabs slap apart. He ignored the bull's glassy eye, now vacant and cooling fast. He tore strips of flesh free and gorged on them, replenishing the energy expended during the chase. Konungur meat was rich, rich enough even to satisfy the demands of his predator's frame.

It was only as Greyloc ate that he saw the snow ahead of him disturbed. He looked up from his feast, blood running down his chin. Something was coming.

He snarled with displeasure, and stood. The beast within him was still roused and alert, still running with the kill-pleasure. In the distance, dark against the pale sky, a flyer was approaching. It came quickly, wheeling across the plain and descending sharply.

Greyloc wiped his jaw, which did nothing but spread gore across his white hair. Every sinew was still tight, every follicle erect. He growled with frustration.

This had better be good.

The blunt, snub-nosed flyer came closer, skirting the drifts. It was a four-man *skarr* gunship, open-sided and armed with twin-linked bolters under the wings. A single figure stood in the exposed crew bay, hands free and long red hair streaming out from the turbulence of the descent.

'Jarl!' the newcomer bellowed over the roar as the flyer came to rest, bobbing a metre from the ground. The tilted engines thundered deep wells into the snow, melting and evaporating it and turning the drifts into slush.

'Tromm,' snarled Greyloc, not bothering to hide his anger. He was still pumped.

The Wolf Guard Tromm Rossek was in full battle-plate. He looked as bulky and ebullient as ever, and there was something joyous in his eyes.

'News from Kjarlskar! Ironhelm summons you!'

Greyloc spat a mix of blood and saliva on to the snow.

'Now?'

Rossek shrugged, still braced against the swaying movement of the gunship.

'That's what he said.'

Greyloc shook his head and shot a rueful glance at the mauled corpse of the konungur. Kill-pleasure was replaced with a numbness, the dull pain of frustration. With difficulty, he reeled in his hunt-state. He felt the hairs on his forearms relax even as he took a running leap and hauled himself on to the crew bay of the hovering gunship.

‘Good kill?’ enquired Rossek, a broad smile across his expansive, tattoo-laced face.

‘Get me back to the Aett,’ muttered Greyloc, slumping to the metal floor as the kaerls in the cockpit fed power to the burners.

It had been.

The gunship went north-east, banking between the ever-rising peaks. All of the Asaheim plateau was high, thousands of metres up, and even down on the prey-plains the air was perilously thin for mortals without rebreathers. Ahead of the flyer, fresh mountains were piled on top of one another, massive shoulders of ice-locked rock jumbled in a climbing pattern, ever higher, ever steeper. The engines of the gunship whined as they powered it upwards.

Greyloc hung on to the edge of the exposed platform casually. He could feel the blood on his face begin to crystallise. He was near-naked and the chill would immobilise even his body soon, but still he stayed on the edge, letting the frigid air tear at his death-white mane.

‘So what’s got him roused?’ he asked at last, adjusting easily as the gunship banked sharply.

Rossek shrugged.

‘Jarls are in the chamber. Something big.’

Greyloc grunted, and shook his head. The subsidence of the kill-pleasure was like a drug withdrawal. He felt surly and blunted.

The two figures on the gunship platform were physical opposites. Rossek was huge, red-haired, bearded, thick of limb and with a heavy-set face. His nose was flat and broken, his neck broad and banded with muscle. A dragon tattoo snaked across his left cheek, terminating at his temple where six metal studs protruded from the bone. In another Chapter that might have indicated six centuries of service. Rossek wasn’t that old – he just liked studs in his skull.

His lord was hewn from different stone. Greyloc was lean, rangy, and his flesh clung tight to the bone. The Wolf Lord’s face was drawn, as if preserved and stiffened by the ice-dry winds. Out of his armour, the tautness in his frame was evident. He was a prey-stalker, a plains-killer, fast, pale, and deadly. The brutish camaraderie of the *Vlka Fenryka*, the superhuman warriors of Fenris, sat uneasily with him. All the Aett knew his prowess in the hunt, but they didn’t trust his brooding, and they didn’t trust the shade of his hide. He was white, and his eyes were the colour of steel.

Like a ghost, they said. Snow on snow.

‘Are all the others there?’ Greyloc asked, still standing in the face of the wind. He could feel ice creep across his exposed forearms and ignored it.

‘Three Great Companies are off-world still, but Kjarlskar’s one of them.’

Greyloc nodded. Ironhelm had been mustering his forces on Fenris for a long time, and the endless expeditions to hunt down his old adversary had seemed – at last – to be in abeyance. The Great Wolf’s passion for finding Magnus had become an obsession, one Greyloc had argued against before. There were a thousand other enemies to hunt, and many of them would stand up and fight rather than shrink away into the aether when the noose closed.

‘We’ll see, then,’ Greyloc said, watching as the mountains loomed.

The massive precipices were coming to a head. Vast beyond imagining, a single peak was rearing up on the horizon. As if the core of Fenris had been shoved through its mantle into a terrifying,

unmatched pinnacle, a conical mountain-mass soared up into the darkening sky. Its flanks were sheer snow-clad on jagged shelves of rock, glossy with ancient, undisturbed ice. In every direction, lesser summits crowded the view, clustering close to the broken skyline in the shadow of the Great One, the Shoulder of the Allfather; the *volda hamarrki*, the World Spine.

Against the gathering dark of the dwindling atmosphere, tiny lights shone at the distant summit. They marked the habitation of the Sky Warriors, the abode of the demigods, itself a tiny fraction of the bulk of that vast peak. The inhabitants of that place, whether kaerl or Space Marine, called it the Aett.

To the rest of the galaxy, awe-struck by half-snatched legends of Russ's fortress and never likely to see it, it was just the Fang.

Greyloc looked at the approaching lights impassively. There were other flyers coming in, at least three of them. Ironhelm was pulling all his forces back to the hearth.

'Perhaps he's given up at last,' said Greyloc, watching the flickering lights of the docking platform draw closer. 'Can that be too much to hope?'

'Wyrmlade! Enough splicing.'

Odain Sturmhjart strode into the laboratorium, pushing aside fleshmaker-thralls impatiently. The huge Rune Priest, clad in sigil-encrusted armour, slammed his staff on the ground and ripples of excess power discharged against the stone.

Thar Ariak Hraldir, bearer of the Wyrmlade that gave him his name, looked up from his work. The low light made his eyes look like pools of resin-rich amber. The Wolf Priest was irritated, and his ragged, ugly face twisted into a scowl. A pair of curved fangs snagged his lips as he exhaled loudly. Slowly, aching from the hunched pose he'd held for so long, Wyrmlade straightened.

'Bone-rattler,' came the caustic reply. 'This, especially, is not a good time.'

Ahead of him, vials containing clear fluid were arranged in long rows on a metal table. Each was labelled with a single rune. Some stood alone, some were connected to one another by microfilament, others were linked together with strands of conductive plasfibre.

Wyrmlade gestured with a finger, and the lights in the chamber rose. Strip lumens exposed white-tiled rooms, surgically clean, each leading off from the other like chambers in a den. Blast doors to the inner rooms closed, obscuring the view of what lay beyond. Before they snapped shut, there was a fleeting view of banks of equipment humming around glistening centrifuges, of pictis updating steadily with rows of runes, and of man-sized tanks of translucent fluid against the walls. There were dark shadows suspended within those tanks, motionless and silent.

'You tell iron-arse that,' said Sturmhjart, and his ruddy cheeks glowed with mirth. 'He'll flay your skin off to cover what he's missing. I've come to save you from that.'

The Rune Priest was built like all the Adeptus Astartes – solid, heavily muscled, broad and stocky. He had a circuit of augmentics around his left eye and a thick grey beard, stiff and matted from age. Talismanic bones hung in chains from his breastplate, carefully arranged to channel his power over the elements. The pattern of runes on his armour might have looked random, but it was nothing of the sort, and every carving and incision had been made after days of scrying and casting. His cheerfulness was misleading too – Sturmhjart was the Chapter's High Rune Priest, and wielded power of a terrifying magnitude.

'He could try,' muttered Wyrmlade, casting a final look over the vials before leaving them. As he walked from the long table, a drawer full of steel instruments closed with a smooth click. 'Then he'd remember who pulled him off the ice, and who gave him his first scars.'

The Wolf Priest moved silently and slowly, carrying his bulk with an accomplished ease. He was old, and the centuries hung heavily on his ravaged features. Black, straggling hair framed his long face, and the tattoos on the flesh had turned scab-brown with age. His skin looked as tough as plascrete, weathered and beaten down by over five hundred years of ceaseless combat. Though ancient, his eyes were still keen and his grip still strong. His armour was as black as his hide, hung with ancient bones and covered in a second skin of gouges, plasma burns and blade-scores. Every one of his movements radiated a deep, old power, tested and tempered in the fires of war.

Two Priests. So opposite, so alike.

Sturmhart cast a sceptical eye over the ranks of vials.

‘Making progress?’

‘You’ve never understood the importance of this. If I failed to convince you a decade ago, I won’t do so now – you’re both older and more foolish.’

Sturmhart snorted a laugh, and it echoed from his chest like an erupting *krakken*. ‘Older, yes, though there’s more than one way to be foolish.’

‘You seem to know them all.’

The two Priests strode out of the laboratorium. As they turned down the long corridor leading to the transit-shafts, lit only by flame torches against the polished rock, black-robed fleshmaker-thralls shrank back respectfully and inclined their heads.

‘I don’t know how long Ironhelm’s going to tolerate this research,’ said Sturmhart. ‘You haven’t been off-world for a year.’

‘He’ll tolerate it until it’s done.’ Wyrmlade turned his dour, sunken-eyed face to the Rune Priest. ‘You’ll tolerate it too. The work’s essential.’

Sturmhart shrugged.

‘Don’t interfere with the wyrd, brother,’ he said. ‘I’ve warned you before. If the fates permitted it, would have been done already.’

Wyrmlade snarled, and the hairs on the back of his arms rose. Deep within him, he could feel his animal spirit glide to the surface. If Sturmhart noticed that, he showed no sign.

‘Do not presume to give me an order, brother,’ he responded, coming to a halt. ‘You’re not the only one who can see the future.’

Heartbeats passed, and neither figure moved. Then Sturmhart backed down.

‘Stubborn old bastard,’ he muttered, turning back down the corridor, shaking his ragged head as he stalked between the torches.

‘Never forget it,’ said Wyrmlade drily, following closely. ‘It’s why we get on so well.’

The Chamber of the Annulus was high up in the pinnacle of the Fang, in the Valgard near the very summit of the vast fortress, surrounded by a seam of pure granite. It had been one of the first halls to be delved from the living rock by the Terran geomancers brought to Fenris to establish the VI Legion in the time of legends. In that age, tech-adepts had been able to level the very mountains and raise them up again, to shape the continents and quell the tumults of the deathworld’s seasonal upheavals. They could have made Fenris a paradise if they’d chosen, and it was only on the primarch’s orders that the planet was never altered from its fearsome character. Russ wished for his homeworld to remain the great proving ground of warriors, a crucible in which its humanity would be tested and honed forever.

So, as it had happened, only one mountain out of the hundreds on Asaheim had been changed from its primeval form, its chambers hollowed out and wrought by ancient devices of forgotten, terrible power. Now the knowledge brought by those long-dead artificers was fading fast, and no citadel of

comparable strength and majesty would ever be built again. The Fang was unique in the Imperium, the product of a genius that was slowly bleeding out of the galaxy as humanity stumbled and unlearned the lessons of the past.

Within the Chamber, twelve figures stood around the Annulus, the huge circle on the floor of the chamber with the sigils of the Great Companies inscribed on panels of stone. Eight of them were Jarls – Wolf Lords – including the pale figure of Greyloc, now in his war-plate and cleansed of the blood of the hunt. Three other Wolf Lords were off-planet, though Ironhelm had sent astropathic messages to their fleets advising them of Kjarlskar’s discovery. Standing beside the Jarls were the three High Priests: Wyrmlade, Sturmhart and Iron Priest Berensson Gassijk Rendmar, resplendent in his foundry-enhanced armour.

That left one place remaining. It was filled by Harek Eireik Eireiksson, Heir of Russ and the Great Wolf. Wearing his customary Terminator battle-plate, he cut a vast, ominous figure at the head of the council. His black hair and beard were long and full, the forks braided and sealed with bone totems. Aside from Wyrmlade he was the oldest warrior present, having led the Chapter for three centuries and served for at least another hundred years before that. The blood of victims had stained his battle-garb for so long that the grey had long since shrunk to darkness. Only the curved sheet of metal implanted across the right hemisphere of his skull glinted from the firelight of the torches, the legacy of the bloody duel that had earned him his iron implants and given him his nickname. In the semi-light of the Chamber, Harek Ironhelm looked as joyless and brooding as a spectre of Morkai.

‘Brothers,’ he said, fixing his gaze on each of the Wolf Lords in turn. His voice carried a permanent undertow of rumbling, grinding aggression. ‘The hunt is called. Jarl Arvek Hren Kjarlskar has uncovered the lair of the Traitor, and now, at last, we will have completion.’

As he spoke, a shimmering green hololith emerged over the centre of the Annulus. It was a planet, rotating gently. Points on the hololith were marked with warship battle-signs, all of them Fenrisian. Kjarlskar had blockaded the world.

‘Gangava Prime,’ said Ironhelm, relishing the words as they left his cracked lips. ‘What orbital defences there were have been destroyed, but void shields shelter the major settlements. Kjarlskar estimates tens of millions in the principal city alone.’

As Ironhelm talked, his voice became more animated. Greyloc saw the Great Wolf’s right hand, enclosed in its heavy gauntlet, flex into a fist as he spoke. A subtle kill-urge pheromone marked the air.

He’s combat-roused. Already.

‘We’ll take the Rout,’ Ironhelm announced, baring his thick, chipped fangs in a chill smile, as if daring any to disagree. ‘All of it. We strike, hard. This prize calls for the full wrath of the running pack.’

The hololith flickered as tactical overlays showed landing sites and ingress routes. The primary target was a massive urban sprawl on a high northern latitude, hundreds of miles across. The swirls of citylight were uncomfortably arranged, and as Greyloc looked at them a hot sensation broke out behind his eyes. He heard low growls around the chamber as the others recognised the mark of corruption in the architecture.

‘How far?’ demanded Morskarl, Jarl of the Third, his question muffled by an archaic Heresy-era face-mask.

‘Three weeks in the warp. The fleet is being made ready.’

‘And you’re sure he’s there?’ asked Iron Priest Rendmar in his strange, metallic voice.

‘Kjarlskar’s Rune Priest confirms it. The Traitor waits for us, confident in his strength.’

‘He invites the attack,’ said Jarl Egial Vraksson of the Fifth, narrowing his eyes across a heavily scarred brow and scrutinising the tactical display. ‘Why?’

‘There are over two million troops in the target zone. It’s fortified, and there are armament works within. He’s building a new Legion, brothers. We’ve caught him before he’s ready.’

‘A Legion with no fleet,’ said Greyloc softly.

He suddenly felt hostile eyes sweep across him. Ironhelm’s enthusiasm was infectious, and they didn’t want to hear contrary counsel.

‘And what of that, whelp?’ demanded Ironhelm. The term ‘whelp’ had been used in the past as a joke, a way for the older Jarls to poke fun at Greyloc’s relative youth, but there was a sharper edge in Ironhelm’s speech this time.

Greyloc looked back at the Great Wolf coolly. The entire Chamber was alive with a rush for completion. The hunters needed to finish the job, and they were straining like hounds on the leash.

‘You think the Traitor didn’t foresee this, lord?’ he said, keeping his voice low and posture respectful. ‘How many false signs has he left for us already?’

Rekki Oirreisson, Jarl of the Seventh, a hirsute monster with a heavy jawline and bunched shoulders, grunted his displeasure.

‘The Rune Priest has ruled,’ he said. ‘Magnus is there.’

‘And if he is?’ replied Greyloc. ‘For all his degeneracy, he is a primarch. If Russ, honour to his name, couldn’t kill him, what hope have we?’

At that, red-eyed Borek Salvgrim of the Second took a step forwards, hand reaching for his weapon-belt. There was a chorus of low, angry growls from other Wolf Lords.

‘Jarl, you forget yourself,’ warned Ironhelm, his powerful voice echoing around the Chamber.

For a moment, the danger lingered. The suggestion – even the intimation – that there were limits to the vengeful capability of the Rout was perilous.

Then Salvgrim withdrew the challenge, grudgingly, casting a dark look at Greyloc as he did so.

‘We are committed to this,’ said Ironhelm, speaking to Greyloc as if demonstrating an axe-grip to a child. ‘It is blood-debt. It is completion.’

That word again. Like all the others, Greyloc knew the importance of it. They were hunters, the Wolves, and nothing was more important than bringing the chase to a kill. Plenty in the Imperium thought of Russ’s warriors as savages, but that betrayed their ignorance of galactic history – the Wolves did what was necessary to complete the task, whatever it was. That was the trait they’d been bred for. To leave a slaying unfinished was a cause for deep shame, something that burned in the soul forever, chewing away until the ache was cleansed.

‘There are other considerations,’ said Wyrmlade, too old to be daunted by disapproval. His lined, cynical face looked up at Ironhelm’s. ‘My work, for one.’

‘Do not mention that here,’ muttered Vraksson, glaring at Wyrmlade. ‘This is a council of war, not a discourse on your blasphemy.’

Wyrmlade gave the Jarl a cold smile.

‘Perhaps your pattern could have done with some tweaking, Egial.’

‘Enough,’ hissed Ironhelm.

Greyloc watched the Great Wolf carefully, noting the dilated nostrils and glistening irises. The kill-urge was powerful now.

This council will only endorse one outcome.

‘Disgust is strong in me,’ said Ironhelm. ‘We have him – the Crimson King, the architect of our dishonour – in our grasp and hesitate before taking the chance. For shame, brothers! Will we cower

forever here, huddled around the fires while the deeds of our fathers keep us warm?’

~~There was a fresh murmur of agreement around the Chamber. The pack-scent had turned from one of surly belligerence to one of impatience. Greyloc saw how skilfully Ironhelm spoke to their pride, and remained silent. There would be no contesting the coming verdict.~~

‘We have our full strength gathered,’ continued Ironhelm. ‘No force remaining in the galaxy can stand against us when mustered together. Kjarlskar has him pinned, and, as we join him, Gangava will bleed under our claws.’

Guttural noises of approval came from Salvrgrim, whose vehemence for the chase was ever paramount.

‘This is it, brothers,’ snarled the Great Wolf, raising his clenched fist before him. ‘Do you not sense it? Do you not feel it in your blood? This is when we destroy the last dregs of Prospero!’

There was a sudden, massed roar from the assembled Jarls at that, a thunderous sound that rebounded from the cold stone around them.

Greyloc exchanged a quick glance with Wyrmlblade, his only ally in the Chamber. The Priest’s expression, as ever, was sour.

‘And who will man the citadel, lord?’ the old Wolf Priest asked, timing his question to puncture the euphoria around him.

Ironhelm looked at Wyrmlblade, and a mix of scorn and exasperation marked his features.

‘You, then,’ he spat. ‘You and the whelp, since your stomach for fighting is so weak. But no more than that. Only one Great Company will remain – the rest I will commit to this.’

He spun back then, facing the circle of huge armoured figures around the Annulus, and there was a murderous smile on his ravaged face.

‘For those who join me, honour beyond measure. We shall do it, my brothers! We shall do what even our dread father did not.’

His smile grew to a wide, expectant grin, exposing his fangs of tooth and metal.

‘We shall take the Crimson King,’ he growled, his voice grating deep within the curve of his breastplate, ‘and tear him from the face of the universe.’



CHAPTER TWO

The chamber's lights were dim, barely above the level a mortal would need to see by. Apart from the glow of floor-level lumen strips there were only four *prakasa* floating below the ceiling. They swam through the air lazily like jewels, tiny points of slow-spreading illumination in the warm darkness. From below the floor, the low hum of the ship's warp engines made them shiver like leaves in the breeze.

Ahmuz Temekh would have been able to read the text before him even in near-complete darkness, but the soft blush of colour was satisfying. He reached for the corner of a fragile page and turned it gingerly. His oversized fingers worked carefully, avoiding the rips that had already disfigured the ancient manuscript.

His violet eyes gazed down on the script. He knew what was written there. He knew what was written in all the books still possessed by the Legion. Only Ahriman, perhaps, had delved deeper, and he was gone.

'You should not have strayed, brother.'

Temekh spoke aloud, feeling the shape of the words slip around his cultured lips. He spoke in Telapiye, the xenos language of the book's long-dead authors. Even with his superhuman control of musculature, he couldn't recreate the full range of sounds necessary – for that, he'd have needed two tongues, each with more prehensile range than his own. Still, that even his rough approximation was heard in the universe was something. Since the last of the *telap* had been exterminated, it was entirely possible that Ahmuz Temekh was the only speaker of the million-year-old dialect left.

A faint chime rang out from the corridor outside Temekh's private lexicanum. He felt a flicker of irritation, quickly quelled. Aphael was only doing his job.

'Come.'

As he spoke, a panel in the darkened chamber withdrew silently and slid open. The *prakasa* swelled into more light and their beams swept around the room, showing up the eclectic contents. A hauxx writing desk from Karellion, an aquarium of feldspar crystal populated with sparkling cichlids, a wraithbone sword-holder from the extinguished Saim-Arvuel craftworld.

So many trinkets. On ancient Terra, they'd have called him a jackdaw.

'Still reading, brother?'

Herume Aphael ducked as he entered the lexicanum. He was arrayed in full battle-armor, which made him a half-metre taller than Temekh. His plate was deep blue, decorated with bronze swirls at the joints; only his bald, smooth head was exposed. The *pyrae* sorcerer-lord spent much of his time in armor these days, and Temekh couldn't recall when he'd last seen him without it.

'There's plenty of time,' Temekh replied, putting the book down on the desk in front of him.

Aphael grunted, and stood opposite him. He was emanating impatience. There was no surprise in that – they were always impatient, his kind. That was the gift of their order, and what Magnus

continued to value them for.

‘Why are you here, brother?’ asked Temekh, not wanting to waste the precious days before system-fall made anything but thoughts of combat impossible.

‘What are you reading?’ countered Aphael, looking at the book with distrust.

‘Nothing of value to the current campaign. The authors’ light has been taken from the universe. By Angron, I believe – one of his many exercises of tolerance.’

Aphael shrugged. ‘He’s as barbaric as the Dogs, but keep your mind focused on the matter at hand.’

‘It is, I assure you.’

‘You would do well to assure me. You’ve become distant.’

‘If I have, it is in your imagination.’

Aphael smiled without humour. ‘And you’d know all about that.’

The pyrae shook his head. As the flesh moved against the interface nodes in his armour’s neck-guard, Temekh could see the puckering, the slight reflectiveness. Was that an early sign, a giveaway symptom?

Oh, no. Not you too.

‘In any case, the assault plans are now advanced,’ Aphael said. ‘You should join the command group, or your absence will cause more comment among the conclave.’

At that, Temekh let his mind detach briefly from the physical, abstracting himself into a local vector within the immaterium. From his privileged vantage he saw the fleet around them as it powered through the warp. Strike cruisers, bristling with weapons, readied for the orbital war to come. Behind them, vast troop ships, crammed with thousands upon thousands of mortals bearing the single eye on their breastplates.

And in the holds of the great battleships were the rubricae, Ahriman’s creations. They waited, silently, animated by nothing but the wills of those who led them. They would feel no hate against the Dogs as they killed them, the ones who had reduced them to their state of eternal, silent horror. For them, the years since the Betrayal were a nothing. Even for Temekh and the others who had retained their souls, mere decades had passed since Prospero had been sacked, whatever else might have happened in the universe of mortals. For Magnus’s children, the wounds were still raw, still weeping.

He relaxed, and his soul snapped back to its physical bounds.

‘The fleet is in good order,’ he said. ‘You are to be congratulated.’

‘I don’t need your approval. I need you on the bridge.’

Temekh bowed his head.

‘I will come, then. And we will refine the instruments of our revenge together.’

Aphael frowned at Temekh’s weary tone.

‘Do you not wish to see them burn, brother? Do you not relish the pain we will cause them?’

Temekh almost replied with the words he had been reading a few moments ago.

There is a symmetry of pain in revenge. When a man will not withdraw his emotion from those whom he wishes to destroy, then even in victory he destroys nothing but a part of himself.

‘Causing them pain will not bring back Tizca,’ he said, gazing absently at the cichlids as they darted through the weeds of the aquarium. ‘But if we have been so diminished that our only remaining satisfaction is in their destruction, then it will have to do.’

His violet eyes flickered back up to look at his comrade.

‘So they will burn, brother,’ he said bleakly. ‘They will burn in ways they do not even begin to comprehend.’

Only to himself, silently and within the privacy of his psychically shielded mind, did he complete

the sentence.

And so will we.

Freija Morekborn had the Blood Claw by the throat, and she wasn't letting go.

'Damn you,' she spat, before landing her knuckles on his slabbed, stupid face, breaking teeth and splitting skin. The Sky Warrior looked up at her blearily, arms limp. 'Show. Some. Respect.'

'Daughter!'

Freija heard the voice from far away, interrupting her dreaming. Somewhere deep in her subconscious, irritation stirred. She was enjoying this one.

'Daughter!'

This time, her shoulder was grasped. Unwilling, grudgingly, she was shaken awake. Her last dream image was of the broken Space Marine sinking to the floor, beaten in combat, humbled and humiliated in a way that could never happen in the waking world.

She opened her eyes, seeing her father leaning over her. Her bedchamber was still dark, lit only by a wavering tallow candle set high into the rock walls.

'What is it?' she mumbled, shrugging off his rough hands. She could make out the familiar line of his shoulders, feel the calloused flesh on hers.

'Get up,' he said, turning from her and looking for more light.

Freija pushed herself up from the disarranged furs of her bunk. Her sand-blond hair fell in unruly clumps around her face. The tiny chamber was ice cold, but she ignored it. Everywhere on Fenris was ice cold.

'What's going on?'

Morek Karekborn managed to find a working glowsphere and sent it spinning up into the air. A thin grey light flooded across the untidy space. His blunt, honest face was thrown into stark relief, and the worry lines around his eyes looked deeper than ever.

'Change of plan,' the old warrior said, running a tired hand over his cropped head. 'The Eleventh has been called off-world. We're back on duty.'

'*Skítja*,' Freija swore, rubbing her eyes and trying to banish the heavy weight of sleep. 'Again?'

'Don't question it. Just get into uniform.'

Freija looked at her father with concern. Morek was a rivenmaster, leader of five hundred kaerls of the Aettguard. His duties drove him hard, and he drove himself harder. He had the shadows of long-term fatigue in his face.

They're killing him, she thought. And they don't even know it.

'We've just come off rotation,' she protested, swinging her legs from the hard bunk and staggering over to the grey tunic thrown across the floor. 'There are other detachments that could do this.'

Morek leaned against the wall.

'Not any more. The Twelfth is the only one staying. Get used to it – we've got weeks of this to come.'

Freija still felt thick-headed from sleep as she pulled her tunic over her head and tried to pull the worst of the tangles from her hair. Weeks of being driven into punishing defensive exercises by the Sky Warriors, of being ordered around by whooping Blood Claws who'd forgotten what it was like to have a mortal body and mortal weaknesses.

'Great,' she said coldly. 'Bloody great.'

'Freija, my daughter,' said Morek. He came up to her and put his hands firmly on her shoulders. 'Be careful this time. Think about how you act, think about what you say. They've been patient with you

because of me, but it won't last forever.'

She almost shook him off. She hated his lectures, just as she hated his blind faith in his masters. He worshipped them, even though he knew that they'd all been mortal once. The Sky Warriors barely knew mortals such as he and she existed, even though without the loyal service of the Aettguard they'd be unable to keep even half of the Fang's huge maze of chambers in operation.

'Don't worry about me,' she said, dropping her fledgling defiance. 'I can fight. That's all they care about.'

Morek gave her a hard look. She knew how he felt. Like so many fathers, he wanted to protect her all the time. She was the only thing left for him. Part of her wanted to give him some kind of reassurance, some kind of certainty that she'd follow in his path, diligently doing her duty to Russ and the immortals. There were times when indeed that was all she wanted, but they made it so damned hard.

'You show your feelings too much,' he complained, shaking his head.

'And what do you want me to do?' she blurted, shaking free of him and reaching down for her boot. 'If they wanted meek, shrinking servants, they've got the wrong planet. *Fekke*, I'm a daughter of Fenris, and my blood runs hot. Mortal blood, at that. They can drown in it.'

She looked up then, suddenly worried she'd overstepped the mark, only to see her father gazing at her with an odd expression.

'Aye, you're a daughter of Fenris all right,' he said, and his brown eyes shone. 'You make me proud, Freija. And sick with fear.'

He pushed himself from the wall and made to leave.

'Get into armour quickly, and get your squad together. We have an hour to take over from the Eleventh. I don't want to look bad in front of that bastard Lokkborn.'

'So what's going on?'

Morek shrugged.

'No idea. No idea at all.'

High up at the summit of the Valgard, ships blasted off from launch platforms like crows leaving a roost. Thunderhawk gunships mingled with the chapter's few remaining Stormbirds, forming an endless stream of jagged shadows against the nightshade-blue sky. Among them were the much larger *hlaupa*-class escorts, heavily armed variants of the Imperial Navy's Cobra destroyers. Vessels of such size would not normally have been able to dock within a planetary atmosphere, but the sheer altitude of the Valgard landing stages made it possible for them to make planetfall on Fenris. Twelve of them had left already, and the fabled hangars were swiftly emptying. Only seven days had passed since Kjarlskar's discovery on Gangava and already the fleet muster was drawing near to completion.

Far above the procession of surface-capable vessels hung the spacegoing fleet. Each warship buzzed with activity on all decks as the thralls prepared the plasma drives to power them to the jump-points. Some ships were new arrivals at the muster, having been recalled by Ironhelm only days before from long-range duty. Others had been held above Fenris in readiness for many months, waiting for the Great Wolf's call to arms. The serrated outlines of the strike cruisers glided amongst the swarms of lesser ships, each of them marked with the symbol of a Great Company and the black wolf's head of the Chapter.

At the centre of the muster, picked out by steady columns of gunships waiting to enter the cavernous launch-bays, was the pride of the Chapter, the colossal *Russvangum*. Built to a design now lost in the cataclysm of the Heresy, the massive vessel hung motionless in the void. Strike cruisers, themselves

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