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RAGNAR BLACKMANE

AARON DEMBSKI-BOWDEN





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.



PROLOGUE

Cadia – The Battlements of Kasr Belloc
The Last Turning of the Year's Wind
999.M41

The Allfather alone knew what would emerge from the dust. Whatever was coming, it shook the ground beneath its thousandfold tread.

A horde. A tide. An army.

No matter.

He had faced armies before. He'd faced them, gutted them and sent them back to the pits from which they crawled.

Ragnar leaned on the wall, gauntleted knuckles on the rockcrete battlement, waiting to see what would come and try to kill him this time. Beyond the battlements there was nothing but dust and ash, drowning the fallen city in a cloud too thick for even *Einherjar* eyes to penetrate.

'The surface is lost,' said a voice across the vox.

The voice spoke true. 'I have said that I will hold this wall until sunset,' Ragnar replied. 'So I will hold this wall until sunset.'

'I am not arguing with you, Jarl Blackmane. Merely speaking what I see.'

Ragnar saw it, too. Only a fool wouldn't. 'Is there more?'

‘Yes, lord. Nightblade reports the Archenemy has a vanguard within the Lavok tunnels. If the foe is reinforced it will be a murderous fight to get through.’

‘Sunset,’ he said again. ‘A promise is a promise.’

A few more hours wasn’t so long to give.

He would hold the city’s last bastion until the sun set, buying time for the rearguard of the Cadian 57th to withdraw and reinforce the defenders at Kasr Lavok. If the vox could be trusted – and Ragnar knew well that it couldn’t – then the Imperial forces at Lavok could hold for perhaps another two weeks.

Two weeks of breath, bought with Space Wolves lives. There was a time, deep in his tribal past, when he would have been disgusted at such a sacrifice. It would have been nothing but a waste of heroic souls.

There was no disgust now. Not even remorse. If he was to die here, then so be it.

To his left and right, his brothers waited along the wall, as lost in the dust as the foe they were about to face. He sensed them, still. Their heartbeats were biorhythmic thunder, and not even the constant shelling and shaking ground drowned them out. Their axes and swords purred, waiting to be revved. Packmates grunted and cursed with one another, always aware of nearby brothers, dust-blind or not.

Their lord stood bareheaded and half-blind in the dead city’s heart, his features greyed by the dirt choking the air. Even breathing was a battle here, dragging in smoke-thick air that tasted of burned stone and melted steel. What few living humans he’d seen in the last few hours were sucking their breath through rebreather masks. He and his men needed no such toys, but even he felt his three lungs straining to filter out the filth.

Ragnar turned his gaze to where the sky should have been. Shapes swam up there, silhouettes ghosting through the hazy caul of grit-powder and dust. Sometimes he heard the strangled whine of engines, distorted and distant, never quite matching the shadows that flashed through the choked heavens. The silhouettes themselves didn’t bank and veer like fighters and gunships; they swooped and shrieked like living things.

Win or lose the war, Cadia was broken. Every city upon its surface was aflame, strangling the skies with the smoke and dust of a million fallen buildings. It would take a decade just to cleanse the filth from the atmosphere. This was the way a world died.

A figure emerged from the dust to his left. Ragnar recognised the cadence of the warrior’s tread, and knew him by the snarl of his armour’s joints. The spirits of every suit of armour in the Great Company gave their own unique growls, and a Wolf Lord needed to know his men better than they knew themselves. The mechanics of this battleplate sounded dry and throaty, harsh enough to set a man’s teeth on edge.

‘Priest,’ Ragnar greeted the other Wolf without missing a beat.

‘Jarl,’ was Ulrik’s reply, crackling through the canine-skull helm. The Wolf Priest stood with his lord, looking out over what was once a city, and what was now nothing but rubble. A world’s worth of rockcrete powder from broken

buildings turned the air to ash. *Something the sagas always fail to mention*, Ragnar thought. *The dust that rises from a dying city, as hundreds of buildings fall to the earth.*

‘Do you hear that?’ Ragnar bared his teeth in an unlovely smile. ‘The marching tread of those who wish to grind us down into unmarked graves.’

‘I hear it,’ said the Wolf Priest, looking out into the dust as if his eye lenses could pierce the murk. ‘The sins of mankind come to drag it down, at last.’

Ragnar spat to ward off ill fortune. ‘Is that what they’ll say of this day, Slayer?’

‘No, jarl. Never in life. The sagas will say that on this day the youngest lord – called Blackmane by his kith and kin – led his bloodied hunters into the jaws of winter.’

Ragnar’s laugh cut the air like a bolter crack. ‘So this is what it’s come to – priests lying like bards. Is my courage so tender that you’d keep the cold truth from me, old father?’

Ulrik didn’t laugh, though this time Ragnar was certain he heard amusement in the ancient warrior’s tone. ‘You asked what they will say of this day, Young King. I told you no lies.’

‘And are you guessing what fate has in store, or did you read that future by casting the knucklebones of sinners?’

A howl went up along the battlements, carried from throat to throat, the cry raised to the occluded sky. To human ears it would be no more than a feral call; to Ragnar it was a song of significance and nuance, with emotion and warning in the tale it told.

Shadows – and the suggestions of shadows – were lumbering from the unending dust, too large to be human, many too large to be battle tanks. Things of hunchbacked carapaces and thrashing tendrils of bloody-red iron lashing at the dirty air. Things with bestial heads and monstrous wings, engines of war that drooled petrochemical run-off, with breath of violet flame ghosting between their ceramite teeth.

The first rank darkened from shadow to substance, crawling and stalking closer to the fortress walls. The second rank followed. The third. The fourth. More, and more, and more.

‘They are without number,’ Ragnar said, with neither awe nor fear. He checked Frostfang’s hilt mechanisms one last time, to ensure the blade would rev true. ‘At least they respected us enough to send a real challenge.’

‘An inspiring speech, my jarl?’

‘Ha! Don’t think I cannot hear the smile in your voice, Slayer. No speeches this time. I am done with speeches, and our brothers need hear no more of them.’

He vaulted up to the battlement wall, throwing his arms wide as he cried his howl to the unseen sky. Unlike the warning call of a moment before, the jarl’s howl ended in raucous laughter. It was taken up as a cheer along the wall as the Wolves heard their young lord’s evident mirth.

‘No speeches now, kinsmen!’ Ragnar roared into the dust. ‘What more is there to say that we have not already said? Look down upon the rusted heaps

marching to claim our walls. Deny them! Kill them! Break them open!’

Another cheer. As it reached its crescendo, Ragnar gunned his chainsword’s trigger. The whine of its priceless kraken teeth chewing the gritty air added a savage drone to the Wolves’ howls.

‘Come for us!’ Ragnar roared at the horde. ‘Our blades thirst for the taste of tainted blood!’

‘That was almost a speech, my jarl,’ said Ulrik as Ragnar’s laughter faded again.

The Wolf Lord turned a grin down at his mentor. ‘I was caught up in the moment, nothing more.’

The battlements began to shake as the war machines drove their claws into the rockcrete walls, beginning their inexorable climb. Ragnar drew his pistol, aiming down at the distorted shadows. Too far away to fire, but that would change soon. ‘Are you ready to die, old father?’

Ulrik took his place at the lord’s side, drawing his own pistol. It shivered in his grip as the magnetic coils along its spine thrummed to full charge.

‘Today is as good a day as any other.’

‘My humourless priest,’ said Ragnar, shaking his head. He lapsed into near silence, closing his eyes as he waited, shutting out the tremors of this tortured world and softly murmuring name after name beneath his breath.

The Wolf Priest listened as he always listened, solemn during the jarl’s funerary invocation. Ragnar spoke the name of every warrior who had died beneath his banner, forcing memories of each of them to the surface, keeping their sacrifice and valour in his thoughts. Would that every jarl value his men’s lives so dearly, Ulrik thought, and remember them with such reverence.

‘...Sunchaser,’ said Ragnar at last. He took a breath, not quite a sigh, and opened his eyes.

Down the wall, a bolter cracked off a single shot. ‘Who fired?’ Ragnar shouted to his left. Laughter immediately echoed out among dozens of warriors. ‘Answer me! Which overeager simpleton just spat a bolt with the enemy still over a minute out of range?’

‘Stonebreaker of the Twice-Proven,’ came the reply. ‘I saw him shoot, my jarl!’

Stonebreaker’s name became a sudden chant, mocked with good-natured jeers and cheers by his brothers.

‘When we reach the Allfather’s side,’ Ragnar called back, ‘the first words I speak will be to tell the Emperor you can’t shoot worth a damn, Stonebreaker!’

More laughter. Ragnar felt his spirits lift at the sound. Ah, to die alongside such loyal warriors, such fine kindred. A doomed man could ask for no more.

‘Your ritual,’ said Ulrik. ‘I have never told you how much I admire you for it.’

Ragnar narrowed his eyes. ‘I don’t do it to be admired.’

‘I know, Young King.’

The Wolf Lord hawked and spat, sending a goblet of bloody saliva over the wall. ‘You know I loathe that name.’

‘Yet others speak it with awe. Every one of your men knows of your rite.’

They love you for it. Your reverence for the slain speaks highly of you, as does the value you place on their lives. Each warrior fighting beneath your banner knows he will never be forgotten – not just with his deeds etched in stone upon the Hearthworld, but spoken in the soulful ritual of his lord before every battle. That matters to them, Blackmane.'

The young commander found himself uncomfortable under such scrutiny. 'Your words are taking a grim turn, old father.'

'Answer me something, Blackmane. Who among the fallen do you mourn most of all?' Ulrik nodded down to where the war machines crawled beneath them. 'Who among the many slain would you have standing by your side in these final hours?'

Ragnar's naked blue stare met Ulrik's scarlet eye lenses.

'Razortongue,' he said at last.

Ulrik looked at his lord through the red-stained gaze of his eye lenses' targeting framework. Biodata streamed in a continuous feed down both sides of his retinal display. The Wolf Priest said nothing, knowing Ragnar would elaborate.

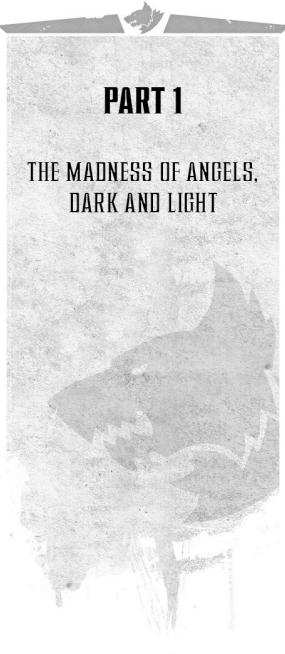
'For the way he looked at the world.' The jarl gave a dark smile. 'And for what he taught me, if not the way he taught it. *Luck runs out, Blackmane*. I hear him saying it, even now.'

Ulrik nodded. 'I would choose him, as well. I mourned his loss then and I mourn it still. Though I do not miss the arguments.'



PART 1

**THE MADNESS OF ANGELS,
DARK AND LIGHT**





I

**The edge of the Maelstrom, aboard the warship *Veregelt*
Year of the Grey Promise
960.M41**

Redness.

The redness of anger, the redness of shallow and shameful pain, the redness of blood in his eyes.

Voices.

The voices of his brothers, the voices of his enemies. The voices of those who fought by his side and the voices of those who wished him dead.

‘Blackmane?’

‘Brother?’

‘Get him up.’

‘Hold your fire!’

‘Give the word, Slayer. We’ll cut them to pieces.’

‘This transgression will not be forgotten.’

‘Nor forgiven.’

‘Get him up, damn you.’

‘Blood calls for blood.’

'Hold your cursed fire!'

'Don't fire! Not unless they fire first!'

Into this storm of conflicting voices, Ragnar came back to himself.

'It is done,' he told the gathered warriors of both Chapters. Silence fell over both sides as they faced each other in the *Veregelt's* hangar bay.

Before him stood the Dark Angels – sixty-one of them in all – their war-scarred plate cast in the same colour as the deep forests of their annihilated home world. They waited in orderly ranks, squad by squad, marked by sigils and standing beneath standards raised by proud bannermen. Robes and surplices of cream were marked by recent battles, burned away in places, blood-spattered in others. Every warrior had a weapon raised, aiming directly at Ragnar.

And behind him, his brother Wolves. Thirty of them beneath his banner – his to command since Jarl Berek had heralded him as battle leader for the campaign at the Maelstrom's edge.

'Take the *Veregelt*,' the Wolf Lord had said months ago, aboard the flagship *Holmgang*. 'I'll give you a third of the company's packs. Return to me with a victory, Blackmane.'

Victory had come, hard-fought but honestly earned, despite the cold indifference of their Dark Angels allies.

But now this. Chainswords sputtered in idle hands, keenly waiting for the call to come to life. Ragnar glanced down at the body by his boots. A Champion fallen, the corpse headless. The Dark Angel's head, still in its helm, lay on the deck a dozen metres away.

Frostfang purred in its ease, blood dripping from the weapon's teeth.

'It is done,' Ragnar said again. 'The duel is over.'

Only silence met this declaration. All was still, even the cyborg hangar-thralls that had been tending to the docked Dark Angels gunships now watched, motionless.

The blow that had crashed against his face had ripped his cheek open to the bone and torn a flap of skin free, but his blood was already clotting in the stinging, re-filtered air. The wound's relative innocence only made the moment worse. It took all of his teeth-clenching effort to hide the momentary weakness of anger and shame.

Ragnar gestured to the body at his feet. 'Take your dead,' he said to the formation of Dark Angels, 'and get off our ship.'

Six Space Marines stepped forwards. Four of them lifted the body in wordless reverence, carrying it back to their ranks. Another carried the severed head with the same sense of respectful, monkish care. The Dark Angels had no captain, for he had fallen in battle weeks before, leaving command of the Fourth Battle Company to rest upon their Champion's shoulders. Now they were leaderless once more.

One of the Dark Angels approached Ragnar, remaining while the others removed the body. His face was bare, his features blunt, his demeanour one of cold serenity. His armour showed only a sergeant's insignia, but the plating was marked with laurel wreaths and ceremonial bolt shell trinkets denoting

valour and marksmanship.

'This transgression cannot stand,' he said.

'What do you want of me? An apology?' The pain that had cobwebbed across Ragnar's face was swiftly fading, nullified by his enhanced physiology and a spurt of battle narcotics injected from his armour's internal regulators. 'Your Champion is dead. Had he been more skilled, he would still be alive. That's the beginning and end of it, Dark Angel.'

The Dark Angel inclined his head, seemingly in consideration rather than agreement. 'The duel was to first blood,' he said, coldly, viciously reasonable.

'Does it matter? It's over.'

'Indeed it is,' the sergeant concurred. 'And you lost, Battle Leader Blackmane.'

Jeers and shouted insults rose from the Wolves' disorderly ranks, but the Dark Angel was implacable. He nodded to the wound upon Ragnar's head, where the hanging flap of skin laid a sliver of his cheekbone bare. 'The duel was to first blood,' the sergeant repeated. 'You bled first.'

Ragnar looked back over his shoulder, where his warrior-packs were throwing derision at the Dark Angels amidst all of the laughter. In reflection, the Dark Angels were perfectly silent, doubtless considering themselves above such trite indignities.

'Listen to me,' Ragnar said, his voice little more than a whispered plea. 'I regret your Champion's death. Truly. But withdraw, sergeant, for this ugly scene will only turn evermore foul.'

'No, Wolf Guard.'

'Are you so blind to reason? We fought and won a war together, cousin. Proudly! Go now and we can avoid staining that glory with bloodshed and further regret.'

The sergeant, standing with his helm under one arm as if on the parade ground, showed emotion for the first time since coming aboard the *Veregelt*. His lip curled, not in feral temper but in simple, human disgust.

'You think we fear the bite of your blades? You have no right to plead for mercy now after committing a crime that demands redress. Blood calls for blood. It is tradition.'

'You... wish to fight us?'

'What I wish is of no consequence, Wolf Guard. This is not about me. *You* lost the duel and ignobly cut down the warrior who beat you. *You* broke the lone tradition that binds us together in the echoes of brotherhood. *You* lost your temper like a newly blooded aspirant, disgracing the primarchs' ritual with foul murder.'

Ragnar's reply was a thing of hissed, hot breath. 'Watch your words, Dark Angel. I've cut tongues from men's mouths for lesser insults.'

'I believe you.' The sergeant's disgust had reached his eyes, infecting the warrior's austere stare with condescending light. 'But blood will have blood, Battle Leader Blackmane.'

Ragnar's fury dissipated. It was all he could do not to laugh in disbelief, even in the gravity of the moment. Even with the sin he'd committed heavy and

fresh upon his shoulders.

‘You threaten us on our own ship? Allfather’s bones, Dark Angel, my men will tear your company to pieces. Already they clamour for your last breaths. Take your threats and go while you’re still able. I cannot guarantee your survival any longer.’

‘I make no threats,’ the sergeant said. ‘You are the one threatening us, which might be considered dangerous ground when we yet outnumber you two to one. You violated the boundaries of *Duellum Honestas*. Thus, I challenge you to *Duellum Dolor*.’

‘A fight to the death?’ Ragnar couldn’t keep the surprise from his voice. A line sergeant against a Fenrisian battle leader, in a fight to the death? The Wolves behind him were howling with laughter now.

‘To the death, Battle Leader Blackmane. In accordance with our rites of war, you have thirty hours – a single turning of the Calibanite day – to accept the challenge and pay the blood price.’

‘And if I refuse?’

‘Then you forfeit all honour. If you will not pay the blood price, the Dark Angels will take it from the Wolves, one way or another.’

Pain nullifiers were no salve for the heat of irritation. He had let his temper get the better of him, but it wasn’t too late to pull the two forces back from the brink.

It couldn’t be too late. *Control, control*, he thought. *Calm*.

‘I’m not fighting you, sergeant, no matter how you threaten me. For the final time, get off our ship.’

The Dark Angel replaced his helm with a hiss of locking seals at the collar, and saluted with the two-handed sign of the aquila across his chestplate. The voice that left the helmet’s mouth-grille was inhuman and metallic, yet somehow serene.

‘Thirty hours, Lord of Wolves.’



II

On the Maelstrom's edge, where reality itself was poisoned by the veil of the warp's tempestuous energy infecting real space, the destroyer *Veregelt* came to life. Row upon row of cannons rattled clear of armoured housings along her spinal battlements, black maws yawning into the void. Turrets, dotted like barnacles along the ship's hull, rotated into firing position at the behest of mind-locked servitors. She turned towards her prey, the equally austere and much larger strike cruiser *Sword of Caliban*, shadowed green where the *Veregelt* was mist-grey.

The Wolves pack leaders met on the *Veregelt*'s bridge, standing before Ragnar as their battle leader slouched in the command throne. With only two exceptions, their mood was justified and jubilant as they stood around their appointed commander.

Ulrik was the first exception, which was no surprise to any of the gathered kindred. The Wolf Priest was almost always grim to the point of solemnity. Black clad and icily serene, he stood with his crozius war maul resting on one shoulder. His face was masked by the helm of artificial bone that legend said had once been worn by Leman of the Russ Tribe himself. With a single word, he could have conveyed a wealth of weariness and disappointment in the young leader's actions, but such wasn't his way. Instead, the only emotion in

his question was bald curiosity.

‘Was that wise, Blackmane?’

Ragnar had no answer to give, though most of his brethren didn’t care. The pack leaders rallied around Ragnar, congratulating him upon his victory.

Valkien – called Foebreaker by his kith and kin – clapped the younger warrior on the back. ‘Severed his head in one blow. There’s one for the sagas. Even the other Great Companies will laugh about this at the next feast day.’

‘And you’re so certain it’s a matter of mirth?’ asked Nalfir Razortongue.

‘Cutting a Dark Angel’s head from his shoulders is always going to be worth a smile, Razortongue.’

Nalfir was the second of the gathered warriors to show no joy. Ragnar had expected mockery and disapproval from the company’s bard, perhaps even a lecture. He hadn’t gambled on actual anger. Nalfir tore the torc from his neck and let it fall to the deck with a clatter, where it landed by Ragnar’s bloodstained boots.

‘Hear me, battle leader.’

Ragnar nodded. ‘I listen.’

‘As well you should, after this day’s pathetic deed.’ The others found themselves inching away from Nalfir, the way true wolves will edge away when a hunt-scarred rival bears its fangs at the pack leader. ‘If a blood price is owed then the Dark Angels can come and try to take it,’ he said, showing his long eyeteeth. ‘You must fight.’

Hrolf – called Longspear by his kith and kin, and named for the weapon he once hurled into a sea drake’s eye – gave a hesitant grunt. ‘Killing their Champion is a deed worthy of boasting. Killing a sergeant with bruised pride is less noble. We’ve already won the ritual duel – let’s leave the fools to nurse their wounded hearts.’

‘And what happens when this sergeant falls?’ asked Valkien. ‘Will Blackmane then have to cut down the next Dark Angel in line, and the next, and the next? When does their stubbornness end?’

Nalfir breathed a curse. ‘This is a matter far graver than you all seem to realise. There’s a time, my brothers, for spitting on the rites and laws of our cousin Chapters. Many times. This is not one of them.’

Ulrik, oldest of all the gathered warriors, gestured for the young bard to continue.

‘Blackmane violated the code between our Chapters,’ said Nalfir. ‘Life for life, blood for blood, honour for honour. The jarl must fight, and it saddens me to see you all considering anything else.’

Ragnar shook his head. ‘This isn’t about valour, Razortongue. It’s about sanity. I can’t kill one of them in cold blood. We’re Wolves, above such pettiness.’

Nalfir favoured the jarl with a sneer. ‘You’re already a murderer, Blackmane. Don’t blame your hot blood here and now. He cut you, and you killed him for it. You have no right to preach the difference between valour and sanity with a dead warrior’s blood on your boots. You could yield, of course. Surrender to them, offering your life into their hands. They’ll kill you

quickly, I'm sure. Execution by the fall of a knightly blade. But you wouldn't sacrifice yourself like that... would you?'

Ragnar's lip twitched in reply. 'You judge me, singer?'

'As is my right. I am of the First Pack – Wolf Guard to Jarl Thunderfist as true as you yourself. More than that, it's my place, my *duty*, to judge you. First you kill a Dark Angel in a child's fury, now you want to run from the consequences. They'd have every right to plunge a blade into the *Veregelt's* spine as we merrily fled.'

'Fled?' Hrolf's eyes narrowed. 'It's not fleeing when we've already won. The jarl calls us to deal with the Flesh Tearers warship. Better to answer Thunderfist and rejoin the company than delay here playing yet more honour games with the Dark Angels. We've waited long enough.'

'You're wiser than your words, Longspear. This is not just any ritual, performed by a nameless and meaningless Chapter with no history. These are the Lion's own sons. What do you think the Sacred Duel is? It's born of our own sense of honour as much as theirs – a tradition that has historically kept our two Chapters from war. It's a release. A bleeding of tension. Every few years, it lances the regrown boil and flushes out the poison.'

'And Blackmane *won*,' Hrolf pressed. 'So a Dark Angel died? Warriors die in duels. Allfather's blood, Blackmane even apologised.'

There were discontented murmurs at that. Ragnar's jaw clamped tight; apologies were rarely given in Fenrisian culture, and a graceless or unnecessary one threatened a tribesman's standing among his men, for only weaklings solved with words what should be solved with red axes and bloodstained snow. All warriors of the Adeptus Astartes strove to be above such simplistic attitudes in the theatre of war, but Fenris ran cold in the Space Wolves' blood. A culture leaves its mark upon all men, women and children within its borders, even upon post-humans who leave their home worlds far behind.

'Enough of your craven whispering,' Nalfir snapped. 'Outside the ship's hull burns the Maelstrom. Dark Angels and Wolves alike have shed blood in purging this storm's spinward edge. Five months of fighting! Now you want to blight the saga by running scared before the Dark Angels' rage.'

'Razortongue,' warned Ragnar.

'What, kinsman? Does my temper displease you?'

'Take a breath, brother. Your blood is up and it's poisoning your words.'

Nalfir's smile was a slowly drawn blade. 'My blood is up? I wasn't the one to carve open one of the Lion's knights because I couldn't control myself in an honourable duel.'

Nalfir saw the tension spread across Ragnar's face, tightening the young lord's features. The other warriors slammed gauntlets to the hilts of weapons, but the bard only laughed.

'So that burns, does it? Well, the truth always has a little sting in its tail.'

'Watch. Your. Tongue.'

'Jarl Thunderfist values me for my honesty. He sent me with you for the same purpose, and I don't give the contents of my chamber's pisspot whether

or not the truth wounds you. The Great Company's elders have spoken of the dangers of your temper more than once. Now we all see why.'

He gestured to the others in disgust. 'Look at all of you, cheering our lord for striking down that knightly fool. As if Blackmane losing his temper and violating one of the Chapter's oldest codes of honour is something to celebrate! Do we venerate murder now? You *lost*, Blackmane. You were bloodied first. We all saw it. Why did you strike the Dark Angel down?'

Ragnar spoke through clenched teeth. 'You want the truth? I don't know. I have no answer to ease your sneering face. He struck me, there was pain... and redness. I remember the fury, and nothing more. When the haze faded, the Champion was dead at my feet.' He spat on the deck, in the Fenrisian custom of warding away bad luck. 'Does that sate your hunger for answers, judgemental one?'

'Sadly, aye, it does. And you're revealed to be no more than an uncontrolled Blood Claw promoted far above his station.'

All were speechless in the wake of those words. Valkien's quick gaze flickered between the gathered Wolves, seeing only stunned silence on their features. Words tumbled through his thoughts, finding no traction on his tongue.

Nalfir wasn't yet done. 'Actions have consequences. We saw you kill like a murderer. Now draw your pretty sword and fight like a warrior. If Jarl Thunderfist were here now, this would be his judgement.'

The bard backhanded Ragnar, swifter than a human eye could follow. The young commander's head snapped to the side and the pack leaders moved as one – half of them restraining Nalfir for his transgression, half of them moving to prevent their battle leader from cannoning his fist into the other Wolf Guard's face.

But there was no blow. Ragnar hadn't moved. He ignored his brothers holding his shoulders and arms, just as he ignored the others forcing Nalfir to his knees in obeisance to await judgement. Ragnar's eyes were cold and still. When he blinked, it seemed an indulgence rather than a necessity.

Nalfir, proud despite his brothers holding his arms wide, stared up into Ragnar's eyes.

'Twenty-five hours remain. Time is not on your side.'

Ragnar breathed through closed teeth. The war between prudence and honour was an ugly one, with no right answers. The others shared his tension, though for different reasons. He saw the savage glint in their eyes and heard the heavy percussion of their drumming hearts. Razortongue's words had stirred them, sure enough. They wanted this. Fenrisian warriors to the core, they wanted to watch one of their own cut down another of their hated allies, earning renown for the Great Company in victory.

The right action for the wrong reason.

And Ragnar wanted it, too. Fenris' ice ran in his veins as truly as it ran in theirs.

We are supposed to be better than this, he thought. Above it. The triumph of higher ideals over base desires.

Now he was caught between honour and reason. When honour called for senseless bloodletting, and reason had become the coward's way out.

His men looked on, waiting for his judgement. His first true command, chosen by the jarl, and he stood upon the edge of making a grievous error worse. Giving orders in the heat of battle was one thing. He had a gift for it – it came instinctively, with scarce need to second guess himself. But this? The Wolves and the Dark Angels – an immovable object meeting an unstoppable force, both fuelled by unbreakable tradition.

Even if the Imperium never heard of this duel, and even if both Chapters celebrated their part in it, the fact would remain: Ragnar would have cut down a cousin in cold blood.

He knew what his lord, Berek, would do in Ragnar's place. Berek would accept the challenge – 'just a single foolish warrior,' he'd laugh – and return to the Fang with a Dark Angels helm on his belt, and a tale of bitter honour to tell in the feasting hall.

But what of High King Grimnar? Would he fight with a heavy heart or back down, putting prudence over empty glory?

The truth was, Ragnar had no idea. His rise through the ranks had been so swift, so unprecedented, that in these quiet moments he sometimes found himself lacking an elder's example to guide his way. Berek was far from here and trusted Ragnar to see this war through alone. Ulrik was a spiritual guide, not a commander to follow. The Great Wolf, though beloved and revered by the Chapter, was a distant king whose path didn't often cross with that of his lesser kinsmen.

That left instinct. Instinct served Ragnar well, but it was a bestial gift, ebbing and flowing with the heat in his blood. Most often a blessing, sometimes a curse.

If the Wolves left, they sacrificed all claim to honour, damaging the fragile peace between the Chapters. If they stayed, Ragnar would compound his failure of temper with a true murder, surely breeding further resentment.

'Blackmane,' said Grey Hunter Valkien. 'Perhaps Razortongue is right. It's just one warrior. Just one sergeant.'

'You already killed their Champion,' Hrolf added. 'What difference is one more?'

And so mankind dies while its chosen defenders devour each other.

Ulrik looked on in wordless vigil, radiating neither disapproval nor encouragement. Ragnar practically snarled at him.

'Speak, damn you.'

'And say what, young one?'

'You are the soul of this Great Company. Speak, old father. Guide us.'

'There's nothing to say. You know the stakes, you know the cost. Now you seek a right answer where none exists. You were chosen to lead us, Blackmane. Make your choice. Lead.'

The battle leader was the silent heart of a silent bridge, his tired eyes unable to meet the waiting stares of his closest kindred. Finally his hand closed around Frostfang's grip.

And loosened. He sighed.

Ragnar looked down into his kinsman's eyes, and offered his hand to aid Razortongue's rise.

'I will fight.'



III

Soraël kept his head bowed before the Lion's graven image, alone yet not alone. Robed Chapter thralls chanted their monastic song above him upon the chamber's balconies, their hooded faces turned to the domed ceiling. Their place was to fill this sacred space with holy song, aiding in the Dark Angels' communion. For now they sang of Champion Harrad's glories in life, rather than the ignominy of his death.

Soraël came often to the chapel, more so than many of his brothers. His sword was bared as custom demanded in this sacred place, and each breath he drew carried the tang of incense into his lungs. It was a familiar scent, one that harked back to so many similar moments of quiet isolation and solemnity. He lifted his eyes to the Lion's stone-wrought avatar. His gene-sire's features, cast in stern majesty, stared indifferently down at the sergeant.

'I will die today,' he told the statue. If there was judgement in the Lion's lifeless eyes, it was beyond Soraël's interpretation. It was, after all, just a statue. Soraël saw an image, not an icon – a source of inspiration and reflection, not a conduit for the divine.

The sound of approaching boots prickled at his attention, disturbing his devotion. He didn't rise. There was only one reason he would be disturbed here now, and he'd been expecting them to come.

‘Sergeant.’ It was Morthiac, of course. They would send no other. No one else of significant rank was left alive.

‘Honoured Lexicanium.’

The Librarian knelt by Sorael’s side, briefly bowing his head to pay his own respects to the fallen primarch. Like the sergeant, he’d unsheathed his sword to leave the blade bare. Sorael watched the younger warrior, noting the crude flesh-replenishment patches still not taking well across the psyker’s throat and cheek.

‘Do your wounds still trouble you?’ he asked once the Librarian had opened his eyes.

The young Lexicanium touched armoured fingertips to the riven and poorly healed flesh. ‘Only with the embarrassment of earning them. The pain and discomfort are meaningless.’

A good answer, Sorael thought. For all his youth – Morthiac was only a year out of the Scout Company – he was still a Dark Angel, cast in the primarch’s stoic image. To even stand clad in ceramite meant surviving a hundred wars that would see lesser warriors left dead in the dust.

‘Once I am dead, you must lead the Fourth home,’ said Sorael.

Morthiac inclined his head, acknowledging the duty. ‘There is a chance—’

‘Spare me all talk of what might be, and let us focus on what will be.’

‘You are a swordsman of no small skill, sergeant.’

‘Enough. Once I am dead, honour will be satisfied. War between the Chapters will be averted. It will be your place to ensure the Fourth reaches the Rock. We are wounded and leaderless. Our time in the deep void is over.’

‘It shames all of the Fourth,’ Morthiac said, ‘to return so bloodied.’

Emotion darkened Sorael’s face. ‘No. That is plainly and deeply untrue. The war was bitter but the enemy was scourged in absolute destruction. We lost eighteen warriors in righteous battle, true. Now their names are known to the Emperor of All and His primarch son. There is no shame there. Master Aralech fell with all honour on the front lines, as did Brother-Chaplain Ectar. Only Harrad’s death has a pall cast over it, and the shame of his murder lies with the Wolf Lord, not with the Champion himself. Harrad fought Battle Leader Blackmane with all honour, keeping to the laws of the ritual.’

‘Yes, sergeant.’

Sorael looked into the younger warrior’s eyes. ‘Are my words clear, Lexicanium Morthiac? They must be, for if you are to bring the Fourth before Chapter Command, your voice must speak the unburdened truth.’

‘Your words are clear, sergeant.’

Sorael stared hard at the Librarian. ‘This campaign was a triumph. Remember that, brother. Chapter Master Azrael must hear that above all else.’

‘I meant only that the tragedy at the end of this crusade overshadows the glory of winning it.’

‘Indeed. That, unfortunately, may be true. Our Chapter’s memory is long, and this is the first time the Wolves have soured the Primarchs’ Truce.’ Sorael released a breath, looking down at his reflection in his sword’s silver blade. ‘Though the Dark Angels are hardly innocent in that regard themselves.’

‘You speak of a specific battle?’

The sergeant lifted his gaze once more. ‘No, just the back and forth tides of this long grudge. Our penchant for ruthless secrecy works against us, and the Wolves have a way of angering those who would be their allies. If we are careful today, we will end this stalemate without aggravating the rest of our respective Chapters and putting the Wolves and Dark Angels at each other’s throats.’

‘At the cost of your life.’

‘I am at peace with it, brother. There are worse ways to die.’

‘You knew the message I brought before I gave it. You knew Battle Leader Blackmane would accept.’

Sorael showed no mirth, beyond a deepening of the wrinkles at the edges of his eyes. ‘This Ragnar is a barbarian with poor control over his anger, but it would be profoundly unwise of him to refuse the duel. You saw him against the Bearers of the Word in this campaign, alongside Master Aralech. For all the primitive’s flaws, he leads from the front and values the lives of his men. He even apologised to me, when we stood face to face over Harrad’s body. A rarity for a Wolf. They detest apologising. It is a sign of weakness in their culture, yet he did so nonetheless, for he knew he had acted in error.’

Morthiac narrowed his pale eyes. ‘You admire the warrior who murdered Champion Harrad, and will strike you down mere hours from now?’

Sorael raised an eyebrow in disapproval, about as expressive as he ever was. ‘Do not mistake acknowledgement for admiration. Did you wish to speak of anything more, or was the message of Ragnar’s acceptance the only matter?’

‘The Wolves have asked where we wish the duel to be fought.’

‘Sacristan,’ Sorael answered at once. ‘In the Endymion Cluster, coreward of the Golgothan Wastes. The world is not far from here.’

The Dark Angels had won a battle there against the Traitor Legions, long before Sorael’s birth. It pleased him to think of his blood running into the earth of a world once cleansed by his forefathers.

‘It will be done, sergeant.’

‘Thank you. Now please leave me to prepare.’

Morthiac rose, bowing and taking the traditional three steps backwards before turning his back on the Lion’s image. Sorael listened to his brother’s retreating tread then, alone once more, he listened to the enslaved thralls singing of the fallen Champion and his life’s deeds.

In a few hours, he thought, they will sing of me.



IV

Sacristan turned in the silence of space, a frontier world in every way mankind judged such things. Here was a world whose peaceful stillness arose from isolation, though it was a peace that vanished the moment one pierced the planet's atmosphere. The weather on Sacristan was forever in flux, and if it wasn't adamantly hostile to human life, it was at the very least not conducive to it.

Scattered colonies dotted its surface, each one primitively shielded against the blizzards that tore their way across the world's face. Once they had been outposts for a planetary culture that had risen, ruled and fallen after an uprising of the Archenemy's Traitor Legions. Although the Imperium had prevailed in that long ago war, the world never regained its primacy. Now the settlements were independent city-states with little contact with the wider Imperium: pirate fortresses, substandard mining installations or other settlements of equal irrelevance.

A week's flight brought the *Veregelt* into orbit above Sacristan. There, patient as only hunters and penitents can be, Ragnar and his warriors waited. With the empyrean's fickle nature, they might be waiting a week, a month or a decade.

Fortune favoured them. Three hours after the Wolves' arrival their cousins

broke from the warp at the system's edge, and the command deck's proximity alarms were music to the bored Wolves' ears. On the occulus, the *Sword of Caliban* was a miniscule dot, near-lost among the star field but broadcasting its identity across standard Imperial channels. At full speed the Dark Angels vessel was only eight hours distant.

Rather than linger on the bridge any longer, Ragnar gathered his warriors and ordered the Great Company to the drop pods for planetfall. He would await his opponent on the surface.

Five ships knifed their way back into reality: a cruiser and four smaller escorts running in unity. All five were armoured in immense plating of filthy cobalt, edged with gold so corroded it looked closer to rotted copper.

The precision of their manifestation was something Ragnar would watch and rewatch hundreds of times in the following years, poring over the grainy archival footage from the *Veregelt's* gun-picters, always studying the imagery for new nuances and always awed at the artfulness of the vessels' arrival.

Never in his life would he lay claim to a ship captain's mastery of the three-dimensional ocean of deep space, but he had a keen appreciation for the skill, flair and calculating mind necessary to turn void warfare into art. He knew enough to know the difference between training, experience and those who piloted warships with a true gift.

The arrival of the five vessels was a display of utter perfection. They didn't burst from the warp in a shuddering run; they speared their way back into real space with vicious, smooth glides, veering around each other in rolling arcs as they lanced forwards. No Imperial vessels could hold such close formation as they left the warp – that degree of unity was beyond the limits of the Imperium's arcane technology. These warships maintained a fluid dance of cohesion at all times. Warp smoke, formed of clinging hands and tortured faces reaching from poisoned mist, trailed at their rolling hulls.

Like sharks, Ragnar would later think, watching the warships twist and glide in the black, starry ocean. *They move like the Hearthworld's sea-tyrants.*

The five vessels surged forth from the same gash in reality, perfectly positioned behind the *Veregelt*. They ran at the Wolves ship, engines hot, gunports unlocking and unfolding. A tidal roar of dissipating warp energy rolled ahead of them, for even a perfect re-entry into reality couldn't banish all of the monumental forces at play. It struck the *Veregelt* like the crest of a wave, hammering the vessel from its place at high anchor.

At the time, Ragnar knew none of this. His world was one of darkness and noise – sirens wailing in every corridor, in every chamber, reaching his heightened hearing through the metal walls of the boarding assault pod. Automated impact warnings melted together with calls of battle stations.

The pod shivered around him, each warrior's harness rattling in its iron sockets. The shiver became a tremor, and the tremor became a shake. Beyond the boarding pod's reinforced hull, there came a great wrenching whine of protesting metal. Even with the *Veregelt's* gravitic generators, he felt the shift of weight in his bones.

'We're turning,' Nalfir said, feeling it in the same second. 'Why are we—'

The vox exploded with crew members' voices, all of them calling for the jarl. They spoke over each other, the communication channels jamming.

Ragnar disengaged the release clasps of his restraint harness and hammered the boarding pod's launch-abort plate. The pod began its shuddering journey out of its firing cradle and back down to the hangar deck, gripped in the slow arms of a positioning crane.

Ragnar looked up at the servitor's face cybernetically fused to the pod's ceiling, serving as a crude machine-spirit.

'Override iris seals,' he commanded.

'Please confirm,' said the servitor, dead-eyed, parched-throated and entirely devoid of urgency.

'Override!'

Hangar light spilled in through the opening iris door. The deck itself was still thirty metres below them, drifting closer with ludicrous hydraulic slowness as the crane lowered them. Thralls and tech-adepts were running to their battle stations, buckling themselves into crash thrones or adopting brace positions.

'Battle leader,' came the voice from the bridge he'd been waiting to hear, the voice he'd been calling for across the vox.

'Wayfarer, my brother, speak to me.'

'Raiders from the Maelstrom, behind us. Five ships clad in the colours of the vile Eighth.' Ragnar could hear the command crew shouting beneath Sijur Wayfarer's report, but focused on his kinsman's voice. 'A strike cruiser and four escorts of unidentified predation classes. They broke from the warp on top of us. I've never seen a manoeuvre like it.'

They had been waiting, Ragnar knew. Waiting for the Dark Angels' and Wolves' crusade to end; waiting for the Adeptus Astartes warships to stand alone in the dark, away from the vessels of the Imperial Navy that had accompanied them for several months of patrol and reconquest at the Maelstrom's edge. This wasn't an ambush, nor even a battle. This was a reprisal raid. The last gasp of the bloodied and the beaten, desperate to salvage some pride.

They followed us as swiftly as they could, as precisely as they were able, waiting for us to be alone. Now they strike.

'What of the *Sword of Caliban*?'

'The Dark Angels are passing the fifth planet of the system,' said Sijur. 'The *Sword* is at least six hours away. To stay here is to die.'

The warriors with him in the boarding pod added their shouts of indignation to the aural melee. Ragnar silenced them with a chop of his hand.

Five enemy ships. *Five*. Today was a day for impossible choices, determined to shame him one way or another.

'Time to go,' he murmured.

'Battle leader? Did you speak?'

He took a breath before speaking across the vox again. 'I did. Disengage, Wayfarer. We're running. Order all hands to prepare to repel boarders – the Night Lords will try to take the ship. We beat them back if they board us, and

break into the warp as soon as we're able. Make full speed for the coordinates where we're to meet Jarl Thunderfist and the *Holmgang*.'

The other warriors were free of their restraint thrones now, standing behind their young leader.

'The Dark Angels may not get their duel after all,' Nalfir told him. 'Facing them was noble, Blackmane, but facing an enemy fleet alone is suicide. We have to run.'

'I know that,' Ragnar snapped. 'Yet your logic doesn't comfort me.'

'It never does. But I'm not here to comfort you, kinsman.' The bard leaned out of the pod and spat onto the hangar deck, to counter ill fortune. 'At least life with you is never dull.'

Ragnar looked over his shoulder, a Blood Claw's mad humour gleaming in his eyes. 'When I die, let those words be written beneath my name in the Hall of Heroes.'

The boarding pod was low enough to leap from. With a wild howl, he jumped.

Ragnar reached the bridge at a dead run, charging up to the central platform and taking command from Sijur Wayfarer with no more than a nod of acknowledgement. On other Imperial vessels an executive officer might announce 'Captain on the bridge' with no small formality. Aboard the *Veregelt*, Ragnar's presence announced itself. Every eye on the command deck instinctively turned to him, even if only for a moment. He brought an aura with him, wordless and vital, bleeding raw confidence.

Ragnar gripped the dais railing as he leaned forwards, watching the battle playing out across the multisected oculus viewscreen just as he felt it in the deck shaking his bones. The *Veregelt* arced and rolled in its flight, but the Night Lords vessels were jackals biting and clawing as they encircled the bigger ship. Hounding the *Veregelt* was easy, for the carrion-feeders of the VIII Legion had the numbers and speed necessary to steer the Wolves ship to their desires. They forced it to bank and veer to avoid collisions, breaking its attack runs; they dived aside from its broadside volleys, leaving the Wolves battlement cannons roaring their payloads into the empty void.

More tellingly, they were cutting off its escape.

'Like fighting rats,' Sijur said from Ragnar's side. He didn't need to admit the *Veregelt*'s guns had scored no worthwhile hits. If the auspex readings showing scan diagrams of the undamaged enemy ships weren't obvious enough, the illuminating flare of their functioning shields told the tale without any doubt.

Data spilled across the oculus alongside the warring vessels. Targeting calculations changed with each second. Attack vectors shifted and redefined their arcs. Predictive runes flashed alongside ship scans and offered hundreds of probabilities at once. Ragnar's preternatural mind processed the wealth of information at a glance.

He came to two conclusions in the same instant. The first was that Sijur had wisely been fighting defensively, seeking to minimise damage to the *Veregelt*

through evasive manoeuvres and returning limited fire when the scarce opportunities presented themselves.

The second realisation was that it wasn't going to work. The Night Lords would cripple them before they could run.

'Our shields fell four minutes ago,' said Sijur. 'Now they're preying on our engines, bringing us down with a thousand cuts. I've been trying to lure them into boarding us early, so they'd hold their fire. That's a fight we might actually win.'

The ship shook beneath their boots with sustained impacts. Tremors ran through the grip rail, into Ragnar's fingers and along his arm. The *Veregelt* was taking a merciless beating.

'What's the status of the *Sword of Caliban*?'

Sijur keyed in a long-distance view of the other Adeptus Astartes warship, a dot of darkness against the infinite void.

'They're hours from maximum weapons range. With the damage we're taking, I can't even be sure they're still heading in this direction.'

Then we're alone. We can't outrun them, we can't outfight them, and no help is coming.

'Very well,' said Ragnar. 'Hail the *Sword of Caliban*.'

The connection took several seconds. When it came, it was flawed by ululating static.

'...mander Blackm...' came an unrecognisable voice.

'This is Battle Leader Blackmane of the *Veregelt*. Sorael, my cousin, it grieves me to abandon our duel.' He swallowed, speaking through clenched teeth. Jarl Thunderfist may well have his head for this. And that was even if the Chapters didn't go to war over it.

'...enemy vessels... retreat...'

'*Sword*, your signal is too broken,' Ragnar replied. 'I pray you hear my words better than we hear yours. The fleet at our position significantly outnumbers us, with or without your aid. Don't engage. Repeat, do not engage. The *Veregelt* would be dead in space before you reached us anyway.'

Sijur met Ragnar's eyes and shook his head. The signal, already weak, was fluctuating into uselessness.

'Sorael,' Ragnar finished, 'forgive me for this dishonour. If we meet again...'

'The link is gone,' said Sijur.

Ragnar growled, venting his anger before speaking. 'Cease trying to seek a way to escape. They close the feigned gaps too swiftly. Come about and focus all fire on the closest frigate.'

'The *Black Prayer*.'

'I care nothing for its name, just kill it. We need to provoke the others into altering their paths.'

As the *Veregelt* shivered, obeying the command of its temporary master, Ragnar watched the void dance taking place through the myriad calculations of flashing Fenrisian runes upon the oculus. He saw the Night Lords' intent the moment they began to move into a new attack pattern.

He pointed at one of the escorts' approach arc. 'That destroyer... The *Vision of Entropy*. It will cut us off, moving between the *Veregelt* and the *Prayer*, forcing us to roll away again and reset our attack run.' Ragnar narrowed his eyes, estimating and calculating as best he could to keep pace with the three-dimensional cogitations taking place before him. 'Don't veer away.'

The warriors around him shared a look. 'Blackmane?' asked Sijur, seeking confirmation rather than comprehension.

'It's our best chance to tear a hole we can slip through. When the *Vision of Entropy* dives across our path to break our attack trajectory, take the ship through it. We risk everything, here. Break through and break free... or let them cripple us.'

'No choice at all, eh?' Nalfir said with a quiet laugh. 'This will almost surely kill us, you know.'

Ragnar unknowingly echoed his Angelic rival. 'There are worse ways to die.'

Baring his teeth, Sijur called down to the helmsmen, 'Ramming speed! All hands, brace for impact!'

The Night Lords vessel *Vision of Entropy* danced alongside the *Veregelt*, taking incidental fire from the destroyer's broadsides as she overtook the wounded Wolves ship. She veered ahead, her shields rippling with dissipating energy, moving into a climb that positioned her between Ragnar's vessel and the Night Lords escort *Black Prayer*.

A predator with millennia of experience, she acted and reacted like a living being as she sailed in the deep void. She ran swiftly, engines hot and screaming into the void, her rearward turrets vomiting torrents of plasma and solid shells against the *Veregelt's* prow armour. With luck she could survive several minutes of retaliation at this range, holding off the Space Wolves barrage against her own shields.

The expected return volley from the burning *Veregelt* never came. By the time the captain of the *Vision of Entropy* realised why, it was already too late. The *Veregelt* leapt forwards with a furious surge of speed, lancing into the destroyer with the strength of an arrow bringing down a hawk on the wing.

The *Veregelt's* prow eradicated the *Entropy's* void shields, bursting them a second before it hammered into the other ship's spine. Battlements crumbled as the Night Lords vessel's superstructure came apart, hopelessly devastated under the weight and velocity of the spearing destroyer.

Hundreds of crew aboard the *Veregelt* were thrown from their feet or out of their restraint thrones. Hundreds more died with their bodies smashed against the walls and deck floors. The warship's prow was a blunted ruin, mangled beyond recognition, and with it she'd lost her forward weaponry array, now crushed beyond any ability to fire. The *Veregelt* carried the *Entropy's* wreckage with it, the Traitor ship still impaled as it fell apart in exploding hull sections.

The final detonation came with the ignition of the *Black Prayer's* warp engines, its force threading cracks of fire through the forward half of the

wounded Space Wolves vessel.

The surviving Night Lords escorts had spiralled away from the maddened display of force, keeping their distance. Now they struggled to come about and recover the pursuit, as the Wolves ship re-lit her weak shields around her flaming superstructure, and lanced for the hole now torn open in the enemy formation. She trailed detritus and vented roaring air from her wounds, as if rising breathless from a graveyard of wreckage.

And then, with an impossibly silent burst of energy that should never exist in the material universe, the *Veregelt's* arcane, sacred engines carved open a wound in space and time, and dived within.

The rip in reality dissolved behind her, breaking down into the shrieking, melting faces of ten thousand monsters.

The Wolves were gone.



V

Jarl Berek, Lord of the Thunderfists, was a king without a throne. In this he believed himself to be carved in the image of Leman of the Russ Tribe, the Hearthworld's first and greatest High King. A hundred apocryphal tales told how Russ had also refused a throne, claiming they were the icons of scribes and administrators who demanded respect, rather than warlords and warchiefs who earned it.

When he inherited the *Holmgang* from his predecessor, a great shipmaster's seat of wrought black iron occupied the central command dais. Berek's first act upon taking over was to have it melted down and beaten into scorched metal rings, offering them as treasures to his favoured warriors and saving the rest to be granted as rewards in the fullness of time. His Wolf Guard elite wore their rings beneath their armour as torcs around their necks and bands around their biceps. By such gestures were traditions born. To serve in his inner circle now was to 'wear the jarl's iron'.

He was on the command deck when Ragnar approached. Berek stood alone despite the sea of thralls, menials and Chapter-serfs working in teams around him. Their lord ostensibly watched from above, though in truth his thoughts wandered to the great oculus viewscreen with its vista of the starry void. A sleek knife of a ship – the destroyer *Baryonyx* cast in the colours of the Flesh

Tearers Chapter – waited for the Wolves to decide her fate. Near her floated the newly arrived and savagely wounded *Veregelt*.

Berek scowled again. He'd been doing that a great deal of late.

'You broke my ship, Blackmane,' was what passed for his greeting.

Ragnar's reply was cold. 'I've come to report, my jarl.'

'So I see. You should have come to me before any other, you know. The next time one of your command reports to me before their commander, it will put me in bleak humour.'

Berek saw the younger Wolf fight back a sneer, not entirely successfully. It still twitched at Ragnar's lip.

'I take it that Razortongue fled to you first, whispering of what happened.'

'He did a bard's duty, and a Wolf Guard's duty besides. He told me of your actions among the Dark Angels, the noble and shameful moments alike.'

'I'm sure he did.'

Berek narrowed his eyes. 'You believe he'd lie?'

Ragnar said nothing.

'If you and Razortongue are unable to be civil with one another, at least keep the grudge between yourselves. If I have to intervene, my judgement will favour neither of you, I promise you that.'

Once more, Ragnar said nothing.

'The shame of the final day isn't enough to eclipse the glory of the preceding months, Blackmane. I'm disappointed in you, true, but not disgusted. However, had you lost the war as well as insulted the Dark Angels, this would be a different meeting. I promise you that.'

'Yes, my jarl.'

'And you know you must honour the duel you swore to fight, come what may. You have to face that Dark Angel... Sorael, was it?'

'Yes, my jarl.'

'Well. Our Calibanite cousins will overlook your excremental manners for a while given the ambush, but honour must be satisfied one day.'

'Yes, my jarl.'

'*Yes, my jarl.*' Berek mocked the younger warrior by mirroring Ragnar's lifeless tone. 'Boy, look what you did to the *Veregelt*.' He nodded over at the image of the two ships on the oculus. 'As if there wasn't already enough misery filling my screen.'

'It grieves me to have added to your weariness, jarl.'

That drew a chuckle, the sound so deep and low that it was almost ursine. Berek's mane of blond hair was plaited into dreadlocks that framed a face hewn from pale rock. He was an ugly creature, make no mistake, and smiling did him no favours.

'Keep your sarcasm to yourself, boy. This is serious and my patience with you is in short shrift.'

'As you say, my jarl.' Ragnar turned his gaze to the wounded *Veregelt* once more, and the void-lost *Baryonyx* beside it. 'What of the Flesh Tearers ship?'

'I haven't decided yet. We found it ten standard days ago, after tracking it for over a month. Word from the Fang reached us soon after.' Berek shook his

head, the charms woven into his dreadlocks rattling against his shoulder guards. His next words were growled low. 'They're sending the Slayer.'

'From the Hearthworld?' Ragnar didn't conceal his surprise. Fenris was a quarter of the galaxy away. To reach their fleet out here would take months.

'No. The Slayer sails with Red Moon's Great Company, engaged on the edge of the Pale Stars. Jarl Gunnar has orders to bring the Slayer to us, then sail back alone.' There was no missing the disapproval in Berek's voice. 'The Slayer will remain with us to *advise*.'

'A... great honour,' Ragnar pointed out.

'What's this? A rare moment of tact from you, Blood Claw?'

'A day of wonders after all, sire.'

But Berek didn't smile. 'I like nothing about this, Blackmane. Not the misfortune of finding this wreck, not the Slayer's presence, and I like the colours marking that warship's hull least of all. Honour's End was before your time, little brother, but we saw the Flesh Tearers' true selves that day. I'd sooner trust Razortongue in a dice game than those blood-maddened carrion-feeders.'

Ragnar was captivated. Berek Thunderfist speaking in quiet contemplation was an event few of his brethren would ever witness. The younger warrior kept silent as the Wolf Lord continued.

'It's said the Inquisition's Black Ships have visited the Hearthworld only once in the span of one hundred centuries. Did you know that? The Fang's chronicles record only one inquisitor with Fenrisian blood in all of Imperial history. Just one. Inquisitor Jarlsdottyr was her name. She fought alongside the Wolves in the War of Shame, five hundred years ago. At Great Wolf Grimnar's side, if you can believe that. She even met the Fell-Handed. I've heard him speak of it myself.'

Ragnar felt his hackles rise at the mention of the First High Jarl, Bjorn Russbrother, called Fell-Handed by his kith and kin.

'I've never heard of this inquisitor.'

'Not many have, especially in the last century or so. Her name is spoken with a curse when it's spoken at all. The last time she was seen by loyal eyes, she was fighting alongside the Flesh Tearers. You see?' Berek hawked and spat onto the deck, either in distaste or to banish ill luck, Ragnar wasn't sure. 'That cursed Chapter. Everything they touch goes badly for them. Every time we meet, it ends in broken oaths and spilled blood.'

The younger warrior, still a Blood Claw in raw youth despite his elevation to the Wolf Guard, knew his lord rarely sought the insight of others. Especially not from those who had so recently dishonoured themselves. Ragnar regarded his jarl with a cautious gaze, his words walking the border close to disrespect.

'You fear this warship is another black omen,' he ventured, not quite a question.

'I fear nothing,' Berek replied. In that moment Ragnar felt a curious disconnect – he heard his lord's defiance yet felt the falsehood within it. Berek might not fear anything as a human would feel terror, but like many of the Wolves in the last year, the threat of dark omens had him hesitant and uneasy.

Ever since the skies of Fenris turned black.

‘Forgive my poor choice of words.’

Berek snorted. ‘Omens everywhere. Maybe this *is* fear, eh? How would any of us even know its taste if it was?’

Before the eclipse of Fenris’ sun, no Wolf Lord would have spoken this way. Now doubt had crept into the Chapter’s blood, and doubt was a threat too insidious to fight. The rune-casters and spirit-speakers had infected every one of the Einherjar’s Great Companies with a darkness no battle could banish.

Faced with his kinsman’s silence, Berek continued with a growled sigh. ‘Every seer, shaman and priest within the Fang tells us we must be watchful. So we watch, as they wish. They sing dirges of the Dawn of the End and the coming of the Wolftime. So we listen and pay heed. Now tell me, Blackmane, why we should deal with this wayward warship. Why not sail away and leave it to rot in the void?’

The test was an unsubtle one, but Ragnar took the rare opportunity to advise his liege lord all the same. He answered at once, speaking the truth without mockery.

‘Lesser Chapters would do just that, but you’re not a coward, Berek. As much as you despise that warship out there in the void, you’re wearier still of flinching at shadows. The eclipse promised darkness and we’re right to take it as a warning, but omens should make us cautious, not leech our courage.’

Berek raised a scarred eyebrow once more. Eyes the colour of scorched stone regarded the younger warrior with amusement.

‘Pretty words. If I didn’t know better, I’d say I sensed a lecture within them. Is that so, young Blood Claw?’

Ragnar occasionally knew when to speak and when to stay silent. It was a skill he was slowly learning.

‘Back to your duty, little brother. Between incurring the wrath of the Dark Angels and breaking the *Veregelt*, you’ve got a great deal to make up for.’

Ragnar remained despite being dismissed. Berek raised a scarred eyebrow. ‘Is there something more, Blackmane?’

‘Yes, sire. You’ve not said what our boarding parties found upon the Flesh Tearers warship.’

The Wolf Lord hesitated. ‘The Slayer’s “request” was for the vessel to remain unchanged until his arrival.’

‘Are you saying you haven’t already sent boarding parties across several times in ten long days, sire?’

Berek grunted a laugh. ‘I’m saying my boarding parties secured the ship without breaking anything. Can you give me the same guarantee?’

Ragnar didn’t dignify his jarl’s mockery with a reply. ‘What of the crew manifest?’ he asked instead.

‘There’s no danger – everything aboard is either dead or in stasis. A thousand menials in all. Ninety-one Chapter thralls in a stasis-locked section of the enginarium. Almost four hundred subsistence-grade work slaves on one of the intestinal decks. Three workshop-barracks were screened by stasis fields, holding two hundred servitors that should still function. Forty-one injured

humans in apothecarion stasis pods, all of whom look to be battle-trained serfs. None of the astropathic choir survived. None of the Navigational coterie.'

Ragnar sensed where he was leading. 'What of the Flesh Tearers?'

'Seven,' Berek affirmed. 'Seven of them. In stasis, sealed from the outside, not simply deanimated.'

Ragnar scratched at his unshaven cheek, thinking.

'Tell me why you wish to go,' the jarl said, his flinty eyes narrowing again.

'To see for myself. The virtue of knowing one's enemy, my jarl. No more, no less.'

'I see. Well, I've no objection, but take Razortongue with you.'

'What? Why?'

'Because he made the very same request. And because I'm telling you to do it. It's called an order, Blood Claw. You remember those, don't you?'

'Sire...'

'Now, now. I could have taken your head for your recent failures, boy. Don't even think of arguing with me now.'

Ragnar didn't argue. His glare, however, spoke volumes.

'You're lucky that I like you,' Berek told him. 'Now get out of my sight.'



VI

The two warriors walked through arches of corroded bronze and dirty iron, making their way along the warship's cavernous spinal thoroughfare.

To Ragnar's senses, the whole ship breathed with the scent of faded carrion: chalk and cinnamon on the edge of every inhalation, too faint to be a stench. They were walking through the memory of death, its smell not ripe enough to be recent. Cratered metal pockmarks ran along many walls, showing – along with spent shell casings – the most obvious sign of bolter fire. Las-burns marked the walls like lesser graffiti, showing where the human crew had fought back against the invading enemy.

Bodies populated every tunnel and every aisle, many in unwelcome states of half-life. A servitor, rotted to bones and steel components, slouched against a bulkhead long-since sealed by a halo of orange rust. Its bionic hand still quivered, fingertips scratching uselessly against the metal deck with a curiously organic screech.

One of the Flesh Tearers lay further down the hallway, pinned to the wall by the three massive spears jutting through his chest. His helmet's eye lenses gleamed with active power, confirmed by the whine of his back-mounted power pack, infrequently spitting sparks.

Ragnar bristled as Nalfir went to the impaled corpse.

‘What?’ the bard asked, seeing his companion’s tension.

‘This is a tomb of the Adeptus Astartes,’ Ragnar chided. ‘The Flesh Tearers will have their own rites for revering their dead.’

Nalfir said nothing beyond a derisive snort as he reached under the corpse’s helmet, disengaging the release seals on the collar.

‘Razortongue,’ warned Ragnar. ‘The Slayer himself wishes this wreck to remain untouched. That includes the slain aboard it.’

There was no hiss of air pressure as the bard lifted the heavy helmet clear. Still Nalfir said nothing. Ragnar strode closer, gripping his brother’s wrist.

‘Mere days ago you lectured me on respecting the sanctity of the Dark Angels’ rituals. What is different here?’

‘Don’t be naive, Blackmane. The Dark Angels’ ritual is our ritual, too. But the Flesh Tearers are dogs and traitors and wretches, down to the last of the bloodline. Now get your hand off me before I remove it myself.’

Ragnar pulled his hand back with a snarl. He looked down at the corpse.

The Flesh Tearer stared eyelessly back at them, his features rotted down to dirty bones in the ruined armour. Leathery threads of ancient tissue held the bones of his neck together.

‘A good death,’ he said, gesturing to the three spears lanced into the slaughtered Space Marine’s chest. ‘Hard, but good.’

Nalfir stepped away with a chuckle, resuming his walk down the wide corridor. Reluctantly, Ragnar offered the dead warrior a nod of respect before following his brother.

A short time later, they came across the first of the slain enemy. A dead Iron Warrior, his ceramite plate torn open by blades and bolts, the body within decayed to a husk. Damage to the bones of the corpse’s neck and chest told another tale; Ragnar recognised them at once.

‘His gene-seed was harvested.’

It was rare to be able to examine any of the Traitorous Ones like this, and he crouched by the legionary’s body, looking over the broken armour with its indescribable runic inscriptions upon the plating.

He sniffed, and though the Traitor was centuries dead he caught the traces of impossible scents. Weapon lubricant made from blood. Blood comprised of acid and promethium. Breath that reeked of forge fires. Forge fires that were fuelled by the shrieks and screams of burning martyrs.

A hundred other impossibilities, each as unnatural as the last. It was the smell of madness. Uncomfortable without being disgusting, addictive without sign of sweetness. The stench of the Great Eye and its twisted denizens.

The Iron Warrior’s silver helmet was turned to the side, staring down the corridor into the dark towards the Flesh Tearer’s impaled body. The killing blow was obvious: a bolter detonation had torn half of the faceplate free, leaving a visage of broken facial bones within the rough hole.

‘Good shot,’ Ragnar murmured. He reached for the sundered hole, wanting to turn the helmet and examine the other side. It wasn’t a mark or pattern of armour he recognised, even had it not sported twin horns of biometallic ivory.

It was Nalfir’s turn to warn him. ‘*Skitnah*,’ said the bard, using the tribal

term for 'unclean'. 'Leave it, Blackmane.'

Ragnar hesitated with his fingers an inch from the dead warrior's helm. He rose in a snarl of armour joints, deciding to follow his brother rather than endure another argument.

Their first stop wasn't the bridge. Nalfir's wandering led them to the chapel-barracks where, among full-strength Chapters, several dozen Space Marines might have been quartered between mission assignments.

There were no bodies. Most of the individual chambers were bare of any sign of habitation, and Ragnar suspected that even before its disastrous end the *Baryonyx* hadn't sailed with a full complement of Adeptus Astartes warriors.

The two Wolves moved on, room by room, until they reached one that showed evidence of once belonging to a living being. Ragnar felt a creeping sense of familiarity as he entered, seeing what were plainly a warrior's choice in personal trophies. Broken weapons of alien manufacture chained to the dark walls; a tattered pennant almost eroded to nothingness, its allegiance and symbolism now rendered unreadable; citation scrolls and honour badges, left with careful reverence on the spartan room's shelves.

Needing no permission, the Wolves poked through the absent warrior's personal sanctuary. Ragnar moved to a weapon rack, running his gloved touch across a mounted bolter – a blunt, straight, aggressive Tigrus-pattern, not often seen in the arsenals of newer Chapters. Instinctively, he counted the respectable number of kill-markings scratched along the boltgun's body, before moving on to a shelf of mementos and trinkets scoured from various battlefields. Among them:

Teeth from a chainsword, battered and blunt from the blow that tore them free.

A thin sliver of razor wire, of the kind often found marking out Imperial Guard trenches, was wrapped around a deactivated grenade.

A scorched, damaged flake of chitinous armour from some unknowable alien breed was etched with crude Low Gothic letters, spelling out 'Migar's Folly'.

Ragnar couldn't even guess what stories these items, which had meant so much to the warrior who chose to keep them, spoke of.

'Lykartan,' said Nalfir from across the room. He tapped a decaying scroll with his gloved fingertips. 'The warrior who dwelt here. His name was Lykartan.'

Ragnar turned from the wartime trinkets, hearing the heavy purr of his own active armour. He'd been looking through the rotted remains of thick paper sheets, seeing the mildewed shadows of what were once orbital printouts of an embattled cityscape.

'I'm not comfortable trawling through these relics. This feels like rifling through a tomb.'

'Is that what Berek feels, do you think? When he goes through the chambers of slain kinsmen, deciding how to divide their arms and armour? Choosing which of their own relics to bury them with, when they're interred back at the Fang? Comfortable or not, he faces up to the duty without hesitation,

Blackmane.'

Ragnar had never considered such a thing, and admitted so.

'I know,' said Nalfir, evidently without judgement. 'Come, brother. Let's go see if this Lykartan was one of the ones to survive.'

The stasis engines appeared undamaged. Ragnar marvelled at their architecture, each pylon carved from volcanic glass in the shape of a Cretacian lizard-king, and in turn set within huge niches in the rusted iron walls. More than a group of engines with sacred purpose, the stasis machinery resembled a sculpted rendition of life on a savage world. Each obsidian carnosaur stood many times the height of a man, half sunken into its immense socket. The near-infinite cabling of each engine made up the beasts' veins, just barely visible beneath the black glass skin.

Ragnar had been fortunate enough to walk upon a Blood Angels warship and witness some of the artistic marvels aboard, wrought by the hands of the Chapter's Techmarines. Here, aboard the *Baryonyx*, there was a fusion of the familiar and unfamiliar: the artistry of the sons of Sanguinius coupled with the uncompromising savagery of the Flesh Tearers.

Individual pods lined the walls – they formed the talons of the towering lizard-beasts, leaving the inhabitants seemingly asleep within the great glass claws of monstrous reptiles.

He walked among them for a time, taking stock. The majority of the room was given over to stalagmite columns of grey machinery, reaching up to their sister-systems hanging down as stalactites from the arched ceiling. Their arcane function was beyond Ragnar's understanding but it stood to reason they were linked to some secondary power source, given the ship's near-dead plasma core. Everything here was running on subsistent energy, surviving on borrowed time.

The place felt haunted, in a way. Not with the clarity of hearing voices echoing off the walls or seeing flickers at the edges of his eyes, but in the way an old, old room can soak up the lives of those who once lived within it. It was a place of memory, neither a sanctuary nor a tomb.

Ragnar walked to the stasis pods. Most were empty. Many were cracked or otherwise flawed. Bolt shell craters and las-burns pockmarked more than one, or speckled the walls and floor nearby. The fighting had raged even here before the Flesh Tearers had evidently disengaged from the Iron Warriors and fled for the fools' safety of the warp.

Seven, the jarl had said. *Seven of them in stasis*.

It proved to be true. Seven Flesh Tearers slept, time-locked in their stasis pods, each one helmetless. Their pale faces were visages of wrenching fury, showing lengthened incisors in their eternally snarling mouths. Ragnar thought it strange to see faces of such aesthetic perfection riven by scars and twisted by torment. The Blood Angels and their Successors were regarded by many as the peak of human beauty. Yet here were the Flesh Tearers, hideous in their serenity.

'They're not what I expected,' he called out to Razortongue across the vox.

Though in truth he'd not known what to expect. Mournful defiance, perhaps. The darker side of angelic wrath evident in their slumbering features. Not this proud, miserable agony.

Nalfir didn't reply. The Blood Claw didn't care – another detail had caught his eye. Each of the last three Flesh Tearers had parchment scrolls upon his armour, torn into thin strips and forming emblematic crosses, like symbolic bandages.

Ragnar moved to the control panel of the nearest pod, looking over the flickering display. The corpse of a tech-adept, worn down to bones and a threadbare memory of robes, stared eyelessly up at him from the floor. He ignored it, seeking any details of the pod's occupant.

No name was visible amidst the few runic letters that were even remotely Gothic. Most of what Ragnar saw meant nothing to him. One symbol flashed brighter than the others, obvious in its urgency. Two red lines – an X of alarm – pulsing, pulsing, pulsing.

'Razortongue,' he voxed again. 'I've found something.'

Nalfir still didn't answer. Ragnar's quick, keen stare took in the chamber – more a dark metal cavern than a room – but there was no sign of the bard. He sought to tune out the clockwork rattling and laborious clanking of the ancient machinery, seeking his brother's heartbeat and the purr of his armour, but the stasis chamber's automated din made the effort useless. He caught no scents over the spicy dryness of old decay and the coppery blood reek of leaking machinery.

As keen as any Wolf's senses were, they were overwhelmed here. Ragnar felt his hackles rise. He drew Frostfang in a quiet pull.

The weight that would have struck him from behind barely clipped his armour as he hurled himself aside from its shadow. Instinct took over – the Blood Claw skidded across the deck and launched back to his feet in a roar of powered joints. Frostfang's kraken teeth whined as they ate the chamber's cold air.

He faced a Flesh Tearer. The warrior was hunched, sweating in the freezing air, with the too-white skin of his face raked by patchwork scarring. The Flesh Tearer bared lengthened fangs at the Wolf, staring with the shining light of madness in his eyes. Cracked vials clinked against black battleplate where they were chained in place. Honour scrolls sealed in place against the ceramite couldn't entirely conceal immaculately crafted red crosses that resembled wounds upon the armour.

'Traitor!' cried the broken angel.

'Hold...' Ragnar warned, levelling his blade. 'I am Ragnar, called Blackm—'

'*Traitor!*' The warrior launched at him, but Ragnar was ready now. He met the Flesh Tearer, shoulder to shoulder, crashing in a slam of ceramite to halt the other warrior's charge.

'Hold...' he hissed again as they grappled, grabbing at one another's wrists, each seeking to cast the other to the deck. 'Hold... damn you...'

'*Filthy traitor,*' the warrior hissed back, no sign of comprehension in his wide eyes. The Flesh Tearer's pupils were pinpricks, devoid of reason.

Ragnar felt his boots scraping across the metal deck as the warrior forced him back. The Flesh Tearer's strength was immense, beyond any battle-brother he had wrestled with in the past. He fought harder, growling into his foe's ruined white face, only to slide back another metre. His sword was useless in these close quarters; he had to drop it to grip the angel's wrist and prevent the Flesh Tearer from pulling out his eyes.

'Beginning to wish I'd just killed you,' he said through teeth clenched hard enough to ache.

'*Traitor*,' the straining warrior breathed back at him.

Ragnar slammed back against the wall, feeling metal give way. The Flesh Tearer bore down on him with renewed strength and leverage, closing one hand across Ragnar's face. The pressure was excruciating as the fingers closed with vice-like strength. Under the pain, Ragnar could *hear* the squealing strain of his own skull threatening to break.

Instinct almost had him spit his corrosive saliva against the palm covering his mouth, but he'd choke on the chemical stink of burning ceramite... and the acid would take too long to have any effect. He'd be dead before it ate its way through to the flesh beneath the glove.

Ragnar leaned back into the mangled wall, stealing enough room to thunder a kick against the Flesh Tearer's knee. The maddened warrior barely reacted. On the second kick Ragnar kept his boot against the knee joint of his opponent's armour, forcing with all the pressure he could give. All he needed was a second to knock the Flesh Tearer off-balance.

Something clicked in his cheekbone. Then a crackle. Then a wet, crunching snap. Vision in the eye started to darken.

Roaring, Ragnar kicked again, hammering out with all his strength. The Flesh Tearer staggered for barely a heartbeat, but it was long enough to release the Wolf's skull. As the crushing strain lifted from Ragnar's face in a burst of cold, blessed relief, the Wolf cannoned his knuckles against the Flesh Tearer's eye, shattering the socket and jerking the other warrior's head to the side. He bore his maddened opponent to the deck with a leap that would have brought down a Thunderwolf, pinning his enemy beneath him, pounding his fists into the Flesh Tearer's stricken features.

All thought of mercy fled. He beat the angel bloody, breaking the bones of the warrior's face with a flurry of blows. Genetically rich blood splashed across him, making his gauntlets reek, yet still he hammered punch after punch into the Flesh Tearer's skull.

Impossibly, the dying angel answered with a roar of his own, hurling Ragnar off his chest with a monumental heave. The Blood Claw turned in the air, landing in a battle crouch on top of another stasis pod, his boots sending cracks splintering through the reinforced glass.

'*Traitor!*' the mangled warrior screamed at him. Blood bathed the Flesh Tearer's face. One of his eyes had burst beneath Ragnar's fist, popping into pinkish jelly. His fangs had eviscerated his own tongue. He was mad... yet somehow not feral. Reason was absent from his bloody gaze, but sentence was not. '*Traitor!*'

The Flesh Tearer came at Ragnar again, hurling himself with hands outstretched. Ragnar met him with an elbow to the soft armour at his collar, feeling bone and machine nerves crunch in unison, but the Flesh Tearer's strength and momentum was enough to throw the Wolf down onto the deck regardless.

They went at each other with fangs and fists, boots and butting heads. Blood rained from the angel's broken face, spattering like hot oil across Ragnar's snarling features. The droplets that trickled between Ragnar's teeth tasted petrochemically foul and his mind flared with stuttering, hazy images of memories that weren't his own.

Scales on the hide of some great beast, rippling in the night. An endless battlement wall beneath a burning sky. A winged demigod with a sword of fire. The acrid tang of corrupted sweat. Flame sucked into his lungs. Pain running through him along the network of his nerves.

He managed to free himself by getting one boot on the Flesh Tearer's chest and shoving the frothing warrior aside. Scrabbling away, gasping for breath, fortune had his palm thud down on his discarded blade.

Ragnar brought the blade up as the Flesh Tearer launched upon him again, the warrior's weight driving the air from the Wolf's lungs and pinning him to the deck. Frostfang was trapped between them. He'd missed the killing blow.

'Traitor!' the angel screamed into his face, spraying acidic saliva and blood from a fanged maw. Ragnar hauled the trapped blade higher, keeping it between them, the kraken teeth scraping deep gouges across black war-plate.

He couldn't reach the trigger. He almost lost his grip completely as the angel's hands closed like an iron noose around his throat, cracking through the machine tendons of his armoured collar. Now even breathing became a battle. What little air he sucked in tasted of the Flesh Tearer's maddened memories.

He still couldn't thumb the trigger. His vision was dimming when he finally wrestled the dead blade up, pushing the toothed saw blade against the side of the Flesh Tearer's face.

'Trai—'

Ragnar cut. He carved with the deactivated sword, the monomolecular-sharpened kraken teeth ripping through the Flesh Tearer's skin, muscle and bone. The warrior's pulped eye was torn from its mutilated socket; the gore drizzle spattering Ragnar's face became a torrent, punctuated with fragments of bone. He carved deeper, sawing the blade back and forth as best as his confines allowed, cleaving down to the grey meat of the brain.

The Flesh Tearer's grip loosened. Ragnar stole the chance to throw the warrior aside and stagger to his feet, wiping the blood from his blinded eyes.

He heard a bolter fire, just once, and his clearing vision was rewarded with the sight of the Flesh Tearer motionless at last, the warrior's head detonated into wet red shards.

Nalfir stood above the body, his bolter's muzzle breathing fyceline mist in the cold air. Ragnar aimed Frostfang at him, the Flesh Tearer's blood burnishing the ancient blade.

'Where in the name of the Allfather were you?'

'In the antechamber,' said the bard with a smile. 'Aren't you going to thank me for saving you?'

'Saving me... You treacherous... I should kill you next!'

'Fine, then. I admit that you killed this poor creature on your own, but that's still no way to show gratitude, Blackmane.'

'You did this.' Ragnar pointed the sword at the corpse on the deck. 'Do you expect me to believe one of the stasis pods coincidentally failed when I walked past? You did this, Razortongue.'

'That's quite the accusation, brother.' Nalfir seemed as calm and composed as ever. 'You should tell the jarl of your theatrical suspicion. Perhaps I'll be given a trial. And when I'm found innocent, for you have no evidence at all, of course... then you can kiss my boots before the entire Great Company and beg for my forgiveness.'

Ragnar barked in wordless rage, which only encouraged Nalfir's smile. 'Temper, temper, Blackmane. Look where that got you with the Dark Angels.'

'I won't take this to the jarl,' Ragnar growled the words. 'I deal with my own grudges. But I'm watching you, "brother".'

'Do whatever you wish.' Nalfir lowered the bolter at last. 'We weren't supposed to touch anything, you know. Look at the mess you've made.'



VII

A week later, eight souls gathered in judgement. Seven were warriors in the grey of a summer storm, one wore the absolute black of a deep night. They met in Berek's council chamber where there were no seats, just as there was no command throne upon the *Holmgang*'s bridge. All were expected to stand in their lord's presence. All were equal – all but one. This last figure, clad in sacred black, said nothing to the others, not even to greet them. He watched and, seemingly, waited.

To walk into the chamber was to walk into the jarl's personal museum and armoury. The Great Company's banners and treasures were housed elsewhere across the *Holmgang* and displayed with righteous, boastful pride. Here the dark iron walls were adorned with Berek's personal glories: the banners of fallen enemy overlords and a host of broken relics taken from lifeless alien hands. All were purified by the Chapter's priests before being put on display.

It was not from any sense of modesty, as his men knew all too well, that Berek kept his trophies away from the Great Company's eyes. For all his bluntness, Berek One-Arm – called Thunderfist by his kith and kin – was not without a warlord's sense of cunning. He chose to surround his elite warriors with his own glories, for they were the ones who were permitted by tradition and law to challenge him for leadership. His Wolf Guard were the kinsmen

who had to be reminded of his prowess, and the shame that awaited them if they offered a failed challenge.

The warriors stood in silence around the central table. Its surface was a granite replica of the Chapter's annulus, showing the wolfhead symbols of the current jarls in command of the twelve Great Companies. Each of the snarling effigies bared its teeth in typical Fenrisian defiance, carved proud upon the stone.

Berek called the gathering to order by placing his axe with a dull clank onto the rearing symbol of the Wolf that Stalks Between the Stars.

'Brothers, we have come together to decide the fate of the Flesh Tearers warship that tumbles out there, powerless in the void. Who among you would speak?'

All eyes turned to the figure in black, only to look away when he made no gesture at all. Three of the Wolf Guard reached to their throats and pulled their iron torcs free, dropping them onto the stone table, signalling that they wished to speak. Ragnar was among them. His face had healed, but discolouration yet lingered around the fused eye socket and cheekbone that had been fractured.

'Greylock,' Berek gestured to the first of them. 'Your jarl listens.'

Uller, called Greylock by his kith and kin, was a mountain of a warrior. He was named for the frosted hair growing among the blond by his temple – the legacy of an axe blow that split his skull in the headstrong days of his tribal youth. He weighed in on the warship's fate with two simple words.

'Burn it.'

'A simple solution,' Berek admitted.

The wolf tail talismans hanging from Uller's belt swayed as he shifted his immense weight.

'Burn it,' he repeated. 'To the abyss with the Flesh Tearers. Whatever nobility they once possessed is long gone now. Their instincts are poisoned. Blackmane saw it himself – their first reaction upon leaving stasis was to attack him, and he did well to see that cur dead. Burn their ship and let's be done with this debate. There are wars to fight, my jarl. Wars we should be fighting even as we stand here speaking. The Flesh Tearers already think the vessel swallowed by the void. They are losing nothing that they have not already lost.'

Several of the others rapped their knuckles on the table in affirmation. Greylock retrieved his torc, closing it around his neck once more. Berek nodded as he spoke again.

'Greylock counsels that we burn it in the void and be done with it. Razortongue, you next. Your jarl listens.'

Barring Ragnar, the bard was the youngest warrior present, and all of them heard the hot blood in his voice. 'We take the *Baryonyx* back to the Fang.'

Silence met these words. Nalfir pressed on. 'We beseech the Iron Priests to restore enough function to reach Fenris, and once she's docked in the Fang's sky platforms, she undergoes cleansing, repair and an overhaul. Within a year she'll be ready to begin her new life in service to the Chapter.'

No knuckles knocked on the stone table.

'We're not thieves, bard,' said Berek.

'No,' Nalfir agreed smoothly, 'we are victors.'

'Then why do you speak of theft?'

'I speak of plunder, my jarl. I speak of the spoils of war. Consider it a trophy if you prefer.'

There was a smile in Berek's snarl. 'You're toying with words.'

'Am I not a *skjald*? Toying with words is my duty.'

Ragnar would be silent no longer. 'You, who advocated my death-duel with the Dark Angels in the name of honour, now advocate stealing another Chapter's warship?'

Nalfir was unfazed. If anything, Ragnar's protestations amused him. 'The Dark Angels are our Chapter's oldest rival, and our bloodlines run all the way back to the Imperium's founding. They're fools, one and all, but I respect them. They're loyal to the Allfather's Throne. The Flesh Tearers are mongrels and mutants by comparison – cannibals known to drink innocent blood. Did the one you fought not accuse you of treachery? *Traitor*, he called you. They hate us, to our very souls.'

'I hear your words,' Berek assured them both. 'Yet in this matter, theft is theft. It's beneath us.'

'My jarl,' Nalfir cut in, 'I know you hear the wisdom beneath my jests. I know all of you do. Perhaps it breaks with tradition, aye, I'll concede that without a fight. But if we return the ship to the Fang, we still claim right of plunder. Can any of you say it's wise to throw away such a prize? Even a single frigate added to our Great Company's armada...'

He let the words trail away, and while they were ill-mannered and brash, they were undeniably true. Practicality now battled with pride in many of the Wolves' eyes. Even a single frigate represented a monumental addition to any Chapter's fleet, let alone one jarl's personal power. Tentatively, knuckles began to knock.

'Especially,' Nalfir added, 'now that Blackmane's ill-fated command of the *Veregelt* left that proud warship so gravely wounded.'

Ragnar bared his teeth. 'Had I not acted as I did, the *Veregelt* would be in the possession of Traitors, and a third of the Great Company dead.'

Nalfir's smile was unconscionably smooth. 'Yes, we're all aware just how you covered yourself with glory in that campaign, brother. The fact remains that the company would be well served by acquiring another warship. This isn't theft, kinsmen. This is providence.'

All present could see the indecision in Berek's eyes. The craving of ambition burned beneath the colour of honour.

'There's a certain cunning wisdom in your words, bard...'

Ragnar thudded his armoured fist on the table, just once. The sound drew all eyes towards him.

'My iron still lies on the stone.'

Berek grunted an acknowledgement that wasn't quite an apology. 'Speak, Blackmane. Your jarl listens.'

Ragnar's blue eyes slipped from Nalfir like a knife sliding from a dead man's

spine. He turned his gaze upon the others.

'We're talking of acts of treachery against another Chapter.'

Nalfir smiled. 'Something you have no trivial experience with yourself, eh?'

'One more word...' said Ragnar, his voice as cold as the ice upon which he'd been whelped and raised. 'Even a whisper, *brother*, and you will regret it.'

Against all odds, the bard fell silent, offering only a smile.

'I know I'm not without flaw in this,' Ragnar continued, 'but what you both suggest is beneath us, kinsmen. You, Greylock, suggest cowardice for the sake of convenience. You counsel the destruction of sacred steel out here in the deep void, where no one will see our sin. And you, Razortongue, celebrate dishonour by dressing it in the rags of pragmatism. I at least felt shame for my failures at the Maelstrom's edge.'

'What then do you suggest, Blackmane?' asked the jarl.

The Blood Claw looked to each of his older brothers in turn. 'Tell me of Honour's End,' he said. 'I would hear the full story before I judge where I stand.'

Berek gave a low, displeased growl. 'I was blade to blade with the mad angels that day. I killed one of them myself. He had a hive-dweller's blood on his teeth. The blood of the innocent, Blackmane. All you've read in the archives is true. The Flesh Tearers have a sickness in their souls, and on that day it broke free for all to see. I doubt any of them carry the Allfather in their hearts now. Not truly. Their gene-seed is stagnant and corrupt. It sends venom through their blood. You ask of Honour's End? There's no need, Blood Claw. You saw it yourself when you faced one of them aboard the *Baryonyx* and he came within a breath of killing you. It was that – the very same thing – written across an entire city.'

'A malfunctioning stasis pod is hardly the same as a war, my jarl. Tell me of the battle itself.'

'What else is there to know beyond what the archives say? Would you have me summon a Rune Priest here to let you re-live it, like a whelp on a vision quest? The Flesh Tearers stormed a hive spire, slaughtering thousands of unarmed Imperial souls. In their blind rage, they could no longer tell friend from foe. We stood against them, to defend the civilians. That is the beginning and end of it.'

Ragnar had seen as much, not just from reading the archived reports but from the blurry pict captures of various helmet feeds. Most of such footage was from the imagifiers of Long Fangs, far back from the action, bringing their heavy weapons to bear on the battle below.

'What I've seen in the archives is inconclusive, kinsmen. One might even consider it suspiciously so.' Silence threatened once more as Ragnar trailed away. It was the figure in black who broke the quiet with his husky murmur.

'I was there.'

All of them turned to the warrior in dark plate. Ulrik, the ancient Wolf Priest, met none of their eyes, instead looking at the annulus upon the table as though the stone itself held his memories. The lines on his leathery face could have been carved from dark rock for all the give in his expression.

'I was there the day we drew our blades against our cousins, to punish them for butchering the innocent. I was there, and I claim the right of a warrior's own eyes over the fireside whispers recorded in the archives.'

'Speak, old father,' Ragnar bade him. If Ulrik took offence at the Fenrisian term for a tribe's eldest male, he showed none of it. Perhaps he'd simply heard it enough times from Wolves of every Great Company.

'I am Ulrik, called Slayer by my kith and kin, for I have watered the thirsty earth of five hundred worlds with the blood of the Allfather's foes. We fed the crows that day, as did the Tearers of Flesh. Warriors in the heraldry of both Chapters fell in numbers enough that their broken ceramite carpeted the earth. The blood of the dead ran thick enough to drown the ground beneath our boots.'

'But we won,' Nalfir chorused loyally.

Ulrik's reply was ice itself. 'Warriors who weren't yet born when the battle took place now see the banners and trophies we took from lifeless red hands, and they cry of our great victory. I say we failed that day. We failed to do our duty. The stain of Honour's End clings to the soul of every Wolf who fought there. The shame that we did not stop the Angel's sons sooner, and the regret that we did not wipe them from the face of the galaxy, like filth from the bottom of a boot.'

Ulrik's eyes were dark like old iron, pinpricked by miniscule pupils. His voice held the rough command of an ancient king's decrees, and his gaze was the serene stare of a guiltless killer.

'I take no pride in the day that the Flesh Tearers' honour ended. It is fair, perhaps, to say you know the heart of the Imperium better than any of us here. We fight the Allfather's wars, but you see into the very soul of His empire. You know that no Chapter would be damned purely for turning their butchers' blades upon innocent Imperial souls. We may hate them for it but we would not rain damnation upon them for that alone. The violence they brought against us is not enough to damn them, for Chapters go to war with one another at the merest provocation. Nor is it simply that they massacred an unarmed population. Their blood-madness runs deeper than even such grave acts. If you rely only on the Chapter's archives, then you will know of a pitched battle fought to avenge the innocent dead. A war raging over the lives of Imperial innocents. But what chronicle ever tells the whole truth?'

'Well...' Nalfir began, though he was silenced by Ragnar's quiet snarl.

'Here is the truth of Honour's End,' Ulrik said with cold fire in his ashen eyes. 'When we fell upon them with indignation and fury, when we sought to punish them for what they had done, dozens died on both sides. And there it ended. Both Chapters were bloodied, but High King Grimnar and Seth, Lord of the Sawtoothed Host, brought us back from the edge of ruin. The skirmish ended before it could become a battle.'

Ragnar was captivated by the sight of the old warrior in the throes of confession. 'The archive lists one hundred and seventy-three dead Wolves,' he said, 'cut down in a single battle. You speak of a skirmish. Two hundred lives is a decade's worth of casualties. That's no skirmish, Slayer.'

‘And the archives are correct, young Blackmane. That is the tragedy at play, here. It is why the Tearers of Flesh are truly damned. The skirmish ended with reason amidst the madness. When both sides were calmed by the commands of our lords, a ceasefire should have reigned until both Chapters could withdraw. But it failed to hold. The Flesh Tearers offered to return our slain so we might harvest the gene-seed of the honoured dead. In return, they demanded we surrender their slain warriors to their own red priests.’

Ragnar took a slow breath. ‘Allfather’s blood. You refused them.’

Ulrik nodded, reliving that long ago day. ‘We refused them.’

Even Nalfir, too young to have fought there, looked to the Wolf Priest in silence. Ragnar cursed quietly in disbelief.

‘And then?’ he asked.

‘Then they attacked us. The real battle began, over half a dozen dead bodies. They didn’t dare let us examine their dead. Do you see? They must have feared what we would find in their blood. Whatever corruption burns in their bodies is a sickness that steals all reason from them in battle. It is a secret they keep at all costs. Were you to access the archives of the Adeptus Mechanicus, I suspect you would find precious little evidence of submitted gene-seed tithes in recent centuries. They are hiding something. Something terrible. A genetic degeneration, a spiritual cancer... It is hard to say. Were we a Chapter more attuned to the whims of the Inquisition and the Adeptus Terra, we might have offered testimony to have the Flesh Tearers declared *Excommunicate Traitoris*.’

‘But we face our foes,’ Berek put in with a growl. ‘We do not run to the mortals ruling in the Allfather’s name and whine for their aid.’

‘As you say, Jarl Thunderfist,’ Ulrik agreed, passionless in his concurrence.

‘But...’ Ragnar began.

‘*But?*’ Berek repeated the word in disbelief. ‘You weren’t at Honour’s End but you’ve crossed blades with one of them yourself mere hours ago. They’re rabid creatures, one and all. You’d be dead now if you’d not struck him down. The Chapter is irredeemable, Blackmane.’

‘No redemption can cleanse them of their butchery, sire, but we broke a most sacred tradition at Honour’s End. In claiming their dead, we gave them no choice but to attack, whether they were guilty or not. Would the Wolves not have done the same, if another Chapter refused to return the honoured dead of Fenris?’

‘It’s different,’ Uller Greylock replied.

‘Utterly different,’ Berek agreed.

‘Is it?’ Ragnar’s voice was almost bladed in its gentleness. ‘And are there no degenerate strains within our own gene-seed? Are we sons of Fenris purer than pure? Or is there a secret swimming in our blood – one we would kill to protect – as well?’

‘I’d advise you,’ Jarl Berek said slowly, ‘to be very careful with your next words, brother.’

Ragnar’s muscles bunched in feral readiness at the threat. His breathing slowed almost to nothing, and he saw the same hunting instinct take hold of the

others in the same moment.

'I'm not accusing our bloodline of disloyalty,' he said. 'Only that there are aberrant strains within our own cells – a secret known only among our own kind. Do the Adeptus Mechanicus viziers toiling over our genetic tithes consider it unholy? Do they see it at all? Perhaps their investigations reveal anomalies without definitive results, even after all these centuries. Perhaps they lack the vision to understand the anomalies they discover. Does High King Grimnar even send the tithes? Or perhaps our place as a First Founding Chapter grants us treatment that the Flesh Tearers are denied. Who can say?'

Berek's jaws ground together hard enough to creak. A trickle of saliva ran from the edge of his lips, and his guttural voice sent shivers through the table.

'I no longer like your tone, Blackmane.'

'I speak no treachery, sire. There is something in the blood of the Einherjar that turns the hearts of men into the souls of beasts. We know it as the Wulfen Curse. But what Mars thinks of it, if anything, I cannot even guess. The warrior I fought aboard the *Baryonyx* was no longer capable of thought. Something had turned his mind. If we can learn—'

One warrior's knuckles thudded against the stone annulus. It was Ulrik.

'Enough,' said the old Wolf Priest.

That single syllable echoed with the finality of a funeral bell. Muscles began to ease. Knuckles loosened from the hilts of undrawn swords.

Berek wasn't so easily cowed. This was his council chamber, and the warriors present were his closest kindred, oathed to his word and sworn to his command. Ulrik walked between Great Companies, beholden to no jarl, without the rank to demand anything of any Wolf Lord. But he was also the Slayer, the bearer of Leman Russ' own helm, with his name already written more than a hundred times across the Chapter's legends.

Authority did not always lie in rank and title. Berek relented, releasing the haft of his battle axe.

One by one, Ulrik met their gazes. 'Blackmane speaks wisely.' He turned his ashen eyes to Ragnar. Bone charms and wooden carvings rattled against his armour with even the smallest movement. 'But you also speak incautiously. You're newly ascended to your lord's honour guard, Blood Claw. Act with honour at all times, and never cast a shadow across the bloodline of Leman Russ.'

Ragnar tilted his head to bare his throat for a moment – a Space Wolf's gesture, not a Fenrisian's. 'I recognise my failing and will be sure to correct it.'

Ulrik smiled at the ancient phrase, his face creasing with amusement so brief that it was almost illusory.

'Be it so. Remember, I did not say we were blameless at Honour's End, Blackmane, but no Chapter would be justified in gathering our corpses for their inquisitive knives. We do not warrant such scrutiny. We do not paint our faces with the blood of the men, women and children we are charged to defend. We do not turn our blades on other Space Marines when our guilt is exposed. Whatever secrets the Wolves hold as precious, we keep them to ourselves.'

Ragnar nodded, speaking another old phrase. 'We do not do what is lawful.'

We do what is right.'

Knuckles rapped against the stone table at last.

'And with that in mind,' Ragnar continued, 'I know what we should do with the Flesh Tearers warship. Destroying it is cowardly. Claiming it is theft.'

'So we should just leave it here?' Nalfir's smile was one-sided, and no amusement reached his stare. 'You would let a prize like this rot in the black?'

Ragnar shook his head. 'No. You're all avoiding the most obvious answer.'

Greylock sensed Ragnar's intent and gave a low chuckle. 'You cannot be serious, Blackmane.'

'Why not?' the Blood Claw replied. 'It's a Flesh Tearers warship.'

'So?' asked Nalfir.

'So... we give it back.'

Havoc erupted in a storm of laughter. Uller even slapped Ragnar on the shoulder in recognition of a great jest.

'Ah, the humour of the young,' Berek said through a grin. 'One of them tried to cut your throat not three days ago, yet now you advocate doing them a great favour.'

Uller was still chuckling. 'Perhaps the youngblood wishes to fill the *Baryonyx*'s belly with our own warriors, so we might leap out in ambush when we're taken deep into Flesh Tearers territory. Is that so, Blackmane? Agree that it is, even if you lie by doing so, and salvage a shred of honour from this while you still can.'

Two souls remained silent throughout the laughter: Ragnar himself and old Ulrik. Ragnar's teeth were clenched throughout the humiliation, the second he'd endured in the same month. His fingers curled on their slow way to becoming fists. He could almost feel his brothers' faces breaking under the hammering of his armoured knuckles.

Ulrik wasn't blind to such things. 'Control your temper, Blood Claw. Say what you wish to say, for even if your jarl is not listening, I am. What do we gain from returning the *Baryonyx* to the Angel's mad sons?'

Ragnar forced his bile back down. His voice was almost calm. 'You said yourself, Slayer, that every Chapter has its sins and secrets. We must be mindful of our hypocrisy in this. Should we sail there to bare our throats and apologise for shedding their blood? No, of course not. We were right to fight them at Honour's End. But that was then, and this is now.'

Nalfir snorted. 'And what has changed?'

'Everything.' Despite leashing his temper, Ragnar spat onto the deck by Nalfir's boots. He was careful, at least, not to let his saliva ducts acidify the sign of disrespect. 'You know what has changed, Razortongue. The sky darkened above Fenris and our priests see grim omens everywhere. Our blades must be turned to worthier foes. Now is the time to resolve this conflict once and for all.'

'Resolve?' the bard laughed again. 'We'll *resolve* this conflict by winning it. By destroying them like the heretics they are.'

'That would bleed the Chapter dry, Razortongue.' Olvec, First of the Wolf Guard – called the Tongueless by his kith and kin for the rarity of his words –

added his voice at last. As he spoke, his brow furrowed beneath his crest of age-whitened red hair. 'In destroying the Flesh Tearers we would cripple ourselves almost beyond recovery. Think what you're saying before you breathe your foolish words into our ears.'

Ragnar sensed the shift of tension in the air and went for the kill. 'How many times have we crossed blades with the Flesh Tearers since Honour's End?'

'Too many,' Berek grunted at once. Knuckles hammered on stone in the rhythm of agreement. Unlike the distant disrespect between the Wolves and the Dark Angels, the tensions between the Flesh Tearers and the Sons of Russ all too often spilled out into open conflict.

Ragnar nodded as if they'd proved his point. 'And each time it has turned to blood on the earth, the snow and the sand before any ceasefire or truce could even be considered. We should face them now, not as enemies but as wayward cousins. We must decide if our old brotherhood can be salvaged.'

'You believe we should forgive them?' asked Ulrik.

'My own... rash... actions of late have turned my thoughts somewhat. I'm not speaking of forgiveness, Slayer. Not yet. For now I suggest nothing beyond sheathing our swords for long enough to learn the truth. If the Flesh Tearers are damned, then we have lost nothing by seeing it for ourselves. Swords can be drawn and enemies ended. But if they might yet be our cousins when the Wolftime comes, then I would find out now rather than sell more of our blood and sweat in a wasteful war. We need allies, my kinsmen. We need souls that will stand with us when the last sun rises.'

'Pretty words,' Nalfir sighed with feigned gravity, 'but they will be wasted on those traitors, Blackmane.'

'Traitors is a dangerous word, brother. Whole echelons of the Adeptus Sororitas and the Ecclesiarchy say the same of us. How many institutions decry the Wolves as traitors to the Imperium for the times we've shunned the will of the Adeptus Terra? The rolls of history are hardly bare of black marks. Several cite Einherjar vessels opening fire on other Imperial ships for provocation that surely makes no sense to those outside the walls of the Fang. All to protect our independence. The Wolves once opened fire on an Ecclesiarchy fleet without warning, just for the sin of sailing into orbit above Fenris.'

'To dissuade them from making planetfall,' Berek said. 'They believed we were worshipping pagan gods above the Allfather.'

'We don't tolerate Imperial investigation,' added Uller.

'As is our right,' said Nalfir. 'We've done nothing that other Chapters haven't done. Even your recent foolishness with the Dark Angels wasn't wholly without precedent.'

'Every coin has two sides, bard. That's all I'm saying. We should learn the truth amidst the lies.'

Silence rose in the wake of his words. A long silence, during which he met the eyes of every warrior present, awaiting their judgement.

The stillness was broken with a tectonic thud as Ulrik's black gauntlet thumped down against the stone table. He lifted his fist and knocked upon the stone again, beginning a slow beat of knuckle raps.

The others joined in, one by one. Nalfir was the last, only joining in once the jarl had done so.

‘Very well,’ Berek said, his eyes unreadable, though his mouth was a thin line. ‘You have spoken, my kin, and your jarl has listened. Back to your duties for now. I will give my judgement tonight.’

‘I will remain,’ said Ulrik. ‘You and I will talk more on this matter, Jarl Thunderfist.’

Berek’s smile was viciously forced. His teeth were gravestones grinding together.

‘Of course, Slayer. Whatever you wish.’



VIII

Nalfir came to Ragnar that night with frost in his eyes and a knife in his hand. Space Marines required less respite than mortal men and slumbered far less deeply. Many simply forewent rest as long as they were able, letting segments of their altered brains close down in succession, resting portions of their minds without resting their bodies at all.

Yet there was something cleansing in true somnolence. Away from the front lines, the warriors of the Adeptus Astartes would sometimes sleep as humans would sleep, resting their senses in true slumber.

It was common for the warriors of many Chapters to keep to their own chambers in their sparse hours of rest. This was not the case with the Einherjar. Within the ranks of the Thunderfist Great Company – and like the wolves of their Gothic namesake – the warriors slept in packs. The central chamber of a barracks hall was a squad's sanctuary, armoury and bedchamber. Servitors and favoured thralls often lived in the same shared space, sleeping when the Wolves were away, serving when the warriors were present.

One of them, an arming servitor, tracked Nalfir's movements across the chamber with a critical cybernetic eye. Its voice was a toneless drone as it acknowledged the Wolf.

'Champion Razortongue, do you require–'

‘Sssss,’ the bard hissed back. ‘Silence.’

Nalfir’s unarmoured form landed with a thud on Ragnar’s slab of a bed. He crouched above the other Wolf’s prone figure, eyes narrowed to vicious slits, tapping the silver knife on his pack-brother’s chest. It clink-clink-clinked against the dark contours of Ragnar’s black carapace set beneath the skin.

‘Blackmane,’ he snarled quietly. His fingers tightened around the hilt as he bathed in the urge to shed the irritating Blood Claw’s lifeblood.

Ragnar still didn’t move. Every breath drew in the scent of the bard’s salt-sweat, and the knife’s separate, sharp metallic smell. He didn’t even open his eyes.

‘Blackmane,’ the bard whispered, teeth clenched now.

‘Go away,’ Ragnar murmured, ‘or I’ll take that knife and pry out both of your eyes.’

‘I think not.’ Nalfir slid from the slab, twirling the knife across his fingers with the grace of a fireside trickster. ‘We should speak, Blackmane.’

Ragnar finally sat up, feeling uncomfortable itches at the armour feed connection ports across his spine and shoulders. They were red and angry, each one like a little wound. It was the first time he’d been out of his armour in months, and with typical timing Nalfir had shattered that chance of well-earned rest.

‘Then speak.’

‘You’re new to the First Pack and hungry for glory. I see it in your eyes. No shame in that, eh? But you’re putting your ambition above the needs of the company.’

‘If you have a point beyond this posturing, please reach it swiftly.’

Nalfir shook his head and sighed as if he’d never seen anything quite so tragic. ‘This is all very selfish of you, Blackmane. We should be sword-brothers, you and I. One pack. One heart. One mind. Not pulling in different directions.’

Ragnar reached up to bind his long hair in its customary hunter’s crest, dragging the strands from his face. He knew there would be no more slumber now.

‘You woke me for this?’

‘No, I woke you to challenge you to a fight.’ Nalfir spun the knife, letting it dance over his fingers in a silver blur. Like Ragnar he was unarmoured, barefoot and bare-chested, clad only in rough hide trousers. Scars decorated his dark-skinned body, telling the tales of a hundred battlefields.

‘Am I to guess the cause of this challenge?’ Ragnar asked. ‘Or should I just assume you want to ease your bruised pride because the jarl heeded my words and not yours?’

In a flash of muscle and sinew, Nalfir had the knife against the Blood Claw’s throat. The keen silver edge scraped Ragnar’s unshaven skin. The bard grinned, face to face with his rival.

‘You’re an arrogant child, Blackmane. You get a pretty sword from a noblemaiden on Terra and suddenly you think yourself lord of the pack, fiercer and bolder and wiser than the rest of us.’

‘Is this bitterness that I was chosen as battle leader?’

‘And look how you performed in the role, eh? This is about more than your childish temper. This is about *arrogance*. Do you think I’m blind to your glory-lust?’

Ragnar’s teeth showed white in the chamber’s faint illumination. ‘What I think is that you’re pushing your luck, singer. If you’re worried about your place in the First Pack, perhaps you should be fiercer, bolder and wiser yourself.’

‘Such pretty threats,’ Nalfir’s honeyed voice was low and snide, ‘from an unblooded cub.’

Ragnar moved just as swiftly, dragging his bone knife from a sheath on his shin and pressing the tip to the underside of his brother’s jaw. A single ruby droplet ran down the fang dagger, turning the air molten with the chemical spice of Nalfir’s blood.

‘*Unblooded?*’ he breathed into the other warrior’s face. ‘Keep pushing me, teller of tales. I’ll wear your blood as warpaint for a year and a day, so all will know my knife cut out both of your worthless hearts.’

If Ragnar was the promise of fire, Nalfir was the chill of ice on the wind. The bard’s spite was a calm thing, deceptively gentle.

‘You,’ the bard smiled, ‘are an upstart, glory-starved infant. A child playing at being a man. A cub playing at hunter, surviving only by your maddening fortune. But luck runs out, Blackmane. Luck always runs out.’

Ragnar’s knife answered by pressing upwards, piercing the surface of his brother’s skin again, shedding another trickle of genhanced blood.

‘I know it was you,’ he breathed the words. ‘You deactivated the stasis lock on the *Baryonyx*. I know it was you, Razortongue.’

‘You know nothing, unblooded child.’

‘Call me unblooded one more time,’ warned Ragnar, ‘and I’ll use your honour scrolls to wipe myself after night soil.’

Nalfir leaned closer, his mouth conspiratorially close to the other man’s ear. His voice softened to a vicious, falsely sweet murmur.

‘*Worthless. Unblooded. Cub.*’

Ragnar threw himself forwards, both warriors crashing to the deck in a tangle of bludgeoning limbs. Around the chamber, thralls and servitors hurriedly backed away. The time of threats and insults was done, now wordless grunts and half-formed curses filled the air, punctuated by the dull thuds of fists striking home and heads cannoning off the iron floor.

The sound of Ragnar’s dagger pommel cracking Nalfir’s skull was the thunderclap of lightning splitting a tree trunk. The sound of Nalfir’s knife driving into Ragnar’s guts was the wet smack of a carcass dropping from a meat hook in the butchers’ hall. Priceless blood decorated the deck in shed speckles, a trail marking the brothers’ warring passage across the chamber.

Nalfir heaved Ragnar’s head up by his hunter’s crest, using it to slam the Blood Claw’s face against Uller Greylock’s bare sleeping slab. Once. Twice. Thrice. A smeared and bloody imprint of Ragnar’s face looked wildly back up at both of them.

An elbow hammered into the bard's throat, hard enough to close his windpipe in a clench of abused sinew, and a second blow cracked into his chin hard enough to break two of his teeth. Rather than slip free as Nalfir's grip loosened, Ragnar pressed the attack. A moment of potential respite dissolved into further brawling. Both of them had lost their knives. Neither of them cared.

It went on like this for some time. Such was life among the frostborn. The Einherjar's sagas were filled with bare-knuckle battles between tribemates and pack-brothers. Most of them ended with the restoration of good sense and brotherly vows of companionship. Lessons were learned. Rivals became sword-brothers. Men who had been willing to brain one other and spill each other's blood found themselves breathless at the end of their brawl, grinning, laughing, bonded closer than ever.

Not here. The fight ended with an iron table crashing into both warriors, thrown with the force of Fenris' winter wind. The table's edge struck Nalfir's already shattered skull, dropping him as though pole-axed. Ragnar took the brunt of the impact on his back and shoulders, sending him smacking face-first into the wall before he staggered down onto his knees.

Down on the deck, they breathed in ragged, bestial panting.

'Nnnh,' Nalfir grunted through blood-coated teeth. Whatever it was supposed to mean was something no one would ever know.

'Grrrhh,' was Ragnar's equally ineloquent reply.

A warrior in full war-plate stood in the centre of the chamber, his teeth bared at his downed kinsmen. Russ himself had never looked so full of fury.

'Accursed Blood Claws.'

'I...' began Nalfir, '...am not a...'

An armoured boot pounded into the bard's chest, snapping the reinforced genetic fusion of his ribs. The bard's protest dissolved into a wounded and puppyish snarl.

'Be silent,' said the warrior standing above them. 'Both of you, shut your mouths. You've got blood everywhere. It's all over my weapon rack.'

'Greylock...' Ragnar managed to say as he regained his feet.

The older warrior's backhand hit hard enough to tear a mortal man's head free from his shoulders. Tanks ran over helpless enemies with less force. Ragnar tumbled to the deck, boneless and groaning.

'I said *be silent*, both of you. That means your clever tongue, Blackmane, as well as the bard's woeful singing.'

Uller Greylock stalked around the pack's shared chamber, looking over the damage, following the blood spatters with an ursine growl.

'I don't need to be a Rune Priest to read the omens in this blood trail.' He gestured at the smeared profile of Ragnar's face imprinted on the metal pallet slab. 'All the portents tell the same simple truth – you're both useless.'

Uller levelled a bolter directly at Nalfir's face. Frost shone in the older warrior's dark eyes.

'If you believe I won't shoot you, boy, you've gravely mistaken my temper.'

'You wouldn't.' Nalfir bared his bloody teeth. 'Greylock, my brother, we're

both First Pack.'

'Which means what, to you?' Uller nodded over to Ragnar. 'You just stabbed your pack-brother in the guts, and he broke your head open in return. Now is a foolish time to call upon pack loyalty, Razortongue. When I said to be silent, I meant it.'

'But Greylock--'

The bolter boomed once. The thunder was near-deafening in the confines of the communal chamber, and the slaves – already cowering in the corners of the room – covered their ears at the detonation.

'You wretch!' Nalfir cried out, clutching the bloody stump where his left hand had been. Uller kept his bolter trained on the two wounded warriors.

'You'll live, fool. It's just a hand. Ask nicely and perhaps the Iron Priests will make you a new one.' Uller tapped the vox-link in his armoured collar. 'Rimefang, this is Greylock.'

'Greylock,' Askarval's voice returned at once, crackling over the vox.

'Get word to the Slayer. He's needed in the Hearth of the First Pack.'

Askarval's only reply was a dry grunt of acknowledgement. Once the vox-link clicked closed, Uller finally lowered his bolter and shook his head.

'Accursed Blood Claws.'

'Stop calling me a--' said Nalfir, but the bolter rose again in the time it took to blink.

'I count one hand still attached to your wrist,' Uller snarled. 'Speak one more word and that number will fall in a way you won't enjoy.'

Nalfir lapsed into wise silence at long last. On the deck, lying on his back and swallowing the taste of his own blood, Ragnar laughed alone.

He opened his eyes when the Slayer entered the room. Ragnar hadn't been truly sleeping, merely immersing himself in the meditative state between slumber and consciousness, quieting almost his entire mind rather than mere portions.

The last two days had dragged – he was healed within hours of his arrival, but he was confined to the starboard apothecarion. A punishment, he suspected, but a practical one. Their elders were keeping him away from Nalfir... and keeping Nalfir away from him.

'Welcome back,' Ulrik greeted him.

Ragnar's body was an artist's canvas of fading bruises and healing knife gouges whitening into shallow scars. The wound across his belly was thicker – a deeper and more jagged reminder of his recent behaviour.

Ulrik turned old, old eyes to the young warrior. His gaze was unreadable. Ragnar had to guess whether he was seeing disappointment or dark amusement, and whether there was a difference either way.

'You're First Pack now,' the Wolf Priest said. 'How swiftly you rise.'

'Is that pride I hear, Slayer?'

Ulrik wouldn't be drawn into such a confession. 'A company's First Pack is supposed to be an example of brotherhood and veteran maturity.'

Ragnar said nothing, which said everything.

‘There’s talk among the other packs that both you and Razortongue will be sent back to the Fang.’

Ragnar cursed. Sent back in disgrace. An outcast, begging for entry into another Great Company or serving within the fortress-monastery’s hall – denied any honour – until finally drawing a last breath beneath Fenris’ stormy skies.

No. He didn’t dare give it any more thought. He was made for more than such a shameful fate.

‘You have a truly vile temper, Blackmane.’

‘So I’m often told.’ He flexed his limbs and stretched his muscles, feeling the pleasant crackle of sinew.

‘Half of those I’ve spoken to were ashamed of you for trying to kill a packmate. The other half were annoyed with you for not finishing the job. Razortongue is an unpopular soul.’

That, Ragnar thought, is a very diplomatic way of putting it.

‘As are you at the moment,’ Ulrik added. ‘Wrecking a destroyer and angering the Dark Angels? Your brothers say that misfortune clings to you like barnacles on a boat’s hull.’

Ragnar’s reply was a noncommittal grunt.

‘This grudge is beneath you, Blackmane. You’re not a petty or trivial soul. So why this? Why Razortongue?’

‘I have no answer worth giving. He baits me as a hunter baits prey. He even counters my orders on the field of battle. He speaks against everything I say. If I stood before the Allfather himself and said the north wind blows cold in winter, Razortongue would insist the southern gales were colder in summer. It’s just his way.’

‘Maybe so,’ Ulrik allowed. ‘Or perhaps it is his role in the Great Company. His place rather than his personality. Where a lord must seem impartial, the lord’s mouthpiece can speak with impunity. Razortongue would hardly be the first bard and herald to be used by a jarl for such a role.’

‘I’ve thought as much, myself. Yet it feels more than that. More personal. This isn’t the first time he’s tried to kill me.’

Ulrik’s dark, weathered features twisted in hollow mirth. ‘Is that so?’

‘There have been other incidents, all since I joined the First Pack. These are only the latest. He even tried on the *Baryonyx*. The freed Flesh Tearer... that was no coincidence, Slayer. No one with eyes and a reasoning mind would believe it was a simple malfunction.’

‘You seem so certain, yet you haven’t spoken out against him for the sin.’

Ragnar felt like spitting at the very idea. ‘I won’t flee to the jarl like a child needing an embrace. I face my enemies myself, on my own terms.’

‘If, indeed, he is an enemy. Anger and conjecture is not proof, young-blood. Yet you tried to strike him down, did you not? And what if you’d succeeded? Murder of a packmate is a grievous crime, Blackmane.’

‘I didn’t try to kill him,’ said the Blood Claw with a smile. ‘I sought only to teach him a lesson in respect.’

‘He says the same of you.’

‘What?’ Ragnar found his grin becoming a growl. The low rumble in his throat infected his words, making them a feral threat. ‘You’ve spoken to Razortongue?’

‘Briefly. He’s confined to the portside apothecarion. They’re keeping you on opposite sides of the ship while you recover.’

‘I’ve already recovered.’

‘Brave words from a man who was practically disembowelled. I wouldn’t go kraken-hunting just yet, Blood Claw, no matter how strong you feel.’

‘I gave as good as I took.’

‘I know that better than you do,’ Ulrik pointed out, ‘for I’ve seen the damage to his skull. But I did not come to speak of what has happened. I came to tell you what will happen now.’

Ragnar nodded, waiting, saying nothing. A chill was snaking its unwelcome way down his backbone. The fact it was the Slayer bearing the sentence didn’t bode well.

‘Your fate has already been decided,’ said Ulrik. ‘The jarl informed the Great Company an hour ago. It is time to redeem yourself, Ragnar Blackmane.’

Ragnar gave a wordless, suspicious gaze, that finally broke with an unselfconscious smile.

‘I’m not going to like this, am I?’

It took seven weeks to repair and refit the *Baryonyx*. She was far from the sleek void blade she’d been in her prime, but with the reverence and concentration of a host of tech-priests and machine-thralls, it was believed she would sail the warp’s tides without coming apart at the seams.

The *Holmgang* and the *Veregelt* were long gone. Jarl Thunderfist’s ships had sailed away to fight in the Allfather’s name, as was their duty. The jarl refused to wait for the repair’s completion, trusting it to those he chose to leave behind.

An Adeptus Astartes frigate sails the black skies with a full crew numbering in the tens of thousands. When the *Baryonyx*’s plasma drives quickened and her engines fired, she was crewed by the several hundred survivors of her long stasis drift, as well as four hundred souls consigned to serve aboard her decks by Lord Berek. The jarl’s own ship sailed away four hundred souls lighter – no small sacrifice, even for a ship of *Holmgang*’s size. Doubly so, considering the number of thralls and serfs he’d been forced to donate to the wounded *Veregelt* after so many human crew had died in the brief, brutal ambush at the Maelstrom’s edge.

Most precious of all, Jarl Thunderfist abandoned one of his own Navigational coteries to guide the Flesh Tearers warship home. The value of even a single Navigator ranked above the profit of entire worlds, yet Berek left one behind when the *Holmgang* set sail.

Seven weeks alone in the void, undergoing painstaking repair. Seven weeks until her engines finally fired, letting her begin a journey that would take months.

On the command deck – now cleared of corpses and the dust that unburied

corpses become – Ragnar stood by the empty command throne. He looked over the thin herd of crew members manning the ornate stations, scarcely enough to manage the ship's basic systems. They would be next to worthless if the *Baryonyx* ran into trouble. Three-quarters of the ship's guns would refuse to fire.

The deck shuddered beneath his boots as the ship finally came alive. The stars on the oculus began to drift.

'Set course for Cretacia,' he called out to the sparse, scattered packs of thralls. As if it needed saying. As if there were anywhere else this ship was destined to go.

He'd studied Cretacia in the hololithic archives, watching it turn in its slow dance, feeling an unexpected stab of familiarity. The world was a sister to Fenris in the way siblings can have everything in common yet look nothing alike. Both were *Inhabitare Mortua* – death worlds in Low Gothic parlance – and fiercely hostile to human life, yet where the Hearthworld was a globe of ice and raging oceans, Cretacia was a sphere of teeming jungles. Its face had showed vile green against the backdrop of stars, almost like corposant in the black. Fenris did the same, though with a glowing visage of blue-white frost.

Ragnar leaned on the guardrail around the central dais, wondering if he'd ever see the Hearthworld again. The isolation of deep, utter separation from his pack and company wasn't entirely new to him – not to a warrior with a past as bloody and colourful as his own – but was always unnerving and forever unwelcome. Pack animals needed time to adjust to being on their own, and a Wolf was no different.

'Are you ready, brother?' he asked over his shoulder.

The other warrior present replied with a false and unlovely smirk. His face was an artist's palette of ripe bruises. A curved cranial plate had been crudely implanted at his temple and cheek to rebind his skull together.

'I'm overjoyed to be coming with you, you know,' said Nalfir Razortongue. 'I'm sure we'll receive the warmest of welcomes on Cretacia.'



INTERLUDE

Cadia – The Tunnels Beneath Kasr Belloc
The Last Turning of the Year's Wind
999.M41

Weaponless and wounded, the warrior fled across the tundra. His boots churned up the snow and shattered the grey rocks beneath his staggering lope, and though he often stumbled, he didn't stop. To stop was to die, slain by the blizzard into which he walked, or the Beast that dogged his heels.

The Beast's roars were growing faint – perhaps drowned by the raging wind, perhaps blessedly fading with distance. He prayed it was the latter, yet feared it was the former. Worse was the sound itself. The Beast didn't cry out like an animal; it shrieked like the singing of a steel blade.

The chill was a force unto itself, a cold beyond cold. Its icy caress ate at him, penetrating his armour and leeching the strength from his bones, as impossible as that was. Never had he felt the bite of such a storm. At least, not since the weakling years of his scarcely remembered childhood. Frost glazed across his armour, cracking when he moved, reforming within the span of a single breath. No earthly storm, this.

Rocks gave way beneath his lurching tread, the treacherous stones sending

him crashing to his hands and knees. He breathed a curse that the wind immediately stole, ripping it from his tongue before he could even hear his own voice.

Behind him, the Beast's metallic clarion rang out once again. Closer, now. Maddeningly close. He hadn't been outrunning it after all.

He dragged himself to his feet, forcing his protesting muscles back into the leaning run. Every breath sawing in and out of his throat inhaled the storm and exhaled the remnants of warmth. He'd forced himself into stasis a handful of times in the past, consciously deanimating his biological processes until settling into artificial slumber. This was different. This wasn't the slowing of life, but the draining of it. His biology wasn't deanimating, it was dying. In his chest, his three lungs were growing slow, freezing into hard, useless chunks of flesh. Both of his hearts were lead-heavy, churning icewater instead of pumping blood.

On he ran. Sluggish blood leaked from the lacerated joints of his battle armour, freezing to ruby ice against the grey ceramite. He couldn't recall how he'd taken the wounds; the wind's bitterness was slowing his mind, sweeping his thoughts out of reach.

When the ground gave way beneath him again, it did more than slip from beneath his boots – it lurched downwards and fell away, all sanctuary suddenly banished. The warrior felt himself sliding, tumbling with the falling rocks. Only a panicked hand slamming into solid stone arrested his drop into a chasm that hadn't existed three seconds before.

He hung there, the muscles of his arm straining and tearing, supporting his dangling weight. Beneath him, only blackness and the roaring of the wind. The chasm was depthless, limitless. It was the wide, lightless maw of the kraken that gnawed upon the world's core.

How easy it would be to let go. To abandon his wounded, freezing husk that promised nothing but another few minutes of frostburned pain before succumbing to this storm of storms, or the sharp, hot end of a death between the Beast's jaws.

No. This bloodless fall into darkness was no way for a warrior to die.

His slackening grip on the rock ledge tightened just as a shadow blackened the sky above him. He looked up, expecting the Beast's flashing fangs, or the blur of its claws. What met his gaze was neither.

His lord stood on the precipice, armoured and armed, his great fur cloak dragged by the blowing wind.

'Blackmane,' said Jarl Berek Thunderfist, crouching to offer his hand to the hanging warrior.

Ragnar didn't take it. Nor could he speak through his closed throat, with his tongue numbed and his lips rimed with ice.

Berek grinned through a frost-whitened beard. He reached lower, offering his gauntleted hand once more. 'Come on, lad. Time to go.'

He slumbered for a time, sinking into black unconsciousness instead of the respite of true sleep. Awareness returned in bleary fits and spurts. His senses

would come to life long enough to feel a dizzying, sickly warmth against his skin. He saw the prickling orange light of a nearby fire.

'Blackmane?' came his lord's voice.

Ragnar didn't reply. He couldn't. His tongue was a dead slug between aching gums, his thoughts too slow to form into words.

'Do you know,' the voice asked, *'just how close you came to death? How close you still are? Fight it, damn you.'*

His eyes fell closed, drowning him first in nausea, then in nothingness.

The next time he surfaced, he saw a cave's grey walls turned amber by the fire's flickering light. Shreds of a dream slipped from his skull – he saw dark armour and priestly robes; he saw silver steel and he heard it sing with an animal's roar...and then nothing more.

This time, he managed to rise. Armour joints snarled in harmony with the aches in his bones.

The cave was small, a haven rather than a home. Ragnar bathed in the fire's light and heat, breathing it in like life itself. The hot air tasted of blood and ash, but even that was a blessing after the choking tang of snow freezing his throat.

'I was beginning to think you'd gone to your reward at the Allfather's side,' said the hulking figure crouched by the fire.

Ragnar looked at his liege lord, the older warrior stirring the fire's heart with a thick deadwood branch. When the words came, they weren't the ones Ragnar had intended to speak.

'You look no different to the last time I saw you.'

Berek grinned, not looking away from the flames. 'What were you expecting, Blackmane?'

'A corpse,' the younger warrior replied. *'You're dead, sire.'*

'Is that so?' Berek tossed the deadwood staff into the flames, letting them eat it with the rest of the bracken.

'I avenged you,' Ragnar pointed out. *As his thoughts came together in unreliable strands, he was beginning to doubt he was awake at all. 'I butchered the heretic that shed your lifeblood.'*

'Oh,' Berek gave an ursine growl that was likely a laugh. *'How heroic of you.'*

Ragnar hauled himself to his feet, only to be met with his lord's murmured warning. 'Careful there, hero. You'll be as weak as a three-day cub.'

As true as it was, Ragnar refused to show it. He sank to his haunches by the fire, opposite his long-dead jarl.

'Where's Frostfang?'

'That little pig-sticker? Who knows. You didn't have it when I found you out in the snow. That's your first question? I expected something more practical from you, Blackmane. Do you even know where you are?'

'Where am I?'

Berek's eyes gleamed, dark and delighted. 'A cave.'

'I see that, sire. Where is this cave?'

'Right here.'

Ragnar bared his teeth in a moment of irritated instinct. 'Where is "right here"?''

'Still got that temper, eh? That'll be the death of you, little king.'

'As yours was the death of you?' Ragnar snapped. *'You, who breathed your last breath spitted like venison at a feast and gutted by traitorous blades?'*

Berek laughed, opening his fur cloak to reveal his dented and scratched suit of battle armour. The breastplate was a shattered ruin, carved from throat to groin, scabbed over by a thick layer of ice. Destroyed organs and riven flesh showed, just barely, distorted through the frozen lens.

'Yes, just like me. How are the others, eh? How are my First Pack?'

'They are my First Pack now, lord.'

'They took my iron before they took any oath to you, whelp, so tell me how my brothers fare. By Russ, I miss them still.'

Ragnar drew breath to speak, only to be struck by a sudden pressure in his skull. The air he dragged into his lungs had the chemical tang of shipboard filtrators, and the comforting fire flared into the stare of an artificial sun, acid-savage in his eyes.

'Blackmane?' he heard Berek call.

Ragnar held his head in his hands, to stop his skull coming apart at the seams.

'Blackmane?'

'Blackmane?'

'Aye, Slayer. I live. Merely lost in thought.'

'More like dreaming on your feet. A sign of skull damage, or a serious wound to the mind.'

'All is well,' Ragnar lied. 'I saw nothing. All is well.'

Ragnar leaned against the corpse barricade, forcing the shaking, cramping muscles in his arm to unlock. Ahead of him a literal vista of bodies choked the wide tunnel for fifty metres. Behind him, his men were breathless and bleeding, their flesh wracked and torn. Several sank to the ground where they had been standing, overcome with muscle tremors from fighting for seven hours straight. One of them dragged his mangled helmet clear with a curse and spat out a handful of teeth. Due to adrenaline and pain nullifiers in their bloodstreams, wounds taken hours ago were only now discovered: one of the Wolves touched dirty gloved fingertips to his mouth, realising that the axe blow that broke his jaw an hour ago had also torn out part of his tongue.

At Ragnar's side, one of his Grey Hunters slid down to the corpse-laden ground, sitting on the chest of a slain World Eater. The warrior looked at his own left arm with an emotion somewhere between disbelief and irritation. Infrequent sparks flickered from his cleaved wrist, where his bionic hand had been severed away.

Ragnar forced a smile across his features. 'Better your wrist than your throat, brother.'

The warrior growled a laugh. 'True enough, sire.'

Ragnar clapped an encouraging hand on the warrior's back-mounted power pack, and moved away from the barricade.

His men hailed him as he moved through their exhausted packs. He kept his features set in a sly grin, joking with them, teasing them, mocking those who showed superficial and unthreatening injuries. The grin was important. His men must always see him keen and battle-ready, never beset by doubt or troubled by circumstance. Leaders had to be aware of such nuances.

So he grinned, even down in the underworld of blood-stink and barricades made from dead foes. His eyes blazed with forced focus despite the pain of his split-open and hastily sealed skull. The head wound troubled him more than he dared admit. An hour ago, Ulrik had fused the back of the jarl's skull closed with armour cement. Desperate times called for desperate measures. He'd since decided against mentioning how his mind – and his senses – wandered worryingly close to dreams and delusions.

The region they now held was called the Concourse. There, beneath the generatoria district of Kasr Belloc, they stood against the tides of foes seeking to overwhelm them. The route to Kasr Lavok was already hopelessly strangled. For the whole of the day they'd held the subterranean junctions at the Concourse, where Ragnar's warriors had manned a series of barricaded chokepoints and prepared several fallback positions.

The long day preceding the last stand at the Concourse had been somewhat less glorious. Kasr Belloc was in flames, and just as Ulrik had warned, the tunnel routes to Lavok were so crammed with the Warmaster's filthy, miserable troops that all forward motion by Ragnar's company had been halted in a grind of ceramite on ceramite. The assault failed when the tunnels collapsed, brought down by the Archenemy on top of Ragnar's vanguard.

Since then, all had been silent. The last of the Cadian 57th had managed to reach Kasr Lavok only to find it already fallen. That was the last Ragnar had heard of their fate, and of the city they'd sought to save.

'Nightblade is back, lord,' said one of his warriors. It was Soergar, called the True Cut by his kith and kin. Ragnar slapped his shoulder guard in thanks and turned to the grizzled figure who approached from the deeper dark.

'Jarl,' the Scout greeted him. Not *My jarl*. The Scouts walked beyond the borders of the twelve Great Companies, beholden only to the orders of High King Grimnar. Drekkka, called Nightblade by his kith and kin, was a far older warrior than the lord he reported to this eve. He was a walking arsenal festooned with weapons, yet without the bulk of sacred ceramite. His trade was murder in the night, not breaking the backs of foes on the front line.

Drekkka's report was terse and to the point. Plainly he expected a swift dismissal after his scouting run, but Ragnar kept the old warrior by his side.

'I need you to push further,' the jarl told him.

'Further towards Lavok?' Drekkka's dark face creased with smile lines. 'The tunnels are lost, Blackmane, and the city is dead. Our future holds no journey to Lavok, this I promise you.'

'Not to Lavok, kinsman.' Ragnar outlined his plan. Drekkka listened and, as was his way, nodded succinctly to give his agreement.

The jarl thanked him, then dismissed him back to the shadows.

As the jarl moved away again, his Wolf Guard flanked him in silent, pack-born unity. He hid his disquiet from his brother-warriors, but the First Pack was bound to their lord closer than any other. They had always seen what others could not be allowed to witness, and knew him too well for his deceptions to take root in their minds. The others of Ragnar's company had seen their lord fight twice as hard as any man alive in these tunnels only to keep grinning between battles, but the First Pack saw beneath the facade. Their lord was weary unto death. They all were.

Away from the other packs, they gathered around a shimmering hololithic display of the local tunnel network generated by the Slayer's hand-held projector.

'We stand at the beginning of the end.' Ulrik gestured to several adjacent passages sweeping around the Concourse's rear. 'I was at the sixth barricade with Skyhunter and his men – the rearward tunnels cannot be held for much longer without reinforcement.'

'You old crow,' said Alrydd with a gunshot laugh. He had replaced Razortongue as the Great Company's bard four decades before, but he was still fresh to the ranks of the First Pack. 'Aren't you drawn to places of death? You should be pleased by the prospect.'

Ulrik smiled beneath his mask, though none of them saw it. 'Perhaps I am. I'm merely pointing out the realities, young singer.'

Ragnar ended their banter with a chop of his hand. 'Focus. Focus on what matters here and now. Fight the battles we can win. That means holding here, and holding here means holding the Septimal passages as well as the rearward tunnels.' He gestured to a cobweb of flickering passages, as thin as filament and spreading out in myriad directions. 'Here. If we take the crawl-tunnels south of the third causeway, it will lessen the pressure on the rearward passages.'

Alrydd cursed beneath his breath. 'It will be knife to throat in those crawl-chutes. No swords. No axes. No bolters.'

Even Uller Greylock sucked in air through his teeth as if in pain. 'It does smell a little like false hope, my jarl, but I'll go if you wish it.'

'I need you elsewhere, Greylock. Longspear, I ask this of you.'

Hrolf Longspear met his lord's gaze.

'Give me Blood Claws, my jarl, and I'll give you those tunnels.'

Ragnar nodded. 'Take the Twice-Proven. Have them leave their ammunition reserves here, divided among the remaining packs.' As he spoke, he looked to Hrolf's features, scarcely lit in the reddish gloom. Longspear showed no unease at the thought of being sent into some of the thickest fighting without a single bolt shell to fire.

'Take those tunnels,' Ragnar said, 'and I'll howl your names to the Allfather myself when I stand before his throne.'

'It will be done,' Hrolf promised.

'Greylock?'

'My jarl.'

The jarl's quick, dark eyes danced across the projection again. His gesturing hand followed. 'The Septimal tunnels. That's where I need you.'

Like Hrolf, Uller agreed without hesitation. 'Who holds those tunnels now?'

'The Red Mist and Wyrdbane,' replied Ragnar. 'At last report, Wyrdbane is down to five men.'

Uller paced the rockcrete floor. 'Good men with good blades, but it's fairer to ask them to grow wings and fly than to hold there alone much longer. By your leave, I'll take the True Cut and his Swordkin to stand with them.'

'Done.' Ragnar's reply was immediate. 'Go.'

Uller bared his throat in the private Einherjar gesture of obedience. He was gone a moment later, calling Soergar True Cut and his pack to follow.

It was Ulrik who asked the question none of the others wished to voice. He asked it calmly, without either hope or rancour. A practical man, concerned only with the details.

'Then I assume we've heard nothing of reinforcements?' The moment the words left his wolf-skulled helm, the tunnel shivered around them, raining dust and pebble debris against their ceramite plating. With a little imagination, the growl of distant artillery could be the laughter of giants.

Alrydd looked to the shaking walls. 'The war itself is laughing at that question, Slayer.'

Ragnar smiled at the bard's grim jest. It was the kind of thing Razortongue would have said.

The Wolf Lord took his place at the first barricade, bracing himself against the armoured bodies of the dead traitors piled up to make a waist-high wall. The symbol of a blue-and-green world, an image of Old Earth perhaps, showed on the dead warriors' red armour. A world being devoured between iron jaws.

Ancient Ulrik was at Ragnar's side, his leathery features masked by the wolf-skull helm. He stared, red-eyed, into the darkness of the tunnel across the barricade.

'Dare I ask?' Ragnar asked the Wolf Priest.

Ulrik's laugh was dry and ugly. 'I've cut the red threads of nine Eaters of Worlds today. *Nine*. Can you say the same of yourself?'

'He could say it,' Alrydd said from Ragnar's other side. 'But it wouldn't be true.'

Ragnar's answer was preceded by another grin, one fiercer and truer than those that came before.

'Only three, Slayer. But the day is yet young.'

The flood came in a tide of shrieking, scarred flesh, and the remnants of Ragnar's Great Company rose to fight it back. The foe's tactic was crude but undeniably effective – flooding the tunnels with worthless thralls to let the Wolves weary themselves slaughtering the hordes of zealous slaves. Even immortal arms can ache, and even immortal hands will tire. Ragnar's men battled with their hands cramp-locked around the bloodstained grips of weapons almost starved of ammunition and fuel.

Bolters were starting to click with empty throats. Chainswords and chainaxes were breaking down, their sturdy mechanisms fouled by human meat, their teeth-tracks thrown from overuse, and their simple hilt engines coughing in thirst.

Behind the barricade of butchered bodies, Alrydd fought at Ragnar's right side while Ulrik guarded the jarl's left. The torrent of unwashed men and women ground against the Wolves' thin lines in a gale of spitting, frothing, bleeding flesh. Hundreds of knives and cudgels flashed out in malnourished hands only to break upon blue-grey ceramite.

The Wolves saw almost nothing human in the men and women besieging them. To the Einherjar they were a single organism, thrashing and heaving like some sickly tide of flesh. To stand against the horde was to fight back an ocean made of meat, bone and rags.

Ragnar killed with every movement of his aching muscles. A fist shattered a dreadlocked man's skull, spilling out the grey sludge within. A sweep of his blade tore a filthy woman's head free from her shoulders. Hammering the butt of his pistol down collapsed the stitched face of the mutated thing scrabbling at his breastplate.

On and on it went, wearing the Wolves down hour by hour.

The vox was beyond worthless, forever lost to screeches of distorted speech, too broken to understand, cutting off in mid transmission. The Wolves learned to ignore it; it was just more background vileness to deal with.

When a break in the tides came, it was scarcely a mercy. Taller figures stalked through the ranks, armoured as the Wolves were armoured, bearing fresh weapons while Ragnar's men clutched broken blades.

'Skitnah!' Ragnar roared above the chattering sea. *Skitmah. Corruption. Filth.* The World Eaters were back, and he summoned every one of his warriors to the barricades.

Alrydd threw his head back in a howl. Hearing their bard still alive at their lord's side, the ragged survivors of Ragnar's Great Company took up the war-cry.

More foes followed. More foes died. It took no time at all to add to the corpse barricades with Space Wolves chainblades singing their reaping song, creating building blocks in abundance.

Ragnar felt strangely exposed fighting without his entire Wolf Guard. Even the First Pack's newest and bravest blood, Tor – called Wolfheart by his kith and kin – had become a presence ever at his side in recent campaigns. Now he fought only with Alrydd Dirgehowler and Ulrik the Slayer, with his other closest brothers sent away to serve among the other squads. Scattering their skills would inspire the exhausted warriors of depleted packs. Every Blood Claw and Grey Hunter would fight harder in the shadow of the jarl's chosen companions.

Ragnar howled in the heat of the melee, venting his weary rage in a wordless, cleansing cry. His muscles were strained almost to ruin beneath the abused layers of ceramite plating – it was only the twin callings of duty and

fury that kept him on his feet. Fury, that any warrior alive believed they would be the one to end his life and legend; duty, for he refused to fall while those who depended upon him yet drew breath.

He killed not with his blade, with his bolter, with his fist, or even with his boot. These were merely tools. Ragnar killed with his heart and soul, pouring himself into every desperate movement, sucking in life with every sawing breath.

Different Wolves fought around him at the first barricade. He rotated the serving packs every hour, keeping them as fresh as he could, sending the walking wounded back to the second barricade in order that they might rush forwards to aid the defenders in the grimmest moments. Their purpose was twofold, though the second duty was far less palatable: should the first barricade fall, the wounded packs holding at the second wall would be the last line of defence.

Only two other figures remained constant. Alrydd was a slow blur at his side, the bard's blade spinning and twisting and cutting and gutting. Ulrik's crozius mace gave a flare of kinetic light and a cathedral bell's clang each time it hammered into yielding flesh. The Wolves nearby fought with the same viciousness, far past the point where ferocity becomes savagery. With their backs to the wall, they became the beasts they were named for.

Another howl sounded above the battle – a breathless thing, closer to a gasping bark than a true, full-throated shout. Without the vox the jarl had no way of tallying his warriors' casualties. They howled now under their lord's orders so that he might keep count of the fallen.

The weight of numbers was ever a threat, even if individual humans were not. These were raggedly armoured ranks of soldiers who once served in the Imperial Guard: soldiers who had thrown loyalty and discipline to the wind yet held fast to their cunning. They tangled his ankles, clinging to his boots and shins. They grasped at his arms and elbows, dragging his defences down. With infuriating regularity, sacrificial fools hurled themselves at his blade, willingly impaling themselves in the hopes of bearing the sword down to the ground with their dying grip.

One of them, the boldest of all, managed to crawl through the corpses littering the floor, avoiding half a dozen stamping Wolves' boots. She rose up behind the front line and launched herself upon the jarl's back, hungry fingers reaching for the lord's hunter's crest to find purchase and cut his throat. Her courage came to naught as she was swatted from the jarl's back by a whirling cut from Alrydd's sword. One of the woman's arms remained in place, the severed limb locked to the jarl's shoulder guard by its hand's death grip. It was shaken loose after a few seconds, tumbling into the sea of butchered bodies piling up around the Wolves' knees.

It was dusk on the surface of this world at war, where day and night still meant something. Beneath ground it was the same unending twilight. Decay played a swift game down there, ripening bodies with rot and adding their sickly sweet smell to the already foul corridors.

As the third day came to its slow, bloody end, Ulrik tore the Helm of Russ

from his head, dragging the stinking subterranean air into his lungs.

‘We cannot hold,’ he said during a lull in the massacre.

‘I know.’ The battered and bloody figure of Ragnar was using a wolf pelt to clean gore from Frostfang’s mechanics.

‘Pull the Terminators back from the battle. Use them to dig through the collapsed tunnels.’

‘That will take an eternity. We need them at the barricades.’

‘It’s our only chance, Blackmane. Give the order.’

Rare were the times when the Slayer saw fit to give orders to the Young King. Ragnar shook his head, triggering Frostfang now its blockage was cleared.

‘No, old father. You said it yourself, we will never reach Lavok. Getting Greylock and the others to dig like rats in the dark won’t change that. Do you think they’d even agree? Slayer, *you* try to tell the company’s finest warriors that they have to abandon the fight and claw through dirt instead. See how they take that order.’

Ulrik looked over the barricades at the ocean of dead bodies carpeting the tunnel floor, waist-deep in places. With narrowed eyes, he asked, ‘What were Nightblade’s orders, jarl?’

‘What are any Scout’s orders? To walk alone where an army cannot go. I sent him back up to Kasr Belloc.’

‘The enemy holds Belloc, north to south and east to west. To surface there would be death, deep behind enemy lines. Even if he escapes the fallen city, the rest of us will not. Why would you do this?’

‘He won’t seek to escape,’ said Ragnar. ‘I sent him to chase down the source of the fractured transmission.’

‘My jarl,’ Ulrik sighed. ‘You’ve sent him to his death at a time when we most need every blade by our sides. This is a waste of life.’

Ragnar turned a cold stare upon his mentor. Rather than reply, he returned to the barricade and prepared for the next assault.

The tide came, broke against them and receded after eleven long, bitter hours.

It is no easy feat to tally the lost lives within a harvest of flesh. Did one Wolf die for every fifty humans? One for every hundred? Who could know for certain? Confusion in such circumstances was forgivable, even among humanity’s genetic elite. Eidetic recollections can be deceived when the warriors are too weary to dredge through their memories and count, one by one, the harvest of lives that have ended so far. Time had a way of playing tricks on the minds of those fighting within a shield-wall.

Beneath Ragnar’s boots ran a river of blood that needed no poetic licence to bring to life. He stood waist-deep in the butchered dead, hurling them aside as best he could, throwing them against the barricade.

In this brief respite the Wolves once more remained in place, too muscle-sore to move away from the barricade and wade through the sea of the slain. Many dropped where they had been standing, murmuring prayers to the old gods that their ancestors had become. Others beseeched the Emperor, not for salvation –

such a prayer would be considered craven beyond reckoning – but demanding that the Allfather turn His holy eyes upon them, witnessing their final acts of courage and glory.

Ragnar remained on his feet, though only barely. He lowered his head, letting the blood and sweat drip from his face. As his eyes fell closed, the stinging ache inside them softened with the sweetest relief. For several heartbeats, he wasn't sure he would ever be able to open his eyes again. Already he could hear the marching tread of more foes drawing closer, their echoing advance becoming a tortured mishmash of sound. These weren't the leather boots of treacherous Guard or the rags of beggar-cultists. A heavy, crunching tread of ceramite boots on stone is a sound like no other. It becomes an orchestra of pealing thunder when enough warriors gather; it was a storm Ragnar knew well.

How long until they reached the barricade? Hard to say. Twenty minutes. Ten. It made no difference, either way. This was, at long last, the end. Every one of the Wolves knew it.

'Don't argue with me,' he murmured through gashed lips, picking up the stray thread of a conversation abandoned over an hour ago. Alrydd understood it at once.

'It's my place to argue with you,' the bard replied. His words could be considered the claim of a wise man or the plea of a cowardly one. Whichever was true, the bard spoke with a razor-tongued sharpness. 'When you're wrong, Blackmane, it's my place to tell you so.'

Every warrior remaining could see how it cost him to say those words. Defying his jarl wasn't something lightly done.

'How am I wrong?' Ragnar paused to spit blood onto the sea of corpses around them. 'Tell me that, if you would.'

'We can kill more of them if we hold here,' said Alrydd. 'Returning to the surface is suicide unless the city is retaken. The barricades here serve us well, and the foe dies in hordes. What else matters now?'

Ragnar opened his eyes to the stinging dark once more. 'Killing more of them is meaningless. Empty glory, Dirgehowler.'

The bard splashed water from his canteen over his face, using the precious liquid to clean his eyes of the foes' poisonous, blinding blood. Once done, he handed the bottle to Ragnar.

'This is a good place to die, brother.'

'A good place, yes. Not a good way.'

'Semantics.'

'You say so? I would rather die clawing my way back to sunlight than harvesting the enemy's lives down here in the dark.'

Alrydd felt too weary to even bare his teeth in a snarl. 'Are you listening to yourself, sire? If we fight our way out, we'll lose the barricades and our fallback junctions. We'll be dead before we even reach the surface.'

'We're entombing ourselves behind walls of the dead. They are barely barricades any more. Just mounds of cooling meat making an ocean of the slain.'

'They're the only reason we're alive now.'

'If I die tonight, singer, it will be by the terms I choose. We are leaving. That's the end of it.'

Alrydd knew as well as any other the futility of arguing with their lord when Ragnar's mind was fixed upon something.

'Be it so, then.' He spat onto the closest corpse. 'I was growing weary of the scenery, anyway.'

Ragnar raised his voice to call the others. 'Kindred! Pack-brothers! To me, all who still draw breath! To me, now!'

Alrydd rolled several bodies aside as he waded through gore to reach Ragnar. 'I hope you know what you're doing.'

'Don't I always?' Ragnar gave a weary laugh at his own words as the other Wolves drew near. In a moment of miraculous restraint, Alrydd let that claim go unchallenged.

'Everyone!' Ragnar called, uncaring how his voice echoed down the tunnels, doubtless to the listening ears of the enemy.

Let the enemy hear. Let them come.

'Leave your barricades and rally to me. Death comes marching towards us now, bearing fresh bolters and readied blades while we scavenge weapons from the cold hands of our own dead brothers. But I reject this death. Do you hear me, kinsmen? I deny it. I *refuse* it. Sharpen the teeth of your swords and cast aside all you cannot carry with you. We'll fight our way to the surface or die trying. And if luck and spite carry us back into the sunlight only to be surrounded by more foes, then I will die in the city above, howling my name to the embattled sky. These are the words of your jarl...'

He let his words trail away, drifting down the corridors. A few seconds passed before he added, in a conversational tone, '...and your jarl assumes you're coming with him?'

They didn't cheer or shout. They laughed. Honest grins split their blood-streaked faces, and the survivors of Ragnar's Great Company lauded their jarl with good-natured laughter.

'Make ready,' Ragnar told them. 'We go forwards, no matter what's in our way. Slayer, the schematic if you please.'

Ulrik raised the projector lens, bleaching the air with the image of the tunnel network. It twitched and flickered, as unreliable as ever.

'We could scatter,' Ragnar said, gesturing at the map. 'We've six hundred and more capillary corridors to choose from, and all likely still feeding enemy flesh towards the barricades. They want to choke us to death down here, that much is clear. If we scatter, there's a chance several of the disparate packs will reach the surface.'

'The odds, though...' one of the Grey Hunters spoke up.

'The odds are against us no matter what we do, Crowcaller.' Ragnar aimed his sword towards the barricades and beyond, where the marching tread drew nearer. 'And whatever we choose, we have little time to make our choice.'

'Still, my jarl... Rats scatter. Vermin scatter. We should stay together.'

Knuckles thudded against breastplates in answer to this. Ragnar fought to

hide his pride.

'A tide of iron,' called out another warrior. 'We fight our way to the surface as a great pack.'

More thudding knuckles.

'Your jarl hears your words, Redhammer. What do you say, kindred?'

It was Redhammer who answered again. 'What worth is there in five warriors reaching the surface, my jarl, if all others lie slain beneath the earth?'

Knuckles crashed in agreement upon every breastplate. Again Ragnar had to bite back his proud smile. This was loyalty – brotherhood even unto death.

'I am glad you agree with me, kinsmen. Be it so. We fight together.' Ragnar walked around the projected map, using Frostfang's tip to mark a trail through the shimmering light. 'Learn this route. Every junction and every turn.'

On he walked, leading their following eyes along a path that avoided the city's principal and secondary space ports, as well as entire habitation sectors and barracks-fortress districts. The watching warriors could see one thing with stark clarity – it would take almost a week to fight through the route.

'This path will take us under the foundry district, avoiding where the foe is most likely to be flooding the tunnels. We avoid evacuation centres, major thoroughfares, the bastions of entrenched enemy forces last reported by reliable intelligence. But we will be channelled through several of the subterranean strongholds built by the enemy as they claimed the tunnel network. If we survive, as unlikely as that might be, we will surface at the city's western edge.'

'The coast?' asked Alrydd. Every warrior present marked the bard's tone. The coast had been one of the enemy's primary landing sites outside the city. Emerging there was as much a death sentence as staying here.

'It's the coast,' said Ragnar, 'or the eastern plains in the enemy's heart, or the conquered city itself. Our best chance is to rise far behind their front lines and cut back to our own forces. At least from the coast we can re-establish vox communication with the fleet, or make our way south to Kasr Corollus and link with the Cadian regiments led by the Black Templars.'

'If they even remain alive that far south,' the bard pointed out.

'Everything in life is a matter of *if*,' Uller replied. 'Stay silent if you're incapable of focusing on what matters.'

Alrydd lifted a hand to return an obscene gesture, taking a second to realise it was the hand he'd lost hours before. He looked at his stump for a moment before grunting in irritation. True to form, he made the gesture with his remaining hand instead.

Ragnar continued as if neither had spoken. 'With the city fallen, the odds of us ever seeing sunlight are pathetic at best. We knew that when we volunteered as rearguard to hold the walls and the evacuation tunnels. But it's better to die on the hunt, my brothers, and face the Allfather without turning away in shame.'

As the chorus of thudding agreement began again, Alrydd rose to his feet, adding his words to Ragnar's.

'And remember, we are few enough now that I will be watching every move

you all make, recalling all that I see for entry into the sagas. Try not to dishonour yourselves, eh? No one wants their legacies ruined.'

Another ripple of amusement answered the bard's words. The approaching footsteps almost drowned it out.

'Go then,' Ragnar ordered. 'Make ready.'

As the packs moved away, Ragnar used the filthy robe of a slain human to clean the gobbets from Frostfang's teeth. The marching grew ever louder, its disciplined rhythm unbroken.

Alrydd watched him, speaking softly. 'Do you regret volunteering for this?' the bard asked.

Yes. No. I don't know. There are worse ways to die.

'Perhaps,' Ragnar admitted.

'You shouldn't. Tens of thousands have survived, all because we held our ground in this city for as long as we did. All the militia, all the soldiers. They needed us. A city that would have fallen in hours held for over a month, my jarl. Even if our remains never reach the Chapter's vault we can die proud, and if this is the final time Frostfang will sing in your grip, make her last song echo through eternity.'

You have your moments, bard.

Ragnar finished cleaning the weapon, turning the blade over in his hands, examining it for signs of corrosion. 'May it be so, my brother.'

'It's been an honour to fight with you, sire.'

'The fighting's not over yet.' Ragnar revved the priceless blade. Kraken teeth roared along its edges, eating the air but starving for meat and thirsty for blood. He lifted the sword high and shouted into the darkness ahead, '*For Russ and the Allfather!*'

Dozens of howling warriors took up the cry.



PART 2

GRETAGIA.
GRADLE OF DRAGONS





I

Cretacia, Home World of the Flesh Tearers Chapter
The Year of the Red Iron and Rising Storms
961.M41

Weaponless, shackled in energy bindings with his wrists linked behind his back, the prisoner paced his cell. He was as one might expect from any Wolf: proud-eyed and draped in the furs of his home world, with his armour plating encrusted with runic markings that meant nothing to those outside of his Chapter and tribe.

From the levels beneath his boots, the resonant song of metal on metal rang eternally against walls of stone. The prisoner endlessly paced the cell, waiting only because he had no choice in the matter. In the way of those born under wide open skies, he rankled at any notion of captivity.

Not that his capture had come as a surprise, of course. The only surprise was that he was still alive.

He faced his captors when they came for him. One of them was a Chaplain, if the holy rosarius medallion around his neck was any indication, and his dark-skinned features were a visage of pockmarked ruination and cybernetic reconstruction. A ravaged hairline of receding stubble was blighted by badly

healed tissue craters and the ugly pebbles of burn scarring.

‘You’re the most fantastically ugly man I’ve ever laid eyes on,’ the prisoner told him, ‘but by the Allfather, I bet you’re proud of those scars.’

The Chaplain deactivated the layered refractor fields around the prisoner’s cell, one by one. The kinetic-resistant barriers snapped out of existence with fizzing crackles of tormented air. As the Chaplain entered the cell, the prisoner stepped back from the iron doorway with no sign of ill intent in his gaze.

‘I seek the High Warrior of your Chapter,’ the prisoner said. ‘Gabriel Sawtooth, Lord of the Tearers of Flesh and this world’s master. Long have I waited to share words with him, face to face and eye to eye.’

‘Chapter Master Seth is far from here,’ the Chaplain allowed. ‘He wages war in the Emperor’s name. I am Brother-Chaplain Scarath. You already know Sergeant Vorain. He was one of the boarding party that brought you to me.’

‘Priest,’ the prisoner said in greeting. ‘Pack leader. Hail to you both.’

‘Our names will serve. My brothers and I rarely stand by titles. You’re the one named Blackmane, yes?’

‘To my kith and kin I am Blackmane. Outlanders more often use the name Ragnar. It is our way.’

‘Ragnar, then.’

The Wolf bared his teeth in a grin. ‘Do you bring thanks at last for the return of your warship? Many were the months we spent sailing it back to your skies. My jarl offered one of his own Navigators for the journey – a prize beyond any other. And you repay us by throwing us into bindings. Cold is the welcome on Cretacia.’

Scarath was more than used to the various dialects and variances in the common Imperial tongue encountered across the galaxy. He could understand Ragnar’s words, but they were plainly coloured by the Wolf’s culture.

‘I am not here to thank you,’ said Scarath. ‘I’m here to sentence you.’

‘Sentence? Ha! For what crime?’

Scarath wondered if this warrior was a particularly dull-witted example of his brethren. The answer, as he saw it, was obvious.

‘For the crime of being a Wolf.’

For a moment, Ragnar thought neither of them would answer. Not the scarred sergeant, nor the gaunt and grey Chaplain.

‘For the crime of being a Wolf,’ said the dead-eyed priest. ‘For being a treacherous dog from a Chapter of treacherous dogs.’

‘Ah, so you wish to execute me. Now I see which way the wind blows. Continuing the war between our Chapters plainly means more to you than any chance of brotherhood. I assume Nalfir will suffer the same fate?’

The Chaplain, thin-lipped and with his eyes half lidded, spoke in a tone as passionless as his gaze. ‘You both died the moment you entered our domain. Just as we would be dead the moment we entered yours.’

For the first time since his imprisonment days ago, Ragnar’s temper boiled forth. ‘Are you so devoid of honour that you would condemn us to death without once hearing our words? Our Chapters were as brothers once – bloodlines from the purest of sources, descended from the most loyal of

fathers.'

Scarath was implacable. 'Times change.'

Ragnar clacked his teeth in Fenrisian emphasis. 'There's a cold truth indeed. If this is how you treat those who would be your allies, then whatever blackness you're hiding in your souls is darker than any of us realised. You're right to kill me. Death is better than the pathetic, terrified hospitality you offer.'

Scarath closed his scarred eyes for a moment, taking a breath. Ragnar couldn't reliably read the gesture – it was either soulful reflection or an attempt to control the rise of anger. No evidence either way presented itself, for when the Chaplain's gaze returned, there was nothing but weary fortitude in his stare.

'We will speak then, for the sake of the archives. Why are you here, Wolf?'

Ragnar hesitated. 'What do you mean? I have told your jailor servitors a hundred times and more. Your apothecaries have filled my bloodstream with truth serums – a violation and a dishonour I have allowed in order to prove my honest intent. Never once has my story wavered.'

Scarath stepped closer, bringing with him the telltale stone scent of old ceramite and the bitter purity of weapon oils. He stood face to face with Ragnar, eye to eye, just as the Wolf had asked for upon greeting him. Honour badges and buzzsaw-shaped trinkets on the Chaplain's black armour glinted in the stark light of the illumination strips running the length of the ceiling.

'I'm asking you, Wolf, not my slaves or battle-brothers. I am asking you. Scarath of the Flesh Tearers, a castellan of the Black Tower. This is your chance to change your story before you walk the Path of the Setting Sun.'

Ragnar's lip curled. He refused to show the unease creeping its way up his spine. This was a poor, poor way to die, denied a warrior's death in this sunless cell. He didn't fear that fate, but he lamented it all the same.

'I am here to see if there can be peace between us.'

Scarath's reply was immediate. 'You lie.'

'It's no lie,' Ragnar growled. 'I have spoken nothing but honesty every time I've opened my mouth. You're not punishing me for lying, you're punishing me because it is easier than dealing with the truth.'

'Yes,' Scarath nodded. 'That's exactly what we are doing. "Better the enemy you know than the stranger you don't." Do you have that saying on your miserable home world?'

'Something similar,' Ragnar admitted. 'But we recognise it for what it is – the false wisdom of cowards seeking to justify their fears.'

Scarath shook his head. What little emotion had showed in his eyes seemed to drain away. 'What peace do you offer, Ragnar? Do you speak for your Chapter, or for a single commander?'

'Nalfir and I speak for Jarl Berek One-Arm of the Thunderfists. He–'

'He is irrelevant. Your lord is one warrior, leading one company, is he not?'

'You say true.'

'And rather than come himself, showing his sincerity, he sends two warriors too young to have fought at Honour's End. How are we to trust you, Wolf? Even if you speak the truth, you speak only for a single Great Company.'

'Our lord would carry word to the Great Wolf.'

'So you say.'

'We offer a first step on the road back to brotherhood. How can you cast that aside?'

'Because Wolves lie, Ragnar. What guarantee do we have that setting you free would make a difference? We could offer forgiveness to your whole Chapter and yet still the enmity might continue. Do you see? You don't bring peace. You've come to see if we are cursed and maddened, because you believe we are the ones to blame for the day that honour ended. The Flesh Tearers spit on your false apology. We have no patience left for the toothy grins of blind Wolves.'

'Wait,' said Ragnar as the Flesh Tearer turned away. 'Speak, priest. You call me blind. At least tell me why.'

'Is it not obvious? Do you think we've never sent ambassadors to the Fang in the last century? And what became of them? Three returned as severed heads preserved in alchemical fluid made from sea serpent venom. Three never returned at all.'

'I was told nothing of this. I didn't know.'

'And had you known, what difference would it have made? The Flesh Tearers have scourged themselves for decades because of what happened at Honour's End. We mourn every drop of blood that was shed that day. How is it that you Wolves do not? How is it that we grieve and atone, yet the Wolves do nothing but cheer and grin?'

The Chaplain sighed, as weary as if he were trying to explain astrocalculation to a beast of burden. 'How are the Wolves so self-righteous, forever acting without shame or remorse? How do you celebrate yourselves as heroes, even when so much Imperial blood is on your hands? How do you always, *always* believe you are the only white in a galaxy shaded grey? Are you all truly that blind?'

'Chaplain Scarath...' Ragnar took a step forwards. 'There are those among the Wolves who are willing to take their portion of the blame for the darkness between our Chapters. Do not let this chance slip through your fingers.'

'Their *portion* of the blame? For trying to desecrate our loyal dead?' Scarath's hands tensed, twitching closer to the sheathed chaindagger at his belt. 'Your brothers pissed like dogs all over the fraternal codes of the Adeptus Astartes! To the abyss with the Wolves and their *portion* of the blame, Ragnar.'

He turned from the Wolf and moved to the iron door. 'Tomorrow you will walk the Path of the Setting Sun. There's no finer death on Cretacia. Consider that my gift to you, rather than slitting your throat here and now.'

'Sergeant Vorain?' called Ragnar. 'Tell me there is more wisdom within your Chapter than the judgement of this foolish holy man.'

The sergeant met Ragnar's eyes from the doorway, then turned and left without a word.

'Scarath!' Ragnar hurled himself against the closing door. Ceramite armour crashed against reinforced iron, neither giving way.

Bolts turned. Mechanical locks thudded home. The wasp-like drone of refractor fields hummed back to life, leaving Ragnar gritting his teeth and staring at the sealed door with his wrists bound behind his back.

There could be no peace between two Chapters as proud and stubborn as the warriors of Fenris and Cretacia. It galled him to die this shameful death in the enemy's hands, but far worse was dying knowing Razortongue had been right all along.



II

For Vorain, the weeks passed as they always did, in tides of duty and respite. The sergeant's responsibilities were many, and he went about them within the fortress-monastery with a single-minded focus that made him invaluable in the role of warden.

It was a role he despised, loath to be away from the Chapter's active campaigns, yet one he was damned to perform due to his excellence in carrying it out. Remaining on Cretacia was a necessary exile, and one not without honour. None of that made it any more palatable. His blade hungered no less than the swords and axes in his distant brothers' hands. They, however, were allowed to fight. Vorain's fate was to watch over an impregnable castle.

And then the Wolves had come. Scarath had tried and sentenced them without consulting the sergeant even once. Vorain was still unsure just how he felt about the Chaplain's interference. Scarath had overstepped his bounds, without question, but Vorain relied on the older warrior's counsel and guidance in matters of the Chapter's soul.

Peace with the Wolves of Fenris? Truly?

He was a sergeant. He could hardly make such decisions for the entire Flesh Tearing Chapter.

The halls of an Adeptus Astartes fortress-monastery always echoed with the

sound of military industry, from the forging of weapons to the chanting and training of the warriors that comprise a Space Marine Chapter. The grey stone castle hewn from the living rock of Cretacia's greatest chasm was no exception. Here, Vorain oversaw the Chapter's past, present and future, while its four battle companies sailed the stars in the Emperor's name.

His world was confined by great arches and curved stone walls. His ears forever rang with the sound of the forges churning out bolt shells, and the hammer-crack of those same shells being fired on the target ranges, hour after hour after hour.

The only thing that set Vorain's subterranean castle apart from other Adeptus Astartes fortress-monasteries was the presence of actual brethren. Where a hundred or more fully initiated Space Marine warriors might tend to their monastic and guardianship duties within the sanctums of other Chapters, the Flesh Tearers' stronghold was bare of such companionship.

Vorain, along with the changeably choleric and coldly serene Scarath, had fewer than thirty battle-brothers under his vigil, aiding in the training of several hundred aspirants. Over time he had found his capacity for conversation dying out, eroding from disuse.

The training bouts with his Chaplain advisor were at least a source of verbal exchange. Much of the rest of the time, among the primitive brutes harvested as potential initiates from Cretacia's population, speech was somewhat scarce. Even his own brothers spoke with him less and less, sensing his withdrawal from their ranks – partly because of his bitterness at this honourable banishment, partly because they were aware enough to see that the sergeant would surely be promoted to the Chapter's command council before long. The Scout Company had been without a formal leader for several years now.

He often watched the brutes wrestling, fighting with bone daggers beneath the proud banners of Flesh Tearers crusades. These were the very youngest initiates, new to their lives as aspirants yet all muscled and scarred beyond the imagining of most Imperial citizens.

Strange to think that only a century ago Vorain had been one of those primitive tribesmen himself. How small the world had seemed. Waking, eating, hunting, sleeping. *Surviving*. What else was there? He had no way of knowing, then, about the great, wide galaxy and its million threats to mankind.

There was an innocence in that simple savagery. The purity of barbarism.

'There's something we must discuss,' Scarath said as the two of them watched the brutes doing battle. The arched chamber rang with the grunts and curses of the fighting clansmen, the crashing clash of bronze weapons, and the pounding of tribal drums echoing off the high walls. The rancid air stank of sweat, blood and desperation.

'This harvest is useless,' was the sergeant's reply.

'You seem distracted, Vorain.'

The sergeant didn't answer. Vorain had seen little of promise in this newest batch of potential initiates. No future Flesh Tearer stood out from amongst the rabble. Their blood would be running through the floor grates before sunset.

'I said, there's something we must–'

'I heard you.' Vorain was already walking forwards, moving between the packs of embattled tribesmen. Unarmoured, wearing only one of the Chapter's monastic robes, Vorain's face and forearms were bare to their stares. He rolled a headless body over with the edge of his leather boot, pausing to pick up the corpse's fallen axe.

A fine weapon. Its blood-marked blade shone in the hazy light drifting in through the stained-glass windows. Once they had shown a scene of the primarch Sanguinius in all his glory before the Eternity Gate. Now the scene was half lost to darkness, choked by jungle creeper vines growing against the fortress' walls, blackening and strangling the primarch's armour.

The axe weighed next to nothing in the Flesh Tearer's hand, but its presence was soothing all the same. An echo of a time when survival was the only question, and triumph the only answer.

Around him, the tribesmen were slowing in their efforts, backing away from the towering warrior. They faced the demigod in their midst with narrowed eyes and clenched teeth, clutching their weapons tighter.

The Flesh Tearer cast off his robe with a shrug of his huge shoulders. The tribesmen shrank back further, raising their own brutish blades.

There were thirty-one of them in total. It took Vorain fifty seconds to kill them all.

When his bloody work was done, he stood in the middle of the chamber, listening to the lifeblood of the unworthy aspirants sluicing through the grates in the floor. The slashing hiss of running blood soothed his irritated headache somewhat. None of them had managed to even block one blow. No matter how hardy Cretacia bred its hunter-sons, only one in a thousand was worthy of wearing the Chapter's red and black.

Vorain cast the stolen axe to the life-soaked stone floor in disgust.

'Another unworthy harvest after all,' the Chaplain agreed.

Vorain stalked back to him. 'You said there was something we must discuss. I assume you've had word of the Wolves?'

Scarath's war-torn features twisted in mirth. 'After three weeks outside the walls? Their bones will have been picked clean by scavengers and bleached by the sun. We have received word from the stars, Vorain, not from Cretacia's wilds.'

Vorain was instantly alert. He couldn't conceal the hope in his voice. 'Word from Lord Seth?'

'Indeed so.'

The sergeant beat his fists against his chest, crying his exultation to the chamber's high ceiling. Scarath watched, waiting for the cry to die away.

'It's over?' Vorain asked at last. 'We will return to serve in a battle company?' Crying out here in this dungeon wasn't enough. He felt like racing to the battlements and shouting his joy to the night sky.

That rush of emotion died when he saw the flicker of hesitation in Scarath's calm eyes. Scarath bared his metal peg teeth in a commiserating smile that Vorain wanted to carve from the Chaplain's face.

'Our lord informed me that the last batch of reinforcements was of the finest

quality to date. In recognition of your exemplary service, you are to be promoted to Captain of the Tenth Company, effective at dawn.'

Vorain winced at the title as much as at the knife thrust of disappointment. 'Captain of the Tenth. We can only field four companies with the Chapter's full strength. How can there be a Tenth Company without the five preceding it?'

'Tradition,' the Chaplain said.

'Then what of attrition? We die faster than our ranks grow. The Chapter is fading, the primarch's curse eats us alive, and all can see it.'

'Tradition is tradition,' said Scarath, 'and the mandates of the Codex Astartes have served our kind well for a thousand generations.'

Vorain exhaled, soft and slow. A hunter's habit, breathing out carefully so as to go undetected by nearby prey. When he raised his gaze to the Chaplain's, he shook his head.

'No.'

'I thought you would be proud,' Scarath said. 'Brother-Captain Vorain.'

'It's a rank that sits poorly upon my shoulders. What did Lord Seth say of the Wolves?'

'Nothing,' the Chaplain replied.

Vorain turned, fully regarding his brother. Communication with the Chapter's distant forces was rare – available a few times each Cretacian year at the very most, relayed by unreliable deep-space probes and tremulous astropathy. The Wolves had arrived with the *Baryonyx* over a month ago; Vorain had been waiting for contact since.

'And why, Chaplain, would our lord have nothing to say of such a vital matter?'

'Because I didn't tell him. Communications were severed before I had the chance.'

Vorain's open stare became a glare. Scarath was no fool, nor was he a liar, and certainly not petty enough to deny such crucial information to the master of the Chapter. If he said communications had failed, then they had failed. It was hardly a rare occurrence. Even so, it should have been the very first matter raised by the Chaplain. Not this maddening talk of promotion. Vorain found himself so suddenly, swiftly furious that he didn't trust his voice not to shake.

'I have once more relayed word via the astropathic choir,' Scarath assured him. 'The third time, if I may remind you. Emperor willing, word will get through at last.'

Vorain exhaled in a feral snarl. 'I'll conduct the next transmission with Lord Seth myself. I'll demand crusading duties once more. I'm finished with this exile.'

Scarath linked his fingers, patient where Vorain was restless. 'You will be denied, brother-captain. You're too valuable here, too valuable to the Chapter's future. I, and the aspirants, would sorely miss your expertise.'

'You would miss me,' Vorain allowed, 'only because you're unlikely to find another warden so willing to sit in silence and let you rule here.'

'You wound me, brother-captain.'

'I mean no offence.' Vorain retrieved his now bloodstained robe from the slick floor, throwing it over his shoulder. 'And I mean that in all sincerity. The flaw has been with me, Chaplain, not you. I have been timid and bitter, concerned with keeping the peace and doing my duty according only to tradition.'

'Tradition is everything,' the Chaplain pointed out. Once more, Vorain wanted to cut the serenity from Scarath's face with a saw-toothed blade.

'Tradition is nothing but the wisdom of the past,' said Vorain. 'A valuable guide. It's not law, Scarath. We shouldn't live by its every twist and turn. The past is rife with error and ignominy, and our Chapter's past is plainly no exception.'

He turned and made his way for the great double doors.

'Does duty call, brother-captain?'

'It is "brother-sergeant" until dawn,' Vorain replied. 'But think on this, my brother. In mere hours, I will outrank you. A warden in rank as well as in duty. And that makes certain decisions mine to make.'

'Is this the birth of arrogance, Vorain?'

'Far from it. Farewell, Scarath. It's unlikely that we'll meet again.'

The Chaplain surged after his brother, following Vorain up the stone stairs in an armoured stride. His heavy boots thudded into the eroded indentations caused by centuries of ceramite tread.

'What madness is this?' Scarath asked, prickled in his confusion.

'There's nothing of madness in my actions,' said Vorain. 'Only pride. I'll transmit my decision to Lord Seth, then I'll consecrate my weapons one last time, and go into the jungle to find the Fenrisians.'

'They're three weeks gone. Dead, along the Path of the Setting Sun.'

'And I will follow them along it. Fenris and Cretacia are as lethal as each other. The Wolves may yet live out there.'

The Chaplain's hand slammed down on Vorain's shoulder, gripping hard enough to hold the sergeant in place, arresting his defiant march.

'They are *dead*, Vorain. You prove nothing by this pathetic, stubborn sacrifice.'

'No?' Vorain gently removed his brother's restraining hand as if it were the touch of an ignorant child. 'If they live then I will hear them out, just as we should have when they arrived and returned the *Baryonyx* to us. And if they have fallen themselves, then I'll find their bones and return them to Fenris.'

'Fool.' Scarath practically spat the word. 'You weren't at Honour's End. I was, and I tell you, you do them more honour and respect than they would ever give us.'

'They already returned our fallen. The dead brothers aboard the *Baryonyx* were untouched after death. You said so yourself when you interred them in the vaults. Whatever wrongs the Wolves have done us in the past, that was a noble gesture that the Flesh Tearers will at least attempt to return.'

'You are the sworn commander of this fortress, oathbound to oversee the Chapter's future. This desire for suicide is beneath you, Vorain.'

For several moments, the former sergeant said nothing. As the silence

stretched into awkwardness, he spoke with a weary sigh. 'How many aspirants die after gene-seed implantation? How many brothers fall in Lord Seth's desperate crusades? How many of our brethren are chained in the Tower of the Lost, screaming their delusions to the granite walls?'

'Meaningless,' said the Chaplain. 'Irrelevant.'

'Far from it. The Wolves have come to us, concerned with their own legacy at the end of the Dark Millennium. I share that fear for my own bloodline, Scarath. You and your Chaplains know the truth better than anyone – our Chapter will be dust within a hundred years. I will not damn us in the present for the sake of a future we'll never see. Helping to end this cold war may be the most valuable service I ever do for our Chapter.'

He turned and walked away, leaving Scarath on the stone stairway.

In his days of aimless savagery, before such ferocity had been directed against the Emperor's enemies, Vorain had been a hunter. A hunter's primary expertise wasn't endurance, strength or even his aim with a thrown spear – it was his ability to track. A tracker could find prey no matter where it fled, and find his way back home no matter how far he wandered from the foothill village.

He had a bolter and an axe now rather than a spear of ironwood, and he wore the dark red ceramite of his Chapter rather than decorating his naked flesh with ritual scarring to resemble the scaled hides of the jungle lizard-kings... But it gratified Vorain to know he could still track quarry in the Cretacian wilds.

He knew it would not be a swift process given the Wolves' month-long head start, and what spoor he found at first was weeks old. Even so, he set out with rare joy fuelling his muscles, feeling free for the first time in years as he moved through the tropical rainforest at a loping, heavy-striding run. The weight of his armour was immense even as its machine-muscles added to his strength, but he could keep this pace up for a week or more if necessary.

Too fast, and he would miss the signs of the Wolves' passing. Too slow and he might never catch up to them.

The Flesh Tearer began by seeking around the fortress-monastery, hunting in concentric circles radiating out from the bastion carved into the cliffs. Not knowing which direction the Wolves had taken left him with no choice but to be meticulous, hoping that time hadn't obliterated every sign of their journey.

Vorain found the first spoor on the second day, as Cretacia's brutal sun fell away and night bathed the jungle black. A trail of footprints had turned almost to stone in deep, dried mud. Whichever one of the Wolves had come this way, the ground had sucked and pulled at his boots, threatening to drag him down. Vorain saw other indentations in the hardened earth – signs of hands grasping for stability – and followed the trail, reading the tale it told.

The Wolf had staggered several times, as evidenced by the depth and twist of the bootprints. He'd reached safe ground at a cluster of trees, clawing his armoured fingers into the huge trunks and hauling himself out of the muck. Next to one of the last bootprints was the shallow mark of what was surely the tip of a scabbard, worn at the hip.

Ragnar, Vorain knew. Ragnar had stumbled in the mud, pulled himself free

and headed onwards.

Alone? Of that, the Flesh Tearer couldn't yet be sure.

Vorain tracked the Wolves over the following days by a series of more subtle signs. A faint boot print, weeks old, in a patch of dry venomgrass; the glint of metal buried in the earth, revealed as a spent bolt shell casing once the hunter dug it from the ground with his fingers. Rarely did he chance across spoor as telling as the footprints in dried quicksand again, though what signs he did find told a compelling truth. The Wolves weren't moving away from the fortress-monastery in wayward haste. They were hunting, as surely as he was, staying near to the Flesh Tearers' sanctum. And if they didn't quite move with the competence of hunters born to this world, they weren't going to swift deaths the way Scarath had assumed.

The most obvious signs of their passage were offered by the jungle's flora rather than anything as mundane as bootprints. No matter how careful the Fenrisian tribesmen were, Cretacia was a world with a million forms of life they'd never encountered. A hedge of insect-eater plants had been beheaded, no doubt after they'd snapped their bulbous maws at the Space Wolves' exposed faces. The quills of a poisonous fruit tree were missing on one side, probably spat in futility against blue-grey ceramite when one of the Wolves came too close.

Vorain followed their arcing trail in his careful run, eyes always scanning the undergrowth, breathing in the rotting green stink of the deep jungle. He only concerned himself with caution when he recognised the signs that he was entering carnosaur territory, and in those hours he would proceed in a warrior's crouch, his weapons in his hands. He knew the hum of his active armour would betray him to many of the lizard-kings with their feral senses, but he still moved with care, guided by his hunting instinct. No sense in bringing additional trouble upon himself.

Sometimes he'd hear the ground-pounding tread of a lizard-king nearby, or see an immense shadowed flank pass by through the dense trees. In those moments Vorain would remain motionless, his axe in his hand, knowing even the slightest movement would draw the reptilian predator upon him. Minutes after the beast passed on, when he could no longer hear or feel its lumbering tread, he would move once more.

He couldn't avoid them all. The lesser *deinonykin* raptors, which hunted in shrieking packs, were ever a threat, able to drag a man down in moments, disembowelling their prey with kicks and slashes from the talons on their powerful legs. These, he killed with a barrage of bolter fire the moment he sensed them stalking nearby, finishing them with his axe if they managed to weave aside from the shells and close the distance. As an adolescent human hunter armed only with a spear these creatures had been his bane, among the jungle's deadliest predators. As a Space Marine, they were only a threat to him in groups larger than four or five, and such numbers were rarely encountered within a hundred kilometres of the Flesh Tearers' cliff-side fortress.

Despite the misery of his exile, he found himself enjoying the hunt more and more, day by day. Even in the miserable evenings when the monsoon rains

scythed down upon him and he spent the nights tracking and stalking – seeing through the green-tinted display of his helmet’s eye lenses – he felt unshackled and free rather than lonely.

Several times he came across the evidence of the Wolves’ brief camps. With blades and bolters they had brought down the smaller carnosaur – the raptor beasts close to the size of a Terran horse – and had cooked the sour reptilian flesh over deadwood campfires. Each time Vorain found the husks of the Wolves’ meals, he felt a small pulse of sympathy. Even with the scales skinned away, carnosaur flesh was notoriously vile.

On one occasion he found blood, genetically altered human blood, spattered in dry markings upon the side of a rock. It was too dry to taste in order to glean any insight from it, but the tale was clear enough. One of the Wolves had limped here to rest for several moments after being wounded. Vorain also discovered a tooth, as long as his finger and curved like a crescent moon, lying deep in the brush. For a moment he took it to be a carnosaur fang, but as he turned it over in his fingers he could see it belonged to no Cretacian beast. Nothing in his memory of hunting on his home world had ever shown a fang quite this shape. He’d seen teeth like this only once before, and the memory was starkly clear because it was so recent.

A kraken fang. From Ragnar’s sword.

When the second week was on the edge of becoming the third, he made a discovery that sent a chill through his blood. A dead snake, twice as long as a man was tall, its scales marked by raised thorns of cartilage with red blotches on its brown flesh. Its head was pulped; the beast had been crushed and hurled aside in anger, no doubt after it had dropped from the branches above to envenom its prey.

Vorain carefully examined the remains of the viper’s mouth, which could open wide enough to swallow his fist without difficulty. He thumbed aside the four ivory daggers it possessed for fangs. One fang was still intact; three were broken close to the roots.

With a crack of bone, he tore the beast’s jaws open wider to peer within. The fleshy ducts in the roof of its mouth were inflamed even after its death. It had died seconds after delivering its venom.

A *Grida* serpent. Its bite was more than capable of piercing the joints of a suit of Space Marine battle armour.

Vorain dropped the dead snake back upon the colony of myrmidon insects that had been devouring its carcass, and moved on with renewed purpose.

He found the Wolves the next day.

More precisely, they found him.



III

This world despised human life. As a son of the winter world, Ragnar knew a few things about planets that fought to reject colonisation. Cretacia was Fenris' sister in that regard. It was the Hearthworld's blisteringly hot, venomous reflection.

After a month and a half in the jungle wilds, soreness had given way to aches, and the aches had fledged into pain. The low branches of a tall tree had raked his face days ago, and the scratches that had first seemed harmless were now plump and infected, constantly itching, giving off the cheesy smell of dirty pus. His armour was raked open in several places by the claws of leaping, shrieking lizard-beasts – monsters the size of a Thunderwolf battle mount – and the wounds beneath quick-drying coats of armour cement were inflamed and angry, heating his blood and turning his joints to glass.

His enhanced physiology fought to purify his body of all alien infection, but it was a losing battle. Both of his hearts beat with arrhythmic speed, and he could almost feel his internal organs humming as they resisted whatever poisons were saturating his bloodstream.

The only food he'd eaten in over six weeks was the bitter, stringy flesh of the hunting lizards that attacked them, which did little more than take the edge off his hunger while turning his guts in wrenching twists.

Nalfir was faring even worse. One eye was swollen closed by a sting from a striped insect the size of his thumb. A single second's contact with the vermin had been enough to turn the veins of his face throbbing and black, showing through his sweating skin. Elsewhere he bore several wounds from the teeth and claws of beasts that had managed to pierce his armour plating. His body was working so aggressively to purge the toxins inside him that his bionic hand had failed days before, no longer answering his will.

'My body's rejecting it,' the bard had said when his hand first failed. 'Treating the false nerves and muscles as an intruding infection to be healed.'

They both knew they'd already be dead without their Adeptus Astartes physiology sustaining them, and without the suits of sacred ceramite shielding their flesh. Even with their post-human endurance, they had to eat and drink to maintain their strength. The vermin-rich river water they found, even filtered through rocks and boiled above a fire, had their innards clenching in spasms. Blood-sucking flies followed them in a slow, lazy haze, drunk on the enhanced fluid drawn from their veins.

At camp one night, looking up at the sparse stars through the jungle canopy, Nalfir had adopted a philosophical air.

'If Fenris is a world that seeks to turn the snow red with the blood of its people, Cretacia is a world set on poisoning them, so their meat and bones will feed its cursed earth.'

'A poetic thought. It'd be lovelier if the one voicing it didn't have black vomit drying across his chestplate.'

Nalfir had waved his dead machine-hand, dismissing Ragnar with a grunt of amusement.

Days after his bionic arm had deactivated, a fresh pain bloomed in Nalfir's elbow and shoulder.

'Phantom pain,' Ragnar insisted at first.

'Aye. Perhaps.'

A few hours later, the bionic hand began to clench and quiver, and the pain beneath Nalfir's armour bloomed into agony at his bicep.

'Hurts too much to be imaginary,' the bard said. He could ignore it – he could ignore and fight through any pain, as could all of his kind – but the muscle spasms were an irritant that wore away at his temper. His nervous system was wracked from the planet's abuses, and no longer carried signals from his brain with any reliability. Half the time he walked in sweating delirium, cursing in languages from various worlds across Imperial space.

He followed Ragnar, letting the Blood Claw lead – eating when Ragnar told him to eat, resting when Ragnar told him to rest.

'We're being hunted,' the younger warrior announced one evening, ripe with stinking sweat from the still-vicious setting sun. The two of them were knee-deep in sludge, wading through a marsh.

Nalfir turned his head, spitting a stalactite of thick, bloody saliva. One-eyed and wretched, he staggered then, going down to his waist in the muck. Something like an eel slithered past his thigh, leaving a trail of slime in its wake.

Ragnar offered his hand but the bard knocked it away. As Nalfir hauled himself to his feet once more, he had to clear his throat of bloody phlegm before he could make himself heard.

‘Hunted by what?’

‘See for yourself.’

Nalfir squinted through the bleary distortion of his remaining eye. Ragnar was indicating... something... in the mud along the shore of the marsh. When he saw the unmistakable imprint of a power-armoured boot trail along the ground, he blinked uselessly to try to unfog his thoughts.

‘We’ve been circling around. These might be our own tracks.’

Ragnar turned an annoyed glare upon the bard. ‘I know where we’ve walked. These aren’t our tracks. Trust me.’

‘So our hosts are out here, too.’ Nalfir laughed for the first time in weeks. ‘They just had to make sure we were dead, didn’t they? Couldn’t even trust their own planet to do the deed for them.’

‘If I’m not back before sunrise,’ Ragnar said, ‘go on without me.’

‘What?’

‘Just wait here, Razortongue.’

Nalfir’s wounded thoughts were slow. He was having trouble following the Blood Claw’s words, let alone the reasoning behind them.

‘Wait here,’ he repeated. ‘But why?’

‘Because you’re all the bait we have. Stay here and look vulnerable.’

Nalfir snorted, wolf-like and grim, at his brother’s command. He hauled himself up the embankment and crashed down to sit on the drier earth.

‘That will require no acting at all, I promise you.’

He drifted in and out of consciousness, fighting the whole time to remain awake. Sometimes his bionic hand would lock for an hour or more, sometimes it would shake with tremors from his tormented nerves. Sometimes he would stare for what felt like hours across the marshland, only to realise scarcely ten seconds had passed. Sometimes he’d blink slowly, only to open his eyes and see several minutes had gone by while he dozed in corrupted delirium.

He lurched upright when he heard the thrum of Ragnar’s power armour across the water.

‘Blackmane,’ he murmured. His eyes refused to focus on the approaching figure as it waded through the murk.

‘No,’ said the voice. ‘It is I, cousin.’

Nalfir couldn’t stop the sudden smile. His vision cleared as if tuned to his amusement.

‘Well, now. If it isn’t Sergeant Vorain, the warden of this planet.’ He levelled his bolter with his good hand, feeling pride burn hot as he drew an unshaking aim.

The Flesh Tearer stood still as the bolter came up. He had an axe in one hand and his own bolter in the other. Like Nalfir, his armour was scarred by fang and talon, discoloured and bleached by the sulphuric rain. Unlike Nalfir, the flesh of his face wasn’t ravaged and pockmarked by venom and poison.

'Razortongue,' he greeted the bard.

'That's my tribal name. You call me Nalfir, Cretacian.'

'Nalfir, then. Are you alone? Where is Ragnar?'

'He's dead.'

'That's a lie, cousin. I would have found his bones by now.'

'Maybe you're just a poor hunter, then. Who can say?'

Vorain tensed, exhaling through his clenched teeth as he fought his flaring temper back down.

'To say a Cretacian cannot hunt is a grave insult, cousin. On this world, only cripples and children are incapable of providing for their clan.'

'We have a similar sentiment on Fenris.' He grinned with blood-pinked teeth. 'Let's say the insult stands for now. I find myself in low spirits. A good argument would fire my blood very nicely.'

Vorain shook his head. 'Your survival is miraculous.'

'And your hospitality is dire,' Nalfir replied. 'We've butchered half of the hunting lizards on this continent – I thought Fenrisian wolves were bad. Everything here is toxic. Every beast is venomous, every plant is poisonous. Even the water teems with parasites.'

Vorain nodded. 'All true, though you've barely scratched the surface. Cretacia's most dangerous beasts stay far from the fortress-monastery. They've learned over the generations that we're not timid about using the castle's cannons on those that come too close.'

'The ones we killed were bad enough. Ugh, and the *taste*.'

'Why did you remain nearby?' the Flesh Tearer asked. 'Most of our banished aspirants move far from the fortress-monastery when they walk the Path of the Setting Sun.'

Nalfir's bloody, toothy smile returned. 'We were seeking any weapon caches or armoury bunkers. Then we were going to fight our way back into your fortress.'

Vorain said nothing for several seconds, realising that the Wolf was speaking the truth.

'How... bold of you,' he said at last.

'We're Wolves,' said the bard, considering it to be answer enough. 'Anyway, *cousin*, I've distracted you long enough.'

The Flesh Tearer whirled in place, three times as fast as any human could move, and it still wasn't swift enough. Ragnar surged from beneath the foul water, hammered the axe from Vorain's hands with a blow from Frostfang, and cannoned a backhand across the Flesh Tearer's face.

The Cretacian staggered back, lifting his bolter only to have it smashed aside by the Blood Claw's great blade. Vorain swallowed as he froze in place, eyes meeting Ragnar's deathly stare. The static teeth of the Wolf's chainblade rested against the Flesh Tearer's throat.

Watery muck ran down Ragnar's war-plate in dark rivulets. His hair was a crest of matted filth and his face was decorated in thick, hungry swamp leeches. Vorain hated himself for being impressed: the Wolf had hidden the sound of his armour by crawling under the marsh water, no doubt for several

minutes, to ambush the Flesh Tearer from behind.

‘A skilful hunt,’ Vorain conceded.

‘I suggest,’ Ragnar hissed, ‘that you make your next words good enough to save your life.’

‘You have my Chapter’s thanks,’ Vorain said, keeping the stare unbroken. ‘Our gratitude for returning the warship *Baryonyx*.’

They made cold camp within a nearby cave. A discordant song filled their ears as it echoed off the walls, made from the snarl of their damaged armour joints, the drip of water deeper inside the cavern and the distant reptile cries of Cretacia’s ruling monsters.

Ragnar had wiped the worst of the grime from his face after his submerged ambush, though his eyes were dark ringed and shot with blood. There was a wetness in Nalfir’s breathing that the Blood Claw suspected didn’t bode well.

He was the first to speak, waving a fat blood fly away with a cracked gauntlet. ‘Why are you out here, sergeant?’

‘It is “captain” now,’ Vorain corrected with no emotion whatsoever.

‘Our heartiest congratulations, then,’ Nalfir grunted, amused at his own weak sarcasm. ‘Answer the question, though.’

‘I wished to find you, to bring you back,’ Vorain gestured outside the cave, at the eternal jungle filling the world from horizon to horizon. ‘Unless you wish to remain here, that is.’

‘Back?’ Nalfir’s laugh sounded closer to a gargle. ‘To execute us properly this time?’

‘No. To return you to Fenris with the Chapter’s thanks. And to come with you, as an emissary to speak of a ceasefire in this futile war.’

Ragnar was tonguing at a loose tooth. ‘You said it was beyond your authority. Sergeant or captain, you’re still not Lord Seth.’

‘Your jarl,’ said Vorain, ‘is one lord among many. His word may not be the word of your whole Chapter. That doesn’t make it worthless. It makes it a first step to a reborn brotherhood.’ He tapped his knuckles to the aquila on his breastplate. ‘I’m just one officer among my Chapter, and I can only speak for the few men under my command. But I give my thanks freely, and acknowledge the great honour in your actions. Our Chapters may meet as foes in the future, but the warriors of our two companies are no longer foes.’

Vorain reached for one of his belt pouches, offering the fallen kraken’s tooth to Ragnar. ‘I found this.’

The Blood Claw took it with a murmur of thanks. The skin around his mouth was raw and scabbed from being unable to control the production of acidic saliva. The new leech bites were indescribably itchy.

‘What changed your mind?’ he asked the Flesh Tearer.

‘You did. The nobility of your gesture, in coming here.’

‘I’d have preferred you to realise that several weeks ago,’ said Ragnar scratching at his cheek. One of the leech bites began to bleed under his efforts.

‘There’s much I cannot say, even here and now, in this moment of sincerity. But I can say this. The truth of the Flesh Tearers is that our gravestones are

already carved. We cannot recruit swiftly enough, or reliably enough, to replace the losses we suffer in Lord Seth's crusades.'

Both Wolves were immediately, utterly alert. They stared at Vorain, their sore eyes alight with shock.

'Your Chapter is dying?' Nalfir murmured. He had a storyteller's interest in such a dark concept.

'Not now, but soon. Some Chapters rebuild over many decades, weighing duty, honour, shame and necessity. Some fight on even in the face of destruction. We are among the latter. In a hundred years our bloodline will be but a memory. We fight now not for glory, but to leave a legacy worthy of the primarch who sired us. Lord Seth leads us in crusades across the galaxy, committing us where the battles are bleakest, seeking not to save us, but to save our legacy in the Imperium's eyes.'

Vorain paused, mustering the right words before continuing. 'It was cowardly of me to stand by and let Scarath banish you to die in the wilds. Worse, it was futile. Your deaths would have proved nothing and saved no lives. If I am to die – if my bloodline itself is to die – then I wish to leave this life with more than my enemies cursing our name. This is my first act as captain, this is what I will say if you bring me back to Fenris with you, and this is what I will report to Lord Seth should I return.'

'One might argue,' said Nalfir, 'that your actions are selfish. You care only for how the galaxy will speak your name when you and your brothers are gone.'

Vorain's teeth showed pearl-white in his dark, scarred face. It was almost roguish. 'You could argue that. And there's truth there, I admit. But there's also a practical gain for the Wolves. Remember, cousins, that I'm the one who guides our Chapter's initiates. Their minds are mine to shape. And as I train the next – perhaps the last – generation of Flesh Tearers, they will take shape with the knowledge that at least some Wolves behave with honour.'

Nalfir turned to Ragnar, speaking in slurred Fenrisian. 'There's much he's leaving unsaid.'

Ragnar nodded, exhaling slowly. 'And much we have left unspoken, also,' he said in the same tongue. 'But does it matter?'

Vorain made no effort to interrupt the Wolves as they talked on. He rose to his feet, walking to the mouth of the cave and activating his gorget's vox-link. Communication quality beneath the jungle canopy left a great deal to be desired. When he heard the response from the fortress-monastery, Vorain spoke in the guttural, monosyllabic murmurs used by many Cretacian tribes. In the furthest reaches of history, it might once, barely, have been related to Low Gothic.

'What are you saying?' asked Ragnar.

'Requesting a Stormraven and cataloguing your wounds for our Apothecary,' Vorain replied, artfully neutral. 'We must reach higher ground for the gunship to reach us. The sound of their engines always summons carnososaurs, and there is no way a pilot can land a craft beneath the jungle canopy. Are you ready to leave now, cousins?'

Ragnar rose to his feet. 'The sooner, the better.'



IV

Vorain led the way. He was aware of the punishment Cretacia had inflicted upon the Fenrisians, and took care to keep his pace slow as he guided them up the rocky incline. The loose earth and scree had them using their hands for purchase to prevent them sliding down in an avalanche of rubble. More often than not, when the Flesh Tearer would turn around to mark their progress, he'd see them clambering on all fours, bestial and defiant.

Cretacia's moon was high, yet the humid nights were as merciless as the brutal days. Sweat ran freely down their faces as they huffed for breath in the equatorial heat.

Like dogs, the Flesh Tearer thought.

Nalfir was soon lagging behind. Ragnar remained with him, keeping up a steady stream of conversation and curses. Nalfir didn't join in. He grunted with each step, blood-flecked saliva stringing between his teeth.

Both of his hearts beat out of rhythm now. The snakebite in the back of his leg had been spreading corruption through his shin and thigh for two days but his immune system always fought back, reducing the infection to painful tingling. Now it was a battle just to walk – his entire left leg was stiff and numb. The limp he'd been hiding for two dawns was finally taking hold.

'Just shut up,' he breathed to Ragnar, as they fell further behind Vorain.

'Blackmane, shut up for a moment. Listen to me.'

Ragnar's comradely chatter died away. 'What is it?'

The bard didn't cease his hitching stride. As they reached another stretch of loose scree, he clambered up on all fours, dragging his weakening leg up the rocks, pawing at any grip he could find with his remaining hand. Stone scraped and screeched across his ceramite plating with each metre he climbed.

'I think I'm dying.'

Ragnar's laugh was a gunshot bark. 'Don't be so dramatic.'

'Listen to me, you git.' Nalfir's voice was a slick whisper. 'That accursed serpent that dropped on us from above, two days ago. The one with those daggers for teeth.'

Ragnar recalled it. The huge snake had launched at them from the high branches of a tree, wrapping itself in killing coils around Nalfir's torso, arm and leg. Unable to constrict him in his layered armour plating, the reptile had struck at the softer jointed armour behind his knee. Three of its four jagged dagger fangs had penetrated the joint, sinking into the flesh beneath.

Nalfir paused, blinking rancid sweat from his bloodshot eyes before continuing. 'I can't metabolise the venom. It's killing me.'

Ragnar's grin faded at the seriousness in the bard's tone. 'Speak sense, Razortongue. It was just a snake.'

'Aye, and a frostwyrm is just a snake, too, eh? But we've seen them kill Einherjar with their venom.' He pushed himself to his feet as they reached firmer rock. 'I'm a storyteller. A gatherer of tales. I speak more languages than there are stars in the night sky, brother.'

Ragnar nodded ahead to where Vorain was climbing, fifty metres above. 'You speak Cretacian?'

Nalfir grinned, showing bleeding gums. 'Not that those grunts and clicks counts as much of a language, but aye, I speak it. I studied it years ago. Jarl Thunderfist wished me to be ready to translate if we crossed paths with the Flesh Tearers. That's how I know. It's what Vorain said across the vox.'

'He might be wrong.'

'He might be. I tell you though, it doesn't feel like he is. My blood is on fire, and I can barely see an arm's length in front of my eyes.'

Before Ragnar could reply, Nalfir spat a mouthful of dark blood. 'Allfather's bones, what a stupid way to die. If you tell any of our brothers about this, I swear I'll curse you from beyond the grave. Tell them I died fighting... I don't know. Something huge. With teeth the length of your legs.'

'Cousins?' Vorain called down to them, seeing their pace slowing more and more.

'All is well,' Ragnar called back.

Nalfir gave a boyish snigger. 'Oh, yes,' he murmured. 'Everything is just fine.'

'How long do you have left?' Ragnar asked him.

'I don't know. Not long. The Flesh Tearer sounded surprised I was still alive at all, and I'll say this with no shadow of a lie – it feels like I died yesterday and forgot to lie down.'

The heavens chose that moment to open, with runnels of stinging monsoon rain trickling through the thick canopy above.

'I've had better days,' admitted the bard. Ragnar found himself lost for words.

'Just keep going,' the Blood Claw said after a minute had passed. It earned another bloody grin from Nalfir.

'Your inspiring talk needs work, brother. *Just keep going?* That's how you motivate a wounded kinsman?'

'I'm beginning to wish you'd just die, Razortongue.'

'Ha!' The bard wiped the sheen of putrid sweat from his face with a grimy palm. 'I may grant that wish soon. It would have to be me that was bitten, eh? Not you, oh no. Not you with your damnable good fortune. Luck runs out, Blackmane. Have I ever told you that?'

'Only six or seven thousand times.'

'It's the truth, you know. The jarl believes you're destined for great things, but perhaps he'd abandon that hope if he heard how awful your inspiring speeches are.'

Ragnar scowled at the words. 'What are you talking about?'

'Are you really this foolish, Blackmane?' Nalfir hacked up a gobbet of bloody foam and spat it onto the rocks. 'Why do you think I've been insufferable to you since you joined the First Pack? Who do you think ordered me to bait you and test you every damn day?'

Between the revelation and the sickness, Ragnar's head was reeling. 'The jarl ordered that?'

'Thunderfist is a craftier rodent than the company realises. He has a dozen games and tests like this going on at any time. He's had me baiting you over your pride and ambitions – and your temper most of all. Can't have a Wolf Guard who can't control his fury. Throne aflame, brother, he was furious after you killed that accursed Dark Angel. Had me testing you twice as hard after that. He wasn't sure he could trust you at all any more.'

'The fight in the Hearth of the First Pack.'

Nalfir nodded. 'And aboard the *Baryonyx*.'

'I knew it was you.' Ragnar felt the maddened Flesh Tearer's hands around his throat again; felt the pressure of being crushed beneath the warrior's insane strength. 'I knew you'd deactivated the stasis lock.'

'The jarl's orders,' Nalfir grinned, though it obviously pained him to do so. 'And you survived, eh?'

Ragnar couldn't find the words. 'I... thought you were just...'

'Just a bastard?' Nalfir seemed to weigh the idea in his thoughts. 'Well, I am that, as well.'

'Razortongue...'

'Enough of this. You'll take my axe back, won't you? Greylock made it for me. Gave it to me the day I became First Pack. I'd hate for it to rot here on this swine-pit of a world.'

'Of course, brother.'

'Good. Good. My thanks.' Nalfir pulled himself over a rocky outcropping,

and a sliver of blood ran from his nose. He sniffed it back up into his sinuses. 'Not dead yet,' he breathed. '*Not. Dead. Yet.*'

The trees were thinning now, the canopy breaking to reveal the churning grey sky, and no longer shielding them from the gritty hammering of the seasonal rainfall. Ahead of them, Vorain was waiting with his axe slung over his shoulder. When they reached him he cast a momentary look towards Nalfir, who slunk down with his back to the rocks, then spoke low to Ragnar through his helmet's mouth-grille.

'Now we wait.'



V

The Stormraven gunship came in low over the trees, its armour plating already streaked with dissolving paintwork under the wet hammering of the lightly acidic rain. It swerved in the sky with an agility rarely seen in Adeptus Astartes aircraft, lacking the heavysset power and momentum of the much larger Thunderhawk.

The craft was a clenched fist of a thing, its turbines wailing as it drifted in closer. Upon its back, a manned turret rotated in a slow arc, its cannons tracking across the sky in search of prey. The servitor bodily locked into the gun pod spared no focus for anything else. Ragnar suspected it was mono-tasked for that single duty – it would live and die in the turret without consideration or complaint. The slave seemed neither male nor female, simply a malnourished grey human cyborged past concepts of gender, identity and personality.

The gunship's ramp lowered to reveal the compartment beneath the cockpit, giving the image of an opening maw. Racked bolters and crates of ammunition waited in the strip-lit crew chamber.

Vorain was the first to break from the cover of the stone overhang that guarded them from the worst of the rain. He strode out into the storm as the gunship's landing claws scraped and kissed the rocky plateau. The Wolves

heard the insectile crackle of his vox-channel as he conferred with the pilot – a silhouette they could only dimly see through the reinforced cockpit pane.

The only warning they had was the shadow passing over the moon. There, and then gone. A blur of all-too-brief blackness.

The assault cannons on the gunship's spinal turret whirled, cycling to life with no chance to fire. The shadow struck from above with a grinding crash of metallic thunder – Ragnar saw something vast, something winged – and then it was gone again, leaving them with the distinctive reek of reptilian flesh and the echoing squeal of tortured metal ringing in their ears.

The gunship's turret was gone, torn away down to its hydraulic roots.

Vorain ran back into their dubious cover, shouting to the pilot across the vox. The Stormraven shuddered as it lifted off again, turbines gasping for altitude, breathing its engine fumes across the Wolves in a charcoal-smelling heat haze.

They were drawing their weapons when the turret crashed down onto the slope below them with a thunderclap – now a thing of abused metal and shattered glass. The servitor spasmed in its restraint throne, still futilely trying to carry out its duties even as it bled to death. Ragnar watched it thrash until it accidentally killed itself, gashing open its throat on a shard of the broken cockpit glass.

The Stormraven didn't seek to escape. The Flesh Tearer pilot brought it around in an agile swing, the heavy bolters on its snub nose opening up to hammer shells into the night sky.

Lightning illuminated the predator as it struck again, turning it from a shadow to a beast for a single heartbeat. Great leathery wings cracked like a Fenrisian longship's sail in a storm wind. Claws like swords flashed through the rain to clang against the gunship's hull, sending it spinning aside, drifting, shuddering to come back under control.

The creature landed on the slope with enough force to send tremors through the rocks. Black eyes gleamed, reflecting the moonlight as it turned its beaked, bone-crested head to the warriors.

'Ptyradon,' Vorain said, voicing the name as a breathless curse.

Dragon, Ragnar thought in the same second. *A gods-rutting dragon.*

Three bolters kicked as one, booming shells towards the creature's densely scaled hide. Every bolt sparked and burst without punching through the beast's flesh. In the face of this torrent of fire, the ptyradon lowered its monstrous head, armoured brow ridges closing over its bulging eyes to protect them, and charged.

Ragnar hurled himself away from the advancing beast and crashed into the gravel scree, setting off a rattling pebble avalanche. Vorain cut the other way, barrelling out into the rain in a dead sprint, reloading his bolter with a slam.

Only Nalfir held his ground. He aimed at the beast's clawed hands at the ends of its wings. Such was its speed that the Wolf missed three shots even at that range, scoring only a single hit to its bony digits.

It was enough. The slightest stumble in the ptyradon's stride allowed Nalfir to throw himself after the Flesh Tearer at the last moment, kicking off with his good leg. Behind him, the reptilian beast snapped its jaws where he'd been

standing. He crawled away across the scree, letting his weight carry him down the slope on a tide of rolling gravel.

The gunship banked back above them, angling its nose down, and the heavy bolters did what the Space Marines' more modest fire couldn't – the stream of massive shells pounded through the ptyradon's scaled hide, sending gouts of viscera arcing and steaming into the air.

Shrieking, the beast took to the sky on shredded wings, leaping up to cling on to the gunship's fuselage with talon and claw. The Stormraven's engines struggled under the renewed weight, and with a protracted whine of strained turbines, both the gunship and the monster embracing it plunged to the ground.

They hit the scree and tumbled down, bouncing, rolling and burning. Twenty metres. Thirty. Fifty. Coming to rest in a smoking heap, halfway down the slope.

Stillness reigned. Ragnar aimed his bolter down the incline at the now-motionless dragon. *Almost* motionless. He could see it breathing.

'Razortongue!' he called. The bard was much farther down the slope, spitting distance from the wreckage of the gunship and the wounded monster atop it. 'Climb!'

Nalfir felt so weak that he almost laughed. To have lived for so many decades as an immortal reflection of Russ and the Allfather... and now to be laid low by the stings and bites of jungle vermin. *Climb*, Ragnar had said. Climb? He could barely move at all. It was all he could do to keep breathing.

With a strangely piteous whine, the wounded ptyradon lifted its head, opening its guarded eyes, and glared directly at the bard. This close he could see the bulbous eyeballs weren't colourless after all – they were halved by a slitted reptilian pupil, darker than the milky black of the eyeball itself. What Nalfir had taken for a collar of bone spines around its neck now trembled and began to rise, each of them linked by a membrane of veined flesh.

'*Put your helmet on!*' Vorain yelled from higher up the slope. '*Its venom is blinding!*'

Nalfir had one moment to wonder just where his helmet was – back aboard the *Holmgang*, most likely. As with most Wolves he despised confining his heightened senses and shunned war helms as often as not.

The moment passed, quick as a blink. The ptyradon's neck frills quivered as the beast drew back its head, and it disgorged a stream of thick mucus-like venom in vomited spurts. The ooze splattered across Nalfir's armour as he was reaching, crippled and closed-eyed, for his fallen axe.

'*Don't breathe it in!*' he heard the Flesh Tearer shout. As if he needed another warning.

He heard the beast moving now. Nalfir made a last surging grasp for his weapon. His fingers closed around the axe's haft and he gripped it tight, thumbing the ignition rune on the handle. The power axe crackled to life, the power field around the wide blade sizzling as it superheated the falling rain.

He was blind. One of his legs was dead from thigh to toes. One of his hands no longer worked at all. He was covered in toxic poison-spit eating into his armour plating that sent his lungs into seizures if he even breathed in its scent.

His flesh itched and ached from rashes and cracking sores from this unbelievably hostile world. His only companions were one of the Flesh Tearers who had unjustly banished him to Cretacia's insane wilderness, and his brother Blackmane, who was variously seen as a hot-blooded fool or the jarl's heir apparent, depending on which of the Great Company you asked.

Frankly, he believed Ragnar was a little of both.

On top of all of that, Nalfir was dying from the snake venom turning the blood in his veins to slime, delivered by a serpent with fangs the length of daggers capable of biting clean through the fibre-bundle machine muscles of Mark VII power armour.

He laughed, unable to prevent it, and once he'd started he found he couldn't stop. It drew the brimstone-and-bile scent of the toxic spit into his lungs, immediately causing his throat and chest to burn. Even as his amusement faded to chuckles, he kept his eyes closed tight. Better blinded by choice than with the venom scalding his eyeballs. The result was the same, but it came without the distraction of mutilating pain.

Nalfir Razortongue dragged himself to his feet for what he was sure would be the final time, slashed the air with his axe to loosen his cramping muscles, and blindly turned to face the draconic monster crawling towards him.

Dragging his leg, he stalked towards his fate. Meeting it standing on two feet, as a Fenrisian warrior must.

Ragnar watched Nalfir limping towards the lumbering ptyradon, knowing that his packmate was going to his death. In that moment he made his choice. He wouldn't open fire on the beast. He wouldn't charge down the slope to Nalfir's aid.

The bolter in his hand kicked once, bellowing a single shell into the rain. It impacted and detonated a metre from Vorain's boot, sending up a shower of gravel and shrapnel that rattled across the Flesh Tearer's armour.

'Let him fight,' Ragnar called to his red-clad cousin. Vorain was too far away to hear the Wolf's words, but there was no questioning Ragnar's stern expression. After a hesitation, the captain replied with a closed-fist gesture in Adeptus Astartes battle-sign, signalling his compliance.

Ragnar lowered his boltgun. A Fenrisian tribesman was going to his death. It wasn't for his companions to interfere or intervene. In the tongue of his tribe, ragged from the infection riddling his body, Ragnar called out to the wounded bard.

'May the Allfather welcome you at His side, Razortongue.'

He heard the traditional words shouted over the slash of the rain and the guttural thunder of the beast's breathing. Standing in the beast's shadow, Nalfir grinned. Even without eyes, he knew where the ptyradon was wounded. Like all Wolves, he'd been a hunter before the Sky Warriors took him into the stars. He could smell the blood on its breath from its ruptured organs. He could hear the hitches in its stride because of its injured limbs.

He'd fought blind a hundred times before, in training and in the field: in

impenetrable fog and noxious gases, in the lightless dark of a powerless spaceship hold, in wars upon worlds where the sun never rose. He knew how to hunt and kill without opening his eyes. The beast was fast, but it was almost as wounded as the Wolf himself. Nalfir weaved aside from the first strike, careful not to trust his numbed leg with any real weight. He spun away from the second lashing claw, and leapt over the creature's barbed tail as it pounded across the scree, seeking to knock him down.

He had no bolter, and no idea where it had fallen. All he had was the power axe, and he would only get one chance to use it. Another duck beneath a swiping claw, another weave aside from the beast's thrashing club of a tail.

The shadow that he could feel but not see expanded over him, swelling wide, bringing a sudden chill. A great stinking wind buffeted him as the monster beat its bleeding wings, seeking to rear up for a killing strike. Coming at him with its snapping, crashing jaws.

Now.

Nalfir moved with what little strength remained to him, his axe held low, its blade striking a trail of sparks as it gouged through the gravel. He swung upwards with a vagabond's blow, the kind of deceitful, desperate attack that cleaves beneath a shield-wall and has no place in a duel between honest warriors.

The blow landed. The axe bit, and bit deep. Nalfir roared as its curved blade crunched into the beast's body, burying itself in vile flesh. Foul-smelling gore drenched him in a reeking flood, along with the cold, wet chains of reptilian guts. He had a single second to wrench the axe back, prying the wound open wider, before he was smashed aside with enough force to shatter his breastplate like porcelain and blast the last of the breath from his body.

Nalfir's form thudded and rolled across the scree slope in a mangled tumble, ending its brief journey with an abrupt crash against a rise of wet rocks. A spray of red burst in a splash of colour where the bard's skull struck the stone.

The ptyradon died with far less dignity, thrashing its limbs as its insides roped out in slopping wet coils. Its roars became bleating whines even as it sought to claw its way over to the bard's body. Weaker with each step, with the organic pulp of its innards sliding from the brutal axe wound, the carnosaur collapsed only an arm's length from where Nalfir lay unmoving.

The beast's last breath left its jaws as steam between sword-length teeth. It died there, glaring at its killer's corpse, its reptilian eyes seething with bestial, stupid hate.

Ragnar exhaled at last, not realising until then that he'd been holding his own breath. Vorain came to him, skidding to a stop. His voice was hushed.

'He killed a ptyradon with... with *an axe*. He disembowelled it with a single blow.'

Ragnar felt the welcome burn of pride at Nalfir's last deed, and the reverence in Vorain's tone. He didn't reply. He simply hauled himself to his feet.

'A heroic death,' the Flesh Tearer said, awed.

'A stubborn bastard's death,' Ragnar replied. 'Though in my experience the

two are often the same thing.'

Together they approached the Stormraven's wreckage, seeking the pilot of the downed craft. Rather than aid the Flesh Tearer, Ragnar waited, watching the dead beast, daring it to move once more.

'I will summon another gunship,' Vorain said.

'Just one? And if there are more of those things out there?'

'Ptyradons are lone hunters.'

Ragnar wasn't convinced, but he had no will to raise an argument. They made their way over to the ptyradon's motionless form.

'Get the axe,' he said to the Flesh Tearer.

It took the lion's share of his remaining strength to push the beast onto its side, exposing the axe driven deep into its belly. He held it there, his muscles burning with fatigue and infection, his fingers gripping its immense reptilian scales as Vorain pulled the embedded axe free with grunted curses. When Ragnar heard the wet crunch of extraction, he released the beast's hide again, letting the body settle.

In keeping with Cretacia's savage fauna, insect vermin were already gathering at the creature's bulging black eyes, beginning their carrion-feeding on the softest and wettest portions of the dead dragon.

When they climbed back up the scree slope, Vorain carried the deactivated power axe still dripping with intestinal slime.

Ragnar carried his brother's body on his shoulders.



VI

It was a long road back to the Hearthworld. The warp's vicissitudes were as benign as could be, letting the Flesh Tearers frigate *Stygmoloch* make the coreward journey to Fenris without incident. With fair navigational winds, making the journey within the span of half a year was considered a blessing. The *Stygmoloch* was one of the fastest vessels remaining in the depleted Cretacian fleet; she made the journey in a mere four months.

The small warship, crewed by fewer than ten thousand souls, refused to sail deeply into Einherjar territory. A brief pulse of telemetry was broadcast into the Fenrisian System, but by the time a patrol vessel from the Fang reached the system's edge, there was no sign of the Flesh Tearers warship.

An unmarked Aquila suborbital shuttle – a lightly armed transit craft ubiquitous across the Imperium – waited at the location of the telemetry pulse. Its systems were active but it was incapable of covering the distance necessary to reach Fenris under its own power, and only had oxygen reserves for a week of survival. All identification had been scraped from its hull plating.

Only two details returned from an auspex scan of the winged shuttle, seemingly lost in the void. The first was its locator beacon: active and beating like a clockwork heart. The second was the presence of trace life signs: two souls, no more, no less.

When it was brought aboard the Wolves patrol destroyer *Atgeir*, a pack of Grey Hunters surrounded the shuttle in the hangar bay, bolters levelled with customary caution at the lowering ramp. The first soul to descend onto the hangar deck was Blackmane of the Thunderfists, leading a coffin-sized stasis pod behind him. He looked worn and weary, with his armour badly scarred and poorly maintained, and he carried an axe that wasn't his own.

'Blackmane?' asked the Grey Hunters pack leader, recognising the Blood Claw from former feasting days at the Fang.

Ragnar nodded, infinitely weary. 'Hail, Stormtamer. I bring the remains of Nalfir Razortongue, slain in honourable battle upon Cretacia, back to the Hearthworld.' He took a deep breath, savouring the recycled and reprocessed air of the *Atgeir*'s landing bay. 'And I have a tale for the Great Wolf's ears.'

'Then you're fortunate, kinsman. The Great Wolf guards the Fang this season, resupplying and recruiting for the Wolves that Stalk the Stars. You said *Cretacia*? Is this a jest?'

Ragnar managed a faint smile, showing his fangs. 'It's a long story.'

Andar hid his suspicions for now. 'We registered two life signals aboard the shuttle,' said the Grey Hunter. 'Who travels with you?'

'An emissary,' said Ragnar. 'Lower your guns.'

The second figure appeared in the shuttle hatch, clad in red-and-black battleplate. He descended the ramp slowly, hands open to show that he carried no weapons. His scarred features were set in a cautious mask as he became the first of his bloodline to ever breathe the air of a Space Wolves ship without boarding it carrying a blade and bolter in hand.

Andar Stormtamer turned to Ragnar, disbelief in his dark eyes. 'He let himself be taken alive?'

'He's not a captive,' Ragnar said. 'As I said, he's an emissary.'

Andar turned his gaze back to the unarmed warrior and spoke in Gothic. 'The Great Wolf will be told of your presence, Flesh Tearer.'

'Yes. Good,' said Captain Vorain in halting Fenrisian. 'It's time, Wolf-cousins, to end the war.'

'Today is a day for mad tales,' said Andar, looking to the stasis pod. He dragged his fingertips across his heart, a traditional sign of sorrow at learning of a brother's passing. 'You say Nalfir Razortongue has fallen. How did he die?'

Ragnar gave a mirror of Nalfir's own smile, as the bard's words left his lips. He spoke the lie he'd been told to tell, which was now nothing but the truth.

'He died fighting something huge, with teeth the length of your legs.'



EPILOGUE

Cadia – The Streets of Kasr Belloc
The Last Turning of the Year's Wind
999.M41

At the outset, High King Grimnar had said this would be no war of conquest. 'The Archenemy comes now not for resources, territory, nor even for their accursed ideology. This is the first battle in a war of extinction. They mean to burn Cadia, raze its fortresses, and sail onwards without looking back.'

With empty bolters and swords that cried out for fuel, the survivors of Ragnar's Great Company reached the surface only to be confronted with the truth Grimnar had promised. The city no longer existed. In its place was a purgatory of ash and fire.

They hadn't managed to reach the coast. The tunnels were collapsed, barring their passage, forcing them to surface within the city limits. With his helm on, Ragnar breathed in the sweat-scented recycled air of his armour, but the charcoal reek of the incinerated city found a way into his throat regardless. Gritty and pervasive, the smoke and ash and dust blended together into a dense atmosphere of ruination that choked the entire region.

The city was still aflame. Ragged warbands of the enemy were everywhere,

desecrating and destroying all they could find in Kasr Belloc's bones. Thanks to the Wolves serving as rearguard for the city militia's evacuation, there was little in the way of living sport for the foe to amuse themselves with.

The ground shivered with the bellows of distant, and not so distant, artillery, as well as the earthshaking grind of battle tank columns and Titan footfalls moving through the dead city. The enemy were no longer shelling the Kasr in force; there was precious little left standing deserving of annihilation. Now they were simply moving their hordes through the wasteland that remained.

'Move,' Ragnar voxed to the First Pack. Together they advanced in low crouches, stalking through the dust-strangled ruins of the fortress-city. The smoke in the air hid the details of their blood-scabbed ceramite and reduced them to armoured silhouettes in the perpetual ashen dark. Other shadows drifted nearby, some human, some far from it.

Ragnar had scattered his packs upon reaching the surface, staggering their advance in the loosest of formations rather than moving as a horde of dozens. Packs were near enough to come to each other's aid in the smoky darkness, yet not grouped up close enough to make significant blurs on any enemy auspex scanners. As ever, the First Pack led the way.

Nearly two hundred Wolves made planetfall with Jarl Blackmane at the campaign's commencement. By the time they regained the surface, scarcely seventy remained. More were lost as they made their way through the city – some impeded by enemy forces during the journey, and Ragnar believed they might yet survive in the ruins. Others sacrificed themselves to distract and hold Traitor patrols so that the other packs might slip deeper behind enemy lines. Each time the company split apart a fraction more, Ragnar's bitter reluctance grew. The fact he had no choice was irrelevant. The necessity of such sacrifice still pained him. His memorised list of those fallen beneath his banner grew by the hour upon this cursed world.

The Wolf Lord led his men onwards, coordinating the advancing packs with whispers across the short-range vox. For a time, it worked well.

'Jarl,' came a murmured voice. 'To me, sire.'

Ragnar looked back over his shoulder, scarcely seeing Ulrik's silhouette near a fallen wall. When even genhanced vision and a finely tuned retinal display struggled to pierce the murk, things were dire indeed. He crossed the shattered road in a low run and reached the Wolf Priest's side.

'Slayer?'

In reply, Ulrik brushed his armoured palm across a section of the tumbled wall still standing. A crude but complicated rune was marked there, cut into the stone. Scraped with a knife.

'That's... Cretacian,' Ragnar said.

'I know little of their tongue,' said Ulrik. 'Do you know this mark's meaning?'

He did. Ragnar nodded, touching the scratched sigil with his armoured fingertips.

'It's my name.'

'Do you jest, Young King?'

‘No, Slayer. It’s my name as a Cretacian hieroglyph. “*Mane of Shadow*”.’ He brushed more dirt away, revealing a series of smaller runic letters.

Ulrik said nothing. He simply waited.

‘It’s a warning,’ Ragnar said. ‘Nightblade is dead.’

Razortongue’s voice echoed down the years, drifting through his mind. *Luck runs out, Blackmane. Luck always runs out.*

‘The Flesh Tearers are in the city. At least... they were. We need to reach the southern promethium refineries.’

‘And why is that, sire?’

Ragnar bared his teeth in a rueful, weary grin. ‘Because that’s what these markings are telling us to do. And an actual mission that involves more than running, hiding and fighting in the dark until we die has great appeal. Gather the packs, Slayer. We hunt.’

The scattered survivors came across Nightblade and his Wolf Scouts soon after finding several more trail signs. Their crucified bodies hung from the statuary of a plaza’s dry central fountain, roped to the plain, serviceable Cadian stonework by industrial chains. Each of the corpses had been doused with promethium and ignited while chained in place, burned alive like heretics to hang as blackened husks. Their defilement was complete; there could be no recovery of their gene-seed after such a death, even if Ragnar and his warriors had reached the Scouts hours after their execution rather than days.

Ragnar turned from the ruined wreckage that had once been five of the oldest and bravest veterans within the Chapter. He watched the shadow of something vast and inhuman staggering mechanically several kilometres away, barely visible through the dust and ash to the west. Nothing living was that large, but no Titan moved with such sickly sentience. The sight of it made his skin crawl.

‘We should cut them down,’ Alrydd said of the crucified Scouts, ‘and turn their remains to ash.’ When Ragnar didn’t answer, the young bard turned to Ulrik, who was master of the company’s funeral rites. The skull-helmed priest gave no reply either.

‘No,’ Ragnar said. Reluctance thickened his tone. ‘When we retake the city, I’ll burn our brothers myself. But not now. Move on.’

They hunted once more. It was Alrydd, a slender silhouette in his Corvus battleplate, who next called a halt.

‘Do you feel that?’ he said across the vox, as softly as his rich singing voice allowed.

Ragnar felt nothing until he crouched and pressed his palm to the rockcrete road. There it was: a pulse in the broken stone, like the city’s own heartbeat.

Or the footsteps of a walking god.

‘Titan,’ he hissed across the company’s general channel.

Ragnar ordered the packs to scatter further and move into whatever cover they could find. Pickings were ripe in the fallen fortress-city, though no structure would protect them if a Battle Titan took umbrage at their existence. They couldn’t remain undetected for much longer, of that Ragnar was certain. That they’d even made it this far on the surface was a miracle, but with the city

practically razed there was precious little in the way of resources for the enemy to plunder. Ragnar suspected many of the enemy's warbands had already moved on to hunt fresh meat elsewhere.

With his back to a low wall, the Wolf Lord crouched and concentrated. The ground shivered harder, slowly becoming a tremble, then a rhythmic shake. He narrowed his eyes, almost a wince, as something vast nearby sounded a great war horn across the devastated cityscape. Imperial Titans blared their sirens to alert infantry and warn them out of the way. Whatever this war machine was, it didn't sound as if it were warning anyone of anything. Impossibly, it sounded hungry.

Ragnar pressed himself closer to the wall as the god-walker eclipsed what pathetic moonlight was managing to pierce the occluded heavens. He shifted enough to watch the war engine stride past, several streets away, its armoured shins and massive clawed feet sending the remnants of buildings crashing to the ground, breaking apart into yet more dust.

'Banelord.' Alrydd was whispering, as if there were a chance the titanic machine might hear them. 'I've never seen one outside of the hololith archives.'

Ragnar had. He'd boarded one, in fact. He'd gutted the malformed overseer-pilots with Frostfang, before hurling their corpses from the Titan's cockpit-head. That had been a good day, and a fine fight. Only two of his men had been slain.

Closing his eyes, he focused on slowing his twin hearts, straining to listen past the confining helm that dulled his inhumanly keen senses.

Distant gunfire.

Chanting, singing, praying.

The drumming of falling buildings.

The rolling growl of tanks.

The god-steps of marching Titans.

He cycled through Imperial vox-channels yet again, seeking anything amidst the static. The voices he did hear were cracked and degraded, and he wasn't certain they belonged to Imperial souls.

'Allfather's Throne,' he murmured.

'My jarl?' asked Alrydd at his side.

The Wolf Lord opened his eyes. 'Frequency ochre-five-three,' Ragnar replied. 'Listen.'

'I hear it,' Ulrik said at once. His breathing was a measured, mournful inhale/exhale breeze through his wolf-skull helmet. For reasons Ragnar had no wish to know, the Slayer enjoyed the taste and smell of the dead city. The priest evidently wished to experience it rather than seal his armour completely.

'I hear it, also,' said Olvec. They were his first words in days. 'The enemy.'

'The enemy,' Ragnar agreed.

'At the promethium installations,' said Alrydd, distracted by the grotesque voices in his ear.

All eyes turned to the bard. 'You're certain, brother?' Ragnar asked. 'The refineries were among the first districts to be shelled. There can't be much

infrastructure left.' He didn't add that the Cretacian markings were guiding him there, promising salvation. A leader should never let his disappointment show to his men.

Luck runs out, after all.

Alrydd nodded, his head still tilted in distraction. 'They're using what remains to refuel their rearguard armour divisions. As sure as the north wind blows cold.'

As usual, Ragnar decided against pointing out that the north wind here didn't blow particularly cold. The bard's axioms tended to be uniquely Fenrisian sentiments.

Even before its near-annihilation, Cadia had been an ugly world. Its sky was bleached by the rancid corruption of the Eye of Terror, which dominated the entirety of its heavens, day and night. Its whole culture, from art and architecture to morality and virtue, was dedicated to the simplicity and glory of Imperial warfare.

As a war-world, its role was to guard the edge of the Eye of Terror, where reality and the warp met to create the haven of Traitors and daemons alike. Cadia could have been beautiful. It could have been a beacon for enlightenment and progress in a darkening galaxy. Instead, because of where it lay in the Emperor's domain, it was forced to devote its entire existence to reinforcing its planetary defences while feeding its entire militarised population into the byzantine processes of the Imperial Guard.

It was said that Cadian children could strip and clean a Kantrael-pattern lasrifle before they could read. On other worlds such a claim would be a crude exaggeration. On Cadia, it was simply childhood.

Understandably, Cadian shock trooper regiments were among the Imperium's most decorated and highly trained Guard forces. Equally understandably, this left the world as a grey and ugly fortress-planet, with its continents given over to vast Kasr bastion-cities, where life consisted of little more than endless training, drilling and military discipline in place of any other kind of culture.

Even away from the main population centres, the wilderness was home to several thousand castles, training camps, bunker complexes and mountain fastnesses. The cities themselves were blocky, armoured, defensible command centres, often shielded from orbit and designed with one thing in mind: to cost any invader oceans of blood for every metre they managed to take and hold. Gun-towers lined the avenues of every place citizens could gather. Communal barracks ran row upon row, road by road, rather than the skyscraping habitation blocks of other cities on other worlds.

Belloc was no exception to the Kasr tradition. In death it had fulfilled the purpose of its life – though it was now dead, aflame and overrun with the Archenemy's rearguard, it was also the grave of hundreds of thousands of invader soldiers, cultists and slaves. The Warmaster, curses upon his black name, had paid dearly to raze the city. He was paying dearly to burn all of the Kasr; the dark truth was that it was a price he seemed willing – even eager – to pay.

Belloc had been named for the mountain range that cast its alpine shadow across the city nestled in its foothills. In the Kasr's southernmost district, closest to the mountains, Belloc's promethium refineries were a tertiary concern to Cadian High Command compared to eastern manufactories and the great central space port.

It took Ragnar's survivors three hours to reach the boundaries of the refinery sector. Each Wolf moved with renewed vitality, energised by the thought of attacking – at last – instead of waiting and repelling assault after assault in the useless dark or hiding among the bones of the fallen city.

The packs spaced out at various points along the district's walled edges, aiming to slip in undetected. They met no sentries or guards.

Ragnar led the First Pack through a row of wrecked and looted warehouses, with Frostfang in his hands. On they moved, slowed by Uller and Olvec in their Terminator plate, yet refusing to leave them behind. The Wolf Lord listened to his packs' voxed communications with razor focus, picturing their positions in his mind on a hololithic map he recalled flawlessly from memory.

The earliest reports spoke of Land Raiders and Rhinos on the ground in the district's furthest side, watched over by patrols of ceramite-clad warriors. The flames made identifying the foe difficult at such distance.

Ragnar ordered his men to begin the attack. He listened to their spoken oaths as they advanced, feeling the familiar and welcome burn of pride. With surly growls and gentle threats they demanded the Allfather pay heed to their deeds and glories.

The First Pack was lagging severely behind when the vox erupted with reports of initial contact. Grunts of effort and the tinny thunder of bolter fire rang out at once. Ragnar's muscles tightened with the need to run forwards and aid his kinsmen.

Uller and Olvec were stomping forwards in their heavy armour plating, frustration writ across their aged features as surely as it was etched across the face of their young lord.

'Go, damn you!' Uller ordered his jarl. The warrior's empty assault cannon whined in helpless, ammo-starved irritation. 'Just save some for us.'

Ragnar broke into a sprint, Ulrik, Hrolf and Alrydd with him. They emerged from the warehouse into a salvage yard with five towering deactivated cranes, and seven others brought down in the war, littering the courtyard with piles of melted slag and scrap metal.

The enemy were here, it was true. Hundreds of them, carpeting the ground, burst open by bolter fire. Traitorous Guardsmen, a horde of them with their flesh marked by ritual knives, massacred upon the earth.

'Sire!' came Soergar True Cut's voice. Laughing. Laughing hard enough to split open his skull. 'It's–' Distortion stole the rest of his declaration. The vox dissolved into static.

A gunship roared overhead, coming in on howling engines and catching him on open ground, far from cover. Ragnar hurled himself down to the scrap-strewn rockcrete, picturing the gunship opening up with its array of chattering, booming heavy bolters. Spent shell cases would rain upon the salvage yard like

metallic hailstones.

But the attack didn't come. The engines kept howling, as the gunship hovered.

'Identify yourself,' came a cold voice in Ragnar's ears, barely distorted at all. The new tones were immediately overlaid by several pack leaders voxing their jarl in the same moment, with the same information.

Ragnar rose from his dubious cover, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the Thunderhawk's scissoring searchlights as they drowned him in illumination. He saw the orange glow of distant fire on dark armour plating, and the winged blade emblem on the gunship's nose. He felt the same mad laughter that was afflicting his warriors also threatening to take hold of his own jaws.

'This is the Thunderhawk *Ophanic Vigil* of the Dark Angels Fourth Battle Company. We repeat, identify yourself.'

'Ragnar,' he said over the sound of his relieved men. 'Jarl of the Blackmane Great Company.'

The gunship began to lower. Its landing claws slid free into landing position, and the forward ramp opened on slow, loud hydraulics. The pilot's voice returned over the vox.

'Your request for reinforcements is acknowledged.' The Thunderhawk slammed down onto the rockcrete courtyard of the salvage yard, grinding traitors' bodies beneath its weight. 'Captain Sorael wishes to speak with you, Jarl Blackmane.'

Fifty-one Space Wolves made it to the Belloc Mountain fortress. Ragnar knew more yet lived in the ruins of the city. He would return and find them, when the Imperium pushed back to retake what remained of the devastated Kasr. Even so, fifty-one was a number to thank the Allfather for.

And, somewhat more reluctantly, to thank the Dark Angels for.

Several thousand Imperial warriors were using the mountain fastness as a fallback base. Alongside the huge regiments of Imperial Guard soldiers were thirty Black Templars, a strike force of the supposedly extinct Shadow Wolf Chapter, an armoured battalion of the Subjugators and a recon detachment of Flesh Tearers Scouts.

Over the coming days, the jarl's warriors would be rearmed, resupplied and reinforced from the Einherjar fleet in orbit.

However, the first soul to greet Ragnar was waiting when the gunship's ramp lowered. Time had changed him, scarring his features more than the Young King recalled, and adding several bronze trinkets and honour badges to the warrior's battered ceramite. He was from a Chapter that cared little for armour ornamentation, however. Little separated him from the appearance of a line soldier.

The Flesh Tearer shook Ragnar's hand, wrist to wrist in a warrior's grip.

'You live,' he said.

'I live, Vorain. How did you know we were down there?'

'It was your hunter, Drekka, who first got word to us. We went into the city

to seek him, but he'd already fallen. You saw our warnings?'

'I saw them. The Allfather alone knows how many you must have scratched across the city for us to find even a few.'

'Even I cannot be sure. My Scouts have been ghosting through the ruins and taking heads every day for weeks.'

'Thank you,' Ragnar said, humbled by the gesture. 'We'll speak again, after.'

'After? After what?'

'I must meet with the Dark Angels commander. There's a tradition we must honour.'

The duel began at sunrise, though there was precious little sun and even less in the way of warmth.

The two swordsmen circled one another in the snow. Their boots crunched holes in the white ground as they stepped sideways, blades levelled and ready. Two lords, alike in pride and dignity yet opposites in expression and bearing. Captain Soraël's helm was crested with angels' wings, and his dark armour plating covered in a traditional surplice of knightly reverence as he gripped his blade two-handed. Lord Ragnar was bare-headed and snarling into the wind, his armour cracked and ruined, holding his toothed sword in a single loose fist.

It was a scene that had played out hundreds of times before in the roll of years since the Horus Heresy. The war strangling this sacred world was, for the moment, forgotten – all that mattered were the edges of their blades and the expectant stares of their waiting, watching kindred. All were battered and bloodstained, but those armoured in the blue-grey of clean skies were cheering and howling; those armoured in the green of deep forests were silent and solemn. The Wolves raised their weapons high over their heads as they roared, as if the glint of the setting sun on their war-ravaged blades might catch the distant gaze of the God-Emperor upon His Golden Throne. The Dark Angels had their swords turned down, the points driven into the earth by their boots.

First blood went to Ragnar – a gash across Soraël's stern features – eliciting a colossal roar from the Wolves' ranks. Second and third blood went to the Dark Angel, cutting twin slashes across the Wolf Lord's face, returning the cheek-slice in kind and adding a cut across the forehead for good measure.

The wind tore at Soraël's tabard and Ragnar's filthy hair. Still they circled, clashing their blades together, each warrior testing the other's grace and technique, learning how they moved. No true blows were attempted. Even the shallow slashes across both warriors' faces were delivered for the sake of spectacle and minor insult as they gauged each other's skill. The only strike that would matter in the fight was the final one.

They began to test each other's strength and balance. The two swords met with a ringing crash, a heavier blow than any yet struck. They disengaged after a heartbeat, moving back into their patient circling. The respite between blows was much shorter this time, as the Wolf and the Dark Angel unleashed a stream of heavy, blurring strikes that impacted against the opposing blade, spraying sparks into the winter air.

The exchange lasted several minutes, punctuated by several blade-locks where both swordsmen heaved against each other, pauldron to pauldron or face to face around their trapped, squealing swords. Boots scrabbled on the loose rock beneath the layer of mountaintop snow as they bore their weight against each other every time their blades ground together.

Finally they disengaged for the final time, and the duel began in earnest. Sweeping cuts tore through the air only to be met with artful deflections. Swift thrusts were batted aside with the flat of a blade or the crash of a vambrace.

For all their matched skill, the differences in their fighting styles could not have been clearer. Sorael was a consummate swordsman, blocking, parrying, riposting, his movements the muscle memory of a lifelong soldier. Ragnar dodged aside from blows rather than seeking to block them, relying on a barbarian's powerful killing cleaves rather than a duellist's grace.

Their speed was beyond anything the mortal eye could follow – the two warriors became a single entity of blurred blades and limbs, two or three metal crashes coming in the space between each second. Ragnar would press the attack, advancing and swinging immense slashes like some reaper of life from Ancient Terran myth. Sorael would defend, recover and reply with a lightning assault of cuts and slashes that would put Ragnar back on the defensive. Back and forth it went, one warrior forced to give ground in one moment, then stealing the chance to retake it the next.

Above them the shrouded sky promised more snow. And above the clouds, war still raged in the heavens, just as it still swept across Cadia beyond the brief sanctuary provided by the mountain range.

Dirty, exhausted Cadian shock troopers were soon milling around the ring of Adeptus Astartes warriors. Even their legendary discipline was overcome by curiosity to see two lords of the Space Marines engaged in a life and death honour duel. In an Imperium where countless worlds believed the Adeptus Astartes were the Emperor's mythic angels, to see them in the flesh was rare enough. To see them performing one of their most sacred rites was utterly unprecedented.

Of course, witnessing the duel required seeing through a ring of towering, ceramite-clad superhumans. Cadian drivers brought their Chimera and Taurox troop transports closer, and platoons of soldiers watched by sitting and standing on the armoured hulls of their carriers.

Vorain watched from the surrounding circle, following their movements with a keen stare. He doubted the Imperial Guardsmen with their too-human minds were able to process the speed at which the fight was taking place. It was captivating and mystifying in the same breath. Frostfang's whirring teeth sent up an endless chainsaw whine, coupling with the waspish drone of the power field around Sorael's longer blade.

Vorain had never seen a fight like it. Ragnar had the edge in strength and speed, while Sorael had the benefit of far more training and experience. It was too close to predict a victor. The first to make a mistake would be the one to die.

The Wolf and the Dark Angel battled on, heedless of their audience.

When Ragnar overbalanced on a wild swing, Sorael thrust at the Wolf's breastplate, seeking a killing impalement; the tip of the sword crashed aside from the jarl's chest as Ragnar leaned away. When Sorael was slow to bring his guard back up, Ragnar risked the chance at a head-chop, only for the knight to deflect the blade's edge with his vambrace just enough for the slash to swing wide.

Thirty minutes became an hour. One hour became two. Ragnar was sweating freely, his skin steaming in the mountain cold. Even preternatural muscles weren't immune to fatigue, and the first signs of weariness were beginning to show in both fighters. In the practice cages, both warriors might have been able to fight for a day or more, but both Ragnar and Sorael were poorly nourished from long deployments and carrying their share of wounds from the recent months of warfare.

Their guards were slipping. Not enough to allow a killing blow, but enough to betray the burn of tiring muscles. Sorael managed to trip Ragnar with the length of his blade, and rammed the sword down even before the Wolf Lord had crashed to the earth. Ragnar rolled to the side, thundering a kick against the Dark Angel's forearm, sending the power sword spinning from Sorael's grip with a nasty buzz.

He allowed time for Sorael to recover the blade, using the time to pick himself up from the ground and spit to ward away misfortune. As he recovered, Ragnar met the eyes of the closest Wolves. They were no longer shouting for their lord, or insults at his foe. All present – Wolf, Dark Angel, human – merely watched in something closer to silence, waiting for the inevitable slip that would spell the battle's end.

'My thanks,' said Sorael as he approached again, once more holding his blade.

Ragnar had been just as grateful for the momentary respite. He was tiring fast, and weariness in a duel was always the first step in a slow haemorrhage of confidence. Doubt saw men dead as often as an opponent's skill. Baring his teeth, he forced a cocky grin as he faced the Dark Angel. Masked by his helm, Sorael showed no weariness beyond the subtle tells of his slowing muscles.

Show no weakness, Ragnar thought. Only defiance.

Sorael returned nothing but an impartial gaze, despite the fact he was nearly panting, dragging air into his three aching lungs.

Ragnar knew that he had to end this quickly, before he lost the chance to win at all. Dragging in a deep breath, the Wolf Lord attacked fast, holding nothing back. Always advancing, stalking forwards, laying on cleaving swing after cleaving swing against the knight's energised blade. Each crash of Frostfang against the Dark Angel's blade bred flares of migraine light from the tormented power field wreathing Sorael's sword.

The Dark Angel fought back, countering with a whirling dance of sword work, weaving his two-handed blade into a spinning silver barrier before him. Ragnar took a step back, then two, then three... He was giving up the ground he'd only just gained, retreating faster than he'd advanced. His boots thudded into the frozen earth, grinding the snow to powder. Twice he almost slipped as

the frost turned treacherous underfoot.

He leaned aside as the aggravated chrome blur of Soraël's sword crackled and spat past his face, missing his eyes by a finger's width. Ragnar had less than a second to taste the burned air of the sword's passing, like ozone on his tongue, before the return strike descended from above.

Ragnar heard the desperation in his own roar as he lifted Frostfang to ward against the falling blade. The two swords locked less than a hand's span from the Wolf's face. Again came the vicious heat of the sword's energy field against flesh.

Throwing the Dark Angel back with a furious howl, he retreated another few steps, breathing heavily, seeking – somehow – to buy time.

Soraël sensed his triumph. Pressing the advantage with a volley of cuts and thrusts, the Dark Angel ended with a decapitating strike, planting his feet to perfection and executing the cut with all the grace and power of the hundred-year veteran he was. Soraël's sword sliced at neck-height, matched to Ragnar's stance and posture, lethal at a mathematically perfect level made possible by a century of experience on the field of battle.

The Wolves and Dark Angels who saw the end coming breathed in as it unfolded; the humans with their slower senses had no idea what was happening until it was already done.

The blade rasped through the cold air, the energy field leaving a curved blur of abused kineticism in its wake.

And tumbled, deactivated and suddenly silent, into the snow.

The Dark Angel stood motionless, one arm outstretched to end the perfect decapitation. That arm ended at the elbow. The severed forearm remained with the sword, and the armoured hand that still gripped the hilt.

Ragnar, on his knees before the Dark Angel, rammed Frostfang upwards. As with Soraël, instinct allowed him to execute his blow perfectly. He could have ploughed it through Soraël's torso, hilted in the Angel's guts and disembowelling his opponent. Instead, the Fenrisian relic sword thrust up, its killing teeth slicing the side of Soraël's neck armour, biting just deep enough to taste blood.

Ragnar rose to his feet, keeping the sword at Soraël's throat. He looked into the Dark Angel's red eye lenses, picturing the warrior's features behind the helm's faceplate.

'It's over, Soraël.'

'It is far from over. This is a matter of Duellum Dolor, Jarl Blackmane. Yield or die – those are the laws that bind us here. It can only be over when one yields and offers his life to the other's blade, or one dies in the duel itself.'

'Then yield.'

'No.'

'Yield, and I'll spare your life.'

'Never.'

Ragnar pressed the blade against his rival's throat, leaning closer. His breath steamed in the icy wind.

'Don't make me kill you. Not after four decades have passed since my sin.'

You lost, Sorael. It's finished.'

Soraël used his remaining hand to disengage his helmet seals and pull the helm free. Sweating as much as Ragnar, he stood bareheaded and stern in the cold mountain air.

'Then kill me, for I do not yield to you, Lord of Wolves.'

Ragnar could scarce believe what he was hearing. Soraël was meeting the Wolf's eyes now, dark to pale, a stare of stark nobility meeting a gaze of all-too-feral fury. He kept his halved arm held against his tabard, the wound already sealed by his enhanced physiology.

It was the old anger that Ragnar felt now, creeping over his skin like a rash, settling into his skull like an infection. He felt the staring eyes of his men upon him as well as the Dark Angels' eyes and the witnessing gazes of hundreds of Cadian soldiers... watching the Imperium's finest warriors on the verge of murdering each other instead of saving this vital world.

All of the fight had bled from him, leeching all of his strength with it. Adrenaline alone kept him on his feet.

There had to be a way out of this.

Razortongue would know. The thought came unbidden. True or not, the bitter and long-dead bard would have also mocked him mercilessly for getting into this position in the first place.

Ragnar smiled, a crooked and sly bard's smile.

'No,' he said, and hurled the priceless Frostfang aside, letting it sleep in the snow near Soraël's powerless blade.

The Dark Angel's eyes flickered to the fallen weapons, then rested on Ragnar once more.

'No?'

'No,' Ragnar repeated. 'We stand at the edge of the Imperium's End, brothers at each other's throats. Russ' blood, if a Flesh Tearer played a part in saving my life, after all the bloodshed between our Chapters, I'll willingly fight at your side without hatred. Can you truly not do the same? Now, of all times, when it matters most? Look at the sky, Soraël. Look at this world aflame. We stand together now, or we fall apart.'

Soraël swallowed and said nothing.

'For forty years I've carried the guilt and shame of leaving this duel unfinished,' said Ragnar. 'We've finished it now, at long last. I've won it, Soraël. *I* choose how it ends. And it ends with both of our blades in the snow, not bathed in each other's blood. *Yield*, you proud bastard. Tend to your wounds, then fight by my side. I have warriors still trapped in the city. Help me find them, cousin.'

Soraël scanned the ranks of his dark-armoured brethren, then watched the growling, snarling Wolves for the span of exactly nine heartbeats.

Thinking. Dwelling. Deciding.

'I yield,' he said at last. There was a pause. 'And we will stand with you to retake Kasr Belloc.'

The reaction was immediate. The Dark Angels' ranks drew their blades from the earth, cleaning the snow from the steel and sheathing them at once. Their

solemn presence melted away, robed warriors returning to their duties in ruthless order, preparing for the next battle.

'My brethren,' said Soraël, 'are not celebratory souls.'

'My brothers are,' said Ragnar, a moment before the survivors of his Great Company howled to the night sky, long and loud.

When the shouting ceased, Soraël cleared his throat. 'I must see if my Apothecary can graft an augmetic replacement to my arm before the next battle. We will speak again before we leave.'

'Wait.' Ragnar offered his hand. His left hand. Soraël took it, gripping wrist to wrist as Vorain had done upon greeting the Wolf Lord upon arrival earlier that day. 'My thanks, Dark Angel, for your aid in the city.'

'Duty,' Soraël replied with a brief smile. It was the first sign of amusement Ragnar had witnessed from the Dark Angel. With that, the captain walked away.

Ragnar watched Soraël's retreating back. 'Their composure never ceases to amaze me,' he said to Vorain.

'They're from cooler, calmer blood than you and I,' admitted the Flesh Tearer.

'Forty years,' Ragnar murmured. 'Four decades of guilt, washed clean in an instant.' He shook his head, overwhelmed by the Dark Angels' stoic madness, yet shamelessly grateful for their part in his company's salvation.

'You were lucky, Blackmane.'

Ragnar turned to Vorain, forgiving him the use of the tribal name. 'You believe so?'

'Even an axeman can judge a fight between swordmasters, Wolf. You were lucky to weave beneath the sword that would have severed your head from your shoulders. You won a duel you should have lost. You beat a foe who was only seconds from killing you.'

'I had him,' Ragnar said, perfectly sincere.

Vorain laughed, the sound rich and guttural. 'Your secret is safe with me, Blackmane.' He gestured to the mountain fortress, to the grounded gunships, to the tank crews with their vehicles, to the rattle-walking Sentinels marching here and there, to the dozens of Flesh Tearers, Space Wolves and Dark Angels in hesitant alliance, cautiously mixing ranks. 'Well, safe with me... and every soul who saw the only reason you dodged the killing blow was because you slipped on the ice.'

'Ah, you lie, Flesh Tearer. You lie like a fireside storyteller.'

'At the speed you were fighting, can anyone be sure what they saw? I know what it looked like to me. Let's speak no more of it, cousin.'

Ragnar didn't argue. Nor did he agree. The Young King smiled as he retrieved Frostfang from the snow.

Luck runs out, Blackmane.

Aye. But not today, singer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aaron Dembski-Bowden is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Betrayer* and *The First Heretic*, as well as the novella *Aurelian* and the audio drama *Butcher's Nails*, for the same series. He also wrote *The Talon of Horus*, the popular Night Lords series, the Space Marine Battles book *Helsreach*, the Grey Knights novel *The Emperor's Gift* and numerous short stories. He lives and works in Northern Ireland.

An extract from *Cassius*.



The engines screamed and the world called Kolovan screamed back, the howl of a toxic storm that roared and scraped at the lower hull of the drop pod. Cassius knew the violent sensations of a drop pod assault intimately: the chill wail of the thin upper atmosphere, the hammering of the retro jets firing up, the hiss and buffet as the pod punched down through cloud cover and the rising bellow of the jets fighting against the thickening air.

As the pod screeched into its final descent attitude, these sensations were as familiar as taking a breath. Leaning into the pod's lurches was like taking a step or speaking a word.

'Clear your minds, brethren,' said Cassius, trusting in the amplified vox-channel to carry his voice above the storm of the descent. 'Seize upon only that symbol that shall lead you to victory. The sacrifice of Lord Guilliman. A passage from the Codex. The sight of blessed Macragge from space. An emblem of all we fight for. Take it and focus on it, and your soul shall be ready for the fight. Be pure and steel-hearted! Be all that is fury and righteousness!'

He was making his descent to the surface alongside a Tactical squad from the Third Company. Sergeant Verigar led them, a grey-haired veteran whose temple and left cheek glinted with the dull sheen of bionics. For now his stern visage was hidden beneath the pitiless iron mask of his red Mark VII helmet, and he sat with the easy calm of a warrior who had been through dozens,

hundreds, of landings like this. Cassius had not fought beside Verigar before, but Captain Fabian spoke highly of him. He knew the names and faces of the others, but had not yet ascribed particular value to any of them. He would see them fight, and then he would know them.

The grav-restraints tightened and forced Cassius back into the plasteel frame holding his armoured body in place. A moment later the drop pod slammed into the ground. The retro engines and shock absorbers did not completely cancel out the teeth-rattling impact, and Cassius' head snapped back and forth with the force.

The restraint around Cassius' right arm snapped free. The Chaplain drew his crozius arcanum from its compartment at his side.

He was armed. He was ready to kill.

The explosive bolts in the drop pod's upper hull fired like a series of gunshots. Light blared in as the hull split into four sections and fell away, exposing the Space Marines inside to the sun of Kolovan for the first time.

The star that hovered overhead and shone between clouds of filthy brown toxins was a painful, acid yellow. It fell on a broken plain, as if the surface had been baked hard by that sun and then shattered by a vast hammer. Deep fissures broke the land up into patches of scorched ground, and fingers of pale rock broke through, the bones of the planet, where the ground had been particularly tortured. A distant line of smouldering mountains spoke of the geological activity that had torn this place up over and over again.

More drop pods bearing the colours of the Third and Fifth Companies were thudding home, raising splintering showers of broken earth. As the crafts' bolts fired, squads of Ultramarines leapt out, weapons raised and ready to kill, the blue of their armour discoloured by the sickly filter of Kolovan's sun.

Cassius' grav-restraints snapped open, and he jumped from the drop pod as his men disembarked alongside him. A thousand battles' worth of experience flooded through him and he took a tally of the landscape around him in the space of a few seconds.

Broken ground, difficult to move over swiftly. Rises and breaks in the earth could serve as cover. The rest of the strike force was making landfall closely-grouped, for the crew of the ship *Defence of Talassar* had performed their task well in launching the drop pods from upper orbit.

The air was toxic. It would have dropped a normal man in a couple of minutes. A Space Marine's constitution could survive it initially but it would build up over time, and so Cassius wore a rebreather unit over his mouth and nose. The toxins stung the skin that still remained on his blasted face, the wind that carried them sharp with the dirt whipped up by the drop pod's impact.

'*We're east of the drop zone!*' came a vox on the command channel from Captain Galenus of the Fifth Company. '*The xenos are massing from the south.*'

'*Sigillite's teeth,*' swore Captain Fabian of the Third over the vox. '*We expected no resistance here.*'

'Do I detect dismay, brother-captain?' said Cassius. 'This is but a drop in the ocean compared to what will come. Let the men test their fury. It will do them

good.'

Cassius turned to the battle-brothers emerging from the drop pod. 'The tyranids were not so distant as we feared,' he said. 'They mass and respond from the south. We take the southern ridge, and we hold it until our main force makes landfall.'

His squad nodded gravely. Gauntleted fingers rested on weapon studs. Blades were checked and stowed. They were ready.

'We hold the ridge,' Cassius repeated through the vox. 'Fabian, you are with me. Captain Galenus, take position to the east and be wary of flanking attacks. Let them come in their thousands, and let them feel the wrath of Guilliman's sons. We are the wall against which the enemy will break.'

'Move out,' growled Sergeant Verigar, wisely leaving the oratory to his Chaplain.

'Let us send the foul xenos shrieking into the abyss,' roared Brother Ortius, doing the opposite.

Cassius let it pass. He knew what strength the expression of battle-joy gave them, and he knew what it covered up. Like everything else, it was there to be used by leaders like Cassius, turned into another weapon in the arsenal of the Ultramarines.

Other squads from Third Company joined with his own, while the landing forces of the Fifth secured the eastern edge of the ridge – Tactical squads, standing tall and proud in their burnished warplate, ready to face the enemy with a torrent of bolter fire; Assault Marines, chainswords already roaring with eager fury; and Devastator squads wielding pristine plasma cannons, missile launchers and heavy flamers. The latter would be key, Cassius knew; disciplined bolter drill and skilful bladework had their place in any battle, but against the swirling, writhing horror of a tyranid swarm, a swathe of cleansing flame or a sanctified warhead engraved with holy rites and packed with refined explosives were often the more effective countermeasures.

Cassius ran up the ridge of broken earth to the south of the drop pod site. As he crested it he saw the land reached down into a shallow depression where once an ancient river had fed a lake now long-drained by the land's upheaval. Into that bowl flowed not water but a mass of chittering, scrabbling flesh, a thousand limbs, the acidic sun gleaming on glossy carapaces and glinting on rows of sharp teeth.

Tyranid battle-organisms, numbering in the hundreds. They were termagants and hormagaunts, creatures evolved to serve as the foot soldiers of the hive mind, to swarm in massive numbers and flood the battlefield with gnashing teeth. Towering over them were a dozen warrior-forms that stalked on their two hind legs and lashed at the smaller creatures with whips of living flesh. The tyranids of each hive fleet had their own appearance and colouration, and these specimens had a particularly ill look to them – maggot-pale skin and plates of ivory exoskeletal armour, with eyes as black as night and maws full of glinting white teeth.

There were two options. The first was to wait at the ridge for the tyranids to reach the Ultramarines, withering their numbers with bolter fire. The second

was to advance to meet them and fight them face to face, driving a wedge of power-armoured fury into the heart of the aliens.

Cassius' role as a Chaplain, as a custodian of his brothers' souls and an example of the Space Marines' fury in battle, screamed to opt for the latter approach. His hatred was a physical ache as he looked upon the foe, and every fibre of his being was dragging him down off that ridge and into their roiling midst.

No. There would be time enough for that later. For now, the landing zone must be secured. The Codex, the word of Guilliman, willed it, and so he waited. He waited until the foul creatures skittered heedlessly into the effective range of the Ultramarines' bolters.

'Volley fire,' yelled Cassius, brandishing his crozius arcanum above his head. 'Burn this filth to cinders. For Macragge! For Mankind! For the Emperor!'

The Third Company Ultramarines opened fire, and a wave of mass-reactive death rolled over the front of the advancing horde. The hissing shriek of the advancing bio-organisms was drowned in an explosion of sacred ammunition that burst carapaces, split leering skulls and sent up a cloud of ichor so thick that it obscured the back of the swarm. It did not matter. From their elevated position, and with such a wealth of targets, the Ultramarines simply could not miss. Heavy bolters bellowed as they tore great rents in the enemy line, and smoking contrails marked the passage of missiles that impacted in the thickest patches of tyranids, erupting in great gouts of orange flame and sending clouds of gore and chitin whipping through the air.

Still they came on. A storm of fire that would have broken the back of any regular force could not force the tyranids into retreat. These creatures were bred only to die and to kill, and fear was a mortal concept that simply could not be applied to whatever vile consciousness urged them forward. Each war-organism was perfectly adapted to its battlefield role, and while the hormagaunts were evolved to leap and slash with the huge claws on their forelegs, the more numerous termagants had forelimbs adapted to wield symbiotic organisms as missile weapons. Through the torrent of bolter rounds that bracketed the dustbowl, dozens of termagants scuttled forward with their fleshborers raised and a hail of biological rounds erupted from the firing orifices.

Cassius dropped a shoulder to take the incoming fire on his shoulder guard. Burrowing beetles thudded into his armour as he ran, the tiny creatures expending their short lifespans in chewing through their target. The ceramite of Cassius' armour held and the beetles fell away as the bipedal warriors roared and the hormagaunts loped to the fore. Shrieking and hissing, they clawed their way up the rise and towards the Ultramarines.

Cassius brought his combi-bolter up and fired into the clutch of hormagaunts leaping towards him. They were so fast they could cover the ground from long bolter range to close combat more quickly than most soldiers could bring their weapons to bear. Cassius was ready for them and he felt the familiar kick of the combi-bolter in his hand as he sent the volley of shots into the tyranids.

Two fell, tumbling beneath the hooves of the xenos behind them.

With a flick of his thumb Cassius switched firing modes. The next time he pulled the trigger, a gout of fire spurted from the underbarrel flamer nozzle. Another hormagaunt was wreathed in burning fuel and collapsed in a heap, shrieking and spasming as its muscles burned away.

Another group of tyrannids had made the ridge, and were dismembering an Ultramarine with wicked swipes of their scythed boneblades. Cassius met them with a bellow of fury and a swing of his crozius. He aimed his holy weapon at a warrior-organism looking up from the dead Space Marine, gobbets of flesh and splatters of blood slathered across its vile maw. The xenos seemed to move in slow motion as the upward arc of Cassius' crozius shattered its twin foreclaws. Screeching, the hormagaunt slammed into Cassius, but he threw it to the ground, putting a bolter round through its skull as it writhed in the dirt.

He risked a glance down the line. The Third were butchering the enemy with the same furious enthusiasm on every side. Sergeant Verigar rammed his chainblade into the throat of a creature that tried to slash at him, hauling it into the air and firing three rounds into its torso with his bolt pistol. Brother Estus laid down wicked bursts of covering fire while Brother Olian primed and rolled a frag grenade down the ridge. Cassius did not see what it hit, but he heard the wet thud of its detonation, and felt a rain of dry earth and rancid biological matter splatter across the side of his face. He almost smiled.

A group of termagants scuttled out of the pack to the squad's right, trying to sweep around them and launch fleshborer volleys into them from behind. They were met by a storm of bolter fire from the battle-brothers of the Third Company. Captain Fabian directed his squads into position as they hammered volley after volley into the tyrannids. His blade was slick with alien blood, and he raised it in salute to the Chaplain before spinning to unleash a torrent of energy from his plasma pistol, the white-hot bolts of flame enveloping a trio of warrior-organisms and burning them to nothing in an instant.

'We deny them!' yelled Cassius. 'We wet the desert with their foul blood!'

Brother Morvion crashed into a hormagaunt a few steps from Cassius, bowling the creature onto its back legs with the weight of his armoured body.

Morvion snarled as he rammed his combat knife through the hormagaunt's throat. 'Die,' he spat. 'Die!' He had lost his grip on his bolter, but was using his weight to pin the creature down as he punched and stamped on its skull, cracking its chitin plating and dousing himself in sickly pale fluid as he jerked his blade back and forth.

'Morvion!' roared Cassius. 'Kill the damned thing and recover your weapon.'

The Chaplain marked the Space Marine's name for censure. Ultramarines did not abandon their weapons and ignore a tactical advantage to brawl with the enemy like some hive ganger.

Cassius waded through the tyrannids, batting aside one hormagaunt and letting Morvion fend off another. Above the sea of snapping teeth and claws loomed the shape of the closest warrior-form, twice the height of a Space Marine, wielding twin bone blades with one pair of forearms and a long-barrelled

weapon of flesh and bone with the other.

The tyranid warrior saw Cassius approaching. Its deep-set black eyes, like flecks of obsidian set into its face, focused on him. Like its swarming cousins, the thing was an anaemic yellow-white streaked with veins of cancerous black. It raised its weapon and the end of the barrel snarled like a mouth, a spiny tongue slaverling between its fleshy lips. The bulbous gland at the base of the barrel flared and the weapon belched a mass of thorny vine-like tendons that slammed into Cassius.

The thorns twined around him and constricted as he tried to move. Cassius ripped an arm free and let the crozius' power field discharge. The power weapon shredded the vines and he was free, kicking his way out to close the distance with the warrior.

There was a symbolism to war that every Chaplain had etched on his memory. Just as a commander had to know the tactical lore of the Codex Astartes and the lessons of the Chapter's combat histories, a Chaplain had to know the images and sensations that would drive his battle-brothers on to greater fury, steadfastness or pride. A Chaplain had to become such an image himself; when Cassius stood at the pulpit and spoke the words of the Codex or of the great deeds of Lord Guilliman and heroes of the Chapter, he became like a stained-glass window or a statue, an illustration of the Ultramarines' ideals. When he delivered admonishment to brothers who had been lax in their duties, he became the face of the primarch himself, his face hidden by the skull mask of his rank or Cassius' own mask of scar tissue and bone.

And in the thick of battle, when the Ultramarines needed a symbol of fury and relentlessness, Cassius became that symbol. His battle-brothers saw him as he leapt at the tyranid warrior, within the arc of its strangler cannon and into the sweep of its twin boneswords.

Cassius' combi-flamer, *Infernus*, blasted a sheet of liquid flame up into the warrior as it loomed down over him. The alien screeched as fire billowed up around it and muscle blackened and shrivelled away. Cassius followed up with a low blow at the creature's hindleg and, with a satisfying crunch, the head of the weapon smashed through the chitin of the warrior's exoskeleton and through into the pulp of muscle and tissue.

The tyranid warrior dropped to one knee. It lost none of its speed and Cassius barely parried the bonesword that lashed at his head. The second strike caught him a glancing blow on his left shoulder spinning him around and forcing him to throw the crozius into a desperate guard as the first blade came down at him again. Suddenly the creature rocked to the side, and the weapon-limb aimed at his head instead cracked into the ground as the alien fought for balance.

Eight Ultramarines stood their ground, pouring a vicious hail of fire into the towering creature. Cassius' heart surged with pride as he saw the newcomers. Each wore the symbol of a skewered tyranid skull on his right shoulder-plate, and the armour of each was littered with honour scrolls which fluttered in the toxic wind. Their helms were painted the white of combat veterans, and the accuracy of their onslaught proved the truth of this accolade – these men had been tempered in the hellish nightmare of the Tyrannic Wars, and they knew

their business well. The warrior-organism howled. Its bony armour plating was not simply blasted and scarred by the assault – smoke rose from ruptured flesh, as the specialised bio-acid embedded in each bolter round began to devour the creature's innards.

Wracked with agony, the xenos turned to face this new threat, forgetting Cassius for just a moment to bring its strangler cannon around.

Cassius leapt up, firing two shots into the underside of its skull as he brought the crozius around in an overhand strike. Its power field had recharged, and it erupted now. The armour covering the warrior's sternum split and Cassius buried the head of the weapon deep in its chest. The warrior spasmed as Cassius held it there for a moment, anchored in place by the crozius' ornate eagle wings hooked into its flesh. The arms carrying its boneswords flailed aimlessly and fell limp. The weapon came loose and the warrior pitched over, showering gore from its ruptured chest.

'So will it be for all your wretched kind,' muttered Cassius. He raised his crozius again, and brought it down on the tyranid's skull, which burst into wet fragments of bone.

The Tyrannic War veterans nodded at Cassius in appreciation of the kill, before reloading their hellfire-round magazines and turning away to seek new targets. One remained, marked out by the black of his armour, which matched the Chaplain's own. Upon his shoulder he wore not the inverted omega symbol of the Ultramarines, but a pair of crossed scythes, painted in the same acid yellow of Kolovan's sun.

'Chaplain,' he said, his voice a dour growl.

'Sergeant Remas,' Cassius replied. The sergeant gave an almost imperceptible nod, and strode off after his men.

The Ordo Xenos of the Inquisition, the magos biologis and the strategoes of the Astra Militarum had all collected reams of data on the tyranids. It was an endless task, for the tyranids evolved to counter every tactic used against them and new variants on the hive fleets' base organisms turned up every time the Imperium clashed with the aliens. But some constants remained. The lesser organisms, the variants on the termagant form, possessed only the capacity to act on crude animal instincts. To act in concert, as an army, they needed a directing force, which for the tyranids came in the form of leader organisms that transmitted the directions of the hive mind.

The warrior-form Cassius had just killed was one such organism, and without it the tyranids nearby lost their focus. They snapped and charged at random instead of surging in waves. Some fled or tried to burrow into the broken ground instead of fighting. The Third Company opened up a great, bloody rift in the tyranid mass in Cassius' wake, hammering the lesser organisms back with bolter fire and isolating and butchering them in ones and twos. Brother Covello vaporised panicking knots of termagants with space-warping blasts of his grav-cannon. Warrior organisms writhed on the ground as they fell over one another to flee or counter-charge, and were despatched on the ground.

Cassius jumped up onto the command-beast's ruined corpse, giving him

another metre of vantage point so he could see all the way back to the battle-brothers of the Fifth Company in their firing lines to the east. They had reaped a toll no less catastrophic on the enemy's left flank. Wretched, torn corpses littered the ground in front of their position like a sea of crushed maggots. Cassius held up his blessed crozius, still splattered with gore from the dead creature's skull. He stood triumphant on the corpse of his enemy, and roared his victory to the tortured sky. His exultation echoed through the vox and into the ear of every Ultramarine on the field.

'Victory! We have victory! For Macragge! For the Golden Throne!'

All eyes went to him. He was a symbol of triumph, of destruction, of how the greatest of the tyranids were just fodder beneath the Ultramarines' assault – a symbol of the victory demanded by the legacy of Roboute Guilliman.

Cassius understood the power of such symbols like few others. Creating and nurturing them was his purpose as a Chaplain. It was with such an image in their hearts that the Ultramarines would scour the tyranids from Kolovan.

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