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BATTLE OF THE FANG

CHRIS WRAIGHT



BATTLE OF THE FANG

A Space Marine Battles novel

By Chris Wraight

++WARRIORS OF FENRIS!
YOU ARE KILLERS, BRED ON A WORLD THAT ONLY RESPECTS
KILLING. THE TIME HAS COME FOR YOU TO TAKE UP THAT
MANTLE.
THE ARCHENEMY IS HERE. THEY WILL LAND ON THIS WORLD
SOON, IN NUMBERS THAT HAVE NOT BEEN SEEN FOR A
THOUSAND YEARS. THEY COME, SO THEY BELIEVE, TO TAKE
THIS PLACE, TO BURN IT, TO DEFILE THE HOME OF YOUR
FATHERS.
NOT SINCE THE DAYS WHEN THE ALLFATHER WALKED THE
ICE HAS AN ENEMY COME TO FENRIS WITH THE POWER TO
SHAKE THESE HALLS. I WILL NOT HIDE THE TRUTH OF IT
FROM YOU. THAT DAY HAS COME AGAIN.
BUT THIS IS OUR PLACE, BROTHERS. WE WILL TEACH THEM
TO FEAR IT.++
++JARL VAER GREYLOC, TWELFTH GREAT COMPANY THE
FANGTHANE ADDRESS++

About the Author

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

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THE SKRAEMAR WAS an ancient, powerful warship, tempered in the long decades of the Great Scouring and bearing the scars of a hundred conflicts since. Some of her encounters had gained sector-wide fame: she'd defied a whole squadron of the Archenemy for two weeks in the Aemnon Belt until heavy support could arrive to turn the engagement, had taken out the much larger eldar Corsair flagship the *Or-Iladril*, and had led the breaking of the blockade of Pielos V at the tip of a desperately underpowered Imperial Navy spearhead. Her machine-spirit was old and star-cunning, and every inch of her machinations was known by her Iron Priest Beorth Rig. She was fast, packed a deadly punch, and didn't die easily.

So when she did die at last, isolated in high orbit above Fenris and surrounded by foes, the death was not quick. There was no sudden warp core breach, no decisive detonation of promethium tanks. She was cut in a thousand places, broken open by a million separate stabs of white-hot las-fire, raked by a score of torpedo impacts and turned black by clouds of burning plasma. They kept coming at her, wave after wave of gunships, dancing around the crushing columns of spitting energy thrown through the void by the looming battleships.

The *Skraemar* never stopped firing, even at the end. With her hull cracked, leaking fire and blood, she wallowed in a tide of incoming ordnance, swivelling on

broken engines to maintain a firing lock on the Thousand Sons warships around her. With her frigate escorts all turned to atoms and the last dregs of the orbital grid collapsing in smoke and sparks, she was alone, a single gunmetal-grey island in a swarm of sapphire and gold.

The *Skraemar's* forward batteries thundered a final time, sending a torrent of whip-fast, spitting hatred toward a wounded Sons destroyer, the *Staff of Khomek*. All of her remaining power had been put into the volley. It ripped the enemy vessel apart from prow to stern, shattering the void shields with pure, overwhelming power.

The *Staff of Khomek* was a minor kill, joining the *Achaeonical*, the *Numeratory* and the *Fulcrumesque* in oblivion. The *Skraemar* had exacted a heavy toll with its defiance, but the end was coming quickly. Gliding through the tide of gently spinning scrap like a predator of the deep ocean, the massive profile of the *Herumon* emerged from the shadows and into firing rage.

The *Skraemar* turned. Unbelievably, leaking oxygen into the void in great, jetting plumes, the crippled strike cruiser saw the danger and somehow managed to obtain a firing solution. On every deck, its remaining kaerls shouldered the burden of survival, performing acts of heroism merely to keep the plasma drives from exploding and the hull plating from crumpling inwards.

Njan Anjeborn, the one they called Greyflank, the only survivor amid the wreckage of his command bridge, still piloted the crippled strike cruiser, preparing for another salvo, knowing there would be no kill this time, but striving to draw his final tithe of blood.

Pitilessly, smoothly, the *Herumon* maintained its course. Taking no chances, lining up the ranked batteries with cool precision, the Thousand Sons flagship rounded

down the options to a single, remorseless singularity.

It took position, opened fire, and the void became light.

As the brilliance cleared, the broken-backed *Skraemar* spun with a glacial agony away from the impact. The last of its shields buckled and fizzed out of life. A line of explosions ran along the port flanks, writhing against space like clusters of snakes. Other ships closed in, aware now that the Wolves flagship no longer had the teeth to so much as scrape the paint from their plating.

On the command bridge, Anjeborn struggled from the cat's cradle of ironwork around him, dragging his blood-drenched body back to the control pulpit. The pict-screens were all down. Vital systems shuddered and gave out, condemning the surviving crew below to suffocation or freezing. He looked around, searching for one last gesture before the incoming spears of energy cut the last of the life from his command.

There was nothing. The machine-spirit was cold and unresponsive. Anjeborn looked up, out through the plexiglass of the realspace viewers and into space. His last sight was the golden hull of the *Herumon* sliding across his field of vision, blotting out the destruction beyond. He saw at close quarters the rows upon rows of drop-pod launchers, the pristine launching bays stuffed with landers, the banks of void-to-surface immolators and the bronze lips of the torpedo tubes, all still unused.

The weapons that would bring Hel to Fenris.

As the explosions from below crashed their way up to his position, shattering what was left of his ship and sending debris far out into nothingness, Anjeborn watched his death coming for him. Clambering from his knees, he faced it standing, shoulders back, fangs bared, brazenly contemptuous of an enemy that hid behind such odds.

‘By your deeds are you known,’ he snarled as the final hammer blows struck and the vacuum rushed in at last. ‘Faithless. Traitors. Cowards.’

THE WOLF GUARD had departed for combat. Rossek, Skrieya and the other elite of the Twelfth had left for their stations, each in charge of their own packs. Only three Wolves remained in the Chamber of the Watch, and they would not linger there long.

‘The orbital defences are gone,’ said Greyloc grimly, turning away from the evidence of their destruction. ‘Counsel?’

Wyrmlblade scratched at the back of his leathery neck, his hook-nosed face crumpled into a grimace as he ran through the options. Augur statistics shone from the pict-screens, showing movements in space above them.

‘They’ll bring the troop carriers down out of range of the guns and come at us overland.’

Sturmhart looked at him questioningly.

‘They have control of space – why not bombard from there?’

Wyrmlblade cracked a crooked smile.

‘Stick to your charms, priest. The shields over the Aett were built to last a siege from fleets four times as big. The witches don’t have that firepower, not since we crippled them on Prospero.’

‘In any case,’ said Greyloc quietly, ‘they have not come to hurl death from afar. They want to take this place, to desecrate it.’

‘I sense nothing,’ muttered Sturmhart. He looked from Wyrmlblade to Greyloc with doubt etched on his face. ‘I sense nothing at all.’

The Wolf Priest shrugged. ‘They are masters of the wyrd.’

‘They know nothing of the wyrd!’ blurted the Rune Priest.

‘And yet they can blind you, and all your acolytes. Something powerful is protecting them.’

None of them said the name out loud.

‘But there are defences,’ said Sturmhart, looking sullen. ‘The Aett has wards in the stone, hundreds of them. Signs of aversion have been carved into the rock and infused with the world-spirit. No sorcerer can enter here, not even the mightiest of them.’

Greyloc nodded.

‘Your brothers have tended them with exceptional care. Now we must preserve them further. How many Rune Priests remain?’

‘Six, but four are acolytes and their powers are untried. Only myself and Lauf Cloudbreaker have the power to match a Thousand Sons sorcerer, should one gain the portals.’

Greyloc found himself cursing Ironhelm again, though he hid his emotions.

You were warned, Great Wolf. The signs were there. Magnus has played you for a fool, and I should have been stronger.

‘Then they’ll have to learn quickly. Ensure the wards are sanctified, and that the Aettguard rivenmasters know their significance. These will be where the defence must be strongest.’

Sturmhart bowed.

‘It will be done,’ he said, turning to leave. As he went, he walked with less of a swagger than normal.

‘He feels his failure,’ said Greyloc once the Rune Priest had left.

‘He shouldn’t,’ said Wyrmlade bluntly. ‘You know who’s directing this, and the one who left us open to it is

not on Fenris.’

‘We will endure. Did any of the ships break the blockade?’

‘The last, Blackwing’s ship, was destroyed ramming the enemy. We are alone.’

Greyloc drew in a long breath. He lifted his gauntlet up and gazed at it for a moment. The armoured fist was scored with many wounds, all inflicted as he’d crunched it into the bodies of his enemies over countless engagements. He looked at it for some time, as if trying to conjure up some power locked within it.

‘Packs will disrupt the landings,’ he said at last. ‘They will not set foot on Fenris unopposed. In time, we will have to meet them here, and I will need you then, priest. I will need you to keep the mortals strong.’

Wyrmlade nodded.

‘They will not falter. But the Tempering—’

‘I know. Do not let it cloud your judgement. The whole Aett will require your fire.’

Wyrmlade looked like he was going to say something else, then backed down. The pooling shadows under his eyes were dark as he bowed.

‘It will be so, Jarl. And when they get here, they will learn what that fire can burn.’

Greyloc nodded.

‘That they will, priest,’ he said. ‘I will count on it.’

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