

WARHAMMER
40,000

THE SPACE WOLF OMNIBUS



WILLIAM KING

SPACE WOLF • RAGNAR'S CLAW • GREY HUNTER



Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Warhammer 40,000](#)

[The Space Wolf Omnibus](#)

[Space Wolf](#)

[Prologue – Assault on Hesperida](#)

[One – The Sea of Dragons](#)

[Two – The Temple of Iron](#)

[Three – The Festival of Passage](#)

[Four – The Last Stand](#)

[Five – The Chooser of the Fallen](#)

[Six – The Chosen](#)

[Seven – Hunting](#)

[Eight – Trials](#)

[Nine – The Gate of Morkai](#)

[Ten – The Cup of Wulfen](#)

[Eleven – The Spirit of the Beast](#)

[Twelve – The Ultimate Test](#)

[Thirteen – Acceptance](#)

[Fourteen – In the Field](#)

[Fifteen – In the Dark](#)

[Sixteen – The Temple of Chaos](#)

[Seventeen – Fighting Retreat](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ragnar's Claw](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Grey Hunter](#)
[Prologue](#)
[One](#)
[Two](#)
[Three](#)
[Four](#)
[Five](#)
[Six](#)
[Seven](#)
[Eight](#)
[Nine](#)
[Ten](#)
[Eleven](#)
[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Fifteen](#)
[Sixteen](#)
[Seventeen](#)
[Eighteen](#)
[Nineteen](#)
[Twenty](#)
[Twenty-One](#)
[Twenty-Two](#)
[Twenty-Three](#)
[Twenty-Four](#)
[Twenty-Five](#)
[Twenty-Six](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Legal](#)

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

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

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

THE SPACE WOLF OMNIBUS

The world of Fenris has long been a proving ground for new recruits into the Space Wolves. The harsh realities of life on that planet prepare the initiates for a lifetime of battle across the stars – should they survive the induction and training. Ragnar is one such recruit – a youth who is saved from death by the mysterious technologies of the Space Marines. But can he control the raging beast within or will it consume him and lead him to take revenge against a fellow recruit who helped murder his entire village? One path will lead to eternal glory in the eyes of the Emperor, whereas the other will only lead to damnation!

It's savage action all the way as *Space Wolf*, *Ragnar's Claw* and *Grey Hunter* are collected into this superb omnibus edition.



THE SPACE WOLF OMNIBUS

By William King





SPACE WOLF



PROLOGUE

ASSAULT ON HESPERIDA

All around the buildings burned. Ragnar strode through the maelstrom of battle, shouting commands to his men.

‘Brother Hrolf – I want two krak missiles into that forward emplacement now! The rest of you form up and prepare to storm in as soon as the door is blown.’

Acknowledgements filled the earbead linking him to the comm-net. He raced from the doorway where he’d been sheltering to a huge block of fallen masonry some twenty metres closer to his objective. Enemy laser blasts melted the concrete behind his heels but, even in his powered armour, he moved too quickly for the heretics to get a bead on him. He threw himself into a crouch behind the rubble and waited for a moment.

The thunder of heavy ordnance filled the air. Somewhere off in the distance he could hear the howl of Thunderhawk engines and the multiple sonic booms as they slowed their speed down from the sub-orbital. Even as he watched, bright yellow contrails pierced the leaden clouds and the gunships hove into view. Missile clusters detached themselves from their wings and hurtled groundwards to smash into the heretics’ positions. He checked his weapons with the precision born of a century of experience, took a deep breath, intoned a prayer to the Emperor and waited.

He was aware of everything. The beat of his primary heart was regular. His body was already healing the minor cuts and grazes he had taken from shrapnel. He could feel a slight nick on his face closing itself. His senses, far sharper than those of the human he had once been, kept up a steady flow of information on the battlefield around him. From nearby he could smell the comforting presence of his battle-brothers, a compound of hardened ceramite, oil, the flesh of Fenris and the subtle markers which told they were not quite human. More than that, he could pick out the faint pheromone traces of anger, pain and well-controlled fear.

He checked his armour to ensure the integrity had not been breached. Here and there were a few scuffs where shrapnel had bounced from the hardened ceramite of the carapace. In two spots he found blisters on the

paintwork that told of the fleeting kiss of a lasgun beam. In one spot there was a distinct chip on the shoulder pad where a bolt pistol shell had torn through the raised rim. Nothing serious. The servo-motors that powered the mighty combat suit were currently operating at 75% efficiency, idling on most systems to save power. The suit's built-in auto-sensors informed him of faint traces of pollutants, contaminants and a residue of the neurotoxins that the heretics had used in their surprise attack on the loyalist forces when they began their rebellion.

Nothing much to worry about, praise Russ. His body's ability to metabolise poison was barely needed to deal with them. He had known poisons strong enough to give him headaches and muscle spasms and dizziness while his body adapted to their presence. These ones were nowhere close to that potency. All in all then, things did not look too bad. If truth be told, he was enjoying the situation. After a month of meditation in his cell back in the Fang and a week cooped up onboard one of the great Imperium starcruisers en route to this minor war, he relished the action. It was hardly surprising really: it was what he had been born to do, and what he had trained for. His entire life had been a preparation for this moment. He was, after all, an Imperial Space Marine of the Space Wolves Chapter. What more could he possibly ask from life than this? He had a loaded boltgun in his hand and the Emperor's enemies before him. In this life, there was no greater pleasure to be found than performing his duty and ending the lives of those sorry heretics.

The masonry at his back shuddered. Chunks of stone clattered off his armour. Someone had hit his cover with something heavy, a rocket perhaps or a very heavy bolter shell. Not that it mattered. He knew from long experience that the metal-reinforced concrete could take it. He studied the chronometer readout superimposed on his field of vision. A minute and four seconds had passed since he had given his orders to Brother Hrolf. He guessed that it would take two minutes for Hrolf to get into position, and another ten seconds for him to line up his shot. That was more than enough time for the rest of his force to get themselves into position. In that time, it was impossible for the heretics to chip away at his cover unless they brought far more firepower to bear than they were currently using.

It was a thought that had apparently occurred to the enemy commander too. Ragnar could hear the sound of monstrous tracks coming closer. He knew that they must belong to an enemy vehicle. The Imperial forces had

just begun their drop from orbit with the Space Wolves as a spearhead. It was far too early for any Imperial armour to be on the ground. The logical conclusion was simple. Whatever was approaching was not friendly. A call on the comm-link soon confirmed this.

+Force Ragnar. Enemy Predator tank approaching your position. Do you wish assistance? Over.+

Ragnar considered for an instant. At this point, the Thunderhawks' air-cover was needed more elsewhere, to support troops still in the critical stage of landing under enemy guns. He did not want to draw their help away from his battle-brothers. Particularly not to deal with a single enemy tank.

+Ragnar here. Negative. We will deal with the Predator ourselves. Over.+

+Message received and understood. The Emperor watch over you. Over.+

Ragnar considered his options. He could hear the tank's approach, smell the acrid chemical fumes of its exhaust. Concrete was crushed under its treads as it moved. He could request Brother Hrolf with the squad's heavy support weapon to blast the tank but that would mean cancelling the attack on the bunker while Hrolf moved into a new position, and Ragnar doubted that there was any need for that, certainly not when he could deal with the tank himself.

He checked his belt compartments. Everything was in place. Healing drug syrettes, grenade dispensers, repair patches. He tapped the grenade dispenser and a krak grenade dropped into his hand. That would do. He glanced out of his cover and saw the long snout of the Predator's gun barrel coming around the corner. Moments later the whole tank hove into view. It was a standard design for an Imperial tank but instead of the neat patterns of the Imperially aligned planetary armies it had been hastily sprayed blood red, and a crude eight-armed Chaos symbol had been painted on the side in yellow. Ragnar bared his teeth in a snarl at the sight of that hated emblem. It was the sign of daemon worshippers sworn to overthrow everything Ragnar had fought to uphold his whole long life, and just the sight of it brought the animal ferocity that was so much a part of his Space Wolf nature bubbling to the fore.

He raised himself to his feet, measuring the distance between himself and the tank with a practiced eye. No more than a hundred strides, he

guessed. The distance was closing fast as the tank rumbled forward. He could see that the turret-mounted bolters were already swivelling to bear on him. His position had been flanked. It was just as well that he had decided to abandon it anyway.

The servo-motors of his armour whined as he raced across the open ground towards the tank. Once again lasgun fire dogged his heels, but as he had counted on, the gunners were too surprised by his sudden break from cover in the direction of the tank to target him swiftly. The tank's gunners obviously couldn't believe their eyes either. Tracer fire ripped the air over his head targeted on a spot behind him. The gunners' efforts were half-hearted. They seemed to have reckoned that he was going to be ground to pieces beneath their onrushing vehicle. Ragnar intended to swiftly prove them wrong. They would pay for underestimating one of the sons of Lemman Russ.

He rushed directly at the tank. It swelled swiftly in his view. Even though he had often marched beside such vehicles or clung to their side as they carried himself and his battle-brothers into the fray he was surprised by how big this one looked now. He smiled. It was always different when you actually had to fight with one of these things. The gap between him and the Predator closed quickly. The air thrummed with the vibration of its engine. The exhaust stink became near-overpowering to his nostrils. The flickering lasgun fire came ever closer to his heels.

At the last second he threw himself to the right, putting the Predator between himself and the fire from the enemy bunker. He reached out and lobbed the first krak grenade between the drive cogs and the tracks they were linked with. The charge was shaped and the fuse was set for three seconds. Plenty of time for Ragnar to set another charge.

When they exploded, whole sections of tread were blasted away and drive cogs began to grind to a halt as the power train failed. A huge section of track flapped free and almost hit Ragnar. Only his lightning-swift reflexes, keyed to superhuman keenness by the stress of battle, enabled him to duck beneath it. Just as well, really, since he guessed the sheer force with which the articulated metal segments were moving would be enough to take his head clean off.

Robbed of the power of one set of treads, the Predator began to rotate slowly on the spot. The tracks on the other side were still working and pushing it forward but it was not going to go anywhere except in circles.

Ragnar was glad of that. Since the turret was already beginning to swivel in the direction of his squad it was time to move to the next phase of his plan.

With a mighty leap Ragnar sprang onto the side of the Predator just above the track guard. He landed easily, ceramite boots ringing against the hull, and raced forward, hoping to Russ that no one inside the tank had yet realised what was going on. He could hear the muffled bellowing of orders and confused shrieks from within so he guessed they had not. Good. They would never realise what hit them. He raced forward to the turret and saw that the hatch was closed. A pity, Ragnar thought, but nonetheless it was what he had expected. In the close quarters combat of a city fight no tank commander was going to go around with his head exposed. Still, it was foolish for them to have advanced so far without close infantry support. It would have been far more difficult for him to do what he planned in the presence of armed warriors. He guessed that the tank had come as quickly as possible in response to a desperate plea for help from the bunker. Well, he would make sure the heretics paid for that mistake.

He reached down and grasped the handle on the top of the turret with both hands then braced himself. He strained with all the strength of his enhanced muscles and tugged. Nothing happened. He threw more and more power into the servo-motors of his armour until the muscle fibres were almost overloaded and the maintenance readouts superimposed on his field of vision were far into the red. Slowly at first, with an awful grinding sound, the hatch began to come away from its hinges. Ceramite buckled under the terrible strength of the Space Wolf. Ragnar almost overbalanced as the hatch cover came free in his hands.

There was a rush of foul air from within the tank, and Ragnar recognised the stink of mutation. Truly these heretics had paid the price of swearing allegiance to their dark masters. He tossed the hatch cover away and grabbed a frag grenade from his belt dispenser. He looked down into the interior of the tank. A quick glance showed him hideously altered mutant faces looking up at him. One was blotched with monstrous red warts each ending in an eye. The other had melted and run as if made of candle wax. The mark of their evil was plain upon them, their exterior selves had been altered to match their inner corruption by the evil powers they worshipped.

One of the mutants reached for his holstered pistol. By the look of blind panic on its face, Ragnar knew that the creature had worked out what was going to happen next. Nor was it wrong. Ragnar dropped the grenade into the open hatch and leaped away. Even as he did so he grasped another grenade and lobbed it with unerring accuracy back into the opening on the turret's top. It was just possible that the mutants might be able to find one grenade as it rolled about within and lob it clear. He knew they would not be able to get both.

The tank was still between him and the bunker. He whipped out his weapons. In the side of the Predator a hatch had half opened. One of the crew, realising what was happening, was trying to get clear. Ragnar kicked the hatch closed and sprang away again just as two enormous blasts shook the tank. A fountain of blood and flesh jetted up through the turret top. Ragnar moved quickly now for cover, knowing that it was all too possible that the drive systems of the tank would go up in the explosion.

Fortunately the inhabitants of the bunker were distracted by the fate of their support vehicle and he dived into the cover of the rubble in which he had previously crouched just as a wracking explosion tore the mighty vehicle to pieces. Huge chunks of metal armour were twisted outward by the blast of the exploding power plant. Oily black smoke twisted skywards from the remains.

Just at that moment the sound of another explosion assaulted Ragnar's ears. He knew that Brother Hrolf had hit the door of the bunker with the missile launcher. Ragnar sprang up, noting with satisfaction that the plasteel entrance had been blasted completely off its hinges by the force of the explosion and that the flanking force of Space Wolves was already moving into position from either side. Even as Ragnar watched Brother Snagga throw himself flat, wriggled on his belly under the firing slot of the bunker and lobbed a handful of microgrenades through the entrance. Explosions and screams of pain were his reward. Within seconds two Space Wolves had entered the bunker. Shots rang out as they finished off the survivors.

Ragnar smiled revealing two huge wolfish fangs. The gleam of triumph appeared in his yellowish dog-like eyes. Another victory was his. At that moment, he caught the faint gleam of sunlight hitting glass somewhere off to his right. Instinct told him to throw himself flat but he was already too late. Even as he sprang, the sniper's bolter shell, rocket-

powered and armour piercing, was ripping towards him too quickly to be avoided. All his leap did was get his body partially out of the way. The shell which had been aimed directly at his heart exploded instead within his chest. Pain blasted through his body. Messengers of agony raced along his nerve endings. He fell forward into a molten lava pit of torment.

‘Don’t worry, Brother Ragnar,’ he heard a voice from the far distance say. ‘We have you.’

Ragnar wondered about that, wondered if they were not too late. Already the voices sounded as if they were coming from the top of a huge well. It seemed to him that he was falling downwards, towards the cold hell of his people, there to be greeted by all his family and his friends, and all the old enemies he had sent there himself. It was odd, he thought, that he should be dying so far from home, so long after he had expected to die. There was something comforting about this strange sensation. He knew what to expect. He ought to. After all, he had died before.

Icy clarity possessed his spirit. His memory flooded back. His soul ventured back through the centuries. Remembering.



ONE

THE SEA OF DRAGONS

‘We’re all going to die!’ Yorvik the Harpooner screamed, glaring round, his eyes wide with fear. Lightning slashed through the sky of Fenris, illuminating the man’s tormented face. Sheer terror made his shout audible even above the roar of the wind and the thunder of the waves against the ship. The driving rain running down his face looked uncannily like tears.

‘Be silent!’ Ragnar shouted and slapped the terrified man across the cheek. Shocked at being hit by a youth barely old enough to have the down of manhood on his cheeks, Yorvik reached for his axe, his fear momentarily forgotten. Ragnar shook his head and glared at the older man with his cold grey eyes. Yorvik stopped, as if realising where he was and what he was doing. They stood in full view of all the warriors on the prow of the ship. Attacking the son of his captain would gain him no credit in the eyes of the gods or the crew. The flush of shame came to Yorvik’s face and Ragnar looked away so as not to embarrass the man further.

Ragnar tossed his head to get his mane of long black hair from his eyes. Squinting through the lash of the wind and the salt-spray of the storm-tossed sea, Ragnar silently agreed with Yorvik. They were going to die unless a miracle occurred. He had been going to sea since he was old enough to walk, and never had he seen a storm this bad.

Sullen dark clouds scudded across the sky. It was dark as night even though it was noon. Spray billowed as the prow of the ship cleaved through another enormous wave. The dragonhide of the deck echoed like an enormous drum with the force of the impact. He struggled to keep his balance on the constantly moving deck. Even over the wind’s daemon shriek, he could hear the creak of the ship’s bones. It was only a matter of time, he decided, before the sea killed the vessel. It was a race to see whether the force of the waves smashed the *Spear of Russ* into a thousand pieces, or whether it simply stripped the cured dragonhide from the ship’s skeleton and left them to founder and drown.

Ragnar shuddered and not just from the chill, sodden wetness of his clothing. For him, as for all his people, drowning represented the worst of all possible deaths. It meant simply sinking into the clutches of the sea daemons, where his soul would be bound in an eternity of servitude. There would be no chance of earning his place among the Chosen. He would not die with spear or axe in hand. He would not find himself a glorious death or swift passage to the Hall of Heroes in the Mountains of the Gods.

Looking back along the rain-lashed deck Ragnar saw that all the massive warriors were as frightened as he, though they hid it well. Tension was written on every pallid face, and visible in every blue eye. Rain matted their long blond hair and gave them a hopeless bedraggled look. They sat huddled at their benches, useless oars held at the ready, massive dragonskin rain-cloaks thrown around their shoulders or flapping in the wind like the wings of bats. Each man's weapons lay beside him on the soaking deck, impotent against the foe that now threatened their lives.

The wind howled, hungry as the great wolves of Asaheim. The ship plunged down the far side of another enormous wave. The dragon tooth on its prow smashed through the foaming water like a spear. Overhead, the sails struggled and flexed. Ragnar was glad that they were made from the purest dragongut; nothing else would have survived the storm's rending claws. Ahead another massive mountain of water loomed. Somehow it did not seem possible that the ship could survive it crashing down on them.

Ragnar cursed in fury and frustration. It seemed that his short life was over almost before it started. He would not live even to see his entry into manhood next season. His voice had barely broken and now he was doomed to be lost at sea. He shielded his eyes and gazed out into the storm, hoping to catch sight of the longship of his kinfolk. They were nowhere to be seen. Most had likely gone to the bottom. Their bodies would become food for the dragons and the kraken, their souls would provide thralls for the daemons.

He turned and aimed an angry glance at the stranger who had brought them to this. There was some satisfaction in knowing that if they died, he would too. That is if he were not a sorcerer, or some sea daemon in disguise sent to lure the Thunderfist folk to their doom. Watching the way the old man stood on the water-covered deck, fearless and unafraid, that seemed all too possible at the present moment.

There was something supernatural about this gnarled ancient. He looked strong as a warrior in his prime despite all the furrows age had ploughed in his brow and he held his balance better than many a seafarer half his age despite the white in his hair. Ragnar knew that he was a sorcerer. Who but a sorcerer would wear the pelts of those enormous wolves around his shoulders and that strange metal armour encasing his entire body, so unlike the leather tunics of the sea folk? Who but a sorcerer would carry all those strange amulets and charms around his person? Who but a sorcerer could offer his father and their kin enough ingots of precious iron to attempt the near suicidal passage of the Sea of Dragons in this, the Season of Storms?

Ragnar saw that the stranger was pointing at something. Was this some sorcerer's trick, he wondered, or was the stranger casting a spell? Ragnar turned to see and felt his mouth go dry with fear. Lightning flared once again. In the flash Ragnar saw a huge head had broken from the waves next to the ship, almost as if the stranger had summoned it. A nightmare face filled with teeth the size of daggers loomed above them. The long neck flexed and the head descended searching for prey. It was a sea dragon, and no mere hatchling but a full-sized monstrosity, large as the ship, stirred from the sea bottom by the fury of the storm.

The thunder spoke its angry words. Death struck an arm's length from Ragnar. He felt the wind of its passage as the huge jaws of the dragon closed on Yorvik. Great fangs pierced the tough leather of Yorvik's armour as if it were paper. Bone gave way. Blood gouted. The screaming man was lifted into the air, arms flailing, the harpoon dropping from his fist. A sneer curled Ragnar's lips. He had always known Yorvik was a coward and now he had proof. He would find himself a place in the cold hells of Frostheim. The dragon bit down and gulped and part of Yorvik disappeared down its throat. The other part splattered down on the deck near Ragnar. The rushing waves cleansed him of blood and bile.

The warriors swarmed from their benches, raising their axes and their spears in defiance. Ragnar could tell that in their hearts they were glad. Here was a quick death and a heroic one, fighting a monster from the depths. To many it must seem as if Russ had answered their prayers, and sent them this beast to grant a great doom.

The enormous head began to descend once more. At the sight of it, several of the warriors froze. As if it had been sent to weed out cowards,

the beast struck them down, biting them in two with its rending fangs. Other Thunderfist warriors lashed out at it with their weapons. Axes bounced futilely from the heavy armoured scales. A few spears bit deep into flesh but the creature paid as much attention to them as a man might pay to a pinprick. The pain merely goaded it to greater fury.

It opened its maw and let out a terrifying bellow, audible even over the thunder of the waves. The sheer volume of it paralysed all the warriors. They froze as if overwhelmed by a sorcerer's spell. Ragnar could see that the creature had reared half out of the water. Its enormous length towered over the boat. It had merely to fall forward and its huge bulk would break the ship in two.

Something snapped within Ragnar. His anger at the storm, at the gods, at this enormous beast and his cowardly kinsman bubbled over. He reached down and picked up the harpoon Yorvik had dropped. Not pausing to think, not pausing to aim lest fear of those enormous dripping jaws should freeze him, he threw the harpoon directly into the creature's eye. It was a good cast. The bone-tipped spear flew true and buried itself up to the shaft in the dragon's eye.

The monster pulled itself up still further, screaming in rage and pain. Ragnar thought he would be deafened by the chill evil of its cries. He was certain now that he was going to die, that the entire ship was going to be smashed to flinders by the enraged beast. Then he heard another sound, a stuttering roar that came from the back of the ship. He risked a glance at the stranger and saw that he was the source of the noise.

The ancient had drawn some kind of massive iron icon from his side, which he held aloft and pointed at the beast. A searing blast of fire spurted from the end of the holy charm along with the roaring sound. Looking back at the dragon Ragnar could see that huge gaping wounds were stitched across its torso – testimony to the strength of the stranger's magic. It opened its mouth to scream in pain and the stranger raised his talisman still further. A hole appeared in the roof of the dragon's mouth and the top of its head exploded. The creature tumbled backwards to vanish beneath the waves.

The stranger threw back his head and laughed. His booming mirth drowned out the sound of the storm. Ragnar felt a shiver of superstitious fear. He could see that two enormous fangs jutted downwards from the

stranger's mouth. He bore the mark of Russ! In him flowed the blood of the gods. Truly, he was a sorcerer or something more.

Crouching low on the deck, keeping his balance easily despite the motion of the ship, Ragnar turned and moved back towards the helm. Spray ran down his face like tears. When he licked his lips he tasted salt. As he moved past the stranger, a huge wave broke over the ship. He felt the pressure of tons of water and floundered. The force of the wave lifted him clear of the deck and send him tumbling. In the waves' fury he could get no clear view of where he was. He simply knew he was going to be swept overboard and carried to his doom.

He growled with rage and restrained fear. It seemed that he had survived the dragon's jaws only to be taken by the sea daemons. Then iron-strong fingers clamped on his wrist. Enormous strength fought against the power of the sea. Then the water was gone. In a moment Ragnar floundered on the deck, saved by the stranger who had banished the dragon.

'Be still, boy,' the sorcerer said. 'It is not my destiny to die here. Nor is it yours, I think.'

So saying the stranger turned and strode away to the prow of the ship. He stood there gazing forward like some elder god. Filled with fear and a strange superstitious reverence, Ragnar made his way to the place where his father stood. Looking up he saw understanding there.

'I saw it, my son,' his father shouted. Ragnar knew no further explanation was necessary.

As if the killing of the dragon had broken an evil spell, the sea began to calm. Mere hours later, it was as smooth as glass and the measured beat of the oar-master's drum was the only sound save the quiet sloshing of the waves against the ship's hull.

The stranger still stood at the prow, as if keeping guard against the daemons of the sea. He scanned the far horizon, shading his eyes with one gnarled hand, seeking something only he could see. Overhead the sun beat down. It was not the pale small sphere of winter. Now it was a huge fiery orb that filled the sky with its golden light. The Eye of Russ was fully open, surveying his chosen people as they endured the terrors of Fenris's long hard summer. The remaining water steamed from the decks under its gaze.

The warriors were quiet. Awe had overcome them. There was none of the usual chat and boasting that one would normally hear from those who had survived such a terrible storm. There was none of the mirth or the singing either. Ragnar's father had not ordered the ale cask broached in celebration. A reverence that was close to terror seemed to have taken hold of the crew.

Ragnar could easily understand why. They had seen the stranger dispatch a dragon by the power of his spells. With a blast of his magic he had destroyed one of the terrors of the deep. With his gaze he had pacified the storm. Was there nothing he could not do?

Still there were questions here, Ragnar thought. If the stranger were so powerful why had he needed to hire their ship, paying in precious iron and promising more, to get to his destination? Why had he not used sorcery? Surely he could have used his mastery of the runes to summon a skyship or a winged wolf to carry him to his goal. Was there some sinister ulterior motive to this journey?

Ragnar tried to dismiss this thought. Perhaps the sorcerer had earned the enmity of the storm daemons and could not fly. Perhaps his lore mastery did not run to control of such runes. How was Ragnar to know? He had no knowledge of spellcraft, nor had anyone he knew, except the Thunderfist's old skald, Imogrim, and he had looked on the stranger with superstitious awe and refused to say anything of him, except to tell his people that the stranger must be obeyed.

Ragnar doubted that even the superstitious awe that surrounded the stranger like a cloak would have made any of his people undertake this voyage if the skald had not recommended it. Their destination, the island of the Iron Masters, was shunned by all the sea folk except during the season of trade, during the spring. The last spring had ended over five hundred days ago and the trade time was long gone. Who knew how the mysterious smiths of the islands would welcome strangers now? They kept themselves to themselves mostly and defended their mines of precious iron the way a troll guards its hoard.

Still, Ragnar wondered, if the stranger had demanded to be taken, even without his handsome payment, could they have refused him? Ragnar doubted that even the entire village of brave Thunderfist warriors could stand against the magic the stranger had shown. Ragnar doubted that their

weapons could even pierce the second skin of metal that surrounded his body.

There was something fascinating about the old man, and Ragnar longed to talk with him and question him. The stranger had saved him and spoken to him and surely that must mean something. Even so, Ragnar stood rooted to the deck. The idea of talking to the sorcerer was more intimidating than facing the jaws of the dragon.

He remained frozen for a moment then mustered all his resolve. Don't be foolish, he told himself. You have not even thanked him for saving your life. Silently Ragnar walked forward. Cautious as a man stalking a wild goat, he advanced towards the prow of the ship.

'What is it, lad?' the stranger asked, without turning, before Ragnar had even got within ten paces of him. Ragnar froze in shock. Here was yet more proof of the stranger's sorcerous powers. Ragnar knew that he had moved quietly. His feet had made no sound on the deck. He was considered a great hunter among his people. Yet the stranger had known he was there, and he was Ragnar, without even turning his head. Ragnar felt assured that he must possess something akin to the second sight.

'I asked you a question, boy,' the stranger said, turning to face Ragnar. There was no anger in his voice, just authority. He sounded like a man who was used to having his own way. There was something odd about his speech too. He spoke very slowly, and his accent was antiquated. It reminded Ragnar of the way the skald would speak when quoting the epics of Russ and the All Father. It seemed to Ragnar that this old man might have stepped straight from one of those sagas. There was a quality about him that one of the old heroes might possess.

'I wished to thank you for saving my life, jarl,' Ragnar said, using the highest term of respect he knew. There was something strange about the old man's face, he realised. It was long and feral, the nose was huge with massive flared nostrils. The leathery skin sunken over his cheeks gave him an even more wolf-like appearance. And what was the significance of those three studs set into his forehead, Ragnar wondered? And how had they got there? Among his own people, he could think of no way of doing such a thing that would not result in gangrene and the spirits of infection setting in.

'It was not your time to die,' the sorcerer said and returned to scanning the horizon. How could the stranger possibly know that, Ragnar wondered.

‘What are you looking for?’ Ragnar asked, astonished by his own temerity. The stranger was silent for a while, and Ragnar feared that he was not going to answer. Just then the sorcerer pointed. Ragnar could see that his finger was shod in metal, and reflected the sunlight.

He looked at what the stranger was pointing to and caught his breath.

Ahead of them mighty peaks rose over the horizon, a great battlement of spears that pierced the clouds. The walls of the peaks were white and something like ice glittered along their slopes even where they flowed down into the sea.

‘The Walls of the Gods,’ Ragnar said and made the rune-sign of Russ over his breast.

‘The peaks of Asaheim,’ the stranger murmured softly and smiled to reveal those enormous fangs. ‘I must have been your age when I first saw them, lad, and that was well nigh three hundred years ago.’

Ragnar looked at him open-mouthed. The stranger had all but admitted that he was a supernatural entity. No man of Fenris, not even the oldest greybeard, lived more than thirty-five years.

‘I am glad I had the opportunity to see them again this way,’ the stranger said, sounding like one of the old men of the village did before he went off to chant his death poem. The stranger shook his head and grinned down at Ragnar with those alarming fangs. ‘I must be getting senile, to babble so,’ he said.

Ragnar said nothing, merely looked at him and then at those distant mountains.

‘Run back and tell your father to change course. Bear to starboard and follow the coast. We will get to our destination the sooner.’

He said it with all the force of a prophecy, and Ragnar believed him.

For the next two days they sailed along the coast of Asaheim. Two days of quiet seas and cold winds, and a stillness broken only by the crash of huge chunks of ice falling from the mountains and drifting out to sea.

This was indeed Asaheim to the north of them, the place where the great icebergs were birthed, the frozen land from which the icy floating mountains came. Overhead, mighty sea eagles soared and occasionally the men spotted the spouts of the great orca herds as they rose from the cold, pure waters. They passed the mouths of great fjords, places of astonishing beauty, and sometimes saw the stone villages of the people of the glacier perched high on their slopes. They rowed swiftly then, for the folk of the

fjords were fierce, some said troll-blooded, and were rumoured to devour their prisoners rather than taking them thrall. Such a fate made even the sea daemons' clutches seem tempting.

During the whole time they passed the coast, the stranger never left his post at the ship's prow. At sunset he stood there limned by the Eye of Russ's dying rays. At dawn he would still be there, as the daywatch arose. Ragnar talked with the night watch and was not surprised at all when they told him the stranger had not slept. If he felt any weariness, the stranger showed no sign. His eyes remained as clear and bright as they had the day of the battle with the dragon. Ragnar had no idea why he watched, he merely felt glad that the old man did so. While he stood guard, Ragnar felt that no evil could touch them.

Then once more the land fell away behind them, and they were on the open sea. The weather remained favourable. The stranger sniffed the wind and pronounced that the sea would remain quiet until they reached their destination. As if afraid to disobey him the sea complied.

After two days at sea, they saw smoke ahead of them, and fires lit the night sky. The men prayed to Russ in superstitious awe, but were afraid he would not hear them. They knew they were entering an area sacred to the fire giants, and here Russ and the All Father held little sway.

The next day, as they approached the islands, Ragnar could see that they were afire. Their tops blazed. The molten orange spittle of the fire giants ran down their black sides and sizzled and steamed as it entered the water. The roaring of the imprisoned giants made them shake.

Filled with trepidation, Ragnar approached the sorcerer once more. He was reassured to see that the ancient showed no signs of fear, merely a quiet pleasure and a certain sadness, like that of a man who has been enjoying a journey and is not looking forward to its end.

'They say Ghorghé and Sla Nahesh are imprisoned within those islands,' Ragnar said, repeating something he had heard the skald say after the spring trading. Despite his fear, he was excited. Never before had he sailed this far with his father. 'They say that Russ bound them there when the world was young.'

'Those are evil names, lad,' the sorcerer said. 'You should not mention them.'

'Why?' said Ragnar, for once undaunted by the stranger. His curiosity overcoming his reverence. The stranger looked down at him and smiled.

He did not seem displeased by the question.

‘Those are the names of great evils, born in a place millions of leagues away, and many millennia in the past. Russ did not bind them. No one could. Not even the Emperor – the All Father himself – in the days of his glory.’

Ragnar was not surprised to be told of their age. After all, Russ had fought them in the dawn ages before he had banished his people from Asaheim. He was surprised to be told that they had been born millions of leagues away. It was a distance he could not conceive.

‘I thought they were the children of the dragon goddess Skrinneir, of her marriage to the dark god, Horus.’

‘And that is another name you should not speak, lad. For you have no idea of its true significance.’

‘Will you tell me its meaning then?’

‘No, lad, I will not. If it is your destiny to know such things, you will find them out soon enough.’

‘And how will I do that?’

‘By dying, laddie, and by being reborn.’

‘Is that how you gained your great wisdom?’ Ragnar asked, annoyed by the stranger’s response and surprised at the sarcasm of his own tone. To his surprise the stranger merely laughed.

‘You have courage, youth, and no mistake.’ He turned from Ragnar and gazed out to sea. Ahead of them dark clouds rose, and the sea was stained an oily black. To the west, the mountain shook, and a huge jet of fire emerged from its tip.

‘The Fire Mountain is angry today,’ the sorcerer said. ‘It is a bad sign.’



TWO

THE TEMPLE OF IRON

‘By Russ, have you ever seen anything like it?’ Ulli asked, awe evident in his words. Ragnar looked at his Wolfbrother and shook his head. He was forced to admit that he had not.

The harbour was vast and strange, a huge cleft in the black cliffs which led to a massive lake enclosed by a black beach. There was room enough there for a thousand dragonships to dock at once without it ever being crowded, and Ragnar knew that during the trade time it was so. People came from all across the great ocean to barter for axe heads, spear points and all manner of metal goods.

It was not the sheer scale of the harbour that held Ragnar’s attention so raptly. It was the buildings that surrounded it. The smallest of them was twice the size of the great long hall back home, which was the largest structure Ragnar had seen in his whole life. Much more strange was the fact that they were built from stone.

Stone, thought Ragnar and shuddered. It was near inconceivable. What if one of the great earthquakes came and sent them tumbling to the ground? Would not everyone inside be crushed to bloody pulp by the avalanche of falling rock? Those huge soot-blackened structures were death traps. Everyone knew it was only sensible to build a house as you would build a dragonship – from dragonhide leather around a frame of dragonbone. Or for sacred structures you might consider using precious wood, though it might burn if an oil lantern got tumbled in the quake. Ragnar had seen such things happen. Everyone had. The islands of Fenris were unstable and had been since before Russ had led his chosen people here.

It was madness to build out of stone but these people had. And not just from stone piled upon stone, the way you might make a drystone dyke. No, these buildings were made from huge blocks of dressed rock, carved into perfect cubes and placed in interlocking patterns. And judging by the great layers of soot encrusted on the buildings and the blackened moss on their sides, these structures were ancient. They looked old, weather-worn, like

the most ancient runestones in the great ring atop Thunder Mountain. And the skald claimed those had been there since the dawn of time.

It was not just one huge building but there were hundreds of them, some large as hills. Through the roofs of others protruded mighty chimneys from which black smoke belched and giant flares of flame gouted.

‘They have tamed the fire elementals,’ said Ulli. ‘They are great magicians here.’

It certainly looked that way, Ragnar thought. These people assuredly did not fear fire either. They must be mighty magicians indeed, not to fear the trembling of the earth or the threat of fire. And how had they built these enormous halls? Did they use magic to sing the stones into place? Or did they make their captive daemon thralls do all the work? The power and skill at work here was awe-inspiring.

Still, Ragnar was not sure he would have liked to live here. The air tasted foul and acrid with the same chemical stink that came from the tanneries back home, only magnified and a thousand times worse. Billows of soot like black snowflakes drifted through the air and settled in their hair and clothing. The water was an odd colour, black and viscous-looking in some places, in others coloured red or green by effluents belched out of the black pipes that ran all the way to the harbour.

‘Bones of Russ,’ Ulli breathed. ‘Look at that!’

Ragnar glanced in the direction indicated by Ulli’s pointing finger and saw the most amazing thing. It was a tower built all of iron, one of the most precious of metals. It rose from the water’s edge. Looking at it closely, Ragnar could see the construction was odd. It was not solid. It was like a latticework of metal beams, like the skeleton around which a hall would be built. Except that here there was no dragonhide stretched around it. The frame was open to the air and to the elements, and you could see the intricate machinery it enclosed.

There were huge cogwheels and great metal arms that rose up and down in a regular rhythmic movement like the pulsing of a great heart. Black stuff, liquid and slimy, bubbled from pipes on the tip of the tower and rolled down long tubes to be gathered in wooden vats around the base. Small figures moved around constantly shifting the vats and emptying them with buckets. It was at once the oddest, most impressive and most baffling structure Ragnar had ever seen.

‘Why do these people not fear the quakes?’ Ragnar asked Ulli, more just to air his curiosity than because he expected any answer.

‘Because they have no need to, laddie,’ said the voice of the sorcerer. ‘These islands are stable and have been for centuries. They will be for many more.’

Ragnar’s mind rocked. The concept was awesome. A land which did not constantly shake and quiver like a leashed beast. A place where there was no threat of the earth opening and swallowing you. A haven from the greatest and most commonplace of all the disasters that afflicted Russ’s people. Could the inhabitants of these islands really be so blessed? Another thought struck Ragnar, the natural thought that would occur to any of his war-like people.

‘Then why has no one taken them away from the inhabitants? The clans would kill to own such a safe haven. How have these people survived for so long without being overwhelmed?’

‘You’ll see soon enough, laddie. You’ll see soon enough.’ The stranger shook his head and seemed to be trying to contain his mirth.

‘State your business, strangers, or prepare to die!’ The islander’s voice was harsh and guttural and there was menace in every word. It was amplified by the metal bullhorn he held in his hand that made it sound even flatter.

Ragnar gazed in wonder at the ships that had moved out from the island to meet them. Suddenly he felt very afraid. Truly here were vessels of great sorcery. The ships had no sails and were made of metal. How was it that they did not sink like stone? And what propelled them? Bound fire elementals? Perhaps that was why smoke billowed from the chimney at the rear of the ship. Such a thing seemed like an affront to the sea daemons but quite obviously it worked. Perhaps some odd pact had been made...

Before Ragnar’s father could reply, the sorcerer bounded up onto the prow and extended an arm in greeting. ‘Tis I, Ranek Icewalker. They have brought me here at my request. I would have speech with the Ironmaster.’

This announcement set off a flurry of activity on the decks of the metal ship. Several figures huddled together in consultation before the speaker raised his bullhorn again. ‘Word is that Ranek is dead. Are you some sea-ghost risen from the waters?’

This question sent a shiver of horror across the decks of the *Spear of Russ*. Ragnar could hear men move uneasily on their oarbenches. The

sorcerer's great booming laugh roared out over the water. 'Do I look like a ghost? Do I sound like a ghost? Will my boot feel like that of a ghost when I kick your arse for your impudence?'

There was answering laughter from the deck of the other ship. 'Then come ashore, Wolf Priest, and be welcome here. Bring your companions and we will feast.'

The strange ship performed a manoeuvre that seemed supernatural to Ragnar. Without turning it reversed direction and began to move backwards to the shore, all the while keeping the dragonship in sight. The beat of the oar-master's drum made the *Spear of Russ* spring to life as it made its way to dock.

Ragnar followed the Wolf Priest, if that was his title, through the streets, uncertain of quite why he was doing so, but determined to accompany him and ask questions for he never knew if he would get another such opportunity in this lifetime. The rest of the crew had gone to wait in a dockside tavern or scattered to wander the streets. Ragnar was on his own with the sorcerer.

Ragnar walked through streets covered in cobbled stones, through a maze of sooty buildings and cramped alleyways. The air tasted foul with the smell of smoke and acrid alchemical odours. The people were strange and new to him and talked in a dialect he did not understand. Many seemed small and hunched and undernourished. They were clad in tunics and britches of drab grey and brown and they carried no weapons. They collected scraps in the streets and hurried along bearing burdens and performing errands. Even here, on these islands rich with metal, there was poverty.

The rulers of the island were fewer and richer. All of them were garbed in metal armour and all of them carried blades of steel in scabbards of dragonhide leather. They were tall men, well-made, with dark skins and brown eyes. They nodded to him with distant politeness as he passed, and he responded in kind.

'Why are you following me, boy?' the Wolf Priest asked.

'Because I want to ask you questions.' The old man shook his head but he smiled, revealing those frightening fangs.

'It's always questions, questions, at your age, isn't it? Ask away.'

'Why did you come here? Or really, why did you pay us to bring you here? Could you not have used your magic instead?'

‘I have no magic, boy. Not in the sense you mean.’

‘But your talisman – the way you killed the dragon – it...’

‘It was not magic. The “talisman” as you call it was a weapon, like an axe or a spear, only more... complicated.’

‘A weapon?’

‘A weapon.’

‘You are not a magician then?’

‘Russ forbid, no! I know some you would call magicians, boy, and I would not change places with them for all the iron on these islands.’

‘Why?’

‘They bear a terrible burden.’

Ragnar was silent. It seemed evident that the old man would say no more. Ragnar was absolutely certain that Ranek’s iron talisman represented a powerful magic, whatever the Wolf Priest might say. They trudged on through the streets, past open shopfronts. Looking inside Ragnar could see that they were workshops filled with forges. The shadows of their interiors were brightened by the glow of red-hot metal. He could hear the clang of hammer on anvil and knew that it was in these places that the goods of the Iron Masters were made.

‘You haven’t answered my first question,’ Ragnar said, astonished by his own temerity.

‘I’m not sure I can in a way that you would understand – or that I ought to.’

‘Why not?’

The old man’s booming laugh echoed down the alleyways. Ragnar saw everyone turn to look at them, then make the sign of the hammer and look away.

‘You’re not easily discouraged, are you, laddie?’

‘No.’

‘Fair enough. I was on a mission. There was an accident. My vessel was destroyed. I needed to get back here and make contact with my... brethren. To cross such an enormous distance quickly I needed your father’s ship, and for his aid he will be rewarded.’

‘What was your mission?’

‘I cannot tell you that,’ Ranek said in a tone which brooked no argument.

‘Was it for the gods?’

‘It was for *my* gods.’

‘Are not all gods the same? Everyone on the islands worships Russ and the All Father.’

‘So do I, but in a different way from you.’

‘How can that be?’

‘One day, laddie, you may find out.’

‘But not today?’

‘No. Not today.’

They walked into a huge square atop the hill. It was rimmed around with massive buildings. Each was so broad as to seem squat even though it towered ten times the height of a man. The walls were carved in an odd fashion. Each of the massive stone blocks was carved with interlocking cogwheels. Metal pipes flowed in and out through the stonework, like clusters of huge worms emerging from the earth and plunging back in again. Soot blackened the walls, and from the pipes effluent had leaked in the past, staining the walls beneath with great blotches the colour of rust. From within came the sound of monstrous engines at work, a clattering and a banging as if giants struck furiously at enormous anvils. The smell of smoke and hot metal smote Ragnar’s nostrils. He wondered whether he was the only person in the whole teeming throng that minded the noise and the stink.

They strode across the square to the largest of the huge structures.

‘This is the Iron Temple,’ Ranek the Wolf Priest said softly. ‘And this is where we part our ways for now.’

Ragnar glanced up at the huge building. It was a squat, massive fortress but it dwarfed all the surrounding buildings. Arrow slits glared out from its walls like the eyes of a hungry beast. High atop the building was a great metal flower, as large as a dragonship. Ragnar could not begin to guess at its purpose.

Great metal-bound doors barred the way forward at the head of the ramp. Ragnar could tell by the smoothness and the indentations that many feet had passed this way over hundreds of years. Strange runes, most unlike any Ragnar had ever seen, were inscribed over its archway. Two sentries armed with metal tipped harpoons guarded the way. They seemed as if they were made of metal. Iron armour covered them like a second skin. Metal helmets guarded their heads. Shields of steel marked with the same runes as those above the door hung from their left arms.

‘Are they your kin?’ he asked Ranek. The old man’s head swung swiftly to look down at him. The keen eyes bored in Ragnar’s own. This close Ragnar realised how big the Wolf Priest was. He was considered tall and well-made among his folk but compared to this old man he was but the size of a child. Ranek was head and shoulders taller than he and would have been far more massive even without the odd armour that encased his body.

‘No, laddie, the Iron Masters are kin only to themselves. There are no others like them on all the islands of the Great Ocean. They are a people apart.’

‘I do not understand,’ Ragnar said. ‘With all this metal and all this... magic, why have they not sought dominance over all the world. Surely they could achieve it?’

‘The Iron Masters seek dominance over nothing save metal and fire. Conquest is not their way. They fight only to defend themselves. It is part of the Ancient Pact.’

‘Pact?’

‘Enough questions, laddie. I must go.’

‘I hope that one day we will meet again, jarl,’ Ragnar said seriously. The old man turned and looked down at him. There was an odd look in his eye.

‘I like you lad, so I will give you some advice. Pray that we never meet again. For if we do, it will be on a day of doom for you.’

Something in the old man’s tone chilled Ragnar to the very bone. The words were uttered with all the force of a prophesy. ‘What do you mean? Will you kill me?’

‘You will know if ever it happens,’ Ranek said, then turned and strode away.

Ragnar watched the old man stride up the ramp. As he did so, the great doors swung open soundlessly. He was greeted by a hunched figure garbed all in black robes, its face obscured by a metal mask. Ragnar watched him vanish into the gloom and then stood bemused for long minutes.

After a while he heard a humming grinding noise. The great flower on top of the building had started to move, to face away towards distant Asaheim. As he watched in wonder, its metal petals unfurled. In the centre lights pulsed eerily. Ragnar was not sure what this magic meant but he was sure it had something to do with the old sorcerer.

Left by himself in the huge square, something like panic seized Ragnar. He turned and hurried back to the docks.

The drumbeat sounded loud in Ragnar's ears as the *Spear of Russ* pulled out of the dark waters of the Iron Masters' harbour into the open sea.

He breathed deeply of the clean fresh air and smiled, glad to have left the foul and polluted town behind. The islanders may have been rich, he thought, but they lived in a way that seemed less healthy than the lowliest of thralls.

At the rear of the dragonship lay a cargo of iron axe and spearheads, wrapped all in dragongut to protect them from the corrosive effects of the sea. They represented huge wealth to the Thunderfist clan, and Ragnar was proud to have been part of the voyage that had won it. Still, there was something worrying about it too. He suspected good fortune, and he believed the old adage that the gods made men pay for their gifts. None of the others aboard seemed to share his concern. They sang cheerful drinking songs, relieved to be out of the harbour and no longer to have the Wolf Priest aboard. Much as they had respected and been in awe of him, his presence had damped all of their spirits. Now, they joked and told tales of the events of the voyage. They ate their salted beef jerky happily and drank stoups of ale with glee. Laughter echoed across the deck and it woke an answering joy in Ragnar's heart.

Suddenly there was a boom like thunder. Ragnar looked up in fear. There was not a dark cloud in the sky and no sign of a storm. There was absolutely no reason for the noise. His keen eyes scanned the horizon looking for the source. All around him the laughter stopped and he heard prayers being offered up to Russ for his protection.

There! In the distance, coming from the direction of Asaheim he saw it. It was little more than a black dot in the distance. It left behind it a white contrail like that of a meteor in the night sky, only this was broad daylight, and the trail was a white line written on the pale blue of the sky. Even as he watched, the dot turned and swerved towards them, and began to grow with appalling speed.

The curses and prayers grew louder, and men reached for their weapons. Ragnar kept his eyes fixed on the dot, wondering what it was. He could see now that it had two wings, like those of a bird, only they did not

move. What sort of monster was it? A dragon? A wyvern? Some daemon conjured up by fell magic?

No, it did not appear to be anything like a living thing. As it came closer he could see that it was much more like one of those iron vessels in the harbour behind them. His mind reeled. Just as it seemed impossible that those things could float, it was surely impossible for this thing to fly. And yet it quite obviously was doing so. There was no way he could disbelieve his own eyes.

It slowed as it approached, losing some of the appalling velocity that propelled it across the sky faster than any bird. And the loud thundercrack boom had stopped, to be replaced by a wailing roar like the call of a thousand lost souls in torment.

The thing was flying low and he could see the wind of its passage was whipping up the sea below it, churning the waves to foam. It appeared to be coming right at them now, and Ragnar wondered whether they had done something to anger the gods. Perhaps this terrible apparition had been sent to destroy them.

It passed almost directly overhead. Looking at it from below Ragnar could see that it was some sort of metal vehicle, a winged cruciform with the shape of an eagle painted on its sides and wings. For a moment he thought he caught sight of windows in its front, and human faces looking out, but he dismissed that thought as a momentary aberration. Looking back as it passed he saw flames licked from its rear like the breath of a dragon. It screamed off into the distance towards the island of the Iron Masters and there it halted, great jets of flame belching forward. It hovered in the air above the Iron Temple for a moment and Ragnar watched breathlessly, not knowing quite what to expect. Half wondering whether it would destroy the town with its flames, half believing that he was about to witness some strange and appalling magic.

No such thing happened. The vehicle slowly settled on the roof of the Iron Temple. Everyone watched silently wondering what would happen next. No one spoke. Ragnar could hear his heart beating loudly in his chest.

Five minutes later the metal bird rose into the sky once more and hurtled back in the direction it had come. As it passed over them, it wagged its wings as if in salute. Suddenly, somehow, Ragnar knew that

Ranek the Wolf Priest had found new transportation to take him wherever it was he wanted to go.

Everyone on the *Spear of Russ* was silent for hours afterwards.



THREE

THE FESTIVAL OF PASSAGE

Ragnar smiled nervously. This was stupid, he told himself. He was a man now. He had taken his oath of loyalty to the ancestor spirits on the rune altar. He had his own axe and his own shield made of dragonhide leather stretched over a frame of bone. He had even started to grow his black hair long as befitted a Wolfbrother. He was a man now. He should not be afraid of asking a girl to dance.

And yet he was forced to admit that he was. Worse yet, he had no real idea of the reason why. The girl, Ana, seemed to like him. She smiled encouragingly every time he saw her. And of course he had known her for all the years of their childhood. He could not quite put a finger on what had changed between them, but he knew that something had. Ever since he had returned from the island of the Iron Masters all those moons ago something had been different.

He looked at his companions, the Wolfbrothers with whom he had sworn blood oaths, and it was hard not to laugh. They looked like boys pretending to be men. They still had the down of youth on their lips. They tried hard to emulate the swagger of the adult warriors and yet somehow it still seemed wrong. They looked like boys playing at warriors, not warriors themselves. And yet that was not the case. All of them had been to sea. All of them had pulled oars through storm wind's lash. All of them had aided in the hunting of the dragon and the orca. All of them had received their shares from the kill. Small shares admittedly but shares nonetheless. By the custom of their tribe, they were men.

Ragnar looked around. It was a late autumn afternoon and the weather was fine. It was the Day of Remembering, the first day of the last hundred-day of the year, the beginning of the short autumnal period when for all too brief a time the weather would be fine and the world would be peaceful. The Eye of Russ was growing smaller in the sky. The period of quakes and eruptions was all but done. All too soon, the snows would come and the long winter would descend on the world, as the Eye grew yet

smaller. The breath of Russ would chill the world and life would become very hard indeed.

He pushed the thought aside. Now was not the time for thinking of such things. Now was the time for feasting, and making merry and betrothal while the weather was good and the days were still long. He looked around. The festive spirit possessed everybody. The huts were newly covered in fresh dragonhide. The wooden walls of the great hall were painted bright white and red. A huge bonfire stood unlit in the centre of the village. Ragnar could smell the minty scent of the herbs that would perfume the air when it was lit. The brewmasters were already dragging great barrels into the open air. Most people were still working but Ragnar and his friends were from the ships. This whole day was a holiday for them and they had nothing to do but loaf around dressed in their best. They had been kicked out of their huts so that their mothers could sweep and clean. Their fathers were already in the long hall swapping tales of the great battle against the Grimskulls. Somewhere in the distance he could hear the skald tuning up his instrument, and his apprentices beating out basic rhythms on the drums with which they would accompany him.

A long lean dog crossed his path and looked up at him in a friendly manner. He reached out and stroked it behind the ears, feeling the warmth of the fur already lengthening in preparation for winter. It licked his hand with a tongue as rough as sandpaper and then bounded off down the street, racing for the sheer joy of it. Suddenly Ragnar knew how it felt. He took a deep breath of the salt-fresh air and felt the urge to howl with the sheer pleasure of being alive. Instead he turned to Ulli, reached out, cuffed his ear and shouted, 'Tig! You're it.'

He turned and ran before Ulli had a chance to realise what was going on. Seeing that the game had started the other Wolfbrothers scattered, dashing among the huts and the busy people, sending chickens squawking skyward. Ulli raced after him, shouting challenges.

Ragnar turned on the spot, almost tripping from his own momentum as he did so and made a face at Ulli. His friend bounded towards him arm outstretched. Ragnar let him get almost within reach before turning once more and racing on. He ducked right and raced down a narrow street. He bounded left to avoid slamming into one of the brewers' barrels and as he did so, his foot slid on a slick piece of turf and he fell. Before he could recover Ulli was on him and they wrestled on the ground pitting muscle

against muscle like playful puppies. They rolled over and over down the slope until they heard girlish shrieks and bumped into something. Ragnar opened his eyes and found himself looking up into Ana's long pretty face. She tugged her braid as she looked down at him and then she smiled. Ragnar smiled back and then felt his face flush.

'What are you two doing?' Ana asked in her soft husky voice.

'Nothing,' Ragnar and Ulli replied simultaneously, then burst out laughing.

Strybjorn Grimskull stood at the prow of the dragonship and glared ferociously at the horizon. He hawked a huge gob of phlegm into his mouth and then spat it contemptuously into the sea. Inside him he could feel the battle lust starting to build. He hoped that combat would come soon.

Ahead of the fleet lay the home island of the Grimskulls, site of their sacred runestone, the place from which they had been driven twenty long years ago by the accursed Thunderfists. Of course, that had been before Strybjorn had been born but that did not matter. He had grown up hearing all about the island's beauty and he felt that he already knew it. Its image was clear in his mind from his father's tales. This was the sacred land from which they had been driven by Thunderfist treachery all those years ago and which today, on the anniversary of their ancient loss, they would at last reclaim.

Anger at the interlopers filled him. He felt it as keenly as any of the survivors of the attack and the massacre when the Thunderfists had arrived from the sea to claim the land in force. Ten dragonships had overwhelmed the outnumbered Grimskull force while the vast majority of the warriors had been at sea following the orca herds. Those brave warriors had returned home to find their own land fortified against them, and their women and children enthralled by the Thunderfists. After a brief struggle on the beaches they had been driven back to their ships and out to sea, there to endure the misery of the Long Search.

Strybjorn shared their bitterness on that terrible voyage. The hopeless attacks on other settlements, the fruitless efforts to find a new home. He recalled the names of all those who had died of hunger and thirst and warfare as if they had been his own dead forefathers. He swore once more that he would avenge their spirits and appease their ghosts with

Thunderfist blood. He knew it would be so, for had it not been ordained by the gods?

Had not Russ himself at last seen fit to reward the Grimskull warriors' perseverance with the prize. They had found the village of Ormskrik with the inhabitants half dead of the wasting plague and they had overwhelmed it, killing the men and enslaving the women and children according to the ancient traditions. And then they had settled down to brood and breed and recover their numbers. And all those long years they had never forgotten the site of the ancestral runestone.

For twenty long years they had planned and prepared. Sons had been born. The gods had smiled. A new generation had grown to manhood. But always the Grimskulls had remembered the treachery of the Thunderfists, and the mighty oaths of vengeance that they had sworn. Tonight Strybjorn knew those oaths would be fulfilled. And truly the gods did smile, for was not tonight the anniversary of the very day upon which the Thunderfists had attacked. It was only fitting that twenty years to the day they had lost their ancestral lands, the Grimskulls would reclaim them.

Strybjorn was proud of his folk. It would have been easy to forget. It would have been easy to sink into the comforts of their new land. Such was not the Grimskull way. They knew the value of an oath. They were bound to seek vengeance. They had bound their children to seek vengeance as soon as they were old enough to take their vows of manhood. When Strybjorn had become a Wolfbrother, he had sworn that he would never rest until the runestone was reclaimed, and he had watered the sacred soil of his ancestral homeland with foul Thunderfist blood.

He stroked his craggy brow with one broad strong hand, and shielding his eyes stared towards the far horizon. Soon he knew they would make landfall, and then let the Thunderfists beware.

Ragnar watched High Jarl Torvald light the great beacon fires. The burning brand arced onto the oil-soaked wood and the flames leapt high like daemons dancing. The smell of ambergris and herbs billowed through the streets. The heat of the flames brought a flush to his face. He looked around and saw all the folk of the village had gathered around the bonfire and watched the chief perform his ceremonial duties.

Torvald brandished his axe. First to the north, towards Asaheim, and the great Mountain of the Gods, then to the south to the sea in defiance of the daemons that dwelled there. He raised the weapon high above his head,

holding it with both hands and turned to face the setting sun. He let out a mighty roar and the whole crowd joined in, cheering and chanting the name of Russ, hoping to invoke the god's favour for another year, as they had done every year since Russ had smiled upon them and granted them victory.

Once the chieftain had finished and returned to the ranks of his warriors, the old skald Imogrim limped into the firelight and gestured for silence. His apprentices followed him carrying their instruments and softly began to beat time to his words.

Imogrim raised his harp and plucked a few chords. His fingers moved gently over the strings as he stood for a moment idly, seeming to compose his thoughts. A smile played over his thin bloodless lips. The firelight illumined every seam of his craggy face, and turned his eyes into deep caverns. The white of his long beard glistened in the flickering light. The crowd waited breathless for him to begin. All around the night was still. Ragnar looked around and caught sight of Ana. It appeared that she had been looking at him, for their eyes met, and she looked away, almost shyly, eyes cast down towards the ground.

Imogrim began to chant. His voice was soft and yet surprisingly resonant, and his words seemed to flow out in time with the beat of the drums. It was as if he tapped some huge spring of memory within himself, and it had begun to flow softly yet inexorably outwards.

He was singing the Deed of the Thunderfists, their ancestral song, a work which had been begun in the lost reaches of time, hundreds of generations ago, and which had been added to by every skald who had held the position since. It was Imogrim's life's work to memorise the song, and add to it and to pass it on to his apprentices as they would, in time, pass it on to theirs. There was an ancient saying that if the jarl was the heart of his people, the skald was the memory. It was at times like this that Ragnar understood the truth of it.

Of course there would not be time for the whole tale this, or any other night, so Imogrim contented himself with extracts. He alluded in passing to the most ancient times, when the people had sailed between the stars on ships built by the gods. He sang of Russ who had come and taught the people how to survive in the dark times when the world had shook, and old evils had entered the world. He told of the time of choosing when Russ had

picked the best ten thousand warriors from all the clans, and led them off, never to be seen again, to fight in the wars of the gods.

He sang of the ancient wars, and all the mighty deeds of the Thunderfists. Of how Berak had slain the great dragon Thruncling and claimed a casket of iron and the hand of the thunder spirit Maya. Of how the great seafarer Nial had sailed around the world in his mighty ship, the Wind Wolf. Of the night when the trolls had come and driven the Thunderfists from their ancestral land.

He brought the tale up to date with the story of how Ragnar's father and his kin had found this island, ruled by the cruel and brutish Grimskulls, and had seized it in a day of bloody conflict. At this part of the song, some of those present had cheered. Others stared off into the fire as if remembering lost comrades and the brutal fighting of the past. And at last after long hours, the tale reached the present. Ragnar felt his heart lurch with pride as Imogrim told of their voyage to take the Wolf Priest Ranek to the island of the Iron Masters, and of how Ragnar had speared the dragon through the eye before it was dispatched by the old sorcerer's magic.

He knew now that his name would live forever. For as long as his clan existed, his name would be recalled by the skald and his apprentices, and maybe even sung on high holy days and other feasts. Even after he had passed into the halls of the slain his name would live on. He looked over and saw the look of pride on Ana's face.

He was so thrilled that he paid little attention to the rest of the song.

How convenient of the Thunderfists to light a beacon to guide us, Strybjorn thought, looking at the vast flickering bonfire on the horizon. It gleamed brilliantly and its reflection, caught on the waves, seemed only to amplify the light.

At first Strybjorn had thought the beacon was some sort of warning sign, that the approach of the Grimskull fleet had been noticed, but there was no sign of any preparation for war. No warriors had assembled on the beach. No dragonships had moved to meet them. There had been some consternation as word had been passed around the fleet but so far nothing had happened.

Strybjorn had suspected at first that it might be some sort of trap. Yet more proof, as if any were needed, of Thunderfist treachery and cunning. Then word had been passed up the oarbenches that it was most likely the

Thunderfists were celebrating the anniversary of their infamous victory, and gloating over the butchery they had so treacherously inflicted. Well soon they would know how it felt. The jarl had ordered them to make landfall at Grimbane Bay, out of sight of the village. From there it was but a short march to swift and final vengeance.

Strybjorn had felt himself swept up by the wave of anger that had broken over his kinsmen.

By Russ, how those Thunderfists would pay.

Soon the singing was over and it was time to feast and dance. The jarl and his bodyguard led the way into the great hall. There the tables groaned under the weight of roasted chicken and new-baked bread. Mountains of cheeses towered over the trestles. Lakes of honey gleamed in their bowls. The smell of ale filled the air. The brewers were already filling huge jacks of it, and drinking horns were being passed from hand to hand.

Ulli grinned at him and passed him a leather tankard. Ragnar threw back the bitter-tasting brew like he had seen the old warriors doing. This was not the weak beer reserved for boys. This was feast day drink for warriors and it was strong and potent. The bubbles almost made him sputter and the strong bitterness of it surprised him. He held it down though and did not disgrace himself, downing the whole tankard in a few gulps to the admiring applause of his comrades.

Ahead of him he saw his father tipping back the great drinking horn and watched as the contents flowed inexorably into his mouth while the older warriors counted down from ten. The whole contents were gone by the time the count had reached five. It was a good time. As the horn was refilled and passed, the count started at five this time, but the new drinker was no match for Ragnar's father and did not complete his swilling until after the count was done. Sheepishly he passed the horn to the next warrior.

Ragnar made his way to the tables set for the Wolfbrothers and began to help himself to hot chicken and bread. The warm meat tasted wonderful. The juices ran down his chin and he wiped the hardening grease away with bits of bread before consuming them in turn. The ale had settled in his belly and he was feeling fine, if slightly fuddled from its unaccustomed strength.

Ulli let out a long howl followed by a belch. He looked meaningfully at Ragnar and then glanced over at the tables where the unwed girls were

sat. Ragnar smiled and nodded, no longer quite so nervous. Soon it would be time to dance.

Strybjorn helped the other warriors haul the dragonship ashore, beaching it on the sand. His muscles ached from the exertion, and his breath came in gasps. The ship was heavy even with the full complement of forty warriors tugging at it.

His feet were wet from the waves, and his britches were soaked up to the knee from when he had jumped down into the water. He felt slightly unsteady on his feet, and unused to the hard stability of land. Weeks at sea had him still compensating for the motion of the boat. Still he told himself, it would take only a little time for him to get his land legs back and that was good, for he would need them soon for fighting and for killing.

He moved over to join his Wolfbrothers, youths like him eager to gain glory in this their first great battle, trying to carve out a name for themselves and to gain the eye of the jarl and of the gods. He offered up a prayer to Russ that he would fight well, and if he died, that he did so with his wounds to the fore and with the attention of the Choosers of the Fallen upon him.

Along the beach long lines of Grimskull warriors had begun to form up, weapons at the ready. Once assembled into their warbands, they began to move quickly and silently along the path towards the Thunderfist village.

Ragnar whooped and reached out to hook his arm into Ana's. He was drunk and he was happy. The dancers had formed up into long lines and weaved in intricate patterns to the music of the skald and his apprentices.

Ana smiled at him, face flushed, as they whirled around in a circle before returning to their respective lines one place down. In this way all of the youngsters got to dance with each other. It was a general reel. More personal dancing would come later.

From the distance he could hear the sound of singing and drinking as the elders continued their feast in the great hall. Slowly, the married couples were coming out to join in the dancing. Dogs barked. Geese honked. Goats bleated. The festivities stirred them up like nothing else could.

Suddenly the music stopped, as the skald and his lads broke off to quench their thirst with ale. Acting on impulse, Ragnar moved over

towards Ana. They exchanged glances. Without speaking they moved off, arm in arm, into the darkness away from the hall. Ragnar could see that the girl's face was flushed. Her hair was in disarray. Her eyes seemed huge in the gloom and the torchlight. Ragnar reached out and put his arm around her waist, she did the same to him. They looked at each other and giggled like conspirators as they moved into the shadows of the huts.

Standing in the shadows, listening to the sounds of mirth from the village, Ragnar was aware that something important was happening here. He felt drawn to the girl by the same attraction that drew a lodestone towards the north. He told her this, expecting her to laugh. She looked up at him and smiled, lips parting slightly. He was immediately aware of her beauty and the soft warmth of her body against his. Without thought, he reached out and pulled her to him. Their lips met. Her arms came up behind his head to clutch his face from either side and to guide him.

After a long moment, they broke apart and smiled conspirator's smiles, then they returned to kissing.

Moving on silent padded feet Strybjorn and his Wolfbrothers approached the Thunderfist village. He was amazed. The fools were so overconfident they had not even posted a sentry. They had become soft living on the fat of Strybjorn's ancestors' land. Well, soon, he thought, they would pay for their mistake.

He knew that all around the village Grimskull warriors were taking up position. Soon seasoned warriors would slip over the palisade and seize the gate. Then Strybjorn and his kind would fall upon their besotted foes like wolves descending on the fold.

Nothing was going to stop them now.

'Make a wish,' Ana said, rearranging her dress. Ragnar stopped buttoning his tunic and looked up in the direction she indicated. Overhead he saw a light in the sky. At first he thought as the girl had that it was a falling star but then he noticed the comet trail of fire that followed it. It reminded him of something else. At the moment, befuddled by beer and his recent embrace with the girl, he was not quite sure what.

In the distance dogs barked as if in response to the sight of the meteor fall.

He rolled over, grabbed the girl, and pulled her down to kiss him. She resisted playfully for a moment before joining him on the ground. He did

not think he had ever been so happy as he was at that moment, but the thought of those flames falling downwards niggled at the back of his mind.

At last he remembered where he had seen something like them. They had been pouring from the exhaust of the skyship that had come to claim the Wolf Priest Ranek from the island of the Iron Masters.

What could be their significance, he asked himself lazily, before he stopped thinking altogether in the passion of the moment. He barely noticed it when the screaming began.

Strybjorn held his axe firmly in his hand and raced through the open gate. All around him his Wolfbrothers pressed close, their eyes bright with anticipation, their mouths open. Strybjorn felt suddenly weak for a moment. He knew it would pass: this sensation always overcame him just before he encountered danger. It was like a sign his body was prepared for the encounter. He was suddenly aware of his breathing quickening, his heartbeat growing faster, the sweat on his palms making his axe difficult to hold. Along with his comrades he loped into the town. From up ahead, he could hear what sounded like music and dancing.

Suddenly, ahead of them were people. They were not Grimskulls. His every sense keyed up like a taut hawser, Strybjorn needed no more provocation. He lashed out with his axe. There was horrid sucking sound as the blade bit home and then was withdrawn. Strybjorn lashed out again, feeling warm blood spurt out of the man's body that fell at his feet. He pressed forward into the bodies. Strangely the music kept playing. Off in the distance a dog barked. As if announcing the attack somewhere overhead there was a boom like thunder.

'What was that?' Ana asked, a look of fear appearing on her face. Ragnar disentangled himself from her and looked up.

'I don't know,' he said, and then suddenly realised that he was wrong. He had heard a thunderous sound like that before, when the skyship had first approached. Was this some sort of omen or sign? And what was that noise? It sounded like a huge brawl had broken out back by the long hall.

He pulled himself to his feet. Ana got up beside him. Holding her hand he made his way between the huts back towards the sound of the commotion. What he saw was worse than anything he had ever expected. Strangers were among the revellers. Huge burly men with dark hair. Their features were craggy and their jaws were massive. They looked almost trollish, and Ragnar recognised them instantly from the songs of the skald.

It was as if they had stepped out of one of his songs. They were Grimskulls.

For a moment superstitious fear froze Ragnar. Had they returned from the grave to claim the souls of their conquerors? Was dark magic at work here? Could the dead have risen to take vengeance on the living?

As he watched he saw one brutal-featured youth, garbed like a Wolfbrother, hack down Ulli's father. The older man still looked befuddled by beer and surprise then he clutched at his stomach, trying to hold in the rope of guts that spilled forth.

'We're under attack!' Ragnar shouted, pushing Ana back into the shadows. 'It's a raid.'

In his heart of hearts, he knew it was no mere raid. Judging by the quantity of warriors present and the number of battlecries he could hear coming from all around, this was a full-scale invasion intended to enslave or destroy his people. He cursed, knowing that the attack had come at the worst possible time, when all the warriors were drunk or dancing. And it was their own fault. They should have posted sentries. They should have been ready but they were not. The long years of peace had lulled them into a false sense of security such as no man of Fenris should possess. And now they were paying for it.

Anger and despair warred in Ragnar's heart. For a long moment he stood frozen, knowing that it was all hopeless. More than half the villagers were already dead or dying, smashed like rotting dragonbone by these terrible invaders. Their attackers were ready, fully equipped, in formation and fighting with a terrible purposeful discipline. The Thunderfists were unarmed, disorganised, confused and unable to do much more than be cut down like chickens being slaughtered.

Suddenly Ragnar knew that the doom of the Thunderfists was upon them.



FOUR

THE LAST STAND

‘Get back!’ Ragnar shouted, pushing Ana into the nearest hut. He knew that it would provide little protection for them, that soon the invaders might take a torch to all the buildings. Still, he wanted time to think, and he knew that without a shadow of a doubt there would be weapons inside better than the dagger at his belt.

Not quite understanding what was going on, Ana resisted, but he was stronger and he wrestled her indoors. He put his hand over her mouth.

‘Be quiet if you value your life!’ he told her and saw terrified knowledge appear in her eyes, swiftly to be followed by firm resolution. She was a true daughter of her people, Ragnar could see.

Screams and war cries filled the night, only slightly dulled by the tent’s dragonhide walls. Inside it was gloomy. Ragnar fumbled frantically among the possessions until he found a shield and an axe. Swiftly he bound the shield onto his arm, and hefted the weapon. He felt a little better but he was still unsure of what to do. The things he had seen had already burned their way into his brain.

He recalled the look of horror on the face of Ulli’s father. He remembered seeing old Horgrim lying in the dirt, the whole top of his head removed, the brains spilling out. He remembered the horrible pulsing wound in the chest of Ranald the brewer. Things that he had barely recognised at the time now burned into his mind. Wet tears ran down his face. This was not what he had expected. This was not the sort of battle of which the skalds sang. This was brutal slaughter of unarmed people by a deadly foe.

And yet some small rational part of his mind told him, this *was* battle. There were always dead and dying and terrible wounds. Sides were rarely fair. And such things always ended in terrible deaths for someone. The question was: what was he going to do?

Was he going to remain cowering inside this hut like a beaten dog, or was he going to step outside and face death like a man? He knew there was little choice. He was most likely going to die anyway and best to meet the

spirits of your ancestors with your wounds to the fore and your weapon clutched in your cold dead hand.

And yet something stopped him from doing what he knew he must do. His eyes were drawn back to the frightened girl, standing dry eyed and pale faced in the corner. She wiped away her tears with the hem of her sleeve and tried to smile at him. It was a terrible grimace and he felt his heart would break.

How his life had changed in a matter of minutes. Less than an hour ago he had been totally happy. He and Ana had been together. Things seemed settled between them in the manner of the village. They would have been wed, had children, lived their lives together. Now that future was gone, as certainly as if someone had torched it. There was nothing left save blood, ashes, and perhaps the honourless life of a thrall, if he was spared. He knew he could not face that.

What was he to do? He could not stay. If he did, he would only be putting her life at risk. A brawl might break out, and angry men had been known to strike down innocent bystanders. Most likely she would be spared to become some Grimskull's wife or thrall. Such was the way of the world. The thought pained him more than he could say but at least she would live.

And still he could not go. The same magnetism that had drawn him to the girl earlier prevented him from leaving now. Instead he stepped towards her, put the axe down and reached out and touched her face, tracing the lines with his fingers, trying to memorise them so that he could carry them down into hell with him if need be. Of all that had happened in his life, she was the best. It tore at his heart now to know that there would be no more, that their lives were over before they had barely begun.

He reached down and pulled her to him for one last kiss. Their lips met for a long moment and then he pushed her away.

'Farewell,' he said softly. 'It would have been sweet.'

'Farewell,' she said, enough of a child of her people not to try to stop him going.

He stepped out into the burning night, into the howling chaos and madness. The next thing he knew a massive figure loomed over him, axe held high.

Strybjorn stalked through the night, killing as he went. He howled exultantly, knowing that the hour of his people's vengeance had come. The

taste of blood was sweet in his mouth. He liked killing. He liked the feeling of power it gave him. He liked the contest of sinew against sinew, man against man.

And yet these Thunderfists were poor foes, barely worthy of Grimskull steel. They were drunk and ill-armed and seemed barely to understand what had happened. How had they managed to drive his warrior folk from their homeland, he wondered.

In the brief respite from the combat a thought struck him. Was it part of the penalty for living on these islands? Had the good life softened his ancestors, the way it had softened the Thunderfists? Had his people once lost their warriors' wits the way these sheep had? It was something he should mention to his father, he realised. It must never happen again. Would never happen again, when he became chief.

Desperately Ragnar parried his assailant's blow. The shock of the impact numbed his arm even though the shield absorbed some of the force. Ragnar aimed a counter at the man's head, only to have that parried in turn.

He punched with his shield arm, catching his assailant in the face. As the man reeled back off-balance Ragnar split his skull with the axe.

He looked around. His home was on fire. The great hall was burning. All was madness. Shadowy figures cut and killed in the gloom. It was like a scene from some hell. Women raced through the night, carrying children. Dogs worried at the legs of the invaders. A chicken flapped squawking through the night, its wings ablaze.

Where was his father, Ragnar wondered. Most likely at the great hall helping rally the warriors. If he was still alive. Frantically Ragnar tried to dismiss the thought but like a knife it sank in that by the end of this night, not only his father but every other warrior he knew, and most likely Ragnar himself, would be dead.

Still, there was nothing for it but to fight, no matter how hopeless the odds seemed. Every sense alert Ragnar raced towards the great hall, hoping against hope to find his father and the others alive.

Once again the strange howling passed overhead, and Strybjorn became aware that a huge winged shadow had fallen over the battlefield. He looked up and saw its burning comet tail passing low overhead. For a moment, the fighting stopped, and everyone looked up to gaze in awe and wonder at the sorcerous apparition.

‘The Choosers of the Fallen!’ someone shouted. Strybjorn was unsure whether it was Grimskull or Thunderfist. He only knew that whoever had spoken was correct. A shiver passed through him. The messengers of the gods were here. They judged the combatants. Now! At this moment, they looked down with their burning gaze to see whether anyone was worthy to join the great warriors in the Hall of Heroes. It was possible that this night someone would be borne living to the legendary mountain where the Chosen of the Gods dwelled in immortal splendour.

Strybjorn knew they would choose only the bravest of the brave and the fiercest of the fierce. Only the boldest were worthy of immortality. The names of the Chosen would live for eternity, sung by the skalds during the hero chants. Blazing ambition woke in his heart.

He knew now what he must do. Somewhere among these whipped dogs he must find foes worthy of his steel. He must find enemies worthy to be called the name and call them out in single combat. The Choosers did not appear for every battle; perhaps this chance would never happen again. It was possible that never again in his lifetime would there be physical tangible evidence of the presence of these mysterious beings.

He glanced around. The same realisation seemed to have touched every warrior regardless of clan. The Grimskulls sprang apart from their foes, giving them time to pick up better weapons. Strybjorn waited anxiously to see what would happen next.

In the lull of the fighting Ragnar looked up and saw the skyship pass overhead. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had watched it from the deck of the *Spear of Russ*, although in reality it had been only two hundred days. Perhaps it was not the same ship. Perhaps there was more than one. Who but the gods knew about these things?

Slowly the thought bubbled into his mind that the Choosers must be present. Might be observing him at this very moment. Judging to see if he was worthy to enter the Hall of Russ. It was an oddly uplifting thought. It gave meaning to the savagery around him. Suddenly this was not simply a battle for survival but a test of honour and worthiness. Of course, all battles were supposedly that but at very few was there actual evidence of the presence of the gods’ messengers. This was one such battle. It was possible for a man to step right from here into legend.

The massive burly warrior with whom he had been trading blows but a second ago looked at him, and something like understanding showed in his

brutal grey eyes. They stepped apart. Ragnar backing away towards the rest of his kin around the blazing great hall, the Grimskull retreating towards his own lines.

Ragnar looked around to see who he could recognise. Ulli was there. So was his father, he saw with a sigh of relief. Jarl Torvald still stood, though his head was bleeding from a ragged cut. Even as Ragnar watched the warrior chieftain tore the sleeve from his tunic and bound it round his head. All of them exchanged strange haunted looks. All of them knew they were dead men. All of them knew it was only a matter of time.

Looking across at the assembled horde of Grimskulls it was obvious that they were now outnumbered at least five to one. Many of the Thunderfist warriors had fallen in the initial rush. There was no way they could hope to overcome so many, even if they proved much better warriors than their foes. And judging by the savagery of the Grimskulls that they had already witnessed such was not the case. Man for man they seemed equally matched – or perhaps even outmatched, Ragnar was forced reluctantly to admit.

Still, the appearance of the skyship had caused a change in the atmosphere of the battle. That much was obvious. The Grimskulls were holding back right now. They, as much as the Thunderfists, wanted to impress the celestial watchers. They had gone from seeking a slaughter to seeking worthy foes. A spark of anger flared in Ragnar's heart.

Now, they were prepared to fight honourably. Knowing the eyes of the gods were upon them they were prepared to grant their enemies a fair fight. A few minutes ago they had not been ready to do so. It hardly seemed fair or in keeping with the nature of true honour. A small part of Ragnar laughed at his own naïveté. What was the point of protesting about the fairness or the unfairness of it? The gods would make their judgements in their usual inscrutable way, and they would not be fooled. He hoped.

Why should he protest? The Grimskulls were allowing him the chance of a worthy death even if they were foul hypocrites. And they were at least ensuring that the Thunderfists would take a few of their number down into darkness with them.

As it became obvious what was happening a few of the Thunderfist warriors raced into the blazing hall, returning with armloads of weapons and shields. The Grimskulls seemed quite prepared to let them do so, and to let their enemies prepare for battle.

There was a tension in the air now. It was quite palpable, as if the presence of the Choosers had generated its own electrical energy. Warriors limbered up swiping the air with their weapons. The Grimskull leaders were huddled, arguing among themselves over what to do – doubtless debating how to make themselves look best in the eyes of Russ.

Well, there were no such debates over here among the Thunderfists, Ragnar thought. Their duty was clear, to sell their lives as dearly as they could and to fight well and honourably before they died. There was no other choice.

From somewhere down the line he could hear the sound of a man crying. It sounded like Ranald Onetooth. This surprised Ragnar, for all his life he had known Ranald and he had always been a steady man, unflappable even in the face of the greatest of storms or the mightiest of orcas. By all accounts he had acquitted himself well in all the raids and battles he had taken part in too. In fact he had faced the Night Troll of Gaunt in single combat and emerged triumphant.

Why had his nerve broken now, Ragnar wondered. Of all the men present he was one who would have seemed most assured of the Choosers' favour. His bravery had been tested time and time again. Was it possible that a man had only a limited store of courage for his life, and when that was consumed his bravery failed? Or was it the presence of the Choosers themselves that had unmanned him? Knowing that the eyes of your gods were upon you might do strange things to a man, Ragnar thought.

Or perhaps it was the sure and certain knowledge every Thunderfist warrior now had, that soon they would be judged and know their ultimate fate. It was one thing to enter a battle or a storm or any other danger knowing that you might live by dint of luck or the favour of the gods or your own strength or skill. It was another knowing beyond any shadow of a doubt that your life would soon be over.

Ragnar inspected his own soul and found that there was fear there but it was not overwhelming. He was nervous and he was excited in an odd way but he was not terrified. More, there was an anger in him, and a thirst for vengeance on the Grimskulls for their treachery that made his fear seem like a small and insignificant thing. He felt himself on the verge of a towering killing rage. In his heart he was impatient to get to grips with his enemies, desperate for the killing to begin.

And he was forced to admit that a desire for the favour of the gods had nothing to do with this. He was sure that he would enter hell happy if he could take a Grimskull with him, and that his life would not have been in vain if he dragged down two. Knowing that his life was over, he had nothing left to lose. All that existed for him now was the chance to sell it dearly.

It was odd that in the course of one evening, a man could go through so many changes. He tried now to remember Ana's face, the face he had tried so hard to memorise only minutes ago, and found that he had no clear recollection of it now. A pity, Ragnar thought coldly. It would have been good to take the memory of something beautiful into the afterlife.

The Thunderfist warriors had finished arming and stood ready. The Grimskulls seemed to have chosen their warriors now. They faced each other across the shadows of the burning square. For a long moment they eyed each other with fear and hatred. Then all eyes were drawn to a massive figure that had emerged from the shadows. It was a monstrous burly man, clad in metal armour with an enormous wolf pelt thrown around his shoulders.

Ragnar felt a shock of recognition. It was the Wolf Priest who they had carried to the Iron Masters' isle those few short hundred days ago. Suddenly and with a surge of fear Ragnar remembered the Wolf Priest's final words. This had indeed been a day of doom for him. It seemed Ranek was a seer as well as a wizard.

Everyone stood now waiting to see if the Wolf Priest would intervene but he did nothing, merely surveyed them all with his blazing eyes. At that moment, Ragnar saw with utter clarity that there was something inhuman, or perhaps more than human, about Ranek. Whatever had happened to him, it had set him apart from the run of humanity, and turned him into something that was quite monstrous.

There was no fear in him. He stood there with utter confidence in his own invulnerability like a man watching children squabble, not someone standing on the edge of a battle between fully grown and fully armed warriors. It was as if he knew nothing could harm him, as if he could kill them all without effort should they annoy him. Remembering how he had dealt with the sea dragon Ragnar did not doubt that this was true.

Another thought entered his mind. Ranek had arrived with the skyship. He was no mere sorcerer. He was one of the Choosers of the Fallen, a

representative of the gods themselves. The same thought seemed to have struck all present as they watched the firelight reflect off the Wolf Priest's shining armour. A feeling of awe came over everyone present. They knew they stood in the presence of something supernatural.

The terrible ancient watched them impatiently, as if waiting for them to begin. Ragnar suspected that his presence had intimidated all the warriors. For a brief moment, left to their own devices, they might conceivably stop fighting. Then the old man gestured for them to continue. The two forces steeled themselves like wolves preparing to spring into combat with each other, and then leapt forward into battle.

Strybjorn felt a thrill pass through him as the massively armoured ancient strode from the shadows. In his heart of hearts he knew that this was one of the Choosers, a being who could grant him immortality and an eternity of endless battle if he so chose. His eyes were drawn to the armoured figure like iron filings to a magnet. There was a sense of awesome power about the Chooser that filled Strybjorn with envy and longing. He wanted to share that power, to be able to stand amid carnage with the same certainty. He wanted to own something of the same pride. He knew that here was one compared to whom the greatest of the Grimskull warriors was but a clod. Whatever it was the old man had, he wanted it. He resolved there and then to perform like a hero in the coming battle or at least to die trying. If he got a chance. He was not in the first wave of warriors to go into single combat with the Thunderfists.

He glanced over trying to guess the numbers who remained and saw that one of the Thunderfists, a youth about his own age, was looking at the old one with recognition written on his face. Was it possible that he knew the Chooser? No. That could not be. It must simply be that the death madness was on him. Strybjorn did his best to memorise the youth's face. He was suddenly possessed of an unaccountable dislike of him, and he fervently prayed the lad would survive the initial battle so that he could kill him himself.

At the old man's signal the Grimskulls charged.

Ragnar ducked the blow of a huge burly warrior. He swung his axe up and caught the man through the chest. Bones splintered, blood and entrails billowed forth. He turned just in time to duck the sweep of another Grimskull's weapon and then to his horror felt himself immobilised.

The dying man had reached up from where he lay in a pool of his own blood and grabbed Ragnar's leg. He seemed determined that his slayer would die with him. Pinned in place by his strength this suddenly seemed all too possible. The second Grimskull lashed out at him and Ragnar barely managed to block the blow with his shield. Impaired by the drag on his leg it was all he could do to keep his balance. He launched a counterblow sending his assailant leaping back. In the moment of respite he decided to take an awful risk. There was no way he could survive pinned in place as he was. He needed to break free. For a brief moment, he risked taking his eyes off his unwounded attacker, looked down and aimed a blow at the wrist of the arm that held him.

It came off cleanly, the sharp axe biting through flesh and bone and sinew. Hot blood soaked Ragnar's leg. The dying man let out a scream like the damned. Ragnar leapt aside barely in time to avoid his new assailant.

As the man swept past, Ragnar lashed out with his axe, catching him a terrible blow on the back of the neck. The axe cleaved through the vertebrae, and the man's head came half off the stump of the neck. Not yet knowing it was dead, the corpse ran onwards for a few strides before tripping over the handless man and falling to the blood-soaked earth.

Ragnar straightened himself and bounded forward, lashing left then right with his axe as he went. His first blow caught a surprised warrior on the temple and cleaved through his skull. His second blow was parried by a small, squat Grimskull warrior. With blazing speed he and Ragnar exchanged a flurry of strokes. A surge of pain lanced up Ragnar's arm where the man's spear point bit deep. Ragnar's return blow sent the man toppling forward into hell.

Ragnar was surprised by how well he was fighting. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. He fought with perfect co-ordination and a speed he had not known he possessed. His mind was crystal clear, cold as a snow-fed mountain stream. He felt strong and fast and he barely felt the pain of his wounds. Of course, he had heard that this was how it sometimes was from the older warriors, and he knew that he would pay for the wear and tear of battle on his body later. Right now, at this moment, he felt invincible.

A swift glance around told him how misleading that feeling was. There still seemed to be an endless horde of Grimskull warriors. As one fell another leapt forward, keen to get into battle. The Thunderfists were

accounting for themselves well now but more than half of them were gone. As he looked around Ragnar saw his father dead upon the ground. He gazed skywards with sightless eyes, hands still wrapped around his axe, two dead Grimskulls at his feet.

Horror took a grip on Ragnar's heart. This was the man who had raised him alone ever since his mother had died. He had been there for as long as Ragnar could remember, a pillar of indomitable strength. It simply was not possible for him to be dead. Cutting foes down like chaff as he went, Ragnar forced a path to where his father lay. The young Thunderfist squatted down over the body and reached out to touch his father's brow. The flesh was already cold. Touching the throat, Ragnar found no pulse. Grief filled him and for a moment he was paralysed by it.

A Grimskull raced towards him. Ragnar watched him come. Grief hardened to something as cold as his father's corpse. The need to kill welled up within Ragnar's soul. The Grimskull moved so slowly that he seemed to be wading through molasses. Ragnar could make out every detail of the attacker, from the wart on the back of his left hand to the notches in the bright steel of his blade. Everything had a fatal clarity to it. He could see by the way the man was limping that he had twisted his leg earlier but it was not slowing him much. He watched as the man drew back his axe for the swing that would decapitate Ragnar. It was as if the whole thing were happening to somebody else.

Then past the attacker's shoulder he could see the old man, the Wolf Priest Ranek, watching him. There was something in the old man's eyes. It might have been compassion, it might have been contempt. Ragnar could not tell. Those wolf-like eyes were impossible for a mortal like Ragnar to read. And yet the gaze broke the spell that held him. Cold rage and hot hate filled him. He erupted into action, springing forward from his crouch under the incoming blow and cannoning into his assailant.

He lashed out, kicking the man in his already wounded leg and sending him tumbling off-balance. As he fell Ragnar split his skull like matchwood and advanced into the ranks of the Grimskulls, killing as he went.

Now he fought like a god. Nothing could withstand him. His hate and his anger drove him to new heights of speed and ferocity. He knew no fear. He lived only to kill and he did not care now whether he lived or he died.

In fury he clove through the Grimskulls like a dragonship through a stormy sea. Anything that got in his way was chopped down.

Somewhere in the madness a blow from a Grimskull axe split his shield. He killed the man who had the temerity to do this and caught his spinning axe as it fell. With a weapon in each hand he stormed forward like a whirlwind of death, killing everything within his reach. He lost count of the number he slew after he put down the twentieth. He became used to the look of fear and horror he saw in the faces of the men who faced him. It was the same sort of look you might give if you confronted a daemon. Ragnar did not care; at this moment, he felt like a daemon. Maybe one had possessed him. If that were the case he welcomed it, as he would welcome anything that allowed him to kill Grimskulls.

For a moment, it seemed like he might turn the tide of battle single-handed. The Thunderfists rallied behind him and formed a flying wedge, ploughing through their foes, heartened by Ragnar's skill and strength. But it could not last. One by one his kinsmen fell. Nothing could maintain the terrible superhuman level of ferocity that Ragnar possessed. He bled from dozens of small cuts. His strength was sapped from absorbing dozens of numbing blows. He slowed, became conscious of pain and once more returned to the level of being human.

Strybjorn slashed down another Thunderfist and tried to locate the youth he had seen earlier. He was nowhere in sight, and must have moved to some other part of the battlefield. It was unfortunate. Still, Strybjorn had managed to get the old man, the one who bore a resemblance to the youth. He had put up quite a good fight for a Thunderfist. Strybjorn was proud of himself. Now that the Thunderfists had regained some spirit they were turning into quite worthy opponents, and he had killed five. He felt quite certain that he had felt the Chooser's eyes upon him as he had done so. He had picked his foes well. All had been warriors in their prime. All had been skilful and all had fallen to his axe.

Once more the sheer joy of bloodshed filled him. He realised that he was as happy as he had ever been in his short hate-filled life. The act of slaying brought him more pleasure than food or sleep or ale. It was sweeter than honey or the kisses of a maiden. In dealing death, a man gained power equal to that of the gods. Or perhaps not, perhaps there was something sweeter than this, something known only to the Choosers and their masters. Strybjorn certainly hoped to find out.

Now it was time to find his chosen prey. It was time to kill again.

Weariness overtook Ragnar. He felt himself slowing. Strength leeched from him. Speed was lost. He blocked a blow from a Grimskull warrior, stepped back out of the way of a second swing. The edge of the axe tore his tunic, and left a bloody weal on his chest. He let the axe pass, stepped in, and chopped a huge chunk out of his attacker's axe with his second weapon. A blow from the right sent the man to his ancestors.

Behind him were many more Grimskulls. It seemed that for every one he killed two more stepped forward to take their place. Not that it mattered to Ragnar. He was intent only on killing, on making them pay for killing his father and stealing the life he should have had with Ana. He knew that when he strode into the cold hells he would be greeted by many that he had killed, and that knowledge made him glad. He was only sorry that he was not going to be able to kill them all, and that he could not maintain the killing rage that let him overpower so many.

A flurry of blows overwhelmed the next two assailants and then Ragnar knew his strength was spent. He had burned his strength up in this battle like a fire consuming wood. There was nothing left to use. He was fighting now only on instinct and reflex. His blows lacked the killing power they had once had, and then he came face to face with the man he felt sure was going to kill him.

It was a Grimskull youth he had noticed earlier. A youth of about Ragnar's age with a cliff-like brow and an enormous underslung jaw. He smiled savagely revealing teeth like millstones. There was a look of blood-crazed madness in his eyes that Ragnar knew must match his own. Briefly they paused to confront each other. Both sensed that in this meeting they felt the touch of destiny.

Strybjorn gazed at his chosen prey. At last he had found him. He had found the youth who had left such a trail of destruction through Strybjorn's kin. He had found the target he had singled out earlier for destruction, the one who had seemed to recognise the Chooser.

He did not look like much, just another slim, broad shouldered Thunderfist lad with an unusual mane of black hair, but Strybjorn did not underestimate him. He had seen first hand the havoc this youth had wreaked. Well that would end here. It was Strybjorn's destiny to slay this great killer and thus win the approval of the gods. This meeting had been fated long ago, of that he felt sure.

‘I am Strybjorn,’ Strybjorn said. ‘And I am going to kill you.’

‘I am Ragnar,’ the Thunderfist youth replied. ‘Go ahead and try.’

Ragnar saw the look of hatred in the Grimskull’s eye, caught the flickering glance that said he was about to attack, and ducked back as Strybjorn struck.

The Grimskull was fast, no doubt about it. Ragnar barely managed to deflect the blow with his axe, let alone get out of the way. And as he did so, Strybjorn followed through, bashing him from his feet with a blow of his shield. The shock of the impact sent stars flickering before Ragnar’s eyes. He tumbled backwards and corpses squished under his weight.

Already the Grimskull’s axe was descending in a blazing arc. Ragnar barely had time to roll aside. Blood sprayed over him as the axe bit into the dead body below with a sound like a butcher’s cleaver hitting a side of beef. Ragnar lashed out with his boot, trying to kick the Grimskull’s legs out from under him, but his foe leapt over the blow and brought his axe down once more. This time Ragnar managed to get his left axe in the way, but he was awkwardly positioned and the force of the impact drove his weapon back at his chest along with the Grimskull’s blade. He winced with pain at the impact, and felt his own blood begin to flow over his chest.

Strybjorn raised his axe for another blow. Ragnar rolled again and scrambled to his feet, diving forward just in time to avoid it. He sprawled his length on the ground once more and then rolled to his feet. He found himself facing another Grimskull warrior. The man had raised his blade for a killing strike.

‘No, leave him! He is *mine!*’ he heard Strybjorn bellow from behind him. The second Grimskull paused in surprise. Ragnar took advantage of his confusion to smash his axe into the man’s ribs and then turned just in time to parry Strybjorn’s blow. The force of the impact this time did more than just numb his left arm. He felt something give in his wrist, and a flash of searing agony blazed up his arm. The axe fell from his nerveless left hand. Strybjorn’s thick brutal lips twisted upward in a grin of triumph.

‘Now you die, Ragnar Thunderfist,’ he snarled.

Ragnar met his grin with one of his own and lashed out with his remaining weapon. The blow was quick, faster than the Grimskull’s and Strybjorn barely had time to react and duck back out of the way. The razor-sharp axe cut into his flesh and raised a huge flap of skin. Blood started to dribble down into Strybjorn’s eyes. He shook his head to clear it away.

Ragnar stepped back to admire his handiwork, knowing that if he was patient the advantage now lay with him. Blood from the cut would soon blind his foe, and then Ragnar could kill him at his leisure.

The same thought had obviously occurred to Strybjorn who let out a bellow of brute rage and charged forward like an angry boar. The flurry of blows he launched came close to overwhelming Ragnar but somehow he managed to give ground without taking more than a few nicks. He realised as he did so, though, that it was hopeless. Strybjorn's attack had driven him backwards into a huge semi-circle of Grimskull warriors, each of whom was eager for a chance to avenge the slaughter of his kin. There was no way to defend himself from them and from Strybjorn at the same time.

Instantly he came to a decision. He would make certain that he would take one last foe with him into the darkness. Leaving himself totally open, he braced himself for the killing blow then sent his axe hurtling forward. He felt the weight of death in it, even before the blade bit home. He knew his assailant was doomed. It smashed into Strybjorn's chest. Ribs cracked, entrails spilled forth. Ragnar felt a moment of satisfaction that his vengeance had been achieved then felt a surge of bright agony in his own chest.

With a reflexive killing strike Strybjorn had sent his own weapon deep into Ragnar's breast, then his kinsfolk advanced to finish the job. Wracked with agony from the flurry of blows, Ragnar tumbled forward into the darkness in which he knew death waited to welcome him.



FIVE

THE CHOOSER OF THE FALLEN

Ragnar floated in an ocean of pain. His whole body burned. He ached in a way that he would not have believed was possible, endured agony that he was certain no mortal was meant to endure.

So this was hell, he thought. It was not what he expected. It was not cold. There was only pain. Where were the others he had slain? Why were they not here to greet him? Where were the judges of the dead? Where were his father and his mother and the rest of his kin?

Through his pain he was aware of a terrible sense of disappointment. He had not been chosen. He had not awoken at the great feast table in the Hall of Heroes high on the Mountain of Eternity. He had not proven worthy enough. He was diminished. The thought struck him sourly and then he was aware of nothing more.

Once again he was aware of the agony but it appeared to have lessened. There was a strange thumping sound in his ears and the roar of a mighty wind. Slowly it came to him that the thumping sound might be his heart and the wind might be the rasp of his breath.

Then it was as if pokers of red hot fire burned his chest, in every place where he had taken a wound. He wanted to scream but he could not open his mouth. He could make no sound. He felt as if needles of ice were being driven into his skin, and a thread of molten lead was being used to stitch his wounds.

Hell, he thought, was a place of torment. Blackness. Silence.

It was cold now. Ice surrounded him, claspng him in its chill, burning grip. This was more like it. This was what the skalds and the old songs had told him to expect. This was the place of endless chill where the lost souls wandered before all memory faded and they were absorbed once more into the primal stuff of the universe.

But where were the other restless dead, he wondered. And why could he not see? There were no answers. He drifted in the endless immensity for aeons then consciousness left him once more.

He was getting warmer. His body shook. Pain and heat seemed indistinguishable. They wrapped him like a cloak, like a shroud. He seemed to be shivering. He felt very tired. His whole body ached. He felt like his spirit had wandered a long way, and was devoid of all strength now.

Yet he was still aware of himself. He somehow still existed in whatever solitary void he occupied. He was aware only of the pain and of his own memories but he was aware. It was something to cling on to. Just as he made this decision, he felt the knives begin to cut once more, and fell into the long darkness of oblivion.

A weight like that of an island pressed down on him, smothering him. He could not breathe and for the first time felt the lack of air. He was conscious of his limbs but they seemed too heavy to move. He was aware of his eyelids but he could not open them. It seemed to him that somewhere, a long way away, someone was calling his name.

Could it be the dead, he asked himself, already aware that it was not.

He forced himself to try and remain aware. He tried to open his eyes. It was like straining with an infinite weight. He knew now how Russ must have felt pitting himself against the awesome strength of the Midworld Serpent. The task seemed beyond him, and yet he would not allow himself to give up.

He focused all his willpower on the task of opening his eyes. They resisted him as firmly as the earth of a grave might resist the struggles of a dead man. He did not stop trying, would not allow himself to give up. He forced himself to go on.

Pain lanced through all his limbs once more but he did not let it distract him. Was that sweat running down his brow? He did not know, for he could not raise his hand to mop it away. All he could do was put all the strength of his life into trying to open his eyes. It should have been a trivial task for a man who had fought in such a mighty battle as he had but it was not. It was the hardest thing he had ever done.

He made himself think of his father and his mother and his friends. If he could open his eyes he could look upon them once more. He would be able to see into the land of the dead. The thought was frightening but what else could he do? He was there now. Sooner or later he would have to confront it, and he was not a coward. He knew himself well enough now to know that this was true.

Why then was he reluctant? Why did he feel this strange fear in the pit of his stomach? Was he frightened to look out on the unknown or was it that he feared looking on those he had loved once more, and explaining himself to them? He forced himself to continue and was rewarded with a brief glimpse of light.

Suddenly the darkness was split with a flash of blue and white. This was not what he expected at all. He forced himself to keep trying, to open his eyes to their fullest extent and slowly it dawned on him that he was looking up at a sky exactly like the sky of Fenris. Truly the afterworld was not what he had been led to believe it would be. He felt a little cheated.

As if the sight of the sky was a signal, other sensations flooded into his brain. He became aware of the scent of the earth, the song of the birds, the distant crash of waves on the shore. Then came the bitter smell of ashes, the smoky smell of burning and the bittersweet stench of human flesh on a funeral pyre.

Something soft was beneath him. He felt grass being crushed beneath his fingers as they bit into soft moist earth. He was aware of pain and a strange numbness that distanced him from it, in the way that the beer had separated him from the world, only this numbness was a thousand times more potent than alcohol.

A huge grizzled head came into view. Cold blue eyes, like chips splintered from the dome of the sky, glared down into his own. He recognised the seamed worn face. It belonged to Ranek, the Wolf Priest, the Chooser of the Slain.

‘So you have followed me here,’ he wanted to say but the words came out an unrecognisable gurgle.

‘Don’t try to say anything, laddie,’ Ranek said. ‘You have travelled a long way. It is an enormous journey back from the land of the dead to that of the living, and it’s not one many men are given to make. Save your strength. You are going to need it.’

He said something in a language that Ragnar did not recognise to someone who was just outside his field of vision. Ragnar felt a pain biting into his arm, and then something cool as glacial meltwater flowed into his veins, and consciousness left him once more.

He came awake suddenly and instantly this time, aware of the sun on his face and the caress of the wind’s fingers on his cheek. He felt well rested. He felt very little pain. He tried to sit up. It was an enormous effort

but he managed it. He could see that he was naked. Instinctively he raised his fingers to probe where Strybjorn's axe had bitten into his chest. To his surprise he found only the faintest trace of a scar and an area of tenderness that gave him pain as he probed.

Looking down he saw a fresh pink scar and a yellowish area that looked like an old bruise. There were other scars and other bruises all over his chest, and he did not doubt that he had more on his back. What was going on here, he wondered. He saw that he lay close to the massive skyship. Looking around he could see what appeared to be the remains of a burned-out village.

It was odd; the afterworld bore a startling resemblance to the real world. Only some things were not quite correct. Where the Thunderfist village should have been was a collection of ruins. The roof of the tumbled down great hall still smouldered. Down by the beach funeral pyres burned.

Groups of living women and children were being herded into dragonships that lay out among the waves.

Slowly it dawned on Ragnar that perhaps he *was* in the world of the living. He remembered the great battle with the Grimskulls, and the fires that had burned then. His home village would look like this after such a battle, he was certain.

Or perhaps this was some new and unknown hell conjured by daemons. Perhaps it was a place intended to show him the consequences of the Thunderfist defeat. Certainly the scene was mournful enough to be that.

He heard heavy footsteps crunching across the turf behind him, and turned to look up at Ranek. The old Wolf Priest studied him with knowing eyes. 'You are back among the living, laddie,' he said. It wasn't a question.

'Am I? Are you not one of the Choosers of the Slain?'

The old man's booming laughter echoed out over the rubble. Several distant figures turned to look at him as if startled. 'Always questions, eh? You haven't changed much, boy.'

'I'm not a boy. I gained the robe of manhood days ago.'

'And what days they were, eh? Well, you distinguished yourself on the field of battle. I'll say that for you. You're a fighter, laddie. I haven't seen such carnage since the time of Berek and that was... well, that was a long time ago.'

'So you are a Chooser then?'

'Yes, laddie, that I am. But not in the sense you think.'

‘Then in what sense are you one? Surely you either are or you are not.’

‘One day, if you live, you will understand. The universe is not nearly so simple as you believe. You will find this out soon enough.’

‘If I live?’ Ragnar looked down at where the wounds in his chest should have been in wonder. ‘Surely—’

‘Surely you have already been dead? Is that what you were going to say? Yes, you were. Dead or the next best thing to it. Your heart had stopped beating and you had lost a lot of blood. Your body took a lot of damage but not enough. Our healer got to you before brain death could occur, and what ailed you was not beyond the power of our... magic... to fix.’

Ragnar was sure he had muttered another word before he said magic but he had never heard the word before and it made no sense, but that was only to be expected of wizards. They spoke in riddles and nonsense. Still, his words gave Ragnar hope.

‘You can bring back the dead? Then my father—’

‘Your father is beyond our aid, laddie,’ Ranek said. He gestured towards the distant fires.

‘Why didn’t you help him when you helped me? You could have done it.’ Ragnar was ashamed that grief kept his voice from being totally level.

‘He had not proved himself worthy of our aid or our interest. You have. You have been chosen, laddie.’

‘Chosen for what?’

‘You’ll find out soon enough, if that is your destiny.’

‘You keep saying that.’

‘I keep saying it because it is true.’

The old man showed his fangs in that disturbing smile. ‘Now you belong to the Wolves. Body and soul, you belong to the Wolves.’

Ragnar raised himself to his feet, unsteady as a new-born kid. He tried to put one foot in front of the other to walk but he found himself reeling and staggering. Almost at once, he overbalanced and the ground rose to meet him. He was slammed into the earth with painful force.

He did not let it stop him: pushing against the ground with both hands he rose to his feet once more. This time he managed a few more steps and before he could fall he stopped himself and stood upright, swaying. He felt nauseous. His stomach churned. He felt dreadful but at the same time he felt a huge sense of relief.

He was not dead. He was among the living. For whatever mysterious reasons they might have, Ranek and his fellows had chosen to spare him. Indeed, it appeared that in some way they had chosen him. Though it was not quite like any of the hero tales he had heard, still he had been picked out.

They were mighty mages indeed. They had healed his wounds. They had brought him back from the dead. Or had they? Was this some kind of foul sorcery such as the sea daemons were said to practise? Had they taken his soul and bound it into his corpse using dark wizardry? Would his body soon begin to rot and decompose? He turned to face the Wolf Priest.

‘Am I dead?’ he asked. It was an insane question, he knew, but Ranek looked at him with what appeared to be understanding, and perhaps even sympathy.

‘As far as those people down there are concerned, yes, laddie. You are among the slain. You will depart from this place never to return. Your destiny lies elsewhere now, among the endless ice, and perhaps among the stars.’

Ragnar thought he saw Ana being pushed out onto one of the dragonships. Suddenly he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that he had to get to her. He began to move towards the beach, staggering like a drunkard. He half expected Ranek to try and stop him but the Wolf Priest let him go.

Ragnar had no idea how long it took him to reach the beach. He knew that when he got there he was panting as hard as if he had run twenty miles over sand. He saw the Grimskull warriors all turn and look at him. There was wonder on their faces and horror. They made the sign of Russ over their breasts and continued to wade out into the sea and clamber on board their ships.

Ragnar tried to follow them but the waves beat against him and he fell. The water closed over his head and began to fill his lungs. He rose to his feet and started to splutter. He tried to push on out once more but a powerful hand closed on his shoulder. He turned around swiftly and lashed out with his fist. Agony shot up his arm and it felt as if he might have broken his fingers.

‘Ceramite will not yield to naked flesh, laddie,’ Ranek said, lifting him as easily as if he were a puppy, despite his struggles. ‘You’ll only break your hands if you keep that up.’

Out on the waters, the drums had begun to beat, oars splashed into the water. The dragonships began to pull away from land.

‘Where are they going?’

‘They are returning to their homes with their new chattels, laddie. They will not live here now. After the battle they believe this island will be haunted. I imagine that your seeming resurrection will only give credence to that viewpoint. This will be a sacred site before long. Of that I have no doubt.

‘And then they will forget. Men always forget.’

Ragnar watched as the ships breasted the waves and wondered whether that small figure who seemed to be waving to him was Ana. There was no way to tell now, and he doubted that he would ever find out.

Ranek set him down on the beach and he waved back anyway, wondering whether the salty moisture in his eyes was tears or merely the spray of the sea.

Ragnar stumbled back towards the hill on which the skyship lay. He tried to fix the village in his memory, for he believed Ranek when the man said that he would never come here again.

He passed the torn hut near the tumbled hall which had been Ulli’s home. Ulli was dead now, he knew. He must have died with his father during the battle and he had not been selected by the Choosers. It seemed impossible that he would never see Ulli again, but it was the case. The friend he had played with throughout his childhood was gone. All of them were.

Ragnar remembered playing tig and kickball and fight-the-monster over this very land. If he listened hard it seemed he could hear the phantom voices of those lads playing but of course it was nonsense. That was all in the past now, gone, never to return. It was as cold as the ashes of the burned-out hut.

Ragnar passed the spot where his father had fallen, and he pushed that thought from his mind. There would be time to deal with it later. Right now it was just too immense a concept for him to cope with. If he even allowed it to touch his conscious mind he felt sure that rage and grief would devour him.

He consciously avoided the place where his father’s hut had been, the only home he could ever remember save for the deck of the *Spear of Russ*. His wandering steps pushed him out to the edge of the village. He knew it

had been a mistake moving through the remains. The memory and the horror were too fresh to be dealt with. He just wanted to get away. As fast as he could, he walked towards the skyship of the Choosers.

As he approached the ship Ragnar noticed another body lying on the ground. It was on some sort of metallic stretcher and all manner of translucent tubes seemed to be buried into its flesh. All of the tubes connected to a metal device that sat like a great spider on the youth's chest. Fluids gurgled through them. Odd runes pulsed in harsh reds and greens.

As Ragnar got closer he saw that it was Strybjorn, the Grimskull with whom he had fought. It appeared that the Choosers were working their magic on him too, and slowly the realisation dawned on Ragnar that this could mean only one thing, that Strybjorn too had been chosen. Hatred and cold fury tore at Ragnar's bowels.

It seemed that the enemy he thought he had killed had escaped his doom. Thinking of the way the Grimskull youth had slaughtered his kin, remembering the look of hatred on his face as their fight began, Ragnar wondered whether the gods were mocking him by sparing his enemy, just as they had spared him.

Without thinking he reached down and picked up a large stone. He fully intended to take it and bash Strybjorn's brains out, then smash the strange mystical device that clung to his chest. He did not know whether it would work. Perhaps the Choosers would be able to raise him from the dead again. Perhaps their magic was that potent. Ragnar had no idea but he fully intended to find out. He stalked closer to the recumbent form of Strybjorn with murder in his heart.

He looked down on his intended victim. Strybjorn looked fierce even in repose. His huge jaw and beetling brow made him look like a primitive savage. Ragnar felt a terrible sick joy clutch at him as he raised the rock. At that moment he did not care what the Choosers might think. He did not care whether he might be defying the will of the gods. All he cared about was revenge. And he fully intended to take it.

Exultation filled him as he sent his arm arcing down. He grinned in expectation of the moment when the rock would collide with Strybjorn's head and turn his skull to jelly. It never connected. Steel-strong fingers encircled his arm, stopping the blow instantly. Ragnar's attempts to move it were as futile as if he had tried to lift a mountain.

‘By Russ, laddie, you’re a fierce one,’ said Ranek’s voice. ‘A natural killer right enough. Still this one is not for you. He has been chosen as well, and he is not yours to slay.’

‘I will see him die,’ Ragnar said, a terrible earnestness in his voice.

‘Where you are going, laddie, you well might. On the other hand, it’s equally possible he will watch your end.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You will find out soon enough. Now go! Get into the Thunderhawk!’ The old man gestured towards the flying ship. Filled with trepidation, Ragnar clambered inside.

The interior of the skyship looked like nothing Ragnar could have ever imagined. The floors were all of metal. The walls were likewise, save where small circular crystal windows allowed one to look out. The seat into which he had been strapped was made of some odd musty leather. Unknown runes flickered on panels near his head. Strange roaring noises made the entire vessel shiver as it strained to fly.

Ragnar fidgeted. The new garment the Wolf Priests had given him felt odd. It was a one-piece tunic all of grey that clung to his body like a second skin. Over his heart was a picture of a wolf’s head, the sign of Russ. The garment covered all of him except his head. It was made of some fabric the like of which Ragnar had never encountered before. It stretched to fit him yet was light and breathable. It did not feel clammy but only slightly warm. While wearing it Ragnar felt like he might be able to walk through a blizzard without feeling the cold, which was odd, for the fabric was no thicker than the finest calf gut.

Suddenly the whole vessel shook. The roaring noise increased in pitch and volume. He was pushed down into the seat. Looking through the window he felt a brief sickening sensation as the land receded below him. It was unnatural watching the island fall away, as the skyship escaped the clutches of gravity and leapt into the sky.

Everything became smaller. He could make out the ruined village lying there like a child’s toy. He saw the beaches that stretched around the island come into view. Slowly they rose above the height of the hills and the skyship gained forward motion.

Looking at the interior once more Ragnar could see the whole deck had tilted as the prow of the ship faced upwards. He glanced out of the window once more and saw that they were gaining forward motion as well as

height and that his home island was already shrinking into the distance. Down on the sea he caught sight of the ships of the Grimskull fleet ploughing through the waves, and once more wondered about the people he knew who were upon them.

Then grey mist gathered around the skyship and the vessel began to shake. Fear clutched at Ragnar as he wondered whether the wind daemons were going to pluck them from the sky or whether some evil magic had them in its clutches. Then it slowly dawned on him that they were passing through the clouds.

No sooner had this thought struck him than they emerged into bright sunlight and the shaking stopped. Below him Ragnar could see an endless ocean of white, cut through occasionally with patches of blue. It came to him that he was looking down on the tops of the clouds, glancing upon a sight that it was given to few mortals to see. For a moment he felt a surge of wonder and gratitude.

The skyship continued to rise. Ragnar was still being pushed back into his chair. He felt as if a giant fist were pressing down on him and threatened to flatten him. He glanced around at the others and saw that the flesh of Ranek's cheeks was being pushed back as if by invisible fingers. What new sorcery was this, he wondered, too amazed to feel afraid. Whatever it was it did not seem to trouble the old man, he merely grinned and gave Ragnar a thumbs-up sign.

Ragnar glanced back through the window and saw that it was dark outside and stars were visible. Below them was a gigantic hemisphere, so big that its curve filled most of the view. It was mostly blue and white but here and there mottled patterns of green were visible. It came to Ragnar that perhaps he was looking down on the world globe and that the blue was the sea, the white was the clouds and the green was the land.

The pressure on his chest eased up with amazing suddenness and he felt himself begin to rise out of the chair. It seemed like only the straps restrained him. He felt as if his body had no weight for a moment, a strange and not unpleasant sensation. The noise of the ship had ceased and the silence was eerie and almost deafening.

Suddenly weight returned. The nose of the skyship tilted downwards and the orb of the world grew until it filled the entire field of vision.

Once again the ship began to shake. Looking out of the window Ragnar could see that the tips of the wings had started to glow cherry red like

coals on a fire. A surge of terror filled him. Was the whole ship about to be consumed by magical flames? Were the sky daemons angered? He risked another look at Ranek. The Wolf Priest had his eyes shut and looked utterly at peace. Ragnar fought for control for a long moment then decided not to worry. Perhaps the blazing wings were merely part of the spell that kept the skyship aloft. It was all beyond his comprehension. Certainly Ranek did not seem at all troubled. As long as no one else seemed worried he resolved not to worry himself.

The skyship continued to shake for long minutes. In a way it reminded Ragnar of sledding downhill in the dead of winter. Then once more the skyship roared to life. There was the sensation of enormous amounts of power being applied. The pressure on Ragnar's chest returned as the vehicle began to decelerate.

The stars disappeared. The sky went from deep black to shadowy to deep blue to blue. The clouds rose to meet them and they plunged down into the misty void once more. The whole ship tilted sickeningly like a boat caught sidelong by a wave then it righted itself and for the first time Ragnar caught sight of the land below them.

It was immense: a shattered landscape of rock and mountain, of lichen and snow. The horizon seemed far off. Huge glaciers wriggled through the peaks. In all that distance, there was no sign of life. It seemed as dead and alien as the surface of the moon. The skyship raced on over the bleak endless immensity unlike anything he had ever seen before.

'Asaheim,' he heard Ranek murmur.

The land of the gods, Ragnar thought, and wondered what awaited him there.



SIX

THE CHOSEN

‘You have all been chosen,’ Ranek said, gazing down from the Speaker’s Rock at the newcomers. The enormous piece of stone jutted up like a fang; part of the tip had been chiselled away to make a podium. The whole stone had been carved so that the part facing the audience resembled a snarling wolf’s head. ‘And now you are all wondering why.’

Ragnar stared beyond Ranek at the distant mountains and shivered. Yes, he was wondering that. He looked around at the others. From the expression on their faces he could tell they were all thinking the same thing. Their eyes were glued to the figure of the old Wolf Priest with a near fanatic intensity.

There were nearly two score others present beside himself. They had been assembled on the flat ground at the edge of the village at first light in order to hear the Wolf Priest speak. All of them wore the odd tunics that Ragnar had worn on the skyship, and many of them showed bruising and scars on their faces and hands that told Ragnar that they had been subjected to similar healing to that which he had undergone. Ragnar shivered again. The air was cold, and his breath emerged in a cloud. He noticed the strange quality that the light had here in the mountains. Everything seemed brighter, and the air seemed unnaturally thin and clear. He felt as if he could see much further than ever he could on the islands.

‘You have all been chosen by me, or by a Wolf Priest like me, because we saw the possibility that you might be worthy to join us. I emphasise the word “might”.

‘Firstly, though, you will have to unlearn many things. You have been told that you have to die to join the heroes of Russ in their long hall. In some cases, for some of you, this has proven true. You were dead and we brought you back through our magic. Others among you have been brought here while you were still alive. It makes no difference. Be aware of one thing.

‘There will be no more second chances. If you die here, you die. Your spirit will step into the beyond and go to join your ancestors. And be aware

of another thing – if you die here, it will be because you are not worthy to belong among heroes.

‘In this place, at this time, you are being given an opportunity to prove that you are worthy to stand among the greatest heroes of our world. You will be given the chance to show that you are suitable to be among the chosen of Russ, to join the companies of the Wolves.

‘Right now, you cannot understand what an honour that is, or what a weight of responsibility it may one day force you to carry. For now you will have to take my word for it. It is no small thing you are being asked to do. It is no small task you are being asked to undertake. In times to come it may lead you into terrible darkness, to face the most wicked of foes, in places beyond your ability now to imagine.

‘You may be called upon to stand between humanity and its ultimate enemies, to fight against monsters terrible beyond the descriptions of legend. It may be that you will stand beside Russ himself in those final days when the forces of evil arise to destroy all that exists. All of this may be – if you prove yourself worthy.

‘We offer you a task worthy of heroes. And the prize is not tawdry. If you are successful you will gain a life far longer than any normal mortal’s, and powers as great as those of any demi-god of legend. You will travel beyond the sky, to the furthest stars, and fight in battles that will test the measure of any warrior. There will be opportunities for glory and for honour and the respect of those whose respect is worth something.

‘If you prove yourself: then power, glory and immortality. If you fail: death everlasting. These are the paths before you. From this day, from this minute, there are no others. You will either triumph or you will die. Do you understand me?’

Ragnar looked at the Wolf Priest. There was no friendliness and no compassion in him now. This was the sorcerer he had first met on the *Spear of Russ* what seemed a lifetime ago. The old man seemed to have grown huge in stature and was wrapped in a cloak of awesome presence. His words had the force of a prophet’s and burned their way directly into Ragnar’s consciousness. They were at once frightening and inspiring, and even though Ragnar did not understand much of what he had heard, he sensed the importance the Wolf Priest put in what he was saying, and that made it important to Ragnar too.

‘Do you understand me?’ the old man repeated.

‘Yes,’ a score of voices responded in unison.

‘Good. You are now aspirants to the Chapter of the Space Wolves. When you understand the meaning of that, you will understand the greatness of the honour being offered you. Now, let me to introduce you to Hakon. He is the man who will teach you what you need to know, and judge whether you are worthy to live or die. Listen to his words carefully, for they mean life or death to you now.’

The Wolf Priest gestured to a newcomer who strode up onto the platform and regarded them with bright wolf-like eyes and a contemptuous smile. Ragnar studied the man’s face closely. It was narrow and almost skeletal. The flesh seemed too tight, drawn taut by the dozens of scars that turned his cheeks into a patchwork quilt of flesh. His hair was grey and held in a long pony-tail. His face was dominated by huge eyes, a huge blade-like nose and thin, cruel lips. He looked like a predator, like a wolf given human shape, and right now he was looking at the assembled youths in the way a wolf might look at a flock of sheep. There was nothing whatsoever reassuring about his cold gaze.

Having performed the introduction, Ranek vaulted down from the platform without any further ceremony and strode off back towards the village. Ragnar noted that Hakon did not climb onto the rock himself. Instead he moved around to stand in front of it. The huge stone wolf head appeared to glare over his shoulders, and it was hard to tell which looked more savage, the carving or the man.

‘Welcome to Russvik, dogs! I doubt you will survive here. As you heard, I am Hakon,’ the newcomer said. ‘I am Sergeant Hakon. That is my title. You will use it. Or, by Russ, I will tear off your limbs like a small boy tormenting flies.’

Ragnar stared at the speaker and fought down an immediate feeling of hatred. Sergeant Hakon was a terrifying figure but at that moment Ragnar felt nothing but loathing for him.

Hakon was tall and strong. Like Ranek, he was much taller than a normal man and would have been far broader even without the gleaming armour that encased his body. Like Ranek he had the same fangs visible when he smiled, which was often and cruelly. Like Ranek he carried many small talismans of obvious mystical significance. He had a huge sword with serrated edges, a mystical weapon of the type Ranek had used to dispatch the dragon, and various other accoutrements. Neither his armour

nor his fetishes were as ornate as the Wolf Priest's but they were quite visibly of the same manufacture and must have come from the same forges.

Ragnar wondered where those were. Looking around he could see no sign of any foundries or smithies. All he could see was the small fortified camp with its huts built of wood and stone so unlike the buildings back home. Or back where home used to be, he corrected himself. Now there was no place to go back to.

'You may believe you have been chosen. You have not! You have been chosen to prove that you are worthy to be among the Chosen. Looking at all of you sorry swine I doubt that any of you are. I think the Wolf Priests have made a mistake and brought me a litter of stupid, useless foolish piglets. What do you think?'

No one was stupid enough to reply. Hakon's voice was harsh and guttural. The tone was a permanent sneer and an affront to their manhood. Back in the Thunderfist village such a manner would have resulted in Hakon being called out to duel. Here, it appeared he could speak in whatever manner he chose. Despite his loathing Ragnar doubted that there was anything any of the newcomers could do. Hakon was armed and they were not, and that was not even counting any magic that he might choose to employ.

'None of you have any guts, eh?' Hakon said. 'All spineless are you? As I suspected. Not a man among you.'

'You are armed and we are not,' said a voice that Ragnar was surprised to hear was Strybjorn's. He was shocked that the Grimskull had dared to speak when no one else had.

'What's your name, boy?'

'Strybjorn Grimskull, and I am not a boy. I have passed through the manhood rite.' A snarl twisted Strybjorn's thick, brutal lips. Anger flared in his cold eyes.

'Strybjorn Thickskull more like. Are you stupid, boy?'

'No.' Strybjorn took a step forward, his fists clenched. There was a sharp intake of breath from the assembled aspirants. No one could quite believe the Grimskull's temerity.

'Then why do you think I would need weapons to deal with an insolent puppy like you?'

‘Wouldn’t you? You talk big for a man standing there in armour carrying a blade. Maybe you wouldn’t be quite so tough without them.’

The sergeant smiled as if he had been hoping someone would say this. He strode forward until he was looming over Strybjorn. The Grimskull was tall and strong but Hakon was much taller and much heavier. His smile revealed those uncanny fangs. Conflicting emotions surged through Ragnar’s mind. It looked as if the Grimskull had made a terrible error and that there was the possibility that Hakon might kill him. Ragnar didn’t mind the Grimskull’s death so much as the fact that he would not be the one to slay him. Still, there did not appear to be anything to be done about that right at this moment.

The sergeant pulled his blade from its scabbard and raised it high. Strybjorn did not even flinch. Ragnar was forced to admit that the Grimskull was brave – even if he was foolish. Hakon drove the blade into the ground in front of Strybjorn. It stood there quivering, point first, down in the turf. Ragnar could see that the weapon was strange and complicated-looking. Serrated blades were fitted round its edges and the blade itself appeared to contain a complex mechanism.

‘Pick it up, boy,’ the sergeant said. ‘Use it – if you can. You will be armed and I won’t be.’

For a moment Strybjorn looked at Hakon. He seemed confused and a little shocked. Then the light of bloodlust appeared in his eyes and a brutal smile twisted his thick lips. He reached out and grabbed the hilt of the massive weapon. He tugged at it, obviously expecting to lift it as effortlessly as the sergeant had. No such thing happened. The blade refused to budge. Strybjorn grasped it with both hands. The muscles on his neck stood out like taut guy ropes. His biceps bulged. His face turned red. Eventually, with much effort, he pulled the weapon free of the ground.

‘Too heavy for you?’ Hakon sneered. ‘Perhaps you would like something lighter? I have a knife here.’

With a roar of incoherent fury Strybjorn threw himself forward, bringing the blade arcing down towards the sergeant’s unprotected head. Given the weapon’s weight and Strybjorn’s obvious strength and speed if it connected there was no way the sergeant could survive. And it seemed to be about to connect. The blade moved through a whistling arc and the sergeant made no attempt to deflect it or get out of the way. Then suddenly, just as it seemed his skull would be smashed, Hakon was no

longer there. He simply stepped back and the blade passed through where he had been less than a tenth of a heartbeat before.

‘You use the blade like a woman, boy. You could not split sticks. Try harder!’

Strybjorn roared and swung the blade at waist height. His face was red and contorted with fury. He obviously did not like being mocked. Ragnar stored this fact away in his memory in case it might prove useful later, for the inevitable day when he got the chance to take his revenge.

Once again Hakon waited until the last moment and then simply leapt into the air. The momentum of the blow carried the blade beneath him. He landed easily on the ground as Strybjorn almost overbalanced from his stroke.

‘You’re clumsy, boy. I’ll give you one last chance if you have the courage to take it. But be warned it will go ill for you if you fail.’

Strybjorn aimed high this time, swiping sideways at the sergeant’s head. The sergeant ducked and allowed the clumsy swing to pass over him. He stood there for a moment grinning nastily and then he struck. Keyed as he was to the slightest movement, still the blow happened almost too swiftly for Ragnar to follow. Hakon lashed out with a fist. It connected with Strybjorn’s jaw with a sickening smack. The Grimskull toppled backwards, unconscious before he hit the ground. The weapon fell from his hand. Hakon picked the tumbling blade out of the air without any apparent effort, catching it one-handed and then holding it aloft.

He touched a stud on the handle and suddenly the weapon erupted into sorcerous life. The blades around its edges began to move round and round, accelerating so swiftly that they became invisible. All of the newcomers watched appalled as Hakon moved the blade through the air, waiting to see what the sergeant would do. Was he going to decapitate Strybjorn and use his head for a trophy? It seemed all too possible.

The dirt which had clung to it from where it was driven into the ground sprayed outwards. After a few moments Hakon touched the stud again and with a nerve-wrenching screech the blades stopped moving. Hakon inspected them fastidiously, obviously making sure they were clean before returning the weapon to its scabbard. Then he strode over to the unconscious form of Strybjorn and looked down on him contemptuously. Ragnar could see that the Grimskull’s chest was still rising and falling. He did not know whether to be pleased or disappointed.

“Thickskull” was right,’ Hakon said. ‘That punch would have broken the head of any man who did not have the skull of an ox.’

In an explosion of nervous tension all the newcomers began to laugh. Ragnar was surprised to hear himself join in. Hakon’s glare swiftly silenced them.

‘You’ll all be laughing on the other side of your face in a few minutes. You two carry him down to second long hall and then report to the forges. The rest of you follow me. It’s time to see you’re all properly equipped.’

The newcomers walked silently through the little village of Russvik behind Sergeant Hakon. They passed over the ditch that ran outside the wooden walls surrounding the place and through the open gate. Guards armed with spears looked at them from wooden watchtowers on either side of the entrance.

Ragnar looked around at the buildings in surprise. This was his first real chance to study them closely, and he saw how different they were to the ones amid which he had grown up. Here the main building material was not dragonhide and dragonbone. It was wood, and stone and thatch. Some of the buildings were loghouses: squat square structures made from the trunks of dead trees and roofed over with turf. Others were made from stones set one on top of the other like those used to make drystone dykes on the islands. These too were roofed with turf. Both sorts of buildings had holes cut in the roofs to act as chimneys for the woodfires within.

The streets themselves were all of mud. Pigs rooted amid the garbage and chickens fluttered squawking around makeshift coops. There was something oddly homely about the presence of these domestic animals. They reminded Ragnar a little of home. What did not were the odd carvings that marked all the junctions. These were made from wood, and all of them represented wolves, rearing, stalking prey, snarling, leaping. All of them were beautifully made, and all of them were strangely lifelike. Ragnar had no idea what the runes carved on them meant but he was sure they possessed some mystical significance.

The streets were filled with young men, all carrying weapons, all going about their business with an air of calm competence that none of Ragnar’s group possessed. They looked at the newcomers with a mixture of pity and contempt as they passed. Here and there other older warriors garbed like Hakon were visible. These were treated with wary respect by all who encountered them.

Some of Ragnar's group looked at the stone buildings with a wide-eyed wonder that told Ragnar they were islanders like himself but that, unlike him, they had never seen the island of the Iron Masters.

It was all too strange. Russvik occupied a long valley, beside a deep blue lake. On either side were towering mountains on a scale unlike anything Ragnar had ever seen before. These peaks dwarfed everything around them, made all the works of man seem insignificant. It was almost as if this location had been chosen deliberately to make the newcomers feel small. Perhaps it had, Ragnar realised. Perhaps this whole process was designed to make them feel utterly insignificant.

He had no idea why that might be, but he could definitely see how it was possible. The location, the Wolf Priest's speech, Hakon's manner were all of a piece. They told you that you did not matter, that you had everything to prove. Somewhere deep within himself Ragnar felt a small spark of rebellion kindle and catch flame. He was not quite sure what he was going to rebel against but he was sure he would find something, and perhaps even get to finish the hated Strybjorn into the bargain!

He looked around and tried to make eye contact with the others. Only one looked back at him and smiled. All of the others seemed to be lost in a reverie of their own. Ragnar was not surprised. There was much to think about. He had seen so many new things that it seemed hard to believe it was only one day ago that he had arrived here. He had spent some of the evening being quizzed by Ranek. All of the details he had given in answer to the Wolf Priest's questions had been entered in a huge leather-bound tome in the central hall. Then he had been subjected to a physical examination by those Ranek had referred to as Iron Priests. They had passed many odd-looking amulets over him, and inspected his body minutely as if looking for the stigmata of mutation. If the situation had not been so odd Ragnar would almost have been insulted. There had been no mutants among the Thunderfists. Any babe which showed traces of the mark of Chaos had been drowned at birth.

It had been dark by the time he had been allowed to go. He had been shown to a longhouse built all of logs. The interior smelled of pine sap. There had been some grumbling from those already there when he arrived. He had found a straw pallet, lain down and fallen asleep instantly.

It was only in the morning that he had caught sight of his companions and realised that Strybjorn was among them. He must have entered the hall

after Ragnar had dozed. Whatever wounds he had taken in the battle had also been mended by the healer's magic. It made Ragnar's flesh crawl to think that he had spent the night under the same roof as a sworn enemy. An enemy he had already killed once! Ragnar spat on the earthen floor in disgust.

There had been no time to do anything about it though, for the Wolf Priest had arrived and led them all off to listen to his speech and meet Sergeant Hakon. There had not even been time to introduce himself to any of the strangers. Now more than ever Ragnar felt the oddness of the situation. He was surrounded by people from dozens of different clans. Under normal circumstances all of them would have been his enemies except if they met during one of the great festivals. Yet here none of them were armed, and none of them seemed at all disposed towards hostility right at this moment. Sergeant Hakon had given them much else to think of.

It also came to Ragnar that most of the others seemed to know where they were going. Certainly the two who had been ordered to carry Strybjorn away knew where they were taking him. This indicated to Ragnar that most of the young warriors had been in the desolate camp long enough to find their way about, and to have some idea what Hakon was talking about. He knew he was a newcomer here and for the moment Ragnar resolved that it was wisest to keep his mouth shut and eyes open.

They arrived at one of the largest of Russvik's wooden halls. Hakon strode inside and within minutes returned with a pile of weapons. Immediately he began to call out names. As each named youth strode forward Hakon thrust a spear and a dagger into his hand and then ordered him to return to the ranks.

'Ragnar Thunderfist!' Ragnar heard his own name called out and strode forward. The sergeant loomed over him. Until he had got close Ragnar had no real idea of how big Hakon actually was. Now he could see that the sergeant was the biggest man he had ever encountered, taller and broader even than Ranek. Ragnar could see too that the armour he wore was covered in small mechanisms such as the ones he assumed had made the blades on the sergeant's enchanted sword rotate. Ragnar's respect for Strybjorn's bravery – and foolishness – increased by a notch.

'What are you staring at, boy?'

‘You, sergeant!’ Hakon’s blow was almost blindingly swift yet somehow Ragnar saw it coming. He threw himself backward with just enough force to lessen the impact. The force of the impact still sent him sprawling back into the dust but he kept rolling and came to his feet. It felt as if he had been hit with a blacksmith’s hammer, sparks danced before his eyes but at least he was still conscious.

‘You have good reflexes, boy,’ the sergeant said, and tossed the scabbarded knife and spear to Ragnar. Ragnar managed to pluck them from the air and still keep on his feet. He saw that the others were looking at him with what might have been envy, or perhaps respect. For this, he felt a small surge of satisfaction.

The scabbard was leather. The steel buckle was in the shape of a wolf’s head. Ragnar was amazed by the ostentation. In all his life, he had seen such riches only once, on the island of the Iron Masters. Amongst the folk of the islands precious steel was for blades, and spear points and tools. Maybe a wealthy jarl might possess a few iron armlets as transportable wealth but it was rare. He pulled the blade from the oiled leather scabbard and inspected it. The quality was of the finest, the edge was razor keen. The pommel was tipped with a small wolf’s head identical to the one on the belt buckle. The spear shaft was of the finest ygra-wood. The point was needle sharp steel with not the slightest trace of rust. Small runes had been carved into the shaft. The whole weapon gave the impression of being well-used. Ragnar had a sudden vision of generations of newcomers before him using the weapon. He did not know whether he found that reassuring or not.

Hakon was speaking again. ‘These are your weapons now. Look after them. They may save your worthless lives. And do not lose them and come running to me either. There will be no replacements. In the unlikely event of any of you surviving your time here, you will be expected to return them. If any of you die, the survivors are expected to bring back his weapons. Leave the corpse for the crows if you like – but bring back those blades.

‘Now I am going to assign you to your Claws. This is your basic fighting unit. Every one of you in a Claw will train together, eat together, hunt together and most likely die together. When I call out your names step forward.’

Hakon called out five names Ragnar did not recognise. Five of the newcomers strode forward to stand before the sergeant. He gestured for them to move to one side and then called out another five names. Ragnar wondered if his name would be called but it was not. Five more names were called and then five more and still Ragnar's name was not mentioned. Soon only himself and three other youths stood there.

'Kjel Falconer, Sven Dragonfire, Strybjorn Grimskull, Ragnar Thunderfist, Henk Winterwolf.'

Ragnar looked at his companions. He saw a short sullen-looking youth, very broad and very strong looking. A fresh-faced boy who looked younger than anyone present and a tall freckled fair-haired lad with an open smiling face. His heart sank when he realised that he had been assigned to the same group as the Grimskull. Briefly he considered protesting but one look at Hakon told him that it would do no good. In fact, judging by the malicious smile twisting the sergeant's lips, Ragnar suspected that Hakon knew exactly what he was doing and how nasty he was being.

Still, thought Ragnar, the arrangement had its advantages. At least the Grimskull would be in easy reach for his revenge.

Hakon's disturbing smile widened. 'Take a look around,' he said. 'Look at your comrades. Remember each other's faces and know this – unless you are very, very special, and I don't think any of you are – at least half of you will be dead by the time you leave this place.'

Ragnar felt a shiver pass up his spine. The sergeant's words had the disturbing ring of truth.

Outside the long hall the winds howled. It seemed as chill as the inside of an ice cave. The aspirants lay on their pallets and wished for a fire. There was a fireplace in one corner but no wood. Each of the groups had arrived together and taken pallets near each other. There was an empty pallet among Ragnar's group which had been reserved for Strybjorn. Ragnar lay on his back and stared at the ceiling and thought about the events of the day. More examinations. More speeches from Hakon. A lot of hard exercise. A meal of porridge and turnip and something that resembled pig fat.

'Old Hakon is a bit fierce, don't you think?' said a calm, pleasant voice. Ragnar looked up to see the freckle-faced youth he had noticed earlier was looking around and grinning at them all. His features were long

and he had a small upturned nose that made him seem at once cheeky and cheerful. Long blond hair framed his face. He seemed insanely happy considering the circumstances. Ragnar could not help but smile back.

‘Yes,’ said Ragnar. ‘A bit fierce.’

‘I am Kjel of the Falconers.’ Kjel extended his hand in a friendly fashion and Ragnar shook it.

‘Ragnar of the... Thunderfists.’

‘You don’t seem very sure of that.’

‘I am not sure that there are any Thunderfists any more,’ said Ragnar simply.

‘Like that, is it?’

‘Yes.’

‘I assume you were chosen after the battle in which your clan was.... harmed.’

‘Yes.’

‘It was a great battle?’

‘It was a fierce and hard one. I’m not sure I would call it great. My village was burned. My people put to the sword. My girl—’

‘Yes?’ Kjel asked. He appeared sympathetic.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Best forget her then,’ said the squat brutal youth on the next pallet. He smiled as if he enjoyed being the bearer of bad news. Ragnar could see that his teeth were large and square and even. His nose had been broken and badly set. His reddish hair was cut in a style that seemed unusual to an islander like Ragnar, cropped short and to the skull. ‘You’ll never see her again. You’ll never see anybody you know again.’

‘There’s no need to sound so pleased about it,’ Ragnar said. The other youth shook his head and clenched his fist. It was not a gesture of menace though, Ragnar could see, more an expression of anger.

‘By Russ’s iron bollocks, I am *not* pleased about it! I am not pleased about any of this. I expected to join the Chosen, to enter the Hall of Heroes. Instead what did I get? Sergeant bloody Hakon and his bloody speech about how bloody useless we all are.’

‘Maybe you should take that up with him,’ Kjel suggested with a grin.

‘Maybe I will. On the other hand, after seeing what happened to Strybjorn and Ragnar maybe I won’t. At least not until I learn what makes him so different from the rest of us.’

‘You think that something made him that way?’ Ragnar asked with interest. ‘You don’t think...’

‘It’s just what I’ve heard round the camp but it seems the survivors of these little bands are taken away to some ancient temple and magic is worked on them. They are transformed into beasts or into men like Hakon and Ranek. By the Ice Bear’s ivory droppings, I’m bloody hungry. When do you think they’ll feed us?’

‘You think Hakon is a man?’ said the fourth member of the group, the one who looked too young to be there. Ragnar looked at him closely. His features were fine and he looked delicate and intelligent, more like a skald than a warrior. ‘I mean, those fangs and everything.’

‘He is surely not a ghost,’ Ragnar said. ‘Not the way he hit me today anyway.’

‘I was amazed that you almost got out of his way,’ the youngling said. ‘I didn’t think anybody could do that.’

‘Ragnar didn’t,’ the surly one said.

‘He almost did.’

‘Which are you, Sven Dragonfire or Henk Winterwolf?’ Ragnar asked.

‘I’m bloody Sven,’ the short squat one said. ‘And, by the Ice Bear’s sacred right buttock, you have a good memory.’

‘I’m Henk,’ said the youngest and rose to shake hands with them all. Ragnar clasped hands. So did Kjel but Sven merely lay there with his hands behind his head staring at the ceiling.

‘That would mean the last of our bloody merry little band is Strybjorn Grimskull,’ said Sven.

‘Yes,’ Ragnar spat. Even he was surprised by the venom which showed in his voice. Sven’s grey eyes flickered right to look at him.

‘You don’t like him, do you, Ragnar? Why?’

‘He was one of the scum who attacked my village.’

‘That’s not good,’ said Kjel.

‘He should be dead. I thought I killed him,’ Ragnar said.

‘You didn’t do a very good bloody job then,’ Sven said. ‘Considering he’s up and walking about – or at least he was until old Hakon knocked him into the land of dreams.’

‘The Wolf Priests used their magic to heal him. They did the same for me,’ said Ragnar.

‘I think they may have done the same for all of us,’ Kjel said. He pulled open his tunic to reveal a long scar running right across his chest and down across his belly. ‘I don’t think anyone could have survived the wound that put me here without magic.’

‘How did you come to be here?’ Ragnar asked.

‘There was a battle,’ said Kjel.

‘I think that goes without bloody saying,’ Sven sneered. Kjel shot him a disgusted look.

‘I was with a raiding party going down the great glacier. We were looking for sheep to carry off—’

‘Sheep!’ snorted Sven. ‘What were you going to do with them I wonder?’

‘In the valleys a man’s worth is measured by the size of his flocks.’

‘I’ll bloody well bet it is,’ Sven said, his voice all innuendo.

‘Anyway, we were ambushed by the Wolfsheads just as night fell. The battle was sharp and fierce. I must have killed or wounded about five of the Wolfsheads before one of them put his spear in me. I thought it was all over then but I looked up and I saw an old man looking down from the hillside just before the darkness took me. When I woke the same old man was there but I was in one of the flying ships on my way here. How about you, Sven – what feat of great heroism did you perform to be chosen?’

‘I killed eight men in single combat.’

‘Eight? At once?’

‘No. One after the bloody other. They were all brothers. They killed my uncle and refused to pay weregeld so I called them out at the Allthing Feast. The Wolf Priest watched while I killed them and then he told me I was chosen.’

‘You weren’t wounded? You didn’t... die?’

‘Eight men died. Eight grown men and warriors. They died, not me. There wasn’t a wound on me.’

‘Truly Sven, you must be a mighty warrior,’ Henk said.

‘Truly,’ Ragnar said dryly.

‘You don’t bloody well believe me?’ said Sven suddenly. The light of violence flickered in his eyes.

‘I never said that,’ Ragnar said. ‘After all, you’re here aren’t you?’

‘And don’t you bloody well forget it,’ said Sven.

‘What about you, Henk?’ Kjel asked. The youngling blushed and seemed embarrassed.

‘I fought with a troll,’ he said. ‘Killed it with my spear. It had killed my uncle and all his brothers and it was already wounded so it wasn’t that great a feat.’

‘The Wolf Priest must have thought so.’

‘He would most likely have killed it easily if I hadn’t.’

‘Why was he there?’ Sven asked.

‘I don’t know. Maybe our croft being on fire attracted his attention. Who can say?’

Ragnar looked at the youngling in astonishment. He had faced and killed the deadliest creature ever to walk the surface of Fenris after it had done for his family, and he talked about it as if it were nothing. Indeed he seemed embarrassed about taking the credit. Given their tales it seemed that all of his companions were worthy of respect. Even the Grimskull, perhaps.

There was a gust of wind and all eyes present turned to look at the open door. Sergeant Hakon entered, carrying the still unconscious form of Strybjorn. He stomped over to an empty pallet and dumped him unceremoniously on the straw.

‘Best get some sleep,’ Hakon said. ‘You’ll need all of your strength tomorrow.’

Without saying another word he walked around the room and snuffed the whale-oil lamps with his armoured fingers then he walked to the door again in the darkness, picking his way over recumbent bodies with no apparent difficulty. The door slammed shut behind him to announce his departure.

Silence fell over the long hall. Ragnar lay for a long time in the darkness wondering whether to take his knife and slit the Grimskull’s throat. In the end he decided against it. He wanted his foe to be conscious when he killed him.

‘That strange gurgling sound you can hear is my bloody stomach,’ Sven muttered. ‘By the balls of the Ice Bear, I’m bloody hungry.’



SEVEN HUNTING

Ragnar lashed out with his wooden baton, catching Strybjorn on the eye. It was deflected by his thick, beetling brow and bounced back. ‘The eye! My kill!’ he shouted, backing away. The circling of watching aspirants roared their approval. Ragnar risked a glance at Sergeant Hakon to see whether he would confirm the kill.

The Grimskull snarled and struck out with his own wooden rod. The curved point caught Ragnar just below the ribs and sent all the air from his lungs. It was thrust home with all the strength and weight of the Grimskull’s massive body behind it. This was knife practice and no blows were pulled. Hakon did not want them to get used to fighting against foes who did not strike as hard and fast as the real thing. The pain doubled Ragnar up and made him want to be sick. He felt barely able to stand. His senses reeled. All around him he could see the grinning, jeering faces of the other aspirants. They were arranged in a circle to watch the fight.

Strybjorn brought the baton cracking down on Ragnar’s skull. Stars flared in the Thunderfist youth’s field of vision. He let out a long grunt of pain and fell to his knees. He saw Strybjorn draw back his foot to kick him.

Suddenly cold, hard anger erupted from somewhere deep within Ragnar. He allowed himself to fall forward and at the last second wrapped his arms around the Grimskull’s legs. With a heave he toppled Strybjorn over. There was a loud crack as his foe’s head hit one of the rocks protruding from the soft turf. Ragnar allowed himself a triumphant snarl and crawled forward to straddle Strybjorn’s body. He took his own wooden baton and placed it across the Grimskull’s windpipe and pushed forward, fully intending to stop off the flow of air, and choke his foe to death. The crowd’s cheering filled his ears; obviously they did not understand his intention.

Suddenly a cold, armoured hand grasped Ragnar’s neck and lifted him off Strybjorn. Ragnar lashed out with the baton but it hit the hard carapace of Hakon’s armour and broke. The sergeant looked down at him.

‘Some unorthodox knife work there, by both of you. Still, at least you were fighting as if you meant it.’

He set Ragnar down on the ground and glanced over at Strybjorn. The Grimskull coughed, spluttered and glared over at Ragnar with eyes full of hatred. ‘I won,’ he gasped.

‘No, you didn’t,’ Hakon said. ‘Your last stroke would have disembowelled Ragnar, sure, but if he had been using a real knife instead of these curved bits of wood his last blow would have pierced your eye and gone into your brain.’

Ragnar allowed himself a grin of triumph. The cold clear mountain air tasted sweet with victory. He even managed to ignore the pain in his ribs. ‘I still would have killed him with my return,’ Strybjorn said sullenly.

‘Maybe you would have at that,’ Hakon said. ‘You’re fierce enough.’

He turned to the crowd and pointed at Kjel and one of the newcomers Ragnar did not recognise. ‘You two! Come on! We don’t have all day.’

Ragnar glared over at Strybjorn once more, knowing that he would have killed the Grimskull for sure, if Hakon had not intervened.

Ragnar felt his breath coming in gasps. The mountain air suddenly did not seem thick enough to sustain him. The early morning chill bit into his flesh. His heartbeat sounded loud in his ears. Sweat ran down his brow and stung his eyes. His long black hair was plastered to his forehead. His legs felt like jelly. The slope before him seemed endless.

‘Come on!’ Sergeant Hakon yelled. ‘You can do better than this. This is just one little hillock.’

Kjel came abreast of Ragnar and managed a sickly grin. ‘Easy for him to say. We’re not all half goat and half wolf,’ he panted.

‘Save your breath for running,’ Ragnar gasped out. ‘Remember, last one to the top has to do it all again.’

‘I’d better leave you behind then,’ Kjel said and loped ahead, his long stride covering the broken ground swiftly. Ragnar mustered the last of his strength and charged on, thinking that Kjel had been right. The sergeant had made it look easy. He had started after them, but even in his heavy armour had swiftly overtaken the lightly clad aspirants. He had reached the top of the hill while they were only half way up and now he stood there, looking utterly unwearied and bellowing at them. What was his secret, Ragnar wondered.

‘Come on! Run!’ shouted Hakon. Ragnar risked a glance over his shoulder. A long way below them, in the low valley, he could see Russvik. It looked tiny from this height. They had covered an enormous distance so far. Seeing the small figures of his fellows strung out behind, he was grateful to realise that at least he was not last. And he’d better make sure that he stayed that way.

On shaky legs he stumbled wearily on towards the brow of the hill.

‘Who among you can hunt?’ Sergeant Hakon asked. About half a dozen weary voices answered in the affirmative. They were all tired. For the past week it seemed they had done nothing but hard physical exercise. They had run up to the top of the hills overlooking the camp so often that Ragnar felt as if he could do it in his sleep. They had chopped wood. They had run up the hill carrying a log of the wood they had chopped. Those who had not been fast enough for Hakon’s liking were made to do it again and again until they collapsed with exhaustion.

They had done endless exercises which had contorted their bodies and pushed their physical endurance to the limits, leaving them gasping for breath on the cold ground as their muscles spasmed and convulsed. They had drilled with spear and dagger. They had been shown how to fight with the axes they used for chopping wood. They had thrown spears at straw men.

The bits that had involved fighting or practising to fight had been almost enjoyable, Ragnar thought, and he had excelled at them. He had always been chosen as the best in his group of five to face the best of the other Claws. It was something that seemed to rankle Strybjorn and Sven but there was nothing they could do about it. He had consistently bested them in practice. With weapons he was better than either. At wrestling they had repaid him for the knocks he had given them with the blunted weapons. Both of them were strong and quick and cruel.

Ragnar hoped that soon they would start practising with real edged weapons. Then there would be an accident and Strybjorn Grimskull would go to greet his ancestors knowing that Ragnar had sent him there.

‘Surely more of you than that know how to hunt?’ Hakon said with a sneer. The aspirants all looked at each other warily. They had learned not to make claims to the sergeant. It usually ended up with extra duties or a severe drubbing when their level of competence did not reach Hakon’s exalted expectations.

‘Well, if none of you know how to hunt, I suppose we will have to teach you. It’s the only way you’re ever going to see meat again.’

The little band of hunters moved in single file up the long rocky path. Ragnar turned and looked back the way they had come. The chill wind whipped his long black hair around his face. The clouds scurrying across the sky seemed somehow closer than ever. At least, though, they were white and intermittent, not dark and heavy with the threat of rain. He sniffed the air and caught the scent of pine. Strangest of all to him was the absence of the salty sea tang he had known all his life.

Far below them, Russvik was visible as a tiny collection of huts surrounded by its wooden parapet and the deep ditch. All around them massive peaks loomed skywards. He was breathing hard. They all were. His thighs felt like jelly from the prolonged effort of climbing the steep slope. His knees felt weak. His face was flushed. It was a relief to see that none of the others looked any better.

All that running up and down the nearer hills started to make sense now. Ragnar doubted that any of them could have made it to this height without rest if they had not been prepared for it by the training. It was exhilarating though. They had come further in the past day than it had been possible to walk without going into the sea on Ragnar’s home island, and they had barely seen a tiny fraction of this vast land. It seemed to go on forever. The pillars of the peaks seemed to support the dome of a sky that lay infinitely far above them. The clouds were greyish-white and pregnant with the threat of snow. Strange trees covered the hills. They had needles instead of leaves and cones of wood littered the ground beneath them. They had been taught that if those cones were open it was most likely going to rain. If they were closed the weather might stay fine. It was another part of the strange lore they had been taught in Russvik. Large birds nested in those trees. Sven had already suggested foraging up there for eggs but the others had wanted to push on, to find something bigger, a deer or a wild goat that they could take back and show off to the other Claws.

This was the first time Ragnar’s Claw had been dispatched to hunt. It was considered an honour to be trusted beyond sight of Russvik on their own, which in itself was galling, a cutting insult to the pride of the fierce young warriors. None had dared to complain to Sergeant Hakon that they were being treated like children. Now, they were confident of their new

found skills. They had spent many days being taught basic survival techniques. How to survive in the howling Asaheim blizzards. How to find their way by the stars alone. Ragnar had found the last quite easy, being used as he was to travelling at sea. Granted, the stars here in Asaheim were slightly different, but the constellations were the same. They had been taught how to light fires quickly and efficiently. How to make lean-tos from branches, to give them at least some shelter from the harsh elements. They had been shown the basics of tracking in the wilds. It was not all that difficult to master. They now knew to look for the places the beasts came to drink, and to keep their eyes open for tracks. They knew how to build snares for rabbits and hares and other small animals. Those who had never learned were taught how to gut an animal, strip off the pelt, slit the belly and let the entrails pour out. Once again Ragnar, who had been gutting fish all his life, found it easy.

Now, armed with their spears and shields and daggers, they had been sent out into the wilds. It was as simple as that. They were to go and they were not to come back until they had hunted fresh food to eat, or lost a warrior trying. It seemed that training to be a Wolf consisted of being thrown into the water, and then thrashing about until you learned to swim. To Ragnar, it seemed that the attitude of Hakon and the others back in Russvik was that there were plenty more initiates where they came from. It was Ragnar's duty to prove himself, and he realised that no one else would look after him now.

In fact, in some ways Ragnar was glad to be out from under the watching eye of Hakon. He was happy that the Claw had been sent out on its own. He knew that before this trip was over there was every chance that Strybjorn would have a fatal accident. Certainly he would if Ragnar had anything to do with it. He turned and looked back at the Grimskull and noticed without much surprise that Strybjorn was looking at him. Ragnar shivered a little meeting his enemy's burning gaze. It was all too possible that the Grimskull was thinking exactly the same about him. With a dull grunt, Ragnar realised that he was going to have to be careful out here in the wilderness. He could be the one who might fall from one of the cliff-side paths or find himself in the path of an avalanche if he did not watch out. Right now, though, he was in charge. Sergeant Hakon had decided that Ragnar was the one best suited to giving orders to the Claw. So far there

had been not problems from Kjel or Henk. Only Sven and Strybjorn had grumbled.

Pausing in his stride, Ragnar looked up at the sky. The red sun was starting to sink in the west. The sky there on the far horizon was the colour of blood, crimson light filtering through the cloud canopy to give the mountains a distinctly sinister look. It seemed to Ragnar all too possible that this place could be the haunt of trolls or other more hideous and savage beasts. Tales of a creature called the *wulfen* had been rife in the camp over the past few days. No one was exactly sure who had started telling the horror stories, but if there was any truth in the tales of dismemberment and grisly death, then the wulfen was a beast to be feared indeed. Ragnar suspected that the scaremongering was probably the work of Hakon.

This dread creature was said to be a monster, part man and part wolf, and wholly fierce. Near invulnerable to normal weapons, the tales claimed. The stories spoke of a wulfen-daemon which crept into Russvik and carried off aspirants. No one was sure whether this was the case or not, although everyone knew that a few days ago an aspirant called Loka had vanished while on sentry duty. No one was sure whether he had simply deserted his post. It was possible that he had been spirited away by trolls or evil sorcerers. But somehow, tales of the wulfen had gone around. Hakon and the other leaders had armed themselves and gone off, following a trail that seemingly only they with their heightened senses could discern. If they had found anything they had not said. Ragnar guessed from the set of their shoulders and the grim expressions on their faces when they returned that they had not found anything. Their hunt had been in vain.

Now, in the gathering gloom, with such tales crowding in on his tired mind, Ragnar tried not to think of what monsters might lie in wait for them in this mighty mountain range. A few miles back they had passed a cave. It could have provided them with shelter for the evening but as if by common consent the whole Claw had walked past it without saying a word. None of them wanted to encounter what might already be sheltered in the cave. Chances were that there would be nothing, but who knew? There might be a troll, a wizard, a bear or a wulfen. Not even Sven or Strybjorn seemed inclined to go and find out.

Ragnar was glad they had collected firewood earlier. Eventually, with dusk well advanced, he chose a likely site to make camp. Nearby, a small

stream tinkled down the slope, bringing them water. It ran down to the boulder-strewn shingle shore of a small lake at the far end of the clearing. The still, black waters looked as deep as the ocean, and Ragnar wondered whether it would yield fish for them to eat. For tonight, though, they would make do with what provisions they had, as night was drawing swiftly on. Ragnar ordered Kjel and Henk to begin to build the fire while Strybjorn and Sven collected branches to build a makeshift shelter for the night as they had been taught at Russvik. He himself wandered down to the stream and began to collect water. He wanted to take the opportunity to be apart from the others for a little while, and also simply to make time to study their surroundings.

Even in the gathering twilight, as he surveyed the wild hills, the rocky canyons and sweeping forests which stretched away for countless leagues in every direction, Ragnar felt certain that if it were not for the beasts and monsters that were said to haunt this savage land, a man could be happy here. He nodded silent approval at his own thoughts. Here, on the mountainside, there was space enough for a freeholding, there was water and there was wood. From what the others had said, such hills would make good grazing for sheep or goats. A man could raise a family here, live in peace. Perhaps even find a degree of contentment, an escape from hatred and strife. With that, Ragnar's thoughts returned to Ana, and he felt the now familiar sadness welling within his soul. Looking back up the slope at Strybjorn he felt sorrow turn to bitter hate. Ragnar was going to make the Grimskull pay. That was the one certainty in his life now.

Snarling, Ragnar plunged his waterskin into the stream angrily, almost as if it were the Grimskull's head, which he intended to keep beneath the surface until the flow of silvery bubbles stopped once and for all. As he forced the waterskin into the icy stream Ragnar gasped at the biting cold. The water was so chill it seemed to burn him to the bone. Within seconds his hands were numb. Forcing himself to endure the pain, Ragnar pulled the dripping sack up, and scowled at the distant peaks. This was meltwater, Ragnar realised, flowing from the snows of the mountains. It was colder by far than the stuff found in even the deepest wells of the islands.

Such thoughts abruptly reminded him that he was a long way from home. Not that he had a home to go back to.

Ragnar's harsh laughter echoed amongst the darkening shadows.

The fire was built. The shadows gathered around the lean-to. Strybjorn and Sven had put together a very serviceable shelter from the evergreen branches which they had ripped from the towering trees around the clearing. The cooking pot was filled with bubbling oatmeal, the only food they carried with them. Each had a sack of the stuff and some salt. It was not exactly appetising but it would be filling, once it had been ladled out into the wooden bowls which they carried in their packs.

Ragnar glanced around the fire, seeing the faces of his companions altered strangely by the flickering underlight. It changed the angles of their faces, made them seem subtly different. So did the setting. In the few days they had been in Russvik, Ragnar had become used to the camp. Even with its privations and hardships, it had somehow become the place he was used to associating with his new-found companions. Now they were somewhere else, yet another strange and different place and in some way, this changed them in his mind to different people. To strangers.

The full moon had emerged bright and welcoming. The wolf-face was visible on its surface, a great patch of shadow roughly the shape of a snarling wolf's head. It was said that Russ himself had put his pet wolf Greymane there to watch over his world until his return. As if in answer to the sight, somewhere in the distance came a terrifying howling, a sound of unsurpassable loneliness and hunger. All of the Claw looked at each other.

'It's only a wolf,' Kjel said with what was clearly meant to be an encouraging grin. It would have been a lot more convincing had the youth's face not seemed so pale in the moonlight. 'Russ knows I've heard enough of them. They used to worry our sheep something fierce in the valleys.'

'I'll bet that's not the only thing that worried your bloody sheep,' said Sven nastily.

'What do you mean by that?'

Before Sven could reply the wolf's howl was answered from the other side of the valley. The long wailing note echoed over the distance and drove thoughts of anything else from Ragnar's mind. It seemed to be the signal for a whole chorus of howls. From every peak, or so it seemed, huge wolves bayed at the moon.

'A pack is out hunting,' Kjel said.

'You don't say,' Strybjorn said.

'I would never had bloody guessed,' added Sven.

‘That’s enough,’ Ragnar said testily.

‘Don’t worry,’ Kjel said. ‘Wolves rarely attack armed men. They won’t usually come near a fire either. Unless they’re starving or desperate.’

‘I don’t know about them,’ Sven said, ‘but, by the Ice Bear’s blessed right buttock, I’m certainly bloody starving. If they come near me, I’ll skin and eat them!’

‘So what else is new?’ Ragnar said. All the same, he had to agree with Sven. ‘Henk, serve up the gruel.’

‘Surely,’ agreed the youngest aspirant, leaning forward and beginning to ladle the porridge into their outstretched bowls.

‘In Russ’s name, what I wouldn’t give for a nice bit of fish,’ said Sven.

‘Or chicken,’ said Strybjorn.

‘Or mutton,’ Kjel said.

The sound of the baying increased.

‘It seems like the wolves agree with you,’ Ragnar said. No one laughed.

It was late. The sound of the wolves had receded into the distance. Perhaps they had found other prey, Ragnar thought. Or perhaps they were merely silently and stealthily approaching. From the makeshift shelters on the far side of the fire came the sound of snoring. It was loud and wheezing, a combination of a blacksmith’s bellows and a hacksaw rasping on a log. It was almost enough to drive all thoughts of sleep from Ragnar’s mind.

Ragnar stared outward away from the fire, as Hakon had taught them. No sense in ruining your night vision when you were on watch. He clutched his spear firmly in his hands, wondering what he would do if the wolves or some vile monster of the dark attacked. There was a strange eerie quality to this mountain night quite unlike anything he had known back home.

Perhaps it was the sense of vastness and emptiness of the mountains which somehow suggested there was a place out here for anything no matter how inhuman or evil to hide. Back on the island, Ragnar had felt it was possible to know virtually everything about the rocky outcrop his tribe had lived and died on. As boys, when they had gone camping, they were never far from the village, and had inevitably roamed across land which they had seen or played on a hundred times before. Here among the

mountains, Ragnar felt that a man might wander for a hundred lifetimes and still not see everything. It was a frightening and inspiring thought.

Ragnar wondered, though, at how quickly he had adapted. Despite the strange and alien nature of the place, he recognised that he had swiftly become used to living in Russvik, to the faces of his new companions, to the life of training and harsh discipline. There were times now when his life on the islands already seemed like a dream, and all the people he had once known little more than phantoms. Had he really once strode the decks of the *Spear of Russ* during a storm? Had he once hauled nets full of fish from the sea? Had he watched orca harpooned and sea dragons slaughtered?

Intellectually he knew he had. In his heart, though, it was sometimes hard to feel it as real anymore. What was he doing here sitting on a mountainside in the dark, gazing into the gloom? He had no proper idea. He had no real notion why he had been chosen either. He had simply lived while others had died or been carried away into slavery.

That thought brought raw emotions screaming to his mind once more. He suddenly remembered the dead and the dying and the girl that might have been Ana being carried off by the Grimskull fleet. The knowledge that one of those responsible was lying snoring not twenty strides away made him want to shout with rage or take his spear and plunge it into Strybjorn's belly. He could almost picture doing it, almost feel the glow of satisfaction he would get as he bore down with all his weight on the worn shaft and drove the bright point of hardened steel home in soft and yielding flesh. Ragnar's lips curled into a snarl, and he was so tempted to get up and do it there and then – when he heard the soft padding of feet coming towards him. Instinctively he brought his spear up into the ready position, but a glance told him that the approaching shadow was only Kjel.

Kjel squatted down beside him. 'May as well end your watch,' he said. 'I can't get any sleep right now anyway with that pair snoring like thunder.'

'You sure?' Ragnar asked. 'You're not too tired?'

'Maybe if I get tired enough I'll be able to sleep later.'

Ragnar nodded but did not move. He was not tired himself and he felt like talking. He felt certain that unless they shouted neither he nor Kjel would wake the sleepers.

'This is a strange place,' he said eventually.

‘This valley or these mountains?’

‘This land. I have never seen anything quite like it. Any one of these mountains seems larger than the island on which I grew up.’

‘They probably are, in a way. Or they might well be the same size at least.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ve heard it said that the islands were once mountains that have been swallowed by the sea so that only their tips now stand above the waters.’

‘That is a strange story.’

‘It is part of an old legend. It is said that in the days before the coming of Russ there were many more lands, each as large as Asaheim, but then the Flood came and it rained for a hundred years and all the lands save Asaheim were drowned. It’s said that sea daemons live among the ruins of drowned cities, each as large as an island.’

‘Do you believe that, Kjel?’

‘Why not? It may be true. On the other hand it may not. My people are not great seafarers. They live among the valleys beneath the great glaciers and spend their days making war and hunting.’

‘I have heard the only time the people of the glacier take a ship out of sight of land is to visit the islands of the Iron Masters.’

‘That is more or less true. Why would anyone want to sail out of sight of land anyway? The sea daemons would surely take them.’

‘I have also heard that the people of the glacier are well... cannibals.’

Kjel laughed. ‘Really? I had always heard it was the islanders that ate each other. Not enough food on those small islands.’

‘There’s always fish and orca meat,’ Ragnar spat. He was angry at being accused of cannibalism. On the other hand, he had more or less accused Kjel of the same thing so what right had he to be offended? In the darkness, he grinned at the irony of their legends. At their ignorance.

‘You were right about this valley though,’ Kjel said. ‘There is a bad feeling about it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. Something about it makes my flesh crawl. It’s like there’s something out there, watching us.’

‘Wolves?’

‘Maybe. Maybe trolls or nightgangers.’

Ragnar shivered. ‘Have you ever seen nightgangers?’

‘No, but I knew a man once who had. Twisted evil things they were, with glowing skin. They dwell in the old places beneath the earth, so it is said, and emerge to feast on human flesh. It is also said that they worship the dark ones of Chaos.’

‘I’ve never heard of such things. We should not talk of them.’ Ragnar made a protective gesture of warding against evil.

‘You live on the islands. The sea is clean of such filth.’

Ragnar nodded. Despite the shiver of fear Kjel’s words had caused he stretched and yawned. He was suddenly tired.

He cast himself down by the fire and fell into a haunted sleep. He dreamed of many strange and terrible things. He dreamed of the blind worms that swarmed on the ocean’s bottom and gnawed at the roots of islands. He dreamed of twisted nightgangers, and monstrous wolves. He dreamed of a huge beast in the shape of a man but with the head of a wolf. The mere sight of it in his dream snapped him to consciousness and he sat up suddenly, glaring around with haunted eyes and a hammering heart.

Suddenly fear twisted his gut, for it seemed to him that there, just outside the firelight stood the creature of which he had just been dreaming. He shook his head to clear it, hoping that what he was looking at was just some simple after-image from his dream but it was not. It still stood out there, in the dark, and it was as real as Ragnar himself.

Ragnar froze for a moment and studied it. No. It was not exactly like the thing in his dream. It did not have the wolf-like head. Instead he could see that its body was monstrous and misshapen. Huge horned spikes protruded from its flesh, and added a jagged, spiky quality to the silhouette. Its head was massive, with a huge jaw and enormous protruding bat-like ears. Its eyes glowed with an eerie greenish light. Slowly it dawned on Ragnar that he was probably looking at a troll. A creature of the most evil and horrifying tales. And most likely a hungry troll, for it was slowly advancing towards the firelight.

Where was Kjel, Ragnar wondered, or whoever in Russ’s name was supposed to be on guard? Not that it mattered much anyway. He was going to have to do something himself. Stealthily he reached out for his spear and shield, praying softly to Russ that the troll did not notice his movements.

He let out a slow sigh of relief once he had his weapons nestled within his fist, and rose quietly into a fighting crouch. In the firelight, he could

see that the others still slept. Strybjorn and Sven snored loudly. Kjel lay by the fire. Henk sat facing out into the darkness, but the way his head lay down against his chest told Ragnar that the boy was asleep.

He realised that it was going to be up to him to distract the creature while his companions made ready. And he realised that he was going to have to do it soon. But hold, part of his mind whispered, perhaps if he waited the creature might take Strybjorn and work his vengeance for him. Ragnar's lips twisted in a sick grin. This was a good thought, part of his mind whispered to him.

No, he told himself. That was not the way to do this. He wanted to kill his foe himself, not slay the Grimskull scum by an act of treachery. And, anyway, there was no guarantee that the troll would take Strybjorn. It might take one of the others, and he had to admit that they were fast becoming his friends.

The monster was almost at the fire, and Ragnar knew that the time for action had come. 'Awake!' he bellowed. 'Awake! A troll is upon us!'

As he shouted he sprang to his feet, and launched himself forward in the direction of the troll. At close range, by the light of the fire he could see it better. He could make out the scaly, leathery lizard-like skin and the slime that dripped from it, glistening in the moonlight. The creature gave the impression of having recently been wet, as if it had just come from the nearby lake.

Ragnar closed the range quickly. The thing was even bigger and more terrifying close up. It was nearly twice as tall as Ragnar and much, much heavier. Its chest was as muscled as that of the biggest bear, and its webbed fingered hands were almost as large as his shield. Each finger ended in a dagger-sized talon. It opened its mouth and let out an ear-piercing bellow. Ragnar could see that its mouth was lined with row upon row of huge sharp teeth. He lashed out with his spear, hoping to pierce one of the large, bowl-like eyes, but the creature turned its head and Ragnar's blade merely grazed its cheek. To Ragnar's horror, even as he watched, the leathery skin began to knit itself back together with a hideous sucking sound. This does not look good, he thought.

The troll struck back at him. Ragnar ducked beneath a blow that would have torn his head off had it connected and stabbed forward at the thing's groin. He was rewarded with an eerie high-pitched screech that almost deafened him. The thing retaliated with another powerful blow. Ragnar

raised his shield, angling it in an effort to deflect at least part of the impact. He guessed he was successful but still the force of the blow sent him tumbling backwards. He landed beside the fire and smelled the stink of burning hair as part of his black mane caught alight. The impact of the blow left him feeling dazed and weak but he pulled himself upright and glanced around to see what the others were doing.

All of them were awake now and had grabbed their weapons and shields. Even as Ragnar watched, Kjel drew back his spear and cast it. It flew straight and true, directly into one of the creature's huge eyes. Ragnar's heart leapt. That was a killing cast, if ever he had seen one. He waited for the troll to keel over and die, but it did no such thing. Instead, it reached up and grabbed the spear. Its clumsy attempt to pull the thing clear merely broke the shaft and left the blade embedded in its eyeball. Now it hissed in anger, like a giant serpent. The sound was petrifying.

Strybjorn and Sven leapt forward, spears stabbing. The keen iron blades bit into the troll's leathery hide. Greenish blood flowed forth for a moment but yet again the wounds began to heal unnaturally quickly. The troll reached forward and grabbed Sven with its massive hand. Ragnar could see blood flowing from where the talons had pierced Sven's flesh but Sven showed no sign of pain.

'Take this, you hell-spawned troll dog!' he shouted and brought his spear round and down into the tendons of the troll's hand. It bellowed in pain and dropped him. For a brief, terrible moment Ragnar feared that Sven was about to be trampled beneath the monster's huge feet but he managed to roll to one side. Strybjorn meanwhile had sprung forward and took the thing clean in the chest. His spear passed upwards under its ribs and buried itself deep in the chest cavity where a man's heart would have been. Other than screaming yet louder the troll gave no sign of toppling over. Could nothing stop this thing, Ragnar wondered? He began to know fear.

Then he noticed something else. Strange fumes were wafting out from the area of the creature's pierced stomach and the shaft of Strybjorn's spear had started to melt away. Of course, Ragnar remembered, in all the tales the digestive juices of trolls were supposed to be so acidic that they could eat through solid stone. Things were going from bad to worse. With a back-handed swipe, the monstrous beast sent Strybjorn tumbling through the air to crash to the ground almost ten strides away. That had to hurt, he

thought. Under normal circumstances he would have been exultant over the Grimskull's possible demise but he realised that here and now they needed every single warrior. So far they had not even succeeded in slowing the monster down.

'We need to use fire!' Henk shouted.

'What?'

'We need to use fire. That's how I killed the troll last time. I managed to lure it into the blazing croft. Its wounds won't close if they are caused by fire.'

Slowly Henk's words pierced Ragnar's brain. That made sense. Fire was mankind's best defence against many of the horrors of the dark and he had often heard old Imogrim's tale of how the men of Jarl Kraki had driven off one of the monsters with flaming torches and arrows. He reached down and grabbed a brand from the fire, swinging it around his head to fan the flames. As the brand blazed up Ragnar returned to the fray, with Henk right by his side. Henk too bore a firebrand.

The troll was stooped down now, reaching for the recumbent Sven who, scrabbling desperately for a foothold in the stony soil, just kept the hideous monster at bay by jabbing frenziedly at its one remaining good eye with his spear. Ragnar raced up and waved the brand in the troll's face. It turned towards him with an almighty roar. Ragnar couldn't help but notice as its stagnant breath washed over him that it smelled like rotting fish. The stench made him gag. He lashed out with his firebrand and contacted flesh. It sizzled and burned and blackened but did not heal. Praise be to Russ, thought Ragnar, Henk had been right.

A blur of fire from the corner of his eye told Ragnar that Kjel had joined the fray. He could see the Falconer wielded a blazing bit of wood in each hand. Wherever he touched trollflesh, the thing burned and did not heal. The troll had turned now like a beast at bay. The brands confused it, and it was not helped by the blindness of one eye. Henk gave a shout of triumph and leapt forward to smite the monster across the face, leaving a great black weal.

'Take this, beast,' he cried and laughed victoriously. The troll's answering bellow drowned out his voice. It reached down and picked Henk up. Its talons bit into his flesh, severing the arm that held the torch. It pushed the boy's head into its enormous cavern-like mouth and then bit

down. Blood gouted and Henk's scream ended as his head was severed and swallowed whole.

Ragnar stood for a moment amazed with shock. He could not quite believe that Henk was dead. One moment the youth had been there, alive and fighting. Now he was gone. Death had reached out and decapitated him. The terrible realisation filled Ragnar that the same thing could easily happen to him, that the troll, though wounded, was still a creature of vast power, and might quickly slay them all. It was obvious that the same thought had occurred to every other member of the Claw for they stood frozen, uncertain of what to do. The urge to turn and flee filled Ragnar but he knew that if he did so, the others would run as well, and that Henk's death would go unavenged. Worse yet, it was quite possible that the troll would overtake them and kill them as they fled. In a second of decision, Ragnar realised that, scared though he was, he was not going to run.

'Come on, you dogs!' he roared. 'Best die with your wounds to the fore, if you're going to die at all.'

The others responded to his cry. Sven clambered to his feet and began to stab the troll. Kjel closed in with his torch while Ragnar came on from the other side. Strybjorn had risen to his feet, and he too had acquired a firebrand. Surrounded on all sides by the hated flames, dazed and dazzled and in pain from its wounded eye, the troll turned at bay and fled, following the stream, still clutching Henk's headless corpse in its huge paw. Blood splashed into the icy waters, black in the stark moonlight.

Ragnar and the others followed it over the broken ground, brands blazing brighter as the air whipped past. It was a swift but vain pursuit. For all its vast size and lumbering appearance the troll's stride was much longer than theirs. It reached the waters of the lake and plunged in, leaving a trail of foam in its wake. Ragnar and the others halted at the water's edge and watched as it waded slowly out into the deep. At last its head vanished beneath the surface and it was gone.

'Do you think it drowned?' Strybjorn asked.

'No.' Kjel replied. 'Trolls can live beneath the water. Its lair is probably down there.'

'Can we swim out and kill it?' Sven asked.

'How?' Ragnar said. 'Torches won't burn underwater.'

'But it's got bloody Henk,' Sven replied.

'Henk is *dead*. And there's nothing we can do here now.'

Still they stood by the water's edge and watched until the sun came up. The troll did not reappear.

'What now?' asked Kjel.

'We go back to Russvik and recount what happened,' said Ragnar. He was not looking forward to that. After all, he was the leader of the Claw and Henk had been his responsibility.

All of them exchanged looks. Ragnar felt as if they should be accusing him but he saw nothing but sympathy in all of their eyes, even Strybjorn's. It was as if fighting on the same side in the battle with the troll had created some sort of bond between them. Ragnar pushed the thought aside. There would be a truce until they got back to the camp. Every warrior would be needed until then, for who knew what other horrors might emerge from the surrounding hills? Once they got back, though, it would be every man for himself, Ragnar decided. Particularly where Strybjorn was concerned. The Grimskull could keep his sympathy, Ragnar thought.

'You are certain that is what happened?' Hakon asked. Ragnar nodded. The sergeant looked at him appraisingly.

He made Ragnar repeat his description of the incident all but word for word, then was silent for a long moment. Ragnar stared off over the sergeant's shoulder, remembering the march back to Russvik. It had not been a pleasant one. All the time he had wondered about the fate of Henk. He had been filled with the uncomfortable thought that his friend's doom might so easily have been his own. Henk had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time. With chill certainty, Ragnar knew that he could just as easily have been the one taken.

A glance at the scared and weary faces of his companions told him that the same thought had occurred to them all.

During the long march back to the camp, exhausted, they had all started at the distant howling of the wolves. Jumping at shadows, they had expected to fight and die then, but nothing had happened. Nothing except that the eerie wailing of the beasts seemed to shiver its way into their very bones and echo there like a grating voice of doom. Ragnar was sure it would echo through his dreams from this night forth, and that he would see there the troll and the wolves and the dead Henk all inextricably linked. He himself felt responsible for the lad's death and had said as much to Hakon when the sergeant had begun his interrogation. Hakon had merely looked impassive, neither approving nor disapproving, and let him

continue to talk. Ragnar was conscious of the weight of his own failure and there were times when it seemed to him that he could see Henk's fresh young face looking at him accusingly. It was almost as bad as the sensation he had felt after the destruction of his village. He wondered how this could be – after all, he had barely known Henk, while he had known his clan all his life. Part of him suspected that he already knew the answer though. Among the Thunderfists he had been a follower, expected only to fight and die for his people. With his Claw, out alone in the wilds of Fenris, he had been a leader. He was responsible for the fate of the Wolfclaw he led. Perhaps that was what it was like being a jarl or a ship's captain. He was not sure he entirely enjoyed the situation, and for the first time in his life Ragnar began to get the inkling that rank and glory might not be entirely an unalloyed benefit.

‘What are you going to do now?’ Ragnar asked. ‘Hunt the troll down?’

‘Why would we do that?’

‘Because it killed one of our people.’

‘If one of our people was weak enough to allow himself to be killed it has done us a favour.’

‘I don't think that is so.’

‘No one asked for your opinion.’

‘Are we finished here?’ Ragnar asked in disgust. Hakon nodded. Suddenly feeling empty and drained, Ragnar rose from the chair and turned to go.

‘Ragnar!’

He turned to glare at the sergeant and was surprised to see something like sympathy written on Hakon's stern features.

‘Yes, sergeant?’

‘It's never easy to lose a man. Believe me, I know.’

Ragnar nodded and left the hall.



EIGHT TRIALS

‘More tracks,’ Ragnar said, shaking his head. He looked around the bleak landscape for any signs of ambushers. The woods about them seemed empty. The pine trees sloped away below. Crags blocked the way to the right. There was plenty of cover but nothing stirred. He felt no sense of impending danger. He wiped the sweat from his forehead, and tugged his hair from his eyes. The great stag had led them a merry chase, and they were a long way from the path that led back to Russvik.

‘That’s the fifth set this week,’ Kjel said. He grinned. ‘Maybe we’re being scouted out.’

‘Maybe,’ Ragnar said. He looked down at the steaming corpse of the dead deer. Strybjorn had finished gutting it while Ragnar and Kjel inspected these new tracks. ‘Try and be a bit more careful with the knife, Grimskull,’ he added.

Strybjorn glared back at him. ‘If you think you could do better, last of the Thunderfists, why don’t you draw your dagger and come over here? Maybe I’ll show you how to gut something more than a deer.’

Ragnar’s hand went to the hilt of his dagger. Hot hatred filled him. Kjel, seeing what was happening, was between them automatically. Sven looked on, waiting to see what would happen.

‘That’s enough, both of you,’ Kjel said. ‘There’s few enough of us now that Henk’s gone. We don’t need to lose another man. Not if there are others about and we have to fight our way back. And Strybjorn, remember, Hakon put Ragnar in charge.’

‘Aye and much good it’s done us,’ muttered the Grimskull dangerously. Ragnar began to move forward but Kjel pushed him back. He noticed the imperceptible shake of the Falconer’s head. Slowly his anger receded. Kjel’s words were as much a reminder for him as for Strybjorn. It would not do for another of his warriors to be lost while he was leader, particularly not if he killed him. He found the thought almost funny, and the tension drained out of him. He contented himself with grinning maniacally at the Grimskull.

Sven and Strybjorn were already tying the corpse to the pole on which they would carry it back to Russvik. Ragnar did not find the sight of the red dripping meat as disturbing as he once had. He was used to it now, having hunted and gutted dozens of the magnificent creatures. Anyway, a dead stag was hardly the problem. The problem was these tracks.

Who did they belong to? Where were they coming from? They certainly appeared to be the tracks of something at least man-like, but having never seen the tracks of the wulfen or even nightgangers, Ragnar was prepared to be cautious. He could try and follow the tracks, and perhaps wander into an ambush. Most likely following the tracks would be a useless exercise. The fresh winter snows which drifted in blizzards on the higher ground would cover them before they got anywhere near the source and their prey would vanish like a wulfen in the night. Maybe very like a wulfen, Ragnar thought.

It seemed as if the rumours and legends about Asaheim were wrong though. Banishing thoughts of evil creatures tracking them for a moment, Ragnar could see that tracks were tracks, and that people of one sort or another probably did live here. These tracks did not belong to any of the aspirants at Russvik, that much was plain. There must be some other folk among the mountains. Ragnar felt that he did not need to ask himself whether they would be hostile or not. On the surface of Fenris it seemed as though the natural state of affairs was that all people were rivals and enemies. Thus had it always been. Thus would it always be. Russ had ordained it so long ago in order to keep his people strong.

That the track-makers would be warriors, Ragnar did not doubt. He doubted that they would be a match for the aspirants in strength of arms. Numbers though might be something else. He had learned enough tracking skills in the past few months to be able to take a good guess at how many had been in the group that passed near here: at least a dozen. The question now was whether the tracks which the others from Russvik had found belonged to this same dozen, or to another group of strangers. Ragnar resolved that he would report the matter to Hakon when he returned. There did not seem very much else he could do right now.

Ragnar trudged down the slope towards Russvik. Down below he could see the lights of the lanterns glittering in the long halls. He could see the flicker of sparks emerging from the chimney holes in the roof of the great hall where it bulked massive in the gloom. Unfamiliar stars filled the sky.

The hooting of night birds filled the air. He could smell wood smoke and the loamy smells of the oncoming night. As always it seemed to him that as the light failed his other senses grew stronger to compensate. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled.

He turned to look back over his shoulders to make sure that Sven and Strybjorn were still there. He could make out their shadowy outlines in the gloom, the dead deer still carried between them. Looking ahead he could see Kjel loping along in the dark, scouting the way. He was going to lose no more warriors from his Claw if he could help it. Not that it seemed all that likely now. In the months that had passed since Henk's death, his companions had grown nothing but harder and tougher. The regime of constant training and exercise had filled them out, made them stronger and fitter and faster than any islander lads Ragnar had ever known. He himself felt twice as fit as he had when he came here and maybe ten times as competent.

He sighed reflectively. He had learned so much in the intervening months it staggered him. He could identify all the edible flora and fauna in the surrounding hills. He knew how to build shelters and fires. He could even make small igloos from the winter snows in which to huddle, protected from the ice-storms which would otherwise surely freeze the skin from his bones. He knew how to treat wounds and frostbite. He had learned to fight with his hands and was as proficient now in unarmed combat as Sven or Strybjorn. He had always been good with a spear or harpoon but now he doubted there was any man in his old village who could have matched his present skill, not even the master harpooners.

It had not been easy. Half of the aspirants were dead now. Of the two score from the time of his arrival only about twenty were still alive. Some had fallen from the cliffs on which they practised climbing. Some had vanished while out hunting, taken by wulfen or trolls or by the wolves. Two had been killed during weapons practice with the axe or spears. One had been executed by Sergeant Hakon for some unmentionable crime.

Of course, new recruits had arrived, fresh-faced and full of wonder and fear. Ragnar wondered at his own feelings of superiority to these newcomers. The few months since his choosing might as well have been a lifetime. There seemed to be a gulf of age between him and the newcomers greater than that which had existed between Wolfbrother and gnarled ancient back in his home village. He wondered where those who had been

here when he arrived had gone. Many of them had vanished, carried away to some unknown destination by skyship. Only Sergeant Hakon knew where they went exactly, and no one had ever dared ask him.

During this time, Ragnar had somehow mostly managed to hold his hatred of Strybjorn in abeyance. It had not vanished, it was simply waiting for an opportune killing time. And in a strange way, while Strybjorn yet lived, and Ragnar's hatred burned cold within him, he had a tenuous link to his old life on the island. Ragnar did not want Strybjorn to die while part of his Claw. He was prepared to spare him now until he was no longer part of Ragnar's responsibilities.

'Let's hurry it up,' he said. 'There are hungry mouths to feed back in Russvik.'

'Try not to eat it all before we get there, Sven,' shouted Kjel. Ragnar had noticed that along the way Sven had been stuffing portions of raw meat into his mouth and chewing them as he worked.

'Yes, you've had enough already,' Ragnar said.

'Bloody have not,' retorted Sven and belched loudly.

The aspirants laughed aloud, spirits lifted, before continuing down the hill towards the flickering lamplight of Russvik.

'I'm telling you, there were more than a hundred of them,' Nils said. He was a smallish youth but quick-witted, the leader of another of the aspirant Claws that had been formed on the day of Ragnar's arrival. So far he had lost two of his people although it seemed to be through no fault of his own. Just bad luck really. Ragnar looked at him with interest, as did all the others eating their venison and turnip stew in the long hall. This was the first definite sighting of a large body of newcomers anyone had made.

'Where did you see them?' Strybjorn asked.

'Coming over the Axehead Pass. We were up the valley from them, looking down out of the trees. Been trailing a big buck and his two does for a couple of hours when we saw them. Thought we'd better come back and tell Sergeant Hakon.'

'A hundred or so,' said Kjel. 'That's a lot.'

Ragnar knew they were all thinking along the same lines as himself. With the new intake of aspirants there were at most forty warriors in Russvik, not counting Hakon or any of the armoured visitors. Those were not good odds if it came to a fight. On the other hand, there were always the magic weapons the sergeant and his kind carried. A hundred or a

thousand, it would not matter against the sorcery that could tear a full-grown sea dragon to pieces.

‘What did the sergeant say?’ Hakon asked.

‘He just laughed and told us not to worry. It was just the winter migration of the Outlanders. He said they would give us no trouble if we left them alone. Not unless they were very hungry, anyway.’

Ragnar considered this information. A winter migration made it sound like this group was part of a much larger movement of people. Once again, he felt his own ignorance about the land in which the skyship had set him down. He wished he knew more. He wished someone would give him the chance to find out more.

One thing was becoming increasingly obvious, however. The newcomers were killing a good deal of game as they passed through the area. The deer that Ragnar’s Claw had brought in was the first meat any of the aspirant groups had managed to catch in some time. It might well be the last with winter descending. And that was not the worst of it. The food stores in the halls were slowly becoming exhausted. There were still sacks of grain left, and some stringy vegetables, but not much else. Ragnar wondered how much longer they would last and when their supplies would possibly be replenished. He also wondered what it was that Sergeant Hakon and the other Wolves ate. He had never seen them share the aspirants’ food. Come to think of it, he had never even seen them eating. There was something supernatural about that.

He shrugged and pushed the thought aside. Of course it was always possible that the sergeant ate where no one could see him. Maybe he had a secret cache of foodstuffs on which he gorged himself. That thought too seemed ridiculous. Sergeant Hakon was not the sort to do anything in secret. Why would he need to? He was the absolute lord and master of this camp.

Still, Ragnar was worried. Winter was deepening. Food was getting scarce. More aspirants had joined them. It was a recipe for disaster.

‘Kill him! Kill the swine!’ the crowd of hungry aspirants cried. The fight in the long hall erupted swiftly, toppling the wooden tables, spilling steaming bowls of gruel. Kjel had accidentally bumped into Mika and Vol, two of Nil’s Claw, in the line for gruel. A bowl had been spilled, splattering the lads with food. Tempers frayed by weeks of hunger, harsh training and abuse from Sergeant Hakon flared. In moments the two

swarmed over Kjel. Mika held him pinned to the table while Vol kicked and punched.

Ragnar cursed. Both Mika and Vol were big and burly and both were very good wrestlers. Neither Sven nor Strybjorn were here yet. There was nothing else to do. If no one else interfered it looked as if Nil's two clawbrothers would happily beat Kjel to death. No one else looked like they wanted to interfere. They were all too busy cheering the attackers on.

Ragnar raced forward. He sprang onto a bench, sprinted across a table and leapt. The weight of his body and the momentum of his jump carried him into the fray. He grabbed Mika and Vol by the necks with his arms and bore them to the ground. Mika's head smacked the hard-packed earth of the hall floor. Ragnar rolled free and sprang to his feet, twisting as he did so to face Vol. With amazing speed the aspirant was already rising to his feet. Ragnar lashed out and caught him just under the jaw with his foot. He kept his toes curled up as he had been taught so that it was the ball of his foot that connected. The force of the kick sent Vol's head snapping backward and he tumbled back onto another table, spilling food and gruel everywhere.

'You can't do that and expect to stay standing!' said a burly newcomer who Ragnar didn't recognise, as he vaulted over the table to attack him.

'Can't I, stripling?' Ragnar growled, dropping him with a punch below the chin. The newcomer's friends obviously didn't like this and moved to the attack. Grinning fiercely as he looked around for a new foe, Ragnar felt a cold draught of air hit his back. The long hall door had opened, and Ragnar heard Sven and Strybjorn's howls of joy at the developing brawl. Two heavy bodies ploughing into his attackers told Ragnar of their arrival.

It was as if a signal had been given for a general melee to begin. Tempers frayed to breaking point snapped. For no good reason bowls of gruel started flying everywhere. Benches were broken as some of the aspirants improvised weapons from the wood. Comrade lashed out at comrade, friend against friend in the madness. It became every man for himself.

Ragnar stepped back and bumped into someone. He whirled fist ready to strike and saw that it was Kjel. The Falconer looked just as ready to hit him but seeing who it was shrugged and smirked.

'Duck,' he suddenly shouted. Ragnar only just had time to throw himself flat as a chunk of broken bench flew above his head. Not even

bothering to look round, he lashed out with his foot and was rewarded with a high pitched shriek as it impacted on his assailant's groin. He rolled to one side to avoid someone's flashing boot and found himself lying below a table, temporarily out of the whirlwind of the brawl.

It was madness out there. Roars and screams and shrieks of pain filled the air. Blood splattered on the floor. The aspirants fought each other with a fury that would have terrified any enemy. And in some strange way they seemed to be enjoying themselves. Fighting and brawling had always been part of the culture of Fenris, and it seemed to be doing the lads good to be able to vent their frustrations in this way. Ragnar felt the tug of excitement himself and sprang out back into the fray, just in time to take a punch in the face from Nils.

The force of the blow sent stars flying before Ragnar's eyes. He gave a grin of savage joy that froze Nils on the spot, before Ragnar dropped the man with a flurry of blows to the head, then bounding forward into the melee, laughing like a maniac.

'Enough!' bellowed a voice like thunder. Instantly the violence ceased. Ragnar froze as if pinned to the spot. Sergeant Hakon hove into view. The grin on his face was not a pleasant sight to see.

'So,' he said, 'you've nothing better to do with your time than brawl, eh? And you like the food so little that you use it for a weapon. I'm not surprised. Asa cooks the porridge so lumpy you could use it for slingstones. Still, it's a waste.'

'Who started this fight?'

No one answered. The sergeant stared around the room. His gaze met Ragnar's. He forced himself to meet Hakon's eye. 'Nobody, eh? Well I guess that means you can all do two runs up the hill to work the aggression out of you before you sleep. That's after you muck out this sty.'

Loud groans echoed round the room. Nobody was happy with the thought of trudging through the dark and the snow before rest. Kjel strode forward.

'It was me, sergeant,' he said. 'I did it.'

'How, boy?'

'Well...'

Mika spoke up. 'He bumped into me, sergeant, but I threw the first punch.'

'Then what?'

‘Then I joined in,’ Ragnar said. He said nothing about Mika and Vol ganging up on Kjel. That was not something for the sergeant to punish. It was something that had already been settled in blows.

‘You did, did you?’

‘Then I joined in,’ Nils said.

‘And so did I,’ another voice shouted. Suddenly there was a roar around the hall as all of the aspirants claimed their share of the blame. You’d think the idiots were claiming credit for killing trolls, thought Ragnar, but he felt strangely proud of them all just the same.

‘Well then, you all deserve the run, don’t you?’ Hakon said.

‘Aye!’ they shouted back.

‘Well, best get started then,’ he said. ‘Except Kjel, Ragnar, Mika and Nils. They can tidy up here first.’

With that Hakon turned on his heel and strode out of the room. The aspirants followed him out into the snow. The remaining four looked at each other.

‘Best get the buckets,’ Nils said sheepishly, as if expecting Ragnar to hit him again. Ragnar nodded. Kjel glanced over at him and grinned.

‘Thanks, Ragnar, for coming to help me,’ he said.

‘Think nothing of it,’ Ragnar said. ‘You’d do the same for me.’

‘Aye, I would.’ They clasped hands and shook vigorously.

‘Thanks for the black eye, Ragnar,’ Nils said. ‘But not much.’

‘Oh well,’ Mika said, grinning. ‘Was the best fight I’ve had in ages. We must do it again sometime.’

With that they started to work.

Ragnar’s fingers were bleeding, which was dangerous. He had no doubt of that fact since he was hanging from a frozen ledge almost a hundred strides above the ground. He had wrapped them in deer hide against the cold before he began the climb but the tough fabric had frayed as he had ascended the rock face, and now the sharp stone dug into his fingers.

The wind plucked at his tunic and the deerskin overcoat he had made for himself. It pushed his long black hair into his eyes at the same time as it made them water. His heart pounded. Cold sweat felt as if it were freezing on his face. He tried to tell himself not to be frightened, that there was nothing to worry about, that he had survived worse things. Under the circumstances, with the abyss below his heels and the storm winds clawing his body, this did not seem all that convincing. Aspirants had died on this

rock face. Only yesterday Vol had plunged to his doom. Ragnar did not want to think about the way he had lain there for long minutes, his back broken, his innards mush, his blood reddening the snow as his life drained away. In mere seconds that same fate could be his.

Ragnar tried to shift his grip, but his fingers could find nothing to grip on the smooth, icy cold stone. Frantically he sought for purchase with his feet but the frozen rock resisted him. He was beginning to slip to his death. In his mind's eye he was already picturing the fall. He could almost feel the short plummet through space, the triumphant wind whistling in his ears, the agonising blaze of pain as the cold earth embraced his body and then the long darkness of death. Part of him almost welcomed it.

After the torture of the past few weeks, it would be almost a relief. Since the brawl things had got worse. Food had become even scarcer and the training had intensified. There had been more brawls and beatings. One of the new aspirants had been found kicked to death outside the long hall and no one had come forward to take the blame this time. Sergeant Hakon had not even investigated very hard. He said that the truth would out eventually and the guilty could not hide forever. Ragnar had not found the thought particularly reassuring. He wished that he shared the sergeant's confidence. Others had simply been unable to take the strain any more and had walked out into the snow. Their frozen bodies had been found near the camp. Sven had jokingly suggested that they might prove to be a source of fresh meat. At least Ragnar hoped he was joking.

He shook his head. What was he thinking about? As always in moments of extreme danger his mind seemed to be working at incredible speed but he was simply using it to daydream and recall the past. He needed to save himself and he needed to do it now, before his fingers skidded right off the ledge and he fell to his doom.

He frantically lifted one hand off the ledge and felt himself begin to tumble backwards. He twisted, throwing his weight forward, stretching out his free hand for purchase on the cold stone. His frozen fingers refused to respond but he brought all the force of his will to bear on them and made them work. Triumphant he felt something under his fingers. It was almost like human hair. It must be moss or lichen, he thought. His triumph swiftly turned to despair as he felt the stuff give way. His weight must be pulling it out by the roots. His fingers lost purchase and he began to fall.

For a brief dizzying instant he felt his body part company from the cliff face. His back arched as he began the long tumble through space. In that instant he knew that he was about to die and no magic or sorcery would bring him back this time.

Then strong fingers clasped his wrist and his downward progress was halted for a moment. He looked up and saw Kjel looking down at him. He gave praise to Russ that Kjel had noticed his difficulties and returned. Relief flooded through his body and he felt weak. He noticed the look of strain on the Falconer's face, an instant before he felt Kjel's grip start to slip.

No, Ragnar thought, gritting his teeth and scrabbling for purchase once more, fearing as much that he would pull Kjel to his doom as that he would drop to his own. This time, with the additional leverage provided by Kjel's grasp, he managed to get a grip and flop up onto the ledge.

'That was too close,' Ragnar gasped after a moment's rest. Fear and emotional reaction had reduced his voice to a whispering croak.

'Yes,' said Kjel, his face still white with the strain.

'I owe you my life,' said Ragnar.

Kjel looked up at the remainder of the rock face. It loomed a long way above them. Ragnar could tell he was measuring what little strength they had left against the rest of the climb. The expression on Kjel's face told him the conclusion was not hopeful.

'Thank me when we both make it out of here,' Kjel said.

Wearily they began the long climb. When they reached the top, limbs trembling from weariness, breath rasping from their lungs, Sergeant Hakon stood waiting for them. There was a thoughtful expression on his face.

'Ragnar, be in the great hall with all your Claw at dawn tomorrow.' Ragnar was unsure from his tone of voice whether showing up would be a good or a bad idea.

The dull early morning light filtered in through the slits that served as windows in the great hall. The air smelled of wood smoke and stale sweat. Sergeant Hakon loomed over Ragnar's Claw. Ragnar felt like a pygmy standing in his huge shadow. There was a strange glint in the sergeant's eye but no readable expression on his stone-like face. He seemed to be considering them, perhaps with a view to killing them, perhaps with something else in mind.

‘You have done well,’ he said eventually. ‘At least, you have done well to get this far. You have all survived, and you have not disgraced yourselves. There’s little else that you can learn here in Russvik and you’re as hard as your sorry bodies are going to allow you to be.’

All eyes were locked on the sergeant now. This was something new. His words hinted at a change in their status. Perhaps they would get to join the other Claws that had already left. Ragnar wondered about that. None of those aspirants had ever returned. His heart hammered against his ribs with nervousness.

‘You are being given a chance to move on from here,’ Hakon continued. ‘Don’t think it will be easy. Where you’re going you will look back on your days in Russvik as a pleasant little carnival.’

He paused for a moment to let his words sink in. From anybody else Ragnar would have assumed the words were an exaggeration meant to frighten them, but coming from Hakon he knew they were a cold simple statement of fact.

‘You may be selected to move on to the next stage of your training. That’s assuming you can pass through the Gate of Morkai.’

Ragnar did not like the sound of this at all. In the legends of his people Morkai was the two-headed hound of Russ. He guarded the gates of the lowest hell. A glance around at his clawbrothers told him the significance of the name was not lost on them either.

‘How will we get there, sergeant?’ Kjel asked. Ragnar could tell he was doing his best to sound cheerful but could not keep the leaden tones of fear from his voice.

‘You’ll find out soon enough.’



NINE

THE GATE OF MORKAI

Once more Ragnar found himself inside one of the great skyships. He knew now it was called a Thunderhawk. Perhaps it was *the* Thunderhawk but somehow he doubted it. The way Hakon and the others talked of it he got the impression there was more than one.

Kjel, Strybjorn, Sven and himself were not the only ones clambering aboard and strapping themselves in. He noticed that Nils and Mika too had been summoned. He also recognised Lars, Hrolf and Magnus from his initial intake of aspirants. It looked like they were the only survivors. None of them looked particularly cheerful, and Ragnar guessed that they too had been on the receiving end of the sergeant's speech. Nils, at least, tried to smile at them but his expression was more thoughtful than happy. Like Ragnar he was wondering what waited for them at the Gate of Morkai.

There was a roar as the Thunderhawk came to life and shook itself from the ground. Looking out of the round porthole Ragnar could see that the snow was steaming off the skyship's wings as it lifted straight up into the air. Once again he was pressed back into his seat by the force of acceleration. He kept his eyes glued to the window though, determined to get a last glimpse of Russvik. Insane though it seemed after the hardships they had all endured there, Ragnar felt an odd sense of nostalgia for the place. For the past few months it had become the closest thing he now had to a home. Brutal though his life there had been he had become used to it. Now he was once more being sent off to face the unknown and that in itself was frightening. Nothing he had encountered since arriving in the frozen wastes of Asaheim had been pleasant, and he doubted this was going to change any time soon.

Thinking about home made him glance over at Strybjorn. Once more he felt a surge of hatred when he looked on the Grimskull's brutal features. Disturbingly, Ragnar recognised that his enduring hatred gave him a grim sense of satisfaction. It alone was perhaps his only constant and dependable companion.

Strybjorn caught Ragnar's glance and returned it with a glare. 'Frightened, last of the Thunderfists?' he asked.

'No,' Ragnar said. One day soon he would take his vengeance, he knew. Of that he was certain. The truce which had held while they were in Russvik was over. He would deal with Strybjorn soon provided they both survived their passage through the Gate of Morkai.

The Thunderhawk raced across the snow-covered land. This time it did not leap so high it threatened to touch the stars. This time it roared down the long valleys between the mountains, and the thunder of its passage startled the beasts far below on the ice fields.

Ragnar had no idea how fast they were flying but their speed was incredible. It seemed as if they were covering as much ground in an hour as a fit man might cover in a month. Their shadow sped across the wilderness below them faster than that of any bird of prey.

All the land below them was white with snow save where the green of the pine trees covered the hills. Here and there a fast flowing stream rushed over a crevasse dropping in a long fall of spray to the earth below. Strangely, the mountains seemed even larger from their vantage point aloft in the speeding Thunderhawk. They rose in endless frozen waves to the horizon, mighty sentinels standing shoulder to shoulder against the endless assault of wind and rain and erosion.

Now the craft passed over the rock strewn surface of a glacier, glittering coldly in the sunlight filtering through the clouds. Looking down, Ragnar caught sight of a party of men passing over its frozen surface. They were not garbed in furs as all the other people he had seen were. In the brief glance he got Ragnar would have sworn they were armoured as Sergeant Hakon was, and equipped with the same weapons. They seemed to be waving at the skyship as it passed, and then in the blink of an eye were gone.

Tattered ribbons of clouds passed beneath the Thunderhawk now, and it shook slightly as it passed over them. Once again Ragnar felt a secret thrill in his heart. This must be how the gods felt when they looked down on the world, he thought. It came to him then that Hakon and his brothers were mighty mages and were privileged with the secrets of a sorcery strong enough to rule this world if only they wished to.

Then the thought occurred to him that maybe already they did, and that the world was ordered as it was because they wished it so for their own

unguessable purposes. Maybe all the clans of Fenris were but the cattle of the cruel gods. No sooner had the idea flickered through his brain than some subtle instinct told Ragnar that it was the truth. Was he not riding on a vehicle such as was used by the Choosers of the Slain, and were not they the messengers of the gods? Perhaps that meant they dwelled alongside the gods, or perhaps it meant that they were in some way gods themselves. Certainly Ranek and Hakon possessed many of the legendary attributes of Russ. They possessed his strange wolf-like eyes, and his long fangs, his mighty thews and his enormous physical strength. That they were his undoubted kin was surely obvious, or so it seemed to Ragnar.

Ragnar did not doubt that he would soon find out more. The Thunderhawk was bearing him ever deeper into the heart of mystery. As long hours passed, the terrain they passed over was becoming more and more savage and bleak. Here and there mighty geysers of lava jetted up into the sky and the snow melted away in hissing clouds from the steaming surface of the black rock. It struck Ragnar that if ever there was a land fitted to holding the entrance to hell, then this was surely it.

The mountains were becoming ever higher and more barren. Here and there monstrous figures loped through the lichen-covered rocks. Packs of gigantic wolves raised their heads and howled in salute as the Thunderhawk passed. The mouths of enormous caverns pitted the barren slopes. What little vegetation there was was sere and stunted.

The valleys became ever deeper, their unfathomable depths black and forbidding, the mountains ever higher. Indeed now the craggy giants made the peaks around Russvik look like mere foothills, unfit even to be called mountains, although in truth they had been the highest Ragnar had ever seen. The mountains through which they passed were truly awesome in their scale, like a wall made by the gods to imprison daemons. Their sheer size was mind numbing. Pinned in their seats by the speed of the Thunderhawk, they hurtled through long dark valleys filled with scree, over glaciers that sparkled like rivers of ice where the probing fingers of the sun touched them. The skyship's fast-moving shadow fell on frozen lakes and dropped away into the clouds beneath towering crags.

The voice of the Thunderhawk roared even louder as it passed through the mountains, as if even this chariot of the gods was struggling to climb through the thinning air. The sky was becoming darker as they rose, and Ragnar was convinced that he could see the cold glitter of the stars.

Then the skyship banked sharply, and as his stomach lurched, Ragnar saw it: the largest mountain of all, the largest mountain he had ever seen or ever would see, what could only be the largest mountain in the history of creation. It towered over all the other peaks as a grown man might tower over small children. Its lower slopes tumbled for leagues into the clouds below them. It was a mountain on an epic scale, a mountain fit to be the dwelling place of gods. Ragnar knew without being told that it would be their destination, and looking around the darkened interior of the Thunderhawk, he could see that the others were similarly stunned into awe-struck silence by the magnificence of the great peak before them.

He knew now, looking at that towering mountain in the light of the morning sun, that he would never forget this moment for as long as he lived. He would never forget the wonder and the fear that the sight of this mighty pinnacle evoked in his heart.

The tone of the skyship's voice changed as they made their approach to the peak. As they closed in they slowed and descended. As they came closer to the surface of the peak, the view of the mountain in all its immensity was lost, to be replaced by individual details of the land below them.

Ragnar saw that the side of the mountain was pitted with great caves, and within each of the great caves was an enormous metal door, large beyond his ability to comprehend. Until that moment, Ragnar would not have guessed that enough metal existed in all of Fenris to clad just one of those immense doors in iron. He had no idea what might lurk beyond such portals and he had no desire to find out. Ragnar simply could not imagine anything large enough to need such vast exits. He shuddered, overcome with awe.

There were other things: huge complexes of metal linked by monstrous snaking pipelines. At first Ragnar thought that the world serpent itself held the mountain in its coils but as he looked closer the idea was replaced by the no less shocking one that the enormous metal structures were the work of men, or perhaps of gods. They linked the steel buildings from which mighty jets of fire flared. He had no idea what purpose these eldritch engines served but he sensed that it was a mighty one. Why else would they be here on the mountain of the gods?

As they dropped further, he saw that each of the gigantic metal buildings was as large as a small island, a veritable hill of precious steel.

Enormous dishes which reminded him of the one on the Temple of Iron he had seen a short lifetime ago, rotated atop those mighty structures. Several of them seemed to turn and look at the Thunderhawk as it approached. Ragnar blinked, clutched his restraining harness and gasped for air, unable to take in all the wonders and terrors he was witnessing.

The Thunderhawk came to a halt in the air near one of the vast metal doors. Looking down Ragnar could see that there was what appeared to be a huge stone bull's-eye on the ground beneath them. Even as he watched the Thunderhawk began to descend on top of it. Ragnar noticed that as the craft touched down they landed in the exact centre of that enormous target. The astonishing precision of what they had just done struck him like a blow from a sword. They had crossed hundreds of leagues of land, flown over a vast continent and somehow the helmsman of the flying ship had managed to find this exact spot and dock his craft there. He was sure that this precision was no accident but the product of a mighty sorcery, the like of which he could not yet understand.

Even above the dying groans of the engines, and through the thick metal skin of the Thunderhawk, Ragnar heard a strange pumping grinding noise and terror gripped him as he saw that the ship was sinking into the ground. Stone walls seemed to rise from the ground around the Thunderhawk as the earth swallowed him. His stomach leapt and his heart sank until a moment's consideration told him that this whole procedure was intentional, and that the stone disc was some sort of platform intended to carry the skyship down into the bowels of the earth.

He squinted out of the window, looking up, and was rewarded with a last glance of the peak receding vertiginously into the sky, like a spear pointed directly at the belly of heaven.

They descended from the skyship into a vast cavern that seemed as large as the vault of the sky. The walls had a glassy sheen as if they had been fused in immense heat. Clouds drifted under the great arches and obscured the enormous murals that filled the ceiling. Ragnar gaped in awe at the partially obscured scenes of battle between beings that could only be gods and daemons. Around the walls of the huge chamber enormous statues occupied titanic niches. Each was a hundred times as tall as a man, each depicted a figure armed and armoured like Sergeant Hakon or Ranek the Wolf Priest. Here, Ragnar thought, was sorcery on a scale that numbed the mind.

Ragnar had never seen anything quite like it before. The whole huge space was lit by magical lanterns which gave off a glare brighter than a thousand whale oil lamps, making the whole enormous space almost as bright as day. All around strange and mysterious figures moved about on unguessable errands.

Ragnar saw figures dressed in the same armour as Sergeant Hakon and their helmsman moving through the cavern towards other skyships, weapons held in postures of readiness. He saw men who appeared more than half machine prodding the skyships with long metal poles from which sparks and flames flared. He saw similar figures attaching long pipes to the underbelly of the skycraft. He saw humanoid figures that looked to be made entirely of metal performing maintenance on the vehicles. As they went about their duties they reminded Ragnar of the shipwrights back on his former home. They had the same air of men totally absorbed in their task.

The noise was deafening. The roar of the skyships mingled with the clash of metal on metal and the shouts of a thousand voices. The metal men clanked and whirred. The machines on which they rode rumbled like thunder. Ragnar listened carefully and realised the language in which these people bellowed did not in the slightest resemble his native tongue. It was even harsher and more guttural, and yet at the same time some of the words flowed smoothly.

The air tasted of chemicals. Not in the same way as the tanneries back home or the stink that surrounded the town of the Iron Masters. It smelled clean and minty with a hint of oil and other substances that Ragnar associated with machinery.

The air in his lungs and the ground beneath his feet seemed to vibrate with the hubbub. All of his senses were assaulted by things the like of which he had never before experienced. He suffered a moment's disorientation and then his eyes focused on the one thing in all this strangeness that he recognised.

From out of the shadowy distance the Wolf Priest Ranek strode towards them. Ragnar felt a sudden shiver of fear. The appearance of the sorcerer had always presaged mighty changes in his life.

‘Welcome to the Fang! To the abode of the Wolves!’ he bellowed. ‘I hope you are ready to face the Gate of Morkai.’

Ranek led them through long dark corridors deep into the bowels of the mountain. He strode with the purposeful confident stride of an old wolf. He knew exactly where he was going and how to get there. For this Ragnar was glad, for the whole complex was a maze on a scale which he could never have imagined. All of his home island could fit into one of the smaller chambers in this vast place.

There were times when he had to fight down the terror that filled him. Frightening thoughts constantly assailed his mind. What was keeping this vast honeycombed mountain from falling on them? What if it were to collapse burying them all alive? How would he ever find his way out again? A glance at the pale faces of the others told him that they shared his fears.

Machines and warriors and the other things, part man, part machine, moved alongside them. They were overtaken by huge wheeled carts which had no visible means of propulsion and which carried burdens too heavy to be moved by twenty strong men. Truly, Ragnar thought, mighty magic was at work here. The inhabitants of the Fang possessed engines which made the greatest machines of the Iron Masters look like child's toys.

He felt that at last he had arrived at the secret heart of the world. It was as if a curtain had been pulled away to reveal the place where the Dark Weavers spun out the fates of men. The mechanisms of destiny were being laid bare. He could see now how the gods lived, and it was an awesome sight.

Ranek led them to two cave-like openings in the side of the mountain. From inside came a strange whooshing noise. Over both openings were carved the sign of a great two-headed eagle. In its claws it held a disc which showed the wolf's head emblem of Russ. Alongside one opening was painted a fluorescent arrow indicating up. Beside the other an arrow indicated down.

'Step inside,' Ranek said, gesturing towards the left opening with one metal-clad hand. Without thinking Kjel stepped through. There was a sound like a scream as he promptly dropped from view. The others froze on the spot. Was this a trap, Ragnar wondered? Was there a huge pit there? Was this the Gate of Morkai?

Had they been brought all this way simply to be slaughtered like sheep? It was unlikely. Was this some strange form of magical sacrifice?

He could not begin to guess. The things he had seen here were beyond his comprehension.

‘Go!’ Ranek ordered. Despite the terror which clawed at his heart, Ragnar decided that he was simply going to have to trust the old sorcerer. He stepped into the opening. For one heart-stopping moment he felt nothing but empty air beneath his feet, then he stepped out and began to fall. Even though he was determined not to scream a moan of fear passed his lips. His stomach churned as he plummeted down a long shaft. Red and yellow lights flickered past his eyes as he dropped swiftly and with ever increasing velocity. He knew now that indeed it had been a trap and his life was over. Just as he felt black rage begin to overtake him at the senseless nature of his own impending death, some unseen force grasped him in its invisible grip and slowed his descent so that he came slowly to rest on the ground at the bottom of the shaft. As he touched down light as a feather and realised that he was not going to die, laughter bubbled from his lips.

He saw another exit and Kjel standing there with a broad grin on his face.

‘That was amazing,’ the Falconer said. Ragnar could only nod and grin back.

‘Look out!’ shouted a voice from above him. Ragnar looked up and saw Sven’s boots descending towards his head. He had only time to throw himself out through the exit before Sven touched down. Sven wasted no time in following him, as one by one the rest of the aspirants dropped into view.

At last Ranek appeared. He landed lightly with a flex of his knees that told he had done such a thing countless times before. His face wore no idiot grin. Ragnar realised that whatever magic there was in that shaft it had long ago ceased to hold any wonders for the sorcerer.

Gesturing for them to follow, Ranek strode on.

The place through which they passed could almost have been chosen to evoke terror, Ragnar thought, and then realised that most likely this were the case. It was dark. There were none of the glowing ceiling globes here that had illuminated the rest of the labyrinth. The only source of light was the blazing firepits and the cherry glow from the bubbling pools of molten lava that surrounded them. The air here was warm and smelled of sulphur. Clouds of scalding mist billowed across the pathways. Ragnar paid careful

attention to the causeways across which they walked. To lose your footing here meant a plunge into certain death.

Ranek strode on, never looking back, confident that they were following him. He had every reason to be confident, Ragnar realised. What else could the aspirants do? None of them knew the way back or had any idea of what secrets and dangers this place might conceal from the unwary interloper.

Ahead of them loomed another massive archway. This one was carved with grinning wolves' heads and runes of an eldritch type which Ragnar had no idea how to read. Ranek stopped and turned to face them. One by one the aspirants assembled on the causeway. Subconscious discipline, drilled into them at Russvik, caused them to draw themselves up in ranks.

There was an aura of fear that hung over this place. Ragnar could sense its presence in the hot sulphurous air. Sweat plastered his hair to his brow. He knew his face was red from the heat. It felt like he was in the abode of the fire daemons. Ancient and powerful forces were at work here and Ragnar sensed invisible presences, perhaps ghosts or spirits. There was power in this archway and whatever lay beyond it.

'Behold the Gate of Morkai,' Ranek said, gesturing to the archway. 'Through it lies the path to death or glory. Beyond this there is no return save as one worthy to belong to the Wolves in body and in soul.'

'There is no other way forward for you now. You cannot leave this place alive without passing through this gate. Anyone who refuses I will throw into the firepits and the daemons will consume their souls. There is only one question here – who among you will go first?'

Silence. All eyes were locked on the archway. The sense of a waiting evil presence intensified. Superstitious fear entered all their minds on stealthy feet. Ragnar knew that they all felt the same as he did. It was no longer as if they were looking through a mist-filled arch. It was as if they were gazing into the mouth of a gigantic beast which would swallow them in just one gulp. All of them knew they should be clamouring for the honour of going first and yet none of them moved.

Ragnar knew that some powerful magic was at work here, freezing his heart with dread, sending the cold fingers of fear up his spine. With every second that passed it became harder to move, harder to speak, harder even to think. It was as if he were a small bird hypnotised by a serpent. He wanted to be able to do something and yet he could not.

But even as he stood there it occurred to him that the test had already begun, that this strange magic was part of it, that courage was one of the most important measures by which he would be judged worthy. He forced his thick tongue to move. He forced his frozen lips to open. With a sense of immense trepidation he heard himself say: 'I will pass through the gate.'

'Then go, laddie! What are you waiting for?'

Like a mechanical man or the victim of an enchantment in a saga, Ragnar strode forward on stiff legs to pass through the Gate of Morkai. As he did so a wave of dizziness swept over him. The runes on the gate glowed. The wolves' heads carved in it seemed to come alive and flow out to greet him: wolf spirits, misty and vague, dragging behind them a comet tail of ectoplasm. In his ears he thought he heard a faint high-pitched howling such as the ghosts of a long dead wolf pack might make.

The spirits swirled around him as he strode towards the arch. They flowed into his open mouth and nostrils. He felt the vapour billow down his throat and fill his lungs. He thought he would choke on the acrid, fusty air but still he forced himself to walk forward, to come ever closer to the mighty archway...

For a moment he thought he was through. He caught a brief glimpse of three terrible old men, clad in armour, the pelts of great white wolves draped around their shoulders then there was a sense of terrible freezing chill, a surge of agonising heat and a sense of falling far worse than anything he had endured in the dropshaft. Time and space twisted and shifted. His flesh seemed to bubble and melt and suddenly he was elsewhere.

He stood on a frozen plain. Far into the distance he could see men and machines. Some were garbed in the grey armour of the type that Hakon and Ranek wore. Others were garbed in blood red armour covered in ornate brazen skulls, yet oddly similar in design to the armour of the men in grey. The men in grey fought the men in red beneath the chill light of a pale white sun. Ragnar saw that he was standing on top of a pile of bodies. A severed head rolled away from his feet. Limbs squelched beneath his boots. He realised that he too was clad in the grey armour and it was nicked and chipped in a thousand places. Oil and fluid mingled with his own blood and the gore of his enemies on its once sleek surface. He held one of the strange magical swords that Hakon always carried in each hand.

One had ceased to work. The blade was broken, the teeth chipped away. The other worked fitfully, coming to life momentarily, shrieking and vibrating in his hands and then stopping as if the spell animating it had ceased to function.

Looking around him he saw the dead bodies of Kjel and Sven and Strybjorn and even those of Sergeant Hakon and Ranek. He was surrounded by the men in red. Some of them had their helmets thrown back and their faces were twisted and distorted into terrible parodies of humanity. Red glowing eyes glared out with terrible hatred from within the helmets of others. He knew that there were too many of them, and that they were too strong for him. He knew without having to be told that these were the servants of Horus, the followers of ultimate darkness, the enemies of Russ. He knew that there were no deadlier killers in all the universe. And he knew that he was mere instants away from death.

One of the red-armoured ones gestured for his followers to halt. They stopped for a moment like hounds obeying the command of a master, but Ragnar knew that the reprieve was only for a moment. They still thirsted for his blood and even the will of their dreadful leader could not restrain them for long. The leader spoke now and his brazen voice was persuasive and sincere.

‘You are a mighty warrior, Ragnar,’ he said. ‘You are a great killer. You are worthy to join us. Throw down your weapons. Partake in the ritual of blood. Offer your spirit to Khorne. Live forever and know the ecstasy of endless battle.’

Who was Khorne, Ragnar wondered? The name sounded oddly familiar, and resonant with evil. And why did his followers seek Ragnar’s allegiance? Not that it mattered much. Ragnar knew that this was a genuine offer and part of him thrilled to it. The red-garbed warrior was offering him an eternity of gore-splattered combat such as was promised to the heroes who followed Russ. More, he knew that once he partook of their rituals and donned their red armour, he would take more joy in the slaughter than ever he had, and he would be rewarded for it, by a power as great as a god’s. For a moment he felt the thrill of temptation. Why not join these great warriors? Why not offer up his soul to this Khorne? Why not gain immortality?

But even as he thought this, another part of him recoiled in disgust. He saw that these followers of darkness were lost and damned. Something had

gone out of them, something important, and its loss had made them into something less than men. They might have honour of a sort but it was not honour as Ragnar understood it. Their twisted forms reflected their twisted souls and not all the intricately worked beauty of their ornate armour could conceal that fact.

Ragnar laughed and spat in the leader's face, then leapt into the fray smiting right and left. Not even the bite of Chaos blades into his breaking bones caused him to regret the decision. A pit of darkness opened at his feet, and too suddenly for him to comprehend the manner of his transition he was elsewhere in a different place and a different time.

All around him were walls of flesh the colour of bruised meat. Great veinous pipes burrowed through them, odd fluids gurgling within them. Yellowish arches of bone and gristle, the colour of old rotting teeth, supported the ceiling. A loathsome sticky red slime covered everything. His boots made a hideous sucking sound everytime he lifted them from the tongue-like floor. The air was the temperature of blood. It felt close and sticky. He sensed life of an alien sort all around him. He felt as if he had been swallowed alive by some huge and monstrous beast.

Once again he wore the grey armour. Once again the strange and potent weapons were clutched in his fist. In his ear, at once somehow remote and immediate, he could hear the chatter of voices he recognised: Kjel, Strybjorn, Sven. Some magic carried their words, strangely flat and unemotional sounding, to his ears. He could hear them speak and their voices were hushed with wonder and fear.

Is this real? he asked himself. He was not sure of the answer. It felt real. Beneath his feet he could feel the floor vibrate in time to the bellows-breathing of the great beast. He could smell the exotic stink of its innards. The taste of odd perfumes lingered like poison in his mouth. But how could this be real? He had died under the blades of the red-clad warriors. Had he been resurrected once more as he had been after the battle with the Grimskulls? Or was none of this real? Was he trapped in the coils of some potent spell?

This one has a strong soul. The voice thundered inside his head. He could not recognise it but it sounded ancient and wise. Almost immediately after he heard the words he felt a flow of force into his mind, easing his doubts, altering his memories, forcing him to live in the moment. His doubts flowed away like blood in a mountain stream. All

thoughts of anything except immediate danger vanished as he heard the distant bellowing of some mighty beast.

The voices of his fellow aspirants sounded loud in his ears. They were almost panicky. He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw fear and horror written on Kjel's face. The others straggled along behind them. Clutched in every hand were weapons such as those Ranek had used to destroy the sea dragon so long ago in Ragnar's other life.

He could tell that all of them were wondering what they were doing here. All of them were looking to him for leadership just as they had done on the night the troll had taken Henk. They relied on his nerve, his courage, his knowledge. And the worst of it was that he had no idea of what to do. He did not know where they were or how they had got there or even what sort of foe was approaching. All he was sure of was that some sort of foe was coming, and that it was bearing down on them with awful speed.

'Be calm,' he told them, hoping that none of them noticed the nervousness and insecurity in his voice. Once more the bellowing sounded, and a shiver passed up Ragnar's spine. Whatever made that noise was big. And there was more than one of it. The sound had come from a different direction than the other. It was answered by another strange call from the corridor up ahead. A noise that sounded like the chittering of thousands of rats, or perhaps the clicking of hundreds of chitinous claws.

The noise was coming closer. He heard Kjel cry out in fear and he fought to control himself, to stop Kjel's horror communicating itself to him. In this he was only partially successful. The sight of what sped towards him down the corridor almost unmanned him.

There were hundreds of the creatures. Monsters bigger than a man. Each with four arms that ended in massive claws. Nightmare faces of tiny eyes and monstrous jaws. Fast. Much faster than a man, covering the distance between them almost too quickly for the eye to follow.

'We're all going to die!' Kjel shouted, and Ragnar was forced to agree with him. Still if he was going to die, he was going to take a few of the beasts with him. And he was damned well going to make sure that the others did the same.

'Stand and fight,' he shouted. 'Or I'll kill you myself, you gutless cowards!'

The roar of sorcerous weapons filled the air. The same magic which had killed the dragon began to take effect on their attackers. Ragnar ducked as bolts of fire passed over his head and raked the monsters. They were dying but not quickly enough. Heads exploded. Bodies were torn apart. Blood and nauseating fluids streamed out onto the living carpet. Still their assailants came on, an unstoppable tide of alien hunger and hate. Despair threatened to overtake Ragnar. What use was fighting? Why not simply lie down and die?

He refused to give way. Screaming with rage and hatred he leapt forward into the mass of monsters, lashing left and right with his blades. A few stopped to engage him, more swept past to get to his comrades. He was surrounded by a whirlwind of jaws and claws that tore through his armour and his flesh. Still fighting, still trying to kill, he fought the agony that threatened to overwhelm him as he descended into darkness.

Once more he awoke unharmed. His eyes took in his surroundings at a glance. It was dark. The sky was lit by enormous bursts of light. A noise like thunder made the air shiver. All around were the ruins of a massive city, larger than anything Ragnar had ever seen except, perhaps, the Fang. The blackened stumps of towering buildings loomed over him. Each seemed almost as large as a mountain.

In the distance, at the end of the street, he could see huge metal beast-machines moving. They were shaped like men, but maybe ten times as high. In their fists were enormous weapons that sent beams of light lashing across the sky like the lightning of the gods. From their shoulders thunderbolts flashed. For a few moments the air was filled with high-pitched whining, and then in the distance could be heard the world-shaking roar of an explosion. The ground trembled underfoot like a whipped beast. A cloud of black smoke and debris leapt into the sky before settling back to earth in a surprisingly slow seeming motion.

Ragnar surveyed the scene. Once again he was in the grey armour with the wolf-sign on it. He was used to it now. It fitted him like a second skin, and made him faster and stronger. Once again he had those odd potent weapons in his hands. For a moment, he wondered what he was doing here, but once again he sensed the powerful presence of those ancient minds and all doubts were swept away.

He looked around. He was on his own. He had become separated from his comrades. For the first time in Russ alone knew how many months he

was by himself. There was no one around to back him up, to help him if he fell, to watch over him while he was injured. He had no idea where the others were or how he had got separated from them in this vast and terrifying alien place. He noticed that the sun was a huge bloated red orb, and the sky was a shade of cobalt blue the like of which he had never seen before. He had a sense of remoteness, of being so far from home that he could not comprehend the distance.

He knew that he must find the others, that they were out there somewhere in need of his leadership, but he had no way of knowing where or why. He felt suddenly insignificant, lost and alone like a child in the wilderness. He fought down the feeling of blackness and despair and strode off in the direction of the battlefield. As he moved he became more aware of his surroundings, and more filled with wonder.

Men had built this place. He could tell by the artefacts he found lying amid the rubble. Pictures of families painted with a detail that made them seem almost real, imprisoned in crystals that showed the scene from different angles as you rotated them. Books in a language he could not understand printed with an odd mechanical regularity the like of which it was impossible to produce on Fenris. Children's toys made from exotic alien substances that were smooth and chill to the touch.

Slowly the scale of what he was witnessing here dawned on him. This was war fought in a way that was unimaginable among his people. This city must have held more people than his entire world, and it had been levelled by the forces unleashed here as surely as if the gods had leaned down from heaven and smashed it flat. Perhaps that was exactly what had happened. His mind reeled as he tried to picture the sheer destructive power which had been focused on this city. Power beyond the scope of his imagination to even begin to comprehend.

Ragnar sensed that perhaps he was being challenged and tested here, and that part of his trial was to be able to adapt to what he was seeing, to understand it and to continue functioning. He knew that some of his kinfolk would have been paralysed by fear, by the sheer dread of walking amid these titanic ruins. He decided swiftly that it would mean nothing to him. He was Ragnar and he would fight just as well here as on the deck of a dragonship and he would continue fighting regardless of the presence or absence of any companions.

He was congratulating himself on his fortitude when the ground shook and he heard the menacing thump, thump, thump of approaching footfalls. One of the distant giant figures he had seen earlier turned the corner and hove into view. It was nearly ten times his height, proportioned somewhat like a man only taller and more slender. The head was long and sleek and ovular and from the way it turned alertly he could tell it was aware of him. Red and yellow pennons implanted on its shoulders fluttered in the wind. Its mighty talons gripped strange elongated weapons.

It bounded forward, covering the ground far quicker than a man. Ragnar felt himself frozen with horror. There was nothing he could do against this thing. His sword seemed as pitiful as a splinter wielded by a child against a grown warrior. This thing could crush him to jelly beneath its enormous boot without even slowing down. In fact it appeared that was exactly what it intended.

Displaced air whipped past Ragnar's face. A huge shadow flickered across the sun as the monstrous foot descended. At the last moment, he mastered himself, determined to do something. He tried to throw himself to one side, out of the area covered by the descending limb but it was too large. There was no way he could avoid it. Howling with frustrated rage, determined to do something to the thing that was killing him, he raised his sword in a last futile gesture of defiance. Sparks flared as the blade's teeth encountered metal. It was the last thing he saw before an enormous weight descended and crushed his bones to jelly.

Still screaming he sat bolt upright and found himself in a new scene. This was hell, he was convinced. He was doomed to spend eternity dying a thousand deaths in places which he did not understand, fighting against forces he could not comprehend. No, he told himself, screaming in tormented defiance, this was all an illusion, a spell woven by those bitter ancients who waited beyond the Gate of Morkai, and he would not let it defeat him.

This one is strong indeed, brothers, said the thunderous voice inside his head. *If he lives he will be numbered among the mighty.*

Once again Ragnar felt an enormous wave of power sweeping through his mind, numbing his will, draining his resistance. This time he fought against it, using every ounce of his savagery and hate. He was not going to be forced back into those alien worlds against his will. He was not going to be the puppet of some ancient wizards. He was not going to give way to...

What? He was not going to give way to what? He could not remember. There was no need to remember. He stood on a beach watching the sunset. Odd looking trees swayed in the soft breeze. The air was warm and scented with strange perfumes. Flowers more lush than anything that ever bloomed in the bleak wastelands of Fenris swayed under the wind's probing fingers.

'Ragnar.'

He turned. The most beautiful woman he had ever seen walked towards him. But 'walked' was not a lovely enough word to describe the swaying grace of her movements. Her skin was amber. Her hair was liquid jet. There was something about her features that reminded him of Ana, only an Ana with no flaws, an Ana out of which all defects had been subtly erased. She smiled and Ragnar felt his heart skip. It was a smile that warmed his surroundings like the sun might. He felt drawn to her by a subtle force, even though her smile revealed small sharp fangs like those of some vampiric beast.

'You have decided then,' she said. Her voice was musical, thrilling as sin. The mere sound of it made him drunk as a skinful of wine.

'Decided what?'

'Do not toy with me. You have decided to join us? To bond with our coven and offer up your soul to our great master Slaanesh?'

What was she talking about? Who was Slaanesh? He had no real idea but once more the very name evoked a sense of evil on an almost cellular level in him. More, he sensed there was some deeper meaning behind her words, just as her tainted beauty signified some deeper reality. Was that a hint of petulance in her tone? Was she mistaking his misunderstanding for refusal? Just what was going on here?

'I have decided nothing yet,' he said, to give himself time.

'That is unfortunate,' the girl replied, and leaned forward to kiss him. His lips tingled from her touch. Her skin seemed to exude subtle narcotics. Her very touch caused pleasure so intense it was almost painful.

As the kiss continued, he felt as if something was being drawn from him, the very essence of his personality, his soul. It was not painful. It was pleasurable, rather like falling asleep on a soft downy bed with a beautiful woman by his side, having sated himself on all the pleasures imaginable. And yet, something was wrong. This was not how he had felt with Ana.

Suddenly, Ragnar realised that he did not want to submit to this gentle destruction of all that he was, any more than he would welcome being

crushed by the steel foot of a mighty war machine. He fought against it, and in doing so came to realise its strength. It was like being pulled down in the undertow of a powerful current. You could struggle all you like and still you would be dragged down to meet the sea daemons. He tried to resist and still his life force was drained away and blackness clouded the corners of his vision.

Again he woke into nightmare. This time he stood before a vast black altar. All around weird figures capered. High overhead a horned sorcerer on a great glowing disc floated, defying gravity by the strength of his magic. Even as Ragnar watched he floated down. A nimbus of light played around the sorcerer's clawed hands but so far he had made no threatening move. Ragnar raised his weapon but did not strike for he wanted to see what would happen.

'What can my master grant you in exchange for your soul?' the sorcerer asked in a voice molten with sorcerous power. 'What is it that you wish? You need but think of it, and it will be yours.'

Instantly and unbidden the image of Strybjorn's corpse sprang into his mind. Before he could even try and cover his thoughts, Strybjorn appeared bound on the altar and a huge sacrificial knife was gripped firmly in Ragnar's hands.

Hatred twisted his guts. He saw again his father lying dead in the burned out ruins of his home village. He saw his people being led away as thralls in the Grimskull dragonships. He relived the duel in which he thought he had slain Strybjorn and in which the Grimskull had come so close to slaying him. The urge to strike down at his enemy's unprotected breast was there, and almost he brought the knife down. He wanted to feel the blade plunge into Strybjorn's chest, wanted to feel the shock of steel against bone, wanted to feel blood spout forth. The only thing that stayed his hand even for a moment was the fact that Strybjorn wore an amulet that bore the same wolf's head icon that was inscribed on Ragnar's own grey armour.

'Go ahead! Strike!' said the sorcerer. 'Take your vengeance. The souls of your ancestors clamour for it. Strike and it shall be yours.'

Ragnar's hand trembled with his urge to bring the blade down. He had wanted nothing more in his entire life than to strike. Even though he knew his soul would be forfeit to the sorcerer's god the moment he did so, the urge to bring the dagger plunging down was almost too much for him.

Even though he knew it would be a betrayal of the armour he wore and the people he had trained alongside, still the desire filled him.

Subtle knowledge flooded into his head. He knew that if he struck now, he would become a traitor to all his people, that he would return to the Fang and betray the servants of Russ to their enemies. If he struck, all of Fenris and all of his people would fall into the pit of destruction and slavery. He stood for a moment balanced on a knife edge with hatred on one side and duty on the other. The fate of the world teetered in the balance. In one scale was his own all-consuming hatred. In the other scale was the knowledge that his name would live forever in infamy.

What did that matter? said a still, small voice. What did all of the people of Fenris mean to him? All of his blood kin were dead, slain by this man and his people. All the inhabitants of the Fang had ever done was force him to endure pain, humiliation and privation. If by slaying Strybjorn he caused his world's destruction, what of it? In the ensuing universal death the Grimskulls would be swept away in a tide of blood and final vengeance would be his. A vengeance so complete that it would never be exceeded.

His hand trembled and the blade began to descend. He fought against the urge. This was not the sort of vengeance he had wanted. This was not a clean kill in the hot blood of mortal combat. This was the slaughter of a bound foe whose soul would be devoured by a dark power. This was not a worthy manner of vengeance.

'Take your vengeance how you like,' the sorcerer said. 'But take it!'

He gestured and the chains fell away from Strybjorn. The Grimskull sprang upright.

'Traitor!' he shrieked and launched himself at Ragnar. Ragnar dropped him with a blow of his fist and reflex action almost sent the knife plunging into Strybjorn's breast. Once again he stopped himself.

Once again he became conscious of being a pawn of forces greater than he. Once again the vision of those terrible old men who lurked beyond the Gate of Morkai sprang into his mind. He knew they were out there somewhere, toying with him, examining the innermost secrets of his being, sifting his very thoughts and judging his worthiness.

The thought filled him with an anger hotter than his hatred. Who were they to judge him? Who were they to mould his mind to their will? He

would have no more of it. He bit his tongue until pain seared through him. He took the knife and plunged it into his own stomach.

‘No more of these games!’ he shouted, falling to his knees and watching his own blood as it pooled at his feet. Agony seared through his veins. His lips twisted in a snarl of rage and pain.

The world trembled. Rocks tumbled down from the ceiling. Everything seemed to shift and dance and melt.

‘I am Ragnar and I defy you!’ he raved, as darkness complete and utter took him for the last time.



TEN

THE CUP OF WULFEN

Ragnar awoke slowly and painfully. He felt tired as a man might who had risen once more from the dead. All of his energy, all of his life-force seemed spent. He could remember very little of his ordeal. It was an endless-seeming nightmare of violence and death where every weakness of his psyche had been probed and exposed. When he looked down at his body he was surprised to see that there were no marks on it, no wounds or bruises. He could not help but feel that there should be.

He was naked. He lay on a cold slab of stone in a cave. The light came from one of the strange sorcerous globes. On the other slabs lay other aspirants. He recognised Sven, Strybjorn and Kjel. Cold misty breath escaped from their mouths, congealing into clouds when it encountered the chill of the cave. Ragnar shivered and realised how cold he was. He picked himself up from the slab and inspected the other bodies. One of them, an aspirant he did not recognise, did not appear to be breathing.

Ragnar walked over, the icy coldness numbing his feet, and checked the body. He laid a hand on the youth's breast. It was cold and there was no heartbeat. The limbs were already stiff with rigour. So it was true then, Ragnar thought, you could die when you passed through the Gate of Morkai. He shivered again, not sure whether it was from the chill or from fear. He felt sure that he had narrowly evaded the same doom as this poor soul.

He felt a calm icy anger being born within himself. He was angry that anyone should rifle through his thoughts and memories like a reaver ransacking a house. What gave these people the right to do such a thing, he wondered? Or rather, what made them feel as if they had the right to do such a thing?

Something made him pause to consider. Whoever they were, they surely must be doing it for some purpose. Behind this relentless testing and winnowing, behind this unending weeding out of the weak and the unworthy there must be some great plan. It made no sense otherwise. It could not simply be a form of cruel amusement for the gods, could it?

He did not know. He only knew that he was cold and tired and hungry and that he wanted out of this terrible place. He stalked over to the cave mouth and saw there was another cave beyond. In it were more stone slabs, but these ones were empty. One of the strange creatures, half man, half machine, stood watching him. One eye was human and blue. The other was of glass and steel and reflected the light like a tiny sun. It turned to look at him, and as it moved its head there was a strange whirring noise. Ragnar could see its neck was partially covered in metal, and a collar of steel fitted into the metallic breastplate that covered its chest.

‘Come with me,’ it said, in a strange emotionless voice, in an accent that Ragnar could not recognise. He followed it through several metal doors. Passing through each the air temperature grew warmer. In the last chamber there were robes of the same stretchable material as the tunics the aspirants had been given in Russvik. These ones though had claw-like stripes on their chest as well as the wolf’s head emblem. Ragnar paused and without being told put one on. He then followed the man-machine into a large chamber where Ranek waited with the three terrible old men who had watched beyond the Gate of Morkai.

He looked at Ragnar oddly and then smiled coldly, showing those massive fangs. ‘You’ve set us a puzzle, laddie.’

Ragnar just looked at him, then let his eyes slide beyond to take in the old men in their armour and wolf pelts. They looked only slightly less grizzled than Ranek and there was about them an aura of power and strangeness. These ones had a touch of the weirdling, Ragnar thought, and no mistake. He had often suspected Ranek of being a sorcerer but he could see now that he was mistaken. These were the true sorcerers, the runeweavers, the seers who could see into men’s minds. He felt his anger and his fear focus on them.

If they sensed it they gave no sign. They looked at him as a man might look at a dog they were considering purchasing. Ragnar gave his attention back to Ranek.

‘No one has ever come closer to being failed,’ Ranek said. ‘There is a flaw in you, boy, and it might yet be your undoing.’

‘A flaw?’

‘Hatred. You have a capacity for hate that is so strong.’

‘Since when has hatred been a flaw in a warrior? Hating his enemies makes a man strong.’

‘Aye, but hating his comrades is an indulgence that a warrior cannot afford.’

‘Oh?’

‘You hate the Grimskull and you want revenge on him.’

Ragnar saw no point in denying it. ‘Yes.’

‘You are not the first to come here that way, laddie. Often we choose warriors from both sides in a struggle. Often old enemies join our ranks at the same time. They learn to fight together side by side.’

‘That surprises me.’

‘It should not. The process of being aspirants creates strong bonds. Only in your case it has not been quite successful.’

‘I cannot be expected to let my enemy live.’

‘You must decide what is more important. Killing your enemy or living your life with honour in the service of a great cause. The greatest. Believe me, in the future, if you live, you will have enemies enough to slake your lust for battle.’

‘So I must spare Strybjorn or I will fail your tests?’

‘No, you must spare Strybjorn or you will die.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because you have it in you to be a great warrior, laddie. And we have desperate need of great warriors. But those warriors must be loyal and true to their comrades or they are useless both to themselves and to us. Beware, laddie, the path for the darkness to your heart lies through your hatred. Bear that in mind, always.’

Ragnar looked at the old man thoughtfully. He could think of no reply so he kept silent. He glanced at the others but their seamed faces were unreadable.

‘Go to the antechamber and wait,’ Ranek told him. ‘Soon enough you will learn what this is all about.’

Ragnar stood on the edge of a huge amphitheatre on the side of the Fang. It was so large it might have held tens of thousands instead of the meagre few score aspirants who waited there. Shafts of sunlight broke through the turbulent clouds. The air was chill and small snowflakes drifted on the wind. In the centre of the arena was an enormous dais on which was inscribed the wolf’s head symbol. Huge wolf-headed statues guarded the entrance. Ranek stood in the centre looking at them. His chill gaze made Ragnar feel small.

‘You have done well to get this far,’ the Wolf Priest said. His calm, gruff voice carried effortlessly across the arena. He was a good speaker and the acoustics were perfect, Ragnar realised. His words affected Ragnar oddly. He felt a swelling of pride in his breast. This was the first praise the aspirants had ever received from him or any of the other masters. ‘You have come from Russvik, Grimmir and Valksberg, all places where aspirants are judged. You have survived where others have died. You have proven yourself worthy of consideration to join our ranks.’

He paused for a moment to let his words sink in. Ragnar could see the smiles on the faces of the others, and he could tell that Ranek’s words had affected them in exactly the same way as they had him. As they had been intended to, he thought sourly.

‘Yes. But that is all you have proven. Everything you have undergone so far has been but children’s games compared to what you must go through now. The real testing is just beginning.’

Groans escaped the lips of all the aspirants. Ranek smiled evilly before continuing. ‘Do not whine. Once you understand why this must be done, you will see our purpose. You will know what it is you endure and you will know the reason why you endure it. You have come this far and you deserve to know this much.’

All were silent now. They sensed that they were about to become party to a great secret. Ragnar found that he was leaning forward, his ears pricked for the Wolf Priest’s least word. Like all of them, he desperately wanted to know what this was about.

‘Who do you think we are?’ Ranek asked. ‘Who do you think lives in this vast mountain?’

‘Russ’s warriors!’ Strybjorn bellowed.

Ranek laughed and his laughter was chilling. ‘Aye, that is what we are. We are indeed the Chosen Ones. Just as those who came before us were chosen. And those who came before them. And so on. And so on back to the dawn of time when Russ walked among men, and the All Father, the Emperor, fought his great wars against the powers of darkness.

‘You stand indeed in the place of the chosen. This is the Fang. It is a mighty fortress in a vast struggle that is waged endlessly between the forces of mankind and the forces that would destroy it. It is a place from which great warriors set forth to walk among the stars, and perform missions that will affect the destiny of millions.’

‘You have no idea how momentous those missions are. There is no way you possibly could. If you survive it will be many years, perhaps many lifetimes as men measure these things, before you have the faintest inkling of it.

‘You think you have been chosen to join the ranks of the immortals, to fight alongside Russ on the Day of Wrath. This is nothing less than the truth. The Fang is the home to a brotherhood of warriors, a Chapter as we call it. We are the sons of Russ, drawn from his people. We call ourselves the Space Wolves, and some day you will come to understand why.

‘Let me tell you of Russ. Some of you may think of him as a powerful spirit, a god who watches over you. He was not. At least not in the sense you think. He was a man. Aye, and something more than a man. He was a primarch, a superhuman being raised above the level of normal mortals by the power and technology of the All Father. He was stronger, faster, tougher, more resilient, more potent than anything you can imagine. He founded our Chapter to follow him into battle. He chose our people, the folk of Fenris, to be his warriors. He chose only the hardiest and the best of our ancestors, for only they were worthy of this ultimate accolade. This is a tradition that we keep even in these lesser days.’

He paused for a minute and gazed at them. His eyes caught the light and seemed to burn like fire. None of them could meet his gaze. ‘I bear within me the mark of Russ. All of the Wolves you will meet in this fortress do. It is a thing that has changed me. Made me different from mortal men. It has extended my life for centuries, made me faster, stronger, more powerful than any mortal man you have ever met or ever will meet. It may do the same for you.’

He paused again. All of the aspirants looked at each other. They were all wondering what he meant, Ragnar knew. His own mind reeled from what he had heard. How could this old man know what Russ was like? How could he speak with such certainty about the ancient times? He was not mad, as far as Ragnar could tell. He sounded convinced of his rightness. And of course he was different from all of the mortals Ragnar had ever met. He was larger, stronger, faster. He possessed those terrifying fangs and those odd wolf-like eyes.

‘I say “may” because there is another possibility. It may kill you or it may do worse than kill you. It may transform you into a monstrous beast,

a wulfen, a thing more than animal and less than man. Other things may go wrong too.'

The old man gestured and suddenly the chamber went dark. He alone was illuminated, standing in a pool of light. Ragnar heard some of the aspirants mutter about sorcery but he wondered. He had seen many things since he came here. It was just as likely that the old man had some hidden means of controlling those ever-burning lanterns. It seemed possible that they were simply machines, vastly more complex versions of the lamps he had seen at home. What happened next caused him to doubt his complacent assessment.

'Pay attention now,' Ranek said. 'You are about to take the first step along the path of knowledge.'

He gestured again, and suddenly floating in the air above him was a naked youth of about the same age as the aspirants. He looked so real that at first Ragnar suspected that he had materialised, been summoned like a spirit out of thin air. As he watched though he saw that there was no movement of any sort, and that if you looked very, very closely you could see through him. He was translucent as a spirit indeed. Ragnar wondered at the magic of it.

'This is a human youth. A lad very much like yourselves. Watch what happens next. You will see what happens when the canis helix is added; this is the mark of Russ.'

As Ragnar watched, the youth began to change. His body became more muscular and hairy. The fingernails thickened and became talon-like. The eyes took on the odd wolf-like look that Ranek's and Hakon's had. Fangs began to protrude from the gums. He took on the aura of strangeness and power that Ragnar had come to associate with the masters of the Fang. He could hear gasps of amazement from the other aspirants as they watched.

'At the end of the transformation, if all goes well, you will be many times stronger and faster than you are now. You will heal quicker. Your senses will be much keener. You will be braver and more ferocious than ever you were. If all goes well.

'If the change goes badly worse things may befall you.'

A look of idiot ferocity and madness came into the projection's eyes. It slumped forward in a disgustingly feral way. All intelligence drained from its face. 'You may go mad or become an idiot.'

The change continued. The thick growth of hair continued to sprout until it covered the whole body like an animal's pelt. The features of the face were obscured as if by fur. The talons on the fingers and toes grew longer until they became full claws. The fangs became so large they distended the face. A look of utter ferocious hunger distorted the youth's features. Ragnar remembered the creature he had once dreamed about. It had looked exactly like this except that the colour of the fur was slightly different. He did not doubt now that he had looked upon a wulfen.

‘Or you may become a wulfen. Why is this, you are wondering? It is because the mark of Russ unleashes the spirit of the beast that is within us all. Some men are strong enough to control the beast. Others let the beast control them. When they do, a wulfen is born.

‘All of these things are things that might happen once you drink from the Cup of Wulfen. If you survive this first transformation you will be well on your way to becoming a Space Wolf. The question that faces you now is do you have what it takes to face the beast within you? Or will you fail utterly and be consumed?’

Ragnar looked at the old man and wondered at his words. It seemed that they were not being given a choice. This was yet another test they must pass. Would they never end?

In the Fang he had no way of telling night from day. They were shown to individual cells and locked within them. A meal waited for him in the small chamber. It consisted of hot meat, fresh cooked bread and ale which tasted slightly metallic. He gulped it all down as if the meal could be his last. It tasted better than anything he had ever eaten.

As soon as he had finished it he stalked up and down his cell. He tested the door but it was locked and beyond his strength to open. Moments later the light went out and the room was plunged into darkness. Unable to do anything else he lay down on the pallet and within moments was asleep.

His dreams were dark. He was stalked through a maze by a monster. No matter how hard he ran and how cunningly he hid it was always there, a few steps behind. And he knew he did not dare look behind him, for if he did, he would see that the monster's features were his own.

His body was covered in cold sweat when he woke.

The temple was elaborate, intricately decorated with finely worked stone worn with passing ages. Yet for all its splendour, Ragnar found the place gloomy. Artificial glow lamps threw their sodium glare into a

carefully directed pool of yellow light, in which stood the centrepiece of the ancient chamber. Wolf heads decorated the altar, which appeared carved from a single rock. On its intricately carved stonework rested a chalice of some unknown metal, which also bore the wolf's head symbol of the Space Wolves. Ranek was there, looking old as the mountain itself. He was flanked by two masked warriors in similar armour to his own. Ragnar could see that one of the masked warriors had an arm that was made all of metal. Exposed bits of it clicked and whirred as it moved. Each of them held a device that looked like a hammer. Ragnar thought immediately of the hammer of Russ, the Lightning Bringer. Perhaps these weapons were its kin.

Ranek glared at them all then strode forward to the altar. He grasped the great chalice with his massive gnarled hands then raised it aloft almost as if he were about to dash it upon the ground.

'Behold the Cup of Wulfen,' he said. There was hoarseness in his voice that took Ragnar a moment to work out was reverence. 'Look upon it and wonder. You look at an object older than this fortress: an artefact forged in the dawn of time by the servants of the All Father. This chalice was carried by the Chapter all through the Great Crusade. It was part of our heritage during the dark times of the Great Heresy and the war with Horus. The hands of Russ himself were clasped around this chalice in the dim dawn of time. Look upon it and think upon my words.'

Ragnar looked again. If what Ranek claimed was true, and he saw no reason to doubt the Wolf Priest, this was an artefact which had once been held in the hands of the god of his people. It was older by far than anything else he had ever encountered. At first glance it did not look like much, but even as he watched, he thought he could see glittering runes of light appear in its side. And a nimbus of strange energies played about it.

'We call this the Cup of Wulfen for a reason. The ancients who made this vessel imbued it with potent magics. Whoever drinks from this vessel will, if they are worthy, take upon themselves the mark of Russ, and with it a portion of the man-god's powers. If they are unworthy, they will pay a terrible price. Listen then to the tale of the wulfen, and know why.'

'Back in the days when Russ first came to Fenris to recruit his warriors, there was a jarl named Wulfen. He was a mighty man, fell and strong, proud in his power. He was a man gifted beyond all others in the art of war and he was bested only once in his life, and that was by Russ, who

humbled him before all his people but seeing a worthy warrior spared him, and offered him a place among his warriors.

‘Russ spoke to the assembled men of Fenris and told them of his plan. He offered them power and a vast span of years if they followed him to make war among the stars. They roared their acceptance, and hailed Russ as their chief. He told them that they must drink a potent brew from the great cup and thus would their transformation begin. Wulfen was the first to step forward and he swigged the glorious mead of Russ from the chalice.

‘But evil lurked still in Wulfen. He was consumed by a secret gnawing hatred of Russ and he planned to take treacherous revenge upon the man-god. The guardian spirit within the cup saw this the moment Wulfen put it to his lips, and it worked a spell on him, making his outer self match his inner evil. To the horror of those who looked on, the great chieftain changed. He turned into a dreadful thing, half-man, half-wolf and he sprang on Russ with a howl of hatred. But Russ was not dismayed. With one blow, he crushed Wulfen’s skull and slew the beast that had been revealed.

‘He looked upon his followers and told them that Wulfen was unworthy, and that this would be the fate of all those who drank from the chalice with evil in their hearts. He told them that those who wished could now depart without drinking. To our ancestors’ credit, no man departed, and all drank and all gained the power that Russ had made their due. And thus began the founding of our Chapter. Those men strode forth to write their name in the history of all the worlds of men. Those who drink from this chalice now will do likewise. If they are worthy. Think on this for a moment.’

Ragnar thought. Was this just a story? Somehow he doubted it. So far they had been told nothing without a purpose, and Ranek did not look like the sort of man who was going to start making things up now. Even as he watched the two armoured warriors had begun to empty a strange brew into the chalice that Ranek held before him. The ingredients came from two separate flasks and as they mingled in the chalice, they began to bubble and steam. All the while they did this, Ranek spoke words in the strange tongue that Ragnar had heard before.

It seemed that if he drank from this chalice with evil in his heart, he was doomed to become a monster, and doubtless to be killed like the

original Wulfen. He wondered though where the monsters they called wulfen came from then. If they were unworthy aspirants, why were they still alive? How did they escape from the Fang? Yet again he sensed a mystery here. One he was in no position to answer yet.

Another question nagged at him. Did he have evil in his heart? Would the terrible fate that befell Wulfen be his? He considered what he had been told earlier about his hatred for Strybjorn. Was that evil? He did not think so. It was simply the way any warrior of Fenris would feel about one of the killers of his clan. Still, why had they warned him then?

The priests had finished mingling the contents of the flasks now. Ranek set the cup down on the altar. Inside it they could see the brew bubbling like a devil's broth. The Wolf Priest glanced around at all of them, then reached within his pouch and produced a handful of wooden straws.

'Each of you must drink. You are not asked to volunteer. It would be pointless. We will let Russ decide the order. In my hand are a number of spills of wood. On each is cut a number of notches. Each of you will take one spill. Starting with the one whose spill has the highest number of notches, you will drink. You will come forward in order, kneel before the altar and take a mouthful of the holy mead from the chalice. Is that clear?'

All of them yelled their assent. There was a nervous quality to every voice, Ragnar thought. And no wonder. Each of them must be thinking about the possibility of becoming a ravening beast. Ranek advanced towards them with his hands outstretched. One by one the aspirants took a piece of wood from his hand. Ragnar watched their faces for a response. He was gratified to see Strybjorn's twist with something like dismay. When his own turn came, his hand was steady when he reached out to take the small splinter of wood. Before he even looked at it his fingers had felt its side and he discovered only one notch. It appeared that he would be going last. He did not know whether to be glad or sorry.

Ranek told them all to open their hands, and looked at the spill they had chosen. He arranged them in order of their numbers and then returned to the altar. Ragnar saw that Strybjorn was at the front, then Sven, then Kjel. There were others between him and his comrades. As he had suspected he was going last.

'Advance to the altar,' Ranek said.

Strybjorn walked forward. His face was pale but determined. He knew that all eyes were upon him, waiting to see his response. He was not going

to show any fear. Hatred warred with admiration for the Grimskull's courage within Ragnar as he watched Strybjorn's firm stride. Strybjorn knelt before the altar then rose proudly to take the Cup of Wulfen with a firm hand. He raised it to his lips, threw back his head and drank. Ranek had to reach forward and pull the cup down to stop him drinking it all.

Strybjorn stood there for a moment. All of them watched with baited breath to see what would happen. Ragnar could hear the beat of his own heart, feel the sweat on his palms as he waited. He was ready to leap forward and strike Strybjorn down with his bare hands if he showed the slightest sign of a change. He doubted that he would have time to do anything before Ranek but he would at least try.

Moments passed. Nothing happened. Ranek gestured for Strybjorn to step back, and the Grimskull backed away. Sven strode forward next. His movements were jaunty; his chin was held high. He forgot to kneel, though, and Ranek brought him to his knees with a blow. Sven shook his head, grinned at the Wolf Priest without malice and rose to drink from the chalice. He even smacked his lips when he finished and managed a belch. Ragnar was surprised that Ranek did not hit him again. Instead he merely laughed and told Sven to move away. Once again no change occurred.

Kjel moved forward. He looked pale and shaken but he took the chalice and drank. He grimaced as he finished the mead and looked as if he wanted to spit it out but somehow he forced it all down then he too backed away. No change swept over him.

One by one the aspirants advanced. One by one they drank. None of them became monsters. Then all too quickly it was Ragnar's turn. He marched forward, feeling the eyes of all the others burning into his back. They were all watching him now, wondering if he would be the one to fail. They had all passed. They were secure. He was not.

He kept his tread steady as he marched towards the altar. He knelt before it, offered up a silent prayer to Russ and then rose to take the Cup of Wulfen from Ranek's hands. It was heavier than he expected. The metal was cool to the touch and his hands tingled with the contact. Yes, there was indeed magic here, he thought. He raised it to his lips and paused for a moment. He paused and the warning he had been given after he had passed through the Gate of Morkai flashed through his mind. Did his hatred of Strybjorn represent the kind of flaw which would unleash the beast within him?

A momentary urge to drop the thing passed through him, to throw it away as if it had turned into a poisonous serpent in his hands. If the fluid was spilled he would not have to drink it, he could not become a monster. Had the others all felt this way, he wondered. Had they been tempted to cast the chalice away? Had they considered their own flaws before drinking? He steeled himself. He was not going to disgrace himself now. None of the others had, and he would not bring shame to the Thunderfist name. He was the last of them. If it were his destiny to become a hideous beast, so be it. He would face the doom the fates wove for him like a warrior.

He raised the cup to his lips and drank. From the smell he expected it to taste terrible. It did not. In fact, he could not detect what it tasted like at all. His tongue tingled and the roof of his mouth became numb. The back of his throat felt like he was downing a draft of ice cold water. He kept drinking and drinking until eventually he felt the chalice being pulled gently from his hands by the Wolf Priest.

Now his skin felt like it was tingling. His whole body felt cold. Was this it, he wondered? Was this the prelude to becoming a beast? Was he about to become a monster and be slain? He glanced up and looked into the eyes of Ranek. He saw nothing there. No sympathy, no horror, no alarm. He felt a little dizzy and it seemed as if the strength were going to drain out of him. He could hear his heartbeat loud as thunder now, and he felt certain that at any moment he was going to feel his muscles twist and tear as the transformation overtook him.



ELEVEN

THE SPIRIT OF THE BEAST

It was the dream again. He was running down a dark corridor, in an endless maze, beneath a mighty mountain. Behind him the beast came on. It was huge and it was fierce and he knew that if it caught him it would devour him. His feet were like lead. The floor stuck to his soles like tar, slowing him down, but leaving his pursuer free to run at full speed. Its howls echoed through the darkened halls. Its breath was hot on his neck. Its foul slaver dripped on his flesh and when he turned to face it, it had his face, yet terribly altered, just as he'd known it would. He raised his hands to try and protect himself but it was no use. It reached out with mighty claws. They pierced his flesh and drew blood. The pain was like red hot irons in his side. He woke, his mouth wide open and only just managed to stop himself from shrieking.

For a moment, he saw one of the ectoplasmic wolf spirits that had entered him at the Gate of Morkai drifting just out of reach. As he breathed it shimmered and vanished, seemingly drawn back into his lungs with the intake of air. A hallucination, Ragnar told himself. Just a trick of his fevered brain.

His whole body ached. He felt like he had been stretched upon a rack. His head was sore. His gums bled. His hands hurt. He felt alternately too hot and too cold. Sweat beaded his flesh for no reason that he could think of. It was hard to think. His thoughts felt slow as molasses. The pain made it even more difficult. He was numbed. Cold. Devoid of feeling.

Ragnar gazed down at his hands in wonder, squinting to make things clearer. His hand looked different. It was broader and flatter. The muscles had more definition. The nails were becoming thicker and sharper. Actually, the whole world looked different. His eyes were watering again. At least it was better than the searing pain that sometimes made it feel like someone had stuck a hot needle through his eyeball. He sniffed the air. There was that strange scent again. What was it? He shook his head. He had no idea. For the past week his nostrils had been assaulted by a tidal wave of scents so strong they threatened to overwhelm him.

The smooth sheets below him stuck to his skin. He peeled himself off. The friction of parting skin from silk felt like someone was going over his skin with a rasp. He had become far too sensitive. Somewhere, far in the distance, he could hear someone muttering. From the next cell he could hear Sven's breathing. The noise was appalling, like someone working a bellows. He shook his head again and waited for the sensations to subside.

They didn't. This did not surprise him. Sometimes they did. Sometimes they didn't. In fact, most often they didn't. He sometimes thought that it was not the sensations that subsided but his ability to endure them that increased. He was not sure though. He was not sure of anything. He was sick all the time. He felt nauseous but he also felt hungry. It was a torment almost beyond enduring.

Wild anger surged through him. He bit the inside of his cheeks until the salty tang of blood touched his lips. He battered his hands against the wall in blind rage until the blood flowed. The pain was almost unendurable to his heightened senses but in some strange way it helped to calm him, to bring him back to reason.

He rubbed the interwoven stretchable links of the metal bracelet on his arm, stopping when his fingers came to the metal disc that had been inscribed with his rune. It had been put there by the Iron Priests after he had drunk from the Cup of Wulfen. Every aspirant had one. There was nothing magical about it as far as he could tell although it did have a rune inscribed on it. Every aspirant's rune was different. He and Kjel and the others had compared them. Ragnar's bracelet bore a rune like the figure of a man with two wavy lines above it. The lines might denote clouds or nothing at all. Kjel's rune showed a stylised hawk. Considering that it bore a slight resemblance to the double-headed eagle emblem they saw everywhere this might be considered a good sign.

His mind slipped in and out of focus. Think, he told himself. Remember! Your name is Ragnar. You are the last of the Thunderfists. You are a human being. Not some mindless beast. You are not ill. You are changing. The mark of Russ is upon you. He looked at his hands again. Yes. There was definitely more hair there now than there had been yesterday. There was more hair on his chest. On his whole body. He rose unsteadily to his feet, fighting off a wave of dizziness. He stood there for a moment, weak and shaking and feeble, and then as quickly as it had come the weakness passed, and he felt strong, strong beyond belief, strong

enough to rip steel, to tear through stone. He raced out of the chamber and down the corridor, determined to find food to assuage the hunger that burned in his belly.

The corridors were comfortably darkened. It did not matter. His eyes could see in the dark now better than they once could. He did not need them anyway to find the food. He could smell it. He could smell the raw fresh meat even though it was hundreds of yards away. He bounded along past the cells where the others lay. None of them looked any better than him. In fact many of them looked worse. All of them looked different.

As he passed Kjel's cell he saw the Falconer lying there. His eyes were open and they reflected the dim light like a dog's or a wolf's. They were becoming just like the eyes of Ranek and Hakon and all the others they had seen here in the Fang. Ragnar guessed his own were too. Kjel looked bigger, more muscular too. He seemed to be sprouting like a weed, gaining height and muscle mass. They all were. Part of Ragnar's mind which was still functioning wondered whether that was one of the reasons the world looked subtly different. He had gained so much height in the past few days that his eyes were further above the ground. His whole perspective had altered. It was a source of wonder to him.

Another part of him did not care at all. It only wanted meat. It wanted to slake its hunger and then its thirst and then it wanted to throw itself on the floor and sleep. And it was prepared to kill anything that sought to prevent it from doing so. The part of Ragnar that was still human wanted to shudder. He knew the bestial part of him was getting stronger, was becoming so strong at times that it submerged his consciousness, drove out all rational thought. He tried to fight against it, knowing that the more this happened, the easier it would be for the wolf spirit to gain control again. Eventually it would gain control permanently and then to all intents and purposes Ragnar might as well be dead, for he would no longer exist as a man.

He made himself think. It was as if he had two souls now, one human and one beast. No, it was more like his soul had been split into two, one part animal, one part human, and they were fighting for control. He knew now that they had been wrong to think they had triumphed when none of them had changed after drinking from the Cup of Wulfen. The change was not like that in the tale Ranek had told. It was not instantaneous. It was slower, more subtle. It had taken days for the beast to begin to emerge and

for the evidence of the internal changes to begin to become visible on the outside. They had all been too quick to think they had won. Ranek and the others, the two Iron Priests as he had called them, had known differently.

Ragnar forced himself to remember being led through the corridors of the Fang to these cells. At first it had seemed strange that the area had been sectioned off with barred metal doors. It had seemed like a prison, not a place for aspirants who had just passed an initiation test, and that was just what it was – a block of secure prison cells. They had been locked in these shadowy corridors to endure the changes and, it seemed, to go mad. At first they had not realised what was going on. Then they had started to feel ill. Then the fights had broken out as they had become aggressive and hungry and the craving for meat took them.

Ragnar shook his head as a wave of feral anger passed through him. Just the thought of anyone trying to stop him from getting his food filled him with rage. Let them try, he thought. He would tear their flesh from their bones with his bare hands and he would consume it. Stop, he told himself. That is not the way a man behaves. That is not the way a warrior behaves. A warrior has pride. A warrior has control. Somewhere deep within him, the beast howled mockingly.

He reached the area where the food lay. The bloody carcass of a huge deer had been thrown down onto the cold stone flags. He was lucky. None of the others were awake yet. No. Wait! What was that?

Ragnar was suddenly aware of the sound of padding feet behind him. Bare flesh slapped the stone. He turned to see Strybjorn racing towards him. Face twisted with hatred and hunger, Strybjorn looked different from the youth Ragnar had known back in Russvik. His features were broader, harsher, even more brutal. His eyes were wild. His nose was larger, nostrils wider. He was taller, broader, more muscular with the rangy strength of a full-grown warrior.

‘Mine,’ he shrieked and dived forward, fingers outstretched, nails like raking talons. For the barest of moments, Ragnar stood frozen. The part of him that was still human was horrified. If the Grimskull had been taken possession of by daemons it could not have been more horrible. There was a transformed, bestial expression painted on his face that was appalling to behold. His face was bright with anger. At that moment, he looked as if he fully intended to kill Ragnar. Part of Ragnar did not mind. Part of him welcomed it. Now was his chance to take final vengeance on his foe.

At the last second Ragnar sprang to one side. Strybjorn's nails raked his ribs, drawing blood. The salt tang of it assaulted Ragnar's nostrils and somewhere deep within him, the beast stirred. Suddenly he was furious again, filled with anger and a black brooding rage. Conscious thought faded, to be replaced by a desire to tear and rend. Animal savagery flooded his brain. It seemed like his mind would be drowned like a dragonship foundering in a stormy sea.

He fought back, trying to hold the wave of animal emotion in check, knowing that he would need his intelligence as well as animal cunning and ferocity to survive the coming struggle. Strybjorn sprang again. This time Ragnar bent double and allowed him to pass over his head. As he did so, Ragnar straightened, grabbed him and threw him to the ground. Strybjorn tumbled away. Ragnar twisted in time to see him land badly but keep rolling, dissipating the momentum of the fall, and eventually rise to his feet once more.

Part of Ragnar was aware that if this struggle was fought out to its logical conclusion then one or the other of them was going to die, or at least be seriously hurt. The beast within howled and jabbered. It did not care. It wanted only to fight. To kill or be killed and then, if it survived, to eat its fill. And part of the human Ragnar desperately wanted to do the same.

Ragnar was aware now that he was fighting this battle on numerous levels: not just with Strybjorn but with himself, with the thing that lurked within him. He knew now that if he gave way to the beast it would only become stronger, and that in the end would lead to a destruction as inevitable as anything that Strybjorn could mete out to him.

Already Strybjorn was returning to the attack, moving forward with swift padding steps, mouth open, teeth bared in a hideous grin that revealed his emergent fangs. In that moment, he truly looked demonic. He lashed out, fingers flexed, hands became talons to rake and rend. Once more he drew blood. Once more Ragnar found himself fighting not just against the pain but against the near irresistible tide of anger and hate that urged him to leap forward and bury his teeth in Strybjorn's throat. The warning Ranek had given him after the Gate of Morkai flickered through his brain. He saw now that his hatred was indeed a weakness, one that would allow the beast within him to overpower his human self. Giving

way now would merely lead to his soul's destruction. Revenge now was not worth the loss of his self. He would wait, and take it later, if he could.

Instead of attacking in bestial frenzy, he balled his hand into a fist and lashed out, catching Strybjorn a blow just above the heart. As the Grimskull reeled backwards, Ragnar struck again. His fist caught Strybjorn just beneath the jaw, hitting so hard that he rose onto the balls of his feet before slumping backwards unconscious upon the ground. Ragnar fought down the urge to leap upon his recumbent body, to rend and tear until he drew blood, to kill and devour. At that moment he felt as if his sanity, his soul, teetered on the edge of a vast precipice, a misty gulf into which his spirit would fall, never to return to the world of men.

He knew that if he gave way to this urge, he would forfeit his humanity, finally and forever. Eating human flesh was one of the strongest taboos of his people, giving way to it would make him ashamed of himself, would be another way to make Ragnar the beast stronger and Ragnar the man weaker. He could not afford to let this happen. And yet part of him wanted to do it anyway, wanted to give in, to surrender the constant heavy burden of thought and become less than a man, yet more than a beast. He knew that there was a traitor in him that wanted simply to give way, to get it all over with, to end this one-sided struggle and enter a world where everything was simple and basic, where there was no need for reason or thought or honour. Part of him wanted to give way to the forbidden urge and drink human blood. And worse, he realised that dark thing had always been there, waiting only for the stuff within the Cup of Wulfen to bring it to light, to make it strong. And now Ragnar was not sure if he could stop it consuming him, even if he wanted to.

For a dozen heartbeats he stood there, at war with himself, struggling for control. It was a fight as swift and fierce and deadly as the one he had just had with Strybjorn and he knew the outcome was just as important. He fought for control, looked for a way of binding the beast. He forced himself to remember all the unfinished business he had that would not be dealt with if he surrendered to the beast. He would never penetrate the secrets of the Space Wolves. He would never understand their magic. Slowly, a breath at a time, he calmed down. His heart ceased to race. He managed to focus his eyes on the food that had been the initial cause of his brawl with Strybjorn.

He reached down and ripped out a huge chunk of raw bleeding meat with his fingers. He forced it into his mouth and began to chew the cold moist flesh hungrily. He swallowed quickly, and gulped more down, determined to eat his fill before anyone could stop him. He bit and chewed until his hunger was assuaged and only then did some semblance of sanity return.

He walked over to the drinking fountain where cold water poured down into a stone trough. By some magic it never overflowed. The water ceased to emerge as the trough was filled. He lowered his head to drink and froze as he caught sight of his reflection. He saw himself and it was not a reassuring sight. His hair was wild. His eyes glowed strangely. Blood had dribbled from the corners of his mouth and covered his hands and his clothes. His face was gaunt as a madman's. He opened his mouth and saw that his teeth were longer and sharper. His canines were becoming fang-like. He looked monstrous and feral. Thus must a wulfen look, he thought, when it emerges from its nighted lair to feast.

Quickly he dropped his hands into the water and cupped them to drink. He told himself that it was because he was thirsty. In his soul, however, Ragnar knew that the real reason was to smash his reflection with the endless ripples.

Ragnar felt calmer now. He had no idea how much time had passed, only that it had done so. At first he had tried to keep track of the number of days that had gone by, or at least the number of times the lights had dimmed and brightened, by scratching marks on the walls of his cell. He knew that this had not always worked. He knew that long periods had gone by while he lay in delirium or submerged in bestial frenzy, and he had been unable to make his mark.

He got up and made his way down to the feeding pit, for such was how he now thought of it. He was hungry still but not now with the ravenous burning hunger that had threatened to consume his soul. The beast was still there, he thought, but he had its measure now. It was part of him but he was in control of it. His senses no longer seemed so keen they hurt. He knew they were far better now than ever they had been before but he had grown accustomed to them. He could sift through the information they presented him with and understand it. In a way it was little short of miraculous. He could see things in the darkness, track people by scent, hear a feather drop.

And he felt faster and stronger than he ever had. He did not doubt that most normal people would seem to be moving like slugs to him now, if ever it came to combat. He was broader too. He could lift the great stone bench in his room, a feat that would have broken his back during his time in Russvik. He felt as if he could run for leagues now without tiring, and he was sure he was much tougher and healthier. He had never felt better in his entire life.

Not everyone had been so lucky. He squirmed when he remembered some of the things that had occurred. They were like dimly recalled scenes from some terrible nightmare. Some of the aspirants had gone mad. He remembered Blarak dashing his brains out against a wall, and someone else trying to eat them. He was only glad that it had not been him. It could so easily have been when the madness was upon him.

He shivered, wondering if truly it was all over, whether he really was his own master once more, or whether the madness had merely abated temporarily. In the feeding pit, he knew, fresh raw meat awaited him.

The Iron Priests pulled Ragnar from the sensor coffin. It was just as well, he thought. He was not sure that he could have stood it for much longer. The metal walls enclosing him in their cold grip, the sensor probe wires wriggling like snakes across his skin, the strange jolts of sensation as the Priests invoked their magical engines had all conspired to drive him to the edge of sanity. Had he been incarcerated in this cold tomb for hours, days or perhaps years? He had no way of telling! The beast within him had howled and raved, sickened by its imprisonment, desperate to escape, and for once Ragnar had found himself in complete agreement.

He knew now that this served a purpose, that the Iron Priests were testing him, seeing how his body was adapting to the changes, monitoring him to see if anything had gone wrong. He knew that the blood samples they drew from his body with their brass needles were sent somewhere to be analysed with ancient machines, and that the reflex tests administered with jolts of chained lightning were carefully assessed by the priests. Even so, knowing that this rigour, this testing, was for the good, somehow did nothing to allay the maddening claustrophobia which Ragnar experienced as it felt like he was about to be crushed in a confined space, and his mind cried for the wide open spaces of the outside world.

And, of course, he thought sourly, none of this was for his benefit. Their magic could allow the priests to predict what was going to happen to

him. It seemed that once their changes had begun they could tell who was going to descend into madness, who was going to mutate, and who was going to descend into the monstrous condition of being a wulfen. They just would not do anything about it. They seemed content to let these things take their course and inscribe the results in their great musty leather-bound tomes. Their attitude seemed to be that there were plenty more aspirants to choose from, and if an individual failed, well, it was the will of the gods.

He shook his head and gazed around the chamber. It was huge and lit by the flickering light of ancient glowglobes. All around, massive machines hummed and whirred. They seemed incomprehensibly ancient, and in places they were rusted. Huge clumps of wires bound by copper coils and inscribed with hoary runes ran from engine to engine and connected them to the massive control altars behind which the Iron Priests sat and prayed and invoked the strange electrical spirits which they worshipped. The air smelled of ozone and oil and the unguents used to polish the machinery. Halos of luminescence played around the active engines showing the presence of the spirits they had summoned. From where he stood Ragnar could see Strybjorn strapped into a monstrous copper circle. His arms and legs were splayed as if he had been crucified. The circle floated inside another circle and slowly rotated first to the left then to the right then upwards so that Strybjorn was suspended upside down and then back to its normal position. As it did so, in the air next to the machine an image formed. It was roughly the same size as Strybjorn and had his outline made all of glowing lines of light. In some areas, mostly around the head and chest the lines were a deep angry red; in most other places they were green or yellow. Ragnar guessed that the individual colours indicated the areas in which most changes were taking place in the aspirant's body, but as with every new thing he experienced here, he did not know for certain. After a moment's hesitation, Ragnar resolved that there was only one way to find out.

‘What do the lines on that glowing figure mean?’ he asked pointing in Strybjorn's direction. The Iron Priest turned to look at him, his features covered by his expressionless metal mask. He fingered one of the runes inscribed on the ingots of iron around his neck and stared at Ragnar as if considering whether to reveal one of the secret mysteries of his order. Ragnar noticed with a faint shock of recognition that the rune was the

same as one of the runes inscribed on the sides of the Temple of Iron on the Islands of Fire. Was there a connection between the two orders, he wondered?

‘The red areas on the holoshadow indicate places within the aspirant’s body where great changes to its internal chemistry are still taking place. The yellow areas are the ones which are either stabilising or beginning to change. The green areas are stable.’

Ragnar had no idea what the word ‘chemistry’ meant but he saw that his general idea had been correct. He was surprised that the priest was telling him this too. In the past these servants of Russ had been terse and uncommunicative, but now perhaps a change seemed to be coming over them. This one still did not quite seem to regard him as an equal but at least now appeared to consider him to be someone of some small merit. A brief surge of excitement passed through Ragnar. Perhaps he could see how Ragnar’s change was going and whether the omens were favourable. Or perhaps it would be better not to know, to sink in ignorance into raving bestiality, if that was to be his fate. He decided to see if he could find out.

Once more the Iron Priest considered his question for a long time before responding in his slow cold voice. This time Ragnar was quite certain he recognised the accents of the Island of Fire in the man’s speech.

‘Your transformation is proceeding slowly and in a controlled fashion,’ he said eventually.

‘Is that bad?’ Ragnar asked, worry gripping his bowels.

‘Negative. Generally it is a positive indicator. A body which adapts in a slow, steady fashion usually adapts to the genetic implants favourably. Normally it is when change occurs in rapid, uncontrolled spurts that we see unfortunate degradation in the subject.’

‘So I’m going to survive.’

‘We did not say that. There is always some room for error in these auguries. Sometimes an aspirant appears fine for months and appears to successfully complete the transformation, then devolves at the last second. Sometimes aspirants begin to degrade and then recover. Nothing is certain. All of it is chance and down to the will of Russ and the blood spirits.’

Ragnar shivered. He might have guessed how the priest’s answer was going to sound. It seemed there was still every possibility that he was going to fail.

Weeks passed. Ragnar felt a lot better now. He felt the same way he had when he recovered from the purple fever as a child. While he was sick it had seemed as if he were never going to feel well again. Now that he had recovered, he was profoundly grateful for the feeling of health and strength that he possessed. Everything looked brighter, more colourful. The air smelled sweeter. Food tasted better. The feeling of the strange fabric against his skin was no longer a torment but a pleasure.

Of course, he told himself, that too might not simply be to do with his feeling better. It might well be because of the changes wrought by drinking from the Cup of Wulfen. All of his senses seemed much keener now, and in terms of strength and fitness he felt better than he ever had. The Iron Priests had pronounced themselves well satisfied with his transformation, although they had, as ever, managed to add a few cryptic warnings, saying there was still a danger of something going wrong.

Ragnar did not need their warnings to tell him this. He could still sense the beast spirit waiting within himself, although to tell the truth every day he was becoming more comfortable with its presence. It was simply part of him now, a thing that would give him strength and ferocity when called on, and which enabled him to understand the information his altered senses gave him. He felt now like he was part man and part wolf, or perhaps something greater than either. Just from looking at the other aspirants he could tell that not all of them felt the same way. Perhaps they were finding it more difficult to adapt.

Kjel looked haunted. There was a strange fey look in his eyes and his face was gaunt and strained. He constantly glared about him like a cornered beast. When he sensed Ragnar's eyes upon him, he growled and spat as if sending a warning. Ragnar noticed that Kjel was beginning to sprout hair all over. It covered the backs of his hands and protruded from the collar and wristbands of his tunic. His posture had changed too. He hunched forward with his hands held low and his fingers hooked like claws. Ragnar found it hard to see the bright, cheery Kjel he had once been in this wild-looking creature. Kjel scratched at the bracelet on his wrist, clawing around it until he drew blood from his own flesh. There was something about him that reminded Ragnar of a wolf with a paw caught in a trap.

Sven, on the other hand, was less changed in appearance, perhaps because he had always been more savage to begin with. He grinned at

Ragnar, showing his new fangs, and his eyes caught the light of the glowglobes, reflecting it eerily. If anything Sven had become even broader and more muscular. His arms were now the size of Ragnar's thighs and his chest was round as a barrel. Ragnar sensed that Sven was enjoying the transformation now and almost at peace with the beast which undoubtedly raged within him.

Aware of a burning gaze upon himself, he turned to look at Strybjorn. Now there was a man who was not at all relaxed. The Grimskull was taut as a hawser drawn tight in the wind. There was something wild about him; a mad rage ran amok in his eyes, and it was evident in his posture too. Strybjorn looked as if he were ready to leap into action at any second, at the slightest provocation. Looking into his deep, cave-like eye sockets it was all too easy for Ragnar to perceive the beast lurking within.

Ragnar still found it odd, almost uncomfortable how he seemed able to sense the others' moods and perhaps glean something of their thoughts. Perhaps that was another effect of the transformation. Perhaps they were becoming more like wolves in a pack, able to understand each other by means other than words and gesture. Perhaps he was reading things in his fellow aspirants posture and scent. That was partly it, Ragnar realised. He felt as if he could almost smell their moods. Kjel's strangeness had an odd acrid odour. The smell of Strybjorn's restrained wrath reminded him of smouldering wood. Sven's cheeriness of the scent of ale. He knew these were imprecise ways of describing the things even to himself, but he did not have the words to do otherwise. There was nothing in his language to express the ideas, to describe the smells or to distinguish the million subtle alterations in the scents which Ragnar now knew happened with every heartbeat.

Ragnar looked around at the others and his heart fell. So few remained. Nils was still there, and a stranger called Mikal. There was no sign of any of the others. He had no idea what had happened to them. Somewhere in the fever-dream madness that were the memories of his transformation, he thought he could discern images of the Iron Priests entering and carrying away aspirants who had become slinking monsters or who had descended into gibbering madness, but he was not sure. He knew that for as long as he lived he would never be entirely certain of what had happened during this period of his life, and in a way he was glad. He was sure there were actions in there that he would rather not recall.

The metal door swished open magically, parting into two distinct sections. Ranek stood there in his full mystical regalia. He surveyed them for a moment and then smiled grimly. What he said next sent a shiver of fear to Ragnar's core.

'Not many now,' Ranek said. 'Not many at all. And soon there may be less. It is time for the ultimate test.'



TWELVE

THE ULTIMATE TEST

Ragnar shivered. It was cold and it was dark and he was alone. He looked out across the chill landscape and the titanic peaks and realised that he could quite easily die here. For the first time in months, he was really and truly on his own. There was no one around for a hundred leagues. Already the Thunderhawk was receding into the distance, vanishing into the heavy grey clouds in the direction of the Fang. He had been the last to be dropped into the snow. The others had been set down already somewhere off in the far distance among the isolated peaks. Ragnar had not realised that there were quite so many aspirants until he had seen them all troop aboard the gunship. All told, he had counted over a score of them on the Thunderhawk. Obviously, Ragnar thought, Space Wolf candidates were brought in from places other than Russvik and kept in many separate areas of the Fang. He had no idea why this was, he just knew it must be so. It was the only explanation he could think of. Swiftly he dismissed the thought as irrelevant to the matter at hand. He had his survival to think of.

Ragnar glanced around him at the bleak and dreary landscape. Huge boulders had tumbled into the valley and obscured much of it from view. Some of the massive rocks were covered in lichen, which showed that it was at least possible for plant life to survive in this barren wilderness. Many of the boulders were already partially covered in snow. Large flakes were starting to fall, slowly, softly but inexorably. After a moment or two contemplating the dismal scene before him, Ragnar shook his head to clear his befuddled thoughts, took a breath of the chill air and took stock of his situation.

All he wore was the grey tunic of an aspirant and the leather belt that held his scabbard and dagger. That was it. He had no supplies of any sort. Nothing else to help him survive in this deadly place. Ragnar knew that at first glance, his task might seem a simple one: he had to return to the Fang and present himself to the Space Wolves. If he survived, he would be initiated as a true Space Marine. If he failed, he would most likely be dead. It was as simple as that.

Things were not so bad, Ragnar told himself. It could be worse. At least his aspirant's tunic, woven as it was from some strange grey material, was uncannily warm. And he had his knife. It did not sound like much even to Ragnar, standing alone in the darkness in the snowy wastes high in the mountains of Asaheim. However, at least the Fang was easy to find. It towered above every other peak in the range and was visible on the horizon. But even as he thought this, another part of his mind whispered that he was doomed. There was so much that could go wrong. Warm though his tunic was, he doubted that it would prove warm enough if the winds really started to blow and the temperature began dropping. And there was always the possibility of it being ripped and torn as he travelled. Ragnar wondered whether it could maintain its miraculous warming qualities then.

Yes, the Fang was visible, but from his time in the far lesser mountains around Russvik, Ragnar knew that clouds and freezing fog could descend at any time, reducing visibility to zero. These valleys were most likely a maze and it would be all too easy to get lost if that happened. And what was he going to do for food? This landscape was as stark and bare as the plains of hell. He doubted that he would find anything edible here. And if he did, it would perhaps find him just as edible.

There might well be packs of the great iron grey wolves at large in these peaks, or trolls, or nightgangers or cannibal tribesmen or, worst of all, there could easily be wulfen. Not even his knowledge of how wulfen were born could shake him of his fear of the monsters.

Well, Ragnar thought, there would be time enough to worry about these things when or if he encountered them. Right now, he had better start moving. Perhaps he could find a cave before it really got dark.

Ahead of him was a stunted tree. Ragnar was strangely reassured and cheered by the plucky tree. It was small and warped, but at least it was growing, clinging to the hillside with its roots. It was defying the mountain, and it showed that living things could survive here. More, if he were clever, it would help him survive. He knew that soon, if he continued to descend, he would see other trees. He had been among mountains long enough to know now that there was a line above which trees did not grow, and that the highest ridges and peaks were bare of all vegetation except moss.

He took up another handful of snow and stuffed it in his mouth. At least he would not die of thirst as long as it lay on the ground. From the things Hakon had told them back at Russvik he knew it was possible that disease spirits might lurk in the unpurified water but right now he did not care. Thirst was a far more real and imminent danger, and he had no way yet of making fire nor any pot to boil water.

The snow froze his gums and chilled his tongue, but it melted and he gulped it down. In his hand Ragnar held a chunk of flint which he had picked up amongst the treacherous banks of shale and scree on the mountainside. He wished he had a pouch to carry it in, but he did not, so holding it in a clenched fist was his only option. The rock would serve two purposes, Ragnar hoped. The first was that he could throw it at any marauding beasts. And with his new-found sheer muscle power, Ragnar was utterly confident that he could throw a sharp stone very hard indeed. The thought brought a wolfish smile to his face. The second use for the flint was that he could strike it with his knife to create sparks, and thus make a fire.

Some hope, Ragnar thought, strength draining out of him as he looked at the damp bark of the tree. Now he had wood aplenty, but it was wet and cold, and Ragnar knew that there was no chance of getting it to catch fire under these conditions.

Ragnar shivered again, and briefly wondered how the others were doing. Had their past few days been as hard as his, a long weary trudge through the snow and cold, trying to follow the valley paths and to always keep the great peak of the Fang visible ahead of them? Had they shivered at the wind's chill blast as they passed along narrow and slippery ledges which hung out over awful rock strewn gorges? Had they kept their ears peeled for the calls of the great beast, the wulfen which they all feared so? Had they watched in awe as a mighty rock eagle passed overhead scanning the bleak landscape for prey with eyes keen enough to spot a mouse moving from a thousand feet up? Had they too survived by chewing edible moss, and eating eggs stolen from the nests of mountain birds?

Ragnar shivered. It was possible that the others were already dead. He had seen so many ways to die on his march so far, and he was only a few days in. In the storm-wracked mountains, there was the constant possibility of avalanche and rock falls. There was the strength-sapping chill all around that made you just want to lie down and die. There were

the narrow paths where a single misstep would cast the careless down into a great abyss. Perhaps they had been eaten by beasts. Perhaps they had gone mad. Perhaps the delayed effects of the transformation had taken them and they had become monsters themselves, even now hunting for Ragnar to rend him limb from limb.

Of all the possible fates which preyed on his mind, this was the one that affected Ragnar the most. He knew that there was still the possibility that something might go wrong even now. The Iron Priests had told him that no aspirant was safe for at least a month after the transformation and possibly not even then. The beast that lay deep in his mind might still leap forth to devour his soul. Perhaps this wild place was all it needed to leap out and possess him utterly. It was not a reassuring thought.

Ragnar forced himself to put one foot in front of the other, knowing that soon he would have to find a place to rest for the night once more. Even with his newly altered eyes, travelling in darkness in these mountains would most likely prove suicidal. There was always the possibility of missing something, of stepping on a patch of scree and tumbling downslope, of stumbling into an unseen pit. Besides, at night the temperature would soon drop even further and he had no wish to test the heat-retaining abilities of his tunic any more than he had to. One thing Ragnar had learned during his time at Russvik was that survival in these circumstances was mostly a matter of doing nothing to provoke the Fates. Rather like playing a game of chance, the trick was to keep as many of the odds in your favour as you could. This meant not taking risks unless you had to. Even if you were strong and capable and confident, as Ragnar most certainly was with his new found strength and combat skills, a slight mishap would be enough to end your life under these harsh conditions. Even a minor accident, a sprained ankle, a twisted limb, a minor ailment could be enough. Ragnar knew that such an accident would bring weariness, numbing the mind, sapping the strength, making the toughest warrior easy prey to other dangers. Over time such minor scrapes or injuries could grow gradually worse until eventually they immobilised even the strongest amongst the Space Wolves. Ragnar resolved that the trick, then, was not to fall victim to the slightest avoidable mishap in the first place. Easier said than done, he thought.

He looked around for a place to rest and saw that near the tree there was a small indentation with an overhanging ledge which protected the

hollow from the worst of the wind and falling snow. Ragnar decided that this was as good a shelter as he was likely to find this night. He began to hack at the tree, collecting twigs and needles and cones for firewood and a long heavy branch that would serve as both club and walking stick. After some effort, he even managed to cut off a longer, straighter, narrower branch which Ragnar hoped he might be able to sharpen and use as a spear.

It took Ragnar some time to collect his booty and return to his resting place. It took him a longer time yet to give up trying to get a fire started using sparks from his knife and flint over a pile of needles and cones. The needles were damp and in no condition to catch light. At least such activity kept him awake, and Ragnar thought that this was probably a good thing in this frozen and desolate landscape. Eventually, chilled and weary, he made a carpet of needles to provide some insulation from the cold rock and then lay down and fell asleep. His last thought was to wonder whether he would ever awaken.

Ragnar dreamed of wolves. He dreamed of beasts that were half-man, half-wolf. He dreamed they were stalking him through the endless stone canyons that lay in the shadows of the mountains. In his dream he was cold. In his mind he sensed the presence of the other, of the beast that had awakened within him when he drank from the Cup of Wulfen. It too responded to the howls. For once it did not seem to want to struggle against his control. It seemed to realise that they shared a body, and that if Ragnar died then its existence too would end. It was just as wary of any threats as he was, and for the first time Ragnar began to see the possibility of something other than an uneasy truce between him and his darker more feral side.

In his dream, Ragnar began to stalk his enemy, rather than slinking away, and guided by the wolf spirit within him, he knew that he would find prey within the stone valleys, that soon he would be able to bury his own fangs into hot, blood-soaked meat.

He awoke in darkness to bone-chilling cold, shivering, unsure whether the sound he was hearing was something from the shadow world of his dream or from the harsh, flinty realm of reality that surrounded him. He did not have to wait long to find out. The howl sounded again, louder and closer now. Surely it was the wail of a storm daemon summoning its brethren. A cry of unutterable hunger and pain and weariness. Ragnar recognised it as the howling of one of the great wolves of Asaheim. He

shivered, knowing that if any of the creature's kin were near, his life would soon be over. Assuming surprise, he might be able to overcome one of the great beasts in combat but there was no way he could defeat a pack. Ragnar knew that acting en masse the wolves of Fenris could drag down a troll or even an ice dragon. In all the wastelands of Asaheim there were no more fell creatures.

He strained his ears to listen and tested the night winds with his nostrils. He thought he smelled something, the tattered remnants of a sour odour fragmented by the wind's cold fingers. It was a smell that he instinctively recognised as belonging to one of the great wolves. He pulled himself low in his lurking place and considered his options. There was at least one good thing about his situation. At the moment he was downwind of the wolf. He could smell it but it could not smell him. Of course that could change as quickly as the wind could shift direction but there was nothing he could do about this, other than pray to Russ that it did not happen. And there was something else about the wolf scent too – a taint, a stink, an odour as of sickness or disease. Ragnar was not yet experienced enough to know exactly what such a smell meant but he hoped that it indicated the creature was merely ill and not the carrier of some plague taint.

He checked his weapons. He held his knife in his left hand and his spear in his right. The club lay nearby, ready to be seized up after the sharpened stick was cast. Ragnar did not hope for much from it; he had intended to harden the point in the flames of the fire he had never managed to start, so he had no idea how effective it would be. Still, it had to be better than nothing. Ragnar thought it a pity he had no shield. He shrugged. He might just as well wish for one of Ranek's magical weapons. Both things were just as unavailable to him.

Ragnar stilled himself. The hair on the back of his neck rose as he heard the faint scraping of talon on stone, and then loping down the long track the Fenrisian wolf came into view. Marvelling at the ability of his eyes to pick out detail even in the dark of night, instantly Ragnar could see that the wolf was old and wounded. Its fur was white and mangy, an old wound going gangrenous in its side was the source of the rotten stink. It was limping a little and favouring its right front foot.

Ragnar held his breath. It was an old wolf, perhaps a pack leader that had lost its struggle against younger more fearsome wolves and had thus

been driven out. It was obviously weakened and starving, and yet it still looked like a fearsome foe. It was as high at the shoulder as Ragnar was and even in its weakened state must outweigh him by almost two to one. Its fangs were like daggers and its eyes burned with red madness. Even as Ragnar saw all this, it appeared to notice him for the first time. It opened its mouth and let out another long lonely howl of rage and hatred, and then it sprang.

Ragnar reacted instantly, casting his spear directly at the mighty beast's breast. The point of the weapon struck home driven by the full power of Ragnar's steely muscles. Blood flowed where the fur parted. The wolf tumbled and the shaft broke. Ragnar hoped the tip was left embedded in the wound. He did not wait to pick up the club, but seizing his advantage leapt forward himself. The immense wolf snarled and lunged at him. Ragnar sprang to one side and caught the enraged brute around the neck, avoiding its deadly fangs. He had no doubt that one bite would rip his throat out or smash a limb to a bloody pulp. Ragnar intended to wrestle the beast down, confident of the power in his superhuman muscles to overcome any mere wolf. As the beast growled and strained to best the aspirant, Ragnar quickly learned that his blind confidence was misplaced.

It was like trying to hold back an avalanche. Enormous cable-like sinews bunched beneath the matted fur. The scent of the wolf's foetid breath stung Ragnar's nostrils. With the cunning of years, the great wolf hurled its weight against Ragnar, smashing him against the sharp rocks which lay strewn about the valley floor. Razor shards cut his arms in a dozen places, and his hands soon ran slick with his own blood. With the weight of the old beast on his chest, Ragnar felt the breath being forced out of his lungs. Soon he was gasping, and lights danced before his eyes. The wolf growled deep in its throat. He hooked his arm around its throat and struggled with all his strength to hold the beast in place. It turned and snapped up at him. The horrid jaws closed like a bear trap mere inches from Ragnar's nose. With his breath coming in ragged gasps, Ragnar swiftly brought his knife up and stabbed it repeatedly and frenziedly into the warm yielding flesh of the wolf's throat. He pulled the knife crossways, feeling the drag of muscle, sinew and artery. Blood spurted as the beast's throat was cut. Warm and crimson fluid jetted out onto the cold grey stone. As the blood steamed in the cold night air, Ragnar held the

wolf in place until its thrashing struggles lessened, became feeble, and then finally ceased.

Then he set to work butchering the creature.

Ragnar was well pleased with his night's work. He had a new cloak of uncured wolfskin hide. Granted, the scraped fur stank, but it served as another layer of insulation around his body. The raw meat of the creature's flesh and innards had assuaged his aching hunger and drinking its warm blood in his cupped hands had refreshed him. Better yet, the wolf's sinews would provide him with cord to bind his knife to the tip of a spear, turning it into a really formidable weapon, once he found another suitable branch. A tattered scrap of fur had already provided him with a pouch to carry his flints in. He had used a final strip to create a makeshift sling with which he could hurl jagged fragments of rock at great speed and distance. As he marched along he practised with it, achieving a tolerable proficiency.

Ragnar studied the sky, not liking the look of it. Huge black sooty clouds obscured the Fang and the southernmost portion of the heavens. He thought he could hear the distant rumble of thunder. Still, there seemed to be nothing else he could do except push on. Munching on a still moist strip of wolf flesh he set out at an easy lope down the slope.

Using his newly-made spear like a staff, Ragnar continued on through the wood. He was happy with his new weapon. The long branch was strong. The dagger was fixed firmly in place at its tip. He felt ready now to take on almost anything.

He liked it better here, he thought, looking at the mass of pines that surrounded the trail. The forest seemed endless but it was warmer and he was now far below the barren ridges above the tree line. Streams raced downwards, carrying meltwater and rain from the peaks. Birds whistled and sang and there were signs of small animals everywhere. He knew now that at least he was not going to starve or die of thirst.

Already he had clambered into the trees and recovered some eggs, sucking the contents out through a small hole he had punched in the top. The stream water was cold and refreshing and he wished he had something to carry it in. If he stayed in this forest, it would be possible to live here, Ragnar thought. Perhaps he should try. After all, he did not have to go back to the Fang, and he owed nothing in particular to the Wolves except a lot of pain. Ragnar doubted that anyone would ever find him if he chose to remain here in isolation. In fact he quite sincerely doubted whether anyone

would even try. The Space Wolves' attitude seemed to be that they did not want anyone who could not meet their standards anyway, and simply by not returning, Ragnar knew he would fail that test.

Looking around as he walked, Ragnar saw more and more evidence that in truth a man could live in these woods quite well. He could build a lean-to as he had been taught, which he could use until he found a suitable cave. He could dry out wood. He could build a fire. He could hunt, and find edible vegetables. He could have a long life here, living by his own rules in a land which would be his own small kingdom.

And yet, Ragnar knew in his heart of hearts that he could not abandon his quest. It was not simply a matter of pride, either, although that most certainly played its part. He had unfinished business back at the Fang with Strybjorn, if the Grimskull bastard was still alive. But more than that there was something else. Ragnar did not want to exist alone out here in the mountain forests. Something at the Fang called to him, as the fellowship of the pack might call out to a wolf. Ragnar had been changed when he drank from the Cup of Wulfen, he knew. He had become something more than and less than a man. It was as if the beast that had awakened within him had made him at least part wolf, and the wolf within him craved the company of the pack. He craved to find a place in it. He craved to carve out his own position within its hierarchy.

More than that, Ragnar knew now that there was something back at the Fang itself he also craved. While he had taken nothing but hard knocks from Ranek and Hakon and their ilk, he knew now that they were supermen worthy of respect, and that they considered their tasks in this life to be worthy and honourable. Ragnar knew that he wanted what they had: their certainty, their pride, their power, their magic. He wanted to become one of the secret masters of this world, and more than that he wanted to be worthy to be one of them. And Ragnar knew he would not do so by remaining here among the woods and mountains no matter how appealing the thought might be.

Ragnar knew that since he had been chosen, he had changed, and not simply because he had drunk of the Cup of Wulfen. A whole new world had opened up for him, a place wilder and vaster than anything he had ever imagined back on his home island. He had done things that none of his people ever had: he had ridden in flying ships, passed through the Gate of Morkai, looked upon the cloud-capped spires of the Fang. He had begun to

understand that the world was not as he had always thought it was, and that there were greater and more terrible things in the universe than tribal wars and long sea voyages. He had begun to sense that the Space Wolves had a great and terrible purpose, and that all these tests that seemed so threatening to him were in a way necessary to that purpose. In the visions he had seen at the Gate of Morkai he had begun to get some inkling of the mighty and terrible nature of their other-worldly foes, and of the destiny that might await him should he prove worthy. Ragnar was certain that it was no accident that he seen what he had. He was certain that his possession of this profound knowledge was intentional on the part of those ancients who tested him, and he felt that what he did with that knowledge might even be part of the test. Ragnar knew from talking with his fellow aspirants that some of them simply refused to believe the terrible visions, never mind accept them, and he felt sure that this was a mistake.

In a strange way, Ragnar was even pleased to be here, now, amid the towering mountains. He knew that he was looking upon nature's wild and terrible beauty in a place he felt sure no man had ever seen before. Like sailing the ocean storm, or seeing the red sun sink below the sea at the end of a hard day at the oar, that in itself was thrilling. He even felt something like gratitude to the Space Wolves for putting him here, where he might experience the awesome loneliness of this place.

Shaking his head, Ragnar exhaled, his breath fogging in the crisp air. He knew that he needed to push on. He intended to find his way back to the Fang. And he intended that he would not be the last.

The mist was thick and clinging and reduced everything to a shadowy outline. The rocks around Ragnar were phantoms. The path was barely visible just a few strides ahead. Sometimes the clouds would shift and billow and he would be able to see a little further but mostly he was shut in by dim, insubstantial walls that muffled sound and sight and made the way ahead invisible.

Ragnar was reminded of his people's idea of hell – a cold and misty place where the shades of the dead roamed a dry and rocky land. This place met that description almost exactly and at that moment it seemed all too possible to Ragnar that somehow he had died without knowing it and stumbled through the gates of death. He listened to the soft movement of the wind currents, tested the air for scents and prayed that this was not true. If it was, at least it seemed that even in death he was able to keep his

new found powers. Still, Ragnar felt that it would not be fair for him to have come so far and to have died without knowing it.

He pushed the thought aside as a figment of his overactive imagination. He yet lived. Blood still flowed in his veins. His skin still tingled with the cold. Condensation glistened on the fabric of his tunic and he could feel the moist droplets as he wiped it away. This was real. Truly he might die here, but he was not dead yet. He grinned grimly to himself.

The mist was dangerous. Of this Ragnar had no doubt. He was following a long ridgeline between two mighty peaks and the path was a hard one. In places it was exceedingly narrow and threatened to crumble underfoot. Often it was a mere ledge alongside a drop that Ragnar had no idea of the depth of. He merely knew that he did not want to test it by falling into it. Perhaps the worst of it was that the path continually twisted and turned so that there was always the threat that it would veer away suddenly to left or right and Ragnar would place his foot on emptiness before tumbling to his mist enshrouded doom.

Ragnar used the butt of his improvised spear as a staff and tested the way as he inched along the ledge. He had no idea at all whether he was going in the right direction or not, but was simply convinced that he needed to press on. Suddenly, and only for a moment, the mist parted, and Ragnar had a clear view along the ridge. For a moment he felt as if he were soaring on wings above the clouds. Far, far below him the valleys and ridges were obscured by the gloom but all around him the peaks emerged from the clouds like islands from the seas of Fenris. The shrunken sun sent spears of light into the mist. Ragnar gasped aloud, as ahead of him he saw the mighty column of the Fang, rearing with sinister majesty through the swirling grey clouds. Truly it was a sight of wondrous beauty.

Ragnar felt he was scaling the very walls of heaven, that he walked upon the clouds. This must be what it was like to be Russ, he thought, or to be a god. It was, in a strange way, by far the most impressive sight he had ever seen, and it moved him deeply. Ragnar's heart swelled within his breast and a fierce joy overcame him. He would survive! He would return victorious to the Fang, to take his rightful place amongst the wolves!

Then in a moment the clouds rose again, like huge breakers throwing themselves onto a storm-wracked beach. The wet mist and cloying fog closed in once more. The vision disappeared. Suppressing a shiver, Ragnar

pulled his stinking wolfskin cloak tight around his shoulders and trudged forwards into the realm of shadows.

For some time now, Ragnar had sensed something out there in the dark grey of the clinging fog. He was not sure where or what it was, but he was sure that there was something watching him. He imagined he could feel its burning gaze boring into his back like a blade. Ragnar looked back over his shoulder into the gloom for the tenth time in as many minutes, and saw nothing. He tested the air constantly, and was sure he caught the scent of something at once familiar yet somehow strange, a bitter tang in the air, a scent that made him shudder.

Ragnar knew that he was getting close to the Fang now. After a troubled night asleep on a high ridge, this very morning he had caught sight of the Fang's lower slopes from the ever rising hills. At dusk as the darkness closed in, he saw the regular patterns of light on the hillside that marked the presence of human beings. He could picture in his mind's eye the enormous structures he had seen when he had first arrived, and he could make the lights conform to the outlines of those gigantic machines with very little effort. Now they seemed as welcoming as they once seemed terrifying and strange.

It had been a long trek. Seven hard days from the place where he had been dropped to this ultimate mountain. He was weary, hungry and cold but he felt a sense of achievement such as he had never known before. All the lessons he had learned at Russvik he had put to good use. He had found shelter and food and water. He had preserved his health and his sanity. He had used his newly honed senses to the maximum extent. He had kept himself alive with nothing and no one to help him save the blessing of Russ. And the truth was that until a few moments ago he had rarely felt better about himself or the world. Now, however, he felt a shiver of fear pass through him at the sense that some inhuman evil presence dogged his steps.

Ragnar guessed that another day's march would bring him to one of the outposts of the Space Wolves, barring accidents, and he had been keen to rest this evening and press on at dawn. Now, he simply felt the urge to keep moving while the full moon beamed down. It was all he could do to keep from breaking into a run, like a hare pursued by a fox. His human logic told Ragnar that he had no proof that anything followed him at all, that his nerves were simply frayed by his long ordeal. The animal instinct

of the beast within him told a different story. It screamed at him to flee or fight, to run or stand his ground. And Ragnar had come to respect the beast.

He sensed that running would be no good. Running over broken ground in uncertain light would be sure to lead to an accident, one that would most likely prove fatal if he were then attacked. Ragnar knew it would be best to make camp, to build a fire using his pouch full of dried leaves, twigs and sticks and try to rest. Perhaps the flames would frighten off whatever it was that watched him. Perhaps not. It might be worth a try.

Somewhere deep within him he felt the presence of the beast. It watched and waited and in it a furious anger was building up. It did not like being hunted. It did not appreciate being prey rather than predator. It wanted to turn at bay and confront whatever followed it with tooth and nail. Ragnar was strangely reassured by that, and found himself in agreement. Running through the dark was not going to help, neither was worry or fear. They would only paralyse him and sap his energy. With a fierce grunt, Ragnar realised that he had come to a decision of sorts. Nearby stood several huge boulders, enormous shadows in the gloom.

In their lee would be some shelter from the wind and the elements. He moved in their direction, determined that he would build a fire. And wait.

The flames flickered. The smell of woodsmoke reached Ragnar's nostrils. He munched on the nuts and berries he had collected earlier and wished that he had some water to moisten his mouth. Tomorrow he would find a stream, he told himself. If he still lived.

He avoided looking directly at the flames so as not to ruin his much enhanced night vision. He was still keenly aware of that sense of presence. Ragnar listened to the sounds of the night, and sniffed at the cold air. The hairs on the back of his neck rose now as he heard the sound of pebbles rolling down the scree, disturbed by the approach of something heavy, something that moved with furtive care. Ragnar reached for his spear and rose to a crouch, placing his back to the largest of the boulders, a stone half again as tall as he. At least in this way he would not be taken by surprise from behind. Whatever it was would have to face his wrath. And if he had to, Ragnar knew he would die with his wounds to the fore, as his father had taught him. He licked his lips, his hands clenching and unclenching on the rough shaft of his spear.

The stink he had smelled earlier became stronger. In it was a hint of something human, and of something animal. There was a smell like that of a wolf's fur. Now he could hear a faint snuffling sound, as of a large beast sniffing the air. His fingers tightened even harder around the spear shaft, his body tensed like a coiled spring as he made himself ready to strike at the unseen enemy.

Fear boiled in the pit of his stomach. The small hairs of his body rose. He recognised the outline of the thing that appeared in the firelight. It was tall and heavy and manlike. Its torso was covered in the remains of a ripped grey tunic that now appeared far too small for its massive muscular form. Its hands ended in long talon-like claws. Its head was still human but covered in thick, matted fur, and its snarling mouth revealed massive fangs. In its eyes burned hunger, rage and a startling intelligence. It opened its mouth and gave a low feral growl. An answering growl was torn unbidden from Ragnar's lips.

It was wulfen. Ragnar knew now what had been stalking him, knew that he had suspected it all along and this had been the source of his fear and his unease. The beast within him had recognised the wulfen. That the thing intended to kill him and feast on his flesh he had absolutely no doubt. It was going to be a matter of kill or be killed. He knew he would have to strike quickly and without mercy if he were to have any chance to live. He brought his improvised spear up and braced for the killing stroke. Within himself the beast stood ready to strike.

And in that moment his hand was stayed. He found that he could not bring himself to make the cast. This wulfen had once been a man just like him. It had been an aspirant. It had drunk from the cup. It had undergone the same changes and torments that he had. In Russ's name it could so easily have been him, if the beast had gained control. Indeed, it was all too possible that this creature was someone he knew. It might be Kjel or Sven or even Strybjorn. Could he really just kill it out of hand?

It appeared the creature felt something like the same emotion. It halted for a moment. Its eyes moved from Ragnar to the fire and then back to Ragnar again. It growled once more. Ragnar could see its muscles tensing. He could see now that a bracelet similar to the one on his own arm glittered on the thing's wrist, and knew with a thrill of horror that it was most likely one of his own former companions. But which one, he asked himself. Was it a friend or foe?

In a moment all such considerations became moot. The wulfen sprang. By instinctive reflex action Ragnar sent the spear hurtling into its chest. The long blade pierced its ribs and buried itself in the monster's heart. The shaft bent and then broke under the creature's weight and the force of its leap. Ragnar was slammed back into the boulder and for a moment found himself gazing into the creature's eyes. Human intelligence seemed to flood back into them.

The twisted lips formed a single word, 'Ragnar,' then the wulfen died.

Ragnar looked down on the slumped form, filled with both horror and triumph by what he had done. He had killed a wulfen. Alone. But he had also known it as a man, a good friend. Ragnar bent down to inspect the bracelet on the creature's arm to find out who it had been, hoping against hope that it was Strybjorn.

In the flickering light the rune etched onto the metal was clearly visible. It showed the sign of the hawk. Ragnar vented a long howl of rage and grief into the cold, uncaring night, knowing that he had just killed Kjel, his only true friend.



THIRTEEN ACCEPTANCE

Ragnar lay on the surgical altar once more. He looked up to see the masked faces of the Iron Priests. He could hear the dim thrum of their machinery, the odd soul-chilling music of their ritual chants, the occasional scream or howl of a warrior in pain as the razorsaw circular knives of the priests bit into their flesh.

The table beneath him was sticky with his own coagulated blood, the smell of it and of various chemicals assaulted his nostrils. His fingers bunched around the metal grips on the side of the altar. He took a deep breath and willed himself to be calm.

Since he got back to the Fang there had been many strange medical rituals performed over him. He had been put in various technical engines and scanned. Iron Priests had prodded him with sensor wands, encased his head in scanner helmets, clipped monitoring filaments to his limbs. He had been fed a diet of meat and ale containing the chemical taint of many strange drugs. His enhanced senses had told him of their presence, but he assumed that they had been put there for his own good so he had not worried. Not that worrying would have done much good anyway, since he was entirely at the mercy of the Iron Priests.

At least he was still alive. Not all of the other aspirants were. Sven had returned. So had Strybjorn. So had many of the others but not all. At least five, including Kjel, had not come back from the ultimate test. A full month had passed and it seemed unlikely now that they ever would.

Ragnar forced the thought of Kjel to the back of his mind. He did not like to think about it. Kjel had been the closest thing to a friend he had possessed among the aspirants, and now Kjel was gone. Many times recently Ragnar had lain awake wondering what it must have been like for the Falconer, wandering alone through the great wilderness while his body altered into something other than human, and the beast within devoured his mind and his soul. Had he been aware of what was happening the whole time? Or had he fallen early into merciful oblivion? Ragnar realised that he would never know.

The Iron Priests assured him that the changes wrought by the Cup of Wulfen were complete, that his body had now fully integrated the magical thing they called the canis helix, and that he was ready to move on to the next part of the process that would turn him into one of the Wolves. He was ready to have the thing they called the geneseed implanted.

Ragnar took another deep breath and strove to remain calm. The beast, the animal side of his nature, did not like this. It hated being strapped down, caged, subject to the will of others. It did not like this business at all. There was nothing he could do. He turned his head fractionally and saw that one of the high Iron Priests was approaching. He held a glass chalice reverently in both hands. In it was a pulpy fleshy thing from which emerged various nodules and tubes of tissue. The chanting of the priests around Ragnar's altar grew louder and more rhythmical as the warrior approached.

This was the geneseed, Ragnar knew, remembering the things he had been taught over the past few weeks. This was the master component that controlled all the others and would enable his transformation into a full Space Wolf. It would enable his body to adapt and it would control the host of other implants the Iron Priests were going to place within his flesh. It did not look like much, but it was a sacred thing. This scrap of bloody flesh had been borne by many Wolves before Ragnar, had originally been taken from the flesh and blood of Russ himself. It was a direct link with the ancient times and with the god of his people. It was a staggering thought to Ragnar that soon within his own body would be part of his god. However, it was something that all the other Space Wolves possessed, and went a long way towards explaining the superhuman attributes they possessed. In a very real sense they were kin to the gods. And soon, Ragnar thought, if all went well, so too would he be!

The Iron Priest came ever closer. Ragnar felt a needle spike going into his arm. In his hyper-sensitised condition it felt like a stab from a sword. There was brief flash of agony and then coolness flowed through his veins, spreading from the point where the needle went in. In moments he was relaxed and numbed and aware of his body as a remote and distant thing. It was as if his soul floated on a cloud of ice and looked down upon the things that happened to his flesh.

He felt his skin shake and a soft pressure on his chest as one of the Iron Priests reached forward and cut him with a ripsaw. Flesh parted. Blood

flowed. Ragnar doubted that more damage could have been inflicted with a blow from an axe and yet he was aware of it only as a passing discomfort. He saw the high Iron Priest make a complex gesture over the vessel in which the geneseed rested before reaching in with one gauntleted hand and pulling the fleshy thing out. He heard an odd sucking sound as the geneseed was placed within his ribcage and began the task of grafting itself to his nerves and veins and sinews.

It was an odd sensation the like of which he had never endured before. It was as if a living thing were crawling about inside his chest cavity. He imagined tentacles of flesh emerging from the thing's carapace, of veins sprouting from it like roots from a seed, of bits of nerve binding themselves to his own. The image filled his mind as another needle was driven home. Molten pain flashed through him, dispersing the coolness, and his spirit toppled forward into a black abyss.

Ragnar knelt in the meditation chamber. He felt better now. His chest no longer felt swollen and constricted by the presence of the geneseed. The scars of the ceremony were already fading even though only days had passed. He was aware only of a slight sensitivity around the whole area where it was tender to the touch. He had found himself poking at it daily like a man touching a cavity in his tooth with his tongue. It seemed inconceivable to him at this moment that the scars and the tenderness both were marks of the favour of Russ, yet he knew it must be so. The things he had learned over the past few days made that all too clear.

He forced the thoughts from his mind and concentrated on Ranek. The Wolf Priest stood before the aspirants once more and bade them begin the ritual. Ragnar cleared his mind as he had been taught and began to intone the strange prayer. He felt himself relax as he reached forward and picked up the crown of knowledge. It was a mysterious and age-old thing of brass and iron, connected to the engines of knowledge by pulsing cables of copper and glass.

Ranek had told them the crowns were connected to great machines where all the history of the Chapter was stored, and much ancient lore. By donning the crowns, that lore could be pumped directly into his head at a rate far beyond that at which a person could normally memorise it. Ragnar found the whole process a frightening and magical one. Once the crown was in place, and the correct litanies intoned by the priests, then the knowledge came. Not only in the forms of words and memories, but also

of sounds and pictures and emotions. Ragnar knew his own feelings were being subtly altered by the machines, but he did not care: the possession of the lore was worth the price. He had learned so much in only a few days. It was an enlightening experience in its own way. The more he learned, the more he understood the Space Wolves, and the more he understood the Chapter the more he longed to serve them and be a part of them.

He knew now that the world was a far greater and more complex place than ever he had believed. Indeed there was not just one world but many. Fenris was an orb that circled the Eye of Russ. It was merely one of many such worlds that floated in the space around that huge sun. And in turn the Eye of Russ was just one of millions of suns that made up the galaxy and around many of which orbited other inhabited worlds. Strangest of all, not all of these worlds were inhabited by humans. Some were ruled by green-skinned monsters called orks. Some were the homes of a tall beautiful yet utterly alien people called the eldar. One whole sector of the galaxy was the home of daemons and those who served them.

The vast bulk of the human worlds were ruled by the Imperium, which the Space Wolves served. The Imperium was ruled by the Emperor, the All Father, the crippled god who had given life to Russ and his brothers and whose shattered shell now existed in a great machine on the ancestral world of Terra. The Emperor was served by an enormous corps of priests and magistrates and rulers and tax collectors. In his name massive armies moved across the galaxy carried by huge ships capable of sailing between the stars. All the other races and nations and kingdoms Ragnar had learned of were the enemies of the Emperor and of humanity, and would do anything to undermine the All Father's rule and destroy his realm. Across the galaxy, savage wars raged between the Emperor's legions and those of his foes, and in the forefront of many of these wars were the Wolves.

He saw the founding of the Wolves all those long ages ago when the All Father was young and walked among men. He saw the coming of Russ to Fenris, and then the arrival of the All Father seeking his lost son. He saw Russ recruit his honour guard of warriors and name them the Wolves of Space. He saw too that the All Father had many strong sons, called primarchs, who founded their own Chapters, just as Russ had done. He learned that these warriors, who all shared the geneseed of their primarchs, were known collectively as Space Marines.

Ragnar saw the founding of the Imperium, and then the terrible war with the arch-heretic and traitor Horus which tore the new-born empire apart and resulted in the crippling of the All Father and the death of Horus. He saw that many of the Space Marines and their primarchs followed Horus in his folly and betrayed their oaths to the Emperor. He saw them depart for the strange warped area of the galaxy known as the Eye of Terror and watched them devolve into things less than human. Ragnar knew now that he was being made privy to knowledge kept secret from the vast majority of people, and that he must never divulge this lore to anyone who did not already know of it. He shuddered when he found out about the four great powers of Chaos, the ultimate arch-daemons who were forever at work to undermine the empire of humanity.

There was Khorne, the Blood God, lord of slaughter, whose followers went laughing into battle filled with an unslakable thirst for carnage. There was Tzeentch, the Great Mutator, who transformed his worshippers and made them privy to the darkest secrets of sorcery. There was Nurgle, the Plague Lord, whose followers spread blight and disease to the furthest reaches of the cosmos. There was Slaanesh, depraved god of unspeakable pleasures. He knew enough now to recognise some of their worshippers as the beings he had encountered in his visions beyond the Gate of Morkai. Ragnar prayed most earnestly that he need never learn more.

He learned of Russ's disappearance on his great quest to find the seeds of the tree of life which would cure his Emperor. He learned of the long and honourable history of the Wolves unto the present age. More and more knowledge poured into his willing brain and he soaked it up like a sponge.

He saw how vast and terrible the enemies of mankind were, and how great was the need for mighty warriors to oppose them. He understood now why the testing of the aspirants had been so savage and brutal. In these dark times no flaw could be allowed in those who were to stand between humanity and its enemies.

Chants and litanies and prayers filled his mind. He understood many of them now. They were to focus a warrior's mind, to keep his faith as strong as his arm. He knew that others were to help him use the new abilities he was gaining daily as the Iron Priests did their work.

He understood the changes that were being wrought in his body better now. He was being given the knowledge to help him do so. He knew that he had been given a second heart, and augmented muscles and glands that

would enable him to breathe poisoned air and eat poisoned food without coming to harm. His senses had been made even keener and his body far more resilient. He knew that he could now recover from almost any wound that did not kill him outright, even without medical care, given time. He learned the basics of field medicine for cauterising amputations.

Most of his body was enclosed in a flexible black metallic carapace. He knew that the various plasteel nodes protruding from it were contact points that would enable his body to interface with the armour that all Space Marines wore like a second skin. He was astonished that he now possessed the vocabulary and the knowledge to understand these concepts. Truly the power of these ancient engines was great.

More and more knowledge flowed into his mind. He learned of weapons and their use. He learned of tactics and organisational structures. He learned the ten basic offensive manoeuvres and the four strong defences. And he smiled as he did so, the pleasure centres of his brain stimulated by the awesome intricate subtle mechanisms of the old machines.

He saw the organisation of his Chapter. He saw that it was arranged into twelve great companies, each led by a mighty warleader from whom the company took its name. He saw that there was a thirteenth great company belonging to the Chapter's leader which consisted of all the priests and other types of warrior. He saw the progress that he would need to make through the Chapter. He learned that if he were accepted he would become a Blood Claw, part of a pack of similar youthful warriors struggling to tame the unruly beast within. If he lived he would become first a Grey Hunter, then a Long Fang, growing older, wiser, mightier and more cunning.

On and on went the endless flow of knowledge, burning itself into his memory, making him wiser, and causing his brain to glow with love of his Chapter and Russ and the Emperor.

'Lift your arm,' the Iron Priest said. Servo-motors whined as Ragnar did so. The priest nodded his masked head, and then tightened a joint with his power wrench. Ragnar felt him do it. The sensation was an odd one, not painful exactly, but it let him know that something was happening with his plasteel carapace. The knowledge implanted in his brain told him that over the coming months and years he would get better at recognising the meaning of these sensations.

‘Now move your fingers.’ Ragnar did as he was told. Once more the priest made a few adjustments. Immediately his hand felt better, more flexible, stronger. The priest intoned a litany to the machine spirits and then bowed his head once more. It appeared the work was complete.

‘You may rise,’ the priest said. Ragnar raised himself from the altar. As he did so the various cables and attachments the priest had fitted retracted back into the sacred stonework. He was free to move. Ragnar smiled and looked down at his body. The entire length of his massive frame had been encased in plasteel and ceramite yet he did not feel too much different. There was no sensation of being encumbered by heavy armour. In fact, if anything he felt lighter, fitter and stronger. He knew now that the powerful servo-motors within the armour were doing their work, helping support his weight, make him mobile. The Iron Priest obviously recognised that smile and knew its meaning.

‘You must be very careful over the next few days, for you do not yet know your own strength.’

Ragnar looked at him, not quite following his meaning. A small servitor robot moved closer at the priest’s gesture. A compartment in its chest opened and a long telescopic arm stretched out and placed a stone in the priest’s hand. Ragnar was amazed by the seemingly mystical manner in which the priest and his machine communicated. Not a word had been spoken.

‘Take this stone,’ the Iron Priest said. ‘Do not worry; it has no significance at all. It is merely to demonstrate a thing.’

Ragnar took the stone, marvelling at the sensitivity of the gauntlets that let him feel its texture despite being thick enough to stop the blow of an axe. It was not quite like touching the stone with his bare flesh. It felt more as if he were wearing thin gloves. The Iron Priest was right. This was going to take some getting used to.

‘Crush the stone,’ the Iron Priest said.

Ragnar looked at him, not quite able to comprehend what he was saying. He knew that it was theoretically possible for the systems in his gauntlets to generate enough pressure to do so, yet something instinctive in his brain rebelled against the concept. It was not possible. Human beings could not crush rocks with their bare hands.

‘Do it,’ the priest said. There was a note of command in his voice that could not be disobeyed. Ragnar closed his fist. Instantly he felt resistance

and instinctively he began to loosen his grip but the Iron Priest merely repeated his command. Ragnar closed his fingers once more. There was a cracking sound as the stone broke like an eggshell crushed by a strong man. Ragnar opened his hand to see that the hard stone had been reduced to several small chips of rock.

He let out his breath in one long slow exhalation. Now he truly began to understand the power that had been granted to him.

‘These are your own personal weapons,’ the armourer said. ‘You are responsible for them. Each has been stamped with your rune-sign so you will know them, and we will be able to identify them in the event of your death.’

Ragnar picked up the weapons reverently. There was a projectile weapon, called a bolt pistol. It was like the magical weapon with which Ranek had dispatched the sea dragon, only smaller. And there was a chainsword, one of the potent weapons that Sergeant Hakon had carried. In the belt on which the pistol was scabbarded was a dispenser of other small but no less potent weapons known as microgrenades.

‘Be careful with these,’ the armourer said. ‘They are as dangerous to fools as they are to enemies. Now follow the servitor and report to the training ranges.’

Ragnar looked around and saw Sven, Nils, Strybjorn and the others all standing inspecting their weapons. They all looked different now, taller, heavier and more burly with their heads shaved save for one long strip of hair, and their bodies encased in armour.

On their faces was the same look of pride and wonder that he knew must be on his. They all looked as if they had just been given enchanted weapons out of legend, and in a way they had. He gave Strybjorn another long hard look. It was just possible, he thought, that the Grimskull might have an accident on the training ranges. Strybjorn looked up and met his gaze, and Ragnar felt that it was all too possible that his enemy was thinking the same thing about him.

The bolt pistol kicked in Ragnar’s hand. Even with the enhanced strength granted by his armour and his altered body, the recoil was something fierce. The gun moved like a wild thing he held trapped in his vice-like grip.

The shell blazed past the target and hit the stone wall behind, blowing a huge chunk out of the cavern wall. Ragnar was exhilarated by the sheer

sense of power using the weapon gave him at the same time as he was frustrated by his inability to hit the target. Not for the first time he became aware of the difference between the theoretical knowledge the ancient engines had placed in his head, and the actual practical ability to do something.

He knew all about this weapon. He knew how it worked. He knew that it fired caseless self-propelled ammunition capable of piercing armour up to several hundred strides. He knew the magazine capacity. He knew in theory how to disassemble, clean and repair it. He knew all about firing it. He knew about relaxing as you took aim, breathing out gently as you fired. Unfortunately there was a big difference between knowing this stuff and being able to do it.

‘Do not worry, lad,’ said Sergeant Hengist, their weapons instructor. ‘Just keep at it. It will come eventually. Anything can be mastered with practice. And you do need to master this. Believe it or not, there was a time when I couldn’t hit the side of a barn door. Now...’

In one smooth fluid action, without seeming to aim or concentrate, Hengist drew his own pistol, seemed only to extend his arm, point it and pull the trigger. A cluster of three shots hit the bull’s-eye directly over the heart of the man-shaped target.

Ragnar watched in awe. ‘You make it look so easy, sergeant,’ he said.

‘Nothing is ever as easy as it looks, lad. And it’s the mark of a master that they make difficult things look easy.’

Ragnar nodded. He enjoyed listening to Hengist talk, and he enjoyed learning from the grizzled veteran. It was one of the most pleasant things about his new status. He and the other aspirants weren’t exactly accepted but at least they were not treated as expendable things. They had value to the Space Wolves now. They might become part of the Chapter at some future date. Or maybe Hengist was simply more pleasant than the other Space Marines. One thing Ragnar was becoming aware of was that all these awesome fearsome characters were different. They were people in and of themselves, as distinctive as all the folk back in his home village. His former home village, he corrected himself. In another, far distant, life.

He did not know why this surprised him. Perhaps it was simply that he had become used to seeing all of the Space Wolves as the same. They certainly all looked similar. They were all far taller and stronger than mortal men, and they all possessed those odd wolfish eyes and frightening

fangs. And they all had a similar fierce and feral manner in some ways. And, of course, they all wore the greyish armour, which sometimes made them look more like machines than men. Still, Ragnar was coming to realise that for all that they were men just like he was. And he was also coming to respect them, for he knew that all of them there had come through everything he had done, or worse, and had survived years of terrible warfare besides.

‘Try again, lad,’ Hengist said, not unkindly. ‘And this time don’t think so hard about what you’re doing. Just relax and do it. Do it a thousand times if need be, but keep doing it. One day your life and the life of your comrades will depend on your accuracy. Sure as Russ was a drinker, that’s the truth.’

Ragnar nodded and raised the pistol once more. He turned to see if Hengist was watching him, but the sergeant had already walked down the line of aspirants and was talking quietly to Sven. Ragnar closed one eye, breathed deeply and as he exhaled pulled the trigger. The bolter shell sped past the target and buried itself in the wall.

Ragnar let out a long sigh of frustration. This was going to take a lot of practice.

Ragnar charged through the jungle thicket. The air was hot and humid. Green fronds whipped his face. Carnivorous plants snapped at his knees. He ducked a strangler vine, skidded onto his knees and rolled forward through the leafy mulch into cover behind the toppled remains of some titanic fallen tree.

He heard a disturbance in the undergrowth ahead of him. He wiped spores from his face, sighted along the barrel of his pistol and whipped off a shot. It smashed through the leaves and exploded sending a cloud of paint and dye over the crouched figure of Sven. ‘Got you,’ Ragnar cried.

With a groan, Sven put his hand over his heart, pushing the button that would deactivate his comm-links then toppled theatrically back onto the ground. Ragnar smiled with satisfaction. That was the third of the Red team he had picked off this exercise. One more and his squad would have won. He would have wiped out all the rival team. He was enjoying himself. He liked this strange place and he enjoyed these training exercises. This vast cavern full of alien flora was the place where the recruits were inducted into the basics of jungle warfare. It was a controlled environment deep below the Fang, where the heat and the humidity were

carefully adapted to create a place just like the real thing. He was pleased with himself. His shooting had improved greatly with practice, just as Sergeant Hengist had promised him it would.

‘Got you,’ he murmured, knowing all he had to do now was find Strybjorn, the last member of the Red team.

‘And I’ve got you, Ragnar,’ a voice said from behind him. Ragnar twisted around striving to bring his pistol to bear but he was too late. Strybjorn stood there his pistol already pointed. He squeezed the trigger and the impact of the shell knocked Ragnar over. A cloud of paint covered his armour. Briefly Ragnar considered ignoring the hit and firing back at Strybjorn but his sense of honour would not let him. Well, that and his knowledge that Sergeant Hengist was probably watching him through one of the camera eyes of the floating drones that moved through the caves. Frustrated, he punched the button on his chest comm unit and cut himself out of the link.

Ragnar cursed. It was going to take a long night of scrubbing to get his armour clean again. Still, he was grateful that it had been only a paint shell and not live ammunition when Strybjorn fired.

He wondered whether the Grimskull would have been so quick to pull the trigger if he had been firing a real bullet. Ragnar knew that he himself would have been.

Ragnar looked down on Vrotwulf’s corpse. Things looked like a mess. The whole back of his head was gone and a pulpy mass of blood and brains decorated the wall over the aspirant’s bunk.

‘Bones of Russ,’ Ragnar breathed. One moment Vrotwulf had been sitting there laughing and joking and polishing his bolt pistol. Then there had been a bang and a roar and his head had disintegrated. It had all happened so quickly that the youth had not even had a chance to scream.

Sven came over and looked down at the corpse. He picked up the gun and looked at it. ‘Idiot!’ he muttered. ‘The magazine was still in it.’

Ragnar looked closely. ‘And the safety stud wasn’t pushed in,’ he added. They looked at each other. Ragnar guessed that they were both thinking the same thing. Deaths in training still happened, and most of the time through sheer carelessness. He was coming to recognise the signs. This was indeed part of the problem with the way knowledge had been imparted to them. All of the aspirants knew things but the knowledge was not yet fully part of them. They all knew the procedures for cleaning their

weapons but they had not yet learned the total respect that the firearms demanded. It was that way with much of the lore they had learned. As always there was a huge difference between knowing the theory and being able to implement the practice.

‘I suppose someone better go tell the powers-that-be,’ Sven said. He looked meaningfully at Ragnar hoping that he would volunteer.

‘Off you go then,’ said Ragnar. Sven snarled, showing his developing fangs but did not argue. He and Ragnar had clashed often in the past few weeks, establishing their positions within the pack, and Ragnar had always come off the best. The others were learning not to challenge him whether in a simple contest of wills or an exchange of blows. Ragnar returned to contemplating the body. He offered up a prayer to Russ.

Well, he thought, they were learning respect, the hard way. He just wondered how many more of them would die before the training was over.

Only two more died, to Ragnar’s knowledge. An aspirant known as Logi managed to blow himself up with his own krak grenade during live ammunition training. Another aspirant, Hrald, had simply keeled over and died while eating one day, and his body was carted off by servitors to be dissected by the Iron Priests. No one really understood what had gone wrong, although word went around that his body had rejected either the geneseed or the new organs that had been implanted. Ragnar was not quite sure how this could happen but the new lore implanted in his brain told him that sometimes human bodies simply would not accept implants, that they rebelled against any alteration, and the subject simply died. This was not a cheering thought to Ragnar or to any of the other aspirants but there was nothing they could do about it except lie awake at nights in their cells and wonder whether it would happen to them. After a few days Ragnar simply quit worrying. He had not died and wondering about it seemed like a needless waste of energy.

Besides, there was so much to learn and to do that his entire mind and spirit were kept occupied. Each day at dawn he rose and entered one of the great meditation chambers, where he busied himself reciting the litanies that had been placed in his brain the previous day. After three hours of contemplation of the religious mysteries and honing his spirit for war, he ate a hearty breakfast. While his body digested this he was hooked up to one of the ancient tutelary engines and more knowledge was pumped into his brain, along with an unquestioning adoration of Russ and the Emperor.

By noon, stiff but unwearied, he was unhooked from these ancient cryptic devices and went to the chambers of armaments. For the remainder of the day, depending on the schedule set for him, he either exercised, or practised unarmed combat, or trained endlessly with the weapons he had been issued. Every few days, they would be sent to one of the environmental chambers, sculpted to resemble some alien landscape, and practise the disciplines of war and survival in those strange places. Ragnar came to recognise quickly what days those would be, for some knowledge of them would have been placed in his brain the day before.

After this they would retire to the refectory for the evening meal, and then another session either with the tutelary machines or with the Iron Priests. The things they learned now were always technical in nature, usually concerning the maintenance of their weapons and armour, or the new organs that had been implanted in their bodies. The day would conclude with several hours in the meditation cells and then to bed where Ragnar would drop into an exhausted sleep.

Every seventh day, they would assemble in the Chamber of the Aspirants where Ranek had first explained their purpose to them. The Wolf Priest himself would arrive and preach to them, telling them old tales of the Chapter's glory, stirring their hearts and minds with the deeds of those who had gone before them. They were then taken around the Fang, always to places they had not seen before. The nature and purpose of the great devices which they were permitted to see were explained to them, along with their glorious places in the Chapter history.

Ragnar looked with awe upon the sites of ancient battles with the forces of Chaos from those dark periods when the Fang itself had been invaded. He watched in wonder as mighty skyships took off, destined he now knew to pierce the envelope of air that surrounded Fenris and rendezvous with those mighty vessels that plied the unimaginable distances between the stars. He stared at the vast automated factories where the weapons and munitions of the Space Wolves were created from the very bones of the planet, from deep mined metals and minerals and oil.

As the days became weeks and the weeks became months he found himself becoming more and more comfortable with his new role and his new position. He got to know many of the people around the Fang by name, and he saw that slowly, as he learned and grew and survived, that they were coming to accept him as one of them. He became more aware of

the rhythms of the place and of the fact that it was more or less empty of the Space Wolves themselves who were forever on the move around the galaxy on the Emperor's business.

He knew more now of how the Chapter was divided up into a number of great companies, the armed retinues of mighty warleaders, and that it was rare indeed for more than one of those great companies to be at the Fang at any given time. Sometimes the companies would return home briefly to be re-armed and re-equipped and to replace losses taken in battle with new recruits from among the aspirants. He knew that there was a constant steady flow of aspirants passing through the Fang, and that one day it would be his destiny to be chosen to accompany one of those great companies out to the stars.

He saw many new aspirants arrive, brought in from Russvik and other places like it scattered around Asaheim, and bound for the Gate of Morkai. He started to recognise those who had arrived before him. Sometimes, in the meditation chambers, he would see true Space Wolves. Grizzled warriors returned from their incredible adventures, and pausing for a moment's peace in the sanctuaries of the Fang before returning to their duties. At such times he wanted nothing more than to join them, and to be on his way to the great battles in far flung parts of the universe, but in his heart, he knew he had a long time to go before that day would come. Ragnar had talked to the older aspirants and learned that sometimes years could pass before they were shipped out to join their more experienced brethren. Still, he told himself, this was no bad thing; it would mean he had plenty of time to hone his skills and ensure that he did not disgrace himself when that great day came.

His hatred of Strybjorn became a dull ache that gnawed at him, but even so the Grimskull had become part of his new life, like Sven and Nils and the others. They all trained together as a team now, and they all realised that they were part of one warband and would be shipped out together when the time came. They had still not been made full Blood Claws or been assigned a warleader, but they knew the day would come when that would happen. No one doubted any more that they were good enough, or that they would make the grade. All of them realised that it was just a matter of time.

Ranek looked down on them from the dais. His scarred face was filled with a pride that was reflected in Ragnar's heart and on the features of all

the aspirants present.

‘You have done well,’ he told them. ‘You have learned all that was set to you and you have lived through trials that it is not given to many men to endure let alone survive. You have a right to be proud.

‘But not too proud, for all that you have learned here should point your thoughts in the direction of one great truth. The life of a Space Wolf is one long trial and there are many ways still a warrior may fail that trial. He might become cowardly or lax in his duties or he might fall into error or sin. He might let some small chink of doubt or hate...’

Was it Ragnar’s imagination, he wondered, or had the Wolf Priest looked directly at him when he said this.

‘...or taint of weakness through which our daemonic enemies may enter his soul and corrupt him. We must never forget that this happened to some of our forebear Chapters in ancient times, and that they were in many ways mighty men, greater even than us. We must never forget that the wars we fight are in many ways as much spiritual struggles as physical battles, and that our faith in Russ and in the All Father is our shield.

‘And we must never forget the purpose of this long life of tribulation and testing. It is to see if we are worthy to stand beside our primarch in those last days when the powers of Chaos emerge like dragons to swallow the universe, and the end of all things is at hand. For in those days, the chosen ones will stand beside Russ and make war on the evil ones, and thus will the fate of everything be decided. Bear this in mind in the future when you are asked to lay down your life for your comrades and your Chapter. If you prove worthy, it will be your reward to stand alongside the greatest of all heroes in the most important of all battles, and surely no warrior can ask for more than that.

‘Now you have been judged worthy to pledge yourself at the sacred Altar of Russ and to join the ranks of the Wolves. Advance, kneel before the altar and swear that you will serve this Chapter in all ways and at all times, unto death and beyond, with body, mind and soul.’

It was the proudest moment of Ragnar’s life when he did so.

Ragnar and Sven clashed steins of ale. Ragnar raised his lips and threw the foaming brew back in one long pull. He wiped his lips with the back of his armoured forearm and let out a long belch. He was drunk and he knew it. This ale must be potent indeed he realised to be able to affect him despite his body’s ability to metabolise poisons. Perhaps this was the

source of the legends of those who died after drinking the ale of the gods. Not that it mattered much to him now.

He glanced around the hall. The place was full. It seemed like everyone in the Fang had been assembled for this feast of acceptance. Long trellis tables filled the chamber. The newly accepted aspirants had one massive bench to themselves. Creatures half man, half machine brought them an endless supply of ale, and platters of fresh venison taken from the enormous spits at the end of the room. On the table in front of him were plates piled high with bread and butter and cheese. He thought he had never tasted food so good. Perhaps that was simply because of his improved senses or maybe it was all much better provender than Ragnar had been used to.

‘One more, Ragnar,’ Sven said, his face red and flushed with happiness and booze, ‘and then we arm wrestle.’

‘Fine!’ Ragnar swigged more ale and felt the eyes of Ranek upon him. He raised his tankard and toasted the Wolf Priest. Ranek returned the gesture heartily. It was echoed by the armoured figures that flanked him on all sides. Suddenly and spontaneously the assembled Wolves burst out into a roaring lusty song. Even though he did not know the words, Ragnar joined in, bellowing out the tune wordlessly, pausing only to stuff more food and more ale into his mouth.

The only thing that clouded his happiness was the presence of Strybjorn at the table. Soon there would be a reckoning, he thought. He had put off his vengeance too long. After that realisation dawned within Ragnar’s befuddled mind, somehow the evening did not seem so bright, the beer did not taste so fine, nor the songs so rousing.



FOURTEEN IN THE FIELD

Ragnar gripped the hilt of the chainsword tighter as he watched the Thunderhawk take off. The skyship's exhaust flared as it accelerated away over the mountains. Within seconds there was a sound like a thundercrack and the vehicle had vanished. He glanced around at the others to see how they were taking things.

No one in the pack looked nervous or out of sorts which was good considering this was the Blood Claws' first active mission. All of them were looking at Sergeant Hengist and waiting for his commands. Ragnar glanced at the sergeant but the older Space Wolf seemed lost in thought at this moment, so Ragnar gave his attention back to his surroundings.

The pack was in a bleak place. Not quite as wild as the mountains he had trekked through before being accepted, but still rugged enough to give most people pause for thought. They stood in a clearing in a wood in a long valley. All around them massive peaks raised their snow-capped heads to the sky. Somewhere in the distance he could hear the sound of fast-flowing water. It must be the river they had seen from the air earlier, he thought, racing down the slope to join the lakes below.

The woods around were dark and gloomy. He could smell pine and greyleaf, and other tough and hardy types of tree that could grow at this altitude. He could hear the scuttling of small animals in the undergrowth and birds singing. Spears of early morning light pierced the clouds, and lightened the overcast morning. Off in the distance he could see soot-black thunderclouds gathering, and he realised that before nightfall there would be a storm. This did not trouble him. He had become used to the infinitely variable weather of the mountains. Or at least he hoped he had. A small cautious voice within him argued that no man was ever completely accustomed to the climate here, and any man who thought differently was destined for a fool's early grave. It was always best to respect the elemental forces of nature.

As far as he could tell there were no immediate threats, but that meant nothing either. He had been taught to be always ready for trouble. Who

could tell? Anything might lie in ambush out there. Maybe that was what had happened to the previous pack.

Ragnar sighted along the barrel of his bolt pistol looking for targets. Nothing sprang into view except some squirrels gathering nuts at the foot of one of the nearest trees. No dark and sinister forces were evident. Perhaps the pack had simply got lost, or been delayed, or perhaps their communications equipment had failed. Ragnar smiled to himself. He doubted that such simple explanations were likely. A pack of Blood Claws led by an experienced Space Wolf sergeant were unlikely to have got themselves lost in the mountains of Asaheim. They had compasses, and locators and all manner of reliable equipment the use of which still astounded Ragnar. Of course, rad storms could disrupt the locator beacons and communications nets, and magnetic vortices could impair compasses. But what were the chances of both those things happening at once? And for a fog to spring up that made dead reckoning impossible? Not likely he thought, but still, was it possible? The fact remained that the other pack was overdue, and had not made its rendezvous with the Thunderhawk. Something had undoubtedly happened, and it was Hengist's pack's task now to find out what.

Ragnar glanced over at the sergeant. He was casting about at the many trails leading from this clearing. Ragnar doubted that he would find any sign. Scents would be over a week old and the rain most likely would have washed away any tracks. On the other hand, they would never know unless they looked.

The other Blood Claws seemed just as impatient to be about their task as he was. There were a dozen present, the survivors of all the groups of aspirants with whom Ragnar had been inducted. There was Strybjorn, and Sven and Nils. He could see the strange fey youth Lars who everybody said was destined to be a Rune Priest one day. There was Snori and Wulf and Kezan and several others that Ragnar did not know too well. They were all keen to be off, wanting to take this opportunity to prove themselves in Sergeant Hengist's eyes.

Ragnar was glad that Hengist was their leader. The old warrior's presence was immensely reassuring. He seemed to possess a wisdom and a self-control they all lacked. Perhaps it came with the scars and the long fangs, Ragnar thought. There was an air of sadness about Hengist, of a man who had lived on beyond his time. Ragnar knew that like many of the

instructors in the Fang and places like Russvik, Hengist was the sole survivor of his pack. All the old comrades he had gone through his basic training with, and whom he had fought alongside throughout his career were dead and gone, leaving Hengist to live out his last days alone. Ragnar looked around him, and, seeing all his companions, realised that it was perfectly possible that one of them would end up in this position. He just prayed to Russ it wasn't him.

Now and again the sergeant would pause and consult with the small locator unit he held in his right hand. Ragnar realised that the sergeant was not simply looking for a sign, he was exercising his logical faculties, deciding which trail it was most likely their quarry had taken from here to their last known position.

After about five minutes the sergeant nodded with satisfaction and gestured for them to follow him as he strode along the trail he had chosen. As they entered beneath the shadows of the trees, a bird called somewhere far-off. Ragnar did not recognise its cry but there was something about it that was disturbing. He shivered, touched momentarily by a premonition of disaster. He looked around and saw that Lars apparently felt the same way. His lean ascetic face was twisted and his eyes briefly held a wild expression.

Ragnar looked away. Even by the standards of Blood Claws newly adapted to the effects of the Cup of Wulfen, Lars was regarded as a wild one.

Ragnar's armour whined as he strode purposefully up the hill. The servo-motors and gyro-stabilisers were working hard to keep him balanced on these long slopes, and his armoured feet dug great clods out of the earth as the Space Marines powered onwards. Ragnar for one was exhilarated by the cold clear air and the beauty of their surroundings. His augmented muscles did not feel in the slightest tired. It seemed like the armour was doing most of the work of marching for him, and that he could keep going forever if he wanted to.

Ahead of him he could hear Sven grumbling as he walked. The canis helix seemed to have warped his mind strangely. He talked to himself more, griped a great deal, and generally wore an aura of gloominess. That was just the way it was, Ragnar thought, shrugging to himself. It would take more than Sven being miserable to break into Ragnar's sense of well-being today. Of course, Ragnar reminded himself, none of them had

remained untouched by the awakening of the beast within them. He fully recognised that he himself had become shorter tempered, more ready to snap with little provocation. Any time anyone questioned Ragnar or tried to put him in his place, he felt an urge to fall on them and show his mastery by pure physical strength. At its worst he felt the urge to tear out their throats with his teeth. At such times he needed all his willpower to restrain the beast, and all the calmness that repeating the ancient litanies granted him. The worst of it was that he hardly noticed these fits until they passed. They simply seemed a natural response. And these were just the changes he had noticed. He often wondered if there were other deeper ones that he was simply unaware of. He knew this was the case with some of the others.

Sven did not seem to notice that he talked to himself. Nils was unaware that he constantly sniffed the air as if testing for the presence of enemies. Strybjorn was even more silent and grim and brooding than he had ever been before. It seemed that there was a price to be paid for the great powers they had gained, and that they were all paying it in their different ways. It was a disturbing thought. He had been told that with time they would all adapt, but, right at this moment, Ragnar found this hard to believe.

To distract himself from these gloomy reflections, Ragnar considered their mission. The original pack had been dispatched to this remote spot to investigate the falling of an odd meteor shower. Apparently, this was something that happened quite often in this part of Asaheim. But such an occurrence still had to be looked into, for sometimes enemies tried to infiltrate their way onto the planetary surface using meteor showers for cover. Ragnar was not sure what these enemies might do once they got here but he had learned that the Space Wolves rarely did anything without good reason.

Thinking of the awesome powers of the enemies of humanity, Ragnar realised that his Chapter had good reason to be wary. There were all manner of strange magics and technologies that could be deployed from these remote locations. A spy could perhaps learn all the secrets of the Fang preparatory to a full blown invasion. He knew such things had happened in the past, and could easily happen again.

In any case, the unit was to find the survivors of the previous patrol, if there were any, and render all assistance possible. If there were no

survivors they were supposed to locate the bodies and recover the sacred geneseed as well as find out what had killed the first pack. Assuming that whatever had done it did not wipe out Hengist's pack as well. That was always a possibility, Ragnar thought. After all, the previous unit had been just as numerous and as well armed as they were.

The difference was, Ragnar told himself, that we are prepared for something to happen. He was forced to smile at that. A Space Marine was always prepared. Every mission was to be performed as if it were a matter of life and death. After all, sooner or later that sound premise was bound to be revealed as the painful truth.

They made camp that night not so much because they needed the rest but in case they missed something when they searched in the darkness. They were much closer to the last known location of the ones they sought. Ragnar could now understand the wisdom of dropping the aspirants some distance away, and getting the Space Wolves to walk the rest of the way on foot. They were in long narrow wooded valleys with no obvious place for a Thunderhawk to set down. The only reasonable way in was on foot. Plus they had discovered some traces of the missing pack: discarded food tubes, areas where the undergrowth had been hacked away with chainswords. In a way these were signs of carelessness or overconfidence. Hengist's band were taking care to leave no trace. Ragnar had no idea what the sergeant feared they might encounter, but he was obviously taking no chances.

No fires had been lit. Sentries had been posted at strategic points around the camp. All communication was on directional scrambled links in the comm-net. It would be very difficult for anyone to eavesdrop on their communication. Ragnar was still getting used to the fact that a small bead in his ear and another one on his throat could let him talk with other Blood Claws at a distance without shouting, but he was profoundly glad this was the case. A sentry could warn them quickly and nearly silently as soon as he spotted something. Anything hoping to sneak up and surprise them would swiftly find the tables turned.

Ragnar looked over at Sven. The muttering fit seemed to have passed and he was his old self again. He sucked food paste from a self-sealing tube with a grimace. 'I wonder if they put this dog excrement straight into the tubes or whether they add some cat puke into the mix first,' he said, grinning ruefully even as he sucked his tube dry. Ragnar knew what Sven

meant. Field rations might well be nutritious, containing everything a warrior needed to live on in the field, but they did not taste anything like real food.

‘If you don’t want yours, give it here,’ Nils said. Ragnar could never understand how someone so gaunt and skeletal could eat so much. It was a sentiment Sven obviously shared.

‘You want more of this?’ he asked.

‘There’s nothing wrong with this stuff. I like it.’

A disbelieving look flickered over Sven’s face. Ragnar noticed that despite his protest he made no attempt to hand over his food tube.

‘Is there nothing you won’t eat?’ Sven asked.

‘I don’t know. I haven’t found anything yet. Apparently with my new and improved stomach there’s very little I can’t eat.’

This was true. They had been schooled that all manner of ‘enzymes’ and ‘glands’ had been added to their stomachs along with the geneseed. They could eat wood if they had to now, and poison, they had been told, would have no effect on them. Personally Ragnar was glad that he’d never had any call to test any of this yet.

‘I saw him eating a bunch of twigs earlier,’ Strybjorn said.

‘There was a nice fat slug on one of them,’ Nils said with a look of relish on his face. Ragnar was not sure whether he really had done this or was just making it up to disgust the rest of the Blood Claws. ‘Anyway, I don’t know why Sven is always going on about what I eat. I’ve never seen anybody put away as much food as he does.’

Sven grinned. ‘Yes, but that’s real food. Venison and bread and cheese and ale. Not this stuff.’

‘I would kill for a bit of cheese right now,’ Lars said. Ragnar agreed with him. Just talking about real food made his mouth water. The food paste suddenly tasted even worse than usual.

‘Get some sleep,’ Sergeant Hengist said. ‘Who knows – you might well get a chance to kill something soon.’

Ragnar watched the dawn break over the mountains. It was the end of his watch and he was not even slightly tired. The beauty of the thing was breathtaking in its own way. At first the mountains were only slightly more than invisible. Their outlines were like a jagged hole cut in the fabric of the night. As the sky lightened they began to come into view but yet appearing flat, like painted scenes on a stone wall. As the light intensified,

they acquired more substance, more depth, more detail until they suddenly sparkled, as if newly made, in the sun.

Mist rose like smoke from the trees below them. It was as if the mountains were giving birth to clouds in the morning light. Or as if some wizard had used a spell to set the forest alight with some arcane trickery which created smoke but not flame. Ragnar knew that such was not the case, that soon the mist would evaporate like a ghost in sunlight. Still he enjoyed looking at the reborn world and listening to the chorus of birds greeting the sun.

In the distance he heard Sven and Nils begin to bicker over food once more. Sven was accusing the other Blood Claw of stealing his food tubes in the night.

They paced down the slope towards a strange warped area of the forest. All of them were silent now, and all of them were wary. As they picked their way down the trail they had seen the area below them. The forest looked deeper and darker and more tangled. The trees looked blotched and sickly. Sergeant Hengist studied them through magnoculars before speaking.

‘This is different,’ he said. ‘This was not in Urlek’s report.’

‘Looks like those trees have got the plague,’ Ragnar said.

‘Don’t say that,’ Sven said. ‘Nils will want to eat them.’

It really did look as if the trees had caught some sort of plague, Ragnar thought. They were stunted and hunched over like sick men. They all looked as if they were rotting and dying. Strange luminescent fungus clung to their sides, its faint glow visible even in the watery daylight that broke through the forest canopy. Ragnar had never seen anything even remotely like this.

He looked around. Lars’s face was again twisted in a grimace. Ragnar could understand why. He too had a very bad feeling about this. Something smelled wrong. The whole area gave off an odour of corruption or decay, and there was a very slight yet disturbing tang to the scent in the air which made the hairs on the back of his neck rise. It was obvious that Sergeant Hengist felt the same way. He opened a broad band channel to the Fang and began to speak his report. There was a crackle of static. Some phenomenon was interfering with his comm-signal. For a moment Ragnar had the eerie premonition that the sickness of the trees had something to do with the interference, but he dismissed the thought as ludicrous. How

could that be? Somewhere deep within his brain, the ancient engines had placed the knowledge that far stranger things had been known to happen.

Ragnar wondered what the sergeant would do. He could order them back to the high ground and hope to get beyond the range of the interference, or he could order them to push on. For a moment it seemed like Hengist himself was undecided, but then he gave the signal for them to move out. It looked as if they were going to carry on.

They stood now at the last recorded position of the missing pack. This was the final reference point where the Fang's sophisticated location systems had been able to detect them. Ragnar now understood why. The trail through the tainted woods ended in a sheer rock face. The only way forward was through a cave mouth which gaped in the mountain side.

Sergeant Hengist gave a hand signal that told Ragnar to advance and investigate. Holding his weapons ready he loped forward cautiously, as if the cave were some dragon's mouth that might snap shut and devour him. As he moved closer the odd stink became somewhat stronger and Ragnar's unease intensified. Somehow, he sensed that there was something in the inky darkness of the cave that he really did not trust or like, a hint of rottenness far greater than anything in the corrupt forest that surrounded them.

Carefully, Ragnar picked his way up to the cave mouth and peered into the gloom. He saw nothing except a long trail leading down into the darkness below the mountain. He felt as if he were looking down the gullet of some vast beast.

+See anything?+ Hengist was using the comm-net.

'Only a tunnel,' Ragnar replied. 'What now?'

+We go in.+ Hengist said.

Ragnar had been afraid Hengist was going to say that.



FIFTEEN IN THE DARK

Ragnar glanced around into the gloom. The shoulder lamp on his armour sent a bright finger of light out to pierce the stygian darkness. At the moment it revealed only the clammy wall of the cavern, but Ragnar had a distinct feeling that was likely to change soon. The walls glittered, pearlescent in the torch beam. Something just wasn't right. Every augmented and supertrained sense which Ragnar possessed screamed this fact at him. On edge, he listened on the assigned communicator channel, but all he could hear was the crackle of static. Some force, perhaps background radiation from the surrounding rocks, interfered with the comm-net. That was not good. All the training missions Ragnar had been part of had stressed how much good communication was essential to a unit's effectiveness.

'What's that?' Sven asked. Ragnar could see that Sven, who was on point, had stopped moving and was bending down to inspect something in the wet sand of the tunnel floor. Ragnar kept his eyes focused on the area beyond his comrade just in case something unexpected and doubtless threatening should emerge out of the darkness. He kept moving, until he had passed Sven and took up a position where he could cover the rough cut corridor. As he did so he caught a quick glance of the thing Sven was studying. Ceramite glinted up from the sand in reflection of the blue-white gleam from Sven's shoulder lamp. It appeared to be a piece of Space Marine armour, half covered by sand. Perhaps a chunk of chest plate. An isolated part of Ragnar's mind almost absently noted that the fragment of insignia visible could easily be extrapolated to complete the Wolf Head rune.

Mentally filing this fact away, Ragnar stared down the tunnel, staying on the balls of his feet, doing his best to keep alert while his mind wrestled with this information. This new development was not good. Very few natural forces could fracture ceramite armour. Ragnar assessed that it probably wasn't a rock slide or an animal which had killed the armour's

wearer. If indeed the bearer was killed, and not simply lying injured or imprisoned somewhere within these seemingly endless passages.

All of which led to another disturbing thought. Ragnar wondered if he had known the person who had worn that armour? Had it belonged to one of the older Blood Claws who had been accepted into the chapter ahead of him? He had seen many of them within the Fang. Ragnar began to silently recite one of the old litanies in his mind, as he had been trained. Turning the words over in his mind, they felt like old friends, reminding him to stay in the moment, to focus on his surroundings, and not to let memories distract him. In this dark place all of these well-learned instructions things seemed like very good advice.

Ragnar tried to estimate how far they had come. It seemed like they had wandered for leagues through these tunnels following the faintest hint of a trail. According to the pedometer built into his armour they had covered exactly five point zero six Imperial kilometres, but that still did not give him any idea how deep they were underground. The corridors had wound and twisted like a drunken serpent. They might be deep within the bowels of Fenris, or they might only be a hundred strides from where they started. It was impossible to tell.

He was certain of one thing. He did not like the smell of this place. There was a taint of something like corruption in the cool, clammy air, and the hint of a scent that made him want to bare his fangs and strike at the first thing that came within range. It was something unnatural, and the beast within him instinctively revolted at its presence. Only the presence of his battle-brothers gave Ragnar any assurance.

‘Ceramite armour,’ he heard Hengist say in his gravelly, matter-of-fact voice. ‘Clean fracture too. Looks like someone used a magsteel blade judging by the break. Very interesting.’ Hengist could have been describing the salient features of one of the automated combat drones in the training pits of the fang for all the emotion in his voice.

‘I never knew the Outlanders had magsteel forges,’ Sven said.

‘Maybe they don’t,’ Hengist replied.

‘What do you mean?’

‘We’ll see. Let’s push on. Ragnar, you seem to have taken over point. Might as well stay there.’

‘Yes, sergeant.’

Ragnar pushed on, deeper into the all-enclosing darkness.

‘Looks like some sort of storage place,’ Ragnar said, staring around the vast cavern. Roughly hewn walls of a grey-green hue arched away above them, rearing up into complete darkness overhead. Rust marks from mineral ores stained the walls like old blood. Ragnar doubted that this cave was entirely of natural origin. The ruddy sand beneath their booted feet was dryer here, and crunched as they walked. Bat-winged creatures flickered away from their lights like torn scraps of shadow. Search beams flickered out inquisitively from a dozen or so shoulder lights, casting long shadows in the gloom. The faint whine of armour-servos and the flapping of the bat-creatures was the only sound. All around the walls were clay urns. Ragnar walked over to the nearest one, wondering whether he should lift off the lid. Hengist strode past and smashed it with his fist. A stale odour of old grain and mould immediately assaulted Ragnar’s nostrils.

‘Looks like you’re right,’ Hengist said. Ragnar gazed around as the rest of the pack moved into the cavern. There was something very strange about this place, he realised. Parts of the cavern were natural and parts definitely did look somewhat man-made. Ragnar would have sworn that he could see a part of a plasteel girder almost entirely enclosed in rock. He pointed this out to the sergeant.

‘Take a look,’ Hengist said. Ragnar looked for handholds in the wall and began to pull himself up. As he did so, a foul smell of excrement wafted into his nostrils. This was obviously where the bat-like creatures made their lair. Soon he had climbed far up the walls, past many niches that looked like nests. The rest of the pack was a long way below him, illuminated by the flickering finger of his shoulder light.

Then he reached the cavern roof, and was not entirely surprised to find that his initial supposition was correct. These were girders of plasteel, partially corroded. The knowledge the Fang’s teaching machines had placed in his head told him that they must be immeasurably ancient. It took millennia for plasteel to begin to corrode. He lowered himself back down to the ground and reported his findings to Hengist.

‘It looks like we’ve found one of the Ancients’ sites then,’ the sergeant said. ‘And obviously we’re not the first.’

Ragnar looked at him questioningly.

‘Mankind is old on Fenris. People were here long before Russ and the Imperium. The original settlers were supposed to have sheltered from the elements in these caverns, and hid here during the Age of Catastrophe.’

Ragnar nodded. That made sense. These caves were the perfect place to hide from the cold, the storms, the meteor showers. And this part of Asaheim was stable. No quakes. Of course, that only begged the question of why they had been abandoned. Ragnar asked Hengist. The sergeant grimaced and shook his head.

‘There are only legends now but it is said there was some ancient force present in the rocks which caused mutation and made the inhabitants susceptible to the influence of Chaos. Some say that this was a natural thing, others that it was the result of ancient forbidden weapons being unleashed. No one knows now. All that is known is that the cavern cities were abandoned, and that Russ himself forbade any to make their homes there.’

‘It looks like Russ’s edict was disobeyed,’ Ragnar said.

‘Yes,’ Hengist agreed. ‘There are always those who will do forbidden things, simply because they are forbidden. It is part of the folly of mankind.’

Ragnar was surprised to find himself at least partly sympathetic to the views of those who would inhabit the caves. After all, they made a perfect shelter from the wild storms of Asaheim. He knew that present necessity was often stronger than ancient taboo. While these thoughts flickered through his mind, he held his tongue. Briefly suspicion flared that such self-questioning thoughts might not have been his own, but the product of some outside influence insidiously playing on his mind, but Ragnar dismissed the idea as irrational.

‘We’d best push on, if we’re going to find any trace of our missing brethren,’ said Hengist.

Ahead of him Ragnar could hear the constant drip-drip-drip of moisture condensing on a cavern ceiling and then dropping into some deep underground pool. He was surprised to round a corner and see a faint pale yellow glow ahead of him. He dimmed his shoulder lamp, made a hand signal for the Blood Claws behind him to hold their position, crouched down and advanced slowly towards the source of the illumination.

The tunnel narrowed and the floor of the passage rose slightly as he moved. He was forced to use one hand to balance himself as he moved up the slope. He held his bolt pistol ready in his right hand. As his head rose above the level of the passage, a strange vista came into view.

He saw that he was looking down from an opening high in the side of another vast cavern, and that far below him, cupped in the bowl made by the floor of the cave, was a huge body of water. Phosphorescent algae swirled like trapped nebula in the water's black and oily surface. It was this that gave off the greenish-yellow glow. Ripples expanded from the places where moisture beads, like saliva dripping from the giant stalactite fangs of the ceiling, disturbed the surface. It almost seemed to Ragnar that he and his fellow Blood Claws were being consumed alive by some huge beast. It was as if the mountain were alive and he was being dragged ever deeper into its stomach for digestion. The sensation made him shiver. A ramp of collapsed rock and sand led steeply down to the pool.

Ragnar turned and gestured for Sven and Strybjorn to advance. His two comrades moved up and past him. While he covered them from his perch, they scuttled crab-like down the slope towards the surface of the water. Ragnar waited tensely, half expecting some monstrous head to emerge from the pool and snap at them, but nothing happened. The only sound was the faint dripping of the water and the scuff of the two Blood Claws' feet on the slippery rock surface, punctuated by the occasional hiss or whirr of a compensator struggling to adjust as rocks slid away under the weight of Space Marine armour.

Sven and Strybjorn stood for long moments waiting, heads cocked to one side as they tested the air, then they gave the all clear signal. One by one, the remainder of the Blood Claws advanced into the chamber, to be joined by Sergeant Hengist. Once they were all within, Ragnar moved down the slope to join them.

'This is hopeless,' he heard Sven mutter. 'We'll never find them.' He emphatically spat a gob of phlegm into the lake. 'That is, if they were ever here.'

Hengist's keen ears caught even these faint words. 'We will continue until we have established the fate of our Wolfbrothers,' the old sergeant growled. 'That is our duty and our way.'

'Aye,' Sven said. 'Fair enough.' He kicked absently at a rock with his booted foot. It arced into the pool, disappearing with a dull splash. 'Still, this is a fell-looking place right enough. I half expect to see a den of trolls any minute.'

For himself, Ragnar would almost have welcomed the presence of such monstrous creatures. It would have helped dispel the strange tension he

was starting to feel, and would have helped him forget the weird sensation of being watched by hostile eyes, a sensation that was starting to make the flesh between his shoulder blades crawl. Maybe this was just his overactive imagination playing tricks. Somehow, this time, he doubted that.

‘It’s like a bloody sea,’ Sven said with a trace of ironic humour. ‘Maybe we can catch some fish for our supper.’

‘I would not dine on the flesh of anything plucked from those foul waters,’ said Lars. ‘Nor would I drink of them.’

Ragnar was forced to agree. There was something deeply disquieting to him about this huge underground lake and its glowing surface. He could not see the far shore from where he stood. His fear of it had not in the slightest decreased. Nor did the suspicion that at any moment a monstrous head was going to break the surface. Ragnar wondered if the great sea dragons perhaps had kin which dwelt beneath the waters in these deep caverns? Every few heartbeats he caught himself shooting swift nervous glances at the water’s surface before glancing back to make sure nothing was sneaking up behind him. Something about the other Blood Claws’ scent and stances told him that they felt the same way, despite all their efforts to conceal their nervousness.

None of them could forget that another pack of their brethren had become lost and had perhaps died down here. Every now and again he felt sure that he heard the faint padding of feet behind him, but when he glanced back he could discern nothing in the dim, boulder-strewn immenseness of the cavern. It surprised him when Sergeant Hengist began to move back down the line, pausing occasionally to mutter instructions to each Blood Claw. When he got back to Ragnar he moved alongside him and whispered.

‘Switch off your shoulder lamp. You and I are going to wait here, and surprise whoever is sneaking along our trail.’

Ragnar nodded and obeyed. Now he knew his instincts served him well. That knowledge gave him some small, grim satisfaction.

Ragnar’s eyes swiftly adjusted to the gloom. The faint glow of the lake gave him just enough light to see by. In the distance he could see the lights of the rest of the pack receding into the distance. He could hear their faint footfalls on the rock. Excitement and fear churned in his stomach. He

knew the others would turn and race back at the first hint of trouble, but he wondered whether they would be in time.

The presence of Sergeant Hengist crouched behind a nearby rock was very reassuring. Hengist was a long proven and battle-tested warrior, for whom Ragnar had every respect. At such a time as this, with his first real battle since the struggle in his home village impending, that was an important consideration. He forced himself to concentrate on the litanies he had learned back in the Fang, to clear his mind of fear and worry and all other emotions that might reduce his chances of survival. He prayed to Russ and to the All Father to make his arm strong and his eye sure and to guide him through the coming conflict. Ready icons flickered across his senses, as his power suit told him that all his battle systems were fully function. Ragnar was prepared for the coming fight.

That was, if there was to be a conflict. Ragnar was still not entirely sure that there would be. So far his keen senses had been unable to detect any sign of anyone or anything following them. Perhaps Hengist was simply imagining things. At the same time, he knew this was mere wishful thinking. Hengist's senses were much keener than his own, and the sergeant had many more years of experience at interpreting the data they absorbed. It did not seem at all likely that Hengist had made a mistake. Furthermore, Ragnar's own dire foreboding and keen instincts spoke to him at some deeper level, telling him that danger was near. Somewhere in the depth of his mind, the beast stirred, responding to the threat. Suddenly Ragnar was glad of its presence, glad of all the implants and the training he had received back at the Fang. He felt strong and powerful and capable. He knew that no ordinary mortals could possibly prove a match for him, and the potent weapons he carried. The more cautious part of his mind reminded him that a pack of his brethren, equally capable and equally well equipped, had already gone missing down here, and his foreboding returned redoubled.

The flicker of a hand signal caught from the corner of his eye told him that Hengist had spotted something. A moment later Ragnar heard a faint soft padding, as of unshod feet on the wet sand – and he knew that the sergeant was right, that they were being followed.

He clutched his weapons tight and steeled himself for action. His body tensed and coiled like a great spring, and he made himself ready to move and strike at a heartbeat's notice. Nearby he sensed the sergeant also had

made himself ready. Ragnar peered out into the gloom and became aware that a wave of shadowy humanoid figures was moving towards them, as quiet, stealthy and inexorable as a tide moving up a beach.

His heart sank when he saw quite how large the crowd was. There must be hundreds of people following them. It seemed to him in that moment that the odds must be insuperable. He shook his head, commended his soul to Russ and to the Emperor, and made himself ready to die. Then suddenly he sensed Hengist move, heard the sound of something whip through the air close by. A moment later, light blazed through the cavern, and there was a roar like thunder as something exploded in the midst of the oncoming crowd.

Ragnar had a second to realise that the sergeant had thrown a grenade before the full horror of the scene illuminated by the terrific detonation etched itself on his brain. In that brief blazing instant, in that hellish light, he caught his first real glimpse of the denizens of the terrible under caverns deep beneath the surface of Fenris. From the descriptions he had heard, he saw that they were undeniably nightgangers.

They were bestial. They had bodies roughly humanoid in outline but slouching and ape-like. Huge saucer eyes evolved to capture the slightest hint of light dominated their ape-like faces. Their skins were pale white and leprous, blotched in places with bizarre birthmarks and the stigmata of mutation and disease. Ragnar was reminded in an odd way of the twisted forest outside the cavern's mouth, and he realised that in some way these people were probably the human equivalent of those disfigured trees there.

And yet the most horrifying thing was that these creatures quite obviously were, or had once been, people. They, or their ancestors, had been as human as his own clan. How long had it taken for this to happen, Ragnar wondered? How many aeons spent in slow devolution underground had been needed to produce this race of monsters? Had the stigmata of mutation been passed on from generation to generation growing slowly worse as the cavern folk became more bestial and unknowing? Or had it all happened at once, the product of some strange magic unleashed in this dark world deep below the mountain peaks?

Not that it mattered much at this moment. Even as he watched, the nightgangers recovered from the shock of the explosion that had rent through their midst. They milled around looking for a cause. Hengist chose that moment to lob another grenade. Once again the mighty flash

rent the age-old gloom. Once more the misshapen folk of the underworld died, flesh torn, blood raining down on the survivors. Blinded by the unaccustomed light of the explosion, they recoiled, clawed and webbed hands clasped over saucer-like eyes.

The scent of the blood combined with the tension of the wait goaded the beast within Ragnar to fury. He leapt up from his hiding place, bolt pistol spitting death. He unleashed shot after shot into the crowd of pursuers. They were so close packed that every shell found a home more often than not. Sometimes they blasted through the tightly packed mass of flesh and buried themselves in another target. Screams of pain mingled with roars of bestial fury.

And yet, misshapen though they were, the nightgangers were not lacking in courage. Either that or they were over-blessed with stupidity. Ragnar knew his own people would most likely have broken and fled at least momentarily before the torrent of supernatural death raining down on them but these denizens of the underworld did not run. They were made of sterner, or perhaps madder, stuff. Swiftly Ragnar realised that opening fire had been a mistake. The muzzle flash of his gun and the blazing contrail of his bolter shells unmistakably gave away his position to the nightgangers. They could not help but notice where he was, and with a mighty roar of frenzied rage they raced towards him.

Ragnar answered their war cry with a wolfish howl of his own, and was reassured to hear it echoed back from the throats of the approaching Blood Claws. He pulled the trigger again and again as the frenzied mass of mutants approached, sending bolter shell after bolter shell rocketing into his targets. Heads burst, chests were torn apart as the shells exploded in their targets. The nightgangers had no armour capable of resisting those terrible shots. All they had in their favour was sheer weight of numbers, that and an insanely ferocious courage.

Hengist lobbed grenade after grenade from his own hiding place, and every one exacted a hideous toll on the nightgangers. It seemed to Ragnar almost as if a giant hand was reaching down into the middle of his foes and tossing them about like leaves before the wind.

The nightgangers were close enough now so that he could make out details of their individual appearance. He was shocked to discover the extent that mutation had affected them. Some of the miserable creatures were covered in fur, some of them had horns protruding from their heads,

some of them had hooves and claws and shark-like rows of teeth in their hideously distended jaws. They were like aberrations from the wildest depths of nightmare. It was as if the gates of hell had opened to let a horde of gibbering misshapen things flop through into the world.

Even as he fired, a detached and calculating part of Ragnar's mind found itself wondering if the nightgangers were really so different from him. After all, he too now possessed an excess of body hair verging on fur, and he had fangs, and his eyes had altered. He swiftly pushed these thoughts aside. They had nothing to do with the fight in which he was engaged, and they verged dangerously close to heresy. The alterations to his body were signs of his kinship to Russ, marks of the Emperor's favour and blessing. They were products of an ancient mystical process that dated back to the Dark Age of Technology. The stigmata shown by these nightgangers were signs of something else. Perhaps they were the badge of Chaos, of those whose souls had been as corrupted by its warping influence as their bodies had been.

The nightgangers were almost upon him now. Ragnar leapt atop the rock behind which he had been waiting. The nightgangers had not responded with missile fire and he had no need of cover. In hand-to-hand combat, occupying the higher ground would give him a temporary advantage. With a swift mental command he upped the magnification of his shoulder lamp so that it would dazzle any nightganger who looked directly at it. A touch of a switch activated his chainsword. It vibrated angrily in his hand as the serrated edges of its blades accelerated up to their maximum cutting speed. Ragnar laughed aloud, feeling the full battle rage come upon him. The beast roared within his soul, demanding to be unleashed.

The nightgangers were almost upon him. Hengist tossed a last grenade that tore another apart and then Ragnar heard the sergeant's chainsword activate as well. He looked down into the sea of mutant faces, let out a long angry howl and then dived into their midst like a swimmer leaping into a turbulent sea.

Even before he landed he lashed out with his chainsword. It passed through flesh like a cleaver through meat. The smell of friction-heated bone reached Ragnar's nostrils as the scream of the chainsword hit a new high note cutting through bone. The moment passed as the chainsword took the limb clean off. Blood gouted from the stump. Ragnar took off a

head, severing vertebrae cleanly and easily before taking the top off another. As he did so he kept up a steady stream of shots from his bolt pistol against bodies too closely packed for him to miss. The screams and howls of his victims echoed in his ears, goading the beast within him to ever greater fury and lending ever more strength to his frenzied limbs.

In moments the nightgangers recovered from the shock of his charge, and leapt to meet him. They were armed only with crude hatchets, stone-tipped clubs and spears. They struck at him wildly at first, and their blows, unable to make proper contact with his fast moving form, slid harmlessly off the smooth curved ceramite of his armour. He was aware of their strikes in much the same way as a man would be of rain striking his cloak. The sensation was at most uncomfortable, but certainly not painful.

He moved through his foes like a whirlwind of death, leaving dead and dying nightgangers in his wake. For a brief triumphant instant he felt like nothing could stand against him. He was invincible, unstoppable, a god of death reaping the lives of his enemies. In that ecstatic instant he had some inkling of how Russ must have felt after his apotheosis. He whirled and struck and kicked, feeling bones crunch beneath his blade. He stamped down and reduced the fingers and skulls of fallen enemies to jelly. He howled long and exultantly and his bloodlust was echoed in the calls of his comrades. At that moment Ragnar felt as if he did not need them, that he was capable of routing and killing all the nightgangers on his own. It did not matter how many of them there were or how brave. There was simply no way for them to overcome him. The struggle was going to be so one-sided.

Then he felt a bite of pain in his ribcage. He looked down to see an axe blade lodged in the hardened ceramite of his armour. It was made of black iron and yet it had cut through one of the hardest substances ever produced in the foundries of the Fang. How could this be? Then he noticed the red glowing runes that blazed on its surface and he had his answer. Evil sorcery was at work here.

For a moment he felt a surge of panic. He half expected to feel evil magical power flow through his body like poison. He knew of such fell weapons, tales of their power had been implanted in his brain by the teaching machines of the Space Wolves. They could have all manner of dreadful powers, built into them by their daemonic makers. Who knew what this one would be capable of?

He stood frozen for a moment and the nightgangers took advantage of his confusion to swarm over him, striking and rending as they came. A blow from a stone club sent his pistol to the ground. Another blow from an axe grazed his forehead drawing blood. Some nightgangers grabbed his legs, others grabbed his arms. They howled with triumphant bloodlust convinced that they had captured their prey.

‘In the name of the Emperor, fight boy!’ he heard Hengist shout. The words stirred him from his daze and he suddenly realised that it did not matter if he were poisoned or cursed. If he did not start to fight back he would be dead in a matter of moments anyway as the nightgangers’ weapons buried themselves in the joints and chinks of his armour. With a roar he flexed his limbs. Servo-motors whined with the strain as he cast the nightgangers off, hurling them aside as if they were made of straw. He whirled around, wielding his chainsword with both hands, lopping limbs and heads off everything within his reach.

From the corner of his eye he caught sight of a nightganger chieftain or shaman lifting another of the cursed axes to throw at him. Snarling with rage Ragnar bounded forward bringing his chainsword down in a mighty arc of death. It took the shaman on the skull and cleaved it in half, passed right through his neck, his chest, his stomach, his hipbone. With one blow he clove the shaman clean in two sending entrails and internal organs toppling out onto the stone floor of the cavern. In that moment, he saw that he had cleared the whole area around him. He reached down and plucked the axe from his armour, casting the foul thing as far away from him as he could.

Looking around he saw that Hengist had left a trail of destruction right through the nightgangers and had now turned at bay to confront them. Even as the sergeant braced himself to strike once more there was a howl of dismay from the nightgangers as the other Blood Claws ploughed into their ranks. Together Hengist and Ragnar leapt into the fray once more.

It was all too much for even the nightgangers’ courage. This time they turned and fled, leaving the corpses of their many dead strewn across the floor of the cavern.



SIXTEEN

THE TEMPLE OF CHAOS

Ragnar looked at the scene of carnage. He could not begin to count the dead nightgangers. He could only guess that at least a hundred had died. All around he could hear sporadic fire as the other Blood Claws blazed away at their retreating foes. He would have carried on shooting too but he was more interested in what Sergeant Hengist was up to.

Hengist had bent over the body of the dead shaman and was inspecting his throwing axe without touching it. Ragnar moved over to beside his leader.

‘What is it, sergeant?’ he asked.

‘These weapons have been touched by the power of Chaos,’ Hengist replied.

‘I thought as much. One of them pierced my armour during the combat.’

‘What? Let me see.’ Hengist bent forward and looked at the place where the axe had smashed through ceramite. He inspected the break closely then sniffed.

‘No blood,’ he said. ‘It did not break flesh. You were lucky.’

‘Lucky?’

‘Sometimes these weapons bear a poisonous power. Sometimes they carry the taint of Chaos itself. That alone can be enough to drive men mad.’

He tapped the utility belt at Ragnar’s waist. ‘Best use repair cement on that break. It should at least hold your armour together until we get back to the Fang.’

Ragnar did as he was told, smearing the quick-hardening paste into the gaps in his armour and waiting for the few moments it took to harden on contact with air.

‘What now?’ he asked.

‘We go on,’ Hengist said.

The Blood Claw pack pushed on deeper into the mountain. As they progressed, Ragnar became more and more aware of signs of occupation.

Here and there bones cracked for marrow lay scattered through the passage. Close examination showed that they had once belonged to someone human or near-human.

‘What do these people eat?’ Sven asked.

‘Always thinking about food, eh?’ Nils replied.

‘When they’re not eating each other, you mean?’ Strybjorn added.

Ragnar nodded. Try as he might it was difficult to picture what the nightgangers subsisted on. Unless they ate the huge roaches that occasionally scuttled away from the light. Perhaps they ate the bats or the eldritchly glowing fungi that spotted some of the walls. Or perhaps they made forays onto the surface to hunt. Strybjorn’s words conjured up another image of warring clans of the hideous mutants fighting each other in the dark and consuming their dead victims.

Was that what had happened to the previous pack, he wondered? Had they had their armour split and their flesh wrinkled from it the way Ragnar used to get crabmeat from a shell? But if so, how had it happened? It did not seem possible that the nightgangers could overcome a fully armed and prepared pack of Blood Claws. By Russ, he and Sergeant Hengist had routed what must have been a whole tribe of them virtually on their own. Their weapons were too primitive, their tactics too simple for them to have overcome a whole unit.

And why had the other pack come here in the first place? Their mission had been to conduct a routine investigation of the area in which the great meteor shower had fallen. Had they somehow been lured down here to their dooms? Was that what was happening to Ragnar and his comrades even now? He wished he had answers for these questions, but he did not.

Still, he told himself, he would doubtless find out the truth soon enough.

‘Looks like this cave complex has just been abandoned,’ Lars said.

‘You’re right,’ Ragnar said with a quick glance around the area. Pots and pans, small stone statues, necklaces of finger bones, leather sacks full of unidentifiable stuff lay strewn everywhere as if they had just been abandoned. Ragnar sniffed the air. The scent of the nightgangers was still everywhere, fresh and strong. Some of the scent traces were subtly different. Women and children, most likely, Ragnar thought.

‘Must have known we were coming,’ Sven said, a nasty grin twisting his ugly face. ‘Maybe the survivors of our last battle came here to warn them not to cross us.’

‘Or maybe they just wanted their womenfolk out of the way before they collapse the roof on us,’ Lars suggested.

Sven bared his teeth in a snarl. He had not liked the other Blood Claw’s tone. Hengist moved between them, to break up any potential brawl. Now was not the time for a squabble over precedence in the pack. Instantly Sven and Lars moved apart.

‘I don’t think that’s what’s going to happen,’ Hengist said. ‘No, I think we’re in for something different.’

‘Like what?’ Ragnar asked.

‘I wish to hell I knew. Whatever it is, one thing’s for sure. It won’t be pleasant.’

Ragnar was forced to agree. Like the sergeant, like all of them, he could sense the presence of something else in the air, could sense the gathering of forces to oppose them. There was a power here, deep beneath this mountain. He was certain of it. And he was certain that this power was strong and ancient and evil. He decided that he had better give voice to a thought that was obviously on the mind of every Blood Claw.

‘Perhaps we should turn back, sergeant,’ he said.

‘Not yet,’ Hengist said. ‘We haven’t found what we came for yet.’

‘And I doubt we’re going to,’ muttered Sven.

Not unless what we came to find was death, thought Ragnar.

‘What was that?’ asked Lars. Ragnar looked at him. There was no need to ask what the blond-haired Blood Claw had meant. He had heard it too. Somewhere off in the distance a great drum was beating. Its vibrations could be felt through the walls like the throbbing of a massive heart.

‘It’s our subhuman friends letting their kinfolk know that dinner will soon be served up. And that it consists of tender young Blood Claws,’ Sven said in his surliest voice.

Nils shook his head. ‘Food. Always thinking of food,’ he said mockingly.

The corridor descended downwards. The way was illuminated by glowing fungi. Vast mushrooms blotched the damp floors and walls and sent an eerie greenish glow shimmering through the air. Ragnar could taste their spores on his tongue, and their scent almost overpowered all others.

It was sweet and sickly and smelled of rot and corruption. There was something about it that reminded him of corpses. Here and there trails of luminescent slime threaded their way between the growths and vanished into holes the size of a man's head in the walls of the tunnel. The image of loathsome slug-like creatures fastened itself in Ragnar's mind and would not depart. Perhaps such creatures were what the nightgangers ate.

He knew that there were tunnels running parallel to the one they were in. He could sense that those tunnels were filled with vast hordes of nightgangers. Occasionally he would catch sight of their forms fleetingly as they passed the mouth of a side tunnel, but the mutants kept their distance and did not come within striking distance. Either they had learned their lesson, or they were waiting for something they knew was to happen.

Ragnar suspected that it was the latter. Hengist pushed on oblivious, following a trail that seemed obvious only to him. Ragnar was not sure whether this was because of the sergeant's keener senses and greater experience of tracking or because the sergeant's weird was upon him, and he was following his death-path. Ragnar had heard of this happening to others back in the island. Men would hear the siren call of their doom and rise from the table to march to their deaths in a troll's lair. He did not see why a Space Wolf should necessarily be exempt from such a thing, although at the moment he thought it best to keep his suspicions to himself.

Ragnar risked a glance over his shoulder. Far, far off in the distance he thought he caught the glimmer of glowing eyes. He hurried on to catch up with the rest of the pack.

Suddenly the trail ended. Ahead of them was a long stone bridge over a vast chasm. Ragnar stood on the chasm's edge. Somewhere far below he thought he heard the sound of water. Sven picked up a pebble and tossed it into the abyss. They both stood there counting but there was no sound of the stone hitting bottom.

On the far side of the chasm was an archway in the wall. It was of dressed stone, and even at this distance Ragnar could see each block had been carved with a leering daemon head. It seemed that Hengist's tracking skills had not led them false, and that they had indeed found what they had come for.

The sergeant turned and looked back at the Blood Claws. His ancient, lined face looked pale and drawn in the light of their shoulder lamps. His

eyes glittered feverishly in their sockets.

‘As I suspected,’ he said. ‘A temple of Chaos.’

‘Maybe we should go back now, and report it,’ said Lars.

Hengist turned on his heel, readied his weapon and strode towards the bridge. He paused at the edge, knowing that it was not the leader’s duty to place himself unnecessarily at risk. He halted for a long moment, and then said: ‘Ragnar, advance and scout out the doorway. Be careful. The bridge might not be safe.’

As if I needed anyone to tell me that, Ragnar thought as he paced forward. In the distance, behind them, he was sure he heard the murmuring as of a great crowd.

Wide enough for just one Space Marine at a time, and stretching several hundred paces across the chasm, the stone felt solid beneath his feet, but Ragnar was taking no chances. He advanced cautiously, placing one foot slowly in front of the other, only gradually placing his full weight on his leading foot. It would not do to forget how heavy he was now in his power armour, despite his agility and speed. Also, there could be traps or deadfalls on the bridge. Ragnar knew that anything was possible where the devilish minds of Chaos worshippers were concerned. The stones looked solid but if there was even a slim chance of them giving way and sending him plummeting down into the abyss below, Ragnar wanted to be prepared. If he was going to die here, he wanted to die in battle. That was the only way a warrior should go.

Now where had that thought come from, Ragnar wondered, feeling the beast stir warily within him. Had it come from whatever was in the temple ahead? He could feel the presence of something there, just as surely as he could feel the cold moist breeze on his brow. It pulsed outwards through the gloom like an invisible, spectral beacon. He offered up a prayer to Russ and to the Emperor for the safety of his soul, and pushed on, his armoured feet scuffing dust from the narrow causeway.

Ahead of him, the archway grew larger. He realised that it was immense. Just as this bridge was longer than it had first appeared, so was the opening correspondingly more huge. He began to appreciate how much labour had gone into the creation of this obscene place. This whole structure was no recent work. The flagstones over which he passed had been worn down by many feet. The thing was centuries, if not millennia old.

In the gloom and distance his eyes had been fooled. Now he was starting to realise the scale of the deception. He guessed that the arch was maybe ten times his height, and that each of the blocks making up part of it was at least as tall as he was. The hideous twisted heads chiselled from the stone looked large enough to swallow a grown man at a bite. In a way, the artistry that had gone into their creation was wonderful. They looked like the heads of real living monsters about to emerge full-grown from the stone. He half expected those yawning mouths to gape wider and snap at him as he approached.

From up ahead, through the towering black archway, Ragnar thought he heard a faint murmuring or chanting, but he could not be sure. He moved across the flagstones up to the archway itself. He paused there for a moment, and glanced through, and what he saw took his breath away.

He looked down a vast flight of marbled steps into an enormous chamber carved from the very heart of the mountain. At the far end of the chamber stood a massive statue of what Ragnar perceived could only be an enormous daemon. The statue appeared to be made of some form of crystal and inlaid with bone. Each scale of its shimmering skin was a jewel. Colours constantly shifted and moved across its surface, mingling and shifting endlessly. The statue was perhaps five times the height of a man but such was the aura of power that surrounded it that it seemed much larger still. Its eyes flickered like flames. There was something about the glow of its skin that made it hard to focus on, that baffled Ragnar's eyes, seeming to suggest that at any moment the statue might change form into something else, or spring into sorcerous life.

Great metal wings were folded round the statue's shoulders like a cloak. Its head was curiously bird-like. It stretched out monstrous talons in a gesture that was at once curiously human and supremely menacing. The thing gave the impression of something at once bestial and god-like, of being at the same time something far greater and far worse than human. And from it, waves of dark power seemed to pulse like the malicious heartbeat of an insane god. Ragnar knew without having to be told that this was an effigy of some aspect of Tzeentch, the Great Mutator, the daemon lord of vile sorcery. His implanted knowledge gave him absolute certainty of that awful fact. Ragnar's skin tingled from the sorcerous emanations the thing projected.

So great was the impression of the statue, and so much did it draw his eye, that it was several heartbeats before Ragnar could begin to take in the rest of the chamber. It was as sickening as the statue was impressive. Multi-coloured flames jetted from the walls of the chamber casting their hellish illumination to the furthest corners. From the way they danced and from their pungent smell Ragnar could tell that these were jets of natural gas.

It was what their light revealed that was so daunting. Scattered across the floor were piles of hideously mutated corpses, bloated and twisted but immediately recognisable as having once been human. It looked as if their flesh had been heated unto liquefaction and flowed into new and bizarre shapes. Heads had swollen like balloons to twice their previous size. Fingers had fused together to form flippers. Masses of entrails had exploded from stomachs, become twisted tentacles which looked to have strangled their owners. In some cases the small fangs in their mouths had become huge tusks. Fur had sprouted from some of their skins. In other cases the skin had become transparent to reveal the mass of internal organs. One poor wretch had sloughed away his skin like a snake to reveal the pink mass of muscle and vein beneath. Here was an awful example of the true power of Tzeentch.

At last Ragnar knew the fate of the previous pack. Hanging from great structures of carved bone were their armour and their weapons. A howl of horror and rage was drawn from Ragnar's open mouth. In the flickering light of the gas jets the great statue of Tzeentch seemed to smile mockingly.

He turned and beckoned for his comrades to follow him across. They came over far more quickly than he had, loping from flagstone to flagstone.

‘By Russ!’ he heard Sven mutter. ‘This is a foul place.’

‘A Temple of Tzeentch,’ Hengist said. ‘The Great Mutator. One of the All Father's four greatest enemies.’

‘We must destroy it,’ Strybjorn said.

‘Excellent idea,’ Lars said. ‘But how?’

‘Use grenades,’ Nils said.

‘That will not work,’ Hengist said. ‘Unless I miss my guess, that evil thing is bound with foul sorcery. It will take greater weapons than we

possess to destroy it. We must inform the Chapter of what we have found here.'

'I think you will have other things to worry about, false marine,' said a cold and mocking voice.

Ragnar looked up. A figure had appeared before the altar of Tzeentch. He was not quite sure how it had come to be there. He had seen no one enter the temple. Ragnar found his eyes drawn to the speaker. It was hard to resist the impulse to stare.

The newcomer was garbed like an odd parody of a Space Marine. His armour was bulky and appeared to be of archaic design. More, it looked as if parts had been removed, and replaced or repaired or modified with bands of gold or black iron. Red glowing eyes burned out from within a massive and intricately horned helmet. It held a bolt pistol of equally antique design in each hand.

Ragnar could see that its armour was impossibly ornate. Glittering jewels and daemon heads were inlaid all over its surface and shimmered in the light of the gas jets. Perhaps it was just a trick of the light but some of those heads seem to leer and yawn and wink, stretching in a manner no natural metal could. From the memories placed in his brain by the Fang's teaching machines, Ragnar knew he looked upon one of humanity's deadliest foes, a Chaos Marine.

'It is you who are the false Marine,' replied Hengist. 'It was your kind who broke your vows to the Emperor and to humanity.'

'It was your senile god who broke faith with us. He was too weak. And humanity proved itself ungrateful and unworthy of our rule.' The voice carried a taint of arrogance, perhaps even boredom.

'The rule of daemons and daemon worshippers. The rule of those who bent their knee before our most ancient enemies. You are scum, worse than scum.'

'And you will have a long time in which to repent those words, and to whimper prayers of mercy to He who will soon consume your soul. And believe me, your prayers will not be answered.'

'You will not talk so proudly once I have taken your head and cast your foul corpse into the abyss.'

The Chaos Marine laughed. It was not a pleasant laugh, Ragnar thought. It was too mocking and too full of confidence by far. No warrior should be able to laugh that way when confronted by a full pack of Space

Wolves. The blue and gold armoured warrior appeared to read his thoughts.

‘You and all your yapping puppies could not manage that.’

‘Could they not? The least of these Blood Claws is a better and truer warrior than you, oathbreaker.’ Hengist spat on the polished floor of the Chaos temple.

‘I admit they were handy enough against ignorant superstitious subhumans but as you can see I am armed and equipped at least as well as you.’ The sorcerer-marine gestured theatrically about him. ‘Perhaps I should remove my weapons and fight you with a spear. That way you might at least have a chance. But no, that would still be too easy for me. I could use my bare hands.’

‘You talk a brave fight, for one who hides in the darkness below the world!’ Ragnar interjected, feeling his anger mount.

‘I have nothing to prove, slave to a false god. For ten thousand years the name of Madox had caused his enemies to tremble.’

‘Only if they were weak-willed fools cowed by empty boasts.’

‘Your prattle wearies me, youth, and since you have been good enough to give my brethren time to arrive, I think we should proceed with the slaughter.’

As Madox spoke doors in the side of the temple slid open and more Chaos Marines were revealed. Hengist raised his gun to fire but Madox was quicker. Both his pistols leapt up and began blazing away. Bolter shells clipped the sergeant’s armour as he dived into cover behind the archway. Two of the pack were not so lucky and were cut down by a blaze of fire from the Chaos Marines.

Ragnar followed Hengist’s example and leapt out of the line of fire. Strybjorn and Sven and several others of the pack held their ground and responded. Their shells flashed across the temple but some evil power seemed to send them astray, and they exploded harmlessly on the flagstones around the Chaos Marines. Ragnar looked across at Hengist for orders. The sergeant raced across the archway and rolled into position beside Ragnar.

‘There must be a full squad of Chaos Marines in there, maybe more. They will prove too much for a pack of Blood Claws. The Chapter must be warned of this. Take Sven, Strybjorn, Nils and Lars and head back to the surface. The rest of us will hold them off for as long as possible.’

Ragnar wanted to protest. The beast within him was strong. The smell of blood made his hackles rise and filled him with the lust to kill. More than that he felt it unfair that he should be denied the chance of a hero's death. Hengist seemed to sense the emotions passing through his mind.

'Sometimes the life of a Space Marine is not easy,' he said. 'Now take the others and go.' He bellowed for the Blood Claws who were to follow Ragnar to fall back. Even as he watched, Ragnar, saw Kraki and Volgard go down to the Chaos Marines' fire. He saw too that they had yet to take a casualty even though they were advancing slowly and relentlessly as automatons across the open floor of the temple. He could hear their otherworldly, unnerving laughter as they came on. Surely indeed they were protected by some malign power, Ragnar thought. Then he knew for certain that it was time to go.



SEVENTEEN

FIGHTING RETREAT

‘Let’s go!’ Ragnar yelled and raced back across the stone bridge away from the temple. He did not need to look back to see if the others were following him. He sensed their presence behind him and caught their scared, angry scents. Like him, he guessed they were frustrated and furious at being forced to leave the combat with the Chaos traitors. He cursed that such a blasphemy had been perpetrated on the holy soil of Fenris at all, and wondered how long the Chaos scum had been lurking below the surface of Asaheim. He guessed that they had come under cover of the last meteor storm, but part of him gagged at the thought that perhaps they had been here for months, years, decades even. Impossible! Ragnar refused to countenance such a thought. And now, having uncovered such a nest of vipers in their midst, they must flee!

Not that they were going to be spared any fighting, Ragnar knew. Up ahead of them he could see that the way was blocked by a horde of nightgangers, led by what looked to be a rune-weapon wielding shaman. The creature pointed a long, skull-tipped staff at Ragnar. He saw a halo of eerie reddish light crackle around its tip and then a bolt of searing mystical energy arced towards him. The Space Wolf sprang to one side just in time and it shattered the stones where he had been.

Without thinking Ragnar raised his bolt pistol and snapped off a shot. All the long hours of practice on the ranges proved their worth. The bolter shell flashed straight and true towards its target. The shaman’s head exploded like a jellyfish hit with a blacksmith’s hammer.

The nightgangers set up a bestial roar and began to race forward onto the bridge. They waved their clubs and axes furiously and chanted the name of Tzeentch. Ragnar was not so much worried by their numbers and weapons as he was by the fact that the sheer mass of bodies might slow them down and prevent them making their escape before the Chaos Marines behind overtook them. He was determined that Sergeant Hengist’s message would reach the Chapter.

‘Grenades!’ he ordered. ‘Now!’

As one the Blood Claws took microgrenades from the dispensers on their utility belts and began lobbing them at the oncoming horde. A wave of explosions passed through the crowd killing as they went. Gobbets of flesh and gallons of blood flowed everywhere. The sheer cataclysmic fury of the onslaught stopped the nightgangers' charge. The whole vast mass of them wavered for a moment.

'Pour it on!' Ragnar yelled and the Blood Claws hurled their grenades with redoubled fury. More and more nightgangers fell. The smell of blood and shattered bodies filled the air. Then at the last second Ragnar realised his mistake. The sheer force of such a large number of detonations concentrated on one spot had begun to weaken the bridge. Even as he watched huge chunks began to crumble and drop away into the chasm below. He realised that if the pack did not get clear soon the whole bridge would collapse and they would tumble into the great abyss.

To make matters worse, a bolter shell chipped the wall of the bridge close to his arm. He glanced backwards to see if anyone was firing at him from the temple entrance but he saw only the remnants of Hengist's force still firing away from the position where they were pinned down. He glanced back at the nightgangers and his keen eyes saw what he sought. A few of the mutant leaders brandished bolt pistols. Some of them were of a familiar design, exactly the same as the weapon he held. Doubtless they had been looted from the corpses of the dead Space Wolves back in the temple. A few more were of a similar archaic design to those carried by the Chaos Marines. They must have arrived on the planet with the heretics, Ragnar thought. Not that any of this would matter if he did not get off the bridge soon.

He glanced around to see that all the others had noticed what he had. He knew at once from their scents and their posture that they had. He had not needed to order them to stop throwing grenades. With the independence of true Space Wolves they had made the decision for themselves. Still they stood and kept up a hurricane of fire on the enemy, killing with every shot. Ragnar saw at once that there was only one thing to do.

'Forward!' he cried. 'Quickly! Come on!' He raced forward, feeling the bridge begin to shudder and tremble at his every step. It was obviously only a few heartbeats from total collapse. Ahead of him more and more of the flagstones were tumbling into the chasm below. The yawning gap

between the still stable part of the bridge and the ledge on the other side grew ever wider. As he ran he wondered whether even his enhanced muscles would enable him to leap so wide a distance. Well, he thought, gritting his teeth in a feral grin, there was only one way to find out.

Each step brought Ragnar closer and closer to the edge. He heard his heartbeat loud in his ears, smelled his own tension and excitement. He knew that he would have to time things just right. A single misstep could take him over the edge and send him tumbling to his doom. Leaping too early would be just as fatal if he could not cover the full distance. Gripping his pistol and sword tight, he ran as close to the edge as he dared and then sprang.

Instantly he was vividly aware of the enormous gulf beneath his feet. Wind tugged at his hair. He felt as if he were moving in slow motion. He could pick out every detail of the mutants' features ahead of him. See every wart and boil that disfigured their twisted faces, count the pores on their skin. He had never been so aware of anything in his whole life. All of his superhuman senses were keyed up to a new level of awareness that was positively astounding. So close to death, Ragnar had never felt so alive.

He let out a long howling warcry. Even as he hurtled forward through the air Ragnar raised his pistol and snapped off a shot at a nightganger at the front of the precipice's edge. The mutant clutched his stomach and slumped forward tumbling down into the gloom and the darkness. Ragnar fired another shot and dropped another of his foes, then with a surge of relief he felt the solid ground beneath his boots once more. His knees flexing at the impact with the rocky edge of the far cavern, Ragnar shouted his defiance into the assembled mass of nightgangers. He was alive, and now they would pay! Now they would know first hand the true wrath of a Space Wolf! He surged forward, chainsword swinging, trying desperately to clear a path through the tightly packed nightgangers before his brethren landed on top of them. He knew it was all too possible under these circumstances that they might get entangled and overbalance and fall together into the gloom.

Flesh parted, bones splintered under the impact of his chainsword. He simply pulled the trigger of his bolt pistol knowing that every shell would find a home in this mass of bodies.

Ragnar cleaved his way through the nightgangers like a ship crashing through a stormy sea. He became a living engine of destruction, a

whirlwind of death that twisted and howled and writhed its way through the massed ranks of mutants. Behind him he could hear the chanting of his brethren as they did the same. Soon a fine red mist of bloody droplets filled his sight from where his chainsword had split flesh and severed tendons and veins. The screams of the dying were almost deafening, even with the sonic dampeners within his helm. Deep within his soul, urged on by the scent of carnage, the beast grew stronger.

Ragnar fought now by pure instinct. He did not need to think. The beast was in control. Reflexes, nerves and sinew were in perfect harmony. He reacted to any threat perceived by his hyper-keen senses with the speed of thought. At that moment his combat ability far transcended that of any mortal. Nothing could or did stand in his way. Behind him, the other Blood Claws ripped through the mutant line like a good sharp axe through rotten wood.

Nightmare faces leered, jaws wide to scream, as he chopped them down. Twisted bodies gave way under the impact of his blade. The blows of stone clubs ricocheted off his armour. He ducked a whirring stone from a slingshot. His senses were so keen that it appeared to be moving towards him in slow motion, and he seemed to have all the time in the world to get out of its way. He shifted his head and was rewarded by the scream of a nightganger behind him who got in the stone's way. With a swift snapshot, he shattered the skull of the slinger and continued to hack his way towards freedom.

A blast of sorcerous energy cleaved through the air, a multi-coloured serpent of purplish-blue light that writhed its way towards him. He smelled ozone and a bitter perfume as it drew closer. Ragnar tried to leap to one side, springing clean over the head of a nightganger, but the crackling bolt altered its course and came straight at him once more. He raised his blade to parry, but faster than thought the finger of writhing, hideous energy swerved around and struck Ragnar's armour full on the breastplate.

Instantly his whole body was bathed in agony such as Ragnar had never known or guessed was possible. Every nerve ending screamed its pain. Ragnar felt his armour blister and begin to melt. Sparks flew outwards as systems started to short. Mad interference patterns flashed across his visor and crackling static roared in his ears. His hair stood on end. Surges of energy caused his power-assisted limbs to judder and spasm

of their own accord. Ragnar felt like his eyes would boil in their sockets. He could smell his hair burning. He staggered like a drunk, engulfed in purple fire.

With a huge effort of will, Ragnar forced himself to concentrate and search for his foe. Gritting his teeth, he tasted the coppery tang of his own blood in his mouth. Looking up he saw a cackling, subhuman shaman capering madly on a floating disc of light, high above the crowd, towards the very roof of the cavern. More cursed sorcery, Ragnar thought. The serpent of energy writhed from the end of a skull-tipped staff held in the heretic's claw-like hand. Desperately, Ragnar tried to bring his pistol to bear, but tears of pain filled his eyes, and blurred his vision. It was becoming difficult to focus. Black and purple stars danced across his eyes and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. Ragnar knew without a doubt that in mere moments he would be dead.

Then suddenly a bolter shell flew straight and true and buried itself in the shaman's heart, knocking the fiend off the already fading disc. As he fell, the shaman spread his arms wide and the serpent of light flickered and faded. Even as he tumbled down, another shell blazed towards the nightganger mage, temporarily averting his downward progress through sheer force of impact. The bolt round entered one eye and exited the back of his head in a fountain of brains and blood. Ragnar looked around to see who had shot his enemy, and to his surprise saw that it was the hated Strybjorn. His sworn rival raised one hand in a salute and then gave his attention back to smiting the mutants.

Ragnar fought the dizziness that threatened to overwhelm him. His armour was already running automated system checks, and endless lines of icons flashed and flickered in the periphery of his vision. Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of a grenade hurtling towards him. Judging from the direction it had not been thrown by any of his comrades. It must be one of those weapons the nightgangers had taken from the dead Space Marines. One thing was certain, whoever had thrown it cared nothing for his comrades' lives. Ragnar was surrounded by howling nightgangers, all of whom would die if a grenade exploded anywhere nearby.

Even in his semi-stunned state Ragnar knew his armour was in no condition to take a direct hit from a krak grenade. He could hear the damage in the atonal whining of the servos, and the flashing red icons in his read out told their own dismal tale. He knew he had only one chance

and that depended on how short a fuse the hurtling explosive was on. As it swept closer he reached up with the flat of his chainsword and batted it away, hoping against hope that the shock of the impact did not trigger the detonation he feared. For one brief heart-stopping moment, Ragnar half expected to feel his arm wrenched from its socket by the explosion but then the grenade was flying backwards into the packed mass of nightgangers. A moment later came the blast that sent subhuman forms blown into myriad pieces tumbling through the air.

Ragnar reeled onwards. The nightgangers sensed his weakness and swarmed over him. Stone hatchets and clubs smashed into the fracture lines on his damaged armour. Chunks of ceramite fell onto the stone floor. Ragnar lashed out with the butt of his pistol, smashing a skull, drove his chainsword point first through the chest of the nearest nightganger, then split his body in two with a swift up and down motion. The nearest mutants, seeing the stalwart determination written on his face, started to back away. This gave Ragnar the space to send his chainsword in a swirling berserker circle around him, cleaving heads and bodies in twain. He whirled through the mass like a razor-edged cyclone and then in a moment realised that he was in the clear. There were no more nightgangers around him.

Panting and out of breath, Ragnar glanced backwards and saw Sven, Nils, Lars and Strybjorn all hacking their way through the mass of struggling mutants. They seemed to be swimming through a sea of raw flesh and spurting blood. All around them, nightgangers fell like wheat before the scythe of a reaper. The Blood Claws seemed inhuman, invincible, unstoppable. But then Ragnar caught sight of another grenade hurtling towards Strybjorn and Sven. He howled a warning, saw the Blood Claws begin to react and knew instinctively that his cry had come too late.

Sven managed to throw himself to one side, just in time. He dived headlong into a mass of nightgangers, howling and chopping as he went. Strybjorn was just a fraction too slow. He was grappled by several nightgangers all intent on pulling him down so they could bludgeon his exposed head with their cudgels. At the last moment, he threw them off with a mighty roar and attempted to evade the grenade. He almost managed it, but began his leap just as the detonation erupted, catching his armour and sending him tumbling through the air like a rag doll tossed aside by a cruel child.

Ragnar stood momentarily paralysed, overwhelmed by strangely mixed emotions. It seemed his hated enemy was dead, killed by the explosion, robbing Ragnar of his vengeance. But that was not the worst of it. Suddenly it seemed to Ragnar that his revenge was a small thing to consider indeed compared with the menace of the Chaos Marines and the evil god they worshipped. That was a threat to all humanity, and Strybjorn had fallen in battle against it. More than that, he had saved Ragnar's life from the shaman's evil spell, and there was no way now Ragnar could repay that debt. He howled in rage and frustration, suddenly aware after all these months of dull hatred that he did not want Strybjorn to die this way, that possibly he did not want the Grimskull to die at all. Compared to the menace that was unleashed deep below this mountain, their old tribal enmities seemed petty and foolish.

He noticed that Sven had turned and was making his way through the mass to where Strybjorn had gone down. Even as Ragnar watched he saw Strybjorn suddenly emerge from the sea of stinking bodies and reel to his feet. His armour was cracked. Internal machinery was visible. Half the skin of his face was peeled away and teeth and jawbone were visible. One arm hung limp and bloody by his side, but still he fought on, chainsword flashing, killing as he went. By Russ, if nothing else he was a mighty warrior, Ragnar thought, then the paralysis left him and he leapt into action, chopping and hewing his way through the nightgangers towards where Sven and Strybjorn made their stand.

In moments, he had cleared a path, and he and the other Blood Claws were clear. He grabbed the reeling Strybjorn by the arm and helped support him as he moved on. Turning to Sven and Nils, he shouted, 'Grenades!'

Sven grinned evilly and began to hurtle grenade after grenade into the press of nightgangers. Heartbeats later, Nils did the same. The caves echoed with the thunder of explosions, the flash of detonation lit the air like lightning. Once more it was all too much for the nightgangers. Leaderless since the death of their shaman, they turned and began to retreat in the direction of the chasm. The sheer weight of numbers and press of bodies carried them over the edge. Ragnar could hear their screams as they fell down into the eternal darkness.

Swiftly he pulled the medical pack from his belt. Ragnar knew he would have to act quickly to save Strybjorn's life. He knew it was only a matter of minutes, if that, before the Chaos Marines were in pursuit. He

looked up to see Sven standing over him. His armour was spattered with blood, gore and congealing brains.

‘Good fight,’ Sven grunted. Ragnar looked at him and nodded, wondering how long they had before the Chaos Marines swept over them. He knew that it was imperative to warn the Chapter of what they had found here, yet he also knew that he was not going to leave Strybjorn here wounded and alone to face the coming of those evil ones. He remembered what the old wizards beyond the Gate of Morkai had told him about how his hate was a weakness that would allow evil into his soul. He knew now they had been correct, and that there was only one way for him to rid himself of that hate. Swiftly he came to a decision, praying that it was the right one.

‘Sven, take Lars and Nils and get out of here. Get to the surface. Get as far from this cursed place as you need to for your communicator to work, and then summon the Chapter.’

By way of answer, Sven reached up and released his helmet claps. The helm fell away onto the wet sand with a dull thud, revealing the Space Wolf’s feral face, contorted with rage and looking for all the world like a daemon in the stuttering light of Ragnar’s shoulder beam. ‘And leave you and Strybjorn here all alone to hog the fighting and all the glory?’ Sven shook his head violently. ‘Are you mad, or do you think I am?’

Despite the dire situation they were in, Ragnar could not suppress a smile. He clasped an armoured hand onto Sven’s shoulder. ‘Get your helmet on and go now, you idiot, or I’ll rip your throat out with my teeth. Can’t you see that it is more important that the Space Wolves find out what’s going on here than for you to die heroically?’

‘So you say! I notice that you’re staying.’ Sven glared at Ragnar through eyes which were narrowed to mere slits, his voice a menacing whisper.

‘That’s because Strybjorn saved my life, and I’m not going to leave him here.’

‘You go! I’ll stay!’ The fever of battle was bright in Sven’s eyes, and he nervously fingered the teeth of his chainsword.

Ragnar lost his patience at Sven’s obstinacy. ‘I’m not going to tell you again!’ he roared. ‘Go now or I’ll kill you myself.’ Their eyes locked. Their teeth bared. The stink of anger and confrontation was in the air. Ragnar felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. A moment later, Sven

apparently sensed Ragnar's determination, in some instinctive way, and like a wolf giving ground before the pack leader, he backed down.

'All right,' he said, picking up his helmet and brushing blood flecked granules of sand from the ceramite visor. 'I'm going. But next time it will be my turn to stay behind with the wounded.'

Ragnar grinned at him. 'Fair enough,' he said. Sven looked away for a moment, then barked orders to Nils and Lars.

'Right you two, you heard the hero. Let's get moving. And no argument or I'll rip your hearts out and eat them before your eyes.'

'Always thinking about food,' Nils muttered. He gave Ragnar the thumbs-up as he moved past.

'We'll meet again,' Lars said. 'I know it.'

'I pray to Russ that you are right,' Ragnar said, watching as the trio retreated into the darkness and then were gone.

Ragnar took out a canister of synthi-flesh and sprayed it onto Strybjorn's face. It congealed instantly to cover the bare bone and teeth. It did not look pretty but at least it would keep the wound clean and sterile. He took the repair cement and just as quickly plugged the cracks in Strybjorn's armour, but not before reconnecting and splicing the power-fibres. Lastly, after a quick glance to make sure everything was in place, he injected the wounded Blood Claw with a powerful stimulant. Strybjorn's eyes opened and he let out a howl of pain and rage.

'You're still here, Thunderfist. I am surprised.' His voice was violent and ragged, coloured by the pain coursing through his injured frame.

'You saved my life. I'm paying my debt.'

'I don't need your help,' Strybjorn hissed through gritted teeth, and tried to rise. He managed to get to his knees, but then started to topple. Ragnar reached out and grabbed him, putting his hand under Strybjorn's left arm. His chainsword was holstered and he held his bolt pistol in his left hand. Blood trickled in rivulets through the cracks in Strybjorn's armour and stained Ragnar's arm red.

'We'd best get going. It's only a matter of time before the nightgangers find their courage again. Or the Chaos Marines find it for them.'

Even through his pain, Strybjorn managed to look thoughtful. 'I wonder how Hengist and the others are doing.'

Ragnar strained his ears to listen. He could hear no sounds of conflict in the distance. It appeared Hengist's force was dead or worse yet,

captured. Ragnar hoped that the tumbled bridge would hold back the Chaos Marines for a little while but somehow he just knew it would not stop the pursuit for long.

Strybjorn leaned against Ragnar as they moved off into the gloom.

Ragnar tried to retrace the steps that had brought them down to the temple. It was difficult. He could catch scent traces of the Space Wolves but they were overlaid by the acrid stench of the nightgangers to the point where it was difficult to pick out his Claw brothers at all. Ragnar realised now how they had been sucked into a trap, allowed to move ever deeper beneath the mountain while a huge force of nightgangers assembled all around them. They had been allowed to reach the temple, and they had walked in like living sacrifices to the Changer of Ways. It was not a cheering thought.

Ragnar's shoulder lamp probed the gloom ahead. He bent down and saw recent traces that Sven and the others had been here. That at least was reassuring. A groan from behind him told him that Strybjorn was not in a good way. Ragnar turned to see that the Grimskull was pale-faced, his skin taking on a yellowish pallor that Ragnar had come to associate with death during his former life on the islands. He only hoped that Strybjorn's superhuman strength would make the difference and pull him through. Ragnar wondered how he could discern what was wrong. Perhaps there had been internal injuries that he did not have the skill or the equipment to treat. He knew that was all too possible. Often it was not the obvious wounds that killed warriors. When he was a lad, Ragnar had heard tales of men taking what appeared to be a light tap to the skull, fighting on through a battle, and then keeling over stone dead in their moment of triumph. Maybe that was going to happen to Strybjorn.

'You go on without me, Thunderfist,' Strybjorn said. The words sounded strange coming from his mangled jaw. 'I'll wait here. If any are pursuing you I will hold them off.'

'You are coming with me, Grimskull, if I have to knock you down and carry you. You've come this far. Be man enough to go the whole way.'

Their eyes locked. As with Sven he sensed the resistance there, and as with Sven he beat it down. He felt that had Strybjorn been at his full strength, he might not have obeyed, but in his weakened condition, he did not have the willpower to defy Ragnar.

‘You win,’ he said. ‘Onwards.’ The motors in Strybjorn’s armour wheezed asthmatically as he moved, and ruptured feed pipes vented steam from his backpack, but the Grimskull moved off at a limping stagger along the tunnel.

Ragnar could see that it was all he could do to keep on his feet.

Ragnar breathed a sigh of relief. He recognised this place. It was the great underground lake. He had never imagined that he would be glad to see its foul waters, but certainly he was now. Sighting the waters around his home island would not have made him any happier at that moment. No matter how bleak and foul this place, it was a landmark Ragnar recognised, and he knew he was on the right track.

There had been times over the last few hours when he had thought he was lost. The path looked very different on the way back up to the surface. Ragnar understood only too well why. It was simply that he was now going in a different direction, experiencing the tunnels and caves from an opposite point of view to that of a few hours ago. As if that was not enough, he knew he was tired. He was alone except for Strybjorn. All of these things had conspired to alter his perceptions of the place, rendering it unfamiliar, menacing and hostile. He shook his head and reminded himself that in truth it was all of those things.

‘Is this the lake of the dead?’ Strybjorn asked, his voice a bubbling whisper. Ragnar realised that his fellow Blood Claw was hallucinating. ‘Are we here at last?’

‘No,’ Ragnar said. ‘It is not. It’s just that foul, Chaos-tainted pond Sven spat in on the way down.’ Ragnar tried to smile, but the best he could manage was an exhausted grimace.

‘It’s you, Thunderfist. I killed you then, and you killed me, and we’ve come to hell together.’

Ragnar shuddered. For a moment, it seemed quite possible. His mind reeled with the concept. Perhaps Strybjorn was right. Perhaps their corpses lay back in the ruins of the Thunderfist village. Perhaps the whole trip to Russvik, the whole process of induction into the Wolves had been merely a hallucination, a last dream-like fantasy conjured up by his pain-wracked brain as he fell forward into death. Perhaps now they really were dead. Mutually slain, maybe they had entered hell together.

Ragnar fought for a hold on sanity. He breathed deeply of the foul air, catching the scent of stagnant water, and mould and fungus. He saw the

trails of blood where the corpses of the nightgangers they had slain earlier had been dragged away, most likely to be devoured. He felt the cool ceramite gauntlets encasing his fingers, and the hilt of the bolt pistol in his hand. He scanned the area, senses keener than those possessed by any mortal man.

No, he told himself. I am not dead. Nor is Strybjorn. Not yet anyway. We are Space Wolves, chosen of Russ, and we will not give up.

He unclipped another vial of painkiller, and pressed it against the induction valve in Strybjorn's armour. With a hiss the vial emptied as the chemicals entered the Blood Claw's system. Strybjorn let out a long groan, shook his head, looked around, his cavernous eyes filled with pain, but no longer perhaps quite so feverish.

'Let us go on,' he said. Ragnar nodded his agreement. In the distance, he thought he heard the sounds of pursuit.

'What was that?' Strybjorn asked. Ragnar was surprised that the Grimskull had heard anything. For the past hour he had become increasingly feverish, barely able to stand on his feet.

'It was nothing,' said Ragnar. He was lying. It was the sound of metal-shod feet moving up the corridor behind them. The echoes rang harshly on the stone. It was difficult to guess the distance that separated them from the source of the noise but Ragnar could not believe it was far. Whoever was following them was confident. They were making no attempt at stealth. They were coming on with all speed.

Ragnar cursed. He realised that they were in the long gallery where he had climbed to spot the ancient girders. It seemed to Ragnar as if days or weeks had passed since they were last here. The surface was not too far away now, as far as he remembered. They had almost made it. Almost. Still, he consoled himself with the thought that Sven and the others seemed to have escaped. He had come across no sign that disaster had overtaken them or that they had been captured. They must have reached the surface by now, Ragnar thought. They might even have got clear of the zone of interference and been able to summon help. They must have made much better time than him on the long climb from the dark heart of the mountain. They had not been burdened by the wounded Strybjorn.

'Let's get going,' Ragnar said. 'Not much further now.'

Strybjorn nodded and limped onwards.

They had almost crossed the gallery when Ragnar heard a familiar melodious yet sinister voice ring out behind him.

‘Where are you going, puppy? Do turn around, please. I want to look at you, for I never like shooting anyone in the back.’

Ragnar recognised the voice. It belonged to the Chaos Marine who had taunted Sergeant Hengist. Slowly he turned around, letting Strybjorn slump to the ground as he reached up to draw his chainsword.

Ragnar almost flinched as he faced his enemy. He had half expected to see a full squad of dreaded Chaos Marines and a horde of nightgangers. All he could make out was a solitary figure.

‘Madox!’ he spat. Ragnar noticed that some of the icons on the Chaos Marine’s armour were glowing, doubtless with malign energies. The hairs on the back of Ragnar’s neck prickled. What was going on? Was there a cursed spell being cast here?

‘You remember. I’m flattered. That’s good too. When your soul reaches hell, you will be able to tell everyone who killed you.’ The words hissed flatly through the dank air of the cavern.

‘I’m not dead yet.’

‘Believe me, it’s only a matter of moments before I change that.’

‘Where are your brethren? All dead?’

‘No. They are hunting down the few survivors of your little party who fled the battlefield like the cowards they are.’

‘I don’t believe you.’ Ragnar could feel the beast within his soul snarl at the insult and begin to rise to the fore.

‘What you believe or don’t believe is irrelevant.’ Once again, Ragnar thought that he could hear a hint of boredom in the Chaos follower’s voice.

‘Then why are you telling it to me, filth?’

The armoured sorcerer sighed, as if wondering at the sheer ignorance of the whelp before him. ‘Because it’s been a long time since I’ve had the pleasure of taunting one of your kind from so close. And I intend to savour it. It’s one minuscule speck of revenge for the burning of Prospero, but these days I take my pleasures where I can.’

‘You are of the Thousand Sons then.’

Ragnar knew now that Madox was one of his Chapter’s most ancient and feared foes, devilish magicians as well as fearsome warriors. The Space Wolves had cleansed the Thousand Sons’ homeworld of Prospero in the aftermath of Horus’s rebellion thousands of years ago. The Traitor

Marines had never forgiven them for it. Several times since they had attacked Fenris, apparently with the intention of repaying the favour. Ragnar wondered if Madox's presence now was indicative of another such plot. Of course, he thought, it had to be. That was why it was so imperative that someone get away to warn the Space Wolves. Ragnar gleaned a small crumb of solace and confidence from the thought of Sven passing on the message, and the retribution which would swiftly follow.

‘Bravo. The idiots in the Fang still teach some aspects of the ancient truths then.’

‘They told me enough about your treacherous kind to recognise a twisted and irredeemable foe of humanity when I see one.’

To Ragnar's surprise, Madox laughed. His mocking voice took on a scholarly tone. ‘They told you nothing. It was not us who attacked your Chapter. It was you who treacherously attacked our home.’

‘After you had forsworn your duty to humanity and the Emperor.’

Madox shook his head. ‘So much certainty. So little knowledge. We did not forswear the Emperor. He forsook us. He sent his Wolves to attack us simply because he did not like the path our primarch, the revered Magnus, had uncovered: the path to knowledge and limitless power.’

‘Limitless evil, you mean.’

Madox shook his head sorrowfully.

‘Truly it is said that it is foolish to argue with those whose minds are closed. And no Chapter has ever had minds more closed or uncivilised than the Space Wolves. I don't know why I have wasted my time trying to enlighten you.’

Ragnar wondered that too. Was the Chaos Marine waiting for something, he wondered? Perhaps he was hoping that his companions would arrive and help him capture Ragnar. At that precise moment Ragnar did not care. Every moment he delayed Madox was a moment more for Sven to bring word to the brethren at the Fang.

‘We may be uncivilised but we are loyal to our oaths,’ Ragnar growled.

‘You're certainly persistent in your folly.’

Ragnar wondered what Madox meant. He was starting to detect something now, some enchantment that tugged at his senses and compelled him to listen to what the Chaos Marine had to say. Was this some subtle spell designed to make him vulnerable to heresy?

He decided he'd better do something. Yet something prevented him from acting. His mind felt as if it was snagged in a net. Were the glittering jewels on Madox's armour glowing more brightly? Were they the cause of his caution? Shaking his head to clear his thoughts Ragnar asked the Chaos sorcerer, 'How did you get here?'

'We came in answer to the prayers of those who worship the Great Mutator. We came in under cover of the meteor swarm that your childish brethren came to investigate. We came in answer to those who worship us. The temple below was consecrated by one of my brethren left on this world after our last attack on the Fang. He taught the true way to those mutants. He led them out of error and into freedom.'

Ragnar nodded. The last piece of the puzzle was in place. He forced his arm to move, to fight the spell that he was sure Madox was placing on him. Slowly, as if fighting against a great weight, he raised his bolt pistol until it was almost aimed directly at the Chaos Marine. As if Ragnar had broken their spell, the gemstones on the Chaos Marine's armour ceased to glow.

'You are stronger-willed than I thought, puppy,' Madox said, his voice dripping scorn and hatred. 'I suppose now I will have to kill you. A pity. It would have been pleasing to have you march willingly to the altar of Tzeentch and have you offer yourself up to the Changer of Ways. Still, I suppose we can't have everything.'

With eye-blurring speed, Madox brought up his weapon and fired. Ragnar's sluggish reflexes were not up to matching him. Before Ragnar could even react the pistol was blown from his hands with one shot. It was an awesome feat of marksmanship. Knowing now he had but once chance Ragnar raised his chainsword and rushed forward. The barrel of Madox's bolter moved to cover him. It appeared huge as the mouth of a cave. Ragnar's keyed-up senses saw the barrel was indeed shaped like a daemon's head whose mouth would spit bullets. He knew at that moment he was going to die. There was no way at this range that a warrior like Madox was going to miss.

He flinched as he heard the roar of a shot, before realising that somehow, impossibly, he was not hit. Instead he saw a great chunk had been bitten out of the Chaos Marine's armour, forcing the sorcerer to stagger back. Of course, Ragnar grinned, Strybjorn still had his pistol; he must have regained consciousness and opened fire. Madox reeled

backwards and then regained his balance in an instant, almost casually sending a shot past Ragnar. The shriek of shattering armour and a groan of pain told Ragnar that the shell had found a home in Strybjorn's body.

Still, the Grimskull had given him a chance, and Ragnar fully intended to take it. As he ran, the last trace of spell-induced lethargy fell from him. Ragnar knew he was himself again; a Space Wolf in full battle frenzy. With a howling warcry he sent his chainsword through a vast arc, intending to drive it clean through the heretic's body. Madox swivelled desperately, trying to bring his gun to bear. He almost made it. Instead, he just managed to interpose it in the way of Ragnar's blade.

There was a shriek of metal on metal. Sparks flew as the two weapons came into contact then the chainsword cleaved clean through the Chaos Marine's gun. Still Madox had time to drop it and step back. The sorcerer extended his hand with a grasping gesture and a runesword flashed from the scabbard at his side and leapt into his hand. Its blade was black. Red runes gleamed with pent-up sorcerous energy along its length. Ragnar knew without having to be told that its touch would be deadly. He chopped again using two hands to drive his blade home. Madox's daemonsword rose to parry. Blade rang against blade with a clangour like a hammer hitting an anvil.

Madox struck back at Ragnar. The Blood Claw leaped clear and sent a counterstroke hurtling at the Chaos Marine. Once again Madox parried easily. They circled each other warily now, weapons held at the ready. Ragnar's hair stood on end as Madox's blade emitted a low eerie moan. It was somehow alive and sentient, Ragnar sensed.

'That is correct,' Madox purred, guessing the chain of Ragnar's thoughts. 'This daemon weapon will consume your soul even as it drinks your blood. It thirsts, you see.'

'First it will have to hit me,' Ragnar said, a low growl emerging from his throat as he lashed out at the Chaos Marine. Madox ducked below the stroke and lashed out with a lightning-quick counter.

'I don't think that will be a problem,' he said, unleashing a flurry of blows which Ragnar strove desperately to avoid. He parried, barely managing to spring aside from the onslaught. The speed and power of the Chaos Marine were incredible. Ragnar knew how strong he himself was, but compared to Madox he might as well have been a child.

And why not, Ragnar thought, as he managed to turn aside another thunderous blow? The shock of the impact left his arm feeling numb. Compared to the Chaos Marine he was but a child. Madox had millennia of experience and all the gifts that the powers of Chaos could lavish on him. Fighting against such a man was more than madness, it was sheer folly. There was no way to overcome such a fell foe. Ragnar felt that he might as well just give up. It would be less painful in the end.

Once again Ragnar became aware that these thoughts were coming from outside himself, that he was being subjected to the influence of some external power. The woeful dirge being sung by the runesword was affecting him. The effect was subtle and demoralising. Its hellish shrieking sapped the courage and strength from Ragnar's arm and will. Once more he steeled himself and threw off the spell, parrying Madox's blade and throwing himself into a furious offensive that sent the Chaos Marine backwards step by step until Ragnar had regained all the ground he had lost to Madox's onslaught.

He could sense the Chaos Marine's chagrin at this unexpected resistance. His lips twisted into a wolfish grin as he hammered another blow down. This one made it past Madox's guard and sheared one of the leering daemon heads from his armour. For a moment Ragnar thought he had struck flesh but then he saw that some sort of red-hot liquid metal was pouring forth. It bubbled like magma then evaporated into a silverish poisonous cloud. Hastily Ragnar stepped back, knowing instinctively that to breathe the foul stuff meant death. He knew that such was the magic surrounding the Chaos Marine that not even his own body's superhuman ability to adapt to poison would be good enough to save him.

'A good blow,' Madox said sardonically. Suddenly and unexpectedly he lashed out with his boot. It caught Ragnar in the groin, and he felt the codpiece of his armour crumple under the sledgehammer force of the impact. The sheer power of the blow sent him tumbling through the air to sprawl headlong on the stonework next to the recumbent form of Strybjorn.

Ragnar let the momentum of his fall carry him, and he rolled backwards, got his feet beneath him and sprang upright. Pain surged through him from the area of his groin. He felt barely able to stand upright and he shook his head in a desperate effort to clear his senses. While he had been tumbling Madox had closed the ground between them with

appalling speed. His howling runesword was held high, ready for the final stroke.

At that moment, Ragnar felt a mind-numbing weakness spread through him. He knew he did not have the strength to stop the killing blow, and that his life was surely over. All Ragnar could do was watch the Chaos Marine come ever closer. He was fascinated by the glowing runes and the wailing song of his deadly blade. He knew that in mere moments, he would feel its chilly bite, and if what the heretic had said was true, he would feel his soul sucked from his still-living frame.

As Madox strode past Strybjorn's mangled form, the Grimskull's eyes came open. With a gasp of effort and willpower, he reached out with his one good arm, and with the last of his strength grabbed the Chaos Marine's ankle, pulling him off-balance. Not expecting an attack from this quarter, Madox started to tumble and fall. Instinctively, Ragnar raised his chainsword to protect himself from the falling warrior. There was the wail of metal on metal as the rotating blades bit home. Sparks flew as he sliced through the hellmetal of Madox's armour. Ragnar just had time to roll clear as the poisonous gas spurting forth and Madox hit the ground, driving the whirring, chewing blades still deeper into his chest until it passed all the way through his torso and emerged from his back. A great, roiling geyser of foul smoke erupted towards the ceiling and slowly dispersed, as a long wail of aeons of despair assaulted Ragnar's senses.

Madox's helmet rolled clear from the chest plate of his armour, and Ragnar could see that it was empty, as if no one had been wearing it. Perhaps that was the case, he thought. Perhaps the physical form of the Chaos Marine had faded long ago, leaving his armour animated only by some foul residue, or the vile essence of his evil soul.

Briefly, Ragnar stood panting heavily in the cave. Pain wracked his body. He felt no sense of triumph right at that moment, though he knew he should have. Between them, he and Strybjorn had overcome one of the most powerful foes a Space Marine could face. Against all odds, they had won. Yes, Ragnar thought, more by luck than skill. That, and their enemy's overconfidence. Under the circumstances, Ragnar was happy with a victory whatever the reasons. It was the best that could be hoped for.

Ragnar reached down and drew his blade from the recumbent form of his enemy. He picked up Strybjorn's fallen pistol and stuck it in his holster. He bent down and hoisted the body of the Grimskull onto his shoulders

and then, bracing himself against the weight, began to make his way slowly towards the surface. His damaged armour creaked and groaned under the pressure, and Ragnar reminded himself to personally thank his artificer for tending so carefully to the ages-old suit. It had served him well on his first real mission.

Feeling the heavy weight across his shoulders, Ragnar grinned. That's three times this day I owe you my life, Strybjorn, he thought. And that is a debt I will repay if it kills me.

Now, though, Ragnar resolved that he could only do that if they both made it alive to the surface. His mouth set in a determined grimace, Ragnar strode off up the tunnel towards the surface once again. He hoped it was not far.

The cool night air hit Ragnar's face as he emerged from the cave mouth and with it came a strange chemical taint that smelled like oil and naphtha. It took a second for it to register in his pain-soaked mind that he had made it to the surface. It took another second for it to register that the whole area around the cave mouth had been cleared of foliage. It took another split-second for it to register that the muzzles of half a hundred weapons were pointing at him. His nostrils flared and he caught the scent of Chapter brethren. Lots of them.

'It is me, Ragnar,' he said, just to make sure that they understood he was not hostile. He felt certain that they had already recognised him, but under the circumstances it was impossible to be too careful. It would be a foolish death to survive the long perilous trek under this daemon mountain, and then be mown down by his own battle-brothers.

Spotlight beams fell on Ragnar, throwing him into brilliant illumination. His altered pupils instantly contracted to compensate for the stark light, but even so for a moment he was blinded. An instant later he felt the touch of powerful minds probing carefully through his thoughts, and he was sure he could sense the presence of the three ancients who had waited so long ago beyond the Gate of Morkai. This time, Ragnar opened his mind to them, wanting to make sure there was not the slightest possibility of a misunderstanding. Ghostly fingers tugged at his thoughts, and he felt that he was recognised and acknowledged.

'It is Brother Ragnar and Brother Strybjorn,' a voice said. 'And there is no taint of Chaos upon them. Russ be praised.'

‘Step forward, lad, and give Brother Strybjorn into the care of the priests,’ said a voice from the gloom. Ragnar recognised it as belonging to Ranek. The searchlight beams winked off and overhead he made out the running lights and ghostly outlines of several Thunderhawk gunships. It seemed that the Chapter had got the warning and responded to it instantly and in great force. Ragnar knew that it was a measure of the seriousness with which they must view the threat of what waited below the mountain.

Mustering his last reserves of strength, Ragnar strode forward towards his battle-brothers, forcing himself to walk proudly upright, despite the pain, his damaged armour and the numbing weight of the Grimskull across his shoulders. Several hurried forward to take Strybjorn from him. He saw they wore the insignia of the healers. One of them looked at him and gestured for him to follow down the slope. He did so, and within a few dozen strides stood at the entrance of a field hospital tent. The healers had already connected their strange devices to Strybjorn’s armour and were beginning to utter the chants of their arcane rituals. Ragnar saw that one of the medics was attaching machinery to him as well.

‘How is Strybjorn?’ he asked. ‘Will he live? He saved my life, you know.’ The words seemed foolish even as they left his lips but the healer only smiled, showing his fangs.

‘And you have most likely saved his by getting him here in time. Now be silent. I must see to you.’ The words were a command, but they were gently said and held no rancour, so Ragnar obeyed. He heard the whoosh of air as chemicals were injected into the appropriate vents in his armour, then a click as the panels of his chest plate swung open. In an instant he felt relaxed. He shook his head to clear away the slight blurring of his vision, and then noticed Sven standing in the doorway of the tent.

‘So you made it out, brother,’ Sven said. ‘I am glad.’

‘It appears you did too, and that you got the message through.’

‘Yes, and what a time we had of it. I thought we were never going to get far enough away to be out of the zone of interference. We must have covered a good two leagues or so before I could make contact with the Fang over the comm-net.’

‘Then what happened?’

‘Then all hell broke loose. About five minutes after I delivered the message I saw the fire-trails of Thunderhawks in the sky. They swooped low and began firing chemical rockets into the forest. Within another two

minutes they had cleared the area around the cave entrance for a thousand strides. A few heartbeats after the alchemical fires subsided the Thunderhawks were on the ground and what looked like every Wolf in the Fang poured out. They're all here – Ranek, the Librarians, the Iron Priests. There's a huge monster-machine they call Bjorn the Fell-Handed. They say he's one of the Ancients, that he walked beside Russ. All the full brothers who were in the meditation cells. A mass of support equipment. It looks like we walked into a real hornet's nest, and they intend to clear it out good and proper.

'Me and Nils and Lars just got back from where we put in the word a couple of minutes ago. I thought I'd come and see how you were before we head below the mountain.'

'You're going back in?'

'Try and stop me! The first squads have already started. They're laying sealed comm-wires, checking for deadfalls, making sure it's not a trap and the whole ceiling won't fall in once we're all down there. The Thunderhawks are scanning the mountain looking for any other exits. Once we get the all-clear we're going back down in force to clear the Chaos scum out.'

'We killed one of them,' Ragnar said. 'Strybjorn and I. We killed the leader, Madox.'

'So I heard. The Librarians told everyone. The whole Chapter is talking about it. Seems it's a long time since any Blood Claw won a fight with a full-blown champion of Chaos like Madox. Seems like you performed a mighty deed.'

'We were lucky.'

'Given a choice between a leader who is lucky and a leader who is wise, I'll take the one who is lucky,' Sven said. 'Anyway, don't say that too loudly or you'll spoil things for everybody round the camp. It's the first time since I got to Russvik that anybody round here has treated us as if we mattered.'

'I don't think that's true. They always treated us as if we mattered. That's why they were so hard on us.'

'Whatever. When you get your wounds dealt with come down and join us. Nils has found us something to eat.'

'I am in no way surprised by that,' Ragnar said and smiled. A sense of elation finally filled him. He had come through his baptism of fire without

disgracing himself. He knew that soon they would clear out this nest of vipers and avenge their fallen brethren. And Ragnar was looking forward to playing his part in the brutal revenge to come.



EPILOGUE

‘Brother Ragnar,’ said a cold clear commanding voice. ‘Brother Ragnar, awake.’

Ragnar’s eyes snapped open. He was suddenly aware of his surroundings, of the cool minty tang of medical incense, of the chill marble feel of the surgical altar beneath his back, of the way his breath congealed into clouds in the cool air. He looked up and saw a lined and scarred face smiling down into his own. The two fangs revealed by the grin told him he was in the presence of his battle-brothers. The pain in his chest warned him he was back among the living.

‘I cannot be in hell, Brother Sigard. You are too ugly to be allowed through its gates.’

‘And you are too mean to die, Brother Ragnar. Although to tell the truth, it was touch and go there for a while. There was a point when both your hearts stopped, and your spirit wandered free from its body. We thought we had lost you then for sure, but something brought you back. I’m not sure what.’

‘I still have business among the living, brother. I have enemies to slay and battles to win. I am not yet ready to die. How goes the war?’

‘Well. We have cleared the dropsite, and Imperial forces are moving in to secure the perimeter. We’ve made a good beginning here but the battle will go on. These heretics are tough ones, and rumour has it that the forces of Chaos have reinforced them. Indeed it may be that the Thousand Sons are present once more. There are rumours that Madox has been sighted leading their troops.’

‘And there is my unfinished business, brother. Twice I have thought I killed him. Third time will be the charm.’

‘I wish you well in your quest, brother. And it may be that your wish will be granted soon, for our enemies are mounting a mighty counter-attack against us.’

‘How soon may I leave here?’ Ragnar asked.

‘In another few days, brother.’

‘Not good enough,’ Ragnar said, ignoring the pain and lifting himself from the altar. The life-support tubes automatically withdrew from the induction points in his armour. ‘The Chapter will need every man in this coming conflict.’

‘As you wish, Brother Ragnar,’ Sigard said.

Ragnar nodded and moved slowly towards the door. From outside he could hear the welcome thunder of battle.



RAGNAR'S CLAW



PROLOGUE

As the shell seared past, Ragnar threw himself flat behind the low pile of rubble, trying to make himself as small a target as possible. That had been close, too close. The shot had almost parted his hair. Only his lightning-quick reflexes and the microsecond's warning provided by his superhuman senses had got him out of the way. If he had ducked half a heartbeat later, his head would have been an exploding fountain of gore and bone. Ragnar had seen it happen too often to have any doubts as to what his own fate would have been.

Now, however, was not the time to brood on what might have been. Now was the time for action, the time to teach the infidel cultists trying to slay him the penalty for attacking one of the Emperor's chosen Space Marines. He raised his head slightly, lifting it just above the parapet of rubble, his superhuman senses taking in the entire scene. Everything imprinted itself in his mind in one split second, then he ducked down once more before his enemies could fire.

He sorted through all the impressions he had picked up; not just the sights but also the sounds, the smells and the less tangible cues from the mixture of senses in his altered brain. He recalled the ruined city, stretching as far as the eye could see. The enormous blackened stumps of the smashed skyscrapers, the burned out wreckage of ground-cars and tanks which filled the street. The infernal blaze of the fuel pumping station that had been hit by a missile and which had now burned on for days, sending huge tongues of flame leaping into the darkening sky. He remembered the crimson and purple clouds contaminated by chemicals from the mighty industrial plants which had once provided this city with wealth and importance to the Imperium.

He recalled the earthshaking roar of distant artillery as Basilisk tanks shelled the rebel positions, and the stutter of small arms fire in the near distance. He could hear the guttural shouts of rebel officers ordering their unruly troops into new defensive positions and the faint scrape of ceramite boot on stone, inaudible to normal human ears, that told him his own troops were close by. He even recognised the footfalls as belonging to

young Brother Reinhardt. He made a mental note to remind himself, after this engagement was through, to have a word with the Blood Claw. He was supposed to be moving stealthily. Not even his leader should have been able to pick out his position by the noise he was making.

Of course, Ragnar had other ways of spotting his troops. The wind carried their distinctive scent to his sensitive nostrils even over a gap of fifty paces. He could pick their clean, cold aroma out from all of the tangled mess of background stinks – the rotten-egg taint of industrial pollution, and the even subtler, sicker taint, which marked the Chaos-touched presence of heretics.

Bones of Russ, how he hated that foul stench! He had never got used to it, though it had assailed his nostrils on countless occasions for over a century. There was something deeply offensive to him in the very odour of those who had forsworn their souls to Chaos, a thing that made the hairs on the back of his neck rise, and filled his heart with a red desire to kill and rend. Not even the fact that he suspected that this was a deliberate product of the process of alteration that had turned him into a Space Marine, could alter the basic, primal nature of his hatred. The unquenchable anger affected him as instinctively as the urge to seek its prey drives a wolf. An apt analogy, thought Ragnar, for he was a human wolf, and the Chaos-worshipping scum were his rightful prey, fit subjects for the Emperor's vengeance, delivered by he and his fellows, humanity's superhuman protectors. They had turned their backs on humanity and offered themselves up to the gods of darkness in return for power, or more likely the promise of power. Ragnar knew that it was a false promise. The only reward most of those deluded fools would receive would be the stigmata of mutation, and a degeneration of mind and spirit until their souls matched their twisted bodies. It would be a mercy to kill them before that happened, although most of them would never appreciate the natural justice of such an end.

Here, amongst these blasted ruins, the stink seemed worse, even, than before, for along with the taint of Chaos was the stench of sickness, of some foul pestilence that had infected the heretics, and the people of Hesperida alike. It was a sour, unclean reek that made his throat constrict. It brought back too many old memories, ones he had thought long buried. He pushed them to the back of his mind; now was not the time to lose himself in reverie.

These reflections had taken less than five heartbeats perhaps. In the midst of battle, Ragnar's mind worked at a speed far beyond the merely human. He realised he had only been keeping himself occupied until his troops were massed in position for the final assault. He focussed his mind back on the problem at hand, selectively editing the memory of the scene he had just witnessed, using his superhuman abilities with a skill born of long decades of practice.

Using ancient meditation techniques taught to him in the fortress-monastery of his order, he concentrated upon the impression of the one part of the battlefield that was currently important to him: the rebel position directly ahead. He consciously selected all the crucial details. The walls of sandbags hastily thrown into position to plug the gaps in the building walls. The heavy bolter team ensconced in the twisted wreckage of a tank just in front of the building. The edge of a peaked cap which marked the presence of a rebel officer glaring out of the barred windows on the remains of the second floor. All was more or less as he had expected it to be when he had surveyed the enemy stronghold earlier. There had been no important changes in the heretics' disposition. His basic plan remained sound.

It would simply be a matter of hitting them at their weakest point, blasting the sandbags out of the way and then scouring the building of every last Chaos-worshipping wretch. Nothing too difficult, he thought – even though his force was outnumbered at least five to one. Such numbers did not really matter, Ragnar knew. In battles such as this, the quality of the troops counted for far more than the quantity. His men were Space Marines, Adeptus Astartes, hardened warriors drawn from a world of fierce fighters, put through the toughest testing regime ever devised, then subjected to a process of genetic re-engineering which had transformed them into supermen, many times faster, stronger and tougher than mere mortals. They were armed with the best weapons and equipment the Imperium could provide. They lived lives of monastic discipline; when they were not fighting in the Emperor's service, they trained to fight. They were the best troops the millions of worlds the Imperium of Mankind could produce.

And their opponents? Scum, pure and simple. They were conscripts, pressed into the service of a rogue planetary governor; men so lacking in faith that they had forsworn their oaths of allegiance to the Emperor, and

given themselves body and soul to the dark powers of Chaos. Of course, they had some military training, and they were not without a certain desperate bravery, but there was no way they could withstand an assault by the Space Wolves.

Ragnar knew the rest of his force was in position. He sensed that the Blood Claws, ferocious young assault troops, were in cover in a shell crater not too far from him. Within moments Brother Hrothgar's Long Fangs would open fire and that would be the signal for the assault to commence. Ragnar smiled wolfishly, lips curling to reveal the huge canines that were the genetic marker of his Chapter. The coming few minutes were always the times he loved the most, when combat was up close and personal, and a man could take the measure of his foes, hand to hand.

A flickering vapour trail was all the warning he needed that Brother Hrothgar had opened fire. The enemy heavy weapon vanished in a sun-bright explosion as the missile launcher did its work. The staccato roar of bolters filled Ragnar's ears as the remainder of his men opened up on the enemy position. They were throwing down a curtain of fire in the way that only Space Marines could, shooting with a speed and precision unknown to lesser warriors. Ragnar risked another glance up and saw huge chunks of masonry being shattered to stone chips by the torrent of bolter shells. He could hear the screams of the enemy wounded and dying, smell the blood and the sour stink of spilled guts. The enemy were well and truly suppressed, pinned down by the unexpected hail of shells, unable or unwilling to stick their heads over the parapet and risk having them blown off. Ragnar knew that this would not last for long, that soon they would regain their courage and return fire – or at least, they would if they were given the chance. Ragnar was not about to allow them that.

Now was the moment to attack.

The Space Wolf sprang lightly to his feet, the servomotors of his centuries-old power armour whining inaudibly to all but his own razor-keen senses. He leapt towards the enemy position, confident that his own highly trained troops would recognise him and hold their fire. He knew that the pack of Blood Claws, twenty strong, was forming a flying wedge behind him. They were directed at the pile of sandbags in the breached wall, the weakest part of the enemy line. In another moment, the Wolves had ceased firing at that area and concentrated their shells on the defences

surrounding and overlooking it. For a few brief moments, Ragnar and his assault troops had a clear run up to their objective, a safe corridor through the rain of fire.

One of the enemy officers, wearing the peaked cap and long greatcoat of a lieutenant, dared to stick his head above the parapet, obviously wondering why bolter shells had ceased to impact on his part of the line. A look of surprise and fear flickered across his face as he saw the oncoming wave of Space Marines. Ragnar gave credit where credit was due: the heretic did not remain frozen for long. After an instant of hesitation he turned his head and began screaming instructions to his troops.

It was a mistake. Without breaking stride Ragnar raised his bolt pistol and put a shell through the man's head. It exploded like a melon hit with a sledgehammer, a puddle of brains and blood filling the peaked cap as it fell from his head. Shouts of confusion echoed from behind the wall of sandbags, then a few heretics, braver and perhaps more experienced than the rest, stuck their heads up in order to take shots at their attackers. But a wave of withering fire from the Wolves behind Ragnar scythed through them, sending their corpses tumbling back amongst their comrades.

With a single mighty bound, Ragnar cleared the wall of sandbags and dropped into the rebel position. It was dark but his altered eyes adapted instantly and he took in his new surroundings in a glance. All around were the enemy, clad in the crumpled and filthy uniforms they had once worn so proudly as part of the Imperial levies, but their insignia had been ripped off and hastily replaced with the evil symbol of the Ruinous Powers, eight arrows radiating outwards from a single watchful eye. The stink of disease was strong, more powerful even than the reek of unwashed bodies and death. All of the heretics looked emaciated and unclean. Some showed the signs of something far, far worse. Most of the men looked superficially human, only slight bulges and blisters indicating where they were about to change. A few, however, were more twisted and warped, corrupted by the evil power they served.

One mutant close to Ragnar had scaly skin and clutched its lasrifle with fingers that resembled small tentacles; his eyes extended on long, slug-like stalks. A second heretic was huge: his chest barrel-like, his arms as thick as a normal man's thighs, his fingers ending in long cruel talons. His face was pockmarked with craters of glowing, greenish fungus, which wept an oddly luminescent pus as he opened his mouth to shout a warning.

Ragnar thumbed the brass ignition switch on his chainsword and the mighty weapon leapt to life, shuddering in his hands as the potent microengine in the hilt brought the rotating blades up to speed. Without thinking, he snapped off a couple of shots, sending the taloned giant straight to hell with a hole in his guts big enough to put a fist through. The force of the second shot blasted Slugeyes backward three yards into the wall. Ragnar snarled in satisfaction, then ducked as two of the rebels regained their wits enough to fire at him. The glittering trails of laser fire passed over his head. Screams sounded behind him as the beams seared the flesh of other heretics who had been attempting to sneak up on him.

He threw himself forward, bringing his chainsword around in a long sweep, beheading one mutant and hacking the arm off a second, before burying the duralloy blades deep within the chest of a third. With one swift kick, the Wolf dashed the corpse from his blade and raced on, heading for the chamber's exit. Triumphant howls and despairing cries from behind told him that his fellows, the Blood Claws, had arrived and had already begun the bloody work of butchering their foes.

Ragnar raced into the corridor. The head of a heretic officer appeared round a door. 'What is going on?' he shouted, in oddly accented Imperial Gothic.

The man's face was pale and he looked ill. His body had the lean look of one who had suffered a long sickness; his eyes burned with a feverish light. He obviously had not recognised Ragnar for what he was. Ragnar took his head from his shoulders with a sideways cut of his blade. Blood fountained, splashing the ceiling with red. Ragnar heard screams as the corpse tumbled backwards into the room beyond. Swiftly he holstered his pistol and tapped the hilt of the microgrenade dispenser on his belt. The small oval disk of a frag grenade dropped into his gauntleted fingers. He pushed the timer three times to set the detonator to go off in three seconds, then lobbed the grenade into the room. He doubted that the terrified men within even realised what was happening until, a few heartbeats later, they were torn apart by the force of the explosion.

Ragnar poked his head around the doorway and surveyed the mangled corpses. Amid all the ruin one man still moved, frantically trying to bring his lasrifle to bear on the Wolf, his breath coming from his ruined chest in horrible gurgles. Before the wounded cultist could draw a bead on him, Ragnar whipped his bolt pistol from its holster and put him out of his

misery with one swift, precise shot, before he could even offer a prayer for aid from his Dark Gods.

The Space Wolf paused for a moment to listen. All around he could hear the sounds of combat and death spreading through the building, like ripples in a pool after a heavy stone has been dropped into it. He knew that all through the building his warriors were passing like a cleansing flame, scouring out the dark taint of heresy. Nothing could resist their relentless onslaught.

His nostrils caught the stink of burning flesh and opened wounds, of blood and spent bolter charges, of bone marrow and brain tissue. The convection currents in the air brought him other subtler scents: the faint pheromone traces of fear and anger, the distinctive scent of his battle-brothers, the foul taint of Chaos-contaminated flesh and once again the sour tang of some strange disease. He knew without being told that victory was within their grasp.

The scent of Brother Olaf reached him, approaching fast from the rear. Olaf was the youngest of the Blood Claws and the least stable. Of them all, he had come closest to devolving into a Wulfen during his transformation into a Space Wolf, and he shared with those cursed men-beasts a terrible rage and an unslakeable thirst for combat. Ragnar knew that with time, the young man would settle down and make his peace with the beast within him. All Space Wolves did eventually – assuming they survived all of their initiation.

Ragnar risked a glance back over his shoulder and saw that the beast was almost in control of young Olaf as the young warrior charged up behind him. His eyes were wide, the pupils dilated; froth foamed from his lips and spittle drooled from his mouth. His neck muscles writhed like great cables as he howled his fury and bloodlust like a challenge. At this moment, he was definitely out of control. The spirit of the Wolf was in him.

Ragnar stepped aside to let him pass and the Blood Claw raced past down the corridor towards another wave of heretics drawn by the sounds of battle. Ragnar followed in his wake, content for the moment to observe, to intervene only if the youngling got himself into more trouble than he could handle.

Not that it looked likely. Olaf's bolt pistol spat death at the leading heretics and moments later he sprang across the corpses of his targets to

wreak havoc on the survivors with his blade. Cutting and stabbing relentlessly, he drove the heretics back down the corridor. It was only as he passed an open doorway that the trap was sprung on him.

A huge arm emerged and a fist the size of a shield closed around Brother Olaf's head. Almost at once Ragnar caught the scent of ogryn, one of the giant abhumans who were sometimes attached to the Imperial levies, mutants suffered to live by the Imperium because of their toughness, loyalty and strength. Unfortunately they were also very stupid and would follow their officers into heresy without the slightest thought of the consequences. Now one of them had Brother Olaf in a grip strong enough to crush even the reinforced bone structure of a Space Marine skull by merely clenching its fingers.

Ragnar was not about to give it the chance. He sprang forward and with a mighty cut severed the huge boil-covered hand at the wrist. It dropped to the floor and for a moment the fingers flexed in nervous reaction so that it seemed to scuttle like a huge spider. A bellow of rage and pain rumbled from behind the door. Ragnar took a step forward and peered within. A massive face glared down at him, mouth distended in shock and anger. Even the ogryn's features showed traces of disease. Enormous blisters filled with pus marred its cheeks and neck. It sounded very unhealthy, air rasping through lungs filled with phlegm. Even so, it showed no sign of weakness, only an unrelenting urge to maim and slay.

Ragnar raised his pistol and sent a bullet through one of the ogryn's eyes. Still it did not fall, but reached out for him with its remaining good hand. Was the creature simply too stupid to die, Ragnar wondered, or was some dark sorcery at work here?

Not that he cared. Pushing Olaf out of the way of the creature's blow, the Wolf dived to one side himself. The ogryn brought its fist down as if swatting a fly. Even off balance, Ragnar had the co-ordination to lash out with his chainsword. It bit off two of the monster's fingers and embedded itself in the palm of the beast's hand. Like a child recoiling from a scalding stove the ogryn sharply withdrew its hand with a hiss.

Ragnar held onto the hilt of his chainsword and was lifted clear of the ground. He felt himself start to fall as the teeth of the chainsword ceased to find traction. Yet for a moment he had another clear shot at the monster, so he put a bullet through its other eye, convinced that blinding it at least would give him all the advantage he would need in the coming fight. It

was more than enough. This time the bullet passed clean through the abhuman's thick skull and blew its few brains over the wall of the chamber. The massive corpse toppled like a falling oak. Ragnar landed on his feet and glanced around to see that Brother Olaf had continued down the corridor, leaving a trail of death and destruction in his wake. Under the circumstances, Ragnar deemed it advisable to follow.

Olaf had made his way to a wide hall. The ceiling was half blown away and broken ceramic tiles strewed the floor. Exposed pipes erupted from the floor and electric cables writhed like snakes from the remnants of the walls. The heretics here milled around in confusion, unable to decide whether to advance or flee the building. The indecision cost them their lives. Olaf charged right into the middle of them, lashing out left and right with his blade, killing with every stroke. His howling battle cry echoed around the furthest reaches of the hall, like the call of some avenging spirit. Ragnar was but two strides behind him and, if anything, was even more lethal. He fought with an easy grace and precision, not a movement wasted, not a blow going astray, smiting around him like a warrior god sprung to life from ancient legends. Before they even had time to realise it, half the heretics were dead. The others turned to flee but Ragnar pumped bolter shells into their backs before they could reach the exit, unwilling to stain his blade with the blood of such cowards.

Olaf glared around him, a blood-maddened wolf seeking new prey. None was visible but that did not matter. He threw back his head, nostrils flaring as he sniffed the air for the scent of heretics. He seemed to catch something, for he cocked his head to one side and listened for a moment – before striding for a metal door set at the rear of the chamber.

Before the Blood Claw could reach it, the door was thrown open and a man emerged. He was tall and cadaverous, his skin pale as parchment and his eyes glowing with a sickly green internal light visible in the gloom of the chamber. He wore the uniform of an officer of the planetary levies but he was obviously something more than that; more than that and worse. Around him buzzed a huge cloud of flies. They crawled over his flesh and covered the upper part of his skull like a helmet. As they writhed and buzzed, patches of leprous white flesh became visible beneath them. It was a sight somehow more obscene than the insects themselves. The man's face was lean and almost fleshless. His cheeks had sunk, and his lips had drawn back to reveal teeth and gums marred by massive white abscesses.

The man's appearance reminded Ragnar of a skull, but the living flesh that still clung to this skull made it far more horrific than the bones of the dead.

The stink of disease was so strong that Ragnar knew at once that here was the source of the contagion which had infected the heretics in this building. Ragnar fought down a shudder, for he recognised the presence of evil magic. This one was a powerful sorcerer, no doubt sworn to the Chaos power known as Nurgle, the Lord of Pestilence.

Olaf did not care. He raced towards the newcomer as if he were just an ordinary trooper. The sorcerer grinned, exposing rotten teeth, then made a sweeping gesture with his hand. A nimbus of dark power boiled around his taloned fingers, becoming a ball of glowing green fire as he finished the gesture. The ball of tainted energy swept outwards towards Olaf, emitting a buzzing like the flies, catching him on the chest. For a moment nothing happened, then a yellowish glow limned Olaf's form, spreading around his body until it encased him. Then a cold fire seemed to consume him. There was no heat, no stench of burning, no sign of anything at work except potent magic. His armour bubbled and blistered and began to run like liquid, taking the flesh below with it. For a moment, Ragnar had a glimpse of the reddish augmented muscles of a Space Marine. Then these too were consumed, rotting to black pus, flowing to the ground like water and evaporating away. In another instant only Olaf's skeleton, so like and yet so unlike that of an ordinary man, remained. Ragnar had a clear view of the heavy bones, the reinforced joints, the unnaturally thick skull, and the mighty fangs... then that too decayed, leaving only a swiftly fading, glowing outline hanging in the air. Olaf was gone as if he had never been. The glow that had surrounded him coalesced into a ball of fire once more.

The sorcerer's insane, gurgling laughter filled the hall with evil glee. He coughed in a long wracking spasm that bent him almost double, then spat on the floor. The huge goblet of green slime that dripped from his mouth bubbled and evaporated on the ground. He smiled at Ragnar as if they were old friends and, in a voice that seemed to consist of the buzzing of thousands of insects, said, 'Lord Botchulaz sends his greetings.'

At the mention of that name, Ragnar almost froze, reminded of horrors long past and griefs so ancient that he thought he had forgotten them. Words of defiance froze on his lips as images of evil and despair flashed through his brain.

The magician made another gesture with his hand and there was no time now for anything but action. With eye-blurring speed, the ball of corrupting flame sailed through the air towards the Space Wolf. Having seen what the thing could do, Ragnar had no intention of letting it touch him. He dived forward beneath it, sensing the evil power of the thing as it passed over his head. He aimed a shot at the Chaos-worshipping sorcerer with his bolter. The man raised his other hand in a warding gesture and the shell was deflected to one side.

By Russ, this was a powerful one, Ragnar thought, greatly gifted by the powers of Chaos.

Ragnar felt the surge of energy at his back which told him the ball of flame was searing up behind him. He sprang to the left, the servos in his power armour straining, and it blazed past him, leaving a flickering trail in its wake. The sorcerer made another gesture and the thing he had created looped towards Ragnar once more, blazing round and down in a deadly arc. This time Ragnar leapt upwards and over it. He felt the power of its presence once more as it passed below him. As he leapt, the Wolf loosed another shot but once more the heretic warding it away with a gesture.

Nothing for it, thought Ragnar, but to settle this up close and personal, the old fashioned way. He dived forward, sensing the ball of fire moving in pursuit, and hit the ground rolling. He tumbled all the way to the mage's feet and lashed out with his chainsword at his foe's legs. The mage tried the warding gesture once more but he was too slow. Even as he did so Ragnar changed the point of impact of his blow and took the man's arm off at the elbow. Black blood flowed thickly from the stump like molasses and instantly began to congeal around the wound. Another gift of the Dark Powers, Ragnar guessed. He smiled nastily and stabbed again. His ancient blade embedded itself in his foe's guts and hung there, blades screeching as it tore the fiend apart.

Ragnar sprang suddenly to his left and the ball of flame missed him and impacted on the mage. Instead of reducing him to nothingness, it was absorbed into his body without causing him any apparent harm. Russ take me, Ragnar thought, but it had been worth a try.

He reached forward once more and pulled his blade free, making sure to turn it in the wound for maximum damage. With a hideous slurping sound the whining chainsword came free, dragging ropes of tangled intestine with it. The sorcerer showed no sign of any pain. A look of

discomfort passed over his face as he began the gesture that would summon the fireball again. This time Ragnar severed the man's head from his shoulders. Even as it fell, the Wolf struck the skull again, searing it in two with his chainsword. The sorcerer's body fell to the ground as though pole-axed.

Ragnar looked at it for a moment, as if half expecting it to stir, but nothing happened. The combat was over. He looked around with some satisfaction but could not see any more targets. All around him the sounds of combat were dying away. It seemed like his men were achieving their objectives. Trying to forget what the magician had said, Ragnar turned and raced back the way he had come. It was like running through a slaughterhouse. Blood and gore decorated the walls. He sniffed the air, taking in all the scents, and knew with certainty that only Space Wolves were left alive in the building. It came as no surprise to him when the signal crackled over the comm-net.

+Objective secured.+

Night gathered. The old yellow moons glared down through the contaminated clouds. Ragnar stood on the roof of the battered factory and glanced out into the night, braided hair flapping in the cold breeze. Over there the war still raged as other units of Imperial troops struggled to contain the heretics. A flower of fire blossomed where a shell exploded. A few moments later there was a crack like thunder. Ragnar was aware of the vibration of the distant explosion passing through the structure beneath his feet.

Down below, the Blood Claws celebrated. They gathered around a blazing fire and roared chants drawn from the epics of their people. They told of their deeds and the deeds of their ancestors. Some of them shouted out what they had done today, the number of heretics they had killed and the way they had killed them. He smiled at the innocence of their boasting. They were so proud of themselves and what they had done, filled with the simple pride of men who were being blooded, on their first campaign; feeling, for the first time, the thrill of war as it was waged between the stars.

He knew that their boasting was as much to relieve tension as to impress their peers. All of them knew how many of their number had died today. All of them had taken part in the funeral rites which Ragnar had led. Now their task was done, they were coming to terms with the fact that they

were still alive, that men, evil men, had tried to kill them, and that they had endured. Ragnar could well remember the shock and the thrill of that realisation himself. There were times when it seemed like only yesterday that he had fought in his own first off-world campaign.

Everything had seemed simpler then somehow, before his rise to command, before the long series of adventures and wars which had seen him rise faster and further than any Space Wolf had ever done before. There were occasions when he wondered whether it was worth it, when he envied the Blood Claws their innocence. They did not yet know what it was like to feel the responsibility for another Space Wolf's death. All through the long evening, as the reports came in and the factory complex was secured, Ragnar had replayed the battle in his mind, wondering if there had been some way to do it differently, some tactic that would have prevented Olaf and the others from dying. But if there was he could not see it. This was war, and in wars men died, even Space Marines. Perhaps Russ and the Emperor could have done better than he, perhaps another commander could have, but there was nothing now he could do about it. What was done, was done. He simply had to accept that and put it behind him. Tomorrow the war would continue. Tomorrow a new battle would be fought.

Still, at that moment, he longed to return to a simpler time, to the time when it had all seemed easy. But he reminded himself: it had only seemed easy. Even in his youth there had been losses, and horrors and intrigues. He let his mind drift back to the events he had been trying to suppress since his encounter with the sorcerer.

He gazed out into the night, remembering.



ONE

Along with his fellow battle-brothers, Ragnar stood at the entrance to the landing bay, his weapons holstered, his newly acquired Blood Claw insignia displayed proudly on his shoulder-pad. They were all waiting for Inquisitor Sternberg to descend from his ship.

The Space Wolf took another deep breath and tried to calm himself. He knew that the monstrous vessel before him was only a shuttle, not even one of the huge craft that plied the unthinkable distances between the stars, but even so the sheer scale of the thing was enough to take your breath away. It seemed as large as the village in which he had grown up, a great wedge of ancient ceramite and duralloy, pitted by meteor trails and seared by weapon impacts. In a strange way, it was beautiful. Gargoyles clutched the fins and the Imperial eagle had been embossed on its side with a craftsmanship that no jewelsmith from his own people could have hoped to rival. He studied the crystalline portholes in its side, looking to see if anyone glanced out at them.

His mouth felt strangely dry. He was about to experience something he would have considered an impossibility but a few short months ago. He was about to encounter strangers from another world. He told himself that he would not gawk and stare, but the thought was still an astonishing one. A season ago, when he had still lived in the Thunderfist village, he had believed that the universe was a great sea dotted with endless islands and girded about by a mighty serpent. Since the time he had been selected to join the Space Wolves, he had learned differently, so differently. He now knew that his homeworld, Fenris, was a sphere floating in the endless immensity of space, orbiting a star that he had once thought was the Eye of Russ. He knew now that it was but one star amid millions which made up the galaxy and the Imperium of Mankind, and that, somehow, mighty ships moved between these worlds. Moreover, he had learned that each world was different, and that many were homes to different nations and peoples. In this they were like the islands in the Worldsea of Fenris, for there too the islands were homes to clans, each with different customs and beliefs. The other worlds were like that and there was scope for far greater

differences between the inhabitants of planets than of the islands of Fenris. Some, he had been taught, were homes to foul mutants, others to alien races inimical to mankind. Some worlds were entirely sheathed in metal and inhabited by teeming billions pressed cheek to jowl. Others were empty wastes of ice and snow on which dwelled fur-clad nomads. Some were deserts of fire, yet more airless barrens where life survived only in ancient cavern cities. His mind could only begin to comprehend the merest fraction of all the endless possibilities they represented.

As he had tried to do so many times recently, Ragnar pushed such thoughts from his mind and tried to concentrate on the task at hand – but it was difficult. He wondered what the passengers on this ship would be like. Would they have green skins or two heads? There was no way of knowing until they emerged. He wanted to look around him to see what his brother Blood Claws were doing or thinking, but he did not. They were an honour guard for these new arrivals, and they were meant to show discipline and restraint. It would not do to go staring about him like some youngling.

He could just picture the expressions on the faces of those around him though. Sven's ugly broken-nosed face would be looking hungrily as if the strangers might be carrying something good to eat, all the while trying to restrain a grin from twisting his features. Ragnar's old rival and former blood-enemy Strybjorn would have an expression of angry contempt locked on his dour, brutal face. Lean Nils would be fighting to keep a smile from erupting on his lips as he wrestled with his urge to toss insults at Sven. All of the others would be fighting with their own impulses. It was not easy for them. They were all Blood Claws, newly initiated, and their heads and hearts were still filled with the wild animalistic urges that were a side-effect of their transformation into Space Wolves.

Pretty much all of the Chapter currently resident in the Fang was here awaiting the new arrivals. They had been drawn from their lairs and meditation cells all over the great armoured mountain to be here and welcome this inquisitor. Only mighty Logan Grimnar, the Great Wolf himself, legendary leader of all the Wolves, and his household were not present. Grimnar waited in his lair for the inquisitor to come and see him, as was fitting. Nevertheless, Ragnar thought this Inquisitor Sternberg must be a mighty man indeed to warrant such a welcome to the Fang. There must be over a hundred Space Wolves here, plus over a thousand retainers. Few strangers were ever welcomed to the home of the Wolves and few

indeed were greeted with such ceremony – or so Sergeant Hakon had told him. His former instructor had returned from the mountains some weeks back to take charge of the Blood Claws after the death of Sergeant Hengist. If he concentrated, Ragnar could catch the veteran Wolf's scent, and it immediately brought to his mind's eye a picture of the sergeant's massive frame and lean, leathery face.

Ragnar found himself considering the rumours he had heard about Sternberg. Some of the thralls had claimed that he had fought alongside the Space Wolves on several occasions, once even saving the life of the Great Wolf himself. Others claimed that he came all the way from the ancient homeworld of Terra, sacred home of the beloved God-Emperor himself, bringing news of an important mission for the Chapter. Still others claimed that he was here to spy on the Space Wolves for the distant masters of the Imperium, hoping to find the taint of heresy in the Chapter and so be allowed to order its dissolution.

Ragnar doubted the last. He knew, as only an initiate could know, how utterly loyal the Wolves were to their duty. They would all of them, Ragnar included, have died to the last man rather than betray humanity to the darkness. There was no way they ever could be found wanting.

He fought back a sudden shiver as a dark memory intruded. Ragnar knew that not even Fenris was free of the taint of Chaos. Mere months ago he and his fellow Blood Claws had uncovered a nest of heresy in the mountains to the north of the Fang; a nest so deep and so filled with foul enemies that all the Wolves present on the planet had been massed to deal with it. He pushed the grim thoughts aside. He knew that it was all too possible that the inquisitor would be accompanied by one who could pluck such thoughts from one's mind – and what had happened during that encounter with the renegade Marines of the Thousand Sons was no one's business but the Chapter's.

As if in direct response to his ill-considered thoughts, the great door in the side of the shuttle hissed and opened. A boarding ramp extruded itself from the spacecraft's side and rattled down to the plascrete floor of the hangar. Ragnar drew a breath and turned his face into a frozen mask as the first of the strangers came into view. Disappointment warred with relief in Ragnar's mind. The stranger was surprisingly normal but impressive nonetheless. He was a tall man, almost as tall as a veteran Space Wolf, and almost as broad too. His body was encased in dark ceramite armour which

left only his grizzled grey-haired head visible. A pair of well-used weapons were holstered at his hip, a long pistol of unusual design and a chainsword. A great red cape fluttered in the breeze caused by the induction fans which pumped air into the chamber. The cape's wide cowl was thrown back to reveal the man's head, but Ragnar guessed that was not always the case. He glanced around him; his gaze appeared to take in every last detail of the scene quickly and smoothly. The man smiled easily, showing white teeth in a face tanned dark as well-seasoned witchwood. He paused only for a heartbeat and then strode down the ramp. It flexed slightly beneath his weight. Ragnar guessed that the armour was a lot heavier than it looked, and was, like his own, animated in part by servomotors.

As the newcomer began his descent others emerged from the ship behind him – and at the sight of the first Ragnar's breath hissed from his chest. She was quite possibly the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, certainly the most striking. She was tall and willowy with dark brown skin, her black hair cropped short to her head. Indefinable symbols had been tattooed or scarred on her forehead. Her armour was similar to that of the man before her, as was her cape – but not quite as ornate, and with far fewer symbols and badges embedded in it. Ragnar was guessing, but he felt fairly certain that this indicated she was of lesser rank than the man he assumed was Inquisitor Sternberg. It was certainly the way of things among the Space Wolves, where men proudly wore the campaign badges and honour studs they had earned in battle for all to see. His ultra-keen eyes made out the name engraved in curled Imperial Gothic on her chest plate: *Karah Isaan*.

After these first two, the rest of the strangers were a disappointment. There were many in the uniforms of warriors, perhaps a bodyguard, most likely the ranking officers of the inquisitor's entourage come to consult with the Great Wolf. Ragnar knew that Imperial inquisitors often travelled with what was in effect a small personal army ready to do their bidding and cleanse heresy upon their orders. That they might be here to protect him from the Wolves was such a ludicrous concept it took a few heartbeats to insinuate itself into Ragnar's brain. He dismissed the idea as laughable. The Wolves would not attack their guest – and in the almost inconceivable event that they decided to, mere mortals could not stand against them.

After the warriors came men and women cowed in the dark blue robes of scribes. Each carried a leather-bound libram chained to a thick leather belt at their waist. Ragnar was unsure whether these were books of lore or for making new records. He decided that he would ask one of them, if he ever got the chance.

As they paced down the ramp, Ragnar caught their strange off-world scent for the first time, and suddenly he was filled with a nagging sensation of unease, a premonition of doom. The beast within him stirred and he felt an urge to rend and tear at these newcomers, to strike them down as if they were his sworn enemies. He had never felt anything quite like it before. As if sensing it, the female inquisitor glanced around her, and caught his eye. Gazing across at her hooded brown eyes Ragnar felt suddenly calm. His sense of unease diminished, but did not vanish entirely. He tried to push it to one side. These were trusted allies, he told himself – yet a need to be wary remained.

As the first inquisitor reached the plascrete floor of the hangar, Jarek Bluetooth, the Great Wolf's chief bondsman and steward, walked forward to greet him. He reached out and clasped arms, hands gripping at the elbow in the traditional Fenrisian greeting. Sternberg did not seem at all surprised by this. He smiled again and, once the clasp was ended, bowed from the waist in an elaborate and courtly fashion. As one, all the folk of his retinue, newly alighted behind him, did likewise.

'In the name of Logan Grimnar, Great Wolf and Chieftain, I bid you welcome!' Jarek said proudly. He spoke in the Gothic tongue of the Imperium, which made his rough voice sound even harsher.

'I thank the Great Wolf for his welcome, and request an audience with him at his leisure.' Compared to Jarek, the inquisitor's voice was smooth and pleasant, yet it held steely undercurrents. Quite plainly this was a man used to getting his own way. Unsurprising really, Ragnar knew, considering the man was authorised to investigate all manner of heresies in the Emperor's name. Only the Space Marine Chapters considered themselves beyond the remit of His Divine Inquisition, for they were bound by laws and traditions which predated the Imperium itself. Ragnar's teachers had been quite specific on this point. The Space Marines were an independent force within the great swathe of humanity and proud of this fact. Indeed, they had been one of the major contributors to its founding and as such

were granted many privileges. They were loyal only to the Emperor himself, not to his minions in the Ecclesiarchy.

There was something about Sternberg's tone that whispered a warning to Ragnar. It was not that he could detect any falseness in it, for he could not. It was just something about it that made his hackles rise. He was surprised that none of his fellow Wolves shared his unease, but he sensed that their scents had not changed. He appeared to be the only one who felt the way he did. Perhaps it was a flaw in him, something left over from his recent transformation into a Space Wolf. He knew he was still sometimes given to visions and hallucinations as well as fits of anger and hate. His elders told him these would fade in time as he became accustomed to the change. Perhaps that was the problem here.

'The Great Wolf will be pleased to grant his old comrade an audience immediately,' Jarek replied formally and fell into step beside the inquisitor. Sternberg and his retinue made their way through the double line of Space Wolves assembled to greet them. As they passed the last of the honour guard, the Space Wolves themselves formed up in ranks behind them and, marching proudly, escorted them to the lair of Logan Grimnar.

A huge pavilion had been erected within the Great Wolf's hall. It was made from the finest grey silk and one side of it was open to face the doors through which Sternberg and his escort entered. The inside was illuminated by floating glowglobes hovering just below the tent's ceiling. Two ever-burning braziers flickered and crackled close to each edge of the entrance. Each gave off the smell of the incense used in the sacred rituals of the Imperium. Ragnar recognised this particular scent: silver-root. It was said to be a powerful ward against evil influences.

In all his time within the Fang, this was the first time Ragnar had been permitted to enter the Great Wolf's lair. There had never really been any need for him to go beyond the training areas, the cells in which the novice Space Marines dwelt and the communal areas shared by all the Great Companies. One day soon, Ragnar knew, his pack of Blood Claws would be assigned to their own Great Company and become part of the greater command structure of the Chapter but for the moment they were in a sort of limbo, waiting to see which company would need replacements either for casualties or for those Blood Claws who had been promoted to the Grey Hunters.

The Great Wolf's lair was huge, taking up one complete level of the Fang. The trek there had not been long, though. A series of grav-tubes had carried the whole party through the maze of the ancient fortress, but if the newcomers had felt any of the wonder that Ragnar had once felt on first seeing the inside of the mountain fastness, they kept it well hidden. He guessed that in their travels they must have seen many imposing sights. Part of him longed to share in that experience, to travel off-world, to see new things and go to new places. He knew that some day he would do just that, yet as far as he was concerned the day could not come quickly enough. Still, some part of him also feared that day; he was not entirely sure why. He suspected that some part of being human was always to have some fear of any new experience.

The Great Wolf awaited them, bedecked in splendour. He was a massive man, a truly mighty warrior to Ragnar's eyes. His chest was larger than an ale barrel and his arms were like tree trunks. A huge grey beard tumbled down his chest like a waterfall. A mane of grey hair erupted from his head and fell down past his shoulders. His eyes, ancient and unknowable, were like chips of ice. His face looked like it had been carved from granite and the scars on his cheeks looked more like the product of decades of erosion than the result of wounds. They reminded Ragnar of ravines driven into the hard stone of mountains. Around Grimnar's shoulders was thrown a great wolfskin cloak which some claimed dated from the time of Russ and was said to be impervious to heat, cold and flame. The head of the wolf rested on Grimnar's head like a crown. Dangling from a cord around his neck was the Amulet of Russ, a simple-looking device, crudely made to resemble the head of a wolf from some unknown metal. It was said to be the repository of great power for its wearer. It was a talisman that was supposed to protect against all manner of evil sorcery and shield its owner from all evil influences.

Dozens of battle honours had been worked onto the Great Wolf's armour, for Grimnar had served in hundreds of campaigns over the past seven hundred Imperial Standard years. That thought itself was almost enough to make Ragnar's mind reel. It was ten times the life span of the oldest mortal man on Fenris, yet Logan Grimnar showed no signs of weakness. Instead he gave off an aura of boundless health, strength and energy. He was the most regal man Ragnar had ever seen. He seemed born to command, a chieftain worthy of the greatest of warriors, commanding

limitless obedience from those who fought for him. And so it should be, Ragnar thought, for this was the man who led a Chapter of the Emperor's finest.

Logan Grimnar sat stern and commanding upon the Wolf Throne. It appeared to be made of ancient stone, carved with runes that looked almost as old as time and seemed to have been cut there by wind and rain. The throne had been made to hold a man even larger than Grimnar. It dated from the time of Russ and it was possible that the great Primarch himself had once sat in it. The back of the seat was carved to resemble a great snarling wolf's head looming over the sitter. Each arm of the throne was its paws. The strangest thing about the throne was that it did not rest on the floor; instead it floated about a hand's breadth above it, and it turned as the Great Wolf wished, seemingly guided by his will. Ragnar could not help but notice that the Great Wolf's armoured form similarly did not touch the stone of the throne, but instead seemed to float just shy of its surface. He now knew a little about the ancient magic of suspensor systems and he guessed that one of them was in use. At the very least it would surely make sitting on the hard stone more bearable, although Ragnar suspected that it had another use. On the back of the throne fluttered two vast banners: one bore the two rampant wolves that were the insignia of Grimnar, the other the snarling wolf's head that was the symbol of the Chapter. They fluttered and rippled, though there was not the slightest hint of a breeze to move them.

Within the shadows of the pavilion, flanking Grimnar's mighty throne, stood the folk of his lair, the Wolf Priests resplendent in their wolf-hide cloaks and wearing their aura of age and command. Ragnar recognised Ranek, the eldest of them all, who had inducted the young Blood Claw into the Chapter all those months ago. With them also were the metal-clad Iron Priests, their helmets moulded to represent wolf's heads. And there were even several Rune Priests, long bearded, carrying huge wooden staffs carved with mystical runic symbols. All of these men had about them an aura of age and wisdom that was palpable. All of them were veterans of a hundred campaigns.

Ragnar wondered if Inquisitor Sternberg was conscious of the honour being done him by this assemblage of all the notables of the Chapter. It seemed so, for the man raised his hand and all his retainers halted, leaving him to advance alone towards the throne of the Great Wolf. Once he stood

before Grimnar, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head like a man swearing fealty to his jarl. Grimnar slid forward and dropped from his throne, before laying one massive hand on the inquisitor's shoulders.

Ragnar watched closely as the two met and was surprised by something he caught from the corner of his eye. Brother Ranek, too, was looking at the inquisitor. Ragnar saw a flicker of quickly concealed suspicion pass across the man's ancient gnarled face and vanish. Ranek turned slightly; he had noticed Ragnar's gaze. Their eyes met and he was sure the Wolf Priest could guess what he was thinking. After a moment, Ranek looked away.

'We meet again, Ivan Sternberg,' the Great Wolf said, his voice like two great granite boulders rubbing together. 'It has been a long time.'

'Too long, Logan Grimnar. It does me good to see you looking so hale and hearty.'

'I thank you, Ivan Sternberg. You too look well. As well as the day you stopped those orks stabbing me in the back.'

'It was an honour to be of service to one of the Imperium's greatest warriors, praise His name. I thank the Eternal Throne I was simply in the right place at the right time.'

'Nonetheless, you took a wound for me, and I owe you a debt of honour. I told you that day you had but to name the boon and if it was in my power to grant it, I would.'

Ragnar fought down the urge to take a deep breath. It was a measure of the trust that the Great Wolf placed in this man that he would make such a statement. It was the sort of pledge that might be redeemed with the very life or honour of Logan Grimnar, and through him, his entire Chapter. The fact that it had been made told Ragnar that the Great Wolf considered both things safe in Sternberg's keeping. Surely this made his own suspicions unworthy and invalid. If the Great Wolf trusted this man, who was Ragnar to doubt him?

He made a mental note to ask one of the Rune Priests about the inquisitor when the chance arose. He was sure there was an epic tale concealed within the Great Wolf's simple words.

'I do have a request to make of you, and I would consider your granting it a repayment of any debt you may feel you have incurred with me.'

'Name it.'

The beautiful woman behind Sternberg coughed loudly. The inquisitor turned to face her.

‘Do you think this is wise, Inquisitor Sternberg?’ the woman asked without preamble. Her voice was calm and clear. Ragnar found it enthralling. Sternberg turned to gesture at the woman.

‘May I present my apprentice, Karah Isaan?’ he said smoothly. Somehow he managed by his manner to convey the impression that she had spoken with his blessing, rather than interrupted a private conversation between him and the Great Wolf.

Grimnar nodded civilly to her. ‘What do you mean, Karah Isaan?’

‘I mean this matter concerns the security of the Imperium.’

Grimnar’s booming laughter echoed around the chamber. ‘We are quite used to dealing with such matters in the Fang!’

If the young woman was daunted she gave no sign. ‘I am sure you are, Great Wolf.’ Her face twisted slightly as she hesitated on pronouncing the title. It dawned on Ragnar that she would have far preferred to be using something more formal. She was quite obviously unsure of how to deal with the legendary leader of the Space Wolves. ‘It is just there are many others here who might... overhear... our discussions.’

‘If you do not trust any of your people, send them away!’ Grimnar boomed.

The woman’s face flushed a little. She tilted her head back and opened her mouth to speak. It seemed to Ragnar that she thought the Great Wolf was being wilfully obtuse. ‘That is not...’

‘I know what you meant,’ Grimnar said, and this time his voice was glacier-cold and full of authority, the voice of a chieftain dealing with an ambassador who had made an impertinent request. ‘Whatever you have to say, you can say in front of any of my warriors. You can trust them as you would trust me. It is your Inquisition which keeps secrets, even from itself, not my Chapter.’

Ragnar was a little shocked that the female inquisitor seemed to be suggesting the possibility that anyone in the Fang might be disloyal, even a traitor. He could see that the same thought had occurred to others. Some hands flexed as if their owners might be considering reaching for their blades and calling her out to fight for the honour of the Chapter. A gruff glare from the Great Wolf stilled all such activity. The woman did not quail in front of Grimnar, but she did flinch slightly and a look of surprise

froze on her face. It dawned on Ragnar that as a member of the Inquisition she was probably more used to making people fearful than to quaking herself. It took her but moments to recover.

‘I apologise if I have given offence. I was unsure of your customs here.’

Ragnar considered another of the Great Wolf’s statements. Was it possible that other servants of the Imperium withheld information from each other? That seemed like sheer foolishness to Ragnar. A warrior needed all the information available to make decisions, or so he had been taught. It seemed clear that the woman thought differently. She had been quite prepared to tell something to Grimnar alone without his followers hearing it – as if Lord Grimnar would not tell them if he deemed it needful for them to know.

‘Forgive Karah,’ Sternberg said. ‘She is young and she has but recently become apprenticed to me. She does not yet know how to deal with Space Marines.’

‘In truth, Ivan Sternberg, few folk do,’ Grimnar shrugged good-humouredly. ‘But you have yet to name this boon you require of me.’

Sternberg paused for a moment, considering. Despite his smooth words, he appeared to be thinking about what Karah had said. Ragnar could smell his momentary indecision. He was sure every Space Wolf present could. He wondered if the inquisitor himself was aware of this. Perhaps he was, for he reached his decision quickly.

‘My homeworld of Aerius has been smitten by a deadly plague. Millions are dying even as I speak.’

Ragnar could not see what the Space Wolves could possibly do about this. They were warriors, not healers. If Grimnar thought the same he kept it well hidden, merely nodding attentively as Sternberg spoke.

‘Our healers were baffled. All the remedies tried by our apothecaries failed. It seemed a cure for the plague was beyond all of our alchemical lore. It appeared to the rulers of Aerius that perhaps the plague itself might be a product of dark sorcery or some ancient curse, so the governor’s astropath requested my aid. I returned to my homeworld as soon as my duties allowed, for Aerius is a mighty industrial world, and keystone to the Imperium’s control of its sector. By the Emperor’s grace, I arrived before too much time had passed.’

Sternberg paused as if gathering his thoughts once more. Ragnar could tell that the man was something of an orator, and that the real reason he paused was to give his words time to sink into the minds of the audience. At the mention of ‘sorcery’ and an ‘ancient curse’ a perceptible thrill had run through the chamber.

‘There had indeed been many strange portents. A great comet had appeared in the skies of Aerius, the baleful star of legend, which appears only once in every two millennia, and whose appearance always presages doom. Showers of falling stars descended on the world at the moment of its appearance. Strangest of all, an eerie glow surrounded the great Black Pyramid.’

A look of recognition had appeared now on the face of Grimnar and some of his advisors. ‘There was a battle there once...’ the Great Wolf murmured.

‘Aye,’ Sternberg said. ‘One in which your Chapter took part, alongside the armies of the Imperium against the alien eldar. Near two millennia ago.’

‘The Balestar blazed down on that battlefield too,’ Grimnar added. ‘What is the significance of this?’

‘That battle did indeed take place under the light of the balestar, and there was at the same time an outbreak of plague on Aerius, though not as virulent as that which afflicts the world now. It ended when the battle was won, which many took to be a sign of the Emperor’s favour.’

‘Go on.’

‘When I reached Aerius much of the world had already been quarantined. There seemed to be nothing I or any of my advisors could do. Over the comm-net we could see pictures of the terrible effects of the plague. I decided to consult the Oracle of Chaeron, who resides in her ancient citadel on the surface of that dark moon.’

‘I have heard of this oracle,’ the Great Wolf said. ‘A most holy woman, blessed by the Emperor. What did she have to say?’

‘Her words were enigmatic, as always. In her temple chambers she told me: *The Balestar lights the sky once more, and the Unclean One’s way to freedom. His ancient prison walls are near undermined and his pestilence is loosed upon the world.*’

‘Enigmatic indeed.’

‘Aye, Great Wolf. I asked her if the Unclean One might be bound once more...’

‘And what did she say?’ Grimnar asked eagerly.

‘Her reply seemed equally unhelpful: *The elder key, now three, must be made one again. To make the prison hold once more, it must be taken to the Black Pyramid’s central chamber.*’

‘One part of that riddle seems clear, at least,’ said Logan Grimnar. ‘She refers to the Black Pyramid, under the shadow of which that great battle was fought.’

‘Aye, and that is less helpful still. For the pyramid has never been opened. Many have tried, using all the techniques known to the Imperium and never once have its walls been breached. Whatever sorcery its creators used is proof against all humanity’s efforts.’

‘Russ once said: *An undaunted spirit will find a path, though it leads through a forest of blades.*’ Sternberg smiled.

‘The Inquisition teaches its members that every question is an answer in hiding, every problem a solution in disguise.’

‘Did you find your answer then, Ivan Sternberg?’

‘I believe so. I fasted for three days and meditated upon the oracle’s answer. I prayed to the Emperor for guidance.’

‘Were you answered?’

‘I believe so, for it came to me that perhaps I had misunderstood the oracle’s words, for her voice is soft and her speech slurred with age. It seemed possible to me that she meant eldar key, not elder key.’

The Great Wolf exchanged a significant glance with Ranek and the other Wolf Priests. ‘That would fit with our saga of the battle.’

Sternberg’s smile widened and his manner became excited.

‘Your Chapter, I am given to understand, has in its possession an artefact known as the Talisman of Lykos. It is a crystal, many-faceted, reddish in colour. It was taken in battle with the eldar two millennia ago after the battle on Aerius. It is a fragment of a greater whole, a talisman of great power, used by the eldar Farseers and destroyed during the final conflict.’

Grimnar cocked his head to one side and smiled coldly. His eyes were fixed on Ranek.

Ranek held his chieftain’s gaze easily as he said, ‘That is so, Great Wolf. Though I would give much to know how this outsider knows what

lies in our Hall of Battles.’

‘It is not a secret,’ Sternberg said. ‘Your Chapter are not the only people who keep records. The Inquisition, too, has extensive archives, and there was an inquisitor present when that trophy was taken. He recorded that it was given over to the safekeeping of the Space Wolves. I wanted to know more before I troubled you with a vaguely worded prophecy, Logan Grimnar, so I went immediately to Abramsas and consulted with the archivists of my Order. One part was given to the Wolves. One part was given into the keeping of the Imperial Guard Commander, Byran Powys, and one part was given to Inquisitor Darke. All of them had fought in the battle on Aerius.’

‘What happened to the others?’ Grimnar asked.

‘Powys and his men returned to Galt. There is no record of what became of his part of the talisman. Inquisitor Darke and his starship, the *Epiphany*, were seen to make a warp jump into the outer systems, but never arrived at their destination. The only part of the Farseer’s artefact whose whereabouts are certain is the part you hold.’

‘Why do you think it is significant?’ Ranek asked sharply.

‘The eldar are an enigmatic people and not given to explaining themselves, but before he died, the Farseer referred to the arcane thing he carried as a “key”.’

‘And you have come to Fenris on the strength of this?’ enquired Ranek. If the Great Wolf felt any annoyance at the way Ranek was interrupting the discussion he did not show it. Then again, Ragnar thought, it was the duty of his councillors to ask questions and to give advice.

‘We both know, Brother Ranek, that the fate of entire worlds has been decided by things that seem less significant. Who am I to doubt the oracle’s words? All I can do is pray that my interpretation of them is correct, and that I may save the people of Aerius.’

Sternberg paused a moment, then added: ‘The oracle’s words have been confirmed by seers of my own Order and by my own consultations with the Imperial Tarot.’

‘The Tarot is notoriously ambiguous,’ pronounced the chief Rune Priest, Aldrek. He ran one bony, claw-like hand through his long white beard. The metal raven on his shoulder cawed ominously.

‘Just so, but my readings have been remarkably uniform, and at every consultation the same combination of cards has occurred. The Eye of

Horus in combination with the Great Hosts, the Shattered World above the Emperor's Throne reversed. The Galactic Lens reversed.'

Once again there was an ominous silence from those gathered around the Great Wolf as they pondered the meaning of the inquisitor's words.

'That is a very bad combination of cards,' Aldrek said. 'It signifies great danger for the Imperium: the gathering of the powers of Chaos, the death of worlds.'

'I know this,' Sternberg said plainly. 'Which is why I am here.'

The ancient warriors around Grimnar exchanged glances. Ragnar wished he knew what they were thinking. Eventually Aldrek spoke.

'This is a very grave matter, Great Wolf. I ask permission to withdraw with my brothers and consult the runes.'

Grimnar nodded his assent and the Rune Priests withdrew towards their own chambers without further ceremony, their footsteps echoing off through the vast lair. Ragnar wondered what was going on. He knew almost nothing about the Imperial Tarot but it was obvious that his superiors were treating the inquisitor's words with the greatest concern. He felt it incumbent on himself to pay close attention to what passed here. Perhaps it was not the inquisitor who had caused his sense of foreboding earlier, but the knowledge he carried.

'We must await the deliberations of our Rune Priests,' Grimnar said. A look of disappointment must have passed across Sternberg's face, for the Great Wolf added, 'Only a fool ignores the wisdom of his advisors, Ivan Sternberg, and no Great Wolf can afford to be that.'

Sternberg nodded. 'Of course. I understand. I also believe that the runes will confirm what I have said.'

'I never for a moment doubt it, Ivan Sternberg. Still, while we wait we must eat. A feast of welcome has been prepared. And such a feast: I have not looked upon its like in a hundred years.'

'Then it must be a sumptuous banquet indeed, old friend, for I remember you and your companions as being the greatest trenchermen I have ever set eyes upon,' the inquisitor grinned.

'Let us go to table. Descriptions are all very well, but you cannot eat words.'

The Great Hall was lit by a massive fire. Giant flambeaux, treated with some chemical process to make them burn brightly and for many hours, blazed in brackets set on the vast stone walls. Servants hurried about,

carrying great platters which groaned under the weight of venison and boar and bread and cheese. Serving maidens brought great tankards filled with ale. Grimnar, Sternberg and his retinue all sat at one large table, toasting each other between mouthfuls of food. Ragnar and his companions sat at the Blood Claw table and exchanged glances. It was obvious to Ragnar that his comrades were all as baffled by the speeches of the inquisitor and the Great Wolf as he was, but he could see that they were all just as curious too. It had all sounded significant and ominous and hinted at mighty deeds to come – deeds in which they themselves might play some part. Ragnar breathed an earnest prayer to Russ that it would be so.

The young Wolf tore a hunk of breast from the chicken on the table before him and stuffed it into his mouth, washing it down with a swig of ale. The foam bubbled in his mouth. From the corner of his eye he caught sight of the female inquisitor staring at him and he coughed in surprise, sending a mouthful of ale spraying over Sven.

‘As always, you have some difficulty holding your bloody drink, Thunderfist,’ Sven growled at him. ‘Perhaps you should stick to milk. Everyone knows you prefer it.’

‘The day I cannot drink you under the table is the day I will do so,’ said Ragnar immediately, casting his eye back in the direction of the inquisitor. He was disappointed to note that her gaze was fixed upon Sternberg and the Great Wolf once more. However he saw that the Wolf Priest Ranek was now gazing at him significantly, and he looked away hurriedly.

‘That sounds like a bet,’ Sven said. ‘Pity I can’t bloody take you up on it! I would not want to force you to forswear ale for the rest of your life. That would be a punishment worse than death.’

‘Are you afraid?’ asked Ragnar.

‘Only for you. I will accept your bet but only if the forfeit is that the loser must drink only milk for the next week. Wouldn’t want you to go the way of Torvald.’

Ragnar considered that that sounded fair. It meant that neither of them would be honour-bound not to touch ale for the rest of their lives, a forfeit which would have been torment to any Space Wolf. In the whole history of the Chapter only one man had ever had to pay that ultimate price, Torvald the Mild, and it was said that he had gone mad. Ragnar reached for the jack to begin drinking but, before their match could begin, the doorway to

the Great Hall was flung open. The Rune Priests had returned and their faces were grim.

They marched straight up to the main table and as their presence was noted, silence filled the chamber. All eyes focussed on them respectfully. Logan Grimnar cocked his head to one side. ‘You have consulted the runes, brothers.’

It was not a question.

‘We have consulted them, Great Wolf, casting them in the prescribed manner, as our forebears have done these past ten thousand years.’

‘What did they reveal?’

‘The future is cloudy and grim, Great Wolf.’

Nothing new there, Ragnar thought. Few prophets would ever get a reputation for folly by saying such words.

‘But we believe we must grant Inquisitor Sternberg all the aid we can. It appears the menace of the Dark Enemy looms and it can only be forestalled by the use of this talisman which has been spoken of. That much is clear to us.’

Logan Grimnar considered these words for a moment. ‘Then it pleases me to grant your boon, Ivan Sternberg,’ the Great Wolf said, addressing the inquisitor. ‘It appears that in doing so I may perform service for the Imperium and for my brethren.’

Inquisitor Sternberg nodded his appreciation. ‘I thank you, Great Wolf.’

Ranek leaned forward and whispered something in the Great Wolf’s ear. Logan Grimnar nodded and turned – and for some reason his piercing gaze fell on Ragnar for a moment. After three heartbeats, Grimnar’s gaze swung back around and he nodded to Ranek. As the hubbub of the meal returned around him and he directed his attention to the meal once more, Ragnar thought nothing of it – but a few minutes later Ranek was at his shoulder.

‘Brother Ragnar, I wish to speak with you,’ the Wolf Priest commanded. ‘Come to my chamber now.’

‘Looks like you’ve weaselled out of the bet,’ Sven said.

‘There will be others,’ Ragnar muttered, wondering what could be so important as to drag him and the Wolf Priest away from the feast.



TWO

‘This is an important task, Brother Ragnar,’ Ranek said emphatically.

Ragnar, standing at ease before the Wolf Priest, gazed around the chamber for a moment. It was not one of the larger rooms used by the Wolf Priests for meetings. It was not a sacred place at all, just a room in the Great Wolf’s lair assigned for their use. No, more than that, Ragnar suddenly realised – it was a chamber assigned to Ranek. He could smell the old man’s scent, which was as potent here as the scent of a wolf in its lair. All the other scent traces were faint by comparison. He looked at it with new eyes, looking for some insight into the personality of the old man.

‘I believe you,’ Ragnar said, ‘but why are you giving it to me? Surely there are others who can perform it better. Why should I be the one to deal with these outsiders?’

Ranek, settled upon a stone seat before him, ran one grizzled hand through his long white beard. His keen blue eyes bored into Ragnar’s. Ragnar forced himself to meet the old man’s gaze despite the discomfort. ‘You don’t want to do this, do you, laddie?’

Ragnar scratched his head. It had been some time since the priest had called him that. It brought back memories of his very first meeting with the old man, what seemed a lifetime ago, when he had still been a barbarian living on an island lost amid Fenris’s world-girdling oceans. ‘No, sir. I do not.’

‘Why not?’

It was a good question but Ragnar was not exactly certain of his answer. He really did not want to show the newcomers around the Fang, although he was actually quite curious about them, keen to know more about them. Why was he so reluctant to spend time with them? ‘I would rather be training with my battle-brothers,’ he managed.

‘That’s understandable, but you will still have plenty of time to do that.’ Ragnar could tell from his scent that Ranek did not really believe him.

Ragnar shrugged and continued to study the Wolf Priest's room. It was no larger than a meditation cell, and it was spartanly furnished. There was a huge slab of granite which was used as a table, and the carved block of stone which the old man used as a chair. Thick furs were cast over it to pad the rock. Doubtless the Wolf Priest had hunted down the beasts himself. On the desktop sat a glowglobe, one of the eternally burning lights of the ancients. It was set into the skull of some suspiciously humanoid alien monster. Beside this puzzling artefact lay rolls of parchment and one of the feather-tipped stylos used by the Space Wolves when they had to write. Ranek followed Ragnar's gaze and understood.

'An ork,' he said, glancing at the skull. 'The greenskin was the first off-worlder I ever killed. I took its skull as a trophy. I was going to use it as a drinking cup.'

Ragnar looked at the old man fascinated. He had never heard this tale before. He wondered at the age of the skull. Given Ranek's age it must have been taken from its original owner centuries ago.

'Not a good idea. Wrong shape, really; the beer drains away through the eye sockets.' It took Ragnar a few moments to realise that the old man was making a joke. The priest bared his large fangs in a grimace that Ragnar knew was meant to be a smile. It vanished as quickly as it came. 'You haven't answered my question.'

Ragnar looked at him. 'I think I have.'

Ranek shook his head. 'You have spoken truth as far as it goes but you are not telling me all that you think.'

Ragnar smiled at the Rune Priest this time. Ranek was too difficult to deceive. He might lack the thought-reading powers of the Wolf Priests but his disconcerting cold eyes could see into a man's heart with equal ease. Ragnar decided he would air his doubts. That was the way of his people.

'I have no real answer, lord. There is just something about these strangers that makes me uneasy. I don't quite know why but I sense a wrongness about all of this. I am not sure the Great Wolf should have granted them permission to come here. I do not think he should let them examine our trophies.' Even as he dared say them, a part of him wondered whether he should voice these doubts. Who was he, a mere Blood Claw, to question the judgement of the Great Wolf? On the other hand, it was the enshrined right of every Fenrisian warrior to speak his mind, and the Space Wolves were nothing if not Fenrisian warriors.

To his surprise, Ranek was standing straighter. His scent told Ragnar that the old priest was paying closer attention to him.

‘You have doubts about the strangers?’ Ranek asked.

‘I know not, not for sure. Maybe about their mission. About something. There is something here that makes me uneasy.’

Ranek nodded, almost to himself. ‘I agree with you.’

Ragnar was not surprised. He could sense something of the old man’s moods from his scent. Reading scents was part of being one of the pack. It was what let the Space Wolves act with a co-ordination and precision that few other humans could match.

‘Unfortunately the Great Wolf does not see eye-to-eye with me on this.’

Ragnar raised an eyebrow and altered his stance uneasily. Such dissension in the upper ranks was rare. No, he corrected himself; he did not know that. It appeared rare. Perhaps it was always there and he just did not have the opportunity to see it. He was a Blood Claw and in training, and he rarely mixed with the Chapter’s mighty rulers. There were few opportunities to. They were out in the field for so much of the time; in comparison, he as yet had not gone much further than the Fang.

‘Logan Grimnar trusts Inquisitor Sternberg. The inquisitor saved his life long ago and there is a debt of honour there.’

‘Are you saying you do not trust him?’ Ragnar dared. It was a bold question for a Blood Claw to ask someone as senior as the Wolf Priest but somehow Ragnar knew he would get an honest answer. Ranek smiled, but there was no warmth in the man’s lined face.

‘I trust him well enough,’ he said. ‘I have no doubt of his loyalty to the Emperor. There is no taint to him or to any of his retinue... but he is not one of us. He is not one of the pack and there are mysteries within the Fang that are only for us of the pack to know.’

Ragnar thought he knew what the Wolf Priest meant. There was a bond between those who had been initiated into the Wolves, who had passed through the Gate of Morkai and bore the geneseed of Russ within their bodies. It was something that no one else could share. These off-worlders were outsiders and more. They were not of the pack. They did not share the sense of place and group identity that every one the Chapter members did. Then another part of what the Wolf Priest had said to him sank in and he almost laughed.

‘I am only a Blood Claw,’ Ragnar said. ‘I know very little of any mysteries.’

Ranek smiled back at him. ‘Then you cannot give them away, can you?’

This time Ragnar did laugh, suddenly appreciating the old Wolf Priest’s cunning. It was true: he could not reveal what he did not know. On the other hand, those who had progressed further into the Chapter would know more of the ancient mysteries, certainly – but was it really so likely that they would give them away to strangers? He voiced his question aloud.

‘All too possible,’ Ranek said. ‘Inquisitors are good at ferreting out secrets. They cannot help it. It is their great yet unenviable task in life. I would go as far as to say that it is their life. It would take a warrior of great cunning to converse with them and be able to keep secrets.’ His tone changed again and became utterly serious. ‘And I have my doubts about what is going on here. I do not know why it should be, but I feel the same as you do. My instincts tell me that there is something dangerous afoot, something that threatens the Chapter. Ragnar, I want you to show these strangers about, and I want you to keep a real eye on them. Furthermore, I want you to come and tell me everything you see. You are quick and your senses are keen. This is why I have chosen you for the task.’

‘Do you want me to report directly to you, lord?’

‘Yes.’

‘And nobody else? Not even the Great Wolf?’

‘Only if he asks that you do so.’

‘I will do as you command,’ Ragnar said uneasily. He wondered what was really going on here. He sensed dissension within the high command, cross-currents in the sea of Chapter politics that he could only guess at. Perhaps the Wolf Priest was acting on instructions from the Great Wolf; perhaps he simply wanted Ragnar to believe that he was acting on his own initiative. Why that might be the case, Ragnar could not guess. Such speculations made his head spin, so he suppressed them. It was always easiest to stick with the simplest line of reasoning until that was proven wrong. Besides, in a way he was glad he had been chosen for the task. He was curious about the strangers... particularly the woman.

‘Good,’ Ranek said. ‘Be open with them. Show them around. Tell them what you know.’

‘And tell you what they ask about?’

Ranek nodded and gave a wide, fang-filled smile. Ragnar wondered what he was letting himself in for.

The great wooden door swung back and Ragnar ventured warily into the chambers assigned to the inquisitor and his retinue. Already they had changed their surroundings. The air smelled different, full of the cloying scent of incense and odd, subtle off-world perfumes. From deeper inside the chambers came the sound of voices chanting. A litany was being recited in Imperial Gothic, the standard language of the Imperium and all its liturgy. Somewhere the praises of the Emperor were being recited, over and over. The ancient words echoed around the hallway.

Heavy crimson brocade drapes had been hung up to cover the bare stone of the walls. Ragnar wondered how the fitting could have been made so quickly, until he saw that each section of cloth hung from a suspensor globe floating on its own antigravity field. He ran his fingers over the cloth. It was thick and soft, of far finer weave than anything produced on Fenris. Each vast rectangular section was trimmed with gold and precious stones, and emblazoned with the symbol of the Inquisition. Before him two enormous braziers burned – and between them stood two black-robed men. Huge cowls hid their faces. Bolt pistols were held in their hands. The left-hand sentry extended his open hand in a gesture that told Ragnar he was to stop.

‘What is your business here?’ the right hand sentry asked, almost as if they were not in the depths of the Fang. As if Ragnar had no right whatsoever to be there.

‘I am Ragnar of the Space Wolves. I have been sent to act as Inquisitor Sternberg’s guide to the Fang.’

The sentry spoke into a small brass device on a leather strap at his wrist. The words were framed in a language which Ragnar did not recognise, though that was hardly surprising; there were millions of tongues in the Imperium, and he spoke only the language of Fenris and Imperial Gothic, which had been drummed into his brain by the tutelary engines of the Fang. The Wolf waited, studying the strangers closely, annoyed by their arrogance but determined not to show it. He breathed in their scent. It was human but held many faint alien taints. It was the scent of men who had grown up eating different foods, breathing different air, under a different sky from the one under which he had been born.

‘You may proceed, Ragnar of the Space Wolves,’ the sentry said. The pair turned on their heels to leave an opening between them for him to pass through. It was performed with a discipline and a precision that Ragnar found almost amusing. Part of his education had concerned the military training of other Imperial units. He knew that they were addicted to marching and moving in formation and all manner of shows of discipline that the Space Wolves rarely indulged in and considered pointless ostentation. Of course, he had been led to believe, they in turn thought the Space Wolves barbaric. To each his own, Ragnar thought, moving forward.

One of the sentries fell in behind him, Ragnar not sure whether this was to show him the way or to escort him as if he were a prisoner. Two more dark-cowled guards had already emerged from the inner chamber, as if produced by a machine to take their place, and they took over chaperoning duties. He could see how some visitors to an inquisitor might be intimidated by such behaviour. He might have been himself, had they not been in the heart of the Fang. Besides, he seriously doubted that these two warriors, well trained as they might be, could even slow him down when it came to a real battle. He was, after all, a Space Marine.

They arrived at the inner chamber and Ragnar saw that it had been partitioned off like the first with many drapes. It was like being in a huge multi-sectioned tent. It gave each person in the retinue some privacy; moreover, from a military standpoint, it altered the lay of the land, and might confuse any intruder for a few moments. Ragnar almost laughed at the thought. As if that could possibly stop the Wolves right in the middle of their own lair. He shook his head realising that he was being naïve. This arrangement was simply a standard procedure for these people, not some special set-up for here in the Fang. Perhaps in other places, on other planets, it would serve its purpose admirably. He decided to withhold judgement.

He was led by the two guards through a winding maze of cloth corridors. It did not trouble him. He could find his way through the labyrinth from memory if need be and, even if that had not been the case, it would be a simple matter to follow his own scent trail back to the exit. He realised that the layout was another clue about these off-worlders. They thought in terms of mazes and puzzles, of deception and trickery. Their thinking was most likely equally convoluted and circuitous.

As they proceeded through the structure, Ragnar noted the activities around him. In some of the curtained chambers, men meditated. In others scribes scratched away with stylos on the parchment pages of huge librams. Ahead of him, he could hear the clash of blade on blade. It sounded as if two people were engaging in combat practice.

The three of them stepped through an entrance where the hangings had been folded back and Ragnar could see that he had been correct. The salt smell of sweat and the hard acrid stink of aggression struck his nose with an almost physical assault. He twitched his nostrils and watched carefully. Inquisitors Sternberg and Isaan were sparring with each other on a padded combat mat. They were using a style he had never seen before, long cloaks held in one fist, knives in the other. They were using the cloaks as weapons, flicking them at each other to obscure vision, using them like nets to try and entangle the other. Ragnar watched in fascination.

They were both very skilled. Sternberg was larger and had the longer reach, but the woman was quicker and somehow she seemed able to anticipate the man's movements better. Sternberg faked a slash and stabbed forward, but she was no longer before him. Her cloak lashed out to entangle his legs. Looking at the way it moved Ragnar could tell it was weighted, designed to be used as a weapon. That too told him something about these people. They thought to conceal weapons even within innocuous items of clothing. He imagined that the weights sewn into those hems, whipped forward at the end of a cloak, might be able to knock a normal man out, perhaps even break his head, though he doubted they would have any effect on the reinforced skull of a Space Marine.

Sternberg leapt upward, letting the cloak pass beneath him but that was a mistake, Ragnar could tell. Taking even one foot off the ground usually was in close combat. It put a man off balance. Leaping into the air was worse. You had no purchase on anything. Isaan proceeded to demonstrate this admirably. Her straightened arm slammed into Sternberg's chest, sending him tumbling backwards. His fingers opened and the cloak tumbled to the floor. Ragnar thought him bested for a moment, but then realised that the truth was otherwise. As he hit the ground he rolled over, feet passing over his head, but even as he did so his newly freed arm slammed into the ground and his whole body rotated, bringing his feet into position to kick the legs from underneath the woman. She tumbled

backwards onto the mat, and the man moved forward with a turn of speed he had not previously demonstrated, to end with his knife at her throat.

‘Yield,’ he said smoothly.

‘I yield,’ she panted. ‘Good move, the last. I had thought you a little slow today.’

Ragnar studied them again, looking at Inquisitor Sternberg with new respect. He had obviously planned out the whole thing, lured his colleague into his trap and then swiftly implemented it. He had used his mind as a weapon as well as the knife and it was difficult to tell which was keener. Ragnar slapped his open hand against his breastplate in warrior’s applause. Sternberg turned at the sound, and bowed to him with a smile.

Ragnar took a moment to study the inquisitor. Close up, the man looked as hard as a Wolf Priest. His hair was so grey it was almost white but other than that he looked youthful. His skin was tanned and his teeth were white and even. His eyes were grey, calm and watchful. His smile was pleasant, even friendly, but that friendliness never quite seemed to reach his eyes.

‘Greetings, my friend,’ Sternberg said evenly, despite his recent exertions. ‘What brings you here?’

‘I have been sent to be your guide and to answer any questions you may have about the Fang.’

‘And about what I came here to find?’

‘I know nothing about such things – but I can take you to those who may do.’

‘Good,’ the inquisitor said. ‘I am most keen to start. Lives are at stake and we do not have any time to waste.’

‘Then let us seek out the archivists,’ Ragnar said.

Matters were not going well, Ragnar thought. On the surface the inquisitors seemed relaxed and charming but Ragnar could tell by their scents that they were angry and frustrated. His nose never lied about such things. No Space Wolf would be fooled by their appearance, and the archivist, too, was a Space Wolf. He, in turn, seemed to be responding to the visitors’ suppressed impatience with an anger of his own.

To distract himself from the swirl of emotions, Ragnar gazed around this section of the Hall of Battles. One corner of the vast chamber was filled by flickering viewscreens and the huge brass and iron chassis of the ancient cogitation engine. The air smelled of ozone and machine oil. The

hiss of pistons and the hum of capacitors reached his ears. In the walls were countless niches filled with smooth stone tablets. Ragnar knew that these were runestones, and that in some way known only to the Iron Priests they stored great volumes of information that the machine could read. The stones were a near-indestructible repository of lore from throughout the Space Wolves' history.

'It will take some time to find out what you require,' Archivist Tal said testily. He was an elderly Wolf Priest, even older-looking than Ranek but far less burly. Age seemed to have pruned every fragment of spare flesh from his frame. His beard was long and straggly. His one good eye was sunk deep into its socket. The green-tinged camera lens of a bionic device glittered in place of its twin. Ragnar could see the inquisitor's face reflected in its polished glass. When the archivist raised one hand the nails were so long they looked like talons.

'How much longer?' Sternberg asked him. His voice was calm, well-modulated. Had Ragnar not been reading the man's scent he would have detected no trace of impatience in it.

The archivist shrugged and the raven hopped from his shoulder and began to scabble along the desk, before it flexed its wings and took off. Ragnar watched the bird go. For a moment it looked like a scrap of shadow under the vast cavern roof, then it disappeared into the gloom. This part of the Hall of Battles was not well lit and it smelled fusty with age. 'Who can say? I will notify young Ragnar when I come across the runestones pertaining to what you require. In the meantime it would be best if you returned to your chambers. Your presence here is merely a distraction.'

'The Great Wolf said that these people were to be given all the cooperation they required,' Ragnar said. He did not feel quite as calm as he sounded. The archivist was notoriously crotchety.

'It is not for you to remind me what the Great Wolf said, young Ragnar. My memory is quite good enough for that. I am the Keeper of Records. I can recall what he told me only yesterday. I am just saying that things would go quicker if I did not have people here asking me fool's questions and goading me with fool's statements.'

'I can see that,' Ragnar said testily.

'And I don't need any of your lip either, youngling. I am not so old that I can't administer a sound thrashing to any beardless cub that cheeks me.'

Ragnar looked at the old man sullenly. He seemed serious but it was hard to tell. The archivist was known to have a strange sense of humour. Age had made him somewhat eccentric; senile, some claimed. Ragnar breathed in the man's scent. There was some resentment there. Judging by his stance and his tone it was not directed at Ragnar but at the off-worlders. It seemed that the archivist, too, was reluctant to give up the secrets of the Space Wolves to people he did not know.

'Can you not at least give me some idea of how long?' Ragnar asked, now using the native tongue of Fenris, a speech that doubled as the secret battle language of the Space Wolves. He saw the archivist's good eye flicker once in the direction of Sternberg. His own gaze followed.

'As long as it takes,' said Tal. Ragnar caught what he was looking at too. No flicker of understanding passed over Sternberg's face. Presumably the inquisitor did not know their language, then. For some reason Ragnar found himself hoping that was the case.

'There are millions of runestones, Blood Claw, and the indexes are not necessarily all that reliable. Such procedures take time. You would do well to learn patience, as would your off-world companions.'

'I will bear that in mind,' Ragnar said sourly. 'I hope all of the people on Aerius who are dying learn patience too. The fate of a world hangs in the balance here.'

The archivist snorted. 'When you reach my age, youngling, you will realise that the fate of a world always hangs in the balance somewhere.'

'How much longer is this going to take?' Inquisitor Isaan asked, glancing around the Hall of Battles with impatience. She did not sound happy. Things were obviously not going quite as well as she had imagined.

'As long as it takes,' Ragnar said. He followed her gaze, oddly glad that Sternberg had not accompanied them, allowing him to be alone with the woman. Sternberg had shown far less interest in the wonders of the Hall than she and waited with the archivist.

The great statue of Oberik Kelman, 23rd Great Wolf of the Chapter, glared down angrily at the pair of them. Kelman had been a famously temperamental man, given to terrifying rages when frustrated. Just at the moment Ragnar thought he knew how the Wolf must have felt. He was struggling to keep his temper in the face of the inquisitor's impatience. It was not that he blamed her. He too would have liked to have seen quicker

progress but he also felt that she blamed him, and her constant questioning of him would not make things happen any quicker.

‘And how long precisely will that be?’ Karah Isaan glared at him with cat-like green eyes. She was almost as tall as he was, brown skinned, with a pert nose and wide lips. Her hair was lustrous black. She was quite the most exotic woman he had ever seen, but right at this moment there was nothing remotely attractive about her.

‘I can see why you are an inquisitor,’ Ragnar replied. ‘You do not easily abandon a line of questioning.’

‘And once again you are avoiding giving me an answer.’

‘The answer is plain, lady: I don’t know. I am not an archivist. I am only here to be your guide.’

‘And to be our watchdog.’

Ragnar looked at her, startled that she would suggest such a thing. In that tone of voice it was close to being an insult. ‘Those are words I would call you out for, if—’

‘If I were a man?’

Ragnar almost smiled. That was exactly what he had been going to say. The womenfolk of the islands did not fight, and he had no idea how to deal with a woman who behaved as if she were the equal of any warrior. Instead of speaking he merely grunted assent.

‘I would not let that stop you,’ she said. ‘I have been trained to fight. All of my calling are.’

‘I am sure. But it would be a most terrible breach of hospitality. We do not slay our guests.’

‘You are very certain you could slay me.’

‘Yes.’ A simple statement of fact. ‘I am a Space Marine.’

Another simple statement of fact. He was one of the mightiest warriors humanity could produce, enhanced in a hundred different ways, taught to kill in every way, bloodied in combat against the vile forces of Chaos. There was no way any normal mortal could stand in combat against him.

She smiled at him, showing small perfect teeth. It was a cold smile, with nothing friendly in it. She moved her hand. Ragnar sensed a gathering of energies, but was unsure of what was happening.

Then he tried to move and his limbs would not respond.

A psyker, he realised. She was a psyker, one of those witches gifted with extraordinary mental powers, one of which was now quite obviously

the ability to paralyse any target she wished.

Ragnar suddenly felt very foolish... and very angry. He exerted his strength, willing his limbs to respond. Her arrogant smile grew wider and colder as she watched him struggle. This just served to make him angrier still. Somewhere in the dim depths of his mind, the beast that had been part of him since he became a Space Wolf began to snarl with frustrated rage. It did not like being caged, even if the cage was his own body.

Perhaps this was the threat he had sensed when the strangers had first appeared. Psykers were notoriously prone to possession by the daemons of Chaos. Perhaps even now one of them had wormed its way into the very heart of the Fang.

‘Space Wolf, I could kill you now and there is nothing you could do about it,’ she said calmly.



THREE

Ragnar could almost smell the woman gloating – and he was livid. He could not sense any other alteration in her scent. She did not appear to be tainted by Chaos. Perhaps, after all, she was simply doing all this to prove a point. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow as he forced his numb limbs to move. Time seemed to slow to glacial time as he urged his body to reject her hold on him.

One of his fingers quivered slightly and a look of utter shock appeared on her face, as if she had never seen anyone break her hold before, no matter how slightly. He smelled her sudden loss of confidence, and a faint flicker in the power as that affected her control. Suddenly, somehow, he could move. It was like being encased in molasses but at least his limbs were his own once more. He seemed to be moving with incredible slowness, but at least he was moving.

She let out a faint shriek. His hand was round her throat, almost before he had thought of it. With his superhuman strength all he had to do was close his fingers and her windpipe would be crushed.

‘And now I could kill you,’ he hissed. ‘And there is nothing you could do about it.’ He opened his hand and stepped back. ‘But that would be neither honourable nor hospitable.’

They stood for a moment, glaring at each other. Both of them were breathing hard. He realised that the use of her powers must be as draining to her as hours of heavy exercise was to him. He himself was exhausted from resisting them as he had not been after a two hundred mile forced march.

‘You are very strong-willed,’ she said eventually, and he was not sure whether it was admiration, fear or dislike he smelled – perhaps some combination of them all.

‘Apparently,’ he said.

‘And there is something else within you. I sensed it, as I wove the web.’

‘Is that what you call it?’

‘I saw something like a wolf: large, dark, fierce.’

‘It was something woken when I joined the Chapter,’ he said, not sure whether he should be discussing this with anyone from outside the Space Wolves. ‘A Wolf Spirit.’

‘No. It’s part of your own spirit. Something that separates you from normal people.’

‘It was bound to me.’

‘I suppose that is one way of looking at it. Albeit a primitive way.’

‘Now you are being insulting again.’

She smiled and this time there was some warmth in the smile. ‘I do not mean to be. It is just that when you are a psyker you become very aware of things. One is that the way people see the world is the way the world is – for them. That doesn’t mean that it is the way the world really is in an absolute sense.’

That was a concept of some sophistication but Ragnar thought he could see what she meant. He knew his own view of the world had changed radically since he had joined the Wolves. Once he had seen the world very differently, with the eyes of a Fenrisian barbarian. Now he looked at it with the altered eyes of a Space Marine. Perhaps it was possible that some day he would learn something that would supersede his current view of the world. It had happened once; he had to admit to the possibility that it might happen again. On the other hand, he did not want to follow this line of thought too closely. Down such paths lay heresy, not a fate any Space Marine wished to consider. ‘Perhaps you are right. But do you know what the world is like, in an absolute sense?’

‘You still have not answered my question,’ she said. This time she sounded marginally friendlier and her smile held more warmth.

‘If one method of questioning fails, you try another,’ Ragnar said.

‘And you find another means of evasion.’

‘Truly I do not want to. I am not an archivist. I know there are many millions of runestones kept here in these Halls. Not all of them are catalogued by the Thinking Engines. Some records exist only in runescript inscribed on the tablets of stone themselves. Others are held only in the sagas memorised by the Wolf Priests.’

‘There are gaps in the records of your auto-librams.’

Ragnar was not familiar with the term, but it sounded like she was referring to the Thinking Engines. He nodded thoughtfully.

‘It is the same with us,’ she continued. ‘The machines are old, dating from the Dark Age of Technology, and their systems have been reconsecrated many times by the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus. Each time that happens, information is lost. There are flaws in the copying process. And, of course, much information is recorded under the individual seal of a specific inquisitor – and sometimes those seals are lost when the inquisitor dies and no one can then access his records.’

Ragnar looked at her. This was the most forthcoming he had ever seen any member of Sternberg’s retinue. Something in her scent told him to be careful. Perhaps this was a trick the inquisitors used, confiding a little information to make the person they were talking to do the same. Not that it mattered very much, he thought. There was nothing here to hide – as far as he knew.

‘And of course, some records are destroyed.’

Ragnar glanced at her in astonishment. ‘Deliberately?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because the knowledge in them is deemed too dangerous for anyone to possess – because it might lead to heretical thought or heretical deed or because it pertains to certain things that were not meant to be known.’

‘Who decides that?’

‘The Masters of our Order. Sometimes individual inquisitors. Over the millennia the definition of what constitutes heresy has changed. Yesterday’s blasphemy is today’s orthodoxy. Surely it is the same with you?’

Ragnar just looked at her, mouth open with disbelief. He did not think that this was the way the Space Wolves looked at things at all! He could tell by the way that she tilted her head, and by the alteration of her scent, that even his lack of reply was considered an answer. He had told her something and it was being filed away in her memory for future use. To fill the silence, he said, ‘We do not believe that is the case. We hold with the old ways from the time of Russ. The truths do not change.’

He stopped, realising even as he spoke that the silence had been another inquisitor’s trick designed to make him talk. So simple, but so effective. He stopped again.

‘You might think that is the case but I’m sure if you looked closely at the history of your Chapter you would see that it’s not true.’ A hint of

challenge was in her voice. He wanted to respond instantly, to contradict her, but he could see that was what she wanted, another trick. He was starting to understand the game. Well, he could play it too. ‘Do you always interrogate people?’

She smiled and lowered her gaze, then shook her head. Her laughter was quiet and self-mocking. ‘You are good at this,’ she said. ‘I see why they gave you to us.’

Clever people often saw subtlety where there was none, Ragnar thought to himself – and then wondered if that was really the case. Was Ranek being subtler than he had imagined by doing this? Was that the reason he had been chosen for this task? Was Ragnar’s presence some sort of elaborate trick, designed to make the inquisitors think one thing, while another happened? Or was it he, Ragnar, who was now being overly subtle? It was enough to make his head spin.

‘Yes,’ Inquisitor Isaan said. ‘I always interrogate people. It is what I was trained to do. Trained all of my life the way you are taught to fight and kill. Trained in such a way that interrogating people is part of my thought pattern and habits. Trained in a way that makes it automatic and unstoppable.’

‘You sound a little bitter.’

‘Maybe I am. A little.’

And maybe you’re not, Ragnar thought. Maybe this, too, is just another pose to win the confidence of the people you are talking to. He began to see how being with the inquisitor was starting to infect his own thoughts. He was starting to think with a subtlety and deviousness that was not normal for him.

‘I am not sure I would like to live in your world,’ he said eventually.

‘Someone has to. Someone has to find the Emperor’s enemies just as someone has to slay the Emperor’s foes.’

‘There is truth in what you say.’

‘Always, if you look for it. That, too, is part of being an inquisitor.’

‘You would know more about that than me,’ he said with decision. Then another thought occurred to him. ‘You are a psyker. Why do you not simply lift the knowledge you need from other people’s minds?’

She smiled again, this time coldly, as if this was a subject she did not care to discuss. ‘Some psykers have that gift, but not I, my talents run in... other directions. Even for those with the gift it is not that simple. A

strong-willed individual can resist them. More subtle ones can mask their thoughts or even send false thoughts. And there are other risks...'

'Risks?'

'Yes. Those who enter the minds of heretics often become heretics in turn. Their very thoughts are a contagion.'

'There are more ways of entering the minds of heretics than by simply reading their thoughts. I would have thought that trying to understand them could lead you down the same path. At least, so we are taught.'

'There is wisdom in that,' the inquisitor said. Silence fell between them for a long moment.

They walked back to the part of the hall where Inquisitor Sternberg waited for the archivist to do his work.

Ragnar could tell by the way the man was standing that he had not yet got what he came here for. Perhaps it was time to try a distraction, he thought.

And he believed he knew just the thing.

'And where are we going?' asked Inquisitor Sternberg.

Ragnar could hear the beating of the man's heart, strong and regular. He shook his head and the noise disappeared into the background, became one with the hum of the grav-pod as it flashed upward through the elevator shaft towards their destination.

Questions, always questions, thought Ragnar. It was all these people ever seemed to think about.

'You shall see in a moment.'

'This one is not an easy one to get answers from,' Karah Isaan said. Her hand flickered in an intricate gesture. Some sort of secret sign language, obviously, like the one the Space Wolves themselves used in certain circumstances.

Sternberg shook his grizzled grey head and his smile widened. 'That's something of a compliment coming from an inquisitor,' he said.

Ragnar sensed the change in his scent and studied the man closely. It was an attempt at humour, even friendliness. He was watchful. He felt he was getting the measure of these people now. Even friendliness was a weapon to them, just one weapon in their arsenal, one of the many techniques they used to get information from people. Ragnar did not know why this made him wary. He had nothing to hide. They were on the same side. Both were soldiers in the service of the Emperor of Mankind. Yet

there was something about them that made him want to keep his guard up, a sense of duplicity, of hidden motives cunningly concealed, that was alien to his culture and to his experience. Perhaps it was simply part of their exoticness, but he did not particularly like it. And perhaps it was this deeper sense of threat that still tugged at his brain. He did not know why he felt it, but it was there.

He tried to push that thought aside. Perhaps it was the nature of their work. Inquisitors were the investigating agents of the Imperium, trained to detect threats to the security of the human realms, hidden and unhidden. They lived in a world of concealment and secrecy, of duplicity and darkness. Living in that sort of world must have some effect on them, help turn them into what they are.

‘Why will you not answer?’ Sternberg asked. He smiled as he said it. This was all part of the game for him.

‘I think you will realise why when we get there.’

‘It’s some sort of surprise, then,’ Karah suggested.

‘It is difficult to conceal anything from two such clever inquisitors as you,’ Ragnar said with just a trace of irony.

‘Humour? From a Space Marine? Who would have expected that?’ said Sternberg. There was a trace of irony in his voice too, Ragnar noted.

At that moment the gravpod stopped. The light within flickered from red to green. A soft chiming note sounded and the door swished softly open. They walked forward into a massive chamber, part of a natural cavern in the flank of the Fang, one side of which had been walled off with translucent crystal. The only illumination came from the inside of the grav-pod and the cold light of the stars visible through the armourglass of the window. The sky was black. The moon was visible.

‘Is it a projection?’ Karah asked. ‘It is daytime, yet the sky is as dark as night.’

‘I think I understand,’ Sternberg said softly, ‘and I think I know why our young friend did not tell us where we were going.’

He stepped forward into the room and the other inquisitor followed. As they advanced towards the edge of the room, Ragnar was rewarded with their gasps of wonder and the change in their scents that told him they were genuinely astonished. In a way it was gratifying to think that he could still show two such far-travelled and cynical souls something that would excite their sense of wonder. It also meant that he felt some kinship

with them, for there was something special about this place which always astounded him too, no matter how many times he came here – and he had come here often since he had become a Blood Claw and authorised to enter certain of the restricted areas of the Fang.

He joined them at the window, and looked down upon the world. Quite literally, the whole horizon was filled by the curved mass of Fenris. It shimmered against the cold darkness of space. This part of the mountain, high up near the peak, projected right above the atmosphere, and gave a view over a vast swathe of the polar continent of Asaheim. Below him he could see the swirling of clouds, the lesser mountains, the glaciers and the lakes as if laid out on a slightly arched map. The slopes of the mountain tumbled away beneath them to vanish into a sea of clouds far below.

‘I have often heard it said that the Fang is one of the true wonders of the Imperium,’ Sternberg said in a voice hushed and full of awe. ‘And now I understand why.’

‘It is truly beautiful,’ said his female companion. From their scents Ragnar could tell they were both sincere.

‘Thank you for showing us this place, Ragnar,’ Sternberg said. ‘For as long as I live I will remember this moment.’

Ragnar felt his smile vanish suddenly. He did not doubt that what the inquisitor said was true. It was also that he felt that nothing the inquisitor saw would ever go unreclected. Ragnar suspected that they were trained to remember everything the way he was trained to fight.

Memory, too, was one of their tools, he thought. No – one of their weapons. He could see he was going to have some difficulty trusting these people.

The clear, bell-like tone sounded in Ragnar’s ear. He came instantly awake, moving from strange dreams of off-world conflict to the dim shadowy light of his cubicle instantly. Responding to his movement the glowglobes brightened. He reached for his comm-net earpiece, which lay on the hewn slab of rock beside the pallet on which he slept. He pushed it into place then pressed the subvocaliser into position on his throat.

‘Ragnar. What do you want?’

‘I have found the thing your off-world friends were looking for.’ The archivist’s voice sounded high and cracked, even over the fuzzy tones of the comm-net.

‘I will notify them at once,’ Ragnar said.

‘You do that.’

The air stank of ozone and machine oil. The sound of great pistons made the air vibrate. Huge arcs of Universal Fire leapt from massive conduction coil to massive conduction coil. A nimbus of light surrounded the great Thinking Engine. Iron Priests bellowed chants designed to propitiate the ancient spirits trapped within the machine and bind its power to their purpose. One of them tapped something on a keyboard so old that most of the ceramite keys had been replaced with others carved from black basalt or whale tusk ivory. A junior Iron Priest slapped cooling unguents onto the machine from a ceremonial urn. Ragnar guessed that if the Engine grew too warm, the spirits within would grow angry and seek to escape – but that was only a guess, he really knew very little about the mysteries of the Machine Spirits. He was glad to leave the whole ritual in the capable hands of the Iron Priests, Emperor watch over them.

One of them fed a smooth black runestone into a brass orifice in the machine. The lights grew brighter, the scents more intense.

Suddenly there was a sound like a small bolter starting to fire and from a slot in the side of the machine a long scroll of parchment began to unroll. Ragnar could see that runic characters covered the page. Ragnar hoped that the archivist was correct. He risked a look at the small slab of black marble which had been dropped into a restraining slot on the machine’s side. Even as he watched, the runes along its top, which had previously been invisible, lit up, shedding a light that reminded Ragnar of molten steel. All they spelled out was a cryptic mass of numbers and letters.

The scroll unwound for an age. Ragnar looked over at Sternberg and Isaan and smelled their impatience. The man in particular seemed almost feverish. There was a gleam in his eye which made Ragnar think of someone whose weird had come upon him. Or perhaps of someone who was approaching a long cherished goal. Beads of sweat were visible on his forehead. The woman hid her impatience better but Ragnar could see she was tense. She pressed her palms together and closed her eyes. Her lips moved slightly and Ragnar knew she was muttering the words of a prayer or meditation exercise. He did not understand the words but the tone was unmistakable.

Eventually the scroll stopped unwinding and the Iron Priest stepped solemnly forward. Making a gesture of benediction in the direction of the

engine of the Ancients, he tore the paper loose, rolled it up gently and handed it to the archivist. He, in turn, unrolled it on the metal-shod desktop, studied it closely and then stamped it with the seal he kept at his belt.

The old archivist nodded once, cackled loudly, rolled it up again and handed it to Ragnar. ‘This is what you are looking for,’ he said. Before Ragnar could reply, he turned and walked away. Ragnar handed the scroll to Inquisitor Sternberg. The man unrolled the scroll, looked at it, smiled sickly and handed it back to Ragnar. The Wolf was suddenly aware that the metal masks of the Iron Priests were all watching him. He was uncomfortably aware of their scrutiny. He gently unrolled the scroll and studied it. The words had all been burned onto the page in some peculiar fashion but they all seemed perfectly clear to him – then in a flash realisation came. The scroll was written in Fenrisian runescrypt, which the inquisitors could not read.

‘Would you like me to translate this for you?’ Ragnar asked. Sternberg nodded. ‘It might take some time. The language is archaic and poetical. Some of the terms look a little obscure.’

‘By all means take whatever time you deem necessary,’ the inquisitor said coldly. ‘We have plenty of it.’

Ragnar could hear the sarcasm in his voice and smelled his anger and his impatience. He knew he had better get to work quickly. Every second of delay might mean thousands of lives lost to the plague.

Ragnar sat cross-legged in his cell and ciphered out the words. The story had all his attention now. It was a record of a campaign fought against the alien eldar some two thousand years before, written by the long dead Space Wolf, Brother Jorgmund. Ragnar was struck by the fact that of all the great inventions with which the Emperor had gifted humanity, writing was perhaps the most important and the most under-rated. By using it he was communing with a man dead for nearly two millennia, hearing his words, grasping his thoughts. It was a minor miracle to which he had never before given thought.

He proceeded with the translation, surprised at how well he handled the process. The tutelary engines had done the work of burning Imperial Gothic into his brain well. Only rarely did he struggle to find exactly matching words and phrases as he turned the words from Fenrisian into the tongue of the Imperium.

The tale of the campaign was long and involved. For reasons known only to themselves, the eldar had attacked the Imperial world of Aeriis. Brother Jorgmund thought it was typical of these treacherous alien humanoids that they struck without warning, dropping from space in their oddly constructed ships, brutally massacring Imperial soldiery and then ringing around the great Black Pyramid with their forces while their sorcerer leader, Farseer Kaorelle, worked his sinister magic. It was during a particularly ill-omened time. The balestar glittered in the sky and plague ravaged the world.

The Space Wolves had responded to the call for a crusade to push the eldar from the surface of a world that rightfully belonged to humanity. They had descended with chainsword and boltgun to cleanse their foul presence from the world. The fighting had been particularly bitter around the Pyramid where the eldar sorcerer had used his most potent magic. According to Jorgmund, the Rune Priests claimed that the Black Pyramid was some sort of nexus of strange mystical forces. He also noted a local legend that it had been built by the eldar back in the mists of time.

After several battles in which the defenders of humanity gained the upper hand, the sinister aliens refused to reveal their purpose. Instead they proceeded with their arcane rituals. What might have happened had they been allowed to complete them, only the Emperor upon the Golden Throne might have been able to foresee. Instead, at the climax of their ritual, the Space Wolves aided by elements of the Inquisition and the Imperial Guard, had managed to break through their defensive perimeter, overwhelm the Farseer's guards and seize the instruments with which the aliens were manipulating vast flows of psychic power.

As they died, the vile alien scum had shrieked that the Space Wolves were making a terrible mistake and that their folly would be the undoing of all the races of the galaxy. Ignoring the villainous lies of the eldar magi, the Space Wolves had taken possession of the alien talisman central to the magical ritual. Fortunately during the great conflict it had been broken into three separate parts, and whatever powers it possessed had become dormant. The Space Wolves had taken one of the segments of the broken artefact. The others had been taken by an inquisitor and the Imperial Guard regiment from Galt as trophies of another great Imperial victory.

Examination of the fragment of the ancient alien talisman by the Chapter's rune priests had revealed that the artefact possessed sorcerous

powers of a great and unknown sort. The process of examination would continue at some future date; in the meantime, other duties called the Chapter, and so the talisman was entombed in the Vaults of Victory to await further examination. That was the last reference Ragnar could find to it.

He leafed hastily through the rest of the scroll but it dealt with another campaign against orcs in the Segmentum Obscura. There were no further references to the Talisman of Lykos. He finished the translation and marked the parchment with his personal rune. It was time to take this information to Sternberg. So far everything the inquisitor said had been confirmed by the records.

Ragnar could not see how finding the talisman might help the people of Aerius, but he realised that this was more the inquisitor's field than his. He was a warrior, not an adept at dealing with sorcery.

Once more Ragnar found himself in the Great Wolf's chambers. Beside him stood Ivan Sternberg and Karah Isaan. The two inquisitors looked calm and relaxed, but Ragnar could smell their nervousness. He did not blame them. The Great Wolf was a presence to make the bravest quail.

'We have found the information we sought, Logan Grimnar,' Inquisitor Sternberg said.

'I am glad we could aid you,' the Great Wolf replied.

'I have a second boon to ask.'

'And what would that be?'

'I wish to see this ancient talisman, to ascertain it is the thing we seek.'

The Great Wolf raised an eyebrow. He leaned forward in his chair. 'I suspected that might be the case. I have already commanded the Rune Priests to open the Vault for you. I see no reason why we should delay your quest any further.'

'I thank you, Great Wolf,' Sternberg said with a small bow of his head.

Ragnar watched the small group from the edge of the chamber. No one had commanded him to attend the ceremony but then again, no one had told him not to. He had been ordered to accompany the inquisitors whenever they went abroad in the Fang, and as far as he was concerned, that was his duty until his orders were countermanded. So he had every reason to be there. Besides, he was curious.

They were deep below the Fang in a place which had obviously not been visited for hundreds of years. The chamber was perhaps a hundred strides across, the ceiling as high as five men. The walls were roughly hewn from the stone, so roughly hewn in fact that Ragnar suspected that the chamber might once have been a cave. The air smelled fusty. The only scent aside from their own belonged to the automated drones which performed maintenance in the area. Ragnar recalled the approach to this place, along miles of corridor. Every ten paces or so, huge armoured blast doors, marked with the seals of ancient warriors, had lined the way. The Rune Priests had led them unerringly to this one place, and with a wave of their hands and a muttered incantation had broken the seal and opened the door.

Inside they had found a chamber with an even heavier blast door. It was obvious that whatever was held within this chamber was to be well-protected – or well-sealed, Ragnar had thought.

Now the Rune Priests were chanting once more, while two of them turned the huge windlass that opened the second door. The inquisitors and the Great Wolf watched them in silence, their scents and their body language communicating an attitude of reverence. Nearby, the Great Wolf's honour guard of warriors stood at the ready. Ragnar could tell from their scents that they were almost as curious as he was, although their postures communicated nothing but an echo of their lord's reverence, and a readiness to spring into action in a heartbeat, even here in the deepest and most secure part of the Fang.

Ragnar was glad of this. For as the huge bulkhead creaked open, an eerie glow leaked through the ever-widening gap and fell upon the people in the chamber. Shadows danced away, as if seeking shelter in the darkest corner of the room. When the light fell on him, Ragnar thought he felt his skin tingle for a moment. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. A palpable sense of barely contained power filled the air.

Looking through the opening, Ragnar could see into a smaller chamber, just as irregularly walled as this one. In that chamber was a dais; on that dais was a plinth; on top of that plinth was a crystalline case. From within that case came the eerie glow. Even as he watched, the shimmering faded. Either his eyes were adapting to the light or the power which had caused the glow was fading somewhat. As it did so, the source of the glow became obvious. It was a gem, about the size of a hen's egg but

multifaceted, cut by a jewelsmith of incredible skill. The others strode into the room. Drawn by the sight of the thing, Ragnar followed. No one objected.

They moved closer to the crystal case, Ragnar as close behind them as he dared. Everyone seemed so distracted by the sight of the talisman that they had forgotten all about his presence.

This close, his keen eyes could see that the jewel was set in an intricate frame of gold. The frame was marked with odd eldar runes which Ragnar could not decipher. It was attached to a chain of some silvery substance he had never seen before. It was obviously intended to hang around someone's neck. Probably one of those alien sorcerer priests he had heard of. Part of the frame was broken and he could see, too, that the gem it contained had roughly shattered edges on two sides. Where the talisman had broken apart, Ragnar realised.

It was not the talisman's appearance that was the most striking thing about it. It was the aura of power that surrounded it. No one looking upon it, or standing in the same chamber with it, could possibly doubt that this was an object of vast significance. Ragnar knew he was no psyker but he could feel the energies pulsing and seething within the thing. Unbidden, a vision of an alien mage, inhumanly tall with an oddly elongated physique, clad in ornate ritual garb, sprang into Ragnar's mind. The talisman glittered on his throat.

Ragnar heard Inquisitor Isaan gasp. She looked pale and a little frightened. Ragnar knew she was a psyker and most likely much more sensitive to the emanations of the thing than he was. He wondered, if it was having this strong an effect on him, what it must be doing to her.

Without being bidden to do so, Inquisitor Sternberg reached out and slid open the crystal case. He reached in and lifted the talisman by its chain. His face wore a look of reverence. With visible reluctance he handed it to Karah.

She took it by the chain, and as it passed to her, the glow returned. She stopped for a moment, frozen, then shook her head. She seemed a little dazed but she passed her hand near the crystal and nodded.

'Is it the amulet we seek?' Sternberg asked her quietly.

'Yes. Of that, there can be no doubt. It is a thing of power. Its aura is very strong and many of the impressions are confused. But I can tell you one thing.'

‘What?’

‘In order to use it, we need to possess all of the parts. There are strong psychic connections between this object and its kin. I believe I could use it to locate the others. Given time. And possession of this one.’

She and her fellow inquisitor turned as one to regard the Great Wolf. Ragnar knew exactly what they were going to ask.

Ranek the Wolf Priest strode up and down the chamber, pacing back and forth like a caged beast. ‘I do not like this at all,’ he was saying.

‘I can see that,’ said Ragnar. ‘But the Great Wolf has already given his permission.’

‘And that is that, eh? The outworlders come here, ask for one of our ancient treasures, an artefact of monstrous power, hidden from elder days, and Logan Grimnar just says “yes”.’

‘It is not that bad,’ Ragnar said. He did not like arguing with the Wolf Priest but he felt compelled to defend the Great Wolf’s decision. And not just because one of its consequences elated him. ‘They are our allies in the service of the Emperor. They are proven and worthy warriors, and fell foes of the enemies of the Imperium.’

Ranek’s lips quirked a little cynically, Ragnar thought. ‘And besides, you get to go with them, off-world, as one of the talisman’s guardians, don’t you, young Ragnar?’

‘I am one of the honour guard,’ Ragnar admitted.

‘Well, at least Grimnar has put Sergeant Hakon in command,’ Ranek said sourly.

Ragnar was not so sure he liked the sound of that. His memories of Sergeant Hakon, the former instructor at Russvik, were not exactly fond ones. Hakon was a hard man, sometimes cruel. Still, thought Ragnar, he was an able warrior and a good commander. Ragnar did not have to like him to respect him. He was not going to let anything spoil this day for him. He was filled with excitement at the imminent prospect of going off-world, of venturing out beyond his home system on one of the great ships which plied the endless lanes between the stars.



FOUR

Ragnar almost laughed aloud as he watched the great shield of the world drop below the horizon, remembering the way he had arrived at the Fang, what seemed half a lifetime ago. Once more he was strapped into the couch of a Thunderhawk gunship. Once more he was passing beyond the atmosphere of his homeworld. Once more he was watching the planet fall away beneath him.

Only this time it was different. This time he was not on a short hop designed to put him down somewhere else on the planet's surface. This time he was heading out into the depths of space, to where the inquisitors' ship waited in orbit. This time, he was going to leave his homeworld behind and go somewhere unimaginably distant from Fenris. Furthermore, it was possible, he had to admit, that he would never return. That knowledge made his departure all the more poignant.

He looked down onto the surface of his home planet with an emotion he had never really felt before, a feeling somewhere between love and longing almost. He watched clouds scud over the vast ocean and glimpsed islands through the gaps in the vapour. He recognised some of them in outline from the maps and globes he had studied in the Fang. He knew that he would not be able to pick out his home island, the place where he had grown up, fallen in love and finally fallen in battle, only to be resurrected into the ranks of the Space Wolves. It was simply too small.

It occurred to him that quite soon he might feel the same way about Fenris. It was only one world but there were millions of such worlds in the Imperium, separated by thousands of light years of distance. He had heard it said that if a man could visit one new world in the galaxy every day of his life, he would not have visited a thousandth of the inhabited worlds by the time he died.

For a moment a sense of his own smallness in the vast scheme of things filled Ragnar. He closed his eyes and breathed a silent prayer both to the Emperor and to Russ to watch over him and his companions, then smiled. Cold comfort there. Both were chill distant gods, remote from man, their duties performed on a scale that gave them little time to watch

over tiny specks like him. They gave men courage and strength and cunning at birth, then expected them to forge their own destinies.

The moment of weakness and loneliness passed, to be replaced by a feeling of excitement about the approaching journey. He could scent that his brothers from the Blood Claw pack shared both his excitement and his unease. He could taste both in the slightly metallic air. He was reassured by the presence of so many recognisable scents. He was proud that he was one of the five who had been chosen to accompany Sergeant Hakon and guard the ancient talisman. And he had to admit that if he had chosen his companions himself, these would have been the ones he would have picked. It was reassuring to have his pack-brothers around him, to feel part of something larger than himself. He was glad of the presence of even those brothers he did not like as people – and in that moment, was certain that they felt the same way about him.

He opened his eyes again and glanced around the darkened compartment of the Thunderhawk, able to distinguish his comrades even in the subdued light of the dimmed glowglobes. Seated next to him was Sven, muttering and cursing to himself, and grumbling about his hunger. His coarse features were twisted into a snarl, his stubby fingers locked together as if in prayer. He grunted and belched, then looked over at Ragnar and winked. ‘Silent but bloody deadly,’ he muttered, and then Ragnar noticed he’d farted. The stink was awful for a moment in that enclosed space. Such was the keenness of Ragnar’s senses that he could distinguish the varying scents of what Sven had had for breakfast that morning.

‘Fish gruel and black bread,’ Ragnar said, without meaning to.

‘Always a good base for a gas attack,’ Sven muttered cheerfully. A bright gleam entered his eye. All of the Blood Claws were having some difficulty adjusting to the awakening of the Wolf Spirit within them. In Sven it took the form of this constant talking to himself and mumbling.

‘I don’t think the engines need any more thrust,’ Nils murmured from the seat behind. ‘We’re going quite fast enough. I swear, though, that Sven rose two finger’s breadths out of his seat.’

‘You’re just jealous,’ muttered Sven. ‘You can’t match my awesome power.’

‘It’s Sven’s secret weapon when we have to fight aliens,’ Ragnar said, knowing this was all so childish, but unable to stop joining in with their

banter. ‘He’s going to gas them to death.’

‘Better make sure he doesn’t do for us first,’ said Nils. ‘I know our implants are supposed to let us adapt to poisons but that was beyond a joke. My head is still swimming.’

‘In the name of Russ, be quiet,’ dark-haired Lars murmured from the other side of him. ‘Can you children never be serious? I can barely meditate for all your chatter.’

‘Yes, your holiness,’ Sven said and farted again to let Lars know what he thought of his complaint. In truth, all of the young Blood Claws were becoming a little tired of Lars and his constant carping. In him the Wolf Spirits seemed to have fostered an excessive humourless devotion to the religious aspects of their calling. If any Space Wolf could be called ascetic, it would be Lars. Rumour had it that he was going to be tested again for nascent psychic powers by the Rune Priests. He had been having dreams recently and visions which some thought might be prophetic – but which Sven and Nils put down to too much meditation and fasting.

‘He did. He took off. I saw him,’ Nils insisted, smirking. ‘And I swear I felt the ship accelerate.’

‘That wasn’t funny the first time,’ Strybjorn growled suddenly down the line at them. Ragnar flinched a little at the sound of his old rival and enemy’s deep, powerful voice. He still did not like Strybjorn, even though he had saved the fellow’s life on their last mission, and his instincts almost rebelled at the thought of having a deadly rival alongside him. Still, of all the men in the Blood Claw pack, these were the ones he knew best. He had trained with them, fought with them, messed with them, and they were as close to him now as his flesh and blood kin once had been.

He glanced along the row of shaven heads, each with the one long strip of hair across the skull that was the mark of the Blood Claw, down the vaulted chamber, towards the front of the craft. He could not say that the people up there were his kin. Right at the front of the craft, close to the command deck, Inquisitors Sternberg and Isaan were strapped into old leather gravity chairs. Between them was the lead-lined casket containing the fragment of the Talisman of Lykos. They had decided to accompany it in the Thunderhawk rather than return to their ship with their own people.

Beside them sat the head of the honour guard, Sergeant Hakon. His scarred face was an impassive mask. His back was rigid. He looked ready to fight at any time. As if feeling Ragnar’s gaze, he glanced backward at

where the Blood Claw and his companions sat. One look from those harsh grey eyes was enough to cow them all into silence. All of them remembered him well from Russvik and few indeed, even the irrepressible Sven, were willing to risk his displeasure.

Ragnar closed his eyes and began the first of many meditation exercises to clear his mind. Around him he sensed the others doing the same.

The first glimpse of the inquisitors' spaceship was a disappointment. Ragnar opened his eyes when he felt the Thunderhawk begin to decelerate and a mild discomfort in his inner ear told him that the craft was engaged in some sort of manoeuvre. He glanced through the thick, scratched plexiglass of the porthole and noticed that there was a tiny sliver of metal gleaming in the distance, barely visible even to his keen eyes in the blackness of space. As he peered, it began to swell in his field of vision, growing rapidly as they approached it.

Ragnar began to appreciate that in space distances were deceptive. There were no landmarks to give scale to what you were seeing. As the inquisitors' ship began to grow, and kept on growing and growing in his sight, he suddenly realised how big it really was. Gasps from around him told him the others did too.

The thing was a flying mountain, a huge wedge of steel and ceramite which dwarfed the Thunderhawk the way a whale might dwarf a minnow. As they neared it, the Space Wolf could see that it bristled with enormous weapons. Huge turrets and emplacements bulged in its side. The Imperial eagle painted on its meteor-pitted flanks was almost a thousand strides across. Beneath it, in Imperial Gothic script, were painted the words *Light of Truth*. Ragnar guessed it was the ship's name. Ragnar had never seen any work of man which gave the impression of enormous power that this starship did. It made his heart beat faster to think that this was the work of mere humans, and under his breath he muttered a short benediction to the Emperor of Mankind.

Smaller spacecraft hovered around the behemoth, coming and going like the shoals of small fish that surrounded an orca. Ragnar watched amazed as their running lights flickered past in the darkness like so many swiftly falling shooting stars. He saw the others lean forward to look in amazement too – all, that is, except the two inquisitors and Sergeant Hakon, who looked as bored and unexcited as people who had witnessed

such wonders a million times. Their scents told Ragnar that was true; they had.

Slowly the Thunderhawk rotated around its axis and the great starship slid smoothly from view to be replaced by the vast field of stars once more. A warning bell tolled to announce their imminent arrival at their destination. The sensation of weight returned. Ragnar felt as if a great powerful hand were pushing him into his seat as they decelerated.

Below them the sides of the starship became visible again, a plain of metal and ceramite from which rose turrets and pipes and gratings. Warning lights winked as they rotated so they were landing flat onto the surface of the spacecraft. Jets of gas erupted from funnels and became floating crystals of ice in the chill of space. Ragnar remembered from his basic training that it was cold enough out there to freeze an unprotected man in mere seconds. It was something he had never really considered until that moment, and he was suddenly glad of the ancient armour which covered his body.

The Thunderhawk was on its final approach now, and momentarily it went dark as they raced down through a huge metal cave in the side of the ship. Ragnar was thrown forward and held in place only by the restraining straps as the ship came to rest. The vibration passing through the Thunderhawk told him that somewhere a huge airtight doorway was sliding into place. Looking through the thick porthole, he could see vapour rising like mist all around them and patches of rime congealing on the gunship's side. Air was being pumped into the landing bay and freezing on contact with the ship's sides which were much colder at that moment than the ice floes of Fenris.

Another bell sounded, telling them it was all clear and safe to disembark without protection. The airlock door swished open and for the first time Ragnar caught the strange sterile scent of the interior of a starship. He caught the tang of thousands of alien aromas, things he could not quite place, mixed with the scent of machine oil, technical unguents and cleansing incense. He heard the clamour of voices, the whirr of unseen machinery and the constant drone of recyclers which pumped air around the ship while cleaning and purifying it. He realised that he was now living in a totally separate, self-contained world, floating free in space, made ready to go anywhere the inquisitors commanded.

He suddenly felt very far from home indeed.

Soldiers greeted them as they exited the ship. They were clad in black uniforms similar to those worn by the Imperial Guard but marked with the sigil of the Inquisition. Ragnar knew that these were Guardsmen seconded to the inquisitor's service for the duration of his mission. Even though they were drawn up in tightly disciplined ranks, they did not impress him. He had a young Space Marine's natural contempt for lesser warriors, untempered yet by the experience of fighting alongside them. It was not the men or their leaders who drew Ragnar's attention but the towering figure that stood at their head, waiting to greet Sternberg and Isaan.

He was a large man, even bigger than Sergeant Hakon, who was huge even by the standards of Space Marines. He was dressed in a uniform of inquisitorial black which fitted him as tightly as a glove. Black leather gauntlets gleamed on his hands. High leather boots encased his powerful calves. His head was bare and shaved hairless. His nose was beak-like, almost aquiline. His lips were thin and cruel. Black eyes dominated the gaunt fanatical face. He glanced at the Space Marines with respect but no fear.

'Inquisitor Sternberg. It is good to have you back. You too, Inquisitor Isaan.' His voice was booming and powerful and there was a coldness to it that might have chilled Ragnar had he been anything but a Space Marine. It was the voice of a man used to command, and Ragnar could tell from its authority that it had boomed out over a thousand battlefields.

The man's left hand was gone, no doubt left on some distant battlefield, replaced by a mechanical metal claw. A bolt pistol and a chainsword hung from a broad leather belt at his waist. Three honour studs similar to those worn by elite Space Marines were driven into his shaven head beside the sign of the Inquisition which had been tattooed there. Obviously, Ragnar thought, this was a man who took his duties and his loyalties seriously.

'It is good to be back, Commander Gul,' Sternberg said, as he and Isaan returned Gul's salute, right fists hitting their chests just above the heart. 'May I present Sergeant Hakon and his pack of Blood Claws? They are our guests on board the *Light of Truth* and the honour guard of a very special cargo.'

'Your mission was a success then, my lord inquisitor?' Gul asked. White teeth flashed, and the tan of the man's skin made them look even whiter. Ragnar caught the man's scent. There was keenness and excitement

there – and something else, some disturbing undertone which he could not quite put his finger on. That in itself was disturbing, for as a Space Wolf he had learned to trust the perceptions of his senses implicitly. Despite himself, his earlier foreboding about the inquisitors returned redoubled. He wondered whether he should share them with the others. Perhaps when they were alone.

‘We have what we came to find, and are on the trail of the other things we seek.’

‘I pray to the Emperor that that will be soon,’ Gul said. ‘We must find the answer before the plague devours our homeworld.’

‘I share your prayers, commander,’ Sternberg said.

Gul seemed to have as much of a personal stake in this as either of the inquisitors. That was not necessarily surprising if he was the commander of the inquisitor’s bodyguard, for Aerius was their homeworld. Still, the man’s scent had cancelled something of the earlier favourable impression the man had made. Ragnar decided that he did not entirely trust Commander Gul.

Nor were the glances his troops threw the Blood Claws altogether reassuring either. Ragnar sensed hostility there – not that it troubled him much. It could simply be jealousy of an elite unit or it might be resentment that the Blood Claws were there to perform a duty they thought should rightfully be theirs. Ragnar knew that only time would tell which.

‘I will have your men shown to their quarters, Sergeant Hakon.’ There was respect and courtesy in the tone Gul used towards the Space Wolf. Hakon nodded and stooped to pick up the heavy casket containing the talisman one-handed.

‘My orders were not to let this out of my sight,’ he said, looking directly at Inquisitor Sternberg.

‘Of course, my friend,’ the inquisitor said soothingly. Ragnar shivered. They were on the Inquisition’s ship now, surrounded by their troops. They numbered but six, while Sternberg’s minions were thousand strong. Space Marines or no, Ragnar doubted that they could stand against all of them. Regardless of whether Hakon held the talisman or not, it was at this moment safely in the inquisitor’s possession whenever he wanted it.

‘They do all right for themselves, these bloody inquisitors, don’t they?’ Sven murmured disrespectfully, sticking his head around the doorway of Ragnar’s chamber. Ragnar sensed that he was not as displeased

as he sounded. Glancing about their new quarters, neither was he. Compared to their cells back in the Fang, these chambers were positively luxurious. Not that he had much to measure them against, but Ragnar suspected that compared to almost anything, they were luxurious.

This room was huge, forty strides by twenty strides with a high ceiling, and each Space Wolf had been given his own chamber just like it. The floors were of gleaming inlaid marble, covered in thick rugs of exotic weave. The drapes upon the panelled walls were as plush as the carpets. The chairs were of soft padded leather, the furnishings of fine wood and bone ivory. There was a television screen built into a mirror which stood on an intricately carved stand. Paintings of alien landscapes hung around the walls. The only clue to the fact they were on a spacecraft was the porthole in the middle of one wall, through which stars were visible against the infinite blackness of space.

‘It’s palatial,’ agreed Ragnar, glancing around warily. ‘One of the nicest dungeon cells ever built, I would say.’

Sven exchanged looks with him. Ragnar could tell that his fellow Blood Claw shared his feelings about the place. He had seen the way Sven studied the layout when he came in. The only visible entrance to each chamber was the one leading into the central communal eating hall. There were only two exits from there: one at the north end, one at the south. It was easily defensible but it would be just as easy to pen them in. In fact the huge blast doors which gave access to the hall looked like they could be welded shut. Not that it would be needed, Ragnar thought. He doubted that any of the weaponry the Blood Claws currently carried could force them if they were simply locked and barred. Those armoured doors must be a span thick.

‘Might not be wise to say such things too loud,’ Nils said quietly, coming through the doorway. He glanced around and whistled. ‘I see you have a window. Walls have ears. Remember this is an Inquisition ship.’

‘What do you mean by that?’ Ragnar asked, although he could already guess.

‘Sergeant Hakon said these quarters were the ones used by important guests—’

‘That’s bloody us, all right,’ Sven said.

‘And important prisoners,’ finished Nils. Ragnar caught on at once. He could see how useful it might be for the Inquisition to be able to overhear

what went on in these chambers. Most people would be too wary to speak openly in them of course, but you never knew...

‘Of course, we’re honoured guests,’ he said. ‘And we’ve nothing to hide.’

‘That’s bloody right,’ said Sven. He banged his chest and belched.

‘Of course, to understand us they’d have to be able to speak Fenrisian.’

‘Hakon says some of the ancient Engines can translate any language.’

‘I wonder why old Hakon was telling you all this,’ Sven said.

Ragnar knew already. Hakon, too, was wary of what might happen here, and wanted them to be on guard.

‘This isn’t a ship, it’s a damn city,’ muttered Sven, glaring around him moodily. Ragnar grinned sourly. Sven had done nothing but complain since Sergeant Hakon had sent them out to get a feel for the starship. Both of them understood that what the sergeant was really saying was: find out the lay of the land.

Ragnar knew what Sven meant as well. They had wandered through seemingly endless metal corridors and chambers for hours and he had lost count of the number of people he had seen. The crew of this vessel must be numbered in the thousands, he thought. The large open plaza they stood in now was full of men toiling away on huge arcane engines. It smelled of machine oil and recycled air and the stink of stale sweat. Ragnar was reminded of the town of the Iron Masters back on Fenris, but this was on a far vaster scale. Looking at some of the men, he saw that they were chained to their machines. He glanced around, located a man in the ornate uniform of a ship’s officer and strode over to ask him why.

The officer was a tall man, his hair dark beneath his peaked cap but his face unnaturally pale. He looked like he had spent a lifetime cloistered in the dim, unnaturally lit confines of the great starship. As he spoke his face was grim. ‘Indentured. Pressed into service. Dirtsidescum, sir, most of them. Criminals sentenced to work ship. Minor traitors who are repaying their debt to the Imperium for their crime. Most of them will serve for twenty-five standard years. If they live that long. It’s a hard life. There are accidents.’

Ragnar considered the man’s words as he glanced at the thin starved wretches, their legs chained and manacled to the machines they serviced. A lifetime unable to move more than two strides from the same place. If it were him he would most likely go mad, he thought. Or try to escape.

The officer seemed to read his thoughts. ‘It makes mutiny difficult too. It’s difficult to communicate with anybody save those who work on their own machine. And if they get uppity they don’t get their portion of food until they calm down. Don’t spare any sympathy for them, sir. They’re criminals and they deserve what they get.’

Ragnar wasn’t sure any man deserved this, but he held his peace. ‘And once they have served their sentence they are free to leave the ship?’

‘No, sir. They are free to move around it,’ the man replied with a grin. ‘Provided they obey the rules and do what they are told. Most of these men are here for life. This is a prison as well as a starship.’

‘There must be a lot of desperate men aboard then.’

‘They soon learn to serve the Emperor with a will. They know what will happen if they don’t.’

Ragnar waited expectantly to be told why. He wasn’t disappointed.

‘They can be lashed or chained or subjected to some of the experimental questioning engines the inquisitors keep up front. If they are incorrigible they go for a walk.’

‘A walk?’ Ragnar asked, puzzled.

‘Through the airlock. Without a suit.’

Ragnar was not sure he liked the relish with which the officer said these things, nor the way the man studied him, as if searching for a particular reaction to his hard words. Without further comment, he walked away and Sven followed. But the officer’s words stayed with him. This ship was a prison. It was designed so that there could be no escape. Not even for Space Marines.

Ragnar and Sven continued their wanderings through the great ship. It seemed almost as vast as the Fang, an endless warren of metal corridors, snaking pipes, ventilators, toiling machinery and men. Ragnar’s earlier fears that they might be prisoners had proven groundless. No one interfered with their movements. No one had forbidden them to go anywhere. As far as he could tell, and he had exerted his very keen senses to the fullest to find out, no one was even following them. They were not watched and they were free to go wherever they wanted. Of course, it was likely the inquisitors had other means of locating them, if they wished, and there was no way off the ship now that the Thunderhawk had departed – unless they took the drastic step of seizing one of the shuttles. But then again, could any of them fly one?

Sternberg had claimed there was a teleporter on his ship. If that was true, it was a sign of the regard the inquisitor was held in. Such devices were as rare and precious as they were temperamental. Only the Terminator companies of the Space Marine Chapters used them, and then only during missions of utmost urgency and importance. The mystical ancient devices allowed small groups and cargoes to be shifted between themselves and other areas without crossing intervening space, or so the knowledge placed inside Ragnar's head told him. Maybe the device could be a way off this vessel, if the time came for it to be needed. If you knew the rituals to invoke its power. If they could find the chamber in which it rested. If... Ragnar found himself wondering why he was spending so much time planning an escape. Was he really so uneasy? He could not answer but his instincts told him he was right to be concerned.

Ragnar pushed the thought aside. Why was he thinking like this anyway? The Inquisition was not his enemy. Its members served the Emperor the same as he did. They had the trust of the Great Wolf. They were honourable people. Perhaps he was just nervous about being trapped on this ship, about going on this immense journey, far from the Fang and his world. In many ways the ship reminded him of the Fang. But the Fang was anchored to the good solid rock of Fenris. This ship was anchored to nothing; it floated in the airless void of space. If certain important systems failed, they would all die. His armour could recycle oxygen and waste-products for him, keep him alive for weeks if need be, but it could not do so indefinitely, and from where they were there was no way to swim home. They were very far out on a dangerous sea, with no land in sight.

The area through which he and Sven were striding was virtually empty. The lights were few and far between. It was a cavernous vault, a storage bay of sorts. Huge crates bearing the twin-headed eagle seal of the Imperium were stacked almost to the ceiling. Huge roaches scuttled up their sides into the shadows. Cunning-looking rats watched them from dark corners. Ragnar could smell their excrement and their foul, musty odour. He was not fond of rats.

In the distance he could hear men moving. These were not prisoners. They could come and go as they pleased. Either they were freedmen, or officers, or maybe they were some of the real crew, trained starfarers rather than indentured prisoners of the Inquisition. Ragnar and Sven strode through the aisles. He could hear the men coming closer. They appeared to

be on convergent courses. Ragnar wasn't too bothered by that. He would be interested to meet more starsailors and talk to them. He wanted to understand all about this ship: the way it worked, the way its crew was organised, everything. Perhaps when he found the time, he would talk to the inquisitors about it. If they would talk to him now. This was, after all, their ship. They had duties here that might be too important to neglect.

The Space Wolves emerged into an area more brightly lit than the rest of the bay. Men worked here on massive scaffolds, transporting the crates like ants bearing rocks. These must be rations, Ragnar thought, or maybe machine parts or something else, he added. He became suddenly aware that he had no idea what they might be. The workings of the ship were indeed a mystery to him.

Close by, on ground level, were a number of men. They worked a winch that lowered a small platform down the scaffold, bringing crates to the floor. Another group of rough-looking men supervised the work. As the two Space Wolves came into view, one of the men looked up. Ragnar sensed the tension in him. The man was ready to do violence. A near imperceptible change in Sven's stance told him the other Blood Claw had detected it as well. Despite his knowledge Ragnar forced himself to look relaxed even though he was ready to spring at a heartbeat's warning.

'What have we here?' asked the man. He was wearing a uniform that marked him as part of the ship's main crew. He carried no sidearm or any obvious weapon, but the heavy crowbar he held in his hand would be an adequate substitute, Ragnar thought. 'Some of the Emperor's chosen. Sacred Space Marines, eh?'

The tone was scornful but Ragnar sensed fear in the man too. It intensified when he used the words 'Space Marines'. It seemed the reputation of the Emperor's finest preceded them.

'Greetings. We are proud to be members of the Space Wolves,' Ragnar said smoothly, in Gothic. He sensed other members of the group were getting ready for a fight now. He was not quite sure why, but their hostility was obvious. And all of these men had crowbars in their hands.

'And don't you bloody well forget it,' Sven added truculently.

Inwardly Ragnar winced. Tact and diplomacy were not skills in which Sven excelled. His tone made the men around them more hostile. What by Russ was going on here?

‘Cocky pups, aren’t you?’ said the crew leader. ‘Maybe we should knock some of that cockiness out of you.’

‘You’re welcome to bloody well try,’ Sven said, not at all bothered by the fact that they were outnumbered almost ten to one. Ragnar knew he had reason for his confidence. These were normal men armed with crowbars. He and Sven were Space Marines, and they carried bolt pistols.

‘Big words for a man armed with pistol,’ sneered the officer.

‘I wouldn’t need it to deal with a cockroach like you,’ Sven said. ‘Nor your dozen girlfriends neither. Ragnar, if you would step aside for a moment, I’ll teach these thralls a lesson.’

Arithmetic was not a skill that Sven had much time for either, Ragnar noted. Still he had to admire Sven’s style. The number of their enemies in no way daunted him.

‘Arrogant whelp!’ another starsailor sneered. This one was a burly, brutal man. A white scar ran the length of his tanned face. Ragnar had enough experience of wounds to know a knife scar when he saw one. Ragnar felt a sudden surge of anger in himself, the beast struggling to free. Why were these men trying so hard to provoke them? They surely must know they had no chance in combat.

Perhaps because he was concentrating so hard on the sneering sailors, Ragnar almost missed the major threat until it was too late. Only the whoosh of air and a shadow growing on the ground near him gave him the slightest of warnings. It was enough. Even as he dived to one side, pulling Sven with him, he glanced up and saw the falling crate. Two starsailors had pushed it down on them from the pile above. The anger within Ragnar turned to fury. These men must be punished. The crate smashed into the floor. Splintered wood flew everywhere and silvery cans of meat ration tumbled out onto the floor.

Seeing that their ambush had failed the rest of the men advanced, brandishing their crowbars or vicious curved billhooks; they were intended to handle cargo but their sharp points looked as if they might pierce ceramite.

Idiots! Ragnar thought. Well, they would soon learn their lesson.

He surged forward, not even drawing his pistol. No need to waste precious bolter shells on these scum. He lashed out with his right fist at Scarface. The impact of the blow, driven by Ragnar’s mighty augmented muscles and the servomotors of his armour, mashed the man’s nose flat.

The thug flew backwards as if hit by a battering ram. His falling body slammed into the men behind him and sent them tumbling. Ragnar reached forward, picked up one of the fallen men and effortlessly hoisted him clean above his head. The man's feeble struggles availed him naught against the Space Wolf's awesome physical power. Ragnar tossed him headlong at a pair of his companions, bowling them over. Sven dived past Ragnar into the ruck, striking left and right with his armoured fists. With every blow he downed another man. It was like watching a whirlwind tear through a field of barley; the sailors had no chance whatsoever. Sven was moving so fast Ragnar doubted that anybody else could even follow his motions. Only his own razor keen senses allowed him to see anything other than a blur.

Bones cracked. Blood flowed. Men fell. Ragnar glanced up and around him, to see that more of the starsailors had grabbed the chains of the lift and, showing more bravery than common sense, were dropping into the fray. Ragnar snarled, showing his fangs, and let out a long ululating howl of battle lust. The sound of it so unmanned one of the dropping starsailors that he let go of the chain and dropped to the ground. From the way he flopped, like a newly landed fish, Ragnar could tell that his back was probably broken. His shrieks spoke of awful agony.

To Ragnar's surprise, his anguish did not cause his companions to reconsider their folly and flee, but seemed to spur them on to attack with redoubled fury. Ragnar ducked the swing of a crowbar, then plucked it out of its wielder's hands, like a man taking a stick from a child. For a moment he considered using it as a weapon against his assailant, but then tossed it contemptuously aside. It buried itself in the thick wooden side of a crate and stayed there quivering.

The man kicked at Ragnar. His foot connected with Ragnar's armoured side with a crunch of breaking bone. The man's mouth dropped open and he screamed in pain. Ragnar's punch silenced him. The thug fell to the ground, blood and broken teeth dribbling from his ruined mouth. Ragnar glanced around him and noticed with some satisfaction that Sven had all but finished off the rest of their attackers. He had the uniformed leader by the throat and held him easily at arm's length, one-handed. The ringleader's feet dangled half a stride above the floor.

Ragnar heard the last of the men from above drop to the ground behind him, and turned to face the new threat. He saw there were only five of

them and dived into their midst, howling his war cry. His outstretched hands closed around the arms of two of his attackers. He closed his fingers and felt fragile human bones break. A kick with his right foot propelled another man ten strides and sent him smashing into a wooden crate. The man landed badly and then tumbled to the ground.

The remaining two, seeing the way the fight was going, turned to run. Ragnar was not about to let that happen. He sprang forward and grabbed them by the necks and then knocked their heads together. The two men dropped at his feet, unconscious. Ragnar turned to look back at Sven. He had dropped the stunned body of the ringleader at his feet. The Wolf gave Ragnar a sour look.

‘Not much bloody fight in this lot, was there?’

‘I haven’t even got a scratch on my armour.’

‘Well, they messed up mine!’

‘How?’

‘By bloody well bleeding on it, Russ damn them! I’ll have to give it a good clean now.’

‘Two men dead! Fourteen men hospitalised. Five of them critically and four more temporarily unable to work because of their injuries. What do you have to say for yourselves?’ Commander Gul demanded in a tone that brooked no excuses.

‘I thought we had killed more. We must be getting soft,’ Sven said disdainfully, looking around the commander’s spartan rest chamber as if admiring the decor. He did not care for Gul’s tone, that much was obvious. ‘We will next time if they try and ambush us again.’

‘You say they attacked you?’

‘Are you implying that we are somehow mistaken?’ Ragnar shot back. ‘They insulted us, then some of their companions tried to drop a crate of canned meat on our heads.’

Gul had seen the site of the battle for himself. He seemed a little mollified, and unclenched his fists. ‘Some of the crew are a little testy, it is true. The different work squads don’t like each other, let alone any strangers on the ship. There might be more of these attacks. Perhaps in future it might be better if you remained in your chambers unless summoned.’

And was that, Ragnar thought, the whole point of this little exercise? His suspicions of this ship and its crew returned redoubled.



FIVE

Ragnar watched uncomfortably. As part of the talisman's honour guard, he was bound by chains of duty to be present at this moment, but he wished it were not the case. Sorcery, even sorcery performed in the service of the Imperium, made him more than uncomfortable. He didn't need to look around to tell that his battle-brothers felt the same way. Their scents told him all he needed to know about their concern.

The chamber was deep in the hidden heart of the *Light of Truth*. All around them were thick steel bulkheads. The doors had been sealed, the lights dimmed. The heady smell of narcotic incense filled the air and made Ragnar's mind swim until his body adjusted to the presence of the drug. The floor was bare metal; in the centre was a double circle inscribed in sanctified inks and salts. Between the outer and the inner rings were various symbols sacred to the Emperor and the Inquisition. A series of lines radiated out from the exact centre of the circle. Ragnar did not know why, but he knew that somehow the direction in which they pointed was significant. At the end of each line was a blazing copper brazier, the source of the incense.

And at the exact point where the lines converged, Inquisitor Karah Isaan sat cross-legged on the cold steel floor. She was naked save for the talisman, which dangled from her neck. Ragnar could see the whitened scars that marked her dark brown skin. Badges of honour from old combats, he expected. The woman breathed deeply and rhythmically. She was gathering her powers for an attempt to psychometrically locate the next part of the amulet they sought. Ragnar had heard Sternberg and Hakon discuss this earlier. Apparently there was some sort of psychic link between all the different segments of the broken talisman, and these could be used to divine their exact position in relation to each other. Ragnar was not quite sure how this worked, but then psykers and their arts were a total mystery to him.

Around the circle stood the Blood Claws, all five of them, together with Sergeant Hakon and Inquisitor Sternberg. All of them watched, grim-faced, as Isaan continued her ritual. Ragnar sensed Sternberg's excitement.

The hunt was on again. They were about to take another step forward towards saving his world from the plague.

Inquisitor Isaan started to chant in Imperial Gothic, the elevated language of ancient psyker litanies rolling from her tongue. The rhythm of the words lent them power, made her voice seem deeper and more resonant, as if something else was speaking through the woman's mouth. Regrettably that was all too possible, Ragnar knew. Psykers were notoriously prone to daemonic possession, which was why most of them were soul-bonded to the Emperor, or fed to him as sustenance in his Golden Throne. Ragnar guessed that, like the Space Marine Chapters, the Inquisition had its methods of screening and protecting its psykers. He only hoped they were as effective as those used by the Fang's rune priests.

He guessed that protection was the reason for the circle and those sacred symbols. They were designed to protect the psyker from unwholesome external influences as the ritual progressed. Ragnar gave his attention back to his own prayers. The inquisitor had instructed them all to pray silently as the ritual progressed so that no malign influences might be attracted by their thoughts. Ragnar wasn't sure what she meant by that but he was determined not to take any chances. He prayed fervently to Russ and the Emperor to watch over them, and guide the psyker in her task.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of Ragnar's neck rose, and it felt like the temperature had dropped a degree or two. His mouth opened in an involuntary snarl. He sensed the presence of something. Strange energies crackled in the air around them, unseen and yet undeniably present. There was a smell like burnt metal. He opened his eyes once more and gazed at Karah Isaan. At first he doubted his eyes: was there the faintest trace of a halo of light surrounding her head? Maybe. No, definitely. As he watched, prayers forgotten, it grew brighter, until it was a shimmering circle of amber light which grew stronger as he watched, became brighter and brighter until it eclipsed the dim lighting of the room and made the female inquisitor the focus of every gaze.

Her short-cropped hair rippled slowly, as if caught by a breeze, although there was not the slightest breath of wind within the sealed chamber. When she opened her eyes, Ragnar could see the unnatural light within them. Her pupils and iris glowed like two tiny suns, as if they were part of a binary system within her head that provided the illumination for the halo. Slowly she raised her thin brown hands until the talisman was

cupped between them. It, too, began to glow, the light of her halo catching on the thousands of facets of the gem, becoming split into millions of points, refracting all around the room. Ragnar could see the beams of light playing over the faces of his comrades. Some of them landed on his own chest like the eerie red dots of a targeting laser. The thought made him shiver slightly and give his attention back to his prayers.

The chanting continued. Ragnar watched in fascination. From the woman's mouth a mist had started to emerge, a writhing vapour which shimmered and glittered and swirled around her – and then began to take on concrete shapes, like images projected by a holosphere. Ragnar saw a world gleam against the cold depths of space. He saw the blue of oceans, the white of clouds and the green of jungles.

Even as he watched, the bizarre scene projected in the air changed. It was as if they were dropping from space onto the surface of the world. One continent leapt into view. They dropped closer towards an endless sea of green. The dizzying speed of descent slowed. Ragnar saw huge towering trees, and brightly coloured flowers almost as large. Huge insects. Strange beasts. A monstrous stone temple, ancient, shaped like a stepped pyramid, covered in strange eroded carvings of humanoid faces. Creepers and lichens swelled into view. Ragnar shivered, sensing some sort of inimical presence in the air. He wondered about daemons and prayed more fervently. The temperature in the room was dropping very rapidly now and the stink of burning, mingled with the incense, was foul.

The point of view descended, passing like a ghost through the walls of the pyramid and into a hidden chamber at its core. On an altar tended by emerald-robed priests lay an amulet twin to the one that glittered on Karah Isaan's neck – save that the gem was green and seemed slightly smaller. This was what they sought, Ragnar knew.

The chill in the air of the chamber deepened. Ragnar's breath came out as a stream of mist. Droplets of moisture seemed to condense then freeze on his armour. He was a Space Marine and his armour was designed to let him survive in far more extreme temperatures, but still he felt the difference. The sense of an evil presence deepened and the picture changed again, swirling, condensing, until it formed a single huge, green-skinned head. Malevolent yellow eyes glared out at everyone in the room. Huge tusks protruded from the thing's leathery lips. A massive scar ran from the forehead across the left eye, down across the mouth and ended on the right

side of its chin. It looked as if it had been crudely stitched together with rough twine, and the twine left in place. As Ragnar watched, the thing opened its mouth and bellowed in rage. The echo of that distant roar seemed to ring in his own head. It was spoken in a language other than his own, but still he understood the meaning.

Come here, and you will all die! Every last one of you!

The vision vanished. There was a shriek of pain. A gust of wind which came from nowhere blew out all the braziers and the lights flickered. For a moment the room was plunged into a blackness as deep as death.

Inquisitor Isaan shivered. She was wrapped in Sternberg's cloak now but it was still cold in the metal chamber. A sense of that brutal alien presence lingered all around them, making Ragnar's fingers seek the butt of his pistol.

'That was an ork,' Sven muttered. Ragnar nodded slowly. He remembered the descriptions of the things, and the images which had been pumped into his brain by the tutelary engines back in the Fang. They were a warrior race, savage, brutal and wicked, utterly without redeeming features. They fought endlessly to conquer and enslave any world they came to.

Sternberg stared at Karah Isaan meaningfully, a fanatical glint in his eyes. 'Your vision quest was successful?'

The woman shivered and nodded. 'Yes.'

'Names! Places!'

Sternberg sounded like a man possessed, Ragnar thought.

'Galt,' she said simply.

'Then that was the Temple of Xikar?'

'Yes.'

'So the talisman ended up there.'

The woman looked very weak and pale. Using her strange powers had obviously drained her. She looked direly in need of rest and yet her colleague showed no sympathy. He touched the communication amulet on his throat. 'Helmsman! Lay a course for the Galt system. I want to get there with all possible speed.'

Moments later, in answer to his command, a deep siren sounded and the lights flickered in an alert pattern. In the distance Ragnar could hear feet pounding down the corridors, as starsailors raced to prepare the ship for the jump into the warp.

‘Best return to your chambers,’ Sternberg said to the Wolves. ‘No leap into the Immaterium is a pleasant experience.’

Ragnar lay on the old leather of the acceleration couch in his chamber. A starsailor had entered earlier and showed him how to strap himself in. He had been surprised to find that the chairs doubled up as acceleration couches. A touch of a hidden button and they folded outwards and backwards, extruding restraining straps which looked thick enough to hold a bull mastodon. The harness was controlled by a quick release button similar to the ones on the restrainer straps in a Thunderhawk. The Blood Claw wondered why they could be necessary. The huge starship had seemed utterly stable the whole time he had been on it. The starsailor had been insistent though. He claimed that everyone not performing vital duties absolutely requiring freedom of movement would be doing the same. The tenseness of the man’s body, together with the undertones of dread and anticipation in the man’s scent, convinced Ragnar. This man claimed to be a veteran of a thousand warp jumps, yet still he was afraid.

‘Never gets any easier, sir,’ he had said, just before he left the room. Now bells clanged throughout the ship and warning sirens blared. The lights flickered from normal to red, then back again. There was no doubt about what was going to happen next.

A final long siren wail blared. Over the intercom, a deep voice boomed: ‘Thirty seconds to jump. May we be blessed in His sight.’

Ragnar felt a sick feeling of anticipation in the pit of his stomach, and just for a moment wished that all of the pack had been assembled in one chamber. He knew there would be something reassuring in their mere presence. Might as well wish to be back on Fenris right now, he thought sarcastically. It’s not going to happen.

His double heartbeat accelerated. He began to sweat. With an effort of will and the words of a Litany of Calming, using the control of his nervous system granted to him as a Space Marine he brought his heartbeats back to normal, and stopped the sweating. Immediately he began to feel the panic subside into mere unease.

‘Twenty seconds to jump. Watch and guide our path.’

Still he felt anticipation. He had never made a warp jump before, although all his training had told him it would be a very strange experience. The ship would be passing out of this space-time continuum and into another place where matter did not exist and time flowed

strangely. In some ways it would be like a submersible going under water. It would become lost to the sight of all tracking devices which operated in the normal universe, until it emerged in real space again. Of course, this might not happen. It was all down to the skill of the ship's Navigator, who would set his course by the mighty beacon of the Astronomican on distant Terra, and would try to find a path for the starship through the treacherous currents of warp space.

The warp itself was a turbulent medium, unstable, as full of ebbs and flows as a mighty ocean. It was said to be haunted by daemons and ghosts and the hulks of the thousands of ships, some of them human, which had been lost in it since time immemorial. It was a shifting, ill-understood realm which filled even those who travelled through it with superstitious dread. All manner of tales were told about the warp. Of starsailors who travelled through it convinced that only days had passed and who later emerged to find centuries had gone by in real time and that all who knew them were dead and gone. It had happened even to the Space Wolves. Ships had been deemed lost for hundreds of years and then their crews had returned to the Fang, unheralded and unexpected, to rejoin their comrades. And other, stranger fates had befallen travellers as well. Sometimes crews would travel out and return what seemed days later to their comrades; only when they emerged from their ships, they had grown old and senile and some had died of ageing. Their crews felt like they had been lost for decades in the warp, and showed all the effects of having been so. Sometimes entire crews went insane the moment they slipped into the Immaterium. No one knew why. And sometimes, most ominously of all, ships, even entire fleets vanished, never to be seen or heard from again. It was all down to luck, the favour of the Emperor and the skill of the Navigator.

‘Ten seconds to jump. May He return us safely.’

Ragnar wondered if anything would go wrong this time. He hoped not but it was always a possibility. All he could do was strive to keep calm, and pray to the Emperor and to beloved Leman Russ for succour, cold comfort though that might be. The worst thing, he thought, was the helplessness. He was a Space Wolf, trained for battle, schooled to face a thousand perils in the line of duty. Right now there was no way he could control the outcome, or indeed have any effect on it. He could not take his bolter in his hand and slay a visible foe. He could not take cover and

retreat from the danger. All he could do was wait, and try to endure the knowledge that his fate was in the hands of other men. He tried telling himself that the Navigators had been as hard-schooled in their trade as he was in his, but it did not help. At the end of the day he was a Space Marine, a man of action, and this sort of waiting came hard to him.

Still, he remembered the words of Ranek during one of the many sermons the Wolf Priest had preached during his induction to the Space Wolves: When there is nothing to do but wait, then wait is all you can do. He knew he must simply let go of his worry; it was counter-productive, could not affect the outcome one way or another. That was what he strove to do now.

‘Five seconds to jump.’

Whatever was going to happen was going to have to happen soon, Ragnar thought. In the distance he could hear the howling of the engines as their power emission began to reach a peak.

‘Four.’ Was that a faint halo of light beginning to appear around all the furnishings? The howling rose and lowered in pitch until it became a noise like thunder and a whine like a plummeting Thunderhawk.

‘Three.’ Yes. The halo was there and getting brighter. Distant thunder rattled the metal walls. The ship was vibrating; it quivered as if with eagerness, anticipation. It reminded the Space Wolf of a wardog being readied to hunt.

‘Two.’ The whole ship was shaking violently. Would it break apart in the warp?

‘One.’ The whole of the vast starship seemed to spring forward, like a hound that had been straining against a leash and was now released. There was a huge thunderclap of sound, and the ship rang as if it had been hit with a titanic hammer. Ragnar wondered how it could endure the stress, then thought of all the gigantic bulkheads and reinforcing struts he had seen on his earlier wanderings. Had those been as much to resist the strains of the warp jumps as to protect the ship in battle, he wondered?

The ship shuddered hugely. Ragnar could hear the metal creak, like the masts of a ship in a storm. It felt as if massive forces were being brought to bear on the ship, now puny in comparison to the typhoon in which it seemed caught. With his enhanced senses Ragnar could feel the tension in the juddering vibrations of the couch beneath him. Was the *Light of Truth* about to shatter like a dragonship dashed against a reef?

The Blood Claw felt a surge of nervous fear in the pit of his stomach and fought to control it. What was that shrieking sound? It sounded like the wailing of lost souls. And that ominous scraping? Was it the claws of daemons dragging themselves along the hull? The stories he had heard came back to him. He had a half-horrified, half-fascinated desire to look out of the porthole but it had been sealed with massive metal shutters in the run up to the jump. It was said that looking out into the warp was a sure way to madness. Yet he felt the tug of morbid curiosity.

Could it really be the souls of lost starsailors he was hearing? Or the call of daemon lovers to the curious and unwary? Were these things really penetrating the shields and baffles which protected the ship, or were they simply products of his own morbid imagination? Part of him was curious and part of him hoped he would never find out.

The ship seemed to have settled now. It shuddered and shivered occasionally but it was less unsettling than the movement of a ship on the sea and Ragnar was well accustomed to that. After a moment's hesitation, he hit the release mechanism on the restraining straps and rose to his feet. His keen ears picked up the sharp metallic ringing of the other Space Wolves doing the same.

Ragnar emerged from his chamber into the central hall. Sven strode into the room almost simultaneously. He looked at Ragnar and grinned.

‘Well, we’re bloody well away now,’ he said and laughed aloud.

‘Aye! That we are.’

A curious anti-climactic feeling had settled on Ragnar. They had made the jump. They were in warp space and speeding to their destination. All they had to do now was get out again.

Galt.

Ragnar called up details of the system from the ship’s mnemonic banks. The information flashed onto the old televisor, a mixture of pictures and Imperial runes. Not an enormous amount of detail, but that was to be expected. It was consulting only the Index of the Compendio Mundae, which contained only the most basic of details. More could be summoned on request, providing the information was not in some way under a ban or interdiction.

Ragnar’s eyes flickered quickly over the screen. Sun: yellow and terrestrial type. Six planets. One inhabited, known as Galt Three. Two moons. A warm world. Closer to its sun than Fenris, and on a regular

helical orbit, not elliptical as his own home world was. Three large continents. Three-quarters ocean. Some large island chains. Most of the human population was confined to the largest continent, where most of the landmass was covered in tropical rainforest. Several large cities. Lots of logging and agriculture. Most common export to the Imperium was the buds of the red lotus used as the basis of many Imperial alchemical products. Also many pre-Imperial ruins – temples, cities, roadways. These indicated the presence of a primitive human culture which had survived the collapse at the end of the Dark Age of Technology. Naturally the cults had been expunged when the people of Galt were welcomed back into the fold of the Imperium. Many of their sacred places had become monasteries and seminaries used by the Ecclesiarchy.

The Temple of Xikar was one such place, an enormous complex set in the jungle which had become home to the monastic sect known as the Brothers of Perpetual Bliss. The sect had been investigated for the contamination of heresy on several occasions, but the inquisitors detailed to the task felt that its deviation from the broad thread of Imperial scripture fell within acceptable and tolerable norms. The inquisitorial jargon made Ragnar's head swim but he deduced that what it really meant was that the Inquisition had decided not to cleanse the Brotherhood with fire and the sword.

And now one of those temples was found to contain part of the Talisman of Lykos. Ragnar wondered how it had got there.

'I am glad you are all here. A problem has arisen, I am afraid,' Inquisitor Sternberg said. He glanced around the vast command deck. His keen eyes seemed to rest on every Space Wolf in turn, measure him, and then move on. Once his steely gaze had moved on, Ragnar risked a glance around the room. All of the Space Wolves were present, along with the two inquisitors, the ranking officers of the *Light of Truth* and the commanders of the inquisitor's bodyguard.

'And what might that be?' Sergeant Hakon asked, with an edge in his voice. The rest of the pack strained forward, keen to hear. They could all sense something in the inquisitor's manner and in his scent. Ragnar thought it was a mixture of anger and frustration.

Sternberg turned and gestured to his military commander. His cloak flowed smoothly with the gesture. 'Gul?' he said.

Commander Gul strode forward into the centre of the room. Overhead the stars beamed in through the crystal roof of the chamber. Ragnar thought it was good to see them again, although he was a little thrown by the strange new constellations which were visible. He was glad the ship had emerged safely from the warp.

‘We emerged into normal space about six hours ago. Since then our astropaths have been picking up various messages from the surface of Galt Three.’

‘Messages?’ asked Hakon.

‘Appeals for help. Military communications. A general alert signal appealing for aid against the invasion.’

Invasion, Ragnar thought? Who would be foolish enough to invade an Imperial system? Then he smiled at his own naïvety. There were plenty that would do it. Alien races, even rebel Imperial governors. Such things had happened before.

‘I instructed our astropaths to make contact with their counterparts on Galt Three and the following details have emerged. About six months ago standard Imperial time, a hulk emerged from warp space. It drifted within three standard units of Galt Three and as it did so it unleashed a host of smaller craft, thousands of them.’

‘Must have been quite a large hulk then,’ ventured Sven with a smirk.

‘Obviously,’ Gul said, as if Sven were an idiot. Which, right at that moment, Ragnar decided, was how he sounded. Hulks could be almost any size. They were huge agglomerations of dead ships which for any one of a dozen reasons came together to form immense space-going craft, often larger than many cities. They drifted in and out of the warp seemingly without reason. Most were uninhabited, but some were homes to various lifeforms. These could be as innocuous as prospectors looking for ancient secrets among the wrecked ships or as threatening as broods of the dreaded genestealers. They could show up at any time, in any system, drifting randomly on the currents of the warp.

‘These ships were the spearhead of the ork invasion.’

‘Orks!’ various people muttered at once.

Ragnar thought about the face they had summoned up during Karah’s ritual. That had most definitely been an ork. The Space Wolves looked pleased. Here were foes worthy of the name. The orks may be brutal and

barbaric but they were mighty warriors, and fearless. Gul looked over at Mozak, the Chief Astropath.

‘Yes, undoubtedly orks.’ Mozak was an old man with a quavering voice and milky white, blind-seeming eyes. He was frail and he leaned on a staff almost as tall as he was. Occasionally Ragnar had come across him tapping his way along the corridors of the ship. He had always nodded to Ragnar, as aware of his presence as any sighted man. His psychic powers must in some way be a substitute for his eyes, Ragnar knew. ‘There have always been some present on the surface of Galt Three, lurking deep in the jungles. They have never formed much of a threat to the Imperial population. Occasional raids, burnings and lootings, that sort of thing.’

‘But their presence may have attracted the orks from the hulk?’ Hakon asked.

‘Perhaps – or perhaps the two facts are unconnected. We shall never know. What we do know is that it is common for orks to suddenly mass huge formations of troops and go on the rampage. These are in some ways like Imperial Crusades. The ork hordes gather troops and manpower as they go until either the leader dies, his savage ambition is slaked, or they are stopped by external forces such as military intervention or a natural disaster. While these crusades are under way ork morale is high and the sheer momentum and scale can make them irresistible.’

‘What has this to do with our quest?’ asked Hakon.

‘Galt Three appears to be right in the middle of one of these ork rampages,’ Sternberg cut in. ‘The orks landed and began arming the local ork population which, it turns out, was a lot larger than anybody thought, and are now scything across the planet, smashing any resistance as they go. In short, Galt Three is now a warzone.’

‘Worse than that,’ the Chief Astropath added. ‘It appears that one of the major centres of ork military effort is Xikar.’

‘Where the temple is,’ Gul added unnecessarily.

‘That’s going to make getting our hands on the talisman a little difficult, isn’t it?’ Hakon said.

‘You could say that,’ said Sternberg with an odd crinkle of his lips which Ragnar realised was meant to be a smile.

‘Is it possible to drop down into the temple and quickly retrieve the talisman fragment?’ Ragnar dared to ask. All eyes turned on him but to his

relief he saw that no one seemed to think he had spoken out of turn. ‘A lightning raid?’

‘Anything’s possible,’ Gul said. ‘The question is whether you can succeed.’

‘We’ll never know unless we try,’ Sternberg added.

‘According to the Imperial authorities on Galt, there are tens of thousands of orks down there, perhaps hundreds of thousands. Intelligence is vague. Compared to those numbers all the troops we have on this ship are merely a drop in the ocean.’

‘No one’s suggesting we try and destroy the entire ork army,’ said Gul. ‘We need only find the talisman and then get it out.’

Ragnar was a little shocked by the callousness of this. After all, Galt was an Imperial world and they were the Emperor’s warriors. Weren’t they supposed to help defend the human worlds against just such a menace as these orks represented? He said as much out loud.

Inquisitor Sternberg regarded him coldly for a moment before speaking: ‘Our current mission takes precedence over any military intervention we might make. There are simply not enough of us to make much of a difference anyway. Galt Three is a lightly populated world, unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Aerius is a vitally important Imperial installation. Its loss would be a disaster.’

‘Nonetheless,’ Ragnar felt compelled to say, ‘are not the people of Galt as entitled to Imperial protection as the people of Aerius?’

‘Your devotion to humanity does you credit, young Ragnar,’ Sternberg smoothed. ‘But you must leave it to your superiors to look at the bigger picture. I am in charge of this mission and I must make the decisions here.’

Ragnar looked at Sergeant Hakon for support but to his surprise sensed that the older Space Wolf was behind the inquisitor on this. Sternberg could see it too.

‘Good. As I see it, a large scale operation would simply draw attention to our presence. What we need is a small, crack unit to teleport dirtside, infiltrate the Temple of Xikar and, Emperor willing, seize the talisman.’

It took Ragnar only seconds to realise just who on the ship would be perfect for the job.

Ragnar glanced around at the ornate inner sanctum of the teleportation chamber. It was an intimidating place even for a Space Wolf. Everyone

who was to be subject to the ritual stood inside a circle of silver inscribed on the floor. Each circle was linked to the others by lines of metal inlaid in the floor. All were inscribed with ancient runes. A mighty double circle enclosed the whole area, and he guessed that the symbols inscribed there were warding signs, designed to contain the energies which would soon be unleashed, and protect the transportees from the daemons of the warp. Robed and cowled tech-priests moved between lecterns set on a great balcony halfway up the chamber wall. Monstrous engines surrounded by the witchfire halos that marked the presence of the Universal Fire loomed above and around them.

Ragnar heard the master tech-priest begin his plainsong chant. He and his acolytes moved their hands over their altars in ritual gestures, throwing the mighty tripswitches in the sanctified order laid down by their hallowed, time-tested rituals. As they did so, the smell of ozone began to fill the air, mingling with the scent of machine oil and technical incense. Witchfire flickered along the lines joining the circles and illuminated the circles and the runes. The lights in the chamber dimmed till only the glow of the teleporter and the power machines provided any illumination. The air shimmered around in the space between the lines of the great circle of containment.

Ragnar's mouth felt dry and the hair on the back of his neck prickled. He knew that teleporters were not entirely reliable, that sometimes those who were supposed to be transported simply vanished and never reappeared. No one knew what happened to them. He prayed to the Emperor that he and his companions would arrive safely but could not concentrate on his devotions. The ship rocked. The floor vibrated beneath his feet.

He knew they were performing a dangerous manoeuvre. Bringing the *Light of Truth* close enough to the world to teleport them to the surface meant bringing it close enough for the enemy fleet to engage them. Ragnar was unsure how long even the powerful Inquisition ship could hold out against a whole ork fleet – hopefully long enough.

He was excited at the prospect of imminent action – but also filled with resentment at the cavalier way in which his pleas to aid the population of Galt had been rejected. Ragnar could tell that all the other Blood Claws felt only the excitement, and for this he did not blame them. After all, this was to be their first teleport and their first step onto the

surface of an alien world. It was their very first off-world mission and they were going to face their first alien foes. In a sense it was everything they had ever trained for; it was what their lives were about.

He could see the others only as shadowy outlines. There was Hakon. There was the squat shapes of Sven and Strybjorn and Nils and the other Blood Claws. Inquisitor Sternberg was present. So was Karah Isaan, the talisman around her neck as it had been since the ritual. If the Space Wolves went into battle, it went too. Ragnar gave her a slight smile and was surprised when it was returned. He was surprised and a little flattered to note that none of the Inquisition troops were coming. Only the two inquisitors themselves were considered sufficiently well trained and competent to keep up with the Space Wolves, and the Space Marines were deemed to be the entire bodyguard they would need. Ragnar felt that was probably true. If he and his comrades could not keep Sternberg and Isaan alive, he doubted that the presence of twenty or so normal human warriors would make much difference.

He gave his weapons and armour one final check, automatically murmuring the words of the Litany against Corrosion, and invoking Russ's blessing on each bolter shell. Such things were important.

A bright light flashed. There was a brief feeling of dislocation. Ragnar felt as if he was being turned inside out, flung around violently, stretched and crushed all at once. His skin tingled as if it were being pricked by millions of tiny needles. His brain felt afire. There was a brilliant flash of light, and a darkness deeper than any he had ever known.

It was too late now, he knew, to do anything but pray.



SIX

The pressure grew and grew. The wolf spirit stirred within him, responding to the unfamiliar stresses being placed on his body. He bared his teeth and fought down the urge to let loose a long howl. They wanted to arrive silently.

Suddenly the pressure stopped. There was a hard bump and he was thrown forward almost to his knees. The breeze was hot and humid on his face and carried a host of unfamiliar scents. Ragnar smelled decaying vegetation, the perfumes of narcotic flowers, the scent of alien animals. It was a heady mix and he felt a strange exhilaration flood through his veins. They were down, and safely too. They were on the surface of a new world.

Ragnar opened his eyes and glanced around. They were in a clearing, near the temple. Everything looked verdant and lush, a riot of greens and yellows. Vast trees surrounded them. A cacophony of birdsong and insect chittering filled his ears. His glance told him that all the others were present and ready for action. He was particularly pleased to see Inquisitor Sternberg, since he carried the beacon, a small cube of brass and coiled wires which would allow the *Light of Truth* to locate them and teleport them back on board. At this moment it was their only way off-world.

Hakon made a chopping gesture at his throat indicating they should all be silent, and then made the hand sign for dispersal. The Blood Claws began to move across the soil of this new world. Ragnar fell in behind Sven. He felt oddly light, and knew that the gravity of Galt Three was less than that of Fenris – not by much, but enough to be disorienting until his body made the adjustment. Matching Sven's wide strides, he jogged away from the drop point towards the undergrowth, moving to establish a defensive perimeter on the edge of the jungle.

He could hear his comrades moving to take up their positions, every Space Wolf deploying as they had been taught to. Moments later Sergeant Hakon, Sternberg and Isaan followed. Ragnar didn't bother to turn and look. He simply knew from the sounds and the scents that it happened. His task currently was to keep an eye on the jungle and make sure they were not surprised.

It was just as well he did not have to rely on his vision, he thought. Mere strides from the clearing's edge the jungle became severely dense. Huge trees loomed overhead, and massive plants, flowers and bushes choked the spaces between them. Creepers and vines descended from the branches. Dust motes flickered in the beams of light that penetrated the thick canopy of leaves overhead. A blood-sucking insect landed on Ragnar's face. His sensitive skin detected its bite. He resisted the urge to slap it. His body could compensate for any allergic reaction. He knew his internal glands were already beginning to secrete chemicals into his sweat which would repel the insect's fellows in future.

He concentrated as he had been taught, listening for any sound of enemy troops, casting around for the scent of unfamiliar humanoids. He could detect no threat. He could hear only the sounds of small animals moving through the undergrowth and the buzz of insect wings. It appeared that their arrival had gone unobserved. So far, so good, the Wolf thought.

Sergeant Hakon dropped down alongside him. He paused to study the dim green readout of the inertial locator on his wrist and then gestured for Ragnar and his team to take point and move off in the direction of the temple. Unbidden, Sven set off first, with Ragnar and the others following close behind in narrow formation.

Cautiously but purposefully the Wolves began to advance through the jungle. Ragnar gently parted the foliage ahead of him, bolter held ready to meet any threat. Suddenly he felt more alive than he had since the day he and his fellow Blood Claws had entered the foul Chaos lair beneath the mountains. This was what it meant to be truly alive, he thought.

He glanced down at the locator on his wrist, now keyed to Sergeant Hakon's own device. The clearing was about two thousand strides west of the temple. Not far over open terrain, but difficult to tell how long it might take in this jungle. He was glad now that he and the other Blood Claws had put in such long hours in the jungle caverns beneath the Fang. Such simulated environments couldn't quite prepare you for the real thing but they helped a little. One of the major differences he realised was the noise. In the Fang they had used recorded sound but that had been flat and unnatural compared to the cacophony which enveloped them now.

Overhead bright birds cawed and sang. Fat, gaudily coloured insects buzzed. The leaves of palm trees rustled together. To his left came the sound of something big smashing down from overhead. He glanced up and

caught sight of a huge nut dropping from the branches of one of the trees. Just after it hit the ground there came the sounds of a struggle: small animals fighting over it. Must be edible, at least to them, Ragnar thought briefly. Probably to him too. He was a Space Marine. His stomach had been altered to allow him to consume almost anything that any creature in the galaxy might find edible.

He breathed deeply, relying more on his nose and his ears for advance warning of any trouble. The only humans he could smell were the inquisitors and his battle-brethren. Back in the Fang he had been exposed to the musky scent of orks by the tutelary engines. Right at this moment he could detect nothing like it. There were animals, warm-blooded ones, around him. He could smell fur and droppings.

Somewhere off to the right he could hear running water. Something slurped around his foot. The ground was becoming a little soft. They were on the edge of a swamp, doubtless fed by the stream he had sensed. He looked up ahead. Sven was already thigh deep in mud. It slurped around his legs as he advanced. It did not seem to be slowing him down all that much, but Ragnar was not sure that it was not a mistake to continue right now. If they were attacked, the mud would slow them down and make swift movement difficult. On the other hand, it was probable that no one would expect them to advance directly through a bog either.

Doubtless Sven had considered this before deciding to push on. Ragnar decided not to order him to halt and skirt the swamp just yet. It was the first real command decision he had taken in some time, and he was not sure it was the right one. Still, there was no point in second-guessing yourself once a decision was made. All he could do was stay alert and try to be aware of any change of circumstances that might make him alter it.

As they progressed, the swamp grew deeper. The ground around Sven was starting to take on the consistency of soup, more fluid than solid. Ragnar could feel small splashes of moisture on his face, caused by his own movements. He glanced down briefly and saw that muck was clinging to the carapace of his armour. He grinned wryly – another cleaning job later. Providing he was still alive.

Suddenly he felt tense. He was not quite sure why. A heartbeat later, his unease communicated itself to the rest of the pack. Sven stopped, cast his head back and sniffed the air. All the rest of the Space Wolves had stopped moving too. Ragnar breathed deeply.

Yes! There was a slight taint to the air, a musky scent close to, but not quite like, that of the ork stench they had been exposed to in training, but that was only to be expected. Not all orks smelled exactly the same, just as not all humans did. It was close enough though. He saw Sven nod involuntarily a moment later. Although his nostrils were not quite as keen as Ragnar's he had caught it too. Ragnar tried to guess their distance. There was a slight breeze and the wind was blowing towards them. That made it difficult to tell exactly. All he could really tell now was that there were orks in the vicinity, or had been recently. There was nothing for it now but to push on, but far more cautiously than before.

Sven had reached the far side of the boggy ground. The surface was down to his knees again, leaving a brownish residue on the thigh guards of his ancient armour. An insect bit Ragnar's face again. Once more he resisted the urge to slap it. Sven reached solid ground. Sure of the surface now, he crouched down and then threw himself flat and began to wriggle forward like a snake. Closing behind him, Ragnar did the same. The smell of ork was getting stronger.

He checked the locator on his wrist: two hundred strides to the temple. A leaf brushed his face and tickled it. He fought down the urge to sneeze, sniffed the air, stuck out his tongue and tasted the pollen-like substance that had landed on it. Fungal spores, he guessed. From somewhere at the back of his mind came the knowledge, placed there by the engines in the Fang, that orks cultivated certain types of fungus as food and the basis of crude fermented drinks. Was this another sign of their presence? Ragnar guessed he would know soon enough. Another scent struck his nostrils. Burning. No, not burning: burnt stuff. Wood. Vegetation. *Flesh*.

Through a gap in the foliage ahead, he caught sight of the temple. A huge clearing had been gouged out of the canopy above. The smell of burnt wood was intense. Ragnar realised that it was the sign that a battle had been fought here, with weapons that had caused the jungle to burn; quite a difficult feat, given the amount of moisture in the air. The temple itself was huge, a massive stone ziggurat, weathered grey by wind and rain and by the roots of plants which had embedded themselves in the cracks and then grown. Curtains of creepers crawled down the centuries-old sides. The thing seemed truly ancient, rooted in a time and place beyond memory, when men worshipped other, more primitive gods. It was a heathen monument, an imitation mountain, built by men who wanted to

attract the attention of some primordial deity. It was, in its crude and brutal way, impressive.

Very cautiously indeed, Ragnar gestured for his companions to stay down, then he moved forward. The stench of ork was even stronger here. It had a leathery, sweaty quality, sharp and feral, musky and strong. From far ahead Ragnar heard an unusual sound which stood out against the constant background hum and chatter of the jungle. It sounded at first like grunting but then Ragnar realised that it had a pattern: it was speech of a sort. The voice was deep, deeper than any human's. Ragnar imagined that it came from the chest of something larger than any man.

Until now he had maintained comms silence, even though the pack was on a sealed and scrambled net. He did not want any signal pulse giving away their position. It was just possible, even though their communicators were set to the lowest possible emission, designed not to project at over a hundred strides, that someone nearby with the appropriate equipment could detect the signal if they were looking for it.

Now it seemed more urgent to prevent the two inquisitors blundering into the enemy. He did not doubt that any of the Space Wolves present would detect the orks before they saw them, but he was not sure of the normal humans at all.

+Ragnar+ he subvocalised. +Have made contact with the enemy. Be still until further notice.+

He needed no acknowledgement. He knew that he would be obeyed. That was the way the pack trained to fight. At the moment, he and his team were at the point. His battle-brothers trusted him to take the appropriate action. He would not fail them.

Ragnar writhed further forward, making as little noise as he could. Suddenly he was at the edge of the jungle, looking across the clearing towards the Temple of Xikar. He could see now that his initial impression had been false. The ziggurat he had seen was but one of many, and far from the largest. Xikar was a huge complex of monuments. All of them just as old, and just as impressive, as the first. It held his attention only for a moment, until his eyes flickered to the source of the grunting voice.

He knew at once that his hearing had not misled him. The speaker was indeed an ork, and it was far larger than a normal man, larger even than a Space Wolf. Its chest was as round as a barrel and its arms were thicker than most men's legs. Its skin was an oily green in colour. Huge tusks

jutted upwards from a massive jaw. The skull was ape-like, the bestial yellowish eyes set in deep cavernous sockets. It was humanoid but its legs were oddly short and its arms incredibly long compared to a man's. The whole impression was of ape-like power and savagery, an impression only partially belied by the array of equipment that festooned its powerful body.

A jacket of thick armour encased its upper torso, leaving its leathery green arms bare. A huge bolt pistol was clutched in one gnarled hand, and a chainsaw-bladed axe a normal man would have struggled to lift was held negligently in the other. A barbaric helm that would have been more at home on some primitive tribesman sat on its head. High boots of scuffed leather protected its legs from the grasping brush.

The creature was not alone. It was talking to someone, or something, but Ragnar could not see who. It addressed its grunting remarks through a cavernous doorway set in the side of the ziggurat. A high pitched chittering voice responded from inside. Ragnar sniffed the air, for the first time becoming aware of a different scent. One more acrid, and sharper than that of the ork and far fainter. It was the scent of something ork-like and yet not an ork. He paused for a moment, frozen into absolute immobility, and waited to see what would emerge.

He did not have too long to wait. A small head poked around the doorway, cautious and wary. It belonged to another green-skinned creature less than half the size of the ork, but obviously in some way related to it. It had the same greenish skin and yellowish eyes, but where the ork's features reflected a brutal strength and self-confidence, this creature's were sharp, sly and cunning. Its movements were cringing and Ragnar noticed that it did its best to keep out of reach of the ork.

A gretchin, he thought, recognising the creature from his lessons back in the Fang.

It, too, had very long arms in proportion to its size, but where the ork's fingers were stubby and powerful, this one's were long and clever and dextrous. A cowl projected from the leather jacket which covered its torso and partially obscured its head. An autorifle was slung over the gretchin's back. The weapon was huge compared to the gretchin and Ragnar was surprised the little alien had the strength to lift it. In the gretchin's hands was clutched a stone box. The creature obviously strained to lift it and seemed concerned to hold on to it. The ork was watching closely, as more gretchins emerged from the opening. These held their autorifles in their

hands and pointed them at something, all the while chittering triumphantly. As Ragnar watched they emerged into the light, followed by a battered-looking human in green robes. The man's head was shaved. On his forehead was a tattoo of the Imperial eagle surmounted on a stylised ziggurat. This was one of the monks from the temple, Ragnar realised. And he was plainly a captive of the brutish aliens.

Ragnar wondered what this signified. Were orks already in possession of the temple? If so, why were there not more of them? If there was an ork army present, the whole place should have reeked of it. Instead he could catch only the scent of these raiders.

From the distance there suddenly came the sound of random sporadic shooting. Ragnar briefly wondered if his Blood Claw had been detected but the sound was coming from too far away, on the other side of the ruins. It was answered by bursts of fire and the sounds of ork bellowing from other areas.

What was going on, he wondered?

The answer came swiftly. The ork aimed his gun into the air and let out a long wild whoop. It was a display of mindless enthusiasm, of delight in noise for the sake of noise, of shooting for the sake of shooting. A senseless waste of ammunition, Ragnar thought, but then the ork went quiet again. An expression of brooding menace passed across its face. The sullen atmosphere of violence suddenly fell on the small group at the edge of the temple.

As he watched, the gretchin began to caper around their prisoner, until the ork bellowed an order and cuffed the nearest creature on the ear. Instantly the gretchin calmed down, seeming petrified with fear of their huge master. The ork advanced on the human prisoner. A swift open-handed slap sent the wretch reeling to the ground. Blood flowed from his nostrils and he choked out a couple of teeth. Ragnar gathered a new respect for the gretchin. They were tougher than they looked if they could take such a cuffing from an ork.

'Slave!' the ork bellowed in very bad Gothic. 'You slave!'

The monk rolled on to his knees and began to intone a prayer to the Emperor. A boot from the ork sent him sprawling into the dirt again, muddying his tattered robe. Ragnar could smell the man's sweat and fear, but still he rose and started to pray once more, asking the Emperor to deliver him.

Ragnar wondered if this were a sign, whether the Emperor had guided him to this place at this time for a specific purpose? That was a dangerous assumption, Ragnar thought. What if they attempted to free the monk and instead gave away their presence here to the ork forces? This was supposed to be a swift and daring mission, and perhaps this would put it at risk. On the other hand, they had come for the fragment of the sacred talisman, and perhaps the monk could guide them swiftly to it. Surely he would have knowledge of where it lay within this huge complex. That would make his rescue worth the risk – provided they could pull it off. And provided the ork didn't kill them or alert its kindred. Ragnar came to a swift decision: do it.

He glanced behind him to where Sven lay. He looked at the ork and ran his finger across his windpipe in the universal gesture for slitting throats. Sven nodded his acknowledgement with a keen smile. With the knowledge of imminent action, Ragnar's mind cleared. Almost as one, he and Sven rose to a crouch. A mere twenty strides separated them from the ork. The greenskin had its back to them, menacing the prisoner once more. The gretchins' attentions were all on the human's torment, except for the one who had opened the stone box and was tipping its contents onto the ground, an expression of pained concentration on its face, its greenish tongue protruding through its teeth.

The key to the success of this was in quick decisive action before any of the alien scum could respond.

Ragnar charged forward, determined to wait to the last second before activating his chainsword so as not to give away the element of surprise. If possible he was determined to fire no shots. No sense in giving away their location unless they had to.

Ten strides. Ragnar's loping pace covered the ground quickly. So far not one of the enemy had noticed them; their attention was riveted to their sport. Ragnar showed his fangs in a feral snarl. He sensed Sven loping along a few paces behind him. Instinct told him that Sven would take care of the gretchin while he despatched the ork. That suited Ragnar just fine.

Five strides. The greenskin with the open chest looked up from the pile of ceremonial regalia it had turned out onto the ground. It must have caught sight of them from its peripheral vision. Its eyes went wide in startled surprise. Ragnar hoped that it would stay frozen in inactivity for just a few moments longer.

Four strides. Three. The gretchin opened its mouth to scream a warning to its fellows. As it did so, Ragnar thumbed the activation rune of his chainsword, offering a silent prayer to Russ as he did so. The blades roared to life. As Ragnar took his penultimate stride he was already starting his swing.

For a creature so large, the ork responded with surprising quickness. Its head swivelled on its shoulders to look back in the direction of the noise, then its whole body pivoted to face the new threat, its chain-axe starting to rise in a parry. But it was already too late. Ragnar brought his chainsword down like a thunderbolt from the heavens. It cleaved right through the ork's neck just above the neck guard of its armour and separated the head from its body in one flickering stroke. As if unaware that it was already dead, the ork's torso kept moving. The axe continued to rise before flying upward from the ork's nerveless hand. Fingers clutched around the trigger of its bolter in a final futile response to death, the crude weapon sending a flurry of shells into the ground. Each impact raised a small fountain of dirt around its feet. Blood flew from the severed neck. The helmeted head rolled to the ground and glared at Ragnar with undiminished hatred. The eyes still moved, following his flickering motion.

Sven, meanwhile, had ignored the gretchin with the treasure chest and piled into those around the prisoner. They were much slower than their ork master and just as equally doomed. Sven took the head off the first with one sweep of his blade, buried the chainsword to the hilt in the chest of the second and sent the third tumbling to the ground with a brutal blow from the butt of his bolt pistol. It rose to its feet trying to swing its autorifle to bear. The gretchin with the chest meanwhile let out a long panicked shriek and turned to flee. Ragnar wasted no mercy on it, impaling it on his chainsword from behind. The force of his blow lifted the small body right off the ground for a few moments until the rotating blades chopped it in two and the partially bisected corpse flopped to the ground, watering the earth with its foul greenish-yellow blood.

Ragnar glanced around quickly to see Sven finish off the last gretchin. It raised its autorifle in a futile effort to parry the chainsword which was even now heading for it. Sparks flew as the blades bit into crude gunmetal, then the autorifle parted into two sections and Sven's chainsword crunched into the gretchin, killing it instantly. A swift glance around and a sniff of

the air told Ragnar there were no more threats in the immediate vicinity. He strode over to the praying monk, who looked up at last as he noticed the Space Wolf's shadow pass over him. A look of surprise and fear passed over the man's face as he saw the unexpected apparition of a bloodstained Space Marine looming over him.

'On your feet, brother!' Ragnar ordered him. 'The Emperor has answered your prayers and delivered you.'

The monk fainted dead away.

Ragnar glanced around, checking all was safe. The light of life had finally faded from the dead ork's head. The brief, brutal struggle was over.

'Get up, man,' Ragnar insisted impatiently. He tapped the monk as softly on the face as he could. The slap of his ceramite gauntlets on flesh still sounded harsh but right now they had no time to be gentle. Ragnar looked around in exasperation as the monk remained comatose. They stood in the chamber from which the prisoner had been taken by the gretchin. Sergeant Hakon, the two inquisitors and Sven were also present. The other Blood Claws had taken up their positions, forming a defensive perimeter around the area. The greenskin corpses had already been dragged out of sight into the woods.

'Stand aside,' said Inquisitor Isaan, brushing past Ragnar and standing over the recumbent monk. She passed her hand over the unconscious man's face. Ragnar felt a prickling at the back of his neck which told him that she was bringing her hidden powers to bear. The monk's eyelashes flickered. He groaned, then sat bolt upright.

'Who are you?' he asked in a cracked voice. Both his tone and his scent told Ragnar that he was very frightened.

'Do not be alarmed,' Isaan said as levelly as she could. 'You are safe. I am Inquisitor Isaan, on the Emperor's service. This is Inquisitor Sternberg. These men are Space Wolves of the Astartes. We are on a mission vital to the security of the Imperium. Who are you?'

'I... I am Brother Tethys, a scribe... of the Order of Perpetual Bliss. I thank you for saving me from those horrors. They would have killed me or made me a slave but for your intervention.'

'Is that what happened to your brethren here?' Isaan asked in a sympathetic voice. The monk nodded. His thin ascetic face looked on the verge of tears. He held one gaunt, bony hand up in front of his face. Ragnar could see that it was shaking.

‘Were your brethren taken?’

‘Most of them. Taken or killed when the temple fell. We tried to fight but there were just too many of them. When the orks burst through the perimeter walls, some of us fled into the hidden passages, hoping to save our scrolls and treasures and perhaps carry on the fight in secret.’

‘How many of you?’

‘I do not know that. Not many. I saw several hundred of the brethren rounded up and marched off by the ork scum. I watched from one of the spyholes in the Great Temple. They were loaded into some manner of huge landcrawler and taken south. Probably going to the siege of Galt Prime City.’

‘How many orks are left in the ruins?’

‘Not that many. The ones here seem to have been left behind by accident. Maybe they were drunk or lost when their comrades left. Who can really tell with such brutes?’

‘How did they come to capture you?’

The monk shrugged. ‘I left hiding to try to steal some food from the granaries. Hopeless really: the orks had already taken it. They must have caught sight of me as I returned to this chamber, followed me. Why is this important to you?’

‘I am trying to get a picture of what happened here – and, to tell the truth, what sort of witness you are.’

‘I am loyal to the Emperor. I did my duty with my brothers,’ Tethys insisted angrily.

Ragnar was not entirely sure this was the case. Something in the man’s scent suggested both shame and the fact that he was not telling the whole truth. Isaan’s voice was gentle and reassuring. ‘I am sure you were. Who could blame you if you fled when the orks overran the walls? There were so many of them and they were so savage. There were many of them, weren’t there?’

‘Thousands upon thousands. A numberless horde. A sea of howling green faces. We killed so many of them but they just kept coming and coming. And they had huge war machines armed with terrible weapons. Where did they come from? I would not have believed there were so many orks on the planet. Or that they could be so well-armed.’

‘They came from beyond the heavens. But do not worry. The Emperor will punish them for their misdeeds. The Imperium always triumphs in the

end. Now tell me, Brother Tethys, why did the orks attack here?’

‘Who can tell why such brutes do anything? They were drunk with bloodlust and the desire to kill.’

‘Yet they took prisoners – slaves, you said.’

‘Only once the battle was long over and they calmed down. Once they were inside the temple grounds, things were terrible. They swarmed everywhere, killing and looting all as they went. Then their leaders seemed to re-establish some sort of control and they went to the sanctum, and pillaged the ancient treasures. Perhaps that is what they sought – our sacred relics.’

‘Sacred relics?’

‘There are many such here: the bones of holy men, devices of great sanctity created in ancient days – an amulet worn by the Emperor himself, it is said, broken in some ancient battle. One day it will be repaired and used to resurrect the Emperor.’ Ragnar saw the inquisitors stiffen like hounds which had caught a scent.

‘What did this amulet look like? Like this one?’ She gestured to the fragment of the talisman hanging around her neck. ‘Have you seen it?’

‘It is a holy thing,’ Tethys said, suddenly circumspect. ‘I should not talk of it to strangers.’

‘We are servants of the Emperor, trusted ones. It is our duty to preserve such relics from the claws of those who would defile them. It is your sacred duty to help us do this.’ She made another pass with her hand. Once more Ragnar felt psychic power flow. Tethys stiffened a little and then seemed to relax. ‘Yes. I understand that now,’ he said in a colourless voice. ‘I must do my duty to the Emperor most high.’

‘Tell us about the amulet.’

‘It is a device of silvered metal on a chain of true silver. Within it is set a green jewel of a thousand facets. It looks on one side as if it had been broken from a larger gem. That side is jagged, not smooth and polished. The high abbot wears it on the night of the Blood Moon when performing the rite of ultimate—’

‘It sounds like what we’re bloody well looking for,’ Sven said impatiently.

Inquisitor Isaan swung her head around and silenced him with a poisonous glare of her dark brown eyes. The meaning was clear: *Do not*

interrupt. She glanced back at the monk, who had opened his mouth to speak once more.

‘If you seek the amulet it is too late. The orks have taken it. I saw it around the throat of their leader. I am not surprised. Our visionaries claim it is an object of great power.’

Isaan looked at Sternberg, then at the rest of them. Her face related all that needed to be said.



SEVEN

‘There can be no turning back,’ Inquisitor Sternberg said grimly. ‘We must recover the Talisman of Lykos from those ork brutes.’

Ragnar and the other Blood Claws stared at him. Ragnar could tell his battle-brothers shared his momentary sense of disbelief.

‘The thing is gone, man!’ Sergeant Hakon said. ‘An ork army has taken it.’

‘Then we shall retrieve it!’ Sternberg said in a voice that permitted no opposition.

‘And how precisely will we find it?’ Hakon demanded. ‘These jungles are swarming with orks. There are ork forces all over the continent. How can we find a single ork amidst them?’

‘How did we locate the talisman in the first place?’ Sternberg countered.

‘I can use my... gifts,’ Karah Isaan suggested. ‘The link between the two fragments still exists – the closer they are the stronger the link gets. Now I can sense the general direction. As we get closer I will be able to pinpoint it exactly.’

‘Could we not teleport back to the ship, perform the ritual once more, and teleport back down?’ Ragnar suggested.

‘The *Light of Truth* has been driven out of teleport range by ork warcraft,’ Sternberg said. ‘It is moving out to rendezvous with the approaching Imperial relief fleet. It will return with the task force in one standard week.’

‘You hope,’ Hakon said.

‘With the Emperor’s blessing, it will be so.’

‘Well if we’re stuck down here for a bloody week anyway...’ Sven started. A stern look from the sergeant silenced him.

‘And what will we do when we find the bearer of the talisman? This is no ordinary ork. It is a warlord. He will be in the middle of the horde and well protected.’

‘Are you not Space Marines? Is this not the sort of mission you were trained for?’ Sternberg said.

A silence came over the small group. It was broken by the distant sounds of the remaining orks letting off their weapons. Everyone present looked at each other warily. Ragnar considered the inquisitor's words. He was certain that if there was a way, they could find it. After all they were Space Marines, the Imperium's elite warriors. He was just not sure there was a way to do what the inquisitor wanted in the time they had available.

'You are proposing we locate this ork, steal into its camp, snatch the artefact, and then escape?' Hakon summarised. His tone was one of heavy sarcasm, but from the way he tilted his head, Ragnar could see he was giving the matter serious consideration. The Blood Claw could understand that. If the deed could be done, it would be a mighty feat of arms, worthy of a saga hero. In fact, Ragnar was thinking, perhaps this would be the way into the sagas for all of them. Their names would ring down the millennia in the annals of the Chapter. If they survived. And if they succeeded. He had to admit they sounded like very large 'ifs'.

'Precisely,' Sternberg was saying. 'That is, if you think you and your warriors can perform this mission. If you can't, you can wait in the jungle and Inquisitor Isaan and I will proceed alone.'

Hakon laughed softly. There was no way he was going to allow that. It would not redound to the Chapter's credit, for its warriors to withdraw and abandon two servants of the Emperor on such an important mission. On the other hand, that mission might well prove to be suicidal. Ragnar understood the sergeant's dilemma. 'I would not allow that,' Hakon said finally.

'You cannot stop me. I am not one of your Chapter. You cannot command me to do anything,' Inquisitor Sternberg said, his face set.

The sergeant shook his head slowly. Space Wolves were not famous for their respect of any authority save their own leaders, and that they gave grudgingly to men who had earned it. A leader who made foolish decisions did not remain one long, rarely became one in the first place.

Ragnar wondered whether Hakon was going to make all of this crystal clear to the inquisitors or whether he would find another, more diplomatic path. The sergeant gestured at the amulet which Isaan wore. 'I am responsible for the safety of the talisman,' he said smoothly. 'I will not allow you to proceed if your actions endanger it.'

The two men glared at each other, and for a brief moment Ragnar felt that they might come to blows. He watched with interest. He had no doubts

as to who would win under those circumstances.

Karah Isaan, witnessing the mounting tension, looked from one to the other and back. 'There is no need for this. We are not enemies here. We all wish to serve the Imperium.' She gazed meaningfully at Sternberg. 'Perhaps the sergeant has a point. Perhaps recovering the talisman is not possible.'

'And perhaps it is. We should at least endeavour to find out,' Sternberg insisted.

Ragnar could see the sergeant nod. He could tell Hakon was considering the inquisitor's words. He wondered whether Isaan was using any of her mind tricks on him. He did not think so. There was no sense of any power flowing here and he was sure he would notice. Unless, of course, he told himself, the power was being used to ensure that he did not. He pushed the thought aside; he doubted whether that was even possible.

'Are there any alternatives?' he heard himself start to say. 'Could we not wait for the fleet to arrive and then bring down a strike force from orbit?'

'Time is of the essence,' Sternberg said with a shake of his head. 'Who knows how long it will take the fleet to fight its way into position to allow our forces to make planetfall?'

'If nothing else, we can be advance scouts for the invasion,' said Hakon. Ragnar could tell he was starting to warm to the plan.

'Perhaps we should see where the other talisman is,' Isaan suggested.

'I think we can all agree on that,' said Sternberg.

His companion reached up to touch the amulet, where it dangled from her neck. 'I will do so at once.'

Inquisitor Isaan emerged from the chamber in which she had performed her ritual. Ragnar did not need her scent to tell him she was troubled. Her face wore a frown and her dark eyes were slitted in thought.

'What is it?' he asked. The others were silent, waiting for her answer.

'Something strange is happening,' she said. 'I could sense it through the link. I think the ork chieftain is starting to use the talisman's powers. He has found some way of tapping into them.'

'What does that mean?' Hakon asked.

'I do not know exactly what yet,' she said. 'But I doubt that it can mean anything else but trouble.'

Somehow Ragnar was not surprised to hear this. 'Where now?'

‘The orks are south of here, along the river. I saw a city under siege.’

‘Galt Prime,’ Brother Tethys spoke up. ‘Our capital.’

From the distance came a sound like thunder. Ragnar wondered what it was. He turned his face to the sky and soon worked it out. Three long exhaust contrails slashed across the blue like a swipe from the claws of a giant cat. Even as Ragnar watched he noticed the dots that were the source of the vapour. They grew in his field of vision until he could see that they were stubby winged, crudely fabricated aircraft.

‘Get down,’ he yelled. And threw himself flat.

Karah did the same. The ork warplanes passed directly over the temple complex. They were flying low, looking for something.

‘I think we should get as far from here as we can before the orks start looking for us,’ said Karah.

Ragnar could see she was scared. He did not blame her. He too wondered if it was a coincidence that the ork craft had appeared so soon after she had made her psychic link with the ork warlord. Perhaps if she could sense him, he could sense her. It was not a reassuring thought.

Bringing a reluctant Brother Tethys with them, they ventured into the maze of tunnels within the walls of the huge stone pyramids. It was quiet and cool and the walls blocked off all sounds from outside. Ragnar wondered how safe this was, and then realised it didn’t matter much. If the orks were looking for them, it was most likely safer than being in the jungle. Ork troops would be out there right now, trying to pick up a trail.

Brother Tethys held one of the ancients’ ever-burning glowglobes in his hand. The light made the pinkish fingers of his flesh seem translucent. It was an illusion Ragnar had seen before but nonetheless a potent one. All around him he was aware of the smell of death. He noticed that the walls were full of alcoves and in each alcove lay a desiccated corpse. This was obviously some sort of burial place. Beneath each alcove was carved the name of a monk, in Imperial runes, to make them sacred but there was no air of holiness about this place, no smell of sanctity. It was a boneyard, pure and simple, and they were heading ever deeper into the middle of it.

‘The temples are huge,’ Tethys said. ‘They have been sinking underground for years. The pyramids you have seen on the surface are only part of much larger structures beneath the grounds. They go down a long way. We could hide here for months and never be found.’

‘Not much food down here...’ Sven muttered only half-seriously.

‘There’s always this salted meat,’ Nils said, gesturing towards the corpses. Hearing the sharp intakes of breath from the inquisitors and the diminutive monk, he added hastily, ‘I was joking.’

‘We’ll have less of your humour, Brother Nils,’ Sergeant Hakon said.

‘How are we going to get to the fragment of the talisman?’ Ragnar asked, to break the tension.

‘These tunnels lead to the river; the river leads to the city of Galt Prime. We can take a boat down there towards the ork lines.’

‘Then what?’ Ragnar asked. He knew it was a question that had been on all the Blood Claws’ minds.

‘Then we’ll see,’ said Sergeant Hakon.

‘And how are we going to get down the river?’ asked Sven. ‘I don’t fancy swimming.’

‘Once we’re out of the temple complex we’ll build a raft and head downstream. According to Brother Tethys the current’s strong, so it shouldn’t be too much work.’

‘What if those warplanes come back?’ asked Nils.

‘We’ll spear that orka when we see it,’ Hakon said, then lapsed once more into silence.

The river was broad and brown, and it stank. It reeked of rotting vegetation and algae and wastes pumped into it from the temple complex. Ragnar wondered how much longer that would happen. He doubted that the orks would maintain the machinery there. From what he had seen they had already begun the business of dismantling it all and incorporating it into their crude engines of destruction. As a race they seemed inveterate scavengers and tinkerers. Still there was no doubting that their primitive-looking devices worked. Those warplanes had been effective enough.

Cloying mud sucked at his boots as they struggled along an overgrown pathway between the trees, away from the tunnel that had emerged in the riverbank. Once they were sufficiently far away from Xikar to feel safe they would begin the construction of their raft and start the perilous journey downstream. Ragnar felt eyes upon him and looked over to see Inquisitor Isaan was watching him thoughtfully.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said to her. ‘We’ll make it through safely.’

‘I don’t doubt it,’ she replied. ‘The Emperor is watching over us.’

She didn’t sound or smell as certain as her words implied, Ragnar thought. But she managed a smile and strode softly forward into the

gathering gloom.

The rafts were hefty enough to be stable, made from tree trunks cut down with chainswords and lashed together with constricting vine. The Wolves had made two of them, together with punting poles from the bamboo reeds that grew all along the jungle edge. Not that they were needed, Ragnar had seen: the current was strong enough to carry them at a speed well beyond that even a Space Marine could march at through the dense jungle.

The expedition had split into two groups, one for each raft. On the leading raft were Inquisitor Sternberg, Sergeant Hakon, Strybjorn and Lars. On the second raft were Ragnar, Karah Isaan, Sven, Nils and Brother Tethys. Nils stood at the back of their raft, guiding it with the long bamboo pole. Lars was doing the same on the other raft.

Even the threat of ork air patrols had receded. In many places the jungle was so overgrown and entangled that the huge multi-trunked banyan trees grew right over the river, blocking out all but a few blinding rays of sunlight. It was like sailing down a tunnel beneath the trees. It was as Brother Tethys had said. There were few of the greenskins left in the temple complex and they seemed to be savage and purposeless, mere flotsam left behind when the tide that was the great ork horde had moved on.

The jungle was alive with life. Large, shaggy ape-like creatures crashed through the canopy overhead. Massive panther-sized beasts, mottled and six-limbed, lurked on the branches and studied them with enormous unblinking eyes. Now and again Ragnar caught sight of an enormous serpent-shape slithering through the branches. It must have been thirty strides long at least with a body thicker than an ale barrel. He wasn't too troubled. There was no beast in this jungle he couldn't handle. In his experience few natural living things were impervious to chainsword blades and bolter shells.

He shook his head and told himself that such overconfidence was dangerous. What if he was attacked by surprise? Or while asleep? What if some creature was strong enough to crunch through his armour? He knew it was unlikely. His Space Wolf senses were such that they would alert him to almost any threat even while asleep. And ceramite would prove impervious to any natural fang or claw.

Don't be so certain, a part of him told himself. You don't know that. Men have died in far less dangerous places than this by thinking the way you do. After all, he was a stranger here. What did he really know of this world? Some of the plants and animals were similar to those on Fenris, that was all.

In a way this was hardly surprising. Most of their ancestors had probably come from distant Terra all of those tens of thousands of years ago during the first great human Diaspora, when Man had set out to colonise the galaxy and remake it in his own image. They were the descendants of those old creatures and plants, reshaped to fit their new homeworlds.

Around the next great bend, huge, dusty brown reptiles basked along the riverbank, presumably some species of dragon. Their immense jaws looked as if they could down a man in one gulp – even one armoured in ceramite. Ragnar kept his hand near the holster of his bolt pistol as one of the creatures slithered down the muddy bank and into the water. For such a large creature it moved with surprising stealth, the splash it made when it entered the water would have been barely audible to any man save one with the enhanced hearing of a Space Wolf. The creature very much resembled a log as it floated down the river towards them. Ragnar could see that the colours of its leathery hide could almost have been designed to mimic old or rotting wood. He wondered how many innocent river fishermen had been deceived by that, how many animals that had come to the river to drink or cross the waters. Well, he was not fooled, and he could tell by the scent of his companions that they were not either.

He looked at Sven and the inquisitor, who had already drawn their weapons. Nils held the pole one-handed and waited to see what the creature was intending to do. By the tension in his body Ragnar could tell he was ready to draw his pistol at a moment's notice and open fire. A swift glance told him that the folk on the other raft had perceived the threat as well, and were ready to help. It seemed apparent that the monster would reach Ragnar's raft first – and it was coming on quickly. Brother Tethys had finally noticed what was going on, and was unshouldering the autorifle.

'Riverdragon!' he almost shrieked as if everyone else were unaware of the threat. Ragnar laid a hand reassuringly on his shoulder.

‘Don’t worry, we’ve seen it,’ he said. ‘Use the bolt pistol. It fires explosive shells. More effective against a creature this size.’

If Tethys heard a word Ragnar said, he gave no sign of it. He reeked of panic. No, of terror. ‘Those things are dreadful, the scourge of the river. They pull you under and keep you there till you drown.’

Ragnar wondered if that was a less pleasant death than being torn apart by those huge fangs and then gobbled up. He shook his head. He doubted that there were any pleasant deaths. The creature swam closer. Ragnar could see that its tiny-seeming legs, out of proportion to that huge body, were working beneath the water, and occasionally the thing propelled itself forward with a swish of its huge tail. He was beginning to get a sense of quite how large it was, probably twice as long as this whole raft. He was aware of the tiny, intelligent-seeming eyes gazing at him from either side of the beast’s snout. It was a chilling sight, and sent cold fingers of fear running up and down his spine.

‘By Russ, it’s bloody huge!’ Sven said. ‘Wonder what it tastes like. I’m getting fed up with tree bark and cockroaches.’

‘I’ve speared bigger orkas,’ Ragnar said, levelling his bolter and aiming it directly at the riverdragon’s eye.

‘Orkas don’t have teeth like that,’ Sven said.

The riverdragon had opened its mouth and suddenly row upon row of yellowing tusk-like teeth, each as long as a dagger, became visible. Its features distorted and its eyes narrowed, making it hard to aim for them.

‘It’s like you, Sven,’ Nils said out of the corner of his mouth, drawing his bolt pistol and getting ready to shoot, never taking his eyes off the beast for a second.

‘What do you damn well mean by that?’

‘It opens its mouth and its head disappears.’

‘Ha bloody ha! Another crack like that and you’ll be joining it for a swim.’

Ragnar heard further splashes from the riverbank and knew that more of the huge reptiles were dropping into the water. Suddenly the situation had become very threatening indeed, and he reckoned that his earlier confidence might have been a little misplaced. All the creature had to do was rear out of the water and it could smash the raft to flinders. He was reminded of the battle he had fought with the seadragon back on Fenris, what seemed half a lifetime and half the galaxy away.

‘Shut up and shoot!’ he said and opened fire. The roar of bolt pistols filled his ears as the Blood Claws joined in. Rocket contrails blazed towards the beast. Its flesh erupted where the shells bit into its leathery hide. The creature emitted a long, hissing screech but kept on coming. Ragnar wondered if the creature felt any pain or whether they had simply angered it. Looking at those jaws and the massive ropes of muscle on either side of them, he wasn’t so sure now that his armour could survive being bitten by them. He certainly had no great desire to find out.

The beast kept swimming on through the hail of fire. The Space Wolves on the other ship had joined in now. Huge chunks of flesh were being blown out of the beast, and Ragnar was sure he could see the white of bone amidst the pale pink meat. Still the creature showed no sign of dying.

Ragnar pulled the trigger again and again, hoping in vain to put a shell through the beast’s eye and blow out its brain. But its head was thrashing from side to side and it was difficult to aim precisely. The Wolf pulled the trigger rapidly, sending bolter shell after bolter shell hurtling towards the beast. Its leathery skin was torn and shredded, but to Ragnar’s awe the massive skull endured the pounding. What was the beast made of?

He kept firing but risked a glance towards the riverbank. Three more of the huge beasts were coming ever closer, making no attempt at stealth. Their tails churned the water as they swept swiftly towards the fray. Ragnar wondered whether they were drawn to the commotion or by the smell of blood. He cursed under his breath. If one of the creatures was proving so hard to kill, he did not relish a conflict with four of them.

‘It’s too dumb to die!’ Nils shouted above the bolter blasts.

‘Just like you then!’ Sven snapped back.

The creature was less than twenty strides away and closing fast. Ragnar’s mind raced. Perhaps a change of tactic was called for. ‘Inquisitor! Can you use your powers on it?’

‘I don’t know if it has a mind to affect,’ Isaan called back.

‘Don’t say it, Nils,’ shouted Sven. Then suddenly the beast was gone. A huge wave of water rippled towards them as it dived below the surface. For a moment only the massive tail was visible and then it, too, had vanished.

‘Did we get it?’ Ragnar shouted.

‘Say what?’ asked Nils in a tone of innocent confusion.

‘I don’t think so!’ bellowed Sven, looking all around them.

‘I don’t like this at all,’ said Nils.

Ragnar risked a glance towards the other beasts. They were less than a hundred strides away. Too close for comfort, Ragnar thought.

‘Watch out!’ Sergeant Hakon bellowed.

What does he mean, Ragnar thought – and then felt the whole raft lurch upwards. He frantically tried to regain his balance as he tumbled towards the water. It occurred to him in that moment, exactly what had happened. The cunning beast had erupted from the water underneath them, lifting the whole raft into the air. Ragnar watched the jungle wheel about below him and then he shut his mouth as the murky water engulfed him.

Desperately he fought to hold on to his bolt pistol. It was a terrible disgrace for a Space Marine to lose his weapon. The strangeness of that thought under the circumstances hit him. The water was a maelstrom of churning waves and bubbles. It was dark but nearby he could see the enormous shape of the riverdragon whirling to face them. When seen from the surface, the beast looked clumsy but once you were in the water with it, it suddenly seemed unbelievably sinuous, swift and agile. He glanced around and saw the others were also in the water, limbs fluttering as they tried to head towards the surface.

He holstered his pistol and struck upwards himself. Keep calm, he told himself and prayed for the others to do the same. He knew that many brave seamen on Fenris had died in situations like this simply by making stupid mistakes. Sometimes in panic they swum downwards instead of up, pushing themselves ever deeper below the waters from which they were trying to escape. Ragnar wondered just how deep the river was here, then decided now was not the time to try and find out. His head broke the water. He saw some of the others bobbing to the surface near him.

He sensed the nearness of the riverdragon and felt a moment’s dread as he imagined those huge jaws opening up below him, and then taking him down in one gulp.

‘Look out!’ he heard Sergeant Hakon shouting again.

He glanced around and saw that the wounded beast had broken the surface and was coming towards him. Its jaws were open wide. It was like looking down a long, pink, tooth-filled tunnel. Ragnar could not remember ever seeing anything quite so fearsome. The oily, reptilian smell of the beast filled his nostrils, along with the scent of its blood, and the rotten

meat trapped between its teeth and the flesh decomposing deep within its corrupt bowels. It seemed to him that, at any moment, he too might become just another bit of butchered meat in the creature's stomach. He wondered for an instant whether his life was really over. Then, deep within his own brain, the beast that was part of him awoke, and responded to the threat with instinctive cunning. What the monster could do, he could do.

As it bore down upon him, he waited until the last second, until the jaws were almost closing upon him, then took a lungful of air and dived, kicking strongly. The riverdragon passed overhead, seeming as large as the hull of a great dragonship. Incongruously, in that moment, Ragnar's memory had a flashback to the times when as a lad he had dived from his father's ship and swum beneath it, purely out of bravado and to prove that he could do it to his watching friends.

He saw the great clawed paws thrashing the water, and the supple curve of the huge creature's spine as it turned to try to catch him. Was it his imagination or did the thing actually seem slower? As it swam, it was leaving behind it a wake of oily black blood. Ragnar could taste it in the water. Perhaps all those bolter shells were taking effect after all. Watching the thing spin around, though, it seemed unlikely to save him. The huge jaws gaped once more as the beast came for him again. He kicked out, trying to evade it, but the river was the creature's native habitat, not his own, and in its turgid waters it was far more agile than he, especially enclosed in his power armour.

He felt the jaws close around him. He felt the pressure on his chest plate as the teeth started to clamp down. The riverdragon gave a swift flick of its head, like a dog with a rat in its mouth. If Ragnar had been an ordinary man, he knew his neck would have broken in that moment. But he was not a normal man, he was a Space Marine, and his body had been reconstructed to withstand far more stress than any normal human beings'. The whiplash threatened to drive the air from his lungs. Sparks flickered in his field of vision. He felt vertebrae grind as his neck muscles took the strain. Ragnar prayed to Russ and refused to black out. He fought to retain consciousness.

There was a sense of increased pressure. He realised that the beast was taking him down, trying to drown him as it would its normal prey. No, maybe not. It was swimming away from the rafts. Ragnar could see them on the surface, shimmering in a patch of sunlight. Perhaps it was carrying

him to its lair, to feed its young. Perhaps it was doing something else entirely. He had no idea and no time to speculate. His armour had switched into oxygen recycling mode. He was in no danger of drowning for the time being. Systems designed to keep him alive in the depths of space would have no trouble doing so here. The major problem was that the jaws were still closing. He could hear the ceramite creaking, feel armoured plates grinding against each other. Prickles of pain from his sensory systems told him that at certain stress points there was a danger of the armour giving way. If that happened, other systems might fail, and then indeed he might drown.

Looking up he could see a new danger threatened. The other riverdragons were diving downwards, coming for him – or perhaps they were coming for their wounded brother. Could it be that the smell of blood was driving them into a frenzy and attracting them towards their prey, the way it did with sharks in the Worldsea of Fenris?

Ragnar could see that his supposition was right. The largest riverdragon was coming for his captor. Another two were circling around them, looking for an opening. Suddenly bubbles of air and billows of blood surrounded Ragnar as the two giants closed for battle. Out of the corner of his eye, Ragnar saw a massive claw sweep towards him. The force of the blow was immense. His head reeled with pain. Blackness filled his field of vision. Just as suddenly the pressure on his chest relented. His monstrous captor had let him go in order to use its own jaws to fight with.

Not that it would necessarily do him any good. One of the other beasts might scoop him up, just another tasty morsel. He fumbled with the utility belt on his waist, and felt his fingers close on the grenade he sought. Through the water he saw another beast coming at him, a nightmare vision of massive teeth and mighty jaws, tiny eyes glittering with ancient malice and hunger. Limbs working as if in slow motion in the water, he pushed the grenade into its mouth and kicked out, heading for the surface, wondering what would happen next.

For an instant, nothing occurred. He looked down at the riverdragon and saw it arching its back as it prepared to come up after him. Then its whole body seemed to inflate from within. Its stomach expanded, as if the creature had swallowed something much too big for it. Its jaws distended, and even here under the water Ragnar was aware of its roar of pain. Then

the flesh of the creature's belly parted, and its innards blew out into the water. It had swallowed the grenade, and then it had been blown apart through its soft unarmoured innards. Even as he watched, the other riverdragons hurtled towards it, determined to get at this huge easy meal.

Ragnar's head broke surface. He saw that the others had managed to pull themselves onto the raft and were watching anxiously. They grinned in relief as they saw him swimming towards them. Ragnar flopped up onto the raft, water running from his dented armour. He turned his head and gazed back. The water churned and turned dark with blood. It was the only evidence he could see of the titanic struggle taking place in the gloomy depths, and it faded from view behind them, as the raft drifted around a bend in the river.

'Say that I'm mindless just like that bloody beast!' he heard Sven say, before lying back and shutting his eyes.



EIGHT

The jungle began to thin out. The river became wider and darker. Ragnar handled the pole easily, keeping the raft on the left bank under the outlying branches. Ahead of them were all the signs of war. Huge smoke clouds billowed darkly into the sky, reaching upwards like the stretching fingers of giants. Great tracts had been ripped from the nearby jungle by the movement of huge machines. Ork warplanes roared overhead, flashing across the sky to deliver their freight-loads of bombs. In the distance, he could make out their target: the massive walled city of Galt Prime.

It was a city on a scale that did not exist on Fenris. Skyscraper towers loomed over the massive plascrete walls, each as huge as one of the islands that erupted from the Worldsea. And there were other things, monstrous war engines, large as the huge buildings, that moved towards the human city. Ragnar knew these were gargants, mighty metal death machines built in the form of primitive effigies of the orks' dreadful deities. They bristled with massive weapons. From where he was, Ragnar could hear the frightful roar as they lobbed giant shells into the crumbling city walls. Ragnar knew that the illusion of war was untrue. The city had already surrendered. The orks were merely indulging their appetite for destruction.

'Russ take us! It looks like we arrived just in time to save the bloody city,' said Sven, his lips twisting in a bitter ironic smile. Ragnar glanced over at him.

'Do you want to do it yourself, or shall I give you a hand?'

'I'm feeling generous so I'll let you share in my glory. You can have a couple of verses in the Saga of Sven.'

'As ever, you are too generous.' Ragnar was suddenly glad that Sven was there. For all his childish jokes and nasty moods, he could think of no one better to have at his back if they really were going to infiltrate this ork army.

'The best thing about this is that we'll have the element of surprise,' he said with a smile. 'They'll never expect us to come out of the jungle'

and completely overwhelm them like this. Inquisitor Sternberg is a master tactician.'

'I almost feel sorry for those orks,' added Sven. 'Almost.'

Ragnar knew the humour covered a very real tension. For the past few days, as they had drifted downriver, they had come upon ever more evidence of the orks' savagery. They had passed riverside villages burned to the ground and seen huge areas of the rainforest burning. As far as he could tell there was no reason for it other than sheer wanton destructiveness. It had been arson on a huge scale, the product of a mindless rage that Ragnar could not understand. This was hardly surprising: orks did not think like humans. They were, after all, a very alien race.

In the skirmishes they had fought and the ambushes they had laid for the orks, he had come to respect their brute savagery and battlelust. They were fearless foes, hardy beyond belief. He had seen one continue to fight after its arm had been blown off by bolter shells. When it ran out of ammo it had actually picked up its own severed arm to use as a club. The creature had seemed almost impervious to pain.

At first Ragnar thought the small groups they had encountered were patrols but then he realised that no such strategy was at work. They were merely stragglers who had got separated from the main ork force, either through sheer negligence or out of a cunning desire to find fresh places to pillage. Either the orks had no concept of effective strategy or they were overconfident and felt they did not need it. If the latter was the case, Ragnar could understand it. As far as he could see the human defenders of Galt had mounted little effective resistance.

And that, too, was hardly surprising. Most of them were not warriors. They were farmers and foresters and traders who had lived for too long under the great shield of the Imperium's influence. They had not expected such a savage invasion. And according to Inquisitor Sternberg, there must have been corruption too on a huge scale. The Imperial Governor was supposed to maintain a powerful standing army but they had found no sign of it. During their late night discussions around the campfire, Sternberg claimed that the money had most likely been misappropriated, used to swell the Governor's private treasure chest. He also claimed that if the man were still alive, the Imperium would extract such a vengeance on him that he would wish the orks had killed him. The thought of the Governor's

folly and mismanagement drove the inquisitor into a quiet rage the like of which Ragnar had never seen before.

They had monitored the comm-net and listened in horror to reports from the human towns and fortresses as one by one they fell before the invaders' superior numbers and weaponry. It seemed as if the entire embattled human civilisation was going down into darkness. The only cheering news was that the Imperial relief force was preparing to make a counter-attack as soon as the spaceways above Galt were cleared by the human fleet. It appeared such a decisive victory was but days away, but it had left them with a dilemma. Should they await the coming of the Imperial battle force and hide in the jungle? Or should they press on with their original plan and seize the fragment of the talisman? Ragnar had heard the arguments for both cases and had been unable to make up his own mind. If they remained in the jungle there was always the chance they would be discovered by ork forces and slain. Further, there was the chance that the bearer of the talisman would slip away in the fighting or that the artefact itself might be destroyed. The inquisitors were not sure if this were possible but if there was even the slightest chance of it then they did not want to take the risk. On the other hand, what were their chances of working their way into the very heart of this huge invading army without being discovered? There were times when it seemed reckless to the point of folly.

Ragnar could not make up his own mind but the part of him that was Fenrisian inclined towards the second option. It would be a glorious feat and one that would live long in the sagas if they could pull it off. But it was a big 'if', and the quest for glory became mere folly if it involved throwing away your life to no purpose. It was one of the things his instructors had drummed into him again and again during his basic training. So it had gone, backwards and forwards in his mind, as they progressed downriver. In all that time it had seemed a slightly unreal exercise, as they quested through the jungle towards their goal. But now the journey was over, and the point of decision was almost reached, and suddenly it was no longer something to be thought about, but something they would have to act and risk their lives upon.

Ragnar did not envy Sergeant Hakon and the two inquisitors at that moment. He was glad the decision was not his. He tried to tell himself that it was not that he minded risking his own life, but he would not want the

lives of his comrades and friends hanging on his choice. And for the most part he managed to believe himself, though sometimes he caught himself wondering whether he really did want to risk his own life to find this precious artefact for Sternberg. Was it really worth his life? Was it worth all of their lives? The answer was straightforward: if they could save the people of Aerijs, yes. But that too was a big 'if'.

Now their journey was almost at an end. The days spent travelling downstream, fighting off riverdragons and the endless nights filled with biting insects were almost over. Ahead of them lay Galt Prime and the massive ork force. It was almost time for them to implement their plan. Ragnar wondered whether any of them would survive it.

It was all very well to sit around a blazing fire and talk about infiltrating the ork camp and seizing the talisman they sought. It was another thing entirely to actually do it. Now that he had seen evidence of the sheer size of the ork force with his own eyes, Ragnar wondered if it were even possible. Inquisitor Isaan was confident that this close she could sense the location of the ork leader and the talisman he held but Ragnar was not sure that this would do them any good. He was sure to be protected by thousands of ferocious warriors, too many for even Sven to overcome in his wildest fantasies.

They poled the raft towards land and scrambled up the riverbank, weapons held ready. Ragnar threw himself flat and gazed out into the jungle. It was time to abandon the rafts and continue on foot.

They made camp that evening in a burned out building, what had once been a warehouse in a suburb a mile or so outside the city's main defensive wall. The building was tumbled down and showed signs of having been fought over. Bullet holes pockmarked the walls. The roof was half blown away and the support girders had half collapsed so that you could, if you wished, run up them onto the unsafe roof. The place smelled of gun smoke and blood and fear. Old bones, some of them cracked for marrow, littered the floor. Ragnar wondered whether this had been done by the human defenders, orks or the wild animals that had come in from the jungle to scavenge. It was something he didn't really want to think about, but the thought kept entering his mind unbidden anyway.

Huge cockroaches scuttled away from their dimmed glowglobes. Vicious-looking jungle rats, as large as small dogs, watched them with glittering eyes from the gloom. Ragnar guessed that it would not take too

much provocation for them to attack. They looked like ferocious creatures but that was hardly surprising: most of the beasts on this world were.

He glanced around at his companions, his enhanced vision able to pick out every detail of their faces even in the dim light. Inquisitor Sternberg looked gaunt and worried. A strange fanatical gleam glittered in his eyes. He had lost weight in the jungle. Unlike the Space Wolves, he had not been able to survive by eating bark and grubs and leaves. His normal human stomach had forced him to live on powdered field rations, and while these contained everything a man needed to live on, they were hardly substantial fare. He now had the look of an ascetic martyr, the type Ragnar had seen pictured on stained glass windows on the *Light of Truth*. It was as if all excess flesh were being stripped from his body by some wasting disease. Ragnar wondered if that might not be the case. All manner of odd illnesses could strike a man down in the jungle. He himself had suffered a fever for several hours while his body adapted. It was so much harder for an ordinary man, he knew.

Karah Isaan had also lost weight but it seemed only to enhance her loveliness, emphasising her huge eyes and high cheekbones. Ragnar guessed that her homeworld was much more like Galt than Sternberg's for she seemed to have adapted to the heat and the humidity much better than her male counterpart. The talisman glittered at Isaan's throat. Normally she kept it concealed beneath her armoured chest plate but at the moment she was staring into the jewel's depths as if contemplating some holy mystery. Ragnar thought he could sense the swirl of her strange powers in the air about him.

Brother Tethys looked tired and haggard. The long days in hiding and the trip through the jungle had taken it out of him. His nerves had not been helped by the fighting in the jungle or the sight of what the orks had done to his homeworld. Ragnar thought he understood a little. He could imagine how he would feel if the orks plundered Fenris.

Sergeant Hakon seemed to have become younger. With every day of travel, and every skirmish fought, years had fallen from him. It was obvious to Ragnar that the old wolf was glad to be in the field again, and not stuck in the training camps of Fenris. Ragnar could identify with this. Like all Fenrisians, and all Space Wolves, he held that the only good death for a man was on the battlefield surrounded by the bodies of his foes. But it was more than that, Ragnar could see. Sergeant Hakon was enjoying

himself. He liked being here on this alien world, amid the ruin and the death, with the prospect of a life or death fight ahead of him. He had the happiness of a man who was doing work which he had trained to do all of his life. It showed. Even though his face was grim and his bearing calmly alert, his movements had taken on a new grace, and his voice a new tone. His scent too had altered to convey this. Ragnar was glad. At times like this, the fact that the pack had a relaxed and competent leader was deeply reassuring.

He could tell that the others felt the same way. They were new to all of this, and this was their first major test. All of them had been blooded against the powers of Chaos in the mountains of Asaheim but this was their first time off-world. Each of them knew that, assuming they survived, it would not be their last. The life of a Space Wolf consisted of moving from planet to planet, campaign to campaign, as the Imperium and the Great Wolf deemed necessary. All of them were nervous and excited.

Sven's face looked brutal and sardonic by turns as he glanced at his companions. His coarse features and broken nose made him look sullen, like a chastised teenager, but the quirk of his lips and gleam in his eyes told of his underlying humour. He opened his mouth and belched loudly, causing the two inquisitors to stare at him.

Nils's pale features and ash blond hair and brows made him look as young as a boy. His nervous movements were quick and bird-like and his head turned constantly as he surveyed the surroundings and sniffed the air. No chance of him being caught unawares, Ragnar thought.

Ragnar found Strybjorn's features as unreadable and expressionless as always. He was a man of few words and no idle chatter. His was a monumental face that looked as if it had been hewn from granite; Sven looked like a choirboy in comparison. The eyes were set in deep sockets. Strybjorn caught Ragnar looking at him and stared back, eyes flinty and dark. Ragnar wondered whether he still felt any trace of their old animosity. Sometimes, Ragnar knew, he himself did. It had not been entirely lost, even though each had saved the other's life. The two of them would continue to avoid each other as best they could, as they had throughout this mission.

Meanwhile Lars had his fingers interlocked in prayer. His gaze was fixed in the mid-distance and Ragnar wondered exactly what he was seeing there. Another of his visions? Or was he merely contemplating the sights

of the day. Of all his companions, Ragnar understood Lars the least. He knew that the youth had several times been taken away by the Rune Priests to be tested. Ragnar did not know what for. Was it possible that he would be selected to join their ranks, or was there some other purpose entirely to it?

Sergeant Hakon looked around at each of them in turn. Ragnar sensed that the veteran warrior was measuring them, trying to judge their commitment and hardihood. Ragnar wondered whether he should feel insulted. After all he had passed all the tests that were required to join the Space Wolves, and he had been blooded in combat against the forces of darkness. He had proven his worth to the Chapter. Swiftly he pushed such thoughts aside. He knew that all of life was a test, and it was one that could be failed at any time. He knew that even the bravest of warriors could lose courage and break, and it only had to happen once for it to prove fatal to the man and his companions.

Hakon seemed to guess the thoughts passing through Ragnar's mind, for he smiled at him coldly, then glanced at the inquisitors. He didn't speak. Sensing the sergeant's gaze on him, Sternberg looked up. For a long moment, Ragnar thought that he, too, was going to remain silent but after a heartbeat, he spoke. 'We have reached the outskirts of Galt Prime. We are approaching the heart of the ork army.'

'The talisman is near,' added Karah Isaan. Her voice was strange, hollow-sounding, like someone uttering a prophesy or speaking in a trance. 'As we get closer the link grows stronger. I can see it now. I can see the bearer. He is an ork of fearful power, and he is the vessel of something greater. In some way, he is the focus of this ork army. He binds it together. He speaks for their gods or so he believes, and in a way this belief is true.'

'If we kill him will the horde disperse?' Ragnar asked. His throat felt suddenly dry. In her own way the inquisitor too seemed to be the focus of powers greater than herself. It was not entirely a comforting thought.

'I know not. It is possible. But first we must kill him. I am not sure that will be easy. Or even possible.'

'Anyone can be killed,' Hakon said. 'With a powerful enough weapon.'

'This warlord is tapping into the powers of the talisman, as well as his gods. He will not die easily. I can sense his soul from here. It is strong and will not pass into the void without a mighty struggle.'

‘We are leaping ahead of ourselves,’ said Sternberg. ‘First we must locate this ork and that means finding a path through his army. That also may prove impossible.’

‘We are a small force,’ said Hakon. ‘Moving quietly and by night we can manage it. The city is in ruins. There is cover. If we are careful...’

‘Might it not be better to wait until the Imperial forces counter-attack,’ Brother Tethys ventured. Ragnar could smell the monk’s fear. He did not blame him. This was not his mission. He had accompanied them down the river. He had acted as guide where he could. If plunging into the heart of an ork army was not to his liking, who could blame him?

‘We do not know when that will happen,’ said Sternberg. ‘Of course the Imperium will triumph eventually but this may occur too late for our purposes. We must act independently.’

‘Assuming you manage to sneak in and kill this ork, how will you escape?’ asked Brother Tethys. A not unreasonable question, thought Ragnar. He had been wondering the same thing himself.

‘That depends on the circumstances,’ said Sternberg. ‘Ideally we will be able to use the teleport beacon to get us back to the *Light of Truth*.’

‘Ideally?’ asked Ragnar.

‘The signal may be blocked by power fields or the use of certain energy generators. Alternatively we may have to cause a distraction and slip away in the confusion till we can find a place where the teleporter can be used.’

‘It will need to be a big distraction,’ Brother Tethys said. Ragnar heard the sarcasm and the questioning note in his voice.

‘If you do not wish to accompany us, you do not have to,’ Sternberg said coldly. ‘You may leave at any time.’

Brother Tethys stared at the inquisitor. ‘No. I will not slip into the jungle. You say this ork is the focal point of the horde, the one responsible for the attack on my homeworld. If you are going to kill him. I want to be there. I want to help you. He has a lot to answer for.’

Ragnar heard the unmistakable sound of the hatred in his voice and caught its acrid scent. He saw the eyes of the pack were focussed on the monk. They all respected his courage but Ragnar was not sure having him with them was such a good idea. He decided that he had better voice his objections. ‘I do not know if you are capable of what we are about, Brother

Tethys,' he said. 'We have all been trained to perform this sort of mission. We can infiltrate silently and effectively. You cannot.'

This, too, was a fair point. Ragnar had observed Tethys in the jungle. The man was brave and he could fight, but he was no master of silent infiltration. Several times his blundering had almost given them away to ork patrols as they waited in ambush. To Ragnar's surprise the monk only smiled.

'Perhaps you are correct,' he said. 'But Galt Prime is my home city. I know my way around its streets. I know the people here. I speak the language as only a native can. I grew up poor and I lived hard and I know places to hide, all the back alleys and the hidden routes. Do you?'

Ragnar shrugged. 'I was merely making an observation,' he said.

'And a fair one,' Sternberg said. 'But Brother Tethys is right. He has knowledge of the city that might prove invaluable to us. We shall move on tonight and he will accompany us.'

Ragnar clambered up the huge tree and focussed on the city through his night goggles. The ruined buildings and the awesome gargants leapt into view as he adjusted the focus. From his point of view, high in the treetops atop the biggest hill they could find, he had a fine view of the monstrous ork force. He was impressed by its size but its apparent disorganisation left him contemptuous. It seemed little more than a seething sea of heavily armed greenskin warriors with little or no idea of tactics or strategy. He prayed to Russ and the Emperor to keep such thoughts from his mind. It never paid to underestimate your opposition. The orks were a race of formidable warriors with an instinctive understanding of war.

While they looked like rabble they were capable of operating with a cunning and speed and grasp of the military situation that would have done credit to many an Imperial general. It was as if, like a Space Wolf pack, they had some sort of unspoken understanding of each other's actions. Ragnar wondered how that could be, then decided it did not matter. The teaching machines had placed many examples of ork martial prowess in his brain, and just in case he needed another, one lay before his eyes. The orks had laid waste to a human world and taken a fortified human city held by an Imperial army. It did not matter if it was under equipped and incompetently led. If they were a mindless bandit rabble they could not

have achieved this. No, he would force himself to respect the orks no matter how brutish and stupid they appeared to be.

He ran his eyes over the visible force. The orks had punched through the walls in many places and were obviously confident they could hold the place. Only a small rearguard had been left behind. A mass of trenches and fortifications, gun emplacements and refuelling dumps spoke of the earlier siege. They had encircled the city with earthworks, minefields and razor wire, Ragnar could tell, before bombing and shelling it into submission. He could see the massive holes in the defensive walls where ork artillery had reduced the bastions to rubble. He could see the camps where prisoners and slaves were now being kept preparatory to being shipped off-world to act as slave labour for their new masters. The whole thing superficially appeared disorganised but somehow it was effective. Just like the orks. Their methods might be crude and direct but they worked. There was a lesson there, Ragnar thought, if we want to learn it.

He continued to scan the walls, memorising the layouts so that he could draw a map of their approach for Sergeant Hakon and the inquisitors. He had been chosen because he had the keenest eyes, and he was not going to let them down. More than his own life depended on this.

He noted the areas that were lightly guarded. He noticed the seemingly empty approach corridors. Were there minefields there, he wondered? He heard the distant roaring of engines and asked himself whether he had been spotted. He focussed in the direction of the sound, and saw a number of dust clouds rising. As he watched, a cluster of crude ork buggies hurtled along one of the clearways. A fusillade of shots went off as their drivers and passengers fired their weapons into the air. Were they about to attack each other? Had they spotted some human attackers? What was going on?

Without warning, one of the buggies swerved and crashed into the side of another. The buggy that had been hit bounced then rolled, crashing into the crude shanties of the gretchin troops, tumbling through the campfires before bursting into flames. Two orks threw themselves clear mere moments before their vehicle exploded. They lay on their backs clutching their sides, and Ragnar wondered whether they had been wounded or suffered some internal injury – then it dawned on him that they were laughing. To them, the crash was just a bit of fun. When he realised this, the purpose of the rest of the orks became clear. They were racing, competing against each other in their vehicles, the way the Space Wolves

raced against each other on foot back on Fenris. To Ragnar it seemed like madness but then he could not claim to understand the minds of these green-skinned alien invaders. Shaking his head he shinned back down the tree, and made his report to Sergeant Hakon. Using a twig he inscribed a map in the soft earth, showing the important details of what he had seen.

Hakon and the inquisitors listened raptly and then began to map out the best approach route. They were committed to going in.

As Ragnar watched, he saw a bright flash light the sky. It looked as if a star had exploded. An eerie blaze of light flashed across a portion of the night and vanished.

‘A ship has died,’ muttered Sergeant Hakon, and Ragnar was suddenly aware that the light had indicated the probable death of thousands of men or orks. Up there in the sky and silence a battle of inconceivable fury was being fought, and the light had been the only indication.

The moons were clear and bright. Ragnar cursed. This would work against them. The Space Wolves, with their heightened senses, could function well in the minimum of light. The treacherous satellites would only make it easier for ork sentries to spot them. Not that the orks seemed particularly alert, Ragnar thought, racing to the cover of the next tree. Not that they had any reason to be. What threat could a few solitary humans, trying to get into the city, prove to be to this huge army? Ragnar guessed that any small groups of humans the orks encountered would most likely be trying to break out of the city, not into it.

By night the ork camp was bedlam. He could hear them bellowing what sounded like drinking songs. He could hear the constant crackle of small arms fire which he now realised was merely a sign of ork exuberance except when it was a prelude to a drunken shootout between crazed bull warriors. The air vibrated with the roar of engines. The acrid smell of engine fuel assailed his nostrils. There was a constant clangour of metal ringing on metal as ork mechanics worked on vehicles and weapons. They seemed to have an urge to constantly tinker, and could never leave anything alone.

He looked back over his shoulder, and gave the all-clear sign. Lars and Strybjorn raced forward, moving up beyond his position so that they could cover his next advance. After them came the inquisitors and Brother Tethys. The rest of the Space Wolves brought up the rear. They were almost at the edge of the jungle now.

Ragnar's last advance brought him to the very edge of the trees. Ahead of him lay the huge ork camp, a sea of campfires and shadow figures. Muzzle flare illuminated the night as weapons were fired in abandon by their uncaring owners. He could see huge flaming jets erupt from the exhausts of the vehicles. There was one such crude buggy parked nearby. It was close enough for him to make out the riveted plates of its chassis. He could see two of the massive bestial aliens lounging on it. One of them swigged from a bottle of what smelled like pure alcohol and then passed it to the other. It grunted and laughed then downed the bottle in one hefty swig before contemptuously tossing it over its shoulder into the jungle. Ragnar thought he was lucky it did not hit him, for it fell nearby.

This was no use. They would have to skirt around these two sots and find another approach. The area beyond them was clear for a couple of hundred strides and then there were some ruins, which he hoped would provide cover. As he watched one of the orks let out an enormous belch and slid off the hood of the buggy. It pulled itself to its feet and began to lumber quickly towards the jungle's edge, grunting something to its bestial companion. Ragnar froze on the spot, wondering whether they had spotted him. He did not think so. He could detect no change in the scent patterns that might have spelled out their alarm. On the other hand, he was not familiar with orks, so how could he tell?

He stayed frozen in place wondering what to do as the ork headed straight for his hiding place. It still gave no sign of knowing he was there, but perhaps it was merely a cunning ruse, a trick designed to lull him into letting the thing get within striking distance. What was he to do? If he reached for his weapons the ork might spot the movement, if it was not already aware of him. If he did nothing he would soon find himself face to face with a foe nearly half again his bulk.

The ork stopped right in front of him. It seemed impossible to Ragnar that it could not see him. He heard buttons pop and the sound of water flowing. Ork urine splashed his armour. The ork let out a satisfied grunt and then a fart. The stink was so bad that Ragnar flinched. His slight motion must have drawn the ork's attention, for it looked down at where he crouched. Its eyes went wide and it opened its mouth to bellow a warning.

Ragnar knew he had only a heartbeat in which to act. He sprang forward, like a wolf pouncing on its prey. He chopped forward with the

edge of his hand, smashing the ork's windpipe. The greenskin fell to the ground, gurgling horribly, unable to breathe. Ragnar kicked it in the face with his boot, and raced on towards its drunken companion. The creature looked at him in a befuddled manner, unable to understand what was going on. Ragnar leapt on it, getting one arm around its thick neck, and twisting.

There was a hideous cracking sound as vertebrae snapped. Ragnar's enhanced muscles enabled him to break the creature's neck with one mighty wrench. The whole action had taken only a heartbeat. It was all over in seconds. Ragnar glanced around to see if any of the other orks had noticed what happened. In the darkness and noise it was unlikely. But he was taking no chances. His enhanced eyes allowed him to see further into the darkness than a normal mortal. He could detect no sign that he'd been noticed. He let out a long breath. All was well.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he could see that the others still waited at the jungle's edge. He gave the thumbs up sign to Sven and Strybjorn and looked around once more. Nearby was the crude vehicle that the orks had been working on.

A plan swiftly formed in his mind. In the darkness it was unlikely that any ork would recognise them for what they were. Perhaps they could commandeer this crude buggy and use it to drive through the city, disguised as orks. It was a long shot too, but it might just work.

'Bloody great plan,' Sven said ironically. He looked comical with a massive horned helmet on his head and a crudely made ork jerkin over his armour. In broad daylight it would have been impossible to mistake him for an ork but at night the stupid brutes might take his squat, wide-shouldered silhouette to belong to one of their number. Ragnar was dressed similarly. Karah was hunched down on the floor of the front of the vehicle between them. The rest of the Space Marines, Inquisitor Sternberg and Brother Tethys hunkered down in the back of the buggy. It was fortunate, Ragnar thought, that there was plenty of room in the huge car. It seemed to have been made to carry over a score of passengers.

The controls were easily mastered. There was a huge steering wheel, a massive pedal to go forward, another for the brake, and a monstrous lever that took most of Ragnar's strength to move which controlled the gears. There was only a series of crude lights on the dash, no gauges or meters or any complex readouts. The whole thing could have been driven by a child, Ragnar thought, albeit a most gigantic, misshapen ogre of a child.

A big red button on the dashboard started things up. The engine roared like a wounded dragon. The air reeked of crude fuel. Its acrid stench assaulted Ragnar's nostrils. Still, he thought, as the buggy lurched forward, there was something appealing about driving the thing. He constantly fought the urge to stamp down the pedal and go roaring through the streets. Suddenly, he understood exactly why the orks raced so much.

Riding in this juggernaut of hardened steel, it was an almost irresistible urge. Of course, he thought. The orks had designed their vehicles this way. Was this urge to go fast a product of riding in the buggy, or was it a simple expression of the ork desire for speed? Which came first, the chicken or the egg? Certainly, it touched something deep within him, and he was not even an ork.

They raced towards the edge of the city, moving all but unnoticed through the massive camp which surrounded it. The vehicle leapt and shuddered at every small bump in the road, and yet Ragnar was surprisingly comfortable. The suspension was good, obviously intended to carry the machine safely over the roughest of terrain, and his seat was thickly padded with leather. Two red cubes dangled from a thong tied to the roll bar.

Ragnar guided the buggy through a wide hole blasted through the thick plascrete of the perimeter wall. The massive burned-out hulks of ancient skyscrapers loomed over them like drunken giants. The air felt colder and yet from somewhere off in the distance Ragnar could smell burning. Perhaps the orks were cooking, he thought. More likely they were using incendiaries.

The night was filled with screams and shrieks. Overhead, starshells burst and red contrails marked the passing of ork rocket planes.

'Which way?' he asked Karah Isaan.

'Keep going the way you're going,' she told him. 'I'll tell you when to turn.'

They moved on through a night that seemed more like a war.

'You look like a bloody fool, Ragnar,' said Sven. 'That helmet makes you look like an idiot!'

'Compared to you, Sven, I look like a hero from a saga,' Ragnar replied. 'But then you always look like an idiot.'

'Can you two stop bickering for a moment?' said the deep voice of Sergeant Hakon from the back of the car. Ragnar flinched. It was not like

the sergeant to complain. It was a sign of the tension they all felt. Just at that moment, an ork war buggy roared up beside them. One of the massive greenskins bellowed something in his incomprehensible language. He accompanied his bestial roaring with threatening gestures.

For a moment panic threatened to overwhelm Ragnar. What was going on? Had they been detected? Were these sentries some form of patrol? Beside him, he felt Sven stiffen and reach for his weapon. Ragnar reached out with his left hand to grab Sven's wrist, immobilising his arm. Now was not the time to start shooting.

He crouched low behind the wheel, hoping that the orks would not see he was human. The orks continued to grunt and bellow and make obscene motions with their hands. They revved their engine and pointed into the air with their weapons. Shots spat upwards into the darkness. Ragnar shook his head in confusion. He did not understand what was going on.

The largest ork, the one behind the wheel, roared a stream of incomprehensible gibberish. Its red eyes bored challengingly into Ragnar's. Even from here, above the acrid smell of the exhaust and the near overwhelming odour of the engine fuel, he could smell the alcohol on its breath.

Was this some sort of warning or some sort of challenge? He wished he spoke their language. But it was a useless wish; he did not. It was obvious that the orks were becoming increasingly frustrated. Their bellowing grew louder, their gestures more frantic. They continued to fire their bolters. One of them made an obscene gesture and their vehicle roared forwards, pulling ahead of Ragnar's as if eager to be ahead of him, then dropped back again.

Suddenly, he understood: *they wanted to race!* They had been challenging him. He knew he had to make a quick decision. What was he to do? Should he race them or ignore the challenge? Which would stand out more? It seemed a common sport among the orks. Might they be insulted if he refused and start a fight? He did not know. It was possible, and the last thing he wanted was to draw attention to himself and his companions.

Instinctively, he put his foot to the floor. The orks in the other vehicle responded with a chorus of jeers and more obscene gestures. Now he felt insulted. He wanted to show these brutes who was best. No Space Wolf was going to be looked down on by a bunch of green-skinned morons!

Part of him realised how foolish he was being. But something compelled him to race on. The buildings flew past. The night was alive with screams and roars. He could see ork faces flash by in the gloom. Ahead of them, one of the orks stood poised on the rear of the buggy. He had dropped his trousers and waggled his buttocks at them. It was not an appealing sight.

‘I’d like to put a bolter shell up his arse!’ Sven grumbled.

Ragnar understood. The ork’s crude humour was an insult. He pushed the gear lever forward. The engine roared in response. The buggy bounced over the rough roadway. The wind rushed past his face. Transparent membranes slammed into place over his eyeballs, to protect them from the wind. Their speed increased with every notch he pushed the lever forward. His heart beat faster with excitement. They were gaining on the orks.

Suddenly from behind them came more roaring. Ragnar risked a glance back over his shoulder. He could see there were more buggies joining in the race. What had he started?

There were several more of the crudely built racers. They were massive vehicles, barbarically painted, adorned with spikes, covered in blocky ork script. Grinning ork faces leered at him from behind their controls. He could see that there was no getting out of this now.

‘Watch out!’ he heard Sven shout. Swiftly Ragnar turned. Ahead of them, the road was blocked by the wreckage of a massive ork truck. Swiftly he wrenched the wheel to the right. Tyres squealed as the vehicle responded. Ragnar was thrown back in his seat by the sudden movement. He felt another bump as the buggy ran over something solid.

‘That’ll teach him to waggle his arse at us!’ Sven roared. Ragnar realised that the ork must have fallen from his vehicle and then been crushed under their wheels. Looking behind them, he could see it starting to climb to its feet. It stood there for a moment, a foolish grin on its face, caught in the headlights of the pursuing vehicles. Then, with a horrible squelching sound, it was hit by the leading buggy.

‘And that’s the end of that,’ said Sven with an evil grin.

Ragnar wondered if that was case. The ork already survived falling from a moving buggy and being run over by Ragnar’s own vehicle. It was perfectly possible that it could endure being struck by another. On the other hand, it seemed unlikely that anything could survive being run over by the succession of vehicles which pursued them. Then it was too late to

wonder about such things. The crushed ork was already a long way behind them.

The road ahead came to a junction. More and more ork vehicles moved in from left and right with no apparent order. The race leader wove through them, causing several to come to a screeching halt. Sparks flew, metal ground against metal, as cars collided. Orks brandished their fists in the air, several reached for weapons.

‘Whose bright idea was this?’ asked Sven.

‘It was their’s,’ Ragnar said, pointing at the orks ahead of them. He wrenched at the wheel, narrowly avoiding a collision with the vehicle in front of them. ‘Keep your eyes peeled for a way out,’ he told Sven. ‘Look for a side street with nothing on it.’

‘Some chance,’ said Sven. ‘This city is crawling with the greenskin scum.’

‘Just do your best!’

‘I always bloody do!’ said Sven. From behind them came the sound of an appalling multi-car pile-up. Ragnar guessed that for many of the orks the race was over.

Ahead of him, he could see several orks making faces. The distance was closing between the two vehicles. Ragnar was gaining on them – and up ahead of them, the road was clear. Seizing his opportunity, Ragnar pushed the gear lever forward to the last notch. The buggy surged forward. Elation filled Ragnar. He was going to catch them.

Ten yards separated them now. Ragnar could make out every detail of the vehicle ahead. He could see every rivet and bolt on the metal plating. He could even smell the orks themselves; the night breeze wafted their scent to his nostrils. He could never get to like such a stink.

‘We’re gaining on them,’ said Sven.

‘Nothing gets past you,’ said Ragnar. He was leaning forward on the gear lever, even though it could go no further, and unconsciously he was willing the buggy to go faster, ever faster.

There was only five yards in it now. The orks stuck out long black tongues at their pursuers. They put their fingers in their ears and twisted their faces into obscene grimaces. One or two of them brandished weapons. Ragnar wondered if they were going to shoot, or if this was mere posturing. With this free hand he reached for his bolt pistol.

‘Bloody hell!’ Sven swore. ‘Are they looking for a fight? If so, I’ll damn well give them one.’

‘You are always ready for a fight, Sven,’ said Ragnar. All the same, he was glad Sven was there. If violence started, he could think of no one better to have at his side.

They were almost alongside the orks now. He wondered if the creatures would notice that they were human. Not that it mattered. He suspected they would be just as hostile to their own kind at this moment in time.

As they drew alongside the ork vehicle, the creature driving twisted the wheel. The buggy crashed into Ragnar’s. Metal shrieked and sparks flew as the two vehicles collided. Once again, Ragnar was thrown around in his seat. It was all he could do to keep his hands on the wheel and their course steady. On the floor between them, Karah Isaan gave a yelp of alarm.

‘Do something!’ shrieked Sven. ‘You’ve got the controls.’

Two could play at this game. Ragnar twisted the wheel and deliberately smashed into the ork buggy. There was a tolling like a huge bell as the two machines crashed together. Ragnar felt as if he could almost reach over and touch the ork beside the driver in the other buggy. Not that he would have wanted to. Suddenly, he noticed two red eyes were glaring into his. A look of surprise crossed the ork’s face. He knew that it had spotted that he was not like his opponent!

Sven had obviously noticed this too. He raised his pistol and put a bolter shell right through the ork’s eye. Its head exploded. The shell passed right through its skull and lodged itself in the throat of the ork driver. He slumped forward over the wheel. The buggy veered off to one side, hit a low wall, then flipped over completely. It skidded along upside down, sparks flaring from the tortured metal of the roll bar. From inside came the shrieks, bellows, and grunting of the orks trapped within. The buggy hit a wall. A fireball erupted as it burst into flames. The explosion sent shards of shrapnel spraying everywhere.

Ragnar glanced back, hoping that there would be no survivors. He saw nothing crawling from the wreckage. Behind them, other ork buggies veered wildly to avoid the blazing wreck.

‘That was close,’ said Sven. ‘I think they recognised us.’

‘You don’t say? And I thought they just didn’t like us.’

Sven gave him a nasty smile, and glanced backwards. ‘Plenty more where they came from,’ he said. ‘No shortage of orks around here.’

Ragnar was forced to agree. He took a deep breath, muttered a thankful prayer to the Emperor, and exhaled. He felt surprisingly calm all things considered. And there were lots of things to consider. He was driving an unfamiliar vehicle through a city he did not know, surrounded by deadly enemies. This would have given most men pause, he knew. Still, he reminded himself, he was a Space Marine, for whom such strange experiences were almost everyday occurrences.

He gave his attention back to driving. The roads hereabouts were clogged with rubble and the wreckage of burned out vehicles. He was suddenly glad for the sheer simplicity of the ork controls. He shuddered to think what would have happened if he'd been in control of an Imperial Rhino, for example.

Behind them, two more ork buggies had ploughed into the wreckage of the first. Fuel had caught fire and a wall of flame barred the street. One after another, more ork buggies plunged through the conflagration. Ragnar could see one trailing a tail of flickering fire that reminded him of a comet. He grinned at Sven. The chase was on again.

'I hope you have your weapons ready back there,' he said. 'You might have a chance to use them soon.'

'I hope so,' he heard Nils say in a quiet but determined voice.

Ragnar kept the throttle open and they raced on through the night.

In the distance Ragnar could hear the roar of engines and the stutter of small arms fire, but around here they seemed to have left the orks behind. He was glad of the respite. The concentration needed for driving at such speed had tired even him, although he had to admit that it was exciting.

At least the race had carried them in the right direction, towards their goal. They had hidden the vehicle in the ruins of a burned out garage. Now they lay sprawled about it. Ragnar could see from the flushed faces of his companions that they shared his exultation. They had been just as excited as he had. Or almost.

'What do we do now?' he asked Inquisitor Isaan.

'We wait here,' she said. 'We should all get some rest.'

'That's not very exciting,' said Sven.

'I should think you'd had enough excitement for one evening,' said Karah.

'Sven never gets enough excitement,' said Nils.

'Not with you lot around anyway,' said Sven.

‘Are we getting any closer to the ork warlord?’ asked Ragnar.

‘Yes,’ said Karah. ‘I can sense his presence now. It’s like a beacon in my mind.’

Ragnar looked around. He did not feel tired. He doubted that any of the other Marines did either. But Sternberg, Isaan and Brother Tethys were only human, and they needed their rest.

Ragnar sat alone, staring off into the darkness. All around him he could sense the presence of his battle-brothers. The mere fact that they were there reassured him. It was part of the pack instinct that he shared with all Space Wolves. Just the very presence of his comrades calmed some inner part of him. Each of the Claw had gone their separate ways to think and to meditate. Ragnar enjoyed being alone as much as he enjoyed the presence of his friends, but it was good to know they had not gone far.

Overhead, unfamiliar stars blazed down. Ragnar looked up at them in wonder. How far was he from home? What great distance had he come? Would he ever see Fenris again? He did not know. And at this moment, he did not really care. He was happy just to be here, and to be alive. He was happy just to look on these unfamiliar sights.

He smiled as he looked on the ruins of the skyscrapers. Back home there was nothing like these. Their massive presence reminded him of mountains, but these were mountains that had been built by men. And then destroyed by orks, he reminded himself.

He breathed deeply, taking in all the unfamiliar scents. Even the air here smelled different. Of course, there was the reek of ork machinery and the orks themselves. It was everywhere. But underneath it lay another unfamiliar tang: the smell of factories, of industrial pollution, of great furnaces, and of all the things they had once produced. It was amazing to think that humans had produced all these things.

He gazed out into the shadows, searching for movement, for the unfamiliar outline that would tell that a hidden enemy was sneaking up on them. He knew that he was much more likely to hear or smell any foe before he saw them, but nonetheless the force of old habit made him rely on his eyes. He had changed so much in a few short months. He’d almost come to take his enhanced senses for granted.

Ragnar closed his eyes. He listened carefully with the concentration that only a Space Wolf could manage. He could hear the breathing of the humans inside the garage. He could hear the soft, stealthy movements of

his comrades. He could hear the distant sound of weapons being fired and the scuttling of small rodents among the ruins. But he could hear nothing remotely threatening.

He breathed deeply, testing the air for scent. Nearby, all he could sense was the familiar reassuring smell of his battle-brothers, and the humans who accompanied them. Further off, he smelled animals and birds and the smell of effluent from the broken sewers. Once again, no threats.

He turned his awareness inwards, communing with himself as he had been taught back at the Fang. It was like looking inside a vast unfamiliar cavern. The teaching machines had placed so much knowledge within him that he had not had time to assimilate it. It was as if he contained whole libraries that he had not read. He knew the whole history of the Chapter was there somewhere, along with all the technical schematics of his weapons and equipment, and endless reams of knowledge that he might never need but that his tutors had deemed useful.

He became aware of himself as a small spark of light in that huge dark realm. And somewhere out there he sensed another presence lurking, the presence of the beast, of his soul's shadow, of the monstrous thing that waited within him. It did not frighten him now as once it had. And yet he could not quite come to terms with it either. He knew it was there. He could sense it just as he sensed the presence of his comrades close by. It was a real thing, as real as the dirt beneath his feet, or the armour that encased his body.

Yet he knew it was wrong to think of it as a being separate from himself. It was part of him, just as he was part of it. Now, at this moment, he was in control. He was in charge. He was the master. And it seemed hard to believe that it could ever be any different. But he knew this was not the case. He knew that in moments of stress, the beast would come to the fore, would take control, would live inside his body, inside of him.

There had been a time when he found it terrifying that he was not the sole master of his own body. Now it was a thought he'd become accustomed to, as he had become accustomed to so much else about being a Space Marine. He knew from the older warriors that in time he would make his peace with the beast, just as they had.

Right now, he simply wanted to feel its presence, to know that it was there if he needed it. It was like having another ally, invisible and yet present. He wondered if his battle-brothers felt the same way or if each of

them thought of the beast differently. It was not something they talked about.

From within the garage, he detected a movement. He could tell by the difference in her scent that Karah Isaan was awakening. The hackles on the back of his neck rose as he sensed something else. She was using her powers.

It occurred to him that in her own way she was just as set apart from normal humans as he was. What must it be like to have such powers? It must change a person, Ragnar thought. And it must change the way other people look at you. He thought of his own reaction on the day he had met her. Had he reacted so badly because she was an inquisitor – or because she was a psyker? He did not know. He did know that her powers frightened him; they reminded him of sorcery, of the witchcraft spoken of in whispers back in his home village.

And what was she doing now? What she working some spell? Was it possible that a daemon would come to possess her? The knowledge buried deep in his brain told him that this was a possibility.

At this moment, there was nothing he could do about it. She was a comrade, and part of the mission. If she turned against them he would kill her. He hoped this would not become necessary.

His reverie was broken. Now he wanted action or he wanted to sleep, he did not want to be alone with his thoughts. What was it about this woman that disturbed his soul? Was it that she was a psyker? Or was it something different, something more primal.

He stared up at the distant stars. Morning seemed a long way away.

The sun blazed down on the ruins of Galt. Ragnar studied the horizon looking for some sign of threat. By day, the pall of smoke hanging over the city was obvious. The thunder of huge weapons could be heard in the distance, as the orks continued their mad wanton destruction. It seemed nothing could satisfy their appetite for wrecking things. They would not be happy until they had reduced first the city, then the entire world to rubble. Contemplating such a foe was a frightening thing even to a Space Marine like Ragnar.

‘Soon it will be night,’ said Sven from nearby. ‘Then we’ll be able to get going again.’

‘I’m looking forward to it,’ Nils said, off to the other side of them. ‘All this stalking around ruins is getting me down.’

‘And I still haven’t bloody well found anything good to eat,’ said Sven. ‘Caught a rat this morning, could barely wrestle the little bastard down my throat.’

‘Just like you not to share it with the rest of this,’ said Nils. ‘I could have done with a nice bit of roasted meat.’

‘It wasn’t roasted. It was still alive.’

The rest of the Blood Claws looked at Sven appalled, unable to believe what he was saying.

‘Be that as it may,’ Sergeant Hakon said. They turned; he was striding carefully over the rubble towards them, Inquisitor Isaan and Brother Tethys in his wake. ‘Best make sure your weapons are ready. Tonight it looks like we’re going to see some action.’

‘I know where the warlord is,’ Karah Isaan said. ‘He’s not too far from here. He’s taken over a huge building overlooking the central square. I can see it clearly in my mind’s eye.’

‘Most likely the governor’s mansion,’ Brother Tethys said. ‘It’s the largest building in the central area and it would appeal to the ork mentality. The whole place is a fortress. How are we going to get in?’

‘So we’ll just drive up and ask them to let us through, shall we?’ Sven said sarcastically.

‘That’s exactly what we will do,’ Karah said.

It was night and the moons beamed down. The death flares of exploding spaceships lit the dark sky. All around them the ork throng roistered, brawled and drank. Weapons were discharged. Broken bottles were thrust into ork faces while spectators laughed. Ragnar glanced around warily; his disguise seemed very thin.

They had lowered the canopy on the buggy so it obscured their faces. Once again he and Sven wore ork armour. Once again the others hid out of sight in the back of the buggy.

‘This is the stupidest plan I’ve ever heard,’ muttered Sven. ‘How did I ever let you talk me into this?’

‘I thought you liked it because it was stupid. It suits your mentality,’ replied Ragnar. But privately, he agreed with Sven. He could not see how they were going to carry this off. It seemed only a matter of time before they were challenged by some sentry, or invited to take part in another race by drunken orks. Still, all he could do now was keep driving, and pray to the Emperor that things would turn out all right.

They were approaching the town square. Ahead of them he could see a huge statue of what he took to be the governor. It had collapsed like a fallen colossus and now lay sprawled amidst the rubble. Its huge head had come away from the torso, and stared sightlessly at the sky with its stone eyes. The building itself was the only one left standing on the outskirts of the square. It had once been an impressive Imperial structure. Huge gargoyles clutched the four corner towers. A monstrous Imperial eagle, now defaced, spread its shattered wings over the entrance. The floodlights that had once lit it lay smashed near the doorway.

Lights blazed in many of the windows and huge banners covered in crude ork signs hung from beneath many of them. Here and there, Ragnar could see ork faces leering through the windows. He could also see the muzzles of great guns. The place was indeed a fortress.

‘How are we going to get in?’ he asked.

‘Keep driving. Go out of the square and round the back, to where the old servants’ entrance used to be,’ Brother Tethys said.

Ragnar did as he was told. He brought the buggy to a halt in a huge open space filled with wrecked vehicles. It was obvious a battle had been fought here. The cars had been smashed with heavy calibre bullets. Skeletons still lay between some of them where cleanup teams had failed to find them. Ragnar felt his heart race. The moment of truth was upon them. How were they going to get into the building?

He brought the buggy to a halt in an open space. The engine noise died. The stink of engine fuel subsided. He glanced around. There were many orks here too, camped out in lean-tos made from wreckage or in the wrecks themselves. Some of them huddled around bonfires, warming their hands and toasting food. They looked barbaric, monstrous figures from the dawn of time. They looked as savage as any Space Wolf and they were far more numerous.

‘What now?’ Ragnar asked.

‘Watch!’ said Karah. She made a gesture towards the nearest orks and Ragnar felt a surge of power emanating from her. He sensed the sudden wariness of his battle-brothers as they detected the same thing. The pack was uneasy, he could tell. The orks turned and looked towards them. Instinctively Ragnar’s hand went for his bolt pistol but a word from Karah stopped him. Slowly, as if compelled against their will, the orks lumbered

towards them. They looked a little confused. Karah said something to them in their own guttural tongue, and they nodded.

‘Conceal your weapons,’ she said, ‘and put your hands in the air.’

‘Like hell I will,’ said Sven.

‘By Russ, just do it!’ Hakon hissed. ‘I see the plan.’

So did Ragnar. She obviously had the orks under psychic control. They would pretend to be prisoners and simply march in. If it was this simple, why had she not done it earlier? His answer was swift in coming.

‘And be quick about it!’ she said. ‘These are strong-willed brutes. I cannot hold them for more than a couple of minutes.’

‘That is all it will take to get us inside,’ said Sternberg approvingly.

Tension filled Ragnar as they approached the doorway – would the ork sentries notice anything amiss; would they be challenged? One mistake would be all it took to bring a city full of greenskins down upon them. He felt his heart rate accelerate as they came to the entrance. He breathed a prayer and brought it back under control. He reduced the flow of sweat on his face by conscious effort. Around him he sensed his brothers do the same. The strain was so palpable he wondered the orks didn’t sense it.

The orks on guard were even more massive than usual. Huge tusks protruded from their lower lips. Their eyes glowed with feral savagery. In their massive paws they held the largest and crudest boltguns Ragnar had ever seen. Still, he thought, crude or no, one shot from them would end his life. They looked down at the orks accompanying Ragnar’s party contemptuously and bellowed a challenge. It was so sudden, and so shocking, it was all Ragnar could do to keep from drawing his pistol and beginning to shoot.

Their guards bellowed something back. The noise was so loud it was almost deafening. It appeared ork was a language to be shouted at all times. He looked over at Karah. She was pale and sweating, and he wondered if any of the orks would notice the stress written all over her face. Ragnar hoped that they would assume she was just another frightened human.

Whatever their escort said did the trick. The two massive orks stepped aside and let them pass. They were inside the hall, making their way deep into the heart of the ork citadel.



NINE

The inside of the building had been devastated by the orks, who had wrought havoc everywhere. In every place he looked, Ragnar could see smashed furniture, vandalised walls, gouged paintwork, and bullet holes. Here, once more, was evidence of the orks' appetite for destruction. They seemed to take pleasure in it. They just seemed to like breaking things.

On and on they ventured, deeper and deeper into the building – and the further they went, the paler and more tired-looking Inquisitor Isaan became. The orks were becoming more and more restless. Ragnar could smell their confusion and their anger. He could sense that they were coming out of the hypnotic trance into which she had put them. He tightened his grip on the butt of his bolt pistol. If trouble was coming, he was going to be ready for it.

Karah was breathing ever more heavily; sweat beaded her tattooed brow. She stumbled as she walked and her chest rose and fell as if she had been running hard. Sternberg and Hakon also seemed to realise was happening. They could see that she was losing control. Without a word, each of them took hold of one of her arms and helped her along.

The party came to a flight of stairs. Up they went, further and further into the building. There were fewer orks here, and more open space. Ragnar sensed that the crisis was coming soon. The orks were becoming angry. They stared around them in confusion. They looked like sleepers awakening from a dream, which in a way they were. Ragnar pushed open a door which led into a wrecked office.

Looking around, he saw that it was empty. This was good. He stepped inside and gestured for the others to follow. The entranced orks did so, but slowly and reluctantly.

Once inside he closed the door. All around him, he could tell by the way his battle-brothers stiffened, that they sensed what was coming – and that they were ready. Ragnar chopped across the throat of one of the orks. The hulking creature let out a long gurgling gasp and collapsed onto the floor. As one, Ragnar's comrades fell on the other orks. It was over in seconds.

‘What are we going to do now?’ Sven asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Ragnar admitted. He noticed that Sergeant Hakon was glaring at him.

‘Perhaps, in the future, you’ll let us know what you are going to do in advance, Ragnar,’ the sergeant said. The hair had risen on the back of the veteran’s neck. He was like an old wolf being challenged for leadership of the pack by a younger one. Instinctively Ragnar bared his fangs in response. The two of them glared at each other, suddenly locked in confrontation, oblivious to anything else. Despite himself, Ragnar felt the beast rise within him. In that moment, he was ready to leap on the sergeant, to rend and tear.

And he knew that the sergeant felt the same way about him. But Sergeant Hakon was older and wiser and more used to dealing with the beast within himself. He took a deep breath, spread his hands wide in a gesture of peace, and Ragnar could see him relax visibly. Something in the sergeant’s manner calmed him in turn. He felt the fury seep away from him like water running down a drain.

‘I– I will do that,’ Ragnar said at last.

‘Remember that,’ said Hakon.

‘Now we’re in,’ Sternberg cut in, as if what had just happened was of no concern to him. ‘The talisman must be close at hand.’

He looked over at Karah Isaan hopefully. The woman stared down at the floor, unaware that all eyes were upon. Slowly, like someone coming out of a trance or awakening from a deep sleep, she raised her head. She glanced around with dark, blind-seeming eyes. Ragnar sensed her intelligence return only slowly. It was as if her mind had been somewhere else a long way off. She sighed, and then spoke, ‘It is here. It is close. The ork-thing that carries it is using its power.

‘And he is terrible.’

Ragnar heard the fear in her voice and smelled the terror in her scent. For the first time, he wondered what it was they were really going to face.

Silence fell as they all considered their options. Ragnar realised that none of them had really believed that they would actually get this far. They were winging it, improvising a plan in face of new and unforeseeable circumstances. He considered the obstacles that still lay ahead of them. They were in a vast, unknown building packed full of orks. They were hugely outnumbered. They were facing a foe whose psychic powers

frightened a powerful inquisitor. And a foe, moreover, who would probably be surrounded by heavily armed bodyguards.

Their only advantage lay in surprise, in the fact that no one knew they were here. They could strike quickly and unexpectedly. But how were they going to get out again? Assuming, that was, that they got their hands on the talisman in the first place. He could tell from the confused scents that all his companions were thinking along the same lines.

‘We can use the teleport to get out,’ Sternberg said suddenly. ‘But someone will have to go to the roof and place the beacon.’

‘What if there is no ship within range?’ asked Hakon.

‘Then we’ll just have to think of something else, won’t we?’ said the inquisitor. His voice was steely with determination.

‘No, then we’ll bloody well die,’ said Sven.

‘Everybody dies,’ said the inquisitor.

‘Yeah, sooner or later,’ Sven snapped back. ‘But personally I’d rather it was later.’

‘We all would,’ Karah muttered from the corner where she had slumped.

‘Sven, Strybjorn, Nils: you’re going to the roof with the beacon,’ Sergeant Hakon said decisively. ‘Ragnar, you and Lars are coming with me and... our guests.’

‘I protest,’ Strybjorn sneered. Ragnar shot him a murderous glance. ‘Why should Lars and... and Ragnar have all the glory?’

‘Because that is the way it is,’ Sergeant Hakon. ‘Brother Tethys, you go with them!’

‘Yes sir,’ the diminutive monk said, almost leaping to obey.

‘We should wait a while,’ Inquisitor Isaan said. ‘Once the orks are drunk and sleepy it will be easier to move around the building.’

‘Logical enough,’ said Sergeant Hakon. ‘Strybjorn, take first watch. Everyone else, get some rest before the action starts.’

It was the middle of the night. They moved quietly through the long dark halls. All around him Ragnar could sense sleeping orks. He could hear their snores; he could smell the alcohol on their breath. The whole party moved with a near-inhuman stealth. Despite their bulky armour, the Space Wolves were all but inaudible even to Ragnar’s keen ears, and he doubted that any but a Space Wolf like himself could have heard the inquisitors as they padded quietly along.

It was dark, but here and there he could see faint lights gleaming. These were places to be avoided, and they all took pains to skirt around them. Ragnar was deeply aware of Karah Isaan walking just ahead of him. He seemed unnaturally sensitive to her movements, but then again, he suspected that they all were. She was the only one of them who truly knew where they were going.

He could sense the deep, dark fear growing within her as they ventured ever further, approaching their goal. A moment later, ahead of them the Wolf sensed rather than heard ork voices. Almost as one the party ducked through a doorway into the concealment of a quiet room. Ragnar held his breath as a clutch of ork sentries marched past. An anxious few moments of held breaths ticked by before any of them dared breathe. They had not been detected.

After ten more heartbeats they re-emerged into the corridor. Proceeding on their way, they entered a more luxurious part of the building. Here tapestries still clung to the walls and statues, though smashed or ridden with bullet holes, still stood guard in alcoves. Judging by the opulence of the fittings, these had obviously been the governor's apartments.

Up ahead he could hear the sound of shouting in guttural ork voices. They were approaching the warlord's lair. He felt his heart start to race once more. A prayer to the Emperor restored control and his twin heartbeats to their normal speed.

He noticed that Karah was chanting softly to herself. Her eyes were half-closed and a dim yellow nimbus of light played erratically around her head. He wondered what she was doing. Was she seeking to attract the attention of the great ork sorcerer from her scryings? Was this her long-awaited treachery? By the Great Wolf, what was going on here?

His hand reached for the butt of his pistol, then he suddenly spun around. Four orks, presumably guards, were stood in a shadowy archway. The orks were looking directly at them all, yet they paid no attention. The brutal creatures looked at them as if it were an everyday occurrence to have a group of armed humans creeping discreetly in their midst. Slowly realisation dawned on the Blood Claw. The inquisitor was using her powers to fool the orks, to befuddle their wits. He had no idea what the orks were seeing. Perhaps they saw other orks or perhaps they saw nothing

at all. It did not matter; whatever it was, they were effectively shielded from the orks' sight.

Once more he noticed the sweat beading Karah's brow, and how drawn and pale she looked. He realised that all this use of her – considerable, there was no doubt about it now – psychic powers was taking a terrible toll on her meagre resources. He wondered how she would fare when they actually met the ork warlord.

They were now only ten strides from the huge entrance which was so obviously their destination. Two immense ork warriors flanked the archway. They were quite possibly the hugest creatures Ragnar had ever seen. They were at least a head taller than he was. Their arms were each as thick as tree trunks. Their leathery fists were the size of most men's heads. The guns they clutched in their hands were crude constructions of folded steel and wood, but they had the calibre of cannons.

Ragnar flinched warily as the party approached them, but the guards did not seem to notice him or the others. Their red eyes stayed focussed on the middle distance. Just ahead of him, Karah weaved on her feet as if she were drunk. Ragnar reached out and steadied her with his free hand. He felt her shiver under his touch. Her skin, midnight dark in the dim light, felt clammy and cold and he could feel the bone-deep weariness in her.

As he supported her, he felt a disturbing tingling in his fingers. He was aware of the flow of power through her, and sensed the huge amount of energy pouring out of her. How were they going to get through the door, he wondered, without the orks noticing? He felt her shiver, a great rippling shudder, and in that moment one of the orks turned. The halo of light around the inquisitor's head was suddenly so bright it was dazzling. The ork turned and stepped through the archway and they simply followed.

They found themselves in a chamber that was all but overwhelming in its barbaric splendour. It was as if all the loot in the city had been poured into this one place. Piles of jewelled trinkets and silver coins lay everywhere, mixed in with heaps of custom weapons and ammunition. It was all obvious portable wealth, selected for its brightness and ability to attract the eye, rather than any genuine aesthetic merit.

In the very centre of the room, a massive ork even larger than his brutal bodyguards lolled on what had once been the governor's throne. Its skin was a strange sickly yellowish-green in the half-light. Its eyes blazed with their own internal fire and a glow that could only be madness. Huge

tusks jutted from its slobbering lower jaws. Around the huge creature hung a palpable aura of power that it wore like a cloak. And on its knees lay a glittering gemstone that Ragnar recognised instantly as the second part of the talisman. He sensed the immediate response from Sternberg and Isaan and he knew from their scents that his battle-brothers had recognised it too. Its pale, sickly fire echoed the one in the ork's eyes. He could sense that the creature was drawing power from it in some crude way.

As the humans entered the room something bizarre happened. Without warning, a bolt of pure psychic energy flared from each of the two parts of the talisman simultaneously. Each piece suddenly glowed a hundred times brighter, and a complex net of energy sprang up between them. Scattered by the facets of the two gems, their light sprayed around the vast room.

Karah Isaan let out a groan and slumped to her knees. Ragnar sensed a dominating presence which she struggled to fight before it could overcome her spirit. The ork looked up at them almost casually, definitely unafraid, unnervingly like a man who has just had unexpected but not unwelcome guests drop in on him. There was an utter confidence in its manner that was daunting. It looked at them and spoke, using heavily accented and yet comprehensible Gothic.

‘Arummm... Greetings, mortals. I am Gurg, speaker for Two Gods. It good you brought Eye of Gork to me. It goes well with Eye of Mork.’

Ragnar glanced at the bestial ork in wonder. Was it possible that the warlord had known they were here all along and had allowed them to come this far? Or was this just some supremely skilful bluff? Or was the creature simply mad? Its appearance certainly suggested that all or any of these wild suppositions could be true – yet there was that palpable aura of daunting power about the thing. Mad or not, this was a being to be feared, of that Ragnar had no doubt whatsoever.

‘Give it and I spare your lives. Done me great service bringing it. Saved big trip. Hur! Hur!’

It took Ragnar a moment to realise that the strange barking sound which filled the room was the ork's laughter. He did not think he had ever heard anything quite so cruel. It touched the beast within him, and set his hackles rising. A raging fury bubbled into his brain. The stink of ork suddenly made him want to tear and rend. It was the feeling he had when he confronted Sergeant Hakon, but intensified a hundred times.

All around him, he could sense the same savage, bestial rage trying to overwhelm his battle-brothers. He felt their anger and their urge to strike. Only the grizzled old sergeant maintained any semblance of control, but, like the restraint of a wolf pack leader, it was enough to leash his followers, at least until they saw what he was going to do.

‘Give us the jewel,’ Hakon said, ‘and we will let you live. Deny us, and you will surely die.’

‘Hundred thousand ork warriors, all around? You who die.’

‘I don’t see any warriors!’ Hakon spat back. ‘Except these two, and they look useless.’

Gurg raised his hand. Green fire burned suddenly in the depths of his eyes. Green and yellow energies swirled out from his piece of the talisman. The two orks who had guarded the entrance suddenly stood straighter and a new keenness came into their eyes. They looked around at the interlopers and growled with suppressed fury. Had Ragnar been anything else but a Space Marine he might have known fear at that moment. As it was, his hair bristled and he bared his fangs in a gesture of aggression that matched the orks’ own. Next to him, however, Karah Isaan tumbled forward to lie face down on the floor. The interplay of energies seemed too much for her.

Gurg grunted something to his minions in orkish and they stepped smartly to either side of his throne, their weapons held at the ready. Suddenly Ragnar wondered just exactly what he and his brothers were doing? Had they all suddenly become so enthralled by the sight of the talisman that they had lost any semblance of common sense? They should have killed the orks when they had the chance and that would have left the warlord alone in their presence.

But hardly defenceless, Ragnar told himself. A creature like Gurg, even without the mystic power of the artefact he had stolen, would never be that. He held his bolt pistol tightly, determined to fire if the orks made the slightest threatening gesture, despite any restraint Sergeant Hakon might show. A slight undercurrent in the pack leader’s scent told him that Hakon had sensed this, and did not disapprove. Not for the first time, Ragnar was glad of the near telepathic sensory link he shared with his battle-brothers. This wordless communication was a huge advantage in situations like this. As were the heightened senses which told him that

even now other orks were coming closer to the chamber, and that the jaws of a trap were closing. Hakon seemed to sense it too.

‘Give me the talisman,’ he said, ‘This is your last warning.’

‘You come take it, wolf boy,’ the ork warlord sneered.

‘With pleasure,’ Hakon shot back, a low growl rumbling deep within his chest. The sergeant moved quickly but, fast as he was, the ork was faster. Even as Hakon’s pistol rose to fire, Gurg had stepped aside from his throne. Moving with incredible agility for one of such huge bulk, he bent to snatch up a power axe lying nearby as he moved and returned to his full height as, all the while, a stream of tracer fire from the sergeant’s bolt pistol traced around his movements.

Suddenly and shockingly, Gurg simply stopped moving and raised his hands. He howled a chant to his brutish gods. A green aura sprang up all around him and suddenly the sergeant’s bolter shells were halted in the air, frozen mere inches from the warleader’s leathery green flesh. The talisman’s glow grew ever brighter to Ragnar’s eyes. He sensed the huge forces the ork was drawing on. Using such energy for these purposes, he thought to himself, was like using a chainsword to chop twigs. The power of the talisman was obviously intended to fulfil a greater purpose although what that purpose might be Ragnar had no idea.

An evil smile twisted the ork’s lips and revealed his yellowish tusks. He gestured and the shells reversed themselves and went hurtling back towards the Space Wolves. Had it not been for their lightning quickness in throwing themselves flat, they might have been hit. But all of them had senses of superhuman keenness, and reflexes to match. As one they took evasive action and thankfully the bullets passed over them.

As he twisted to watch, Ragnar saw one of them ricochet off Sternberg’s armour, and several others buried themselves in the wall. Then all hell broke loose as Gurg’s bodyguards opened fire, and the Imperial warriors responded. Ragnar knew it would be a short battle. With so much firepower being deployed and so little cover available, it was bound to be. More than that, the Space Marines and their allies needed it to be for he sensed the presence of a horde of approaching orks. He rolled across the floor and snapped off a shot at one of the bodyguards. The bolter shell smashed through its heavy armour and embedded itself in the ork’s flesh before exploding.

The ork was thrown back off its feet but, incredibly, started to rise again. Ragnar was amazed – he could see a massive hole in the creature’s armour and internal organs gaping from its open chest, yet the ork was still moving, and not only that, still fighting. It swung its weapon towards Ragnar and he dived to avoid the hail of bullets flashing from its blazing muzzle.

Ragnar did not flinch, even though he momentarily expected to be greeting his ancestors in Hell. Instead he kept moving, knowing he was not quick enough to avoid the storm of lead if the ork kept firing and yet determined to try. The shooting ceased. Ragnar glanced over to see that the ork’s head had been smashed to pulp by a well-placed shot. He was not sure which of his comrades had saved him, but he was determined to thank them later... if there was a later. Right now that did not look so certain.

Gurg strode towards him, his skin seeming to repel bullets as Ragnar’s armour might repel rain. He looked ultimately fierce and determined and the massive power axe roared like thunder in his hands. He took a mighty swipe at Ragnar and the Blood Claw was only just able to leap clear. By Russ, the creature was fast! Ragnar wondered whether it was naturally so quick or whether its speed had been augmented by the awesome power of the talisman. The ork was by far and away the most formidable close combat opponent Ragnar had ever faced. Almost as soon as the fight began, he knew he was hugely overmatched and he was fighting for his life – but he was determined not to give up without a struggle. Leaping backwards and away from the warlord, he snatched up his chainsword and thumbed the ignition rune. The sacred weapon, though many centuries old, roared to life in his hand and he raised it to parry the ork’s next blow.

Almost as soon as he had done so, he knew it was a mistake. Strong as the Wolf was, the ork was far, far stronger. Its power was unnatural, even for one so obviously big and strong, and Ragnar knew immediately that some supernatural agency was at work here. Sparks flickered as their two weapons came together, metal grinding against metal, serrated blades interlocking with serrated blades. A smell of ozone and hot steel filled Ragnar’s nostrils. The ork launched another sledgehammer blow, and his blade was smashed from his grip and sent flying across the room. For a brief moment, Ragnar stood defenceless before the massive ork leader. Gurg smiled at him nastily and aimed another blow.

At that moment, Ragnar caught a flicker of something from the corner of his eye. Lars leapt past him and barrelled into Gurg at great speed. It was a diving tackle of the sort Ragnar had seen Fenrisian youths use in their brawls. It was a crude tactic but it certainly proved effective. The gigantic ork reeled backwards, momentarily off-balance. Ragnar threw himself into the fray, leaping forward and seizing Gurg's hefty wrist with both hands before he could bring his axe down on poor Lars.

The mighty ork warlord, buoyed up with power from the talisman, swatted him aside as if he were a fly. The force of the blow cracked the carapace of Ragnar's armour and sent him hurtling across the room to smash into the wall with sickening force. He lay near to his still whirring chainsword. If it had not been for the reinforced bone structure of his head, Ragnar felt his skull might have been crushed by the impact. As it was, stars flickered before his eyes and his vision seemed to pulse from black to grey and then back again. He tried to force himself upright but he was too dizzy and weak. Despite all of the alterations made to his body during his transformation into a Space Marine, none had prepared him for combat with such a foe as this.

Gurg laughed and raised the talisman into the air. Lars lay at his feet, struggling to rise, to bring his weapon to bear. Gurg brought down one enormous foot, knocking the Blood Claw flat again. Another stomp and there was a sickening crack as Lars's neck broke. The scent of one of his own pack going down ripped a howl of pain and fury from Ragnar's throat. He just had time to snatch up his chainsword before the beast took over completely. A red wave of berserker rage tore through his brain, drowning out all pain and all fear. In a furious desire to avenge his fallen comrade, Ragnar leapt to the attack once more, swinging his chainsword with superhuman speed and force.

Gurg raised his axe and blocked the blow, but this time Ragnar was ready for the move and twisted his blade free. He unleashed another blow, and then another. The warlord parried both but he was obviously taken aback by the fury of Ragnar's assault. The Wolf forced the beast back, one step, then another and another. From behind him Ragnar could hear the sounds of firing as the others tried to pin down the approaching orks with fire. The sane part of Ragnar's mind, now buried deep within the beast, knew this was a forlorn hope at best. There was no way they could succeed in keeping so many orks at bay. There were just too many of them.

He kept up his attack, lashing out again and again, heedless of anything now save his desire to kill the giant greenskin before him. But it was no use. It seemed now like the ork had got his measure. His parries became surer and swifter, and his counterblows came back at Ragnar like thunderbolts. For all his speed and power, it was all Ragnar could do to keep the ork at bay. Slowly, one step at a time, it drove him back over the ground they had covered, and then further back still. Ragnar knew that he was never going to survive the fight. It was only a matter of time now before he misjudged one of the ork's attacks, or stumbled and fell under the sheer punishing power of his blows. It was a forlorn hope that he could manage to stand against a foe so mighty.

Already his arms ached. His fingers felt as if they were about to be ripped from their sockets every time he parried. Sweat beaded his brow, and despite the awesome reserves of stamina and fortitude built into his re-engineered body, he was breathing in gasps. The air rasped in and out of his lungs. This had been a foolish venture, he decided, doomed from the start. Still, at least he would die in battle, as any true Fenrisian warrior should, though it galled him to fall with his task incomplete.

Suddenly Sergeant Hakon was there, standing beside him, lashing out at Gurg with his own blade. The ork laughed as if delighted to have another foe to slaughter, and switched his attack to Hakon. Ragnar knew that the veteran was a far more experienced combatant than he, but even so he could see that the sergeant could do little more at the moment than hold the ork back, and soon he would be unable to do even that. But at least he had bought Ragnar a brief respite in which to gather his wits and his strength before returning to the fray.

He breathed deeply, praying fervently to the Emperor and to Leman Russ for guidance and aid. As he did so, he became aware of the alteration of Karah's scent from somewhere behind him, as she reasserted her power. When he heard her mutter the chant of a spell in some alien language he did not recognise, Ragnar risked a glance at her.

She stood, long legs planted far apart, her dark eyes glazed and half-closed, like one of the orks she had put into a trance. Her fragment of the talisman glowed brightly in her hand. He could see lights swirling within it, like water in a whirlpool. Energy seemed to be flowing back into it, somehow drawn from the talisman in the ork's hands. A startled look of surprise and anxiety flicker across Gurg's inhuman face. His attack lost

some of its potency. He looked as if suddenly he were fighting two simultaneous battles. One, on the psychic level with Karah, and another on the physical level with Ragnar and Hakon.

‘Whatever you’re doing, Karah, keep it up!’ he shouted, then wished he hadn’t. All he had succeeded in doing was drawing the ork’s attention to the inquisitor. Gurg knew now that he would have to kill her in order to survive. Determined to redeem his mistake, Ragnar plunged forward to attack and keep the brute away from the woman. Hakon sensed his intention and redoubled his attack as well. The two of them rained down blow after blow on the ork. Once again the warlord was forced to take a step backwards.

Ragnar sensed the build-up of psychic power around him. Swirls of light flickered past him from the direction of the female inquisitor. They impacted on the talisman in Gurg’s hand. As the tendrils became brighter, the glow of the talisman and the glow that surrounded the warlord dimmed. It seemed that Karah was sucking the power away from the ork. Gurg became weaker and slower. New hope filled Ragnar and he continued to rain down blows on the greenskin, praying that his psychic shield would fail before the rest of his bodyguard could break through his comrades’ wall of gunfire and come to their master’s aid.

The ork growled deeply and struck back. The sheer ferocity of his attack took Ragnar by surprise, and the blade of the power-axe bit through the shattered armour of his chest plate, sending a surge of pure agony searing through him. He fought to retain consciousness as his altered nervous system sought to damp down the overload of pain. Endorphins and opiates poured out of altered glands to help him ignore the pain.

He bit his lips, drawing blood, in the effort to avoid shrieking like a wounded beast. Instead, he lashed out with his chainsword, and was surprised when it passed through the green nimbus and bit deep into the ork’s flesh. Muscle showed through the rent in the armour, but the warlord’s blood was strangely reluctant to flow. Even as Ragnar watched the flesh began to knit together again with a sick slurping sound.

‘By Russ! Are you a troll?’ he shouted in alarmed Fenrisian. The ork did not even bother to answer, merely aiming another blow at him, which would have severed his head if it had connected. Its return swing bit deep into the stonework at Ragnar’s feet sending chips of plascrete flying in all directions. Sergeant Hakon took the opportunity to send his blade into the

ork's neck, severing tendons and veins. But once again, the skin and sinew began to knit almost as soon as the wound was inflicted.

'I have favour of Gork!' Gurg screamed. 'And you now die.'

'It's the power of the talisman!' he heard Karah shout. 'He's attuned himself to it and now it's healing him.'

Ragnar ducked another swing of the huge axe. The woman's words filled his thoughts. If the talisman was what made the ork invincible, then perhaps he should try and get it away from him. Almost at once he saw his opening. He lashed out at the warlord's hand, smashing his blade into the fingers which grasped the talisman. It seemed as if Gurg realised what he was doing and closed his hand in a determined effort not to drop the thing, but it was too late. His fingers were severed. The second fragment of the Talisman of Lykos fell to the floor and the green aura faded from around the huge ork's frame. The brute responded almost instantly, bending down to try and grasp the thing, but Ragnar back-heeled it away in the direction of Karah and aimed another blow at Gurg.

This time the ork jumped back and clear. The warlord took in his situation at a glance and realised that without the talisman's power he had no chance against the Space Marines. Acting quickly, he turned and raced back behind the throne. Ragnar heard a door open and then slam shut. Even as the Wolf raced to intercept the ork, he knew he was too late.

He lashed out at the plascrete door with his chainsword. The blade whined as it ricocheted off the rock-hard substance. Behind him he heard Karah Isaan's triumphant shout: 'I have it. We can go.'

'Ragnar, regroup! We don't have time for that. We must get to the roof!' Hakon shouted.

Mind reeling with frustration and disappointment, Ragnar turned back. He could see that the others were already making preparations to depart. Karah brandished the amulet in her hand. Hakon was hoisting Lars's corpse onto his shoulders. Seeing Ragnar's troubled glare, he said, 'We leave no bodies for the orks, boy. We must reclaim his geneseed for the Chapter.'

Using the body partially as a shield, he raced out into the corridor. Bolter shells tore into poor Lars's corpse as the sergeant moved steadily down the corridor, eliminating his enemies with well-placed shots. 'I just hope the others have got the teleport beacon set up,' he shouted.

So do I, thought Ragnar, racing up the flight of stairs. Otherwise all of this is for naught.

Behind them, he could sense the horde of orks at their heels. Ragnar ducked as another bolter shell almost hit his head. He turned and grabbed Karah as she toppled forward. Briefly, he wondered whether she was hit, but then he saw she was merely exhausted. The use of her powers had drained her almost completely. She held out both parts of the talisman to him.

‘Take them,’ she said. ‘I can’t go on and they must be taken away from here.’

‘Don’t be foolish,’ he replied, bending down and lifting her as if she were a child. He draped her across his shoulders and raced on. To him she seemed to weigh almost nothing. She was not much of a burden. ‘Just don’t drop those things,’ he said, ‘It’ll be hell going back for them.’

‘I’ll try to remember that,’ said her ironic voice from just behind his head. Ragnar heard ork war cries behind him. It gave his feet wings as he pounded on up the stairs towards the roof.

Sven and the others were waiting for them. They had taken up position near a great rusted metal air vent in the centre of the roof that provided them with some cover. Ragnar thanked Russ for their foresight. He suspected they were going to need all the cover they could get in the next few minutes.

They had already set up the emergency beacon. The brass coils were humming and an array of runes flashed in sequence on the display. Ragnar sincerely hoped it had been configured correctly, for it was their only chance of escape. Space Wolf or not, he did not think they would long survive an encounter with several thousand greenskin warriors.

Ragnar and the others hurried to join their comrades. He could tell from the dour look on Sven’s face that there was something wrong.

‘Trouble?’ he heard Sergeant Hakon ask.

‘Aye, trouble,’ Sven replied. ‘The beacon is scanning for a carrier signal but we can’t find it. We don’t even know if any of our ships are up there and in range.’

‘It’s possible that the orks have a low-intensity power field around the building. It could be disrupting the signal,’ Inquisitor Sternberg suggested, running a hand through his grey hair. ‘If we can find some uncovered

frequencies there's a chance we can punch the signal through. Let me see the controls, lad.'

The Blood Claws around the beacon did not move. They had all stood and were all looking at Sergeant Hakon in silence. They had noticed the significance of the burden he carried, and knew from the scent that Lars was not simply wounded but dead. Their own scents carried their grief and their concern to Ragnar's nostrils. Sergeant Hakon grimaced at them, showing his teeth.

'He met his end like a true Space Wolf. I suggest you prepare yourselves to do the same. If Inquisitor Sternberg cannot fix this beacon, all of our souls will go to greet the Emperor within the hour. Now move aside and let the man do his work.'

The Blood Claws did as they were ordered and Sternberg swiftly knelt over the beacon and began to make adjustments to the controls. 'Do not stray more than ten paces from me,' he said as he worked. 'If the ship can get a lock on us, they'll respond to the distress signal immediately. Anyone out of the beacon range will be left behind and there's not much anyone will be able to do about it.'

Ragnar strode over and gently placed Karah Isaan on the ground next to her fellow inquisitor. He was taking no chances with her safety, or the safety of the talisman, he hastily assured himself. She gave him a wan smile of thanks and drew her pistol, ready to defend herself. Ragnar turned and joined his companions. The Wolves had fanned out to cover all points of the compass. They all kept themselves facing outwards, and as spread out as possible. Ragnar knew they were all thinking the same thing he was. Clumped together at close range like this, they would be easy prey for a single grenade.

He could hear wild howls coming closer. Even as he watched, the first of the pursuing orks emerged from the stairwell – to be cut down by a withering blast of fire from the Space Wolves. Fortunately only a few of them could get through at a time. As long as the ammunition held out, they could be kept at bay.

'Watch out!' he heard Sven shout, just as the acrid stink of ork hit his nostrils. 'They're coming up the outside of the building too.'

'Fire escape's still intact!' he heard Tethys shout. Ragnar had no real idea what he meant. In the village where he had grown up no building had been more than a single storey high, and the Fang was carved from the

rock of mountains. Even as he whirled and snapped off a shot, it dawned on him that it was probably some way out of the building in case of emergencies, if the internal stairwells were blocked or the dropshafts weren't working. Right now that did not matter. What mattered was that it was providing the orks with another means of getting to them.

Shots from behind him told him that a few of the greenskins were managing to escape from the exposed stairwell. He turned and fired from the hip, blowing the head clean off one of the brutes. Its brains splattered over its companions but they merely bellowed louder and ran faster. The chatter of gunfire from off to the right told him that some of the orks had taken up position on the edge of the roof near the fire escape and were pouring hot lead onto the Space Wolves from their flanking position. It was not looking good, and it was getting worse.

From below, he could hear the sound of breaking glass and the roar of what sounded like mighty rocket engines. Suddenly, dozens of ork troops rose into view, massive jetpacks strapped onto their backs, huge boltguns held in their hands. Ragnar shot at one of them. His shell buried itself in one of the jetpacks. Sparks flew and the ork swung out of control, smashing first into one of his companions and then into another. It gave Ragnar a small sense of accomplishment but he knew he had barely slowed the inevitable. There was no way so few of them could hold the teeming greenskins at bay. Even now more and more orks were clambering over the dead bodies of their comrades in the stairwell and charging into view. Overhead he could see a few of the rocket packers preparing to hurl down stick grenades. It seemed that, like it or not, they were going to have to spread out and away from the beacon or be torn apart in a rain of explosive death.

Bolter shells blazed all around him, taking out part of the air vent. Shrapnel spanged off his armour. If they stayed here, then the sheer weight of enemy fire was going to kill them anyway. Ragnar took a deep breath, offered up a prayer to sacred Russ, and prepared himself for a desperate last stand. He also prayed that he would meet his end as well as Lars had.

Suddenly the orks stopped firing, as if at a single command. He wondered why until he saw the massive figure of Gurg step out of the stairwell onto the roof. All of the orks held their fire at a gesture from their chieftain. Such was the barbaric majesty of the warlord that the

Blood Claws, too, stopped shooting. Only Inquisitor Sternberg kept moving, tinkering frantically with the controls of the beacon.

‘Good fight,’ the ork warlord boomed. ‘Over now. Surrender, give me back jewel. Maybe let you live.’

‘Space Wolves don’t surrender to greenskin scum like you,’ said Sergeant Hakon and made to raise his pistol.

‘Fair ’nuff,’ said Gurg with a shrug. ‘Your lives over.’

‘No! Wait!’ Ragnar shouted suddenly. ‘What are your terms?’

All of his comrades’ eyes were upon him. He thought he saw contempt written on their faces. Not that it mattered. He was not really afraid for his life; at least that was what he told himself. He just did not want them to fail in their mission, and for Lars to have fallen in vain. Right now the most important thing was to buy Sternberg time to fix the beacon, whatever it took. It was their one hope of getting away from here with the talisman. At all costs he had to keep the ork talking. He saw Hakon’s nostrils flare, as if reading his scent, and comprehension dawned on the sergeant’s face.

‘One wolf-cub fears for life,’ Gurg rumbled. There was a note of malicious enjoyment in his voice.

Good, thought Ragnar, every little helps.

‘I will wring his neck myself,’ Hakon said bleakly. Ragnar was not sure whether he meant it or was simply acting out his part in the little drama.

‘Just give him to us, sergeant,’ he heard Sven say viciously. ‘We’ll make him suffer.’

‘What are your terms?’ Ragnar asked once more.

‘Put down guns. Give me jewels. That’s it.’

‘Do you guarantee our safety?’

‘Guarantee you die if you don’t!’

‘At least we’ll die fighting, then, and not be tortured and eaten by you ork cannibals.’

‘If you want!’ The warlord began to gesture to his warriors to attack. Ragnar’s mouth went dry. He thought the game was up and that it was all over. A quick glance told him that Sternberg had not yet got the beacon to work.

‘No! Wait a moment!’ Ragnar shouted. ‘Are you really so afraid of us?’

‘What you mean?’

‘Do you fear to face me in single combat?’

‘First you offer surrender. Then you offer fight me! Make up your mind, boy. What is it?’

‘Will you fight me one-on-one, or are you afraid?’

‘No afraid. No stupid either. Why fight you? Have you killed like this!’
The ork snapped his fingers.

‘Then you are afraid!’

Gurg turned away, shaking his head in disgust, and barked a quick command to his followers. Ragnar did not have to speak ork to know he was saying: ‘Kill them.’

Suddenly the orks were raising their guns to fire. From overhead a mass of stick grenades began to fall. Ragnar knew there was no escape, no way out. His last desperate gamble had failed and that it was all too possible that his comrades would take the belief that he was a fool and a coward with them to the grave.

He tried to snap off a shot at Gurg, determined at least to try to kill the warlord, but a seething sea of green faces surged between them. Bolter shells blazed all around him. The sound of thunder filled his ears. Something hit him. Pain tore through him. A blinding flash filled his sight. There was a sensation of coldness, of being torn apart. Eventually it was over.

Slowly Ragnar’s vision cleared. He looked around. The orks were gone. The air smelled different but he almost instantly recognised in what way. It smelled like the inside of the *Light of Truth*. Then it came to him that it could only mean one thing – that the beacon had worked, and that the teleport had reached down like the hand of the Emperor to sweep them to safety.

He glanced around at his companions to see the same look of shocked surprise on all of their faces. They were all just as amazed as he was to see that they were still alive. Ragnar felt his lips twist into a feral smile. Exultation filled his heart. They had done it. They had walked right into the heart of the ork stronghold, and escaped again, taking the talisman with them. They had succeeded in the first part of their mission.

The others were all staring at him. He wondered if they still thought he was a coward who would betray them, or whether they had realised that it had all been a ruse to buy them the time they needed. They looked worried

and pale, and he wondered what was wrong. He opened his mouth to speak but no words would come out. He felt oddly weak, uncertain and dizzy. There was a strange buzzing sound in his ears.

Then he noticed the blood flowing from his side and face, and was aware of the searing pain surging through him. He had been hit, he knew, whether by an ork shell or something else. He raised his hand to his face and felt a great open wound. He felt organs leaking through his sides and looked down to see something long and rope-like protruding from his stomach. He reached down and felt his own innards starting to tumble out. Perhaps he had not been so lucky after all, he thought, and tumbled forward into darkness.



TEN

Ragnar's eyes snapped open. He felt numb. Part of his body felt frozen. For a moment he was disoriented. He had no idea quite where or who he was. It seemed that he might be in the cold hell of his people after all. Perhaps he really had died with the rest of the Thunderfists when the Grimskulls attacked their village, and all of the other stuff, about going to the Fang and becoming a Space Wolf, was just a hallucination of his dying mind, a trick played by evil spirits. He stared at the unfamiliar metal ceiling and tried to tell himself that it wasn't true. Sweat beaded his brow, and he could feel his heart racing.

He was alive, he told himself. He was not dead. He was not

Like a message of confirmation sent by Russ, Karah Isaan's beautiful brown face came into view above him. He felt more than relief at seeing it. He felt a surge of something else, something he could not quite put his finger on, something he had not felt since Ana had been lost, something that really should have been impossible for him to feel as a Space Marine. He pushed the confused thought aside. He was alive. He was not trapped in some strange pre-death dream. At least he hoped not. It was a nightmare that he had often had since becoming a Space Wolf and it sometimes gave his life a complete sense of unreality.

'Where... am I?' he forced himself to ask.

'The sanctum of the *Light of Truth*,' she replied, reaching down to touch his brow with her long, cool fingers. 'You were very close to death, for a long time.'

'How long?'

'Weeks. We have made another warp jump into a new system while you lay in the healing sarcophagus.'

'What happened?'

'Don't you remember?'

'Not much.'

'You saved us. You kept Gurg talking just long enough for Inquisitor Sternberg to fix the beacon. It was quick thinking. He will want to thank you himself for it.'

‘I meant: how did I come to be here? Was I wounded?’

‘In several places. We had to dig bolter shells out of your chest and your head.’

‘Was it serious? Will there be long-term damage? Will I be able to walk and fight again?’

‘One question at a time, eh? I am supposed to be the inquisitor here.’

‘Was that a joke?’ he asked, confused.

‘Yes, it was. And in answer to your questions, you will heal just fine. You Marines are made very tough, and your body will heal anything that does not kill it, or so our chirurgeon assures me. Says he has never seen anything like it – that the Ancients must have been miracle workers to make such a thing possible.’

‘I have no idea what he means by that.’

‘Nor I really. The chirurgeons have their own mysteries.’

He could tell by her scent that she was not telling the truth but decided it was not his business just now to pry into whatever forbidden knowledge she might possess. After all, there were certainly mysteries about the Space Wolves that he could not reveal to her. ‘Are all the others well?’

‘Yes. A few minor wounds, nothing serious. Except... except for Lars, of course. They have already performed the funeral rites for him.’

‘And I missed them.’

‘Yes.’

Ragnar felt a strange stab of pain and loss. It was odd to feel such a sensation for someone he had really barely known. Lars had been one of the quiet ones, had kept himself to himself, and now he was gone and Ragnar would never have the chance to know him. It seemed like such a waste. He told himself that it was his sickness and weakness speaking. Lars had died in battle like a true Wolf, and no Space Marine could ask for more.

‘He saved my life, you know.’

‘I was there. I saw it. He was very brave. But then you all were.’

‘He saved my life, but I could not save his.’

‘Sometimes these things happen. You did save mine though. And I am grateful.’

‘I saved the talisman,’ he said, surprised himself by how coldly his voice came out. He was ashamed when he saw the tiny flicker of hurt, quickly concealed, flare in her eyes. He wondered why he had said that,

and in such a way. Why did he feel threatened by the closeness that seemed to be developing between them?

‘No. You saved my life, and I am grateful. You could have taken the talisman and moved on, but you didn’t it. You came back for me.’

He forced a smile. ‘Maybe.’

‘You should get some rest. Sergeant Hakon says he wants to have you back in harness soon. The others have repaired your wargear.’

‘That should please them,’ he said ironically.

‘I don’t think so. Sven told me to tell you that he’s a Space Marine, not a bloody armourer, and that next time you can fix your stuff yourself no matter what Sergeant bloody Hakon says.’

Ragnar laughed in spite of himself. Karah’s mimicry of Sven’s voice was amazingly good. She obviously had a gift for it. ‘I don’t think he meant it. He has a good heart hidden behind a harsh manner, that one.’

‘I know that too. How goes the war on Galt?’

‘Imperial forces are moving into the sector. It looks as if there will be a massive spacedrop some time soon. We picked up some odd comm-net reports from the planet’s surface before we made the warp jump. It seems like the ork forces are starting to fall apart and fight with each other. It may be that Gurg is losing his power.’

‘Do you think it’s because he lost face when we escaped?’

An odd grimace passed across her face. ‘Maybe. But I think it was more than that. I sensed something while we were down there. Gurg was more than just a strong warlord. He was a sort of psychic focus for all the orks. He meant more to them than a mere general. He was sort of their spiritual leader as well, in a very real sense.’

‘So?’

‘I think he lost that power when we took the amulet. I think we somehow diminished him.’

Ragnar did not really understand. This was psyker talk and he had no experience of this sort of thing to relate to. He found it confusing, but he could see one hole in her argument, much as he wanted to believe it, and heroic as it made their mission seem. ‘But if what you’re saying is true, he was their leader before ever he got the amulet.’

‘Yes, there is that,’ she admitted with a nod, ‘but being a psyker is as much about having belief in yourself as it is about being touched with the power. If we undermined his confidence in his abilities by besting him, it

may be that we somehow undid his power as well.’ She shrugged. ‘I don’t know. It’s just a theory.’

‘Still, it means that we may have done some good for the people of Galt and for the Imperium, as well as for our quest.’

‘Yes, it does.’

‘Then that is a good thing,’ he said simply and smiled. She smiled back and opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again. She reached out stroked his brow and suddenly upped and went. Ragnar listened as her footsteps crossed to the door, then heard it whoosh closed behind her. He tried to pull himself upright but it was too much of a struggle. He realised that he must truly have been close to death indeed, for he knew how tough his altered body had been made. Anything that had left him feeling this drained and taken all of its resources to heal must have been all but fatal.

Still, he was alive, that was the main thing. And he had helped his fellows succeed in their mission. That was something too. It left him with a quiet sensation of accomplishment and pride. His thoughts turned back to the girl. What was really going on there? He was still wondering when he drifted off back to sleep.

He woke when he sensed someone in the chamber with him. He came awake slowly for a Space Wolf and thus knew he was still hurt. He relaxed a little when he caught a familiar scent, and opened his eyes to a familiar face.

‘Brother Tethys,’ he said. ‘How are you?’

‘I’m sorry for disturbing your rest, Ragnar. I merely looked in to see how you were. But it’s good that you are awake. Now I can thank you for saving us. I thought my life was over back there on the roof.’

‘Everyone seems to want to thank me for that today,’ Ragnar said. ‘Inquisitor Isaan was just in and she said the same thing.’

‘She can’t have been, Ragnar. She has been locked up in her chamber for the past day fasting and purifying herself for the Ritual of Divination once more. I believe she came to see you two days ago.’

‘I have been asleep for two days?’

‘Yes. The chirurgeons say it was good for you. It gave your body time to heal itself.’

Ragnar considered this. It was not a reassuring thought that he had lain unconscious and helpless for over two days. He must really have been hurt badly. Like a daemon summoned by an ill-considered thought, his pains

returned. He was suddenly aware of a bone-deep ache that permeated his entire body.

Brother Tethys must have seen him wince. ‘Are you hurt?’ he asked with concern. ‘Shall I summon help?’

‘It is nothing but a minor ache.’

‘Your wounds did not look that way to me. I was surprised that any man could survive them. Yet they say that Space Marines are more than human, so perhaps I should not have been.’

Ragnar wished that people would not dwell on how badly hurt he had been. It was not a comforting thought. It made him think of Lars, who had taken a wound from which no recovery was possible. Or was it? Could they not have been able to take him back to the Fang? The Wolf Priests had overseen his resurrection once, surely they could do it again.

The knowledge that had been placed in his brain by the tutelary engines surfaced in his thoughts. He knew it was not so. Unless the resurrection procedures were accomplished immediately on the field of battle, the lack of oxygen would cause brain damage. Even if resurrected the dead warrior would be little more than a vegetable if he were not helped within minutes.

He tried to push these dark thoughts aside, but he could not do so entirely. He felt them lodging deep in his soul along with something else, something that he knew he did not want to consider. To distract himself he asked Brother Tethys, ‘Are you coming with us? Don’t you want to go back to Galt?’

‘I want to go back very much but I don’t have much choice. The inquisitor is not going to turn his ship around just to take one unimportant monk back to his homeworld. Oh well, I always wanted to see other worlds. I suppose this is my chance. It’s not quite what I expected though.’

Ragnar smiled at the little man’s cheerful acceptance of his fate. ‘You’ll get back eventually, I’m sure. The Emperor looks after his own.’

‘I hope so. Certainly the way you arrived to save me from the orks leads me to believe this is so.’

Ragnar found himself wishing that he could share this belief – but he could not.

‘I am tired now,’ he said. ‘I must sleep.’

‘I understand,’ Tethys said. He bowed from the waist and left him to his thoughts.

‘The sleeper has bloody well awoken,’ said Sven, as Ragnar walked gingerly back into the stateroom. He still felt weak but he was far better than he had been two days before. He had fallen into a healing coma as his body repaired itself. Now he had some energy he was sick of lying in the hospital bay and had decided to visit his comrades. It was an odd feeling, moving around without most of his carapace armour. He had grown accustomed to it, and now he felt almost naked.

Sven looked up at him and grinned.

‘Good to have you back in the land of the living. The others thought for a while that you might not make it – but I told them you would live just to be contrary and annoy me. See who was right.’

Sven’s tone was joshing but Ragnar could scent the concern behind it and was grateful. ‘The witch helped too, when she wasn’t casting her spells to see where this mad journey would take us next.’

‘She helped?’ Ragnar was perplexed.

‘She used her powers to help heal you. Must have cost her a lot too. She always looked pretty pale and drained afterwards although I suspect it was from the strain of looking at your ugly face for all that time. We can’t all be as good-looking as me, I suppose.’

Sven was one of the ugliest men Ragnar had ever seen. ‘Thank the Emperor for that,’ he said.

‘No need for bloody blasphemy!’ Sven said.

‘Anything else new?’

‘Not really. Not that anyone is telling us Blood Claws anyway. Hakon has been closeted with the inquisitors and Gul, doubtless trying to come up with new ways of endangering our lives. The crew still treat us like we were corpse-eaters. I wish I knew what was bloody well going on there. Why do they hate us so much? We’re supposed to be the Emperor’s finest, after all.’

‘Maybe that’s why.’

‘You mean they envy me my distinction as well as my astounding good looks.’

‘No, I mean that many of those men were impressed into the Emperor’s service. You can’t expect them to look with favour on his representatives.’

‘No. But I can make them look on us with fear, and I have. I’ve knocked a few heads together.’

‘That will increase your popularity for sure,’ Ragnar said. Sven grinned his cheerfully ugly grin.

‘You know I think all this time spent closeted with psykers has affected you, Ragnar. I think you’re going soft. I mean you were always soft in the head, but now...’

‘Care to try that theory out?’

‘I don’t beat up sick fools.’ Ragnar sensed some menace in Sven now despite his jovial tone. It was a pack thing. They were like wolf cubs playfully testing each other, but testing each other nonetheless. Remembering how proficient Sven had been during their unarmed combat training, he wasn’t sure he felt up to fighting him, just yet. Not unless he did something sneaky.

‘Give me a couple of days, then I’ll make you the sick one. A fool you are already.’

‘I must be to waste my time in company like yours.’

‘Any ale around here?’

‘Some. And lots of other stuff too. Nils says the inquisitor has the booze of a hundred worlds on this ship. And the vittles are pretty good too, after what we had in the jungle.’

‘Then let’s go get some.’

‘Fair enough,’ Sven agreed. ‘I’m starving hungry.’

‘So what’s new?’

As they sat down to eat in Sven’s stateroom, Nils and Strybjorn entered. They looked at the piled table and sat down and began helping themselves without asking. Nils gave Ragnar an encouraging smile as he chewed. Strybjorn, however, looked as dour and surly as ever. Ragnar didn’t mind; it was good to see them all well. But sitting there, Ragnar felt there was something missing – then realised with a cold sensation that it was Lars. The Wolf had always been quiet but he had been there. Now he was gone, and his absence was tangible. The others sensed the change in his mood and responded. He could tell that they had done some of their share of grieving but he had missed out on it, being unconscious at the time.

‘To Lars,’ Sven said suddenly, raising his goblet to the light. ‘Wherever he bloody well is.’

‘To Lars,’ they all echoed, then fell silent once more.

‘Where have you two been?’ Sven asked, glancing over at Nils and Strybjorn.

‘We’ve been on the bridge, talking to the crew,’ Nils said between mouthfuls. ‘It seems we’re welcome there, at least, ever since we brought their precious inquisitors back. Gul wasn’t happy but then he never is.’

‘Why wasn’t he happy?’ Ragnar asked.

‘I don’t think he likes us,’ Nils said.

‘Nobody likes you,’ said Sven. ‘I would have thought you’d bloody well noticed that by now.’

‘It’s funny. They always tell me what a great lad I am. It’s just my idiot friend Sven with the bulldog face they don’t like.’

‘Come on, don’t mess around,’ said Ragnar. ‘What’s really going on?’

‘Well, we found out where we’re going,’ Strybjorn spoke up. His voice was deep and gloomy, and his manner of speaking was slow and considered. Ragnar could smell his current puzzlement. ‘And?’

‘And, it’s very odd. That’s all I can say.’

‘Why?’

‘Because we seem to be heading out into the middle of nowhere.’

‘We’re in space. Remember your training. There’s a lot of nowhere out here.’

‘But we’re going particularly far out. To a place where there are no inhabited worlds. To a dead sun called Korealis.’

‘What’s there? I thought we were looking for the third part of the talisman.’

‘We are. That’s where the witch told the Navigators to go when she came out of her trance. They are obeying her.’

‘Well, I guess we will find out what’s going on soon enough,’ Ragnar said.

‘I did hear one other thing, just as we were leaving the bridge,’ Nils offered. Strybjorn looked over at him with a sour expression. Obviously he had missed something.

‘What was that?’ Ragnar asked.

‘Two words.’

‘I’ll give you two bloody words if you don’t tell us quickly,’ Sven said eagerly.

‘Space hulk,’ Nils said with a nasty smile. Silence fell on the chamber. Ragnar reached for more meat and stuffed it into his mouth while he

considered his battle-brother's words. They were enough to place a chill in his heart.

In training they had run through simulations of boarding space hulks. It was one of the things a Space Marine could be expected to be called on to do in a long career of serving the Emperor. Assuming he survived the experience, of course. Space hulks were among the most deadly environments known to mankind. Ragnar let his thoughts drift back to what the tutelary engines had taught him about the things. It was not reassuring.

Space hulks were gigantic structures, agglomerations of many craft, of rubble and debris, which accumulated in the warp. No one quite knew how or why this happened, but everyone knew that it did. And there was something about the hulks that no one quite understood. They drifted in and out of warp space, seemingly at random, with neither rhyme nor reason to their movements. Sometimes they would disappear for centuries, only to reappear again somewhere far from the last place where they had been sighted.

Most were harmless enough, mere junk in fact; sometimes a threat to navigation, sometimes containing secrets that had been lost in the dark depths of time. But sometimes they were the home to other things: to orks, and genestealers and far worse creatures. Indeed sometimes they were taken over by such creatures and used to drift from world to world. Come to think of it, hadn't Gurg's horde arrived in the Galt system aboard one? Was there some sinister pattern here that he could not quite see? Hulks were the common denominator in this sorry saga so far. He mentioned this to the others, but they did not seem impressed.

'Orks use anything they can get their filthy claws on. You saw what they were like on Galt,' said Nils. 'They cannibalise hulks the way they cannibalise everything else. There's nothing more sinister about it.'

'So you say,' said Ragnar. 'But I'm inclined to suspect the sanity of any man who can tell me there is nothing sinister about a ghost ship that drifts for centuries between the stars.'

'They're not all like that,' said Sven.

'Enough are.'

'You may have a point,' said Sven. 'But I'll be damned if I can see it.'

'The same goes for me,' said Nils.

‘Look, I don’t know. It may just be coincidence. It may be something else.’

‘How will we be able to tell?’ Strybjorn asked grumpily.

‘You’ll all be able to tell soon enough, because you’re all going aboard,’ Sergeant Hakon said from the doorway. Ragnar was amazed that for all their razor keen senses, the sergeant constantly managed to sneak up and take them unawares. Then again he had had several centuries of practice, Ragnar thought. If anyone ought to be able to do it, it was he.

‘When, sergeant?’ Ragnar asked.

‘Within the next six hours. I want your gear checked and all of you ready to go.’

‘Does that include me, sergeant?’ Ragnar asked, not sure which answer he wanted to hear.

‘Well, you’re up and about aren’t you? And you can hold a gun, can’t you?’ the sergeant snapped.

Ragnar nodded, feeling the urge to challenge the veteran take a hold of him once more.

‘Then I don’t see what the problem is,’ Hakon said, striding towards the door. ‘Do you?’

‘No, sergeant,’ Ragnar said, abashed.

‘And since your fellow Space Wolves have been good enough to repair your armour for you, while you slept, I see no good reason for you to parade around here without it, do you, Blood Claw?’

‘No, sergeant.’

Hakon turned at the door. ‘And Ragnar...’

‘Yes, sergeant?’

‘You did well back on Galt. Welcome back.’

‘Thank you, sergeant.’ Ragnar felt a little uplifted by Hakon’s words. Even so little praise from the taciturn old Wolf was praise indeed. His words of thanks fell on empty air. Hakon had already turned and left.

‘So Ragnar is the sergeant’s favourite now, as well as the inquisitor girl’s,’ Nils mocked. ‘What a crawler.’

‘Well somebody has to be a hero around here,’ Ragnar said. ‘But don’t worry, when the skalds get round to chanting the sagas I’m sure they’ll mention the fact that I had three trusty comrades who polished and mended for me.’

‘I can see it now,’ said Nils. ‘Ragnar’s Saga! A stirring tale of a warrior who died when his neck broke under the strain of carrying his huge head.’

‘Whose constant boasting so annoyed his trusty comrades that they murdered him in his sleep, more like,’ Strybjorn said nastily.

‘Who spent so much of his time lying around and snoring while his companions did all the bloody work, that they eventually booted him off their ship,’ added Sven.

‘It’s nice to know I’m appreciated,’ said Ragnar. ‘Now if you don’t mind, Sven, how about passing me some more of that ale.’

‘Yes, my liege,’ Sven smirked, handing it to him in such a way that most of it went over Ragnar.

‘And how about some more food,’ added Nils, tossing a hunk of cheese at him. Within seconds food and ale were flying everywhere, amidst gales of raucous laughter.

Ragnar stood on the bridge of the starship and gazed around in awe. The place was huge, the size of a chamber in the Fang. The ceiling was vaulted like that of an Imperial chapel, and a huge stained glass dome in the roof depicted scenes of inquisitors plying their trade, fighting monsters and heretics, scourging the unrighteous, breaking unbelievers on the autorack.

All around robed and cowed Initiates of the inquisitor’s retinue performed their tasks. At long benches, numerists of the Machine God fed endless streams of data into their consoles. At a high central lectern the astrogators checked their calculations and made minute alterations to the ship’s course. Figures more machine than man, communed directly with the ship’s central data-core. The air smelled of the purification incense liberally distributed by censer-swinging initiates. Such things were done differently on the ships of the Space Wolves and by the uniformed officers of the Imperial Fleet, but this was an Inquisition ship, and it was run in the Inquisition manner.

It occurred to him, for the first time, just how vast and variegated the Imperium was. Each of the great departments of the Ecclesiarchy was a world unto itself, with its own rules, codes, and functions. They stood apart from each other as well as the mass of humanity they ruled in the Emperor’s name. It was only the core of shared faith that bound them, and the million worlds of the faithful.

On a massive central holo-screen a three dimensional replica of the system they had entered had just appeared. It flickered into being in response to the chants of the initiates and the technical prayers they offered up, seeming to float in the air above all of their heads.

Ragnar could see half a dozen worlds each the size of a fist circling round a small, dark star. They moved at differing speeds in their orbits. A tiny pulse of blue light in the shape of an Imperial eagle indicated the position of the *Light of Truth*. A red skull showed their eventual destination.

‘That is Korealis,’ Inquisitor Sternberg said, his resonant voice filling the chamber and echoing away into the gloom beneath the vaults. ‘It is a dead sun, burned out, but not collapsed. Its surface is a cold shell of dust. Somewhere in its depths, fires still flicker but not enough to give light and heat.’

‘It was mapped by the Great Surveys of the 30th millennium when they passed this way, and it was mostly forgotten. According to our records, there is some evidence of heretical pre-Imperial civilisation on the planetary surface of the fourth world, but the place was deemed too remote to merit cleansing, and no threat to the Imperium itself. Now and again there have been reports of prospectors passing this way, and at one time it harboured a colony of pirates. The pirate station was destroyed in a combined action between the Inquisition and the Blood Angels, in the 39th millennium. There is little else to tell about the place of any interest.’

‘What is it exactly we are looking for, inquisitor?’ Sven asked. ‘I take it we didn’t come here just so you could give us a history lesson.’

Sternberg laughed. ‘No. Indeed not, Master Blood Claw. Indeed not. Perhaps Inquisitor Isaan would be good enough to answer your question.’

Karah moved to her fellow inquisitor’s side and looked down on them from the lectern. ‘I have performed the Ritual of Divination once more, using the two pieces of the talisman we have so far acquired. It told me that this was the place to come but little else. I saw a space hulk in my vision, a thing vast and old that has drifted in the warp for many centuries – but that is all I have seen. There is something about the influence of this star, or perhaps about the hulk itself which clouds the seeing. In any case, I know that what we seek is on the hulk and all that remains is for us to go and get it.’

‘Will there be any fighting,’ Strybjorn said flatly.

‘Who knows?’ she replied with a shrug. ‘Hulks are notorious for harbouring malefic denizens. Once we are in range of it, we will run all the standard sensor divinations for life forms, which will give us a clearer idea of any threats that may be lurking within the craft.’

‘Who will be going in?’ asked Ragnar.

‘As if you don’t already know the answer,’ Sven muttered from his side.

‘The Space Wolves will spearhead the assault, accompanied by Inquisitors Sternberg, Isaan, and their bodyguards, led by myself,’ said Gul.

‘Within visual contact distance,’ one of the initiates interrupted loudly. ‘Summoning image to view.’

The plainsong of the technical acolytes changed tone and a new picture shimmered into being. Ragnar shivered at the very sight of it. If it was possible for any space going vessel to look haunted and accursed, it was this one.

At first sight it did not even look like a ship, more like a graveyard of ships. It was a vast agglomeration of debris, united by some strange force around a central core. It looked like a vessel built of scraps of dead ships by some insane artisan. Ragnar could see now why orks were so attracted to hulks. There was something about the jury-rigged nature of these vessels that would appeal to their crazed technologies.

But, in the name of Russ, the thing was vast. As he watched it swell into view, Ragnar saw that each of the individual ships that made up one small component of the structure was as large as the *Light of Truth*. The hulk was bigger than most islands of the Worldsea on Fenris. There must be more miles of corridor in there than in the Fang. Finding the third part of the talisman was going to be quite a task.

‘Coming into range of sensor divination, my lord inquisitor,’ said the Chief Initiate.

‘Begin the ritual invocations,’ Sternberg replied calmly.

Ragnar could smell the man’s tenseness even over the mildly hallucinogenic aroma of the incense. The chants changed tone once more and the chamber dimmed. Beneath the image of the space hulk odd technical runes began to appear. They shimmered and danced, and Ragnar was aware that they contained a goldmine of information for those who could read them; unfortunately he could not.

‘Interesting,’ he heard Sternberg murmur. ‘Continue with the divination.’

As Ragnar watched, a shimmering glow settled on the image of the hulk. Small red and green dots drifted over its surface. Then without warning the whole image became distorted, shimmered and winked out of existence. A stillness descended on the bridge of the *Light of Truth*. Ragnar was not at all sure what had happened, but he could tell from the scents of those around him that it was not good.

‘What happened?’ he asked.

‘Those lights we saw just before the image was nullified tell us that there are living creatures aboard the hulk,’ Karah said quietly.

‘And the fact that our sensor sweep was interfered with tells us that they don’t like prying eyes,’ Sternberg finished for her. ‘Chief Initiate Vosper, what happened?’

The Chief Initiate studied the monitor on the bench before him. ‘It appears our sweep triggered some sort of automatic shielding device, my lord inquisitor. It will take several hours to work out exactly what type. I suspect from the auguries that it was not a product of any human technological ritual, but rather something alien.’

‘Could it be that we have triggered some sort of automatic system on the hulk that has nothing to do with those life-forms aboard?’ Karah asked.

The initiate bowed his shaven head and steeped his fingers. ‘Yes, Inquisitor Isaan. That is within the realms of possibility. Although it’s probably wisest to assume some form of hostile intent for the moment.’

‘My thoughts precisely,’ Sternberg said.

Privately Ragnar agreed with him. All of the knowledge placed in his memory by the tutelary engines led him to believe that if a creature was alien, it was undoubtedly hostile. So far nothing he had encountered had caused him to doubt the wisdom of those teachings.

‘Ready your weapons,’ Inquisitor Sternberg said grimly, turning to regard them all. ‘It looks like we’ll be going in armed.’

There was a strange sense of acceleration as the shuttle fell away from the *Light of Truth*. Ragnar studied his companions. This time it was not just him and the other Space Wolves. There were over thirty armed men of the inquisitors’ bodyguard. They were garbed like Imperial Guard but were wearing full face helmets and oxygen tanks to protect them against any decompression, lack of air or poison gas in the hulk.

It was chilly inside the shuttle and the air smelled of peculiar chemicals. The confined space within the small chamber made him feel just a little claustrophobic. Ragnar glanced over at his comrades. They all looked more relaxed than he felt, but he could smell the tension in the air. They checked their weapons with the concentration of men who knew their lives would soon depend on them. He himself felt oddly reluctant. He wondered why?

His hearts were beating faster and he was controlling the urge to sweat only with a massive effort of will. Something inside his stomach felt loose. He realised that he was actually afraid, and afraid in a way he had never been before. He actually feared for his life.

What was going on, he wondered, gazing over Sven's shoulder and out the porthole? The stars winked coldly back at him. This was not like him. He had been nervous before a battle before, but he had never felt this sense of near paralysis.

He tried to work out where it had come from, and the answer was blindingly obvious. It came from being so severely wounded and from witnessing the death of Lars on Galt. Ever since he had been resurrected by the sorcerer-scientists of the Fang, he had possessed a sense of his own immortality that had amounted to a feeling of near-invincibility. He had been hurt before now, but never so badly. He realised that he had not believed that he could actually die. He had known it intellectually. That had been drummed into his head often enough during his training back on Fenris, but he had not actually believed it.

He was, after all, one of the Chosen. His fallen body had been lifted from among the dead by the Wolf Priests and they had brought him back to life. He had been one of the lucky ones, a favourite of the gods, and so had his comrades.

Yes, he had seen people die before, even Space Wolves, during the battle with Chaos Marines at the Temple of the Thousand Sons. But they had not been people he had known that well. He had shared a history with Lars; they had come through the time of choosing together, and trained and fought alongside each other. They were almost the same age.

The connection had been made in his own head, he realised, between Lars dying and his wounds. He had suffered a great deal of pain at that time which had driven home the lesson of mortality in a way that nothing else could. He knew now that even though he was a Space Marine, and one

of the Emperor's chosen champions, there was no special dispensation for him. A bullet could still kill him. A chainsword could still cut him down. His life could be ended like anybody else's. For a warrior that should not have been a frightening thought, and yet he had to admit that it was for him.

And now a new fear was growing in his mind, that his courage would be tested and found wanting, and that he would disgrace himself. Was it possible that if they were attacked he might be paralysed with fear or even turn and flee? He hoped not, but it was a possibility. He prayed to Russ and tried to dismiss the thought, but it stayed on and niggled at the back of his mind. Had his offer of surrender back on Galt been, on some level, a genuine one? Had he merely been voicing what his spirit was really thinking, instead of trying to trick the ork warlord?

He was aware that Sergeant Hakon was looking at him thoughtfully – and somewhat disapprovingly too, it seemed – and he wondered if the old Wolf could somehow read his thoughts. Did his doubts show in his scent? Were all of his comrades only too aware of his weakness? He hoped not, but how could he be sure? That was the curse as well as the blessing of the Space Wolf's pack awareness.

He felt another set of eyes fall on him, and glanced over at Karah Isaan, sitting surrounded by her armoured and helmeted bodyguards. She, too, seemed to be picking up some of his conflicting feelings. But she just smiled at him reassuringly, and he felt something like warmth flooding into his mind. Unconsciously he fought against it. He wanted no one else privy to his secret thoughts. He did not want to have to rely on any external help, from her or anybody else. It would be a true weakness, and not just some phantom conjured up by his own dark thoughts.

Somewhere within him, the beast stirred. He felt a growl of rage begin deep in his throat. It was not afraid. It was angry and was desperate to confront any foe. He knew that it would relish bloody combat with any threat that presented itself. It was good to know that it was there, and could be counted on to aid him. That was help that he was prepared to take, from something that was part of him, bonded to his spirit.

Slowly his fears subsided to a manageable level, but he knew that they were still there, and might return in a moment of stress. He let out a long, slow breath, and offered up a fervent prayer to Russ.



ELEVEN

There was a deep metallic clang, like the mournful tolling of some vast unseen bell, and a sudden bone-shaking vibration, as the shuttle came to rest alongside the space hulk. Ragnar sensed the change in mood as the Blood Claws rose and followed Sergeant Hakon to the front of the ship. Already the auto-borer in the nose of their ship was at work, chopping through the ceramite of the hulk's hull and preparing a way for their entrance. Soon it would pierce the hulk's side and expand like a flower blossoming to allow a boarding tunnel to pass through.

Ragnar's chainsword and bolt pistol were ready in his hand. He doubted that there would be immediate trouble but you never knew, and Space Marines always went in as if combat were mere moments away. There was a hiss of air as the pressures equalised between the boarding tunnel and the hulk's interior. Ragnar immediately tested the scent of the place. He did not like what he caught. The air was stale and cold and fusty, and held the taint of many subtle poisons.

Whatever systems kept the air pure here were working imperfectly, he could tell. And there were other things, the trace scents of living beings of many different types. Some of them were so old as to be barely discernible. He doubted that in any other place they would have lasted so long but here, with constant but flawed recycling, who could really guess at their age?

Gravity within the hulk was less than he was used to. He felt light and constantly had to fight to control his movements and keep his balance to prevent himself from floating upward towards the ceiling.

Sven and Nils moved ahead, one moving left of the tunnel's entrance, the other moving right. It was their job to scan the corridor and make sure there were no nasty surprises. Ragnar waited for the signal and then moved clumsily to join Sven. Strybjorn strode off to partner Nils.

Ragnar did not know quite what to expect but what he saw was anticlimactic. He was looking down a long metal corridor. The floor was covered in a sort of corroded mesh of mottled steel. Ancient-looking glowglobes flickered feebly in the ceiling. There were hatches lining the

corridor and not too far off he could see a ladder that descended from above to disappear into a hole in the floor. There were tattered remains of ancient posters glued to the wall, written in some old human script he could barely understand. Long masses of exposed cables ran the length of the corridor, as if some long-dead engineer had jury-rigged a power circuit along it.

Sensing movement from behind him, Ragnar knew that the inquisitor's bodyguards were starting to make progress along the tunnel. He made a quick check to see if there was anything Sven had missed, saw nothing and began to move off down the corridor to make room.

'Interesting place,' Sven whispered ironically. 'I'll bet there's even less good stuff to eat here than there was in the bloody jungle.'

'I'm sure if you look you'll find a nice fat mutated cockroach,' Ragnar hissed back. 'You always find them on ships like this. The ancients used to carry them to eat the flakes of dead skin their bodies constantly shed.'

'Thank you, oh sage one,' said Sven, 'I knew that. The tutelary engines put the same knowledge in my head as they did in yours.'

'Yes, but you need a brain to be able to use that knowledge. It just echoes around in all the empty space inside your skull.'

'Ha ha. You missed your true calling, Ragnar. You should have been a bloody jester.'

As they paced carefully along, they surveyed all of the shadows for threats. Despite their banter, Ragnar could tell that Sven was just as keyed up as he was. He knew that both their senses were stretched to the absolute edge. No enemy was going to take them by surprise.

Ragnar flared his nostrils and opened his mouth to catch any random scents. Nothing threatening. He kept moving to the junction where the ladder entered the corridor. 'Down or up?' he asked Sven.

'Up!'

Ragnar nodded. Sven would look up and cover the ceiling at the ladder. It was now Ragnar's task to see that nothing surprised them from below. As he approached he kept sniffing, and he fell silent. He was all too aware of the chatter of the guardsmen behind him, and the scent of their armour and weapons. He still caught no hint of a threat.

Standing at the edge of the metal ladder and looking down he saw that it descended a very long way, vanishing into darkness far below. In his gut

the beast writhed and growled. It did not like the look of that long drop at all.

‘Which way?’ he called quietly into the comm-net.

‘Down,’ came Karah’s clear precise voice. Sven was already moving in response. He holstered his chainsword so that he would have a hand free for the ladder. The bolt pistol was still held firmly in his right hand. He swung himself out and began to climb.

‘How far?’ he asked.

‘Until I tell you to stop,’ the female inquisitor replied.

‘Fair enough.’

They went down a long way. Ragnar felt as if he had been climbing for weeks. Even his reinforced muscles were aching and he felt sorry for the normal humans who accompanied them. They must really be in pain.

The climb had been interesting though. His tutors had taught him that geological and archaeological remains were found in layers, and this climb reminded him of that. As they descended, their surroundings grew more ancient, it seemed, as if the hulk had been built outward from some exceedingly old core. They passed through levels that had spoken to him of many different cultures and civilisations. He realised that they really were descending, not through one huge spacecraft, but through an accumulation of smaller vessels that had been built in many different places and times, and which, over the years, had been occupied by members of many different races.

Everywhere he saw evidence of the crude handiwork of orks. Here and there he saw crudely daubed graffiti which bore the chilling marks of Chaos. How many different types of people had lived and died here, he wondered? How long had it been since this place was first occupied? Were these traces from individual ships in the time before they had drifted in to become part of the hulk or were they evidence of occupants in the time since? Only whatever dark spirit presided over this hulk could tell him, and there was no way he could commune with it, and no way he would want to even if he could.

Behind him he could hear the nervous chatter of the guards, as they kept up a constant cross-talk on the comm-net. He could smell their deepening unease as they proceeded, an unease that was only increasing with tiredness and distance from their mothership. Ragnar did not blame them. He was beginning to wonder at the wisdom of this penetration into

the space hulk. To get back by conventional means was a long trek over dangerous ground, and the teleport beacon was very unreliable, as he had already discovered. Their line of retreat was far from secure.

And yet what other options had they? If they wanted to reconstruct the Talisman of Lykos and save the world of Aeriis from the dark plague then they simply had to push on and pray for the best. Sometimes the only way was the longest way. As a Space Marine he realised he should not be daunted by that fact.

Gnawing unease had settled on him like a cloak. He did not like this place. With its endless miles of corridors it seemed like a twisted parody of the Fang, but it lacked the comforting scent of the Space Wolves and their vassals, and the sense of long, continuous and benevolent occupancy. If the Fang had been abandoned by the Wolves thousands of years ago, then used by whoever had stumbled across it as a temporary lair, it might have looked like this.

He muttered a prayer and tried to push away these grim thoughts. The oppressive atmosphere of the place was getting to him. Or perhaps it was something else. Perhaps the malevolent presence he imagined was real, and was placing these shadowy fears in his mind. Perhaps...

Get a grip of yourself, he told himself. Concentrate on the foes which might actually be there. Don't people this place with imaginary enemies while real ones are capable of sneaking up on you.

So he pushed on into the darkness and the gloom, all too aware that somewhere out there something wicked was waiting. He could tell from his comrades' unease that they felt the same way.

Ten hours in, they stopped to rest. The Space Wolves could have kept going easily but the inquisitors and their bodyguards needed to stop.

They set up camp in a huge hall. It had once been a pavilion of some sort. Overhead was a crystal dome through which the stars had once beamed down. Now overhead they could see only the great shadowy bulk of another part of the hulk. Sometimes odd lights could be seen shimmering in portholes, which only added to the haunted atmosphere of the hulk. It was not a reassuring thought that behind the crystal there was only hard vacuum and a hungry void waiting to devour any unprotected thing that fell into it.

The floor was a vast mosaic, but the picture had long since been eroded away into a blur of shapes and colours. Without wind and rain, Ragnar

could only imagine that this had been done by the passage of countless feet or vehicles. Dotted around were huge empty pits that had once been fishponds or swimming pools. In the middle of some were islands on which stood fountains. Here and there statues depicting an alien race that he recognised as the eldar stood on plinths. It was oddly peaceful and oddly beautiful and for the first time since their arrival on the hulk he had a sense of security. Perhaps that was why they chose the place to rest.

The warriors slumped down where they stood, leaving their lasrifles close at hand. Inquisitor Sternberg and Gul passed among them, dividing them up into watches. Without speaking, at a gesture from Sergeant Hakon, the four Blood Claws took up positions covering the four corners of the chamber. Ragnar knew they would prove far more effective sentries than any mere human. Hakon himself went to consult with the inquisitors.

Ragnar took up his position near one of the statues, thinking that not only would this give him a closer look at its alien workmanship, but that he could use it for cover in case of an attack. This was not a bad defensive site. The sunken empty ornamental ponds and the fountains they contained could be used like earthworks if danger threatened. They could have done worse.

He took a deep breath and murmured a prayer to the Emperor, willing himself to relax. His muscles were aching more than they should be, and he was tired in a way he had never felt since being chosen. It seemed that his wounds and his subsequent illness had drained him more than he had imagined. Perhaps this was why his imagination was playing up. Perhaps he was simply tired and ill. Somehow he doubted it. There was something about the gloom and stillness of the space hulk that was simply evil. He knew this to be the case. Right at this moment, he felt as if they had walked into a troll's lair unarmed.

He looked up at the statue. It showed a tall, lean humanoid garbed in oddly elongated, curved armour. The figure carried a gun of some strangely beautiful alien design in one hand, and a banner in the other. The face was hidden by a mask that was as beautiful as it was functional. The whole thing was made from a substance that Ragnar did not recognise. It looked like polished stone but something about it suggested bone. When he touched it, he felt a slight tingling, not unpleasant yet odd enough to make him snatch his hand away.

Who were you, Ragnar wondered? Some hero of the eldar fallen in battle long ago? A god they worshipped? Or a vain chieftain who caused his image to be placed here for eternity? It was another riddle to which he would never know the answer. The universe was full of them, a place of mystery and horror, that no man could ever really understand.

He wondered about the people who had made the statue. Where were they now? How had their ship come to be part of this hulk? Had they been lost in the warp and drawn into it? Had they dwelt here as part of the hulk, or had the ship been abandoned long before? It was a thing to tease the imagination of a man and drive him mad with speculation.

He had heard the eldar dwelled on huge spaceships, craftworlds they were called, and had long since abandoned all surface dwellings. He knew they were a decadent and sinister race who performed arcane rituals for their own unguessable purposes, and who interfered in the wars of mankind for no discernible purpose. And now they were seeking parts of an artefact that had once belonged to that eldritch race. Was the fact they had found this hall significant, an omen? Or was it simply chance, the only pattern here being the one imposed on events by his own mind? No, there had to be a connection. Had not the eldar built the Black Pyramid on Aerius? Had they not been there the last time plague had ravaged that world?

He caught a familiar scent approaching from behind. ‘Hello, inquisitor,’ he said without turning.

‘Practising your psychic powers?’ Karah Isaan smiled softly.

‘No. I recognise your scent.’

‘What is it like?’ she said, curious.

‘Unlike any other.’

‘I am the only woman here.’

‘No. It is not that. You smell differently. Like someone who was raised on a different world from these folk. Amid jungles and flowers and under a hot sun. I have never been there but I would guess that Aerius is cold like Fenris in winter, and gloomy, and smells of industry and metalwork.’

‘You would make a very good seer, Ragnar, for you are correct in almost every respect. And you can tell all that by scent? Your nose must be very keen.’

‘Keener than a true wolf’s, or so they say.’

‘It would be quite a gift for an inquisitor. For tracking and questioning and such.’

‘It is a gift given only to the Space Wolves, a legacy of the geneseed of Russ.’ Remembering Ranek’s words about secrets back in the Fang, he wondered if he was telling her too much. She moved around in front of him. He was struck by her beauty. She was a lovely woman, if rather stern-looking. In her own way, with her dark skin, brown eyes and alien scent she was as exotic and unknowable as the eldar. He guessed that, in some way, he was probably the same to her.

‘I wanted to speak to someone,’ she ventured. ‘This is a vile place and I have no desire to share that thought with our troops.’

‘This is an evil place,’ he agreed.

‘Your nose tells you that?’

‘My nose and my spirit... and my common sense. Were it not our duty to do so, we should not have come here.’

‘But it was our duty. And our duty often takes us to places we would rather not be, to do things we would rather not do.’

‘I am a Space Wolf,’ he said. ‘I live to fight. There is nothing I would rather do.’

‘You lead a rather simple life then, Ragnar of the Space Wolves.’

‘No. You lead a rather complicated one.’

‘Perhaps... but I sense there is more to you than meets the eye, Ragnar, and that you are not quite as unafraid as you would have me believe.’

Her words brought back his dark thoughts from earlier and he looked away, embarrassed. They were his secret shame, one that he wanted no one to know. He certainly did not want this woman, with her disturbing beauty, to be aware of them. He said nothing and simply stared off into the distance.

‘There is no shame in being afraid in a place of darkness like this, Ragnar. There would only be shame if your fear mastered you. And I am enough of a seer to know that will never happen.’

Her words and their tone were meant to reassure him, he knew, but he was not reassured. He wondered if he would ever regain the feeling of invulnerability, of immortality, that he had once enjoyed. She seemed to sense his dark mood and turned and walked away.

Ragnar watched her go, and then gave his attention back to his guard duties. If there are monsters out there, he thought, let them come. They

will find me ready.

After six hours of rest, they broke fast on ration tablets washed down with purified water, and then pushed on deeper into the hulk. Once again the nature of their surroundings changed. The glowglobes became less common, and in many places they had burned out altogether. The shadows became deeper. The guards turned on the beacons on their shoulder pads to give them more light. As yet Ragnar's altered eyes could still penetrate the gloom easily, but the increasing darkness had a dampening effect on his spirits.

Sometimes, up ahead of them now, he thought he could hear sinister scuttling movements, so faint as to be barely perceptible even to his superhumanly keen ears. He tried telling himself it was rats or some of the huge mutant cockroaches that were all too common in ships like this, but he could not. A quick glance at Sven told him that his fellow Blood Claw was thinking the same thing. He raised his hand and gave the signal for *Be careful*. From the change in the rhythm of their movement, he knew without looking back that the guards were paying attention.

'Wonder if it's edible,' Sven said. 'I hate bloody food tablets.'

'We'll know soon enough,' said Ragnar, catching the tension behind his friend's words.

'You know what I like about you, Ragnar? You always have a stupid answer to whatever I have to say.'

'You know what I like about you, Sven?'

'What?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

'Like I said before,' Sven snorted, 'you missed your calling. You should have been a court jester, not a Space Wolf.'

Ragnar smiled and clutched his weapons tighter. If there was trouble ahead, he was glad Sven was there. Any man who could trade such dumb insults when danger threatened was worth having around.

They moved on through the depths of the great hulk. Ragnar felt as if it were coming alive all around him. He had a sense of ancient evil things waking from long dormancy. Even with his hyper-acute senses he could not quite put a finger on why. There were subtle changes in the scent patterns in the air. The almost subliminal hum of the life support systems had altered. Occasionally he felt vibrations pass through the hull beneath

his feet as if some giant were moving or a vast piece of machinery had been activated.

He could tell by the tension of Sven's body and the subtle alterations of his stance and scent that his fellow Blood Claw felt it too. Sven held his weapons ready and glanced around as if he expected to be called upon to use them at any moment.

Karah Isaan's words about a new threat coming from the ship that followed them echoed through his mind. Was this sense of something stirring connected with their own presence, trespassing on the ship, or were the two unrelated?

'At the next junction take the passage that slopes down,' Karah's voice sounded loud and clear over the comm-net earbead.

The tension was starting to drain him. He spoke into the comm-net: 'Are we any closer to what we seek, or have we been wandering around in circles?'

'Be patient, Ragnar; we're getting there,' Karah soothed.

'Thank Russ for that,' Sven muttered.

As they progressed downwards, it became evident that machinery had been switched on. Huge compressors were at work, great flexible accordion tubes expanding and contracting. Mighty pistons pumped up and down. Huge clouds of steam and smoke swirled out of cracked and defective piping.

'What in all the bloody cold hells of Frostheim is going on here?' Sven asked.

'It looks like somebody activated all of this machinery,' Ragnar replied.

'You don't bloody say,' said Sven. 'I mean – why?'

'It could have switched on automatically when we came in. Some ancient devices do that.'

'Or, Ragnar? I hear an "or" in your voice.'

'Or maybe somebody switched it on to provide themselves with cover. Noise, smoke, confusing smells. They will all make it more difficult to spot an ambush.'

'Noise and smoke, yes, I understand. But scents – why that? Surely they can't know there are Space Wolves on board.'

'Can't they? Why make that assumption? You are assuming that whoever did it thinks and senses like a human; that may not be the case.'

Many alien races have made their homes on hulks.'

'You're not a particularly reassuring man to talk to in a situation like this, Ragnar.'

'This is not a particularly reassuring situation.'

'Aye, you are right there.'

Suddenly the stink that hit his nostrils suggested something that was not even remotely human. The figure emerging from the smoke reinforced this impression.

It was larger than a man and it moved much, much faster. Four huge arms, tipped with monstrous rending claws, swivelled from its shoulders. Row upon row of hideous fangs gleamed in its mouth. A horny shell of armour encased its body. It loped along on clawed and padded feet. Its manner suggested the scuttling of some enormous insect. The memories placed in his brain by the teaching engines told him what it was instantly.

'Genestealer!' Ragnar yelled, taking a bead on the thing with his bolt pistol and squeezing the trigger. Quick as he was, the thing was quicker. It jinked to one side and his shells passed over its head. Ragnar had never seen anything move so swiftly. Its reflexes made his own seem slow by comparison. The fear he had felt earlier returned like a wave of ice running through him and, for one horrible vital moment, he froze. The thing came straight at him and it was on him before he could react. Its weight crashed into him, bowling him over with irresistible force.

In an instant its face was in his, snarling and snapping. He could smell its foetid breath, see the thick, mucus-like saliva dribbling from its mouth. He could feel those impossible strong talons grasp him, and heard his armour begin to crack under the pressure. He knew that his split-second of hesitation was going to cost him his life.

Blood and flesh splattered his face. The blade of a chainsword sheared through chitin an inch before his eyes and the beast stopped moving.

'Get up!' he heard Sven bellow. 'We're under attack.'

Ragnar shook his head and sprang to his feet, throwing the genestealer's corpse to one side with the force of his movement. He was appalled. In the moment of crisis he had frozen, as he feared he might. Only Sven's quick thinking had saved him. The fact that he had been surprised by the thing's speed and strength was no excuse. He was a Space Wolf. Nothing was supposed to be able to take him unprepared.

No sense in worrying about it now, he realised, hearing the padding of dozens of approaching feet, and seeing the monstrous forms of half a dozen genestealers emerge from the smoke. In his state of heightened awareness he noticed that their carapaces were all blotched and cracked. They had an odd, diseased look that differed from the images placed in his brain by the tutelary engines.

The beast within him snarled in fury. He knew that it, too, had been shocked by its near-death, and that its rage was all the stronger because of it. Gratefully Ragnar surrendered to it.

Laser bolts spat over his shoulder as the inquisitors' guards opened fire. He heard the thunder of bolters as Sergeant Hakon and Inquisitor Sternberg opened up too, and he could hear more bolter fire from the rear. It was Strybjorn and Nils, he realised. The things were attacking from behind them too, then. So these were no mere beasts. An inhuman intelligence was at work here, guiding the attack.

Ragnar raised his pistol and shot. This time his aim was true. The shell passed right through the head of one of the stealers. He howled with satisfied bloodlust and fired again. The stealers were too closely packed to miss, but this time the armour of his target's carapace partially deflected the shot so that instead of killing it cleanly, it merely removed one of its huge clawed arms. If the creature felt any pain it gave no sign, and it kept on coming.

The smell of burning flesh filled the air as the lasguns bit home. Ragnar could see armour sizzle and liquefy and run under the heat. Still the beasts came on. From behind him came the sound of battle cries and the screams of dying men. The smell of spilled entrails and human blood assaulted Ragnar's nostrils. He knew that behind him the battle had become close and deadly.

The terrible suspicion that at any moment one of the genestealers was going to break through and claw him in the back filled his mind. He dared not look back though, for doing so meant taking his eyes from those swiftly closing inhuman foes. They were so quick that any distraction might prove fatal, and he was not risking such a mistake a second time.

Half the stealers had fallen now but the rest were almost within striking distance. He could hear curses from the guards behind him and sense their fear, and he knew that they would not be much help when the

melee came. They were but ordinary men, however well trained, and there was no way they could stand against the fury of the stealers' charge.

Ragnar did not wait for them to come to him. Filled with the beast's anger, he sprang forward, swinging his chainsword through a huge arc which ended with it buried in the insect-like skull of one of the stealers. With a reflex like the death strike of a scorpion it lashed out with its claws. Ragnar sprang back but not quickly enough. One of the dying stealer's talons connected glancingly and the force of the buffet sent him flying backward off-balance to land beside Karah.

Ragnar rolled over, brought his feet below him and regained his balance. He stood in a fighting crouch and had a perfect view of the struggle before him. Sergeant Hakon had joined the melee and Inquisitor Sternberg and Gul were at his side. Together with Sven they fought savagely with the surviving stealers. It was impossible to tell who fought with the greater fury, the humans or the aliens. Such was the savagery of the battle.

Even as he watched, Hakon clubbed one of the genestealers with the butt of his pistol. Bones and armour crunched with the force of the impact, and as the alien beast fell backwards the sergeant decapitated it with one sweep. Sternberg blasted another in the face point blank sending a huge gout of blood and brain and splintered skull everywhere. Gul wrestled with one of the creatures and in a show of near superhuman strength was holding his own.

From out of the corner of his eye, Ragnar saw that one of the stealers had flanked Sven and was about to spring in his back. The Blood Claw was busily engaged by two of the stealers' brood and could do nothing to stop it. Ragnar growled; it was time to repay his debt.

He leapt forward, landing on the genestealer's back, just as it had intended to land on his comrade's. The vile thing began to tumble forward. Ragnar clubbed it on the back of its head with his pistol, smashing through the skull. As it tumbled forward, to sprawl on the deck he brought his heel down on its neck, just as he had seen Gurg do to Lars. Vertebrae snapped as the neck broke. He snapped off a shot over Sven's shoulder, risking the chance that his battle-brother might move into its way, in order to remove the threat of one of the other monsters facing his friend, then as a last precaution he decapitated the stealer at his feet with his chainsword.

He looked up in time to see Sven finish his last monstrous opponent, and together they sprang to aid Hakon and the others. They chopped into the genestealers in a storm of chainsaw blades and bolter shells, and in moments the conflict was over. From behind him, the sounds of battle had also ceased. Ragnar glanced around.

He could see that Strybjorn and Nils still stood. Their armour was so covered in filth that their Blood Claw emblems were obscured and reeking gore steamed on their carapaces. Around them lay the corpses of dead genestealers – and half a dozen dead humans, all from the ranks of the guards.

‘It seems we have repulsed the attack,’ said Sternberg, panting hard.

‘Yes, but how many more of these dire things lie between us and our target?’ Sergeant Hakon asked.



TWELVE

Ragnar studied the scene of carnage. The attack from the rear had been the stronger of the two and had inflicted greater casualties. That spoke of a swift, evil intelligence at work. It had struck where they were weakest, not strongest, and it had known enough about them to assault the precise spot. How could that be?

He dismissed the thought as irrelevant. It did not matter how. It just mattered that it had happened. More worrying still, looking back on it, was the fact that he had frozen when attacked. It could have cost him his life, he knew. Worse, it could have cost others theirs. If he was the weak link in the chain, it could have all sorts of consequences. If he had not been there Sven might have fallen, and perhaps the genestealers would have reached Karah. From there, who knew?

In this place, at this time, all of their lives were in each other's hands. He knew that they all relied on each other, and that the failure of one could easily lead to the doom of them all. He resolved that this was the first and last time he would ever let the others down.

He became aware of the fact that Sven was staring at him. The guilty sense that the other Blood Claw knew his thoughts flooded into Ragnar's mind.

'What?' he asked savagely.

'Nothing. I was just going to say thank you for saving my damn life, that's all.'

Ragnar let that sink in for a moment. Sven had not noticed his fear. He thought Ragnar had behaved well. 'No. Thank you for saving mine. It would have been the end for me if you hadn't cut down the genestealer when it was on top of me.'

Sven's crooked grin lit up his ugly face. 'Think nothing of it. I don't. Having you around makes the rest of us look good. That's why I did it.'

'Thanks anyway, oh gracious one.' Ragnar felt better already. He glanced around at the others. Sternberg and Karah looked fine, if a little shaken. Sergeant Hakon was spraying synthiflesh on his face to cover a gaping wound. Even as Ragnar watched the artificial skin closed over the

gash, sealing and cleansing it. Ragnar knew it was quite a bad wound for the sergeant to need the arcane stuff at all, but if Hakon was in pain, he gave no sign of it. Looking at him, Ragnar wondered how often in his long career Hakon had been wounded. Had he ever felt the way Ragnar did, after taking damage? If so he had not let it affect him too deeply. Ragnar resolved that in future he would be like the sergeant. If Hakon could learn to endure, so could he.

The guards moved around, seeing to their own wounded. Watching them, Ragnar became aware of just how fragile a thing a human being was. The corpses looked pitiful. Some had been split open by the stealers' claws, reduced to slashed sacks of slimy organs and wet, bloody muscle. Compared to those, some of the others looked strangely rested; their wounds looked minor, so small that they should not have been able to kill a grown man – and yet they had.

The survivors looked tired and weary after a battle that had left him feeling mostly invigorated. He wondered if this was natural for some men, or yet another part of the reconstruction of his body as a Space Marine. He wished there were someone he could ask about these things.

Already Gul, Sternberg and their own corporals were starting to chivvy them into some sort of marching order. Warily Nils and Strybjorn came closer. Ragnar could see that like him they were constantly scanning their surroundings for new threats. Strybjorn's face was gloomy as always. A bright intense light burned in Nils's face. He seemed exalted.

'That was a good fight,' he said. 'Must have killed about five of the four-armed bastards single-handed. They were all over us for a bit. We showed them back.'

Strybjorn shrugged and glared off into the distance. He seemed possessed by a strange melancholy. At the same time, his scent spoke of a furious excitement that was, if anything, stronger than Nils'.

'We killed a few down here as well,' said Sven. 'Would have killed more if bloody Ragnar hadn't decided to lie down on the floor and have a kip in the middle of the battle.'

'All right! Form up!' Gul yelled. 'We're moving on.'

'We're getting close now,' Karah said by way of encouragement, though her face gave the lie to her confidence.

'Bet we'll meet more of those bloody stealers before we get what we're looking for.'

‘They’re what I’m looking for,’ Nils said, as he and Strybjorn hung back to cover the rear.

‘Aye, easy for you to say,’ muttered Sven. ‘But it’s Ragnar and me who are on bloody point.’

The inside of the hulk became darker and gloomier. Here and there traces of flesh-like substance became visible on the walls. Ragnar smelled new scents in the air. Traces of something organic. The sort of smells you got when you opened a human body or gutted an animal. Musks, like exotic perfumes. Overlaying it all a strange alien aroma like the one the genestealers had possessed and yet subtly different, as if it belonged to something related to them, and yet not wholly like them.

‘Smells like we’re crawling around inside somebody’s body, doesn’t it?’ said Sven. Ragnar nodded. It was not a pleasant sensation, and it was getting worse.

Along with the smell, there was an oppressive sense of presence in the air. It was like the one which surrounded the ork chieftain in some ways. It suggested a powerful psychic force. Ragnar knew that they were moving ever closer to the intelligence that had guided the stealers. He wondered whether they would discover it in possession of the fragment of the talisman they sought, and perhaps using it in the same way as Gurg had. He would not be surprised if that was the case. He glanced back to see how Karah was taking it.

She seemed lost in heated discussion with Sternberg. Her face was drawn and a frown was painted on her brow. It looked as if she was in pain, and growing more so with every step. He guessed that if the presence that enveloped them was strong enough to be sensed by a non-psyker like him then it must be causing her considerable distress. He imagined that the psychic spoor must be as strong to her as the scent was to him. It was not a reassuring thought.

There was a definite change in the walls of the corridors now. Here and there, traces of glistening slime were visible. Occasionally patches of a substance resembling flesh clung to the walls like a patch of mould. If he looked closely he could see the remains of a near translucent membrane. It was as if something had burst out of the metal and strode off. In his mind, he pictured obscene, man-sized monsters hatching from the walls. He shuddered as he tried to shake off the image.

As they pressed on, he noticed that massive vein-like pipes, made from the same organic substance, began to run between the patches on the walls. From within he could hear the obscene gurgling of fluids. What was this, he wondered? Now it really seemed as if they were deep within the innards of some massive living creature.

And yet, if he looked closely, he could tell that whatever it was, it was unwell. There was a sense of sickness about the thing. There was a smell of rot, of corruption, of festering pus, in the air. It made him think of Nurgle, the Dark God dedicated to disease and decay. Whatever vast beast surrounded him was sick; this was not its natural condition. Thinking back to the genestealers they had fought earlier, he remembered their blotched carapaces and the sores on their flesh. They too had been sick. It was as if some dreadful power was at work here, one that could warp even the genestealers and that had created them to its own purposes.

‘This does not look bloody good,’ he heard Sven murmur. The words drew him from his reverie and forced him to consider his surroundings in more than the automatic manner he had been doing so. He instantly saw what Sven meant. In the distance he could see a mass of organic material that in some way suggested the components of a huge living machine. Overhead greenish lights burned above the organic machines. They reminded Ragnar of the phosphorescent algae that swam in the seas of Fenris, but much brighter and more concentrated.

He could see vast tubes inside which egg-shaped objects moved by peristaltic action. He could make out something that resembled a huge pulsing heart surmounted by what looked like an exposed brain. Enormous filaments stretched out in every direction, connecting to fleshy nodes that burrowed into the floor of the hulk. The whole thing glistened with fibrous green-white mucus. He knew at once that they had reached the centre of the corruption that he had sensed, that this was the heart of the darkness within this vessel.

In the centre of the thing’s mass of brain tissue something glittered, and Ragnar knew immediately that he was looking on the third and final part of the crystal they had sought.

Even as he watched, a horde of living creatures emerged from the centre of the fleshy mass, moving with an inhuman precision, as if they were all cells in one mighty organism. He could see huge insect-limbed creatures that bore what looked like guns made from living flesh. There

were smaller fleeter creatures, all legs and jaws and lashing tails. There were genestealers, chittering and snarling as they sprang. And something else – something massive and monstrous with enormous mandibles that looked as if they could chop a man in two by simply closing. He knew at once what they faced.

‘Tyranids,’ he heard Sergeant Hakon say, his voice full of both dread and wonder.

Ragnar shuddered. These were the feared warriors of the swarms which had menaced humanity on several occasions in the past and which he knew, from the Chapter records, had slain many Space Wolves in their passing. What were these? Some remnant of one of the great hive fleets that had swept through the human realm? Or were they secret infiltrators, harbingers of a new tyranid invasion to come?

And in the instant that they began their swarming charge, he could see that some sickness was at work here too. They looked flawed, ill made, as if the process that created them had not quite worked properly. They did not accord with any of the artificial memories. They looked like sick distorted parodies. Limbs hung loosely from their sides. Boils and warts erupted from their flesh. Thin yellow mucus wept from their mouths and breathing membranes. It was as if they had been infected by some terrible plague. Even their movements were sick and limping.

This was something new, he thought. In all the records, there were no references to diseased tyranids. They sometimes infected whole worlds with their biomechanical spores, but there was never any reference to them suffering illness. Not that it meant anything, Ragnar thought after a moment’s reflection. There were many gaps in the old records, and who really knew much about these heretical aliens?

Perhaps there was a connection of some sort between the disease here and the plague on Aerius. Then the time for all wondering was past, as the tyranids attacked.

They swept forward in a huge wave. The giant hive warriors bellowed eerie alien challenges. The smaller things chittered and aimed small, organic looking guns. Their chitin gleamed greenly in the half-light.

‘Watch out!’ Sven bellowed. There was a grinding sound, and then the bizarre organic guns began to spit a hail of projectiles towards them. He threw himself flat, letting the shells pass overhead. Groans of agony from behind him told him that others had not been so swift or so lucky.

Drawing a bead with his bolter he opened fire himself, concentrating on the genestealers and the huge hive warriors. He knew that soon they would be upon him and that he was going to have to rise into a fighting crouch or be butchered where he lay, but right at this moment he wanted to thin out their numbers a little.

Shouted orders from behind told him that others had had the same idea. Las beams pulsed over his head as the remnants of the inquisitor's bodyguards returned fire. The thunder of bolt pistols told him that his battle-brothers were joining in the combat. He saw some small circular objects go whistling overhead, and a shockwave of death ripped through the onrushing tyranid line. Someone had enough sense to lob grenades into the tightly packed mass, he thought. Good idea! He thumbed his grenade dispenser. One of the small circular microgrenades dropped into his cupped hand. He squeezed twice to set the timer and then threw.

It arced away and landed among the tyranid attackers. The first few passed over it without harm, but an instant later the explosion smashed into a tall hive warrior and some of the smaller brood. Great chunks of the beast's carapace blasted outwards, then the huge creature toppled like a felled tree. Its smaller kin were shredded instantly. Cold satisfaction filled Ragnar as he reached for another grenade.

Some of the alien shells chewed into the ground near him. He could see them shatter and smelled an acrid acidic stink as greenish fluid bubbled forth. He knew it was a form of corrosive that would eat flesh as well as armour. The stench was appalling. He was glad none of it had splashed his flesh.

He rolled to one side so that the beasts could not get a bead on him, snatching his pistol as he went. Something sprayed on his hand, and he smelled a scent like burning from his gauntlet. Knowing there was nothing he could do about it right now, he sprang to his feet and unloaded shot after shot into the tyranid horde.

There were so many of them he could not miss. Each shell smashed into a victim. Heads flew apart, flesh tore, and alien body fluids oozed forth to splatter the deck. Any human force would have broken under the relentless fire the Marines and their allies spewed forth. The tyranids kept on coming, oblivious to any casualties. It was quite terrifying to see the way they maintained their advance and Ragnar could smell the barely suppressed fear of the men all around him. Only the Space Wolves, the two

inquisitors and Gul seemed immune. He could hear Sternberg shouting encouragement to his men, and Gul bellowing orders for the troops to hold steady. He sensed Karah mustering her psychic powers.

It was as if a river of pure light passed all around him now. The guards' fire was steady despite their panic. They had obviously realised that their best hope of survival lay in obeying their commanders, and inflicting as many casualties as possible. The whole front rank of the tyranid onslaught was scythed down. For a moment, a brief moment, it appeared that their relentless advance might halt. They wavered, their ranks thinned by human fire and a torrent of grenades. The cohesion of the whole group seemed to fail, and it looked like they might actually turn tail and run. But then the wavering stopped, and they picked up momentum again, leaping over the corpses of their fallen, determined to get to grips with their enemies.

Ragnar steeled himself for the shock of impact, knowing that in the next few heartbeats he might die. This time he was determined that come what may, he would not freeze, and that, if he were to die, he was going to take some of these inhuman monsters to hell with him. Sven let out a long howl and charged forward. Ragnar watched him plough into the monstrous mass, cleaving about him as he went. The savage teeth of his chainsword ripped through chitin like it was paper and exposed pulpy innards. Weapons of flesh and bone were chopped in two. They fell to pieces, leaking blood and pus just like the monsters that carried them.

The Wolf watched for a moment, and then decided that Sven had the right idea. He leapt forward and felt the shock of impact as his chainsword smashed through organic armour. It was like being a swimmer diving into a sea of flesh. All around him monstrous things bellowed. Distorted alien faces, twisted in unreadable expressions that might have been hatred or hunger, surrounded him. Unnatural eyes glittered with hatred and malice. The stink of the tyranids was all but overwhelming, and goaded the beast within him to savage excess. He lashed out, clearing a path to Sven's side, and they stood back to back against the horde.

Lasguns flashed in the darkness. Grenade explosions strobed across his sight. He smelled burning and blood and the sour stench of disease. The deck flexed beneath his feet, resonating to the blasts of the bombs. The air in his chest vibrated with the sounds of battle. He pulled the trigger of his bolt pistol, and shells cleaved a path of destruction through the aliens. They were so tightly packed that they could not dodge. Bolter fire blasted

clean through the body of one and exploded in the chest of the tyrannid behind. He ducked the sweep of a huge claw, and sheared it off with his return stroke. Greenish slime pumped forth to spray him. The rotating blades of the chainsword sent droplets of it spraying across the room.

For the next few seconds he was too busy to think, let alone notice what was happening all around him. Duck and strike, parry and thrust, move and lash out, that was all he could do. It was fighting at a pace too fast for thought. Instinctively he knew he would live or die according to the speed of his reflexes. He existed only in the moment, feeling nothing except his own movements, noticing nothing save the flickering motion of his foes. It was terrifying and exhilarating, he felt as if he were being carried along on some great wave of excitement and action and fear. This was what it meant to be alive. He felt perfectly poised and balanced, every sense was stretched to the maximum, and every sinew was tautened by the need to deal death, and avoid swift retribution.

He hacked out with the chainsword and disembowelled a nearby beast. He sensed something huge moving through the horde pushing things aside like an orca moving through a shoal of fish. Suddenly he was face to face with one of the mighty hive warriors. It towered almost twice his height above him. In two of its four claws it held swords of razor-sharp chitin. In the other two it clutched one of the weird living guns. Its huge jaws opened and it bellowed a challenge even as the blades swept down from both sides.

Ragnar twisted, ducking to avoid the sweep of the right hand blade, raising his chainsword to block the swing of the left. The force of the impact almost tore the weapon from his hand, but he willed his fingers to stay closed and clench its hilt, and raised his pistol intending to put a shot through the creature's eye. It read his intention clearly and brought its blade round swiftly, smiting the barrel of the bolt pistol, smashing it to one side so that the shell flashed outward and upward, instead of into its own flesh.

Ragnar howled his own battle cry and leapt forward, bringing his feet down on the creature's huge legs and using them as a springboard to propel his leap to the level of the tyrannid's head. Before it could react this time, his chainsword swept out and ripped right through the thing's neck, severing vertebrae and taking the head clean from its shoulders. Even as it began to tumble, he landed on its falling body and leapt once more, the

force of his leap carrying him through into the mass of smaller creatures beyond.

He landed on top of one, flattening it to the ground, and kept moving, chopping and slashing, swinging and shooting, until he had left a ring of dead and dying monsters behind him. Two of the sick-looking genestealers moved in from each side. Their movements were far slower than the ones he had faced earlier and yet still much quicker than a normal man's. As they closed, he dropped to one knee, allowing their claws to pass over his head, then he sent his chainsword arcing out to open both their bellies. He sprang back to avoid their instinctive strike and barrelled into Sven who had been coming up behind him. For an instant pure reflex action almost caused him to lash out at his fellow Blood Claw, but at the last second he brought himself under control, and redirected his strike at the falling stealers. This time he cleaved one of their heads clean in two. Before he could move Sven had hacked the other one into pieces. Suddenly there was no movement around them. Ragnar realised that they were in a calm spot on the battlefield, and had an instant's respite from the fury of combat. He glanced around to see how the battle was going.

Looking back he could see the mass of tyranids had swept into the humans. The fighting had degenerated into a ruck in which all semblance of discipline and formation had been lost, and it was a battle which favoured the tyranid style of fighting more than that of the servants of the Imperium.

As he watched he could see guards lash out with the butts of their lasguns and be cut down in return by the claws of alien monsters. Here and there small pockets of humans still held together and cleared the area around them with fans of firepower, but these small islands were being overwhelmed by the relentless tides of battle. Off to the right he could see the inquisitors and Gul and Sergeant Hakon were still holding their own. And in the distance chilling wolf-like howls told him that Strybjorn and Nils still fought on.

Looking closely he could see an aura of light flickering around the talisman on Karah's breast. Searing beams of white-hot power lashed out from her hands to strike her foes. The glow underlit her face and blazed within her eye sockets, making her look positively daemonic. She was causing terrible casualties with her power, but even so, it was obvious to Ragnar that unless something were done, and quickly, the human forces

would be overwhelmed and their quest would end in disaster and death. The tyranids still fought on as if they were all talons on one vast claw, exhibiting a co-ordination and a fury that was simply too much for the humans.

He glanced around to see if there was anything he could do. He saw that the way was clear to the vast organic machine and the talisman they had come to find. Perhaps he could make a grab for it, and the human force could make a fighting retreat. It seemed worth a try.

He raced forward over a carpet of living flesh towards the heart of a living engine made of flesh, and bone and gristle.

‘I hope you know what you’re bloody well doing,’ he heard Sven shout, and immediately understood why. As if responding to a more pressing threat, the tyranids had wheeled away from the bulk of the human force, and were heading towards Ragnar and Sven in one unstoppable mass. Now why would they be doing that, he wondered? There had to be a reason.

Almost as quickly as he asked the question, the answer flashed into his head – they were protecting something important. They assumed that the two Blood Claws were threatening something vital to their own safety. The problem was that Ragnar had no idea what, and he did not have many seconds to find an answer to the riddle. There was only one thing he could think of, so he holstered his pistol and even as he moved lobbed a grenade into the mass of brain-like tissue. As one the tyranid horde let out a shriek of pain and near human horror. They milled around confused for a heartbeat before advancing once more.

Ragnar knew he was on to something. He kept moving forward and threw more and more grenades. The explosives threw up great gobbets of flesh where they tore through the mass of tissue. With every explosion the horde halted and howled. Ragnar knew this was not usual. Never in all the records had the creatures shown a weakness like this in the past. Was this some mutation brought on by their long stay in the hulk or was it a flaw created by the disease from which they so obviously suffered? He did not know; he was only grateful that it was so.

Sven had obviously understood what he was doing for he too was now sending grenade after grenade flying into the organic machine. From behind him, Ragnar could hear the human force, freed from the close assault, reform and begin to send a torrent of fire into their alien enemies.

The distraction had bought them the time they so desperately needed. Now they were scything down the tyrannid scum as if they were grass.

‘Keep it up!’ Ragnar yelled. He was running now down the corridors in the machine, tossing grenades left and right, feeling a sense of triumph every time the horde of creatures shrieked their alien agony. In the avenues around him the tyrannids moved, but their actions seemed slower now and less co-ordinated.

Suddenly, he realised that he was before the great central pillar. High up on it glittered the fragment of the talisman they had come to reclaim. He knew instantly what he must do. Leaping up, he lashed out with his blade. The intricately scalloped flesh of the tyrannid bio-machine parted. Fluids leaked forth like tears. The talisman came free and dropped into Ragnar’s outstretched hand.

He grabbed it tight and landed beside Sven. Instantly there was silence, as if someone had thrown a switch and somehow turned the battle off. The horde stopped moving as if they had been animated only by the presence of the talisman in their midst. Somewhere in the distance, Ragnar sensed rather than heard a psychic shriek, as if something were in its death throes. Then as swiftly as they had stopped, the tyrannids were in motion again – but this time there was little rhyme or reason to their actions. They moved in all directions, as if the guiding intelligence were gone. The smaller creatures seemed as insensate as beasts. The larger things appeared to struggle to control them. The relentless firing of their human opponents continued to take its toll, and this time, bereft of the unifying presence of whatever had dwelled within the machine, they turned and fled, scattering in all directions.

Ragnar risked a glance at Sven and returned his companion’s wide grin with one of his own. He could hardly believe it. It was over and they had won. The inquisitors and Gul raced over. Karah reached out, indicating he should give the talisman to her. Seeing the zealous glow burning in her eyes, he felt oddly reluctant to do so for a moment – but nonetheless he gave it to her. She smiled, and there was little human in the smile.

‘It is ours,’ she said. ‘Now we must get to Aerius and complete our quest.’

Somehow, the words sounded desperately ominous. Ragnar felt a shiver pass through him.



THIRTEEN

The *Light of Truth* shimmered out of the Immaterium in the outer reaches of the Aeriis system. Ragnar felt a surge of pride and hope. Soon their quest would be over. They had brought back the Talisman of Lykos as they had intended. During the voyage from the hulk, Inquisitor Isaan had managed to reassemble its three parts to create a unified whole.

Ragnar risked a glance across the command deck at her and was suddenly uneasy. Despite her tanned features, she looked pale and drawn, as if the glittering emerald amulet on her neck was draining her of her very life force. Her face was gaunt, and there were flecks of grey in her hair that had not been there short weeks before. The amulet, now a single stone of wondrous beauty, pulsed on its chain at her throat. There was something about its eerie alien loveliness that set the hairs on the back of his neck rising. He wondered if he was the only one who felt this way. His battle-brothers seemed to be showing no signs of sharing his unease, and he had not discussed it with any of them.

He wondered what would happen next. A strange silence had descended. The ship's astropaths had not been able to contact their counterparts on the planet. This was not a good sign. Only death could silence an astropath totally.

The others were watching expectantly the holo-pit set into the centre of the bridge. Now that they were within hailing distance of Aeriis they would soon be able to speak directly with the surface of the planet, rather than communicate via astropath. Ragnar wondered what they would learn.

'My lord inquisitor, we are within hailing distance,' Chief Initiate Vosper announced finally, after what had seemed like hours of waiting.

'Emperor be praised,' Inquisitor Sternberg replied. 'See if you can make contact with the governor's palace.'

'It shall be so, my lord.' The man gestured to his minions, and the technical plainsong intensified as the crew moved sliders on their control altars. Ragnar saw Vosper pull two gargoyle-headed levers forward and suddenly there was a flickering light in the holo-pit.

Suddenly they were looking at the Imperial governor. It was a shocking sight. The man must once have been tall and powerful and impressive looking, that much was obvious. He leaned back on a throne carved to represent the double-headed Imperial eagle; its eyes were diamonds and it rested on a dais of marble. The man's armour looked as if it had been intended for a much larger warrior. His cheeks were sunken, the bones were evident on the hands which clutched the throne's armrests. A feverish light burned in the man's eyes.

'Inquisitor Sternberg!' he croaked. 'Is that you?'

'Secretary Karmiakal! Where is Governor Tal?'

'Tal... Tal is dead, my lord. Most of his cabinet are dead as well. They have all succumbed to the plague that ravages our world.'

Sternberg looked shocked and then overcome with grief. 'You are the acting governor then?'

'I have that honour. Was your quest... successful?' There was a note of desperation in the man's voice that was truly pathetic, Ragnar thought.

'Aye, we have the talisman with us.'

'Then you must bring it down to us. It is our last hope. This dreadful disease has infected over fifty per cent of the population. The death toll is enormous. Bodies choke our streets, too many for the mortuary wagons to take away.'

'We will do what we can,' said the inquisitor. 'I will bring my shuttle down at once. Please ask the Administratum to grant us immediate landing clearance.'

'It shall be so, inquisitor. Although I doubt that there are enough people left alive manning the aerial defences to cause you any trouble, even if you attempted to land without clearance.'

The figure in the globe flickered and vanished, leaving the folk on the bridge to glance at each other in appalled silence.

'We must go at once,' said Sternberg. 'It seems we have arrived not a moment too soon.'

As one the inquisitors, Gul and the Space Wolves left the bridge and made their way to the shuttle bay.

Ragnar watched Aerius swell in the porthole of the shuttle. He was glad they had taken the spacecraft rather than the teleporter. Sternberg had not wished to risk a malfunction by that ancient and temperamental device at this late stage. Aerius was a smaller world than Fenris, that much was

obvious, and the surface of its landmasses glittered darkly in the sun's light. As the shuttle drove downwards into the atmosphere he realised exactly why. The entire surface of the continent at which they were aimed was sheathed in metal. The whole surface was one huge industrial city. The black clouds that obscured the sky below them were not natural, but the products of enormous factories. Chimneys as large as mountains spewed chemical pollutants into the sky.

Here and there he could see monstrous burning pits that looked like lakes of molten lava. He guessed, from the knowledge placed in his brain by the tutelary engines, that these were the waste products of the titanic factories for which Aerius was famous. As they came lower, individual details became visible, and the scale of what he was witnessing became almost too much to comprehend. They were passing over buildings the size of islands back on Fenris. There were thousands of them, in all shapes and sizes, mountainous structures so large that they could surely not be the work of man. They seemed, rather, the products of the imagination of insane gods. A growing sense of wonder filled him. Intellectually Ragnar had known the Imperium was capable of building on this scale. But it was one thing to know something was possible; it was quite another to see it for yourself.

The shuttle began to buck as it hit turbulence in the atmosphere. Ignoring the lurching and rolling, Ragnar pressed his nose against the porthole and continued to watch. He realised that what he had thought were rivers were massive roadways, threading their way between the skyscrapers which rose to dizzying heights above the ground.

‘How many people do you think live down there?’ Ragnar asked Sven.

‘Too bloody many!’ replied the Blood Claw. ‘But less than there were, because of the plague,’ he added blackly.

‘It is said that a million, million people lived on Aerius,’ Inquisitor Sternberg said. He had obviously overheard Ragnar's question. ‘No one knows for sure. The Ecclesiarchy have never been able to get more than a small percentage of them on the census rolls.’

‘It must be a very bountiful world,’ Ragnar said.

‘Bountiful and terrible,’ Sternberg replied. ‘It is one of the most productive Hive Worlds in the Imperium. Its manufactories supply over half the worlds of this sector. If it were lost it would be a terrible blow to the Imperium.’

‘You don’t think that is even remotely a possibility though, do you?’ Ragnar said.

‘It is more than a possibility. With its defences so weakened, a determined invasion by orks or Chaos or any of the other blasphemous alien races could easily seize or destroy the great factory districts.’

‘Then it’s a good thing we got here in time to save it,’ Nils said with a smile.

‘We haven’t saved it yet,’ Karah Isaan cut in ominously.

The Black Pyramid was not quite as large as Ragnar had expected. True, by the standards of the villages he had grown up in it was huge, easily the size of a hill, but it was dwarfed by the towering structures that surrounded it. Even so, it was the most impressive building out of all those Ragnar could see. Its sides glittered like glass and the crystalline reflections of its dismal surroundings were visible in its shimmering sides. More impressive still was the palpable aura of power that surrounded it. You could tell simply by looking at it that here was a building which held or concealed something of tremendous importance.

Ragnar watched the shuttle’s reflection grow in its side, and then stabilise as the craft first hovered, then began to descend. He felt relieved at the prospect of setting foot on solid ground after weeks cooped up aboard a starship. The shuttle shivered as its landing gear touched the metal-swathed ground.

‘Well, we’re here at last,’ said Nils.

The first thing Ragnar noticed when he set foot upon the ground was the number of corpses. Bodies filled the whole vast plaza before the pyramid. They lay everywhere, in various states of decomposition. It was only after a few horrifying moments that he realised that some of the bodies were not dead and rotting, but were still alive, albeit barely, in the grip of the terrible plague.

The second thing he noticed was the pyramid itself. It seemed much larger now than it had from the air. It had a sense of presence, of majesty, that dwarfed all of the much larger buildings around it. Of all the buildings in the area, it alone drew the eye. And yet there was something about it that made Ragnar feel very uneasy indeed. For all its glittering beauty, there was a sense of menace about the pyramid that made his hackles rise. All the misgivings he had felt way back on the Fang and which had haunted him occasionally on their trip, seemed to return redoubled.

He tried to tell himself that it was simply the presence of all these sick people that made his flesh crawl, but he knew it was not so. There was something about the pyramid itself that filled him with dread and made him want to shout a warning to the others. All his instincts rebelled as he contemplated it. He was surprised that the others did not feel the same way. It seemed so obvious to him.

Perhaps this was just another symptom of the malaise that had affected his mind ever since he was wounded. Perhaps he was seeing a threat where none existed. Surely this must be the case. Surely the others could not be so blind.

‘Look at that,’ he heard Nils breathe.

He glanced skyward in the direction his comrade was pointing and saw thousands of glittering contrails moving through the upper atmosphere, descending through a gap in the clouds. At first, he thought they were under some form of attack but then he realised that these were falling stars, so many of them that they were visible in daylight. The stars will fall, he thought. As the gap in the clouds widened, he caught sight of something else: a monstrous red comet, dragging a tail of greenish-yellow behind it lit up a fifth of the sky. Ragnar knew without having to be told that he looked upon the Balestar.

‘What now?’ he heard Hakon ask.

‘We go in,’ Sternberg replied sombrely. ‘The oracle was quite clear on that. To end the plague the talisman must be brought to the hidden chambers within the pyramid.’

‘And where is the entrance?’

‘We will find it,’ Sternberg said grimly.

They had to step over the bodies of the dead as they approached the building. To Ragnar they looked almost like sacrificial victims offered up to some evil god. There was something deeply disturbing and offensive to his sense of rightness in the manner in which they simply lay there, sprawled out obscenely.

Even worse were the groaning half-dead who begged for water, or to be put out of their misery, as the newcomers approached. Ragnar tried to ignore their pleas, but they sank into his mind despite all his efforts.

He saw Gul bend and snap one’s neck with a chop of his hand. Then the huge warrior looked at all of the folk that lay around him, and then

shrugged pathetically, as if overwhelmed by the sheer scale of what they were witnessing.

‘Bloody cheerful place,’ Sven muttered, as if sensing Ragnar’s mood and attempting to lighten it. He looked at Ragnar and smiled mockingly. ‘Are you sweating, Ragnar? I hope you are not coming down with a fever.’

Ragnar could tell from his scent that he was joking, but even so he wondered whether Sven had spotted something that he had not. Was he really sweating? A hand to his brow told him he was not. He let out a deep breath and tried to ignore the deep and offensive stench of pestilence that filled his nostrils.

The pyramid loomed larger in his sight. How were they going to get inside, Ragnar wondered? The prophecy had not exactly been specific on that subject. To tell the truth, he suddenly realised that he had no real idea of what they were supposed to be doing at all. Until now, he had simply been following others who presumably knew better than he did. It was like being a character in one of the old sagas. You did not question the wisdom of what the soothsayers said, you simply did it. Now, he was starting to wonder. What relevance could finding some mystical talisman, however powerful, have to combating death on this scale. The plague was a force that was invisible and yet omnipresent, and it was bringing a whole mighty world to its knees.

Ragnar felt his lips twist into a smile that might have been a snarl. It was a little late to be having such thoughts now, he realised. He wondered what was wrong with him. Why had his thoughts become so defeatist over the past few weeks? Perhaps it was because of his wounds, or perhaps it was because of some other external reason. But what? And why was he thinking this way now? What influences were at work here?

They were alongside the pyramid now, walking under its vast shadow. Ragnar could see his reflection mirrored in the black marbling of its side. His image seemed subtly distorted – thinner, weaker, its eyes feverish, its skin blotched as if with plague. For a moment the thought struck him that this was an omen; that he was looking at a picture of his future doom. He pushed the idea aside with a shiver. He noticed his flesh had started to itch. He fought down the urge to scratch and kept marching.

They were at the exact centre of the pyramid’s west wall now. He noticed that Karah’s eyes were closed and that a nimbus of power played round her head. Tendrils of force ran from it to the amulet and then back

again. Questing fingers of power reached out from her and flowed over the pyramid's side. As they did so, lines of eldritch fire sprang into being, revealing a complex pattern in the curious runic script of the eldar. For a moment the symbol blazed bright as the sun, and the sight of it burned its way into Ragnar's brain. There was something ominous about it that set his nerves on edge, as if it were shrieking a warning that he did not understand.

He wanted to go forward and tell the others to stop, that they were disturbing something best left well alone. He wanted to but he could not. He realised that like the others he was caught up by the simple momentum of their quest. He had no reason to stop them, and they had no reason to listen. All he had were his forebodings and what were they when weighed against the chance to save billions of lives?

Even as he watched the shimmering symbol vanished, and with it went part of the wall of the pyramid. It simply vanished like mist, leaving a gap in the stonework that revealed the maw of a great dark tunnel. Despite himself, Ragnar was impressed by the magic, and he felt a small surge of excitement. Whatever they were doing, they were making progress. They had pierced the wall of a structure that had proved invulnerable for millennia.

Inquisitor Sternberg produced a glowglobe from a deep pocket in his cloak and they advanced into the gloom. The walls of the pyramid's interior were not made from the same mystical substance as its outer walls. They appeared to be carved from pure granite, and seemed much older than the external walls. It appeared that they were within the remains of a much older site.

The walls were inlaid with frescoes and scrollwork bearing more eldar symbols, and for the first time Ragnar wished that he could read that arcane language. He felt that he might learn at least part of the great secret that was concealed within this structure. What was this place, he wondered? Was it some vast tomb built to protect the corpse of some ancient eldar king? Judging from what he had seen on the space hulk he decided that this was unlikely, but how could he know for sure? He had no idea how typical the eldar on that hulk were of their race in general. He doubted that they would have built anything as crude as this. And then again, didn't the eldar shun the surface of worlds, and hadn't they done so since mankind had first encountered them? Was this something from the

distant past, from the time before the eldar had abandoned planetary surfaces? Now he truly wished he could understand the writings on the wall.

All around him he felt the swirl of mystical forces. Instinctively he rose on the balls of his feet, ready to meet any threat. Even as he did so, he knew it was a futile gesture. The builders of this complex would not resort to anything so crude as traps and deadfalls and guardians. The things that protected the pyramid would be far subtler. Spells, curses, pure psychic force was what they could expect here, and these were things he was not really equipped to deal with. These were matters for Rune Priests, not simple warriors. For all his inexperience, poor Lars might have been better prepared for this than he. He had at least spent time with the Chapter's mystic masters.

Was that why he was dead, Ragnar suddenly wondered? Was there a huge pattern of events at work here of which he had caught only the faintest glimpse? Was this all part of some immense plot, on a scale which he could not begin to comprehend? Had the appearance of the falling stars, and their quest and the death of his comrade all been part of the web of some vast scheme? He shook his head. He was imagining things. This gloomy place was starting to get to him.

At the edge of his vision, he thought he saw a host of shadowy inhuman figures gathering. He had seen their likeness before. They looked like eldar.

'Be very still,' Karah said in a voice that carried eerily in the echoing corridor. 'Be very still if you value your lives.'

Ragnar could see no threat but her tone and her scent warned him that she was serious, so he froze on the spot. He stretched his senses to their limits and still could detect nothing. So he waited. Karah raised her hands and the amulet blazed bright once more. As she did so, more lines of fire became evident. They shimmered into being in the air before them, millions and millions of beams all criss-crossing in an intricate web of light. At her gesture they blazed brighter and brighter – and then suddenly faded.

'We... we can go on,' she stammered, in the tone of voice of one who had just seen and avoided a deadly threat by a matter of inches.

They pressed on into the heart of the pyramid. The aura of gloom deepened. Ragnar's sense of being surrounded by hidden powers

intensifying as they worked their way deeper into the maze.

Scant moments later, the air ahead of them swirled. A figure materialised, seemingly coalescing out of thin air. Ragnar gazed at the apparition, his mind suddenly filled with stories of ghosts he had heard back on Fenris. It was not an inappropriate thought either. The figure before him might have been the spirit of a warrior returned to haunt the living.

It was an eldar, inhumanly tall and slender. and garbed in exotically beautiful curved armour. A huge crest rose from its gaunt helmet. Strange weapons dangled from its belt. It stood before them with its arms folded across its narrow chest. It wore an over-tunic decorated with diamond patterns, and the sleeves and leggings of its armour were decorated in gaudy checks. When it spoke its voice was thrilling and musical.

‘Go back, humans,’ it pealed. ‘You should not have come here.’

The alien was not real, Ragnar realised. He could catch no scent, and it shimmered translucently. He knew that if he reached out he could put his hand through it. Still, what was the purpose of this projection? Was it simply a way of communicating with them, or was it a distraction, intended to keep them occupied while something else sneaked up to attack them?

‘We go where we will,’ Hakon responded. Ragnar glanced around, sniffing the air to make sure his suspicions were not correct. ‘We are the Emperor’s servants, in the Emperor’s realm, and it is not for any alien to tell us where we may go.’

The eldar shook its head sadly. ‘I mean you no harm, Space Wolves. I bring a warning. You meddle with things that are best left undisturbed. You seek to awake something that should not be awoken. If you persist along this path, it will lead only to catastrophe on a scale you cannot comprehend.’

There was an echoing quiet as the alien’s words sank in. What was this talk about warnings and catastrophes? Was the eldar sincere or was this all some sort of trick? Sven stood slack jawed behind him, as well he might. Ragnar himself felt like he was confronting some mythical creature from one of the ancient sagas.

‘What is this?’ he heard Sternberg ask. ‘What do you wish of us, ancient one?’

The eldar pointed to the talisman hanging at Karah's breast. 'Do not seek to remake that which was broken. Do not take it to the place of the curse. Do not set the imprisoned one free. You have been warned. Even now the forces that hold it are unravelling and the spell which has kept my brethren and I here to guard it is almost undone. Go back! Go back! Before it is too late, go back!'

Even as it spoke the figure shimmered and vanished. The inquisitors and the Space Wolves stared at each other. No one spoke. There was nothing to say. All of them knew they had come too far to turn back. All of them considered the ghostly eldar's words.

What was the thing that should not be awakened? Was this a sincere attempt to avert their doom on the part of the alien, or was it some unfathomable attempt to manipulate them for its own purposes.

He did not know. He only knew that if they did not bring the talisman back to Aerius in one piece the whole world would die. And that if they did, the plague would end, although he suspected at terrible cost. The Oracle had said this. The Space Wolves' own Rune Priests had confirmed it. Surely, even though the eldar possessed their own dark wisdom, and possibly an ability to see the pattern of the future, it could be no greater than that of the Imperium's own sages?

Ragnar's head swam from trying to understand the swirling complexities of the situation. He pushed all thoughts aside, glad for the moment that he was not the leader here, that he did not need to make decisions, that it was not his task to wrestle with the mysteries that surrounded him. All he needed to do, at this moment, was fight when called on to, and win if it were humanly possible.

He smiled as this knowledge lodged itself in his brain. It was good to reduce things to such elemental simplicity. It was even better to be able to find something to concentrate on that kept his mind from pondering on things of which he had no understanding.

As they ventured further into the heart of the pyramid, Ragnar realised that the corridors were laid out like a maze. They twisted and turned with neither rhyme nor reason, and did so in such a manner as to befuddle the head of any normal man.

'Why is the place like this?' he heard Nils ask.

'Russ take me!' Sven snapped back. 'Can't you see they were just trying to confuse any fools who came in. Fools like us actually.'

‘No, Space Wolf. You are wrong,’ Karah said. ‘The maze is set out according to some kind of arcane geomantic principle. The runes in the wall and the layout of the corridors are all part of a pattern designed to funnel unseen energies. I can sense the flow all around us, being channelled and directed.’

‘Why?’ Ragnar asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she responded. ‘Maybe it is all part of the system that has kept the pyramid inviolate for all these centuries. Maybe it’s something more. I sense that there is something powerful at the centre, though. I can feel that too.’

Not a tomb then, Ragnar thought. A temple? A nexus of mystical forces? A machine that focussed power? Who could guess why the aliens had built this place here.

Three more times they stopped, and waited anxiously while Karah dispelled the lines of fire. Then suddenly it was over. They had reached the end of the tunnel and the end of their journey.

In an open chamber which echoed hollowly with their footsteps, they came to stand before an immense stone door covered in runes. Ragnar wondered what lay beyond.

‘How are we going to open this?’ Sven asked, his voice too loud in the echoing chamber.

‘Explosives,’ Nils suggested.

‘Don’t have any,’ Strybjorn sniffed.

‘We’ve got our grenades.’

‘Won’t make a dent in this. Unless I miss my guess, it must be ten strides thick and weigh tons.’

Ragnar contemplated the immense weight of dressed stone standing before them. It seemed as massive and immobile as the pyramid itself had from the outside and just as unbreachable. Yet now they were here, in the centre of the vast, ancient monument. He knew that given time they would find a way into its secret heart.

Karah Isaan walked up to the vast stone door and placed her hands flat upon it. As she did so, lines of brilliant white light emerged from her palms and spread like a web of fire across the stone. This time the pattern did not fade away, but flashed and sparked for several long moments.

There was an earthquake-deep rumbling and a sudden swirling cloud of dust. In one motion, the stone descended into the floor, leaving the way

clear into the chamber in the heart of the pyramid.

As it did so, Ragnar felt a sudden terrifying feeling of utter dread, and an overwhelming sense of evil.

Barely a heartbeat later, a deep rolling laughter, wicked and yet strangely jovial, boomed out around the chamber, and then a mighty voice spoke.

‘Greetings, fools! In the name of beloved Uncle Nurgle, I, Botchulaz, favoured spawn of the most disgusting Lord of Disease, bid you welcome. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for freeing me.’

Along with his companions, Ragnar entered the chamber warily, weapons held ready, knowing that there was no way he could defend himself from what waited within.

The floor was caked in what looked like the hardened remains of a millennia of effusions of pus and snot and phlegm. In the middle of the floor, on an altar that looked as if it was carved from a mound of pure hardened mucus, lounged an obese and profoundly disturbing figure. It was truly huge. It was obscenely fat and its skin was a blotched and unhealthy green. It rippled to the ground in many leathery folds. The reek from it was worse than any sewer. Tiny horns emerged from its foul, bulbous head. Its eyes were tiny and sparkled with ancient malice. The thing gave a long, hacking cough that sent a great shower of snot spraying out onto the floor. Where the disgusting eruption landed, each drop formed into a tiny capering figure that resembled its creator. They danced across the floor for a moment and then sank into the carpet of filth, disappearing without trace.

‘Emperor save us, an Unclean One...’ he heard Sternberg mutter, and a shiver of horror passed up Ragnar’s spine. The Unclean One was the ancient name for a type of terrible, terrifyingly powerful daemon, devoted to the service of Nurgle, the Lord of Pestilence, and now it appeared he was in the presence of such a being. ‘Now all is clear to me.’

As Ragnar watched, the greenish stuff of the altar writhed and reformed. Tiny gargoyle faces emerged, stuck out their tongues, hawked and spat and then vanished into the substance of the structure again like ripples disappearing from the surface of a pool.

‘Excuse me for not rising,’ said the daemonic thing. ‘But I am not in the best of health.’

It laughed uproariously as if it had just made some astoundingly funny jest, and its laughter only died out in another long and hacking cough.

‘Daemonic scum! Prepare to die!’ roared Hakon.

‘Please be a little quieter. Can’t you see I’m not well?’ said the vile daemon, looking at the sergeant with watery eyes brimming with cynical humour. ‘You humans can be so tiring. Almost as bad as those eldar pests who trapped me here. Well, it’s been a boring few thousand years but oddly restful too, so I suppose I mustn’t grumble. But now I have things to do. A plague daemon’s work is never done, you know.’

Ragnar looked at the daemon in astonishment. He knew that its words were not actually being spoken aloud but somehow were appearing in his head as if by magic. And he knew also that despite the humorous tone of the daemon’s remarks, its speech was simply a way of belittling and distracting them. There was a wicked intelligence at work here.

‘You shall not leave this place!’ shouted Sternberg. An appalled look flashed across the inquisitor’s face. He looked like a man who has found out that his whole life’s work had been a mockery. Ragnar felt a certain sympathy for him. The inquisitor had come here believing that he was about to save his home world from the plague – but he had just found out that he freed one of the deadliest daemons in existence. A malefic being, that he had sworn to oppose with his life if need be, had been unleashed upon the universe through his actions.

And mine, Ragnar realised.

The daemon’s laughter gurgled forth. ‘On the contrary, my little human friend. I shall. I am very keen to see the outside world once more. I tell you, you don’t know the meaning of boredom until you’ve spent two thousand years animating statues made from your own filth, and then trying to teach them to dance. Still, every cloud has a silver lining. You know, I have devised some very interesting new disease spores.’

‘You’ll never have the chance to spread them,’ Sergeant Hakon spat. He looked ready to strike, but Ragnar could tell from his posture and his scent that he was unsure of himself. The daemon’s odd conversational manner and its obvious poise had thrown him. Ragnar could tell that his whole pack was struck by a similar unease. Possibly they were all dumbfounded by the thought they had been used as pawns by this vile gurgling monstrosity.

‘Now, now, don’t be like that,’ Botchulaz simpered. ‘I am entitled to my little bit of fun, you know. Have a little sympathy. You’re not the one who had been stuck here for millennia with only your own secretions for company. I mean, those eldar were unnaturally cunning, if you ask me, almost too much for a poor bumbling creature such as myself. All those wards and gates, all that power bound up in that lovely talisman. All those ancient warrior ghosts to keep my followers away. One of those accursed intricate patterns which only reveals its flaw every three thousand years when stars are falling from the sky and the moons are in the right alignment. It was tricky arranging this, I don’t mind telling you. Surely you don’t grudge me a little amusement?’

‘We shall slay you where you stand,’ Nils dared to say.

‘Foolish boy, you can’t slay me. I am a daemon prince of Nurgle. You might, if you were very powerful and very lucky, be able to destroy this living vessel and return my essence to the warp, but you could not kill me. Not even your Emperor could do that. Believe me, I know, I met him once. A nice enough chap but very dour.’

Ragnar could not believe he was hearing this blasphemy. And yet, he realised, it was perfectly possible that the unholy fiend’s words were true. According to holy writ the Emperor had fought against the plague daemons of Nurgle over ten thousand years ago. Was it really so unbelievable that this creature had been one of them? No more unbelievable than the fact that it had survived in the heart of this pyramid all this time, and schemed for its release, using them all as its pawns, directing them all from across the vastness of space.

Almost as if it sensed his thoughts, the daemon swivelled its blubbery head and looked over at him. Its face broke into a wide grin which revealed row upon row of thousands of blotched green and brown fangs. There was a ghastly stench of halitosis and gum disease. ‘It wasn’t easy, I can tell you. Only at certain times could I send my thoughts questing outwards, to make contact with my minions and get you people to do my will. Seemed like an age, believe me. Oh, what am I saying? It was an age since I first got stuck here. The eldar again – they never liked me, you know. I suspect the Farseers built this pyramid as a trap for my kind ages ago. You can never tell with them, they can predict the future in an odd sort of way, and they are subtle in a way you lot have never been.

‘Anyway, I blundered right into it, I was only here to spread some new spores and a little good cheer among my worshippers and they dropped right out of the sky and began their rituals. Nobody was more surprised than I was when I got sucked into this prison. I might have been stuck here forever, too, if your people hadn’t interfered and slaughtered the eldar.

‘Broke the blasted amulet too, and carried it away and I thought: Well, that’s that; I’m stuck, aren’t I? The amulet was the key to the whole thing and then it was broken and gone. It was hard to maintain a positive attitude, what with my poor health and all. I was so depressed that it took me centuries to get in contact with the minions and find out even the location of one piece. And then, there was all the trouble of finding a reason for you to go and get it for me. It had me worried, I don’t mind admitting.’

The daemon was mocking them, Ragnar realised. It was boasting about how it had used them, all the while speaking in tones of false sympathy and humour. Why were they standing here listening to it, Ragnar wondered? Were they all hypnotised? Memories of how he had almost been ensnared by the sorcery of Madox came back to him. That had been a close run thing, and surely this creature must be a hundred times more powerful than Madox?

‘Oh, that reminds me: dear Gul, it’s time for your reward.’

‘Thank you, master.’

Commander Gul stepped smartly from their ranks to come face to face with the daemon. Suddenly it seemed much larger, as if somehow it had changed its size without them even noticing. It loomed over the massive figure of the inquisitors’ bodyguard, then reached forward to lick his face with a long, slime-soaked tongue.

‘No need to look so shocked,’ the daemon said to them all. ‘I needed to have somebody to keep you all on the right track. And Gul has been my servant for many years, haven’t you, Gul?’

‘Yes, master.’

‘Man and boy, like his father before him, and his father before that, and so on. I won’t bore you with a tedious repetition of all the sorceries that were needed to conceal his true nature from your tests. They were many and varied in nature and one so likes to preserve some of the mysteries. Anyway, it was my worshippers who did most of it, and I’m not

one to hog all the credit. Suffice to say that they were difficult and costly in terms of energy and sacrifice.'

'Gul, you are a traitor to all of humanity,' Sternberg said. Frank disbelief showed in his face. He obviously had difficulty adjusting to the thought of his trusted henchman's betrayal.

'And you are a fool who believes he knows the truth,' Gul replied with a sneer.

Hatred twisted Ragnar's gut. Gul had accompanied them on their quest pretending to be their ally and all the time they had been serving his vile purposes. Lars and others had died so that this man, if man you could call him, could find his way here and abase himself before Botchulaz.

'Now, now,' said the plague-thing. 'There's no need for harsh language. All's well that ends well, and so on.'

Botchulaz's mocking tone fuelled Ragnar's righteous rage. He knew now that this unending torrent of cheerful clichés was nothing more than a wicked jest of the daemon's. In its heart it hated them all, and this was its way of showing contempt for their intelligence.

Ragnar managed to throw off the spell of the daemon's voice long enough to raise his bolt pistol and aim a shot at Gul. The shell flew straight and true and exploded within the cultist's heart.

'That wasn't very nice, Ragnar,' Botchulaz said as Gul collapsed at his feet. The former bodyguard gazed up at the plague daemon the way a hound might gaze at a beloved master. 'I had rather planned to reward Gul, too. His wasn't an easy task, you know. Pretending loyalty to your Emperor and his rather over-zealous Inquisition was a bit draining for a man of his background.'

Gul reached up and tugged at Botchulaz's leg. His fingers made a hideous sucking sound as they drew back. Ragnar noticed their tips were covered in slime. 'Yes, yes,' said the daemon soothingly. 'Don't worry. I'll see you right. Least I can do, really.'

Ragnar drew a bead on the daemon, which met his fierce gaze with one of his own. Yellowing teeth were revealed by its wide grin. 'You wouldn't...' it said cheerfully.

Ragnar pulled the trigger and sent shell after shell streaking towards the daemon. One went into its head; three more went into its stomach. Botchulaz's face crumpled inwards like a rolled up piece of paper. The shells sank without trace in the rippling folds of flab around his midriff.

For a moment, Ragnar thought he might have done the thing some harm, but then the face sprang back into its normal shape – and then there was sound like a cork being pulled from a bottle, as the bolter shells were expelled from its flesh.

‘That hurt, a little,’ it said in a pained voice. A horrible coughing sound began deep in its throat and for a moment Ragnar thought that perhaps he had damaged the monster after all. It bent forward, clutching its midriff where the bullets had gone in. A spew of vile stuff vomited from its mouth. Ragnar watched as the foul stuff bubbled downwards, engulfing the dying Gul. Even as Ragnar watched in disgust and horror, it filled the dying man’s wounds, closing them, and began to spread outwards over his flesh, leaving a blotched mouldy crust as it went.

Gul gasped and shook like a man in the terminal stage of a dreadful fever. Then the shaking stopped and his whole body seemed to swell. His muscles ballooned out and his skin took on a sick greenish yellow tinge. Weird lights blazed within his eyes and he rose to his feet, fingers flexed like the talons of a hawk.

‘There we go,’ said Botchulaz. ‘One good turn deserves another, that sort of thing.’

Karah Isaan seemed to snap out of her trance. She yelled a fierce chant and raised her arms high above her head. A wave of white-hot psychic energy flowed out from her towards the daemon. A wall of searing fire enveloped Botchulaz and made his outline shimmer and dance. The daemon’s skin seemed to bubble and pop and for a moment, Ragnar thought the inquisitor might actually succeed in banishing it. Then the plague daemon’s outline congealed. It turned towards Karah and seemed to belch forth a tidal wave of energy of its own. Thousands of serpents of sickly green and yellow light entwined around her, encasing her form. She gave one long moan of agony, her skin suddenly blotched and discoloured and then she fell motionless onto the ground. Botchulaz stood there, steam rising from his skin as it knitted back together. He nodded amiably to himself, checked all his limbs to make sure they were intact, looked around and laughed pleasantly.

‘Well, it’s been fun, but I mustn’t dawdle. I have some business to attend to. I’m sure Gul will see to your deaths.’

Ragnar watched in astonishment as a web of green and yellow light erupted from the plague daemon’s body. The air was suddenly filled with a

sense of vast energies unleashed. The walls of the pyramid began to change colour. Ragnar knew this did not bode well for anybody on the surface of Aerius, but he did not really see what he could do about it right now.

Gul was looking less and less healthy. His whole form slumped forward now, as if the flesh had partially melted. His fingers were extruding long talons. Massive boils were erupting through the crust around his body. There was a smell similar to putrefaction but even more sickly sweet in the air.

‘I am immortal,’ he said.

‘We’ll bloody well see about that,’ Sven yelled, leaping forward. Ragnar moved to join him.



FOURTEEN

A dozen things happened at once. The Blood Claws, Sergeant Hakon and the inquisitors all sprang into action. Writhing figures began to emerge from the vile carpet of muck caking the floor, whole bodies pulling themselves out, like swimmers emerging from the sea. They were vaguely humanoid, resembling smaller, less distinct versions of Botchulaz. Their heads were featureless blanks save where two sightless eyes had been poked in them. Their bodies had a fluid boneless quality. From their stink Ragnar could tell they had been created from snot, mucus and other daemonic excreta.

Something snared his ankle, and looking down he saw a smiling face looking up at him. It seemed to have been carved from the floor but Ragnar knew full well it had not been there moments before. It leered at him with a crazed daemonic mirth which echoed Botchulaz's.

He kicked out with his leg, tearing the arm free from the ground. The fingers remained glued to his ankle and the whole form continued to emerge from the sludge. Bolters sounded all around as more bolts tore into Gul and the vile things the daemon had summoned. Ragnar heard the strange sucking sound once more as the shells bit home. They seemed to have no effect on the creatures. Ragnar found this to be hardly surprising. They were boneless, had no internal organs, and were animated only by dark sorcery. They would not succumb to wounds that would have felled a normal man.

Gul laughed insanely, inspecting his altered flesh, capering with glee. 'Now, servants of the False Emperor,' he said. 'You will most assuredly die.'

Ragnar shifted his leg but the grip strengthened and the snot thing's arm lengthened. He felt the constriction increase, and to his horror saw that the ceramite was starting to give way in places. He lashed out with his chainsword and severed his captor's arm at the shoulder. The blades screamed and tore and then cut right through. The arm came away and he was able to move.

Looking around he saw that more and more of the eerie figures were pulling themselves from the floor. His battle-brothers blasted them with bolter fire but their flesh parted and knitted together again. He saw Sven lash out with a chainsword and chop off a head. It rolled free, was picked up by another shambling monstrosity of snot and mucus, which attached the head to its own chest. Gul stood in the centre of it all, encased in his blotched carapace, and howled with crazed mirth. Even as Ragnar watched one of the hideous figures reached out. Its arms stretched and a spray of its own disgusting slime smashed into Inquisitor Sternberg's face. Ragnar wondered what possible harm this would do, until he saw streams of pus emerge through the inquisitor's eyeballs. A moment later, under the extreme pressure of the vile fluid that had been forced into it, his head ripped apart.

For a brief moment, Ragnar imagined the inquisitor's last moments, worms of diseased plasma wriggling through the mush of his brain, and tendrils of foulness extruding down his throat into his stomach, choking off all air. Ragnar glanced over at Sergeant Hakon and knew from the veteran's gritted teeth expression that the old Space Wolf was thinking along the same lines.

It was time to get out of here. Ragnar picked up Karah's unconscious form and threw it over his shoulder. Carving a green path through the knee-deep slime, he made for the exit of the chamber. Seeing him go, Gul drew his pistol and aimed it. His movements were slow and his hand trembled like that of a man with the ague but Ragnar knew it would not matter. All it would take was one shot.

He dived forward, hoping that presenting a moving target might throw off the Nurgle worshipper's aim. A bolt pistol shell churned the floor behind him. Ragnar kept moving, offering up a prayer to Russ and the All-Father. He heard the other Blood Claws shouting war cries as they, too, began to retreat from the room.

Vile hands tugged his ankles, slowing him down. A terrible slurping sounded every time he raised his feet from the floor. It was like being trapped in a well-remembered nightmare, one in which deadly foes pursued him, and he was unable to make any headway in his escape.

He heard another shot ring out and half-expected to feel a sudden agonising blast of pain in his chest. None came. He turned his head and saw that Sergeant Hakon had blasted Gul aside, and was now trying to

fight his way clear of the mucus beasts emerging from the walls and floors. Ragnar wanted to go to his aid but some instinct warned him that it was imperative that he get Karah to safety. Perhaps the psyker would have some idea as to how to contain the plague daemon and its minions. He was certain of one thing: he did not.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw Strybjorn and Sven move to the sergeant's aid. They lopped off inhuman limbs with their chainswords, and then pulled Hakon to safety through the door. Ragnar glanced around in panic, wondering what had become of Nils. Back in the heart of the room was a humanoid figure, completely encased in hardening goo. Even as he watched, more and more greenish figures threw themselves on it, and the struggling stopped.

In a moment, all that remained was Nils's outline, encased in hardened green stuff. Horror filled Ragnar. This was an abomination, and one against which there seemed to be no defence. Normal weapons appeared to have no effect against these creatures. Their soft, magically animated forms were impervious even to bolter shells, and simply knitted together again when struck with chainsword blades. It was like fighting with trolls, only worse; even trolls had not engendered this level of horror in him.

'Go! Go!' Sergeant Hakon ordered. 'There is nothing we can do for him now.'

Ragnar wanted to stay, to at least try, but he could see the sense of the sergeant's words. By staying they would only guarantee themselves a horrible death, one that was in no sense heroic. A sacrifice that would not help the teeming millions on the planet's surface who would soon fall victim to the daemon.

At least the things were slow moving. If they ran, he and his companions should be able to outpace them. He wondered what had happened to Gul. He had caught no sight of the traitor since Hakon had shot him. If there was any justice, Ragnar thought, he would be drowning in the mucus that covered the floor. Somehow he doubted they were going to be that lucky.

Making sure Karah's slight, lifeless form was secure on his shoulder, he began to trot back the way they had come, following the scent trail they had left on the way in. Behind him, echoing footsteps told him his remaining battle-brothers were on his trail.

They emerged from the pyramid into night and an ominous silence. Ragnar wondered what had happened. Surely everyone could not be dead already. The daemon's powers could not possibly be so virulent, could they? But how could he know what the thing was capable of? How could he measure the abilities of a being that had managed to stay alive in the heart of the Black Pyramid for millennia and which was capable of the dark magic he had just witnessed. Its powers far and away dwarfed those of Madox, the sorcerer-warrior of the Thousand Sons he had killed back on Fenris, and who was his only previous experience of the fell terrors of Chaos sorcery. Perhaps Botchulaz could indeed bring this world to its knees. Perhaps he had already done so. Ragnar had no way of knowing.

He glanced around, out into the mist and silence. The patterns of tiny lights on the starscrapers glowed in the distance. Overhead he could see the running lanterns of aircars and descending spaceships. Behind him a strange greenish yellow glow suffused the surface of the pyramid. It pulsed eerily, and even as he watched the shimmering light seemed to separate itself from the structure, coalesce into a cloud and drift off into the night air. Thousands upon thousands of misty tendrils extended themselves outwards, a manifestation of a dark sorcery he could not quite comprehend. He was sure it boded no good for the inhabitants of Aerius.

As he watched, the lights along the side of the Black Pyramid flickered and reassembled themselves into a new pattern. Ragnar could have sworn that for a brief instant he saw the leering face of the plague-thing looking down on them. Moments later, he was convinced that the face was itself made up of thousands upon thousands of smaller versions of Botchulaz, all capering and prancing and posturing. Even as he watched, liquid began to coalesce on the side of the pyramid. Droplets of green slimy sweat seemed to ooze from the very stone. It became apparent to Ragnar that whatever magic the eldar had used to imprison Botchulaz, it was no longer working.

He realised that he himself was not feeling too good. His head felt light and sweat was pouring from his brow. He stifled a sneeze and realised that he was rapidly becoming feverish, ill in a way he had not been since he first became a Space Marine. Not even his altered physique was immune to the vile contagion created by the daemon, Botchulaz. All he could do now was pray to Russ and the Emperor that he was strong enough to resist the illness.

It occurred to him then that if the disease was now strong enough to affect even Space Marines, it must be a terrible scourge indeed for ordinary mortals.

‘Smell that,’ he heard Sven say. Ragnar sniffed the air and realised what his battle-brother meant. There was an odd taint to the night air which had not been there before. His nostrils seemed to tingle.

‘Vile sorcery,’ Sergeant Hakon said. ‘Of the worst sort.’

‘What are we going to do about it?’ Strybjorn asked.

Hakon looked at the unconscious figure of Karah. ‘We need to find out what is going on. What the daemon has planned.’

‘I think that is just about to become obvious,’ Sven said, pointing at the crowd of sickly figures which lay around the square. Ragnar’s foreboding increased as the eerie mystical reek intensified, swathing them in an almost tangible cloud. It was like the smell of sewage mingled with rotting flesh, only greatly intensified and a thousand times worse. The unhealthy mob had begun to moan and writhe. A few of them were starting to clamber unsteadily to their feet. They did not look as if they had recovered, though. If anything they looked worse. Their faces were pale. Pustules erupted all over their bodies. Their movements had a terrible slowness, like those of old men in the last stages of some terminal illness. Their flesh had an odd greenish yellow tint. Their sweat looked more like mucus than any normal body fluid, and gave their flesh a loathsome, nausea-inducing sheen. A strange greenish glow had entered their eyes, a sorcerous light that burned dimly beneath the rheum which crusted their eyeballs. Ragnar sensed the flow of alien energies around and through them. He knew now that they had passed beyond being human, and had fallen under the evil spell of the plague daemon.

As if to confirm this, the first of the newly arisen plague victims turned towards the Blood Claws. It opened its mouth and let out an eerie sound, half shriek, half gurgle; a noise that made Ragnar think of a man drowning in the mucus that filled his lungs and throat. Slowly the infected man shambled towards them, arms outstretched, mouth agape, eyes blazing.

Ragnar looked at his companions. He was not frightened. Compared to what they had just escaped in the pyramid these few corrupted souls were nothing. Then, in a moment, true realisation dawned, and what he was seeing became suddenly quietly terrifying. Across this world were

millions of plague-infected mortals. If all of them, or even some, were turned into Nurgle's creatures by this disease then the Plague Lord would soon have an enormous army under his sway. Worse than that, if the pestilence were to spread off world, soon systems, even entire segments might fall to him. Was it possible that the monstrous being was really this powerful? Truly, if it were so, then this was a threat not merely to the world of Aeriis but to the whole Imperium! Despite himself, his respect for the dark powers of Botchulaz increased.

'Perhaps we should return to the ship and get Inquisitor Isaan some treatment,' Sven suggested, looking at her recumbent form with concern.

'No!' Ragnar said suddenly. All eyes turned to him. 'If she is infected, if we are infected, all we will do is spread this contagion to the *Light of Truth*. Who knows where it might go from there?'

'Ragnar speaks the truth,' Hakon agreed. 'We must keep this place quarantined at all costs!'

The sergeant spoke into the comm-net, relaying details of their situation to the ship, telling them to broadcast an interdiction order to all vessels in the system, and informing them to request the presence of an Imperial battlefleet to contain the threat. Ragnar saw the sense of this, but wondered what good it would do. By the time a fleet could get here, the damage would be done.

Ragnar glanced back at the crowd. They were beginning to surround the Space Marines and their comrades. Ragnar was not sure what they hoped to accomplish, unarmed against armoured and well-equipped troops. As he watched, though, the crowd shambled forward, arms outstretched, fingers extended like talons. He was reluctant to open fire on these pitiful victims of Botchulaz's daemonic machinations. They were, after all, the people he was sworn to protect, who their mission had been intended to save.

'Fire at will!' Sergeant Hakon said. 'These people are beyond saving. They are no longer human, merely vessels of evil.'

He matched his action to his words and opened fire. Bolter shells blasted through the chest of the first unfortunate, sending him tumbling back into the crowd. It did not even slow his fellow plague victims down: they shambled forward mindlessly, intent on pulling down Ragnar and his comrades. Ragnar realised that they might just possibly manage it too, by sheer weight of numbers. He reached for a grenade and lobbed it into the

mass of bodies. The explosion tore them apart, sending blood and body fluids and internal organs spraying everywhere.

Lasgun beams and bolter shells smashed into the walls beside him. Now he saw what was happening. There was no way through the press of bodies. There were too many of them, and some of them were armed. They could not fight their way clear. By sheer weight of numbers the plague victims were forcing them back into the pyramid.

Karah stirred. When she spoke, her voice was weak but her words were clear and distinct. 'Leaving here will do no good. The daemon is... tapping into the power of the pyramid itself, using the energies that once trapped him to fuel his sorcery. We must... stop him here and now, or we will not stop him at all. We must go back in there... and finish this...'

At least she's still alive, he thought and snapped off a shot into the oncoming crowd. It spoke with one voice, roaring and gurgling, and in that eerie cry, Ragnar thought he heard an obscene echo of the plague daemon's mirth.

'Let's move!' Hakon yelled; his keen senses had obviously picked up her words. He raced back into the pyramid. Within heartbeats, the Blood Claws had followed him. Behind them, the mob howled and gurgled sickly, leaving Ragnar wondering what sort of hell they had found themselves dropped into.

Around them the blackness of the ancient eldar pyramid closed in once more.

It was quiet. Ragnar placed his back against the cool stone of the wall and took a deep breath. His head swirled. He felt feverish. He knew it was the effects of the daemon's magic. His body was trying to throw off the symptoms of the plague, so far unsuccessfully. Looking at the others he could see that they did not look any better. Sweat beaded Sven's forehead and his skin had taken on a sickly, greenish-yellow hue.

'You look like an ork,' Ragnar said.

'You don't look so bloody handsome yourself,' Sven responded. 'I've seen corpses look healthier.'

'The power of Chaos is strong here,' said Strybjorn.

Sven let out a bitter bark of laughter. 'Thank you for pointing that out. Without your help I am sure we would never have noticed.'

Strybjorn glared at Sven and snarled. The air between them was suddenly tense with violence. Sergeant Hakon laid a restraining hand on

Sven's shoulder and Ragnar stepped between them.

'We are all sick and tired and there is a daemon loose on this world. Now is not a time to be at each other's throats,' said Hakon. 'We must stand together or we will never find a way to stop this madness.'

Despair filled Ragnar at the sergeant's words. They had all witnessed the daemon's power. It seemed invincible and unstoppable. There was nothing they could do against such a being. Nothing. It had used them as pawns from the very start. It was too clever for them. Its ageless eternal evil was more than any mortal man could overcome.

What could four of them hope to do against such a creature and its minions? The monsters it had created were bad enough, but he knew now that, outside the pyramid, an army dedicated to Chaos was coming into being, an army made of the infected bodies of the plague's victims, reinforced no doubt by the members of the secret cult that had worked for so long to ensure Botchulaz's freedom. Who knew how many of them there were, and what positions of power they had attained. If Sternberg's own trusted lieutenant had been one of them, how many others might there be?

Right from the start, they had been caught up in a web of evil from which they had not been able to escape. Ragnar wondered if they had ever had a chance to break free, if any decision could have been made differently that would have allowed them to avoid freeing the plague daemon, and saved the lives of his comrades?

Guilt swept through Ragnar. He had believed Sternberg and had become an unwitting pawn of the daemon, and so had all his companions. Unknowingly Lars and Nils had laid down their lives in the service of the foul powers of Chaos. It was a thought that made him ashamed to the core of his being.

It also made him angry. If he was if only partly responsible for the devastation they were watching, Botchulaz was all the more so. It had been the daemon's malign intelligence that had planned all of this, Ragnar did not blame Sternberg or his companions or himself half as much as he blamed that vile monster, and he swore that if it was the last thing he did, he would have revenge on the daemon.

With the anger came a sense of betrayal. They had all been let down. The prophecies that had led them here had proved false. He felt hopelessness return when he realised that the daemon's powers had been

great enough to reach out from this sealed pyramid halfway across the galaxy to sway the minds of even the Rune Priests of the Space Wolves. Or were they?

The prophecy had said only that the evil would end when the talisman was brought to the central chamber of the pyramid. It had not said anything about the cost in human lives. But had they not brought the talisman to the appointed place, and had they not failed even then?

Ragnar forced himself to think back. Was that what had in fact happened? Karah had been blasted unconscious before she had a chance to use its power. The daemon's minions had forced them to retreat. If they had stayed put, perhaps they might have been able to achieve something. But what?

The brief hope that had flickered in his mind died away. He was clutching at straws, deluding himself. There was no hope; they had failed. There was nothing left but to lie down and die. He felt a touch on his forehead and looked down to see that Karah's eyes were open. She looked at him in understanding, as if reading his thoughts. She smiled wanly.

'I think you are right,' she said through cracked lips. 'Perhaps the talisman is the key – and used properly we might seal the daemon within its prison once more.'

'How can you know that?'

'I have had more chance to study the layout of this pyramid than anyone save its builders. I have communed with the forces at play here. I think I can see a way to activate them again and imprison that evil thing once more.'

'And what if you are wrong?'

'What do we have to lose?' she shrugged. 'We are already as good as dead.'

Ragnar heard the sharp intake of breath from his battle-brothers, and looked around to see that they were all nodding their agreement. The despair that had been written on every face was gone, to be replaced by looks of single-minded determination.

'She's bloody well right,' Sven said for all of them. 'We've nothing to lose, and everything to gain.'

'We have a chance to settle our score with the plague-thing. I, for one, welcome that.'

‘Then let us go and face our doom!’ said Ragnar. ‘At least we may die as worthy sons of Russ!’

All of them nodded agreement save Sergeant Hakon. His thin lips were compressed into a snarl.

‘Not yet,’ he said. ‘I would know more of what we should do. Our heroic deaths might redeem us in the eyes of Russ, but it will do nothing for the people we are sworn to protect. I would know more of what you plan, Karah Isaan.’

‘Very well,’ she said. ‘Listen.’

And as Ragnar listened his heart sank once more.

They raced on, deep into the heart of the pyramid. Ragnar clutched his weapons in his white-knuckled fists. His chainsword was ready. His bolt pistol was held level. If any enemy came into his sight, they would die. All around he could catch the strange scents of the diseased ones. They had entered the great pyramid from the square and wandered about within. Ragnar could smell the sickness in them, and there were other scents, more subtly tainted, that he assumed belonged to the cultists who worshipped Botchulaz. He bared his fangs in a snarl. He wanted to get to grips with those traitors to humanity. He wanted them to pay with their lives for their betrayal of the Imperium and their fellow men.

The corridors were shadowy. Strange witchfires burned in alcoves in the walls. Their yellowish-green light reminded him of the magical energies the plague daemon had unleashed. It had conjured this glow forth for its own fell purposes, probably to allow its worshippers to hunt down the Space Wolves. So far they had managed to avoid the foul creatures. The pyramid was huge, the corridors seemingly endless. Even the massive number of diseased ones could not be everywhere. They had managed to avoid them by taking different turnings, trusting to their sense of direction, that they would be able to return to the correct path at need. It was slowing down their progress though, and Ragnar could not help but feel that every second counted. With every heartbeat he sensed the daemon’s power spreading. The plague was getting stronger, more and more people would fall under its foul sway, and succumb to the daemon’s magic. Worse yet, he felt his own strength lessening, and his own brow becoming more feverish.

At the back of his mind, he could hear a strange whispering voice, full of mad gurgling mirth, urging him to lie down, to rest, just for a moment.

By doing so, he would regain his strength. He knew this was the work of Botchulaz, the start of the plague daemon's spell. He knew that if he lay down, he would lie down forever and rise again as the daemon's minion. He determined that he would never do that, that he would rather put his own bolt pistol to his brow and pull the trigger than become a slave of such evil. He could tell by the way his battle-brothers snarled that they too had reached the same decision. A soft hand came to rest on his shoulder.

'And that, too, would be a victory for the spawn of Nurgle,' Karah said grimly. 'If all who are strong-willed enough to resist his power feel the same way, soon there will be none left to resist him. Be assured that this, too, is just another manifestation of the daemon's Chaos-spawned power. To give in to it will grant him victory as surely as falling to his plague spores.'

He saw the others look at her blankly, then slowly understanding dawned in their eyes. They realised that their dark mood was also a product of the evil spell. Ragnar sensed their spines stiffen as they prepared to resist it. He realised that he, too, could do no less.

By Russ, how his joints ached, though. And now his nose had started to run. He heard Sven stifle a sneeze. Heard Strybjorn clear his throat of phlegm. Even Sergeant Hakon coughed. This was not good. How could four weakened Space Marines and one weary psyker overcome the power that has created such a potent disease? He tried to dismiss the thought, to tell himself that it was merely a product of Botchulaz's wicked spell, but he knew that it was not so, that the despair that gnawed at his heart was only too real.

Muttering a prayer to the Emperor he lengthened his stride, moving ever closer to the heart of the darkness that festered at the core of the pyramid.

From up ahead he could hear chanting. It was an unclean sound, so unlike the pure plainsong that filled Imperial temples. It was not like the guttural war cries of orks. It was something far worse. It was like the roaring of a sea of phlegm. It was the sound of hundreds of voices bubbling from froth-corrupted lungs. It was the pained murmuring of men lashing out in fever dreams. It was the sound of a throng which had given itself over wholly to the worship of Nurgle.

The stink was worse here. The walls were caked with filth. Huge gobs of greenish spittle stuck to his boots as he moved. Puddles of rank urine

glittered in the greenish glow. A stench like that from festering wounds reached his nostrils. His skin felt obscenely warm and moist with his own fever sweat. He did not know if he could force himself to go on, and yet he knew he had to.

‘Sounds like they’re having a big bloody festival up there,’ said Sven. ‘Wonder what they’re celebrating?’

He paused as if expecting some reply, and then glanced around. Ragnar knew without being told that he was waiting for some disparaging reply from Nils, a reply that would never come. He saw the pain in Sven’s eyes when that realisation dawned, and he realised that it was a pain he himself shared. In the centre of his being a small bright spark of anger was fanned. It lent him strength to resist the sickness. It gave him the power to carry on.

‘Let’s go and interrupt them,’ he snarled. ‘Let’s show them they haven’t won yet.’

‘Good enough,’ said Sven.

Sergeant Hakon nodded agreement. Ragnar sensed that Karah and Strybjorn shared his renewed determination. Briefly he permitted himself a smile, wondering whether they were all mad. Not that it mattered much, he thought, mad or no, this was a battle it was unlikely any of them would be returning from.

The central chamber was full of sickening worshippers of the Lord of Disease. They were wrapped in cowed cloaks of sickly green, belted with yellow sashes; odd stains marked the coarse fabric. A sickly sweet scent of corruption filled the air. Ragnar saw that each of the worshippers bore a weapon, and he knew that these were the secret masters of the plague cult come to pay homage before their master. A strange buzzing filled the air. Standing upright before an altar that looked as if it were made of hardened snot was Gul, his face blotched, his bloated arms raised as he guided the cultists in their worship. On the altar sprawled Botchulaz. A web of sorcerous energy emerged from his body and vanished into the altar and the walls of the pyramid. Ragnar did not doubt that this energy was being used to power the plague spell across the worldcity.

As Ragnar watched the plague daemon let out his long tongue. It snaked up his face and entered his nostril, emerging caked with a thick moist blob of mucus which it slurped back into its mouth. As if sensing their presence, Botchulaz raised its gaze to meet Ragnar’s.

‘Oh, there you are,’ it sniffed. ‘Jolly good. I was wondering when you would be back. Nice of you to show up, actually. Saves us the trouble of going looking for you.’

Sven took a step forward. ‘I’m going to take this chainsword and stick it up your bloody—’

‘I think we get the idea of your intentions,’ Botchulaz interrupted, with a fruity chuckle. ‘Sad to see such hostility in one who is soon to be such a trusted minion. Still, we’ll have all eternity for some pleasant little chats, you and I.’

There was something in the daemon’s rich mellow voice that suggested that any talks he and Sven had would be anything but pleasant. Ragnar suddenly realised what the buzzing sound was. The whole chamber was filled with clouds of monstrous fat bluebottles. The flies crawled all over the worshippers. Only the area around the altar was clear of them. He realised that every fly in the city must have found its way here. Briefly he wondered why. Perhaps they were one of the vectors of the plague. Maybe somewhere in their tiny minds was a spark of the worship of the Lord of Decay. He did not know, and he realised that right at this moment he did not care. All he wanted to do was slaughter his foes, and get to grips with the daemon that had manipulated him and his comrades. As if unaware of their hostility and the fact that his worshippers were rising to snatch up weapons, Botchulaz burred on mockingly.

‘I’m sure you’ll soon find out the error of your ways, and come to regret all this nastiness. It’s so much easier when people can just get on and—’

The firing of a bolt pistol sounded shockingly loud in the confined space of the central chamber. A massive hole appeared in the plague daemon’s chest, swiftly followed by several more as Sergeant Hakon blasted away. For a moment, Ragnar felt a surge of hope as he looked into the daemon’s disgusting innards but then the wounds closed with a hideous sucking sound.

Botchulaz let out a strange tut-tutting sound and said; ‘Really, there was no need for that.’

The scorn in his words was evident. His worshippers threw themselves forward, blades bared, pistols and lasguns in every fist. A tidal wave of diseased cultists flowed towards them. Ragnar bared his teeth in a snarl. This was the sort of fight he could understand.

‘Just keep them busy,’ he heard Karah mutter. ‘Distract the daemon if you can. I will need some time to remake the spell on the pyramid. Be ready to go when I say the word.’

Knowing what she intended, part of Ragnar wanted to tell her not to do it. But another part of him, the part that was ever loyal to the Emperor and to humanity knew that there was no other choice, and that she would not listen to him, or to anybody else. A sadness filled him that was nothing to do with the loss of his comrades. It was something akin to what he had felt on the day he had watched Ana depart on the Grimskull ships, a sad sorry feeling that he would never see her again, never have a chance to talk to her or touch her...

Savagely he suppressed these feelings as unworthy of a Space Wolf. They were both warriors of the Emperor, and they both would perform their duties, and that was all there was to it. He needed no such distractions at this moment anyway, not with a seething sea of rage-filled plague cultists advancing on him with death in their hearts and weapons in their hands.

He could see too that ectoplasmic energy was emerging from Botchulaz and that the hideous mucoid figures were beginning to extrude from the floor, though the sheer mass of the cultists was stopping them from coming out fully. There was just not enough space for them to seep through. For the moment Ragnar was truly glad of this.

‘Remember, when I give the word, get out of here,’ he heard Karah say again. The depths of concern in her voice wrenched at his heart.

‘I will not leave you,’ he said.

‘You must, you all must. Someone must bear tidings of what happened here to the Inquisition lest it happen again. The more of you who try, the greater the chance that one of you will win free,’ she said grimly.

Ragnar could tell from the tone of her voice that she did not believe that there was much hope for any of them, but she was willing to give them a chance. At that moment he did not know how he would find the strength to depart from here, or the desire. She seemed to sense his thoughts.

‘It is your duty, Ragnar,’ she said. ‘You were right about that. Don’t forget.’

Sensing the power of the daemon and seeing the number of its followers, he wondered if it mattered. There was only the slimmest chance

of their plan working. It relied on so many untested things. Could she really remake the spells that the eldar had woven? Could any human? He could not tell. It was not an area in which he could claim any knowledge.

He simply knew that she would have to try, and that they would have to distract the daemon and its minions while she did. There was only one way he knew that was possible and that was to fight on against the hopeless odds, and pray to Russ and the Emperor that they might succeed. All things considered though, it was not a bad death. At least he would send a few of these lost souls ahead of him to welcome him to Hell. Still, he thought wryly, he might have hoped for a more heroic set of final opponents than these disease ridden, pox-accursed heretics and their burbling master.

Pushing that thought from his mind, he sprang forward into the fray like a swimmer diving into waves. Ahead of him loomed cowed cultists. In their hands they carried rusty-looking and mucus-befouled blades. Their pistols and rifles were shoddy and appeared corroded. They moved listlessly, like men in the last throes of some terminal disease. He lashed out with his chainsword and sheared away an arm. Fingers clutched reflexively in their death spasm on the trigger of a laspistol and a beam of glittering light spurted upwards towards the ceiling. Ragnar howled and his long lonely call was answered by his battle-brothers as they prepared to sell their lives dearly. The mocking burbling laughter of Botchulaz echoed through the chamber. ‘Gul, please welcome our new comrades appropriately. Unfortunately, I must return my attention to the great spell of uncleanness. Still, I am sure you can give our friends the reception they deserve...’

As the daemon spoke the web of energy swirling out from the altar intensified, the buzzing of the flies grew louder and each of the insects became surrounded by a halo of sickly light. Their eyes glittered like miniature gemstones and in a cloud they swirled through the air. Ragnar felt their soft tickling against his face, and hastily closed his mouth lest the buzzing creatures find their way inside. He could only guess what foul effect this might have, and he did not want to risk it.

Two more cultists threw themselves at him, bringing their blades down in a flashing arc. In his plague-weakened state Ragnar was too slow to entirely avoid them. One sword rang against his armour but did not penetrate. One clanged against his chainsword blade. Sparks flew where

they met. He brought his bolt pistol round and pulled the trigger. One of the cultist's head exploded as a shot blasted through the bridge of his nose and emerged from the back of his skull. Part of his cowl ripped away as the shell passed through, the remainder of it swelled like a sail catching a breeze as it filled with brain jelly.

Ragnar exerted his strength pushing the chainsword down against the sword. His foe resisted desperately but was no match for Ragnar's power. The Wolf pushed forward and his blade bit into the man's chest. There was a shriek as its blades scraped against a hidden chest plate. It slithered around in his grip like a living thing but by the application of all of his strength Ragnar pushed it ever inwards and the armour parted. Blood sprayed against the Wolf's face as he bisected his foe. Droplets of it hit the buzzing flies, turning them crimson.

The stench was sickening and the feel of the flies against his face was near unbearable. The air thrummed with sorcerous energy as the daemon threw more and more power into its plague spell. Insane visions streamed through Ragnar's brain. In his mind's eye, he saw the infirm rise from their sick beds to snatch up whatever came to hand, and turn on those who cared for them. He saw diseased soldiers open fire on their officers, and sick officers treacherously mow down their men. He saw the plague spread across the cities and the plains like wildfire, and knew that it was unstoppable, that it was pointless to resist, that it would be better to simply lie down and accept his fate.

In his mind the beast howled and gibbered. It did not accept defeat the way Ragnar's rational mind wanted to. It simply saw a challenge before it that had to be overcome in order to live. It did not care about odds, or evil sorcery, or the power of its daemoniac foe. It wanted only to rend and tear its foes, and to fight its way out of this trap or die trying. Its unquenched spirit lent Ragnar strength, and suddenly he felt better. The disease-weakness drained from him, and moment by moment he felt himself becoming stronger and faster. He was reminded of a time, long before he had become a Space Marine, when he has fought against the horde of the Grimskulls with a strength that was near supernatural. He knew better than to fight against this fury; instead he just surrendered to it.

It seemed to him that his foes were slowing down. They moved like men underwater, as if the air itself was thickening around them, and slowing them down. Ragnar knew that this was an illusion caused by the

fact that he himself was now moving and thinking faster. He raced forward chopping and cleaving, wanting to fight his way to the centre of the enemy force and confront Botchulaz himself. He had no thought of what would happen when he got there. He merely set his mind to the task and his body obeyed.

In the distance he could hear the thunder of bolter fire as his battle-brothers fought on. He could smell the scent of heated bone as the chainsword blade cut through it. The stink of death mingled with the corrupt scent of disease. He lashed out, hacking through two foes at once, throwing himself flat beneath a return blow, rolling over, and pumping a bolter shell into the groin of one of the cultists, and snarling with satisfaction at the man's high-pitched wail of agony. He flipped himself over and rose swiftly, sensing rather than seeing something that reached out for him from the throng.

He realised it was one of the odd conjured things, the mucoid creatures that had slain Nils. He rolled to one side evading its grasp, but even as he did so it followed, attempting to seize him once more. He could see its strange doughy face, the eyes that were like two holes poked in snow, an obscenely gaping mouth the expression of which reminded him of its foul daemonic master.

As he moved, he lashed out with his blade, taking away the legs of two cultists. They fell between him and the monster, but did not even slow it down. Its pliable body stretched around them, and its outstretched claws still reached for Ragnar. With the beast howling within his head, he felt no fear, but the part of his mind that was still rational was uneasy. He did not want to die the same way as Nils. It was a fate similar to drowning, a thing all Fenrisian warriors feared, only worse, for being caught by this sorcerous thing meant to be encased within the flesh of something daemonic. Who knew what might come afterwards?

He holstered his bolt pistol and tapped the grenade dispenser on his belt. A small explosive disk dropped into his hands. As the creature came for him he tossed it. The fuse was set for one second. It exploded in the middle of his pursuer, and blasted it to fragments. Cultists howled as pieces of its flesh scored their faces. Ragnar felt a brief flash of triumph that vanished almost as quickly as it came. Even as he watched the dismembered fragments of the thing began to writhe across the floor

towards each other. In a short while the creature would reform, as strong as before and would pursue him once more.

Still, he had earned himself a brief respite. He ploughed on towards his goal, refusing to be distracted, refusing to simply wait for his foe to flow together once more. He had a brief interval in which to kill these Nurgle worshippers and perhaps confront their ultimate master. He had no idea what he would do then, but anything seemed better than waiting to be slaughtered like a lamb.

He raced onwards towards the monstrous altar on which the plague daemon lay like a giant slug. Clouds of glowing flies brushed his face. From nearby he heard a chanting that told him one of the cultists was working some sort of evil spell of his own. With a single fluid movement, Ragnar drew his bolt pistol, turned towards the source of the sound and unleashed a bolt shell with pinpoint accuracy. There was a hideous scream as the stricken cultist fell backwards. Tendrils of energy emerged from his body like maggots eating their way out of his flesh. Whatever strange forces he had intended to summon were running out of control, and consumed his flesh like a forest fire devouring dry tinder. A pungent stink filled Ragnar's nostrils. He chopped down another cultist, and suddenly, shockingly, found himself face to face with Gul. The Wolf's heart went cold as the deathless warrior reached out to seize him, insane eyes blazing.

'Good,' breathed the worshipper of darkness. 'I have hoped for this moment ever since you slew my agents on the *Light of Truth*.'

'Enjoy your last few breaths, traitor,' said Ragnar, and lashed out with the chainsword. Gul's parry was deceptively slow. Somehow his blade was just in time to intercept Ragnar. The Blood Claw leaned forward with all his weight, hoping to smash through Gul's guard as he had done with the earlier Nurgle worshipper, but Gul was strong, far stronger than he had expected. With a flex of his bloated arms, he cast Ragnar back into the crowd. The young Space Marine went flying, to land at the feet of Sergeant Hakon. The veteran Wolf howled a challenge and launched himself at Gul. Their blades flickered almost too fast for mortal eyes to follow as they met in single combat.

Sparks flickered before Ragnar's eyes as he tried to pull himself to his feet. He felt hands grasp at him, trying to restrain him while others brought weapons to bear. With a roar of fury, he threw them off, and

prepared to launch himself into the fray once more. He would aid Sergeant Hakon to destroy Gul and then...

No, Ragnar, said a voice in his head that he recognised as Karah's. *Distract the daemon. Sergeant Hakon can look after himself.*

Ragnar sensed a change in the atmosphere around him. Currents of power flowed through the pyramid now and they were not all directed by Botchulaz and his revolting plague spell. It seemed that the inquisitor had been at least partially successful in using the talisman to tap into the pyramid's power. It looked like he was not the only one to sense it. Botchulaz's eyes snapped open, as if he had just become aware of this new threat. He looked down at Ragnar as if capable of reading his thoughts, and then those ancient evil eyes turned in the direction of the entrance to the central chamber. A slow smirk of understanding spread across his inhuman face. Understanding – and perhaps, at last, fear.

Hope filled Ragnar. He could see another light now in the floor of the chamber, a brilliant ruby and emerald glow that warred with the daemon's sickly luminescence. It seemed to be coming from out of the walls of the pyramid and swirling inwards to converge on a spot in the exact centre of the chamber, a mandala of light at the hub of which stood the daemonic altar.

Botchulaz let out a long moan, and muttered. 'That isn't very friendly, you know.'

He raised a bloated paw and prepared to send a bolt of energy lashing out at Karah. An aura of evil light played around his talons. Ragnar knew that if this foul dark energy found its target then the eldar spell would never be completed, and the daemon would be free to do its evil work. It became very clear to him what he must do. As the daemon brought its hand forward to cast the bolt, Ragnar leapt directly at Botchulaz. His heavy armoured form crashed into the daemon's slimy arm, knocking it to one side, causing the flash of energy to go marginally astray and strike its target only a glancing blow. Karah's screams were still terrible to hear but the flow of ancient eldar energies had not stopped. At least, their plan had a small chance of working.

'You have no idea, how very, very foolish that was, my little friend,' rumbled Botchulaz, looming over Ragnar. Suddenly all pretence of humour had dropped away from the daemon, and its massive putrid presence was fearsome indeed. Its shadow fell on Ragnar like the spectre

of imminent death. Its eyes glowed with terrible power, and looking into their depths Ragnar felt his soul begun to be sucked from his body.

For a brief terrifying instant, he caught a glimpse of the pit from which the daemon had crawled. He saw it was only a small fragment of a greater corruption, of the awesome entity known to men as Nurgle, that it had been broken off from its parent and sent out into the universe to work its evil, but that it was still linked to its creator and all the other children it had spawned. For a moment, knowledge of a universe infested with dreadful dark things threatened to invade Ragnar's brain and crush his sanity. He saw the slow subtle working of decay in everything, even his own living flesh. He saw the way it relentlessly tore at everything, even the work of the other Lords of Chaos. He saw that disease lived in all things, the one invincible unstoppable foe, that could turn even its opponent's own bodies into weapons against them. He saw the certainty of inevitable triumph that all the fragments of the Lord of the Decay shared, and the horrid humour that spawned. He knew that even if they won this day, Nurgle would win in the end. His victory was inevitable.

Within him, the barely contained wolf-beast howled in denial. He offered up prayers to the Emperor and to Russ to preserve his sanity as Botchulaz prepared to crush his mind and feast on his soul. An ocean of filthy corrupt knowledge struggled to pour itself into his brain. He vaguely glimpsed the process by which plagues were birthed and the millions of different spores by which they were spread. He saw that they existed microscopic and silent on every world, in every place, even within his own altered frame. He saw himself consumed by a million different diseases, felt the symptoms of countless plagues, writhed in the grip of innumerable slow deaths. This was a torture of the most hellish sort, a spell unleashed by a foe who hated him and all he stood for.

He knew now that he had just moments to live, and that something worse than the mere extinction of life loomed before him. He knew that part of his immortal essence was about to be drawn into Botchulaz and that for all eternity he would suffer these torments along with the daemon's mockery. And he saw how much the daemon was looking forward to it.

Desperately he tried to cast the daemon forth, but he was not strong enough. He was but one mortal man pitting himself against a thing whose life span was measured in millennia and whose power was immeasurable

in mortal terms. He sensed the triumph that filled Botchulaz at this prospect, obscuring all other desires for one brief moment – then he felt something else, a cold clean power that was part human and part something else scything into his brain and freeing him from the daemon’s grasp. For a second he felt as if he were surrounded by others. He sensed the presence of Karah, and thousands upon thousands of other souls. These were alien presences, as undying as the daemon, eldar warriors who had been bound within the pyramid to prevent the daemon’s escape. They moved forward to do battle with the daemon and briefly Ragnar felt himself hugged by Karah; her words of soft farewell passed into his mind.

Suddenly his eyes were open and he was falling free of the daemon’s clutches. In one glance he took in the scene. Botchulaz writhed on the altar. His flesh was opening and reuniting again as if he were being cut with thousands of invisible blades. He seemed to fight against a shadowy host, and from the corner of his eye, Ragnar thought he could make out many invisible presences. The cultists shrieked in terror as the eldar ghosts moved among them. Many died without any physical hands being laid upon them at all.

The traitor Gul fell at the feet of Sergeant Hakon, his head separated from his body by one mighty blow from the sergeant’s sword. He saw Strybjorn and Sven fighting back to back against a few cultists. He saw the walls were coruscating with green and red and gold, and the air itself seemed to shimmer as the eldar’s ancient binding spells were reinstated. He looked around and saw Karah sprawled in the dirt, and he knew from her posture that she was already dead, her soul unbound from its body in the final effort to unleash the power of the talisman. He felt a great explosion of hatred and fury pass through him, and he wanted to dive into the mass of his enemies and slay them out of hand. Even as he landed and prepared to spring forward he felt a powerful hand grasp his shoulder, and he turned snarling to look into the burning eyes of Sergeant Hakon.

‘Time to go, Ragnar,’ he said. ‘Time to do our duty, just as she did.’

In his hands the sergeant held the Talisman of Lykos. It looked dim and dormant now, drained of all energy, but nevertheless Ragnar knew it was best that it be taken away from this place. It would not do to leave the key to the prison within the daemon’s grasp. Ragnar nodded and moved to join his battle-brothers.

Together the Blood Claws fought their way out into the night.



EPILOGUE

Ragnar looked out on the wastes of Hesperida and thought about the words of the Chaos-worshipping sorcerer he had killed earlier.

Botchulaz sends his greetings.

Had the daemon escaped? Ragnar doubted it. The ancient eldar spells still held it, he was sure. Perhaps its thoughts had simply trickled across the warp and allowed it to contact his worshippers, as it had once contacted Gul and his predecessors. Or perhaps it was all a trick. Who could tell with the worshippers of Chaos. Certainly, after the pyramid was sealed again, the plague had died back. The infected victims had simply keeled over and died. They had been buried in huge plague pits hastily bulldozed in the ground.

At least some things had ended happily. Brother Tethys had found his way back to Galt. Ragnar had met him again in better circumstances many years later. And the *Light of Truth* had taken the surviving Space Wolves and the Talisman of Lykos back to Fenris. As far as Ragnar knew, the thing was still there in the vaults of the Fang, just one more trophy among millions.

He heard the voices of the Blood Claws below him, and felt less envy now. Memory had taught him one thing this evening. Even at their age life had not been so simple as he had wanted to believe it had. He felt more sympathy for them now, remembering his own losses, long-past: of Nils and Lars and Sternberg – and most of all of Karah, who had given her life to hold the daemon imprisoned and whose spirit was bound into the pyramid as surely as those of the eldar ghosts and Botchulaz himself.

He pushed the memories aside. Tomorrow was a new day, with new battles to be fought and new foes to be overcome. He knew he had better make ready.



GREY HUNTER



PROLOGUE

Ragnar raced forward through the hail of enemy fire. Overhead, lightning split the night, turning the clouds an eerie electric purple. Moments later the thunder spoke, even its god-like voice unable to drown out the roar of small-arms fire. Rain the colour of blood, tainted by chemical pollutants and oxidised iron, pattered off his armour. Around him, las-fire ripped the night. Here and there grenades flared, bright as the lightning stroke and just as brief.

Ahead of him the fortress loomed, a massive structure of plascrete sheathed in steel. Once it must have been the local headquarters of the Imperial levies, or perhaps a sector house of the Arbites. Now, it answered to a different master. Banners bearing the hideous eye of Chaos fluttered in the rising wind. Someone had painted baleful runes down the building's bristling sides, creating an inscription in the language of evil gods. Was it a prayer or curse? Perhaps both.

The earth shook as Ragnar scrambled into position behind the tumbled remains of a wall. Shattered brickwork lay near him. Close to his hand he could see where stonework had run like water under the infernal blast of energy weapons. He smelled the air: it stank of explosives, chemicals and technical unguents from the huge machines all around. He caught the scent of his battle-brothers, all hardened ceramite and altered flesh of Fenris. He looked backwards and saw them racing forward through the night, man-like shapes, though larger by far than any normal man, garbed in powered armour inscribed with the wolf sigil of their Chapter. Bolters bristled in their massive fists. A few carried rocket launchers and other heavy weapons. They moved through the rain and the mud with perfect confidence, an unstoppable tide rolling towards the enemy fort.

Behind them, in the distance, he could make out the unimaginably huge shapes of the Titans. They looked like men but seemed the size of small skyscrapers, an impression heightened by the storm of battle, the clouds of dust and his own knowledge of how powerful the mighty war machines were. Beside them, all other armoured vehicles looked puny.

Now they loomed out of night and storm like ancient gods of battle woken by the thunderous drumbeats of war. The glow of their shields was faintly visible even amid the clouds of dust surrounding them. When their weapons fired, the muzzle flare flashed brighter than the lightning, throwing the entire war-blasted landscape around them into flickering relief for a few seconds. At their feet, lesser vehicles scurried, weapons blazing, sending salvo after salvo scorching towards the fortress walls. The earth around them sputtered upwards as the massive guns of the fortress replied.

Ragnar breathed in the shuddering air. He smiled, showing two enormous protruding fangs. He could smell terror coming from the Imperial Guard units around them, and a dim distant part of him understood it. Many a night, as a boy on his home world of Fenris, he had lain awake shivering as he listened to the thunder's rumble and saw the lightning's flare. It was on such nights that wolves of war were said to come forth to hunt, and ancient terrifying beings bestrode the world.

The scene surrounding him might have been ripped from his boyish imaginings, but in reality was a thousand times more fearsome. Yet, now, he himself felt no fear. He felt alive, every sense stretched to the maximum, every tendon of his altered body taut and ready to spring into action. All around him the pack that were his brethren and his liegemen awaited his commands.

He poked his head up and surveyed the massive walls of the fortress ahead of them. So far so good. The small postern airlock the Scouts had reported was just ahead. Over it turrets bristled, but their weapons were trained on the distant attackers, distracted by the mass of Titans and armour, and the hordes of waiting Guardsmen. Mikko's Blood Claws were already in position, ready to swarm through the gates to take out the plasteel lock and hold the entrance at his command. A good leader, Mikko, Ragnar thought, about ready for promotion to Grey Hunter. He shook his head. Now was not the time to let organisational details distract him.

The heretical defenders were unaware of the closer threat. Good. For Ragnar, it was just a matter of crossing the fifty metres of killing ground and they were in.

Suddenly the landscape erupted. Tonnes of earth and broken paving hurtled into the sky. Ragnar flinched for a moment, wondering if they had been spotted. His body tensed in anticipation of explosions or raking fire

strafing their position, but nothing happened. It had been a near miss, a miscalculated shot from the distant support force. Ragnar glanced back to make sure none of his men had been caught in the blast and saw no sign of it. He offered up a prayer of thanks to Russ and the Allfather. That had been a little too close for comfort, the sort of mistake that happened on a battlefield, all too often and all too fatally.

Brother Einar, Brother Anders and the rest of their Blood Claw packs had formed up around him. Their young faces looked tense, strained and eager for the kill. Briefly Ragnar wondered if he had ever looked as green as that to his superiors, and knew the answer was a resounding 'yes'. That had been a very long time ago though.

Brother Hrolf and his Long Fangs were in position now in the nearby crater ready to give them supporting fire if it was needed. The rest of his company's Grey Hunters stood ready to go in. Ragnar looked over at Brother Loysus. The Rune Priest had been assigned to his company for this mission by Great Wolf Logan Grimnar himself.

Ragnar's fingers flickered through his Chapter's handsign asking the priest if he was ready. It was too noisy for speech, and too close to the sensitive detection equipment within the fortress to risk the comm-net. Loysus gestured in the affirmative. A faint nimbus of light played round his fingers. Ragnar smiled grimly and then gave the sign. It was time to go in.

'Take out the door!' he told Mikko over the comm-net.

+Aye, lord!+ The youth's response was instant. Ahead of them, the bright bloom of explosive charges lit the night. The gate crumbled. Ragnar gave the gesture to move.

'Charge!' he cried.

After the sounds of conflict, all seemed quiet. After the dreadful brightness of the storm-lashed night, the sunrise seemed almost dim. Carrion birds fluttered over corpses. Pariah dogs had emerged from their holes to drink the water puddled in craters. The priests went about their business, tending to the wounded, granting final rites to the dying, speaking words of encouragement to the living. Above the walls of the fortress the Imperial banner had been restored. Already work teams from the guard units were scouring the Chaos runes from the side of the building.

Ragnar sat in the silence, filled with the sense of gloom and anticlimax that often filled him after a battle, and took stock of the situation. The casualties had been light, all things considered. Ten Blood Claws wounded, six dead. Two Long Fangs lost to enemy fire. Four men missing. It was not yet known whether they were dead or if their locator beacons had simply been damaged. Doubtless all would become clearer as the morning progressed.

Ragnar suddenly grinned, trying to find something that would dispel his black mood. 'Mikko for Grey Hunter,' he said suddenly.

Old Brother Hrolf grinned back at him. 'Aye, he's about ready. So are Lars and Jaimie.'

Ragnar nodded. 'Talk to the brotherhood. See if they agree to accept them. If they are, I will perform the rites myself this evening.'

Strictly speaking, Ragnar had no need to consult anybody before elevating a Blood Claw to the ranks of the Grey Hunters. It was his privilege as Wolf Lord to make that selection, but only a fool discounted the opinions of his master sergeant, and the men who would have to fight alongside the newly raised Claw.

Initiation into the ranks of the Grey Hunters was an important rite for all concerned, not just for the men involved but for the company. It marked the passage from raw ferocious youth to something wiser, more battle-hardened, and above all, less likely to get his companions killed by his eagerness for combat. Blood Claws were furious young men; Grey Hunters had tempered their lust for combat with experience.

Ragnar saw the sergeant was looking at him, as were all the other warriors surrounding him.

'What is it?' Ragnar asked, already knowing what was coming. It was part of the personal myth that surrounded him.

'The tale is that you were never a Grey Hunter, lord.'

'Aye, that is so, more or less.'

'I thought it was impossible for a man to become Wolf Lord unless he had been initiated into the brotherhood, lord,' said Zoran, one of the newest recruits to the company, a man who had been transferred in from Fenris as a replacement for casualties. Zoran had the fresh-faced look of a Blood Claw who had only just been accepted into the Grey Hunters himself.

‘I thought every man must undergo the rites to become a Grey Hunter, to be bound into the brotherhood.’

‘I did not,’ said Ragnar.

‘How can that be, lord?’

‘It’s a long tale,’ said Ragnar.

‘We have all day,’ came someone’s voice from the background. Ragnar could see they were all keen to hear it, even those who had heard the story many times before. The sagas were one of those things that bound them together as a Chapter, part of what made them a brotherhood. Some of the Blood Claws had approached and were taking their places around the fire. Ragnar looked at their eager faces, and smiled sadly.

He plunged backwards into his memory, seeking the words that would, this time, enable him to tell the whole terrible tale correctly.

‘It was a long time ago,’ he said. ‘In the days when Berek Thunderfist was lord of this company...’



ONE

‘When will we ever get out of this bloody place?’ asked Sven, a grimace of pure frustration twisting his cheerfully ugly features. Frost had gathered on his eyebrows, and hung like icicles from his sideburns. ‘It’s been nearly six months since Xecutor, and I am as sick of looking at bloody Fenris as I am of looking at your ugly face, Ragnar.’

Ragnar did not take the comment personally. It was just Sven’s way. He understood his fellow Blood Claw’s frustration. All of this training might well be improving his skills, but it was no substitute for action.

Briefly he wondered if the process that had turned Sven and himself into Space Marines had not done something to their minds and souls as well. He felt restless in a way he had never done before. He craved the excitement of battle and the thrill of combat in a way that he suspected was not entirely natural even for one of his warrior people. Or maybe it was that despite the leatheriness of their skins, and the few grey hairs that had started to appear in their hair, they were still Blood Claws at heart, with all of a young warrior’s yearning for blood and glory.

He smiled and shook his head looking at their surroundings. All around them were the Ice Wastes of Asaheim, league after endless league of snowy desolation, broken only by the cold peaks of the Dragonfang Mountains. It was an environment in which he could not have survived ten years ago, back when he had been merely a lad of the Thunderfist tribe. It was so cold that even wrapped in the thickest of furs he would not have lasted an hour, and so desolate that if the temperature did not kill him, starvation would have. Most likely the ice fiends would have taken him before that happened. Now he found the place merely entertaining, a place to hone the skills he had been taught by his Chapter.

But then, ten years ago, his body had not been sheathed in the miraculous armour of the ancients, capable of shielding him from far more hostile environments than this. And ten years ago his body had not been transformed into a near tireless killing machine capable of eating lichen or the inhuman flesh of the ice fiends and their related folk. Ten years ago his unaltered eyes would have been snow-blind by now, rather than filtering

out the glare. Ten years ago he would not have agreed with Sven in finding this little hiking trip quite so dull. Being back on Fenris after the Xecutor campaign had proven a bit of an anti-climax. He did not even feel a thrill of pride any more when he contemplated the armour runes that showed he belonged to Berek's company. Not much anyway. Not as much as when he had first been assigned to a proper unit.

Of course, back then he had never been off-world, had never embarked on the great ships that sailed between the stars, had not fought against men and daemons and monsters. Back then, he would have thought only gods capable of doing what he now found so lacking in challenge. How times had changed! Since then there had been Galt and Aerius and Logan's World and Purity and Xecutor and a host of minor campaigns he could not even be bothered to enumerate.

'There's nothing bloody funny about it, Ragnar Thunderfist, or should I call you "Blackmane" like all the little cubs do?'

Having failed to get a rise out of him one way, Sven was taking another tack. It was a bit of a sore spot. Part of Ragnar wished he had never had that old wolfskin made into a cloak, it had been the cause of so much jesting from his old comrades. The new Blood Claw packs and even some of the older Wolves, the Grey Hunters and the Long Fangs, had taken it as a mark of Russ's favour. After all, it had been a long time since any man had killed one of the beasts while still in training and armed only with a spear. It was in fact considered near impossible.

Ragnar had pointed out the old monster had been sick and starving and he had killed it with a lucky blow, but that had made no difference. If anything, his un-Wolf-like modesty had gotten almost as much attention as the slaying. Perhaps he should have boasted about it, like Sven or anybody else would have done. He did not quite know why the fame made him so uncomfortable. Perhaps it was because he felt he was not worthy of it.

'You bloody daydreaming again?' Sven asked. 'Or can't you answer a civil question?'

'You'll find out when you ask one,' Ragnar responded, his nostrils dilating, catching the faintest hint of an acrid inhuman scent on the wind. He looked over at Sven to see if his friend had caught it too. Sven's marginally less keen nose twitched. The long moustache he had been cultivating since the campaign on Xecutor moved like the whiskers of some great hunting beast.

‘You smell that?’ he asked. Ragnar nodded.

‘Ice fiend, I reckon. Not too close, not too far either.’

‘Perhaps you’re not quite so bad at tracking as I thought,’ said Ragnar.

‘We can’t all have the razor keen senses of the blessed of bloody Russ,’ said Sven. ‘Maybe I should let you go and check this out on your own. After all, the cubs will give you all the credit for killing the beasts anyway. Even if I were to kill a whole bloody tribe single handed, while you stood back and applauded my fine bloody technique with a chainsword, they would praise you for it.’

Ragnar checked his weapons. Tracking down the ice fiends was the whole purpose of this expedition. They had been raiding along the coastal glaciers and slaughtering the mastodon herds. It was time they were taught a lesson. ‘I think you’re just jealous of my well-deserved reputation,’ he said.

‘I would be jealous if it was well-deserved,’ said Sven. ‘Unfortunately, all you do is hog the credit for my own heroic deeds.’

‘Like I did on Micah,’ said Ragnar, ‘when I pulled you out of that squig pit, before they could gnaw you to death?’

‘You always have to bring that up, don’t you?’ said Sven in a tone of mock gloom. ‘I would have fought my way out in a few heartbeats if you had not interrupted.’

‘Your plan was to choke the squig to death by thrusting yourself down its throat then, was it?’

‘I was lulling it into a false sense of security,’ muttered Sven, his eyes checking the horizon. Ragnar could tell he too had spotted the massive white shapes until now near invisible amongst the snows.

Sven made a few practice passes with his deactivated chainsword just to loosen up.

‘I don’t remember that being covered in the Codex Tacticus.’

‘I am a brilliant improviser.’

‘Apparently.’

‘Well, what about it? I don’t cast up all the times I have pulled your fat out of the bloody fire. What about that time on Venam? When I saved you from those heretics before they could chop you up with your own chainsword? You never bloody well hear me mention that, do you?’

‘Not more than once or twice a day.’

Sven was in full flow now, not to be stopped. ‘Or how about on that space hulk near Korelia or Korelius or whatever it was bloody well called – when I saved you from those tyranids? I never mention that, do I?’

‘You just did.’

‘Or what about that time–’

‘Sven?’

‘Yes.’

‘Shut up.’

‘Don’t tell me to bloody well shut up, Ragnar bloody so-called Blackmane. Just because you have a head swollen to the size of a small bloody planetoid, doesn’t mean I can’t kick your–’

‘No! Can’t you hear it?’

‘Hear what?’

‘That!’ There was a sound of cracking ice. Ragnar saw a crevasse start to open ten strides away.

‘Glacier’s breaking up,’ he hissed, beginning to run forward, as the crack splitting the ice came nearer.

‘I would never have noticed,’ said Sven sarcastically.

‘Quite probably,’ said Ragnar, racing forward and leaping over the gap. Sven was a few strides behind him, but leapt fractionally too late. It was obvious that he was not going to make it across the widening gap, and was going to tumble down, Russ alone knew how far. Ragnar leaned out and grabbed his friend’s outstretched hand, tugging him forward and sending him sprawling in the ice beside him.

‘Siding with the ice fiends now, eh?’ said Sven around a mouthful of snow.

‘No – just saving your life yet again.’

‘So you say. I was doing fine before your sneak attack sent me sprawling.’

‘Going to wedge open the crevasse with your thick skull, were you? Best use for it, most likely.’

Sven bounded to his feet and cast a casual glance over his shoulder, checking on the distance separating them from the ice fiends. Several hundred strides lay between them still. It looked like the fiends were waiting to see whether the crevasse took them. ‘Yours is the only head around here big enough to fill that hole,’ said Sven cheerily.

The ground beneath their feet started to move again, as the glacier shook. ‘Maybe we should get off this frozen river of ice before it swallows us both up,’ said Ragnar.

‘Well, looks like the only way out is through them,’ said Sven, gesturing to the approaching ice fiends.

‘And your point is?’

‘Just giving you directions in case you get lost again,’ said Sven, turning and racing towards the approaching creatures. Ragnar followed him, the snow crunching under his ceramite boots and splashing off his greaves, his breath clouding the air like steam. The ice fiends bellowed challenges. The two Blood Claws answered with whooping war-cries. As they closed the distance Ragnar realised how big the creatures were. They were almost twice his height. Long white fur covered their bearish bodies, massive yellowing tusks protruded from the gaping caverns of their mouths. Long dagger-like claws tipped the three digits on each paw. Their faces were a startling combination of humanoid and beast. Their yellowish-red eyes gleamed with a malign and bestial intelligence and a glittering malevolent hatred of all not their kind. There were close on ten of them, all male, a pride of hunters. Ragnar knew they would fight until either they were dead or their prey was. There was no more insensately ferocious life form on the surface of Fenris. Unless it was Sven, he thought.

Ragnar thumbed the activation rune of his chainsword and it roared to life. He sprang into the ice fiend pack, chopping right and left. His first blow took off a taloned hand and sent blue blood spurting to stain the snows.

Briefly and incongruously a screed of information placed there by the tutelary engines back in the Fang blazed across his brain. He recalled that the blood of an ice fiend contained different chemical elements from human blood, designed to prevent it from freezing in the winter chill of the arctic wastes. He also remembered that it was poisonous, just as the creature thrust its stump into his face and a deadly searing jet of the stuff spurted into his eyes.

Ragnar was grateful as the translucent second lid dropped into position over his eyeball. Even so, the pain was immense as the corrosive stuff began to eat away at the specially hardened flesh. He shook his head to clear it away and a massive impact sent him sprawling into a snowdrift.

Gratefully he scooped up a handful of snow to wash the poison ichor from his eyes. From the scents of the beasts and the sounds of their heartbeats he could tell there were none within striking distance. He could hear Sven leaping among them, chopping away with his blade, preventing the beasts from getting at him.

‘Just as I thought!’ he bellowed. ‘Leaving me to do all the work, while you have a bloody kip in the nice soft snow.’

Ragnar retracted his second eyelid and wiped his eyes. The stinging had started to diminish as his enhanced body adapted to the poison. He saw Sven carve a ruinous path through the ice fiends, hacking left and right with his mighty chainsaw-edged blade. It looked like his fellow Blood Claw was going to do just what he claimed and take out the entire pack all by himself, when one of the beasts grabbed the Space Wolf from behind, immobilising his arms. Another knocked the chainsword from his grip with a buffeting blow.

Ragnar leapt forward, burying his own blade in the back of the beast that held Sven immobile. It let out an ear-splitting howl and dropped the Blood Claw as it clutched its wound. Ragnar hacked again, smashing his blow into the creature’s neck and beheading it. He could hear Sven scoop up his blade. A moment later they laid into the beasts with their potent weapons. Chainsaw blades ripped through fur and flesh. Blue blood flowed. The beasts kept coming, filled with the insensate savagery of their kind, determined to kill the human interlopers.

The Space Wolves matched savagery with savagery, and brute strength with superior speed and weaponry. Within heartbeats Ragnar carved up two of the fiends, severing limbs and spilling ropy intestines. In five heartbeats he could see that more than half of the ice fiend pack was dead. Even so, the monsters kept fighting. Their claws scabbled against the hardened ceramite of Ragnar’s armour with a hideous keening screech. Their foetid breath stank in his nostrils. The reek of their blood and fur and internal organs began to overwhelm all other scents.

Ten heartbeats later it was over. All of the ice fiends lay dead or dying. One of the wounded lashed out at Ragnar even on its dying breath. He avoided the stroke easily and sent it to hell with a flick of his blade.

‘Fierce buggers, aren’t they?’ said Sven, rotating the blades of his chainsword in a snowdrift to clean it.

‘I’ve seen worse,’ said Ragnar scooping up a handful of clean snow to wipe the alien blood from his armour.

‘Well, they won’t be killing any more bloody bondsmen, that’s for sure.’

‘You have it there,’ said Ragnar quietly. He felt an obscure melancholy start to sneak over him now that the excitement of the battle was over. The creatures had not presented much of a challenge after all, and in death had started to look slightly pathetic.

‘Useless beasts,’ said Sven. ‘Not even good to eat.’

‘I suppose not.’

‘Cheer up, Ragnar. You’d think it was you that had taken your death wound, not them.’

Ragnar attempted a smile, wondering at the change in his mood. Such things were becoming rarer and rarer as his body adapted to the changes that becoming a Space Wolf had wrought, but still they sometimes took him off guard. Suddenly, his eye caught sight of a distant flickering, as something massive dropped through the white clouds to the south-west. A moment later, he heard the sonic boom of the approaching aircraft.

‘Looks like we’ve got company,’ he said.

‘Help has arrived. Too bloody late as usual. I’ve done all the work. You’ll get all the credit.’

Ragnar reached down and wadded up a snowball. A second later he snapped it into Sven’s face. So swift were the Blood Claw’s reflexes that his comrade almost evaded it despite Ragnar’s speed. Almost.

‘Sneak attack, eh?’ said Sven. ‘Well, there’s only one bloody response to that.’

A moment later, a snowball smacked off Ragnar’s armour, and then a second.

They were still fighting when the Thunderhawk’s landing skids dropped into the snow nearby.

Ragnar was surprised to see Sergeant Hakon emerge from the hatch of the gunship. He thought the veteran had returned to Russvik to take charge of training once more. The old Marine was even more grizzled-looking now than when Ragnar had first met him, five years before. His face was still a patchwork of scars, his eyes still chips of blue ice. His hair and long sideburns were pure grey. His canines were monstrous fangs. He surveyed the two Blood Claws for a second and the fighting stopped.

‘You’re wanted back at the Fang,’ he said.

‘We’re flattered that you came all this way to get us,’ said Sven. Over the past few years, they had all lost some of their awe of their leader. ‘Has our liege Berek Thunderfist decided that he needs a bigger audience when the skalds sing his bloody praises?’

‘You should watch your tongue, youth,’ said Hakon, ‘or Lord Berek might rip it out. He always had a bit of a temper that one. Or I might do it myself, if you don’t show some respect for your elders.’

Hakon’s voice was a flat and flinty as ever. Sven’s cheerfully ugly face lost some of its cheeky expression at the sergeant’s tone. Perhaps he had not quite lost all awe of the old man, Ragnar thought.

‘Why have we been summoned?’ asked Ragnar. It was not every day that a veteran sergeant and a gunship was dispatched to recover two Blood Claws on a hunting expedition.

‘It’s not just you,’ said Hakon. ‘Every Wolf on the planet has been called back to the Fang.’

‘Every one?’

The sergeant nodded.

‘Must be something big,’ said Sven.

‘Aye, youth, must be. Such a thing has not happened since you and your friends discovered that Chaos nest under Daemon Spire Mountain, and that was the first time that had happened in over a century.’

‘It’s nice to know we’ve brought a bit of excitement into your otherwise dull lives,’ said Sven.

‘Get in. You’re not the only cubs I have to pick up today,’ the sergeant said.

Ragnar followed Sven into the innards of the armoured gunship and strapped himself in.

‘Who’s he calling a bloody cub?’ muttered Sven. ‘About time we were made Grey Hunters, that’s what I think.’

‘Do you have an idea what all this is about?’ asked Aenar Hellstrom brightly from across the hold. His oval face looked almost obnoxiously young and cheerful. Aenar was part of the most recent intake of Blood Claws to Lord Berek’s company. A whole new pack of them, the second Ragnar had seen since his own acceptance by Lord Berek. Looking around he could see a couple of other members of the pack – the saturnine Torvald and the massive brute everyone just called Troll.

Sven grunted, not wanting to reveal his ignorance to one of the cubs, as they thought of the youngsters. It would not do. After all, he and Sven and Strybjorn were veterans of sorts, the oldest Blood Claw pack, and Aenar and his ilk had not even been off-planet yet. Aenar whooped as the Thunderhawk shuddered and roared its way through a patch of turbulence. Was I ever like that, Ragnar wondered with all the world-weariness of his extra five years? It's a wonder that Hakon did not shoot me.

Ragnar exchanged knowing glances with Sven who looked as if he were about to cuff the younger Blood Claw. Ragnar glanced around the inner cabin of the Thunderhawk. It was indeed a strange mix the gunship had picked up on its trip around the wastes. Along with Hakon there were other veterans, Long Fangs bearing the insignia of three different great companies, Grey Hunters, Blood Claws, even a Wolf Priest who had been scouting for new aspirants along the ridges near the glacier valley. It seemed like a fair cross-section of the Chapter had been abroad, about their own business in the winter-bound lands of the northern continent.

Hardly surprising really. Most had probably been doing the same as him and Sven, keeping their skills sharp by hunting, tracking, climbing mountains, practising winter world survival strategies. It was part of the routine for most of the Wolves when at home on Fenris. Those not involved in mandatory duty rosters were left free to pursue their own interests, unless of course some emergency came up.

What could be going on, Ragnar wondered? What was so important that all of these warriors had been recalled to the Fang? Had the Thousand Sons returned? Had a nest of Chaos worshippers been uncovered? Or was it something else – a summons to battle beyond the stars? He fervently hoped so.

Ragnar took a deep breath and began to murmur cleansing prayers to Russ. He needed to calm his mind, and be ready for anything, to be certain that whatever the challenge was, he could meet it. In a way it did not really matter what awaited them back at the Fang, he would find out soon enough, and be ready. It was his sworn duty as a Space Marine and a bondsman to Berek Thunderfist and Great Wolf Logan Grimnar. It was his duty to Russ and the Emperor and the spirits of those who had gone before him.

He felt a great calmness pass over him, as the ancient words of the prayer triggered responses programmed deep into his body's central

nervous system. At once he felt both at peace and alert. The beating of his double hearts slowed. His breathing became deeper and more relaxed, his mind clearer and calmer. It was becoming easier, he thought. The more he practised these ancient rituals, the more effective they became, and the quicker he got results.

‘You’ll soon be as god-bothering as Lars was,’ said Sven. Instantly a vision of their old comrade, killed by a monstrous ork warlord on Galt, sprang into Ragnar’s mind, dispelling the serenity that filled him. Lars had been a strange fey youth, perhaps marked for the Rune Priesthood had he lived. Ragnar knew that he himself had little in common with him. He doubted he was going to hang himself from the tree of life to gain mystical knowledge. As far as he knew, he possessed no trace of psychic powers.

Rather than laughing, Aenar greeted this remark with a look of even deeper respect. He was one of the ones who had started calling Ragnar ‘Blackmane’, after the skin of the great wolf he had killed during his initiation quest. Ragnar felt he could do without looks like that. They made him feel a little too responsible for his liking. Sven saw the look too and shook his head disgustedly.

‘Ragnar slew all ten ice fiends,’ he said with heavy sarcasm. ‘I stood and watched his splendid bladework.’

‘Really?’ asked Aenar breathlessly.

‘No, you idiot. He bloody well did not. He spent most of the fight wiping the tears from his eyes. Tears of envy at my god-like bloody prowess I might add.’

Disbelief scribed itself on Aenar’s face. Sven shook his head in disgust again, leaned back, closed his eyes and started to snore. Outside through the portholes, Ragnar could see the wolf-marked face of the moon, glimmering against the jewelled blackness of the sky.

No matter how many times he saw it, the sight of the Fang always astonished Ragnar. The massive peak, thrusting clear of the atmosphere, was the home of his Chapter. It was said to be the highest mountain in the Imperium, one of the greatest natural wonders, and Ragnar had never found any reason to doubt this. It dwarfed all the lesser peaks, the way a wolfhound might dwarf a terrier. Within its hollowed core lay one of the mightiest fortresses in the galaxy, the central and most important base of one of the oldest and most renowned of all Space Marine Chapters.

A thrill filled Ragnar when he contemplated it. In ancient days the place had been home to the man-god, Leman Russ, primarch of the Chapter, and the Emperor's mightiest bondsman. From here he had set out to distant Terra and fought against the traitorous factions of the Horus Heresy. Here he had overseen the transformation of the first generation of Fenrisian warriors into the very first Space Wolves; he had given his own blood and genetic material to ensure it. This was the place that every one of the thousands of warriors who had become Space Wolves over the past ten thousand years called home. In the time since their founder's disappearance, the Wolves had done their best to live up to his legacy.

The Thunderhawk screamed down the Valley of the Wolves, towards its landing site, passing over fields worked by the thralls of the Chapter, and over the mines and refineries that kept its warriors supplied. In the hellish glare of the venting gas jets, Ragnar saw the massive metal pipes clinging like enormous steel vines to the mountain sides. A cloud of dark smoke rose from the towering metal chimneys to wreath the ridges of the great mountain. Abruptly the gunship decelerated, slowing from fantastic velocity to a standstill in a few dozen heartbeats.

Ragnar, like everybody else, was thrown forward against the straps of his restraining harness. Sven opened one eye and looked around.

'I see our pilots haven't improved any with practice,' he said, and closed his eye once more.

The Thunderhawk landed on the hydraulic platform and descended into the depths of the Fang.

Ragnar emerged from the gunship into the great landing bay. All around. Space Wolves and thralls stood frozen in amazement. A great booming blast echoed through the cavernous hallway, seeming to disturb the clouds that had formed under the vaulted ceiling.

Servitors – half-man, half-machine – halted, red warning lights blinking on their craniums, and gazed around in wonder. Ragnar himself paused, half wondering if what he was hearing could be real. Every nerve of his body thrilled and responded to a knowledge imprinted deep in his brain by the teaching machines. This was the Horn of Doom, sounded only in moments of the gravest crisis to the Imperium and the Chapter, a signal calling every man to battle.

'Excellent,' muttered Sven. 'Some bloody excitement at long last.'



TWO

Ragnar glanced around the Great Hall, drinking in the sight of the Chapter's meeting place. Amid the barbaric splendour of its trappings the Wolf Lords and their retinues had already begun to assemble. All of the great captains present within the Fang had already made it to the chamber. Judging by their grim faces, they had been consulting with Logan Grimnar, and knew about whatever was going on.

Berek Thunderfist stood ready, flanked by Morgrim Silvertongue, his skald, and Mikal Stenmark, his chief lieutenant, and captain of his Wolf Guard. Ragnar, Sven and Hakon moved to take their place in his retinue, along with nearly a hundred other warriors of Berek's company. There were none of the usual greetings, backslappings, taunts and boasts. Ragnar could smell the acrid taints of tension, suppressed anxiety and excitement in the air.

He studied Berek closely hoping to glean some hint of what was to come.

If he had expected to discover anything he was disappointed. Berek looked much the same as ever. He was a massive man, his broad open features no different from usual. A smile, part self-satisfaction, part genuine friendliness, hovered on his full lips. His human hand toyed with his striking mane of long golden curls, before moving to smooth his neatly trimmed beard.

The ancient power gauntlet that replaced the hand he had lost in battle with Khâr the Betrayer flexed unconsciously. A faint aura of lightning crackled across its surface, filling the air with the taint of ozone. It was from this he took his nickname, and not from some connection with Ragnar's own clan, as he had once supposed. As always, the Wolf Lord looked relaxed and a little too pleased with himself.

Ragnar pushed the thought aside. If any man here had reason to be justifiably proud it was Berek. He had come victorious out of more than a score of legendary close combats with the Imperium's deadliest foes. He had led the expeditionary force to Kane's World and destroyed the foul Temple of Khorne there. He was one of the most successful field

commanders in the Chapter's history and was talked of by many, not least himself, as a possible successor to the Great Wolf when that time came.

Ragnar had reason to be grateful to the man, and he was. It was just that it sometimes seemed to him that there was a flaw in Berek, hidden too deep to be noticed, yet which you could occasionally sense, as you could sometimes feel the presence of danger only by instinct. It was true that Berek had never lost a battle, but Ragnar suspected the body counts in the staves of his saga told a different tale. Berek led men to glory but it was often purchased at a high cost in Space Wolf blood.

Ragnar shook his head, wondering if the flaw was in him. No one else seemed to think this was a failing. Many Blood Claws clamoured to follow Berek, desperate for the glory that being in his company promised. Ragnar had himself, if truth be told. The Wolves were never afraid of the sight of their own blood if it gave them a chance to prove their valour but...

Ragnar glanced around at the other Wolf Lords. There was Egil Ironwolf. Another mighty man, older by far than Berek. A silver crescent of hair descended from the sides of his bald head, and his beard hung in a dozen pleats. Great furrows crinkled the leathery skin of his face. His clear blue eyes surveyed the scene with a cold ferocity unusual even in a battle-brother.

Often appearances were deceptive; the brethren aged at different rates depending on how their bodies responded to the genetic alterations that transformed them into Space Wolves. In this case they were not: Egil was older even than Logan Grimnar although he looked as hale as a man half his age. It was said he had weathered over seven standard centuries in the service of the Chapter.

Gunnar Red Moon was proof of the variability of the ageing process. If it were not for the length of his mighty fangs, he could easily have been mistaken for a Blood Claw. His skin was fair and his complexion as clear as the newest initiate's. He was slender by Space Marine standards, with a fragile haunted fey look that made him resemble an apprentice skald more than the battle captain he was. You could never have guessed by looking at him that this was the man who had torn off an ork warlord's arm and used it as club to beat it to death when his chainsword had failed at the battle of Grimme Field. As with Egil and Berek, there was a grimness about his manner that told Ragnar nothing about what was going on.

Before he could inspect the other Wolf Lords, the great iron gates sealed with the rune sign of Logan Grimnar were thrown open and the Great Wolf himself strode into the chamber, flanked by his retinue of priests and skalds. Also in the retinue were two figures Ragnar had not seen before, a tall slender man and woman garbed in ornate grey tunics with golden epaulettes on their shoulders. Their heads were shaved and tattooed and wrapped round with grey scarves bearing runes of a strange design. From their gold buckled belts hung holstered laspistols and scabbarded rapiers. From their necks hung golden chains bearing the sign of an eye flanked by two rearing wolves.

‘Navigators,’ he muttered, the knowledge rising from deep within the caverns of his subconscious. He felt a brief sense of wonder. He knew that a small clan of Navigators from House Belisarius had a sanctuary within the Fang. There was an ancient friendship between the House and the Chapter, and it was a right granted to them by Leman Russ himself, in the ancient days before the Empire. The family had the exclusive right to guide the starships of the Space Wolves’ fleet through the immaterium. In return, it could call upon the services of the Chapter when it required them. Ragnar considered why the Great Wolf had required their presence at this meeting. It could only mean one thing – the Chapter’s fleet was about to be deployed somewhere, which meant most likely that the Chapter was going off-world.

The Great Wolf strode to a raised podium in the centre of the chamber. He was a massive man, grizzled and ancient-looking, but who moved with the electrifying speed of a much younger warrior. He raised his massive axe in the air. Instantly all went silent.

‘Brothers,’ he said, his deep powerful voice filling the chamber effortlessly. ‘The Shrine of Garm has fallen to heretics. The Spear of Russ has been taken.’

Instantly there was a gasp of horror. Ragnar saw expressions of disbelief and outrage on the face of the older Wolves. Somewhere within him he felt a visceral response to the Great Wolf’s words and he was surprised by it. Another legacy of the tutelary engines, no doubt. A heartbeat later knowledge flooded into his mind.

Garm was the site of one of the holiest of all the Space Wolves’ shrines. Indeed, the world had taken its name from Garm, mightiest of the First, one of the Wolf Lords who had risen in the service of Russ himself

during the founding of the Chapter. The cairn marked the spot where he fell in battle with Magnus the Red, primarch of the Thousand Sons, during the battle that had freed the planet from the domination of the traitor Marines. It had been a desperate moment, when Russ stumbled and the evil one had stood triumphant over him. Garm had snatched up Russ's spear and launched himself to his primarch's defence.

Using Russ's mighty weapon he had wounded the Chaos primarch, a feat considered near impossible by mortal man. The furious Magnus had burned him down on the spot with evil magic, but the hero's death had given Russ time to recover, and drive off the lord of the Thousand Sons.

The cairn had been raised by Russ himself with his own hands, in tribute to the first and greatest of his followers. The primarch caused a jet of cold blue flame to mark the spot, and laid his enchanted spear on the cairn, asking his old friend's spirit to watch over the weapon until he returned to claim it. It was a place where one could still sense the presence of the primarch on certain wild stormy nights. It was also a place that had been sacred to the Thousand Sons, and the two Chapters had fought many a battle over it. Never had it been allowed to remain in the hands of the heretics. It was an insult to the honour of the Space Wolves and it was not to be borne.

As for the Spear of Russ, it had been forged for the man-god by the folk of Garm, greatest artificers of the factory worlds of this sector. They had taken the fact that Russ himself had laid it in the shrine as a pledge of friendship with his people, and they had protected it ever since – with help from the Wolves of Space, of course.

'The Shrine of Garm has fallen and we are going to take it back. No slave of Chaos will be allowed to sully it. The holy site must be cleansed with fire and blood. The Spear of Russ must be waiting for our lord on his return if the prophesies of the final days are to be fulfilled.'

Ragnar found himself joining in the roar of approval that followed. In the scents of his battle-brothers he could detect nothing but anger and outrage.

'What happened?' shouted Berek Thunderfist.

Logan Grimnar's voice boomed across the chamber.

'The tale goes thusly! One hundred days ago the master of the Order of the White Bear refused to pay his tithe to the Imperial governor of Garm. He foreswore his oath of allegiance and sent the heads of the tax collectors

back to the palace on plates. It was a sign for a general uprising. Apparently the governor was a venal man who had set taxes at ten times the level required by the Ecclesiarchy, using the money to live in luxury and fund a network of spies, informers and strong-arms. He was hated by the folk of Garm, who rose against him urged on by an apostate priest known as Sergius. Civil war raged across the surface of the planet. Many of the industrial brotherhoods, including the Order of the White Bear and the Silver Mastodon, declared for Chaos, and are now trying to summon aid from the Eye of Terror. Now Chaos seeks a beachhead on one of the greatest foundries and arsenals of the Imperium and if it is not opposed it will seize it and fortify it. If this happens, the enemy will control one of the main routes between Fenris and the Eye of Terror, and one of the most sacred sites in the long saga of our brotherhood will have fallen forever into the foul claws of Chaos. Can we allow this?’

‘No!’ roared the massed ranks of Space Wolves as one man.

‘Can we stand back and allow the Spear of Russ to be held in the foul talons of the evil ones?’

‘No!’

‘Will we allow this call for succour and vengeance to go unanswered?’

‘No! No! No!’

‘The Wolf ships will sail between the stars to Garm. There we will join forces with the Imperial fleet gathered to free the world from the shackles of Chaos and the taint of heresy. We will teach the slaves of darkness what it means to sully the honour of our Chapter. You have one hour to prepare yourselves for departure!’

Pausing only long enough to acknowledge the approving roar of his followers, the Great Wolf swept from the chamber. A couple of heartbeats later, Ragnar found himself joining the throng racing towards his cell to gather his gear and personal effects and make ready for the long journey between the stars.

‘So, it’s off to bloody war we go!’ said Sven loudly as they left their cells. For all his complaining tone, his manner and scent spoke of happiness and excitement. They raced through the corridors of the Fang, heading to the great hangar bay in which the shuttles waited, carrying the kitbags that held their personal possessions. ‘The bold Space Wolves must save yet another world from the denizens of the dark.’

‘It is the task the Emperor has set us,’ said Ragnar, echoing the fulsome tones the Wolf Priests used when preaching their sermons. ‘And we will not fail Him! There will be foes to smite, plunder to take, and new worlds to tread. Who could ask for more?’

‘Maybe a bite to bloody well eat,’ said Sven. ‘I don’t fancy eating grubs and worms and tree bark again like we did on Galt.’

‘The fleet is going,’ said Ragnar, as they leapt into a drop-tube and drifted a thousand metres down into darkness. ‘And I am sure it will be well supplied.’

‘What do you know about Garm? And I don’t mean all the stuff the bloody ancient machines taught us about the holy shrines either. You are always studying the archives about old battles. Know anything?’

Ragnar thought for a moment. Garm had been the site of more encounters with the Thousand Sons than any other world in the sector. Since his encounter with the Chaos Marine Madox, he had taken a personal interest in such things. He had read as much as he could about it, for he felt certain that he would encounter the heretical Traitor Marines once more.

He flexed his knees to absorb the shock of landing and bounded out into the corridor once more, kitbag over his shoulder. Sven raced along by his side, keeping pace easily, despite Ragnar’s longer stride.

‘It is an industrial world,’ he said eventually. ‘Part forge, part hive. Dark clouds of pollutants fill the skies. Steel citadels cover the surface. Each is ruled by an industrial order, sworn to serve its own master. Each master is sworn to serve the governor, and the governor is sworn to serve the Imperium.’

‘The members of the orders represent only a small fraction of the population. Each owns its own factories and foundries and the services of the clans who work there like thralls. Every man, woman and child has a lord.’

‘Sounds more or less like bloody Fenris.’

‘On Garm, the distinctions between classes and castes are much more strict. Obedience is demanded and expected. Disobedience can be punished by death.’

‘Doesn’t sound like the system is working too well at the moment.’

‘Perhaps it is.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘If a lord becomes a heretic, all of his followers will too. If a lord becomes a rebel, so will his people.’

‘Why should they obey a rebel or a heretic?’

‘Just because he is an oath-breaker does not mean that they are too. Besides, they may know no better.’

‘They must be bloody stupid if they can’t work that out for themselves.’

‘Wait until you see for yourself before you judge.’

‘Yes, oh wise one. You sound more like a bloody priest every day.’

‘You’re the one who asked me about Garm.’

‘I’m sorry I did, your holiness.’

They emerged into the hangar area. Already companies were forming up to take shuttles, one for each company present, one for each ship. Each of the great companies was assigned its own vessel for the duration of the campaign. Each would carry its supplies and equipment and thralls, containing everything it needed to keep that company on the field.

These shuttles were different from the one he had taken when he had accompanied Inquisitors Sternberg and Karah Isaan on the starship *Light of Truth*. They were smaller, more streamlined and much more heavily armoured. They bristled with weapons, and looked more like large Thunderhawks than normal spacefaring vessels.

As Ragnar watched, a Rhino armoured personnel carrier roared up the ramp and into the interior of the shuttle. It was swiftly followed by another and then by squads of bikers. Ragnar glanced around and saw several thralls in power-loader exo-skeletons carrying massive crates on the tines of their mechanised armour. One by one they disappeared within the depths of shuttle freighters and emerged without their loads.

All through the hangar hall hundreds of thralls loaded dozens of shuttles. Some of the vessels, less well armoured than the others, were used only for carrying stores to starships. Ragnar was suddenly aware of the scale of the operation going on around him, and how well organised it was. Most of the Chapter was already on the move, ready to make the leap between the stars, mere hours after their supreme commander had given the order.

‘Hope we get our own bikes this time out,’ said Sven. ‘There’s nothing I bloody like more.’

‘I think you have ork blood in you,’ said Ragnar, thinking of the awesome greenskin warriors and their fondness for loud fast machinery.

‘I’ve had plenty of ork blood on me,’ said Sven and laughed as if he had said something funny.

As he and Sven clambered up the ramp into the interior of the shuttle, the duty sergeant, Hakon, as fate would have it, called out their names and checked them off a list.

‘Not taking any chances on leaving anybody behind, sergeant?’ asked Sven, cheekily.

‘If we didn’t make this list some of you would probably sleep through the Horn of Doom and miss the ship. And we couldn’t have that now, could we? Now get on board and less of your lip.’

‘Aye, your lordship,’ Ragnar bellowed and narrowly avoided the sweep of Hakon’s boot. Grinning, he and Sven entered the innards of the shuttle. It was warm and dark and smelled of oil, weapons, ceramite and the exhaust fumes of vehicles. Lubricants had pooled in the well-worn floors. Ragnar made his way up a set of stairs balustraded with wolf-headed gargoyles and moved through a series of bulkhead doorways till he found the take-off chamber containing the other Blood Claws.

A quick check told him everybody was present. Strybjorn as well as the boys of the new packs. They looked at him and then Sven with a mixture of excitement and anxiety written on their faces. He realised that some of these youths had never been off-planet before. Casting his mind back, he managed a surge of sympathy for them. He recalled his own first voyage into space in the company of Sven, Strybjorn, Hakon, Nils and Lars. An unaccountable sadness filled him when he thought of his dead companions and the dead inquisitors who had accompanied them, particularly Karah Isaan, for whom he had felt an un-Space Wolfish fondness.

‘What’s it like, travelling through the immaterium?’ Aenar asked enthusiastically.

‘Bloody horrible,’ said Sven. ‘The ship shakes and vanishes and you hear the howling of daemons and dead men outside its walls. Your stomach feels like it’s about to jump up your throat and romp off down the corridor all by itself. Your bowels get weak and loose and—’

‘Sven is just describing how he always feels when he faces any danger,’ said Ragnar. ‘You’ll be fine.’

‘Hark to Ragnar, the bloody hero,’ said Sven. ‘I’ll have you know he wouldn’t be here now if I had not pulled his bloody bacon from the fire a dozen times.’

Before Ragnar could reply, red warning runes glowed along the walls, and they heard a great air-horn blast. In the distance, Ragnar could hear massive airlock doors clang shut.

‘Strap yourselves in,’ he said. ‘We’re taking off.’

Ten heartbeats later, the shuttle shuddered into the air, and headed for the distant sky. What waited for them beyond it, Ragnar wondered, feeling an ominous sense of foreboding.



THREE

Ragnar watched the approach of the *Fist of Russ*, Berek's ship, through the porthole of the shuttle. On first inspection, it was a disappointment. Seen from close up it was smaller than the *Light of Truth*, the first starship on which he had travelled, though it looked more densely armed and armoured. Around the ship, shuttles and Thunderhawks came and went. Judging by the loops and flare of landing jets, many of the gunship pilots were merely testing their vessels, performing shakedown trials before hurtling into the docking bays of the mothership.

Briefly Ragnar considered whether, when he finally made the rank of Grey Hunter, he would apply for pilot training. He found the idea attractive, and mentioned it to Sven.

'Does this mean you want to bloody well skive off from hand-to-hand fighting? Typical.'

Ragnar considered this for a moment, as he watched a Thunderhawk hurtle by so close that he could make out the pilot's features through the armour glass windows.

He must be doing that deliberately, Ragnar realised, matching velocities exactly so that there were only a few dozen metres per second difference in the speeds of the two vessels.

'No. I still want to be in the front line. I just quite fancy being able to fly one of those things.'

Sven looked at him as if he were mad. 'If the Emperor had meant us to fly, we would grow wings along with our second hearts.'

'Don't be stupid, Sven. That's like saying if He meant us to be able to fly between the stars we would make warp jumps instead of farting.'

Sven laughed. 'There are some people I wish could do that.'

The *Fist of Russ* came ever closer. The rune sign of Berek's company was visible on the side, a massive silver hand clutching a lightning bolt. 'Do you think our lord and master could have had that painted any bigger?' Sven's tone was affectionate, but showed an awareness of their captain's besetting sin.

'Not without having the ship made bigger,' Ragnar replied.

‘I wager he would do so if he could.’

‘Or if he thought Sigrid Trollbane was having it done,’ added Strybjorn. Ragnar looked over at the Grimskull. His former enemy must be a little excited. He did not usually take part in Sven and Ragnar’s good natured mocking of their chieftain.

There was a faint sense of motion as the shuttle rotated for docking. Ragnar saw massive dish antennae rotating on the side of the *Fist of Russ*. Above it, on the jutting tower where the ship’s bridge was situated, was another symbol. It was not in the familiar runic script of Fenris but showed flowing Imperial characters surrounding a winged man.

‘What is that?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Sven. ‘I thought you were the scholar around here.’

Sergeant Hakon overheard them, as he made his way down the steel corridor. ‘It’s the sign of House Belisarius.’

‘Who are they?’

‘Navis Nobilitae. Navigators.’ Ragnar remembered the two slender foppishly garbed figures he had seen with Logan Grimnar back in the Fang.

‘How come they have their sign on our bloody starships?’ asked Sven.

‘Because without them these starships would not be going anywhere,’ responded Hakon curtly. ‘They guide us through the immaterium. Without them—’

‘I know what a Navigator does, sergeant. I am curious to know why our ship bears their sign. Does it not belong to the Chapter?’

‘I sometimes wonder whether the teaching engines managed to drive anything into that thick skull of yours, Sven. Ragnar, did they do any better with you?’

Hakon was being unfair, Ragnar thought. The teaching machines had placed enormous amounts of information within their brains but that did not mean you instantly had access to all of it. Sometimes, trying to find what you needed to know was like being lost in a great library, looking for a single volume. And, of course, sometimes the information was simply lost, forgotten or never transferred at all. Like most of the ancient machines owned by the Chapter, the tutelary engines were not entirely reliable.

Still, it was worth a try. Ragnar closed his eyes and invoked the mnemonic prayers he had been taught, concentrating on the image of the

winged figure, the name Belisarius, and the concept of the Navis Nobilitae. As if from a great distance concepts drifted up, like half-forgotten memories suddenly recalled by the stimulus of a scent or a song.

‘They are our allies,’ he said eventually. ‘Our pact with them dates from the time of Russ, from the Dawn Ages, before even the founding of the Imperium.’

‘Very good, Ragnar,’ said Hakon. Sven grimaced sourly at this. Obviously his grasp of the process of mnemonic prayer was not quite so good as Ragnar’s. ‘They are sworn to guide our ships and to provide twenty-four of their best pilots to serve the Great Wolf. In return we are sworn to come to their aid should they summon us, and to provide sanctuary in times of need. Their chieftain has a bodyguard of Space Wolves, just as our lord has a retinue of Navigators.’

‘Why do we need twenty-four bloody Navigators?’ said Sven. ‘The Chapter has only fifteen great ships. One for each company. Three in reserve.’

‘Slow as ever, Sven,’ said Hakon. ‘Replacements and reserves are always needed – with Navigators as much as with ships. More so, for there are times when men need to rest and ships do not.’

As Hakon and Sven talked, other images and ideas flowed into Ragnar’s mind. He realised he had never given consideration to a lot of things before now, to the level of support that stood behind every Space Marine. It was not just thralls and mechanics they needed, but Navigators and crews. For he realised that the crews must be raised from the folk of Fenris and trained by those who preceded them on the great ships. In a moment, he became conscious of the fact that he and his battle-brothers were merely the tip of a great spear, the cutting edge of a huge organisational structure intended to send them into battle anywhere in the Imperium.

Out of the porthole he caught sight of glittering lights, so distant as to be little brighter than stars, each in reality a huge ship. In another moment the giant sphere that was Fenris came into his field of vision, remained there for a moment, and then vanished as the shuttle entered the vast metal cavern that was the hangar deck of the *Fist of Russ*.

As they moved through the ship to their assigned cells, Ragnar could not help but contrast his experience on the Space Wolf ship with his first experience of an Imperial starship, the *Light of Truth*, and with that of the

transport which had eventually brought him back from Aeriis to Fenris. On those ships most of the crew had been conscripts and convicted criminals, either sentenced to serve punishment for some crime or press-ganged by a naval shore party. Most of them had been chained to their machines, and harshly disciplined by their officers.

The folk of the *Fist of Russ* were free men, proud to serve the Chapter, permitted to come and go as they pleased. They looked on Ragnar with awe but no fear. They did not expect the lash for the slightest infringement of discipline, real or imagined. They were an elite among spacefarers and knew it. All of them showed the mark of Fenris. They were tall men, mostly blond, rangy and fierce-looking. They wore grey tunics that bore the sign of the wolf, and went armed and ready to do battle, if need be, in defence of their ship. They moved with a purposeful stride, certain of what they were doing.

The *Fist of Russ* smelled different too: cleaner and more efficient, more like the air of Fenris. There was no taint of pain and torment in it. Obscurely, Ragnar felt proud of his Chapter. This ship was just another one of the myriad of small but important things that separated his people from the other arms of the Imperium like the Inquisition. The thought stayed with him as he marched to the cell he had been assigned.

His cell was small and steel walled. It had a porthole that looked out into space, and a small terminal that allowed access to the ship's datacore. There were racks for his weapons, and stands for his equipment. A hard bed filled one corner. He tossed his kitbag into the chest bolted to the floor and stowed his wargear before making his way over to the terminal altar.

It was slightly different from those he was used to in the Fang but still recognisable. A small cube of metal topped by a circlet of hologems surrounding a small brazier for the machine incense. A long brass umbilical connected the machine to the data cavity in the wall. Two rearing metal wolves, bolted to the tabletop, flanked it and held it in place.

Ragnar squatted cross-legged before the altar. He lit the small block of machine incense, tapped the ivory keys and spoke the words of invocation. His fingers worked through the invocation sequence to summon the knowledge spirits of the datacore. In answer, the altar shuddered, the air shimmered and a glowing sphere of light sprang into being over the glowing hologems.

Ragnar's fingers flickered over the keyboard. In answer, the ectoplasmic nimbus of light before him swirled and a picture of the *Fist of Russ* came into being. It was a small but perfectly accurate facsimile of the mighty vessel he had seen from the shuttle. In answer to another catechism, the machine spirits showed images of the other craft. To Ragnar's surprise they were all different.

Logan Grimnar's *Pride of Fenris* was similar to the *Light of Truth*, a grim warship far larger than the *Fist of Russ*. Egil Ironwolf's was of the same type, if marginally smaller. The others ranged from one half to one third the size of those ships, and showed many subtle differences. In answer to his questions the spirits whispered facts about the fleet. Most of the ships were old. The Chapter had captured many of them in battle during ancient actions millennia ago. Some had become Chapter property more recently.

The *Iron Wolf* for instance, had been taken during a battle against a rebel fleet when Egil's own ship, the original *Iron Wolf*, had been crippled. The Chapter had claimed the battleship as plunder, and refused to return it to the Imperial fleet, an act that apparently still caused problems in certain quarters. Ragnar could not for the life of him understand why. On Fenris these things were simple: when you captured an enemy's ship it belonged to you or your liege lord. It did not matter if your foe had stolen it or claimed it in battle with someone else.

Apparently, certain factions within the Imperium thought differently. Ragnar was worldly wise enough to know that strangers had strange customs, and that not everybody held to the law as it was adhered to on Fenris, but he could not help but feel sorry for anyone who sought to claim the Chapter's spoils back from it.

Ragnar wondered what it must be like to have command of your own ship, to be a Wolf Lord like Berek Thunderfist? To be in charge of your own company, to be considered a hero by your Chapter, and a legend in your own time, particularly by yourself. To a Blood Claw like himself it was an almost unimaginable position. Aside from becoming Great Wolf, it was the highest position anyone in the Chapter could aspire to.

Of course, it was rumoured that Berek was not content with it, that he desperately wanted to be Great Wolf. Ragnar wondered if that was one of the things that made him a Wolf Lord with his own company. Would

anyone with the drive to reach such heights be content to stop there, one rung below the ultimate achievement?

It did not seem likely that Logan Grimnar would die soon. At least not of old age, but then few Great Wolves had ever died in their beds. There was always the possibility when the Chapter went into battle that even the highest ranking could become a casualty. If that were the case, perhaps Berek would achieve his ambition.

As a lowly Blood Claw, Ragnar was not privy to all of the scuttlebutt that passed around the ranks, but even he had heard discussions of Berek's ambition and his rivalry with Sigrid Trollbane, who was seen as his chief competitor for the Wolf throne. Ragnar had also heard of brawls and duels being fought between men of the two great companies, a shadow of the tension that lay between their chieftains.

A shadow fell across the altar. Ragnar looked up to see Sven standing in the doorway of his cell. 'You never bloody well stop, do you! You'll go blind if you spend all your time staring at a hologlobe.'

'At least I'll know something about what's going on.'

'You think that's important? All a Space Wolf needs is a foe in front of him and a weapon in his hand.'

Ragnar considered his friend, knowing that Sven was serious. Sven had many virtues but imagination was not one of them. Now that he had adjusted somewhat to the changes wrought by his transformation into a Space Marine, he seemed genuinely content to be one of the rank and file. He had no ambition greater than becoming a Grey Hunter, and no desire stronger than to cleave the foes of the Chapter. Ragnar was suddenly aware of the difference between the two of them.

He did like to know what was going on around him. He did want to be more than a sword in the fist of the Great Wolf. Was he ambitious himself? Was part of the reason for his ambivalent feelings towards Berek Thunderfist, that the Wolf Lord's ambition reflected his own? Ragnar did not know. He just felt that in some way he was growing up into someone different from the vast majority of the Blood Claws around him.

'Maybe so. But it never hurts to know why and more importantly how you are going to get to your foes.'

'You think too bloody much, Ragnar. You need beer.'

'Is there any on this ship?'

‘This would not be the *Fist of Russ* if it did not have a stein of beer in it.’

‘Hopefully there is more than one.’

‘As fate would have it, while you were weakening your eyesight communing with the spirits of knowledge, I was performing a vital reconnaissance mission. I have located the feasting hall and uncovered the location of a barrel at least.’

‘Then like true Space Wolves, let us boldly seek our objective.’

‘Best be prepared. Doubtless there are several scurvy knaves who will seek to stand between us and our prize.’

‘Then we shall teach them the folly of their ways! Lead on!’

The feasting hall lay deep within the bowels of the ship. Around the tables was a scattering of Blood Claws. It seemed that they were the only ones without duties to perform before the ship made its jump through the immaterium; the crew and the rest of their brethren were busy. Ragnar and Sven helped themselves to steins of ale.

Ragnar sat down on a bench next to Aenar, Torvald and the hulking Troll, along with several other members of their pack.

Ragnar felt a little envious. Most of his early comrades had gone to the ‘grave’. He pushed that dark thought away. Doubtless soon these bold lads would know the feeling too. The rate of attrition among Blood Claws was terrible. By the time they made Grey Hunter it was likely that only half of the young warriors in front of him would still be alive.

Sven took a place opposite them. Overhead in an ancient cogitator a countdown tolled off the minutes and seconds before the ship would be on its way. There were several hours yet to go.

‘Have you heard anything about where we are going?’ Aenar asked. Torvald was leaner and shaven headed with a bleak but humorous face.

‘Ask Ragnar,’ said Sven. ‘He is the scholar around here.’

‘That’s because it takes a brain to be a scholar, and Sven is hampered by his lack of one,’ said Ragnar, before sharing his knowledge.

‘It would be just my luck for it to be some hellhole or other. I was cursed at birth, you know.’ Torvald was given to complaining bitterly about some curse that had been placed on him at birth. His mother had offended a witch or something. Ragnar was not entirely sure. The tale changed a little every time Torvald told it.

‘I hear that a full ten companies are being sent out,’ continued Aenar.

Ragnar nodded. The maximum number of companies ever deployed in the field at once was eleven. One company always had to be left out of a campaign, so if all the others were wiped out it meant the Chapter would continue. Such an event had happened only three times in the Space Wolves' history, but happen it had. To have ten companies dispatched to the same place at the same time was most unusual indeed.

'Garm is an important place,' said Ragnar. 'The shrine there is almost as sacred as those in the Fang.'

A familiar scent told Ragnar of the arrival of another old companion. 'Look who has finally decided to join us,' said Sven. Ragnar looked round to see his old rival and comrade Strybjorn Grimskull approaching their table. He seemed even broader and more muscular than ever, and his deep-set eyes studied them all with a habitual wary, appraising look.

'I thought I would give you the pleasure of my company,' said Strybjorn, without cracking a smile.

'When does that start then?' said Sven. 'I've known you for years and it's never been a pleasure.'

'Very funny,' said Strybjorn grimly. He nodded at Ragnar. There had been tension between them since before they became Space Wolves. Strybjorn had been part of the raiding party that had wiped out Ragnar's entire clan. Not even the fact that they had saved each other's lives and fought together against deadly foes since then had entirely removed it.

'All ready for Garm?' he asked. The younger Blood Claws roared enthusiastic affirmatives. Sven nodded. Ragnar shrugged.

'You don't seem all that keen, Ragnar.'

'I'm keen enough. I just want to learn more before we go in.'

'What is there to know?' Sven asked.

'What sort of foes we will be fighting, for one thing,' said Ragnar.

'How many of them there are,' added Strybjorn.

'How well equipped they are—'

'That's easy,' interrupted Sven. 'Our foes will be flesh and blood, just like us only less tough. There won't be enough of them to go around the rest of you by the time I am finished with them. Their equipment will be like ours but less destructive since we are Space Marines, and have the best bloody gear in the galaxy. If you have any other questions, I will be pleased to answer them.'

‘Thank you, Sven,’ said Ragnar ironically. ‘It’s hard to understand why you haven’t been made a Wolf Lord already, seeing as how your confidence must inspire the men.’

‘He inspires me,’ growled Strybjorn sarcastically. ‘Inspires me to wonder how it’s possible for anyone so thick to be a Space Marine.’

‘I didn’t think intelligence was a requirement,’ said Sven too quickly to realise what he was saying. ‘I thought it was courage and ferocity.’

‘I think all three might prove useful,’ commented Ragnar.

‘We’ll see,’ said Sven. ‘Once the shooting starts all the knowledge in the world won’t make any difference, it’s down to skill with chainsword and bolter.’

Sergeant Hakon strode into the hall. He looked at them and said, ‘It’s nice to see that some folk have nothing better to do than sit around and drink beer and boast.’

‘It’s a great life being one of the Emperor’s chosen, sergeant,’ said Sven.

‘The Emperor chose you to fight in his name, not sit around like drunken farmers. Get back to your cells and check your gear, then strap yourselves in for the warp jump.’ His words were fierce but his tone belied them. He knew as well as they did that their gear was already stowed and checked.

‘Any word on what we can expect when we get there, sergeant?’ asked Aenar.

‘War,’ said Hakon. ‘Now off to your cells. Move!’



FOUR

The echo of the warning klaxon faded. They had left the immaterium. Ragnar shook his head. This time the disorientation of emerging from the warp was greater than any he had experienced. His whole body tingled and his senses shrieked. He felt as if he had been stretched on a rack. He had heard that no two warp jumps were ever the same, but this was the first time he had ever received such definitive proof of it. The whole ship had shivered like a whipped beast for what seemed like days. The hull had shuddered as if some evil god had smote it with a hammer.

Here and there he could make out new dents in the armour plate of the walls. He had no idea what could have made them, and he was not sure he wanted to find out. He was just glad they had arrived.

The ship suddenly shook once more. He was tossed forward and had it not been for his restraining harness, he would probably have fallen, Space Wolf reflexes or no. What was going on? The alarm horn sounded, a long ululating blast that every fibre of his being responded to. The ship was under attack!

What had happened? Had some monster followed them out of the immaterium? Had they encountered pirates or a Chaos fleet? Even as these thoughts flashed through his mind, the air above the terminal altar flickered and the face of the Navigator, the tall slender woman he had seen earlier with Logan Grimnar, appeared.

‘All crew: we are being attacked from vector alpha-alpha-twelve by enemy craft, presumed to be traitors. They are attempting to prevent us achieving orbit around Garm. In His name, they will be denied.’

Despite the pounding of his hearts, Ragnar forced himself to keep calm, unhooked himself from the restraint harness of his bunk and hurried across to the altar. This was his first real opportunity to witness a space battle, and he was determined not to miss it. After all, it might easily also prove his last. He might die here in an instant, the ship surrounding him vaporised by the terrible destructive energies being unleashed all around them.

Ragnar crouched before the altar terminal and made the invocations. The holosphere shimmered and became a three dimensional representation of the space around the *Fist of Russ*. Blue teardrops represented the ships of the Space Wolf fleet. The red points of light must be the enemy vessels. Other distant points in a lighter blue were, doubtless, ships belonging to another Imperial force.

The lights flickered and an eerie booming sound vibrated through the air. It was either the ship's shields absorbing an attack, or a power drain caused by the primary armaments being activated. His hands danced across the keyboard runes, his invocations to the spirits of information came so fast as to be almost garbled. Suddenly he achieved what he was aiming for, a pure unfettered communion between himself and the machine. Ragnar hooked himself into the flow of information passing through the ship's central nervous system. This was the same tide of data that the pilots, gunners and Navigators responded to. In his case, there was nothing he could do to alter the flow. He could only watch enthralled, his eyes riveted to the holosphere, as the *Fist of Russ* raced into battle.

He could see that the sky was filled with ships. A monstrous red sphere represented a space hulk. Amazement filled him. Those evil structures got everywhere, drawn to battle and war as inevitably as vultures to carrion. How did they manage it? Did some daemon god guide them? He dismissed the thought and concentrated on the work at hand, plucking information out of the datastream.

He could see that the Chaos ships were mostly huge battleships and cruisers. Massive, heavily armed, not particularly manoeuvrable, but then they did not need to be. They relied on the terrifying hitting power of their weaponry. Superficially they bore a resemblance to the Imperial warships they had once been, but over the millennia they had altered and mutated just like their crews. One of the Chaos ships had peeled off and was closing determinedly on the *Fist of Russ*. Other enemy cruisers appeared to be doing the same with the remaining Space Wolf craft. It was a challenge to which there could only be one response, although Ragnar was not sure it was the correct one.

Had he been in charge of the Fenrisian fleet, he would have grouped his ships in order to concentrate their fire power against a single foe and engaged the enemy one at a time, picking them off individually. Instead, the great ships were responding like Fenrisian warriors challenged to

single combat, pairing off with their chosen foes, and making ready for battle. It was like watching a battle of dragon ships back home on the world ocean of Fenris.

Ragnar smiled savagely. It was all very well coming up with a superior plan, but a field commander has to work with the troops he has available, and take into account their likely response. In the case of the Space Wolves, this was entirely predictable. They would fight their duels, and only then, with victory achieved, would they go to each other's aid. Ragnar shook his head. The pride of a Fenrisian warrior was a great strength as well as a weakness. Fortunately it appeared their foes felt the same way. Either that or their captains were so insane that they no longer had a grasp of sound tactics.

He studied the oncoming ship as more details became available. The image expanded to fill the holosphere. It was incredibly large, a massive structure of metal and ceramite, crudely riveted together. Massive cables snaked across its side, spitting sparks as they overloaded. It reminded Ragnar of the carnivorous fish of the Fenrisian sea: a barakuda or a ripper. Massive turrets lined the upper dorsal spine. Some of those weapons already belched fire although the range was too great for them to do much damage. The heretics were not ones for conserving energy.

At this range, the *Fist of Russ* had superior weaponry. Its nova cannon was capable of doing huge damage. Ragnar could tell that their pilot's strategy was to keep as much distance as possible between the two ships and use the Imperial vessel's superior ranged capability to pummel the foe into submission.

For the moment, as far as he could tell, it appeared to be working. Energy bolts chipped away at the screens surrounding the enemy vessel. Whenever they made contact, the shields flared and brightened. Sometimes a pale blue glow spread across the energy barrier like ripples on a pond. Sometimes huge thunderous sparks of energy danced along the side of the heretic ship, turning armour to cherry red, molten slag.

It was a thrilling sight but somehow dissatisfying. This was not how combat should be. A Space Wolf should be in the thick of battle, smiting his foe, not watching the discharge of mountain-shattering energies on a holosphere.

It appeared that the heretic captain was not about to sit still for the Fenrisian's tactics. He turned his vessel head on towards the Space Wolf

ship, and suddenly the sensors recorded an enormous discharge of energy from the rear of the vessel. Readouts raced into the red. For a moment, it looked like one of the *Fist*'s shots had hit the reactor or done some other critical form of damage. Any second, Ragnar expected to see the enemy ship fly apart, wracked by a terrible explosion.

It did not. Instead it began to lurch forward, moving with ever-increasing velocity, closing the gap between the vessels with a speed that the *Fist of Russ* could not match. The heretic crew were overloading their engines, taking an awful risk with their drives in order to close with their foe. Mouth dry, Ragnar watched as the gap closed. Surely soon the Chaos cruiser would be in range to annihilate the *Fist of Russ* with one blast of its awesome batteries.

The *Fist*'s pilot had anticipated the enemy's move, and the Imperial ship veered erratically on an evasive course, which only let their opponent close the distance quicker. The enemy ship opened fire. The *Fist of Russ* shuddered under the impact of multiple blasts.

Red warning lights blazed on the cell wall, a klaxon sounded loudly. The steel of the deck vibrated beneath Ragnar's feet. He could hear bulkheads slam shut and the hurricane roar of air being sucked out into the void of space. He felt the ambient temperature leap as a whole section of the hull must have been reduced to slag.

The holosphere winked out. The lights flickered and died. For a moment, the only sound was the twisting of metal and the eerie whine of the great fans that circulated air within the ship spinning to a halt. Darkness filled the cell. Ragnar could smell panic in the air. If the *Fist of Russ* lost power, they were dead, a sitting duck to be reduced to their component atoms by the enemy's next blast. This was not the way he had expected to meet his death.

He bounded to his feet and made ready to race into the corridor. He was not sure what he was going to do, but every instinct in him revolted against sitting quietly and awaiting doom. Every fibre of his being demanded that he do something, anything, in the face of inevitable death. The beast within him howled its protest against such a fate.

A heartbeat later the lights flickered back on, dimmer, partially extinguished in places. The holosphere glowed and returned. In it, Ragnar could see that the *Fist of Russ* had swung around and was arcing towards the enemy ship. Its image looked very damaged. The heretics continued to

fire, although sporadically, without the super-violent intensity of their opening salvo, and, even as Ragnar watched, that firing ceased, like the last few raindrops of a storm pattering sullenly into the ground. Even so, the *Fist of Russ* boomed and echoed and shuddered under the impact a few seconds later.

What was going on? An instant later the answer smacked Ragnar in the face. The Chaos worshippers were going to board them. They were going to try and take the crippled Imperial vessel as a prize. Ragnar found himself thanking Russ for the savagery and greed of the heretics. They were offering him a chance at a warrior's death, rather than a simple annihilation. An instant later, a broadcast across the comm-net made him even more grateful. It was the booming jovial voice of Berek Thunderfist, filled with confidence and a wild joy in being alive.

+All Wolves report to the forward bore-tube. We are going to teach these Chaos-worshipping scum a lesson.+

Ragnar paused for a last glance at the holosphere and saw exactly what he expected. The *Fist of Russ* was now driving directly towards the enemy cruiser, moving at full speed, ramming velocity.

Sparks of light lit the corridor as a crewman frantically tried to weld closed a blazing power conduit. Ragnar raced along, to be joined by Sven. The other Blood Claw had a chainsword in one hand and a bolt pistol in the other. He looked ready for trouble.

'Well, Ragnar, are you ready to teach the heretics a bloody lesson?' Sven asked jovially. He sounded for all the world like a man engaged in some enjoyable recreation, not one trapped on a crippled starcraft racing towards an inevitable collision with a much larger foe.

'I most certainly am. How about you?'

'They will not find a better bloody teacher. I wonder if old Berek has a plan or whether he is making this up as he goes along.'

A massive fist emerged from a doorway and clipped Sven around the ear. It was followed by Sergeant Hakon. 'The Wolf Lord undoubtedly has a plan, just like he has more brains in his arse than you have in that empty cave you call a head. I have followed Berek Thunderfist out of far tighter scrapes than this! Now follow me! Battle awaits!'

The sergeant took the lead as they barrelled along the corridor. Ahead of them someone had opened a postern gate through one of the bulkheads. As they reached it, Strybjorn emerged from a side corridor. He too was

armed and ready for combat. In his mind's eye, Ragnar tried to visualise how close they must be to the enemy ship and found that he did not have a clue. The *Fist of Russ* shuddered once more, like a man in the grip of breakbone fever, as another blast smashed into it. For a moment, Ragnar found himself tumbling through the air, as the artificial gravity failed, then training took over, and he cartwheeled, kicked himself off the walls and followed his comrades through the postern at increased speed.

He felt as if he was swimming, pushing himself off the floor or ceiling or wall and hurtling headlong down the corridor like a diver. He could see that the others had holstered their weapons to give themselves a free hand to control their direction or take advantage of any rungs or other handholds. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of other company members doing likewise as they moved along parallel corridors. It seemed like every Wolf on the ship was responding to Berek's command.

Sven and Hakon had disappeared from sight. The corridor ended in a steel ladder, metal rungs set in the wall. He cartwheeled again to bring his legs around and absorb the impact, then piked forward, grabbed a rung and pulled himself upwards. Above him he could see Sven's boots. Below him he could sense Strybjorn duplicate his own manoeuvre.

Ten heartbeats later he emerged into a long gunnery hall. Sweating men rammed massive cartridges into the maws of huge weapons. Teams of gunners responded to the bellowed instructions of their officers. Each of the weapons was larger than a Rhino APC, and most impressively, Ragnar knew these were among the least of the guns mounted by the *Fist of Russ*. At a signal, one of the gunnery officers pulled a massive lever, and a weird halo of energy surrounded the weapon as it discharged. The smell of ozone filled the air. The *Fist of Russ* was fighting back. An instant later, he had passed the weapon and joined the rest of the company in the forward boarding hall.

Ahead of him, Berek Thunderfist stood astride the mount of another great gun, flanked by Mikal and his Wolf Guard, the toughest, bravest and most highly honoured warriors in the company, each a veteran of a hundred frays. It was Ragnar's ambition to one day be worthy of joining them, but he knew he had a long way to go. You had to be a Grey Hunter of at least ten years of very distinguished service to be invited to join that select group. It had been made very clear to him on numerous occasions

that they were almost as far above a lowly Blood Claw, as Berek Thunderfist himself.

Astonishingly, the Wolf Lord looked as if he was enjoying himself. His lips were split by a wide grin, revealing his enormous fangs. His booming laughter echoed round the chamber, filling all who heard it with confidence, dispelling all fears.

‘Greetings, brothers!’ he roared. ‘In approximately two minutes and four seconds, assuming we are not all blown to hell in that time, we will make contact with our opponent. They undoubtedly think they are going to board us, and take our ship as a prize. We shall teach them a different lesson. Our ship is now aimed directly at them. The boarding beak is in position. As soon as we make contact, we are going through. The enemy is an Acheron-class cruiser and I think we can assume the schematics have not changed all that much since the Second Gorechild War. We will fight our way into the heart of the heretic ship and detonate its power core with thermo-charges.’

A roar of approval greeted this bold plan.

‘The charges will be set on a variable fuse, length to be decided by the man who plants them. As soon as they are activated we will return to the *Fist of Russ* and break away. We are Space Wolves. There should be plenty of time for us to take a little stroll and kill a few Chaos worshippers on our way back. If not, if we run out of time, I will see you all in hell.’

Ragnar realised that despite Berek’s jovial tone, their mission was a desperate one. It would require them to fight their way through a host of deadly warriors to the heart of an unknown vessel. There was very little chance that they would be able to make their way out again, once the charges were set. And yet, it was a plan that allowed them a chance at glory. It certainly beat being blasted into non-existence by the Chaos ship, or the ignominy of being taken captive.

‘In the unlikely event that our mission fails, I have ordered the crew to arm the self-destruct sequence of the *Fist of Russ*, so one way or another we will take these bastards into hell with us.’

And assuring that there is no retreat possible either, Ragnar thought. He was reminded of those Fenrisian warlords who would burn their ships on the beaches when they arrived on a hostile island, telling their men and their foes alike that there was no retreat and no way out save through victory. It was all a very desperate gamble, yet still it appealed to him.

Which was probably why he found himself cheering like a madman along with all the others.



FIVE

Suddenly, the *Fist of Russ* decelerated. There was a thunderous clash of metal. A rumbling vibration passed through the deck as the beaked boarding prow cleaved through the armoured hull of the enemy vessel. Ragnar held his breath involuntarily, knowing that this was one of the most difficult of all special manoeuvres. The *Fist's* captain had just a few seconds to exactly match the velocities of the two vessels or the impact would destroy them both. The grinding sound continued.

The absolute tip of the ship, a great neutronium bit, the hardest substance in the known universe, smashed through solid duralloy and steel, chewing through metal like a drill through soft wood, creating a route for them into the heart of the enemy vessel. The Space Wolves stood ready. Ahead of him, Ragnar could see Berek check the sensor on his wrist. It was doubtless set to locate the impulses of the Chaos power core. Near him, several of his Wolf Guard hoisted weapons in one hand, and massive square thermo-charges in the other. Nearby he saw Hakon and the members of his own squad checking their weapons as automatically as he was doing.

All around him, metal creaked and shuddered as the reinforced bulkheads absorbed the strain of the impact. From somewhere came the smell of blazing chemicals. Overhead, a power cable spurted a jet of sparks. It was like being trapped by an enormous accident. He breathed deeply and recited litanies of calm, determined to push the image of the two ships colliding and crumpling out of his mind, of him and his brothers being crushed to a bloody pulp.

Suddenly, the motion ceased. Ragnar knew this was an illusion created by the two vessels' velocities now being perfectly matched, but it was an illusion so compelling that it might as well have been true. Ahead of them, the neutronium bit ceased its rotation. There was a hiss and a spurt of steam or smoke as the two vessels joined and pressure attempted to equalise.

A barrage of new scents assaulted Ragnar's super-keen senses: the bitter smell of the polluted machine oil the heretics used, the odd scents

created by their strange machines, all of it mingled with the weird undercurrent of unnatural life that was the hallmark of Chaos.

Ahead of them the light was dimmer and more reddish than on the *Fist of Russ*. Already the Wolves of Berek's company were racing through the boarding tunnel towards it. When his turn came Ragnar joined them.

They emerged into the Chaos ship. It was like entering a different world: everything looked colder and darker. The machinery seemed simpler and much more massive, evidently patched and repaired with whatever came to hand, stuff salvaged from wrecks and looted craft. It looked as if it were given the bare minimum of maintenance by tech-adepts who just did not care. Despite this, there was moulded metalwork done with amazing if insane skill. Embossed daemon heads leered above archways. Moulded metal claws tipped every lever and door handle.

It was madness – what kind of tech-priests would spend their time crafting ornate casings and not pay attention to the spirits they contained?

The hellish lights illuminated corridors speckled with rust and marred by huge holes and dents. The sometimes sour, sometimes sickly-sweet scent of Chaos and mutation was stronger, carried everywhere by the monstrous ventilation ducts.

Quickly, the Wolves spread out. Every sergeant had linked his locator to Berek's through the comm-net, just as his own was linked to Sergeant Hakon's. Berek and his Wolf Guard were already racing deeper into the ship. There was nothing to do but follow them.

Almost immediately they emerged into a large hall, in the centre of which loomed a massive gimbal mounted weapon. All around it milled a group of Chaos crewmen, armed with a motley assortment of weapons, led by a huge scaly-skinned mutant whose stalked eyes emerged directly from his forehead. In one hand he brandished a massive cleaver, in the other a large antique-looking gun. The crewmen were clad in what might once have been a mixture of uniforms but were now simply tattered rags. They were like an army of beggars who had garbed themselves in the tattered remnants of some defeated army.

Before the Chaos worshippers could respond, the leading Wolves were in position, blasting them with a withering hail of fire. It was a testimony to the mutants' toughness that it took a number of direct hits from bolter shells to put them down. Ragnar saw the leader keep coming, despite the fact that one of his arms had been blown off, and a bullet had passed right

through his forehead, and blown half his brains right out the back of his skull.

‘Bloody mutants don’t need their brains to fight,’ muttered Sven.

‘Just like you,’ Ragnar replied. He took aim with his pistol and put a bullet through the huge creature’s right eye. This time it tumbled and fell, a look of blank incredulity on its brutal face, as if it could not quite understand what had happened to it.

Ragnar felt the beast stir within him, and howl with rage and battle-hunger. He fought down a rising tide of excitement that threatened to overwhelm him. It was difficult; for him, as for many Space Wolves, combat had an effect comparable to the most powerful stimulant drugs. He felt exalted. The constant flow of stimuli fed his emotions. All of the new scents and sounds, the thunder of battle, the roar of weapons, acted to feed the frenzy, as did the scent of excitement coming from his battle-brothers.

There was nothing to match this feeling. It wiped away fear, and nervousness. It increased the keenness of his senses to near unbearable levels as he scanned his surroundings for threats. There was nothing to quite compare with the feeling that your life lay in your own gauntleted hands, and that you lived or died by the keenness of your perceptions, the quickness of your reflexes, the strength of your sinews and your skill with your weapons.

Briefly, some distant detached part of his mind wondered whether this might be one of the flaws of his Chapter, a legacy of impetuosity and ferocity left by the gene-seed of Russ. Not that it mattered. He drank in the nectar of battle, sweeter than any wine.

The bolt pistol kicked in his hand once more. Before he was fully conscious of it, he had shot another enemy. A flash of pallid greyish skin caught from the corner of his eye, a blur of movement, and too quickly for the conscious mind to process it, he had spotted the threat and acted to remove it.

Like a tide of steel and ceramite, the Space Wolves raced through the Chaos craft, heading towards their goal. At their head ran Berek and his Wolf Guard. Occasionally, Ragnar would catch a glimpse of his leader in action. It was as awesome as it was revealing. Berek was a warrior of the utmost deadliness. In close combat, nothing could withstand his fury and the ancient power of his thunderous fist. He smashed through the Chaos worshippers like a steel-prowed ship cleaving a stormy sea.

Somehow, without understanding quite how it happened, Ragnar and his squad found themselves in a different corridor from the rest of the Wolves. He had vague memories of a rush from a side door, a massive bull-horned enemy barreling into him, and a swift, savage hand-to-hand battle that ended with the enemy dead at his feet. He could remember the stink of the monster's tainted blood, and the feel of its taloned fingers on his throat as it strove to hold him in place and smite him with a power axe. He recalled vividly how his own counter-stroke had taken its hand off at the wrist, and how the corpse had seemed to dance across the floor as it tried to resist the impact of the bolter shells exploding in its chest.

He looked up and saw Sven grinning at him. His bulldog features held the same look of fierce joy that Ragnar knew must be on his own face. He grinned at Ragnar and mouthed, 'Good fighting.'

Ragnar could only agree. Now all worries and fears had fallen away. The fact that they were fighting their way ever deeper into a vessel filled with deadly enemies meant nothing. The fact that even if they reached their objective they had little chance of escape before those terrible charges detonated meant even less. Now there was only the moment, the turbulent sweep of battle and the deadly thrill of combat. Ragnar felt truly alive, running along the edge of existence.

Sergeant Hakon paused to glance at the locator on his wrist, pursed his lips and indicated that they should proceed down the corridor. Filled with excitement, Ragnar took the lead, knowing instinctively that Sven and Strybjorn were at his heels. The whole Blood Claw pack trotted in single file.

The corridor widened and gained height. Huge girders reinforced the ceiling over their heads. More daemon heads leered down. Foul altars depicting monstrous creatures marked the sites of controls. Metal stairs led up to balconies above. Ragnar kept his eyes peeled knowing that this would be a good spot for an ambush. He noted the metal doorways in the walls. Their hinges were massive. They were made from reinforced steel that looked like it had been stripped from the turret of a tank. Enormous pipes snaked along the walls. Large regulator wheels protruded from the joints where two or more of them met.

In the distance small-arms fire echoed down the corridor. It seemed like the battle continued unabated. Ragnar risked a quick glance over his shoulder to see if he should take the passage leading towards it, but Hakon

shook his head. It appeared that in this massive hull, echoes were just as deceptive as they were anywhere else. He nodded acknowledgement and strode forward.

Briefly he considered what must be going on around him. All throughout this monstrous craft man and mutant were engaged in a life or death struggle. Judging by what he had seen so far, Berek had not encountered stiff resistance. Unsurprising, really, since the last thing the heretics would have expected would be for their prize to assault them. They were about to learn what it meant to do battle with Space Wolves.

Briefly, another image intruded into Ragnar's mind, of the Chaos worshippers, unaware of the attack, pressing ahead with their assault on the *Fist of Russ*. He pushed the thought aside of what would happen if the Wolves were successful in blowing up the ship, and then returned to their own ship, only to find it held against them. That was a bridge they would burn when they came to it, as Sven would say.

From up ahead, he caught sight of the bright muzzle flash of bolters, and heard the unmistakable howling of battle-cries. He picked up his pace, emerging onto a high metal balcony that looked down onto some sort of vehicle storage hangar. Beneath him Ragnar could see row upon row of massive tanks, studded with spikes and stained with vile insignia of Chaos. The coarse glow of the ceiling lights bathed the area in ruddy light, illuminating the fierce battle that was taking place.

A group of Space Wolves was pinned down behind one of the tanks, surrounded on all sides by bands of howling mutants, cut off from Space Wolf support. Ragnar smiled. As fate would have it, he had emerged on the balcony above and behind the largest group of mutants, putting him in the perfect position to attack them from the rear and ease the pressure on the embattled Wolves. Not one of the creatures had noticed him yet. He touched the grenade dispenser on his belt and allowed a few of the lethal metal eggs to drop into his palm. He set the fuse of the first and tossed it, lobbing the rest in quick succession.

Huge explosions rent mutant flesh. Gobbets of enemy meat flew in all directions. Tainted blood sprayed their cover. Almost out of grenades Ragnar opened up with his bolt pistol. Moments later, he was joined by Sergeant Hakon and the rest of the Blood Claw pack who added their contribution to the hail of fire.

The heretics were thrown into utter confusion, suddenly finding themselves under assault by an unknown number of foes from an unexpected direction. They were brave though, Ragnar had to give them that. Some of them turned, seeking the source of the danger. One of them, a massive mutant, a giant really, twice the size of all the others, bellowed instructions to his fellows. Ragnar saw him grab one of his men and push him roughly forward. The fellow fell flat on his face and for a second, Ragnar had a clear shot at the leader. He took advantage of the moment, and snapped off a burst of fire that took the leader in the head, below the helmet. The mutant's face exploded, and for a second his torso stood there, still waving encouragement to his followers, before toppling forward onto his sprawling minion who let out an enormous, demoralising scream of terror. It was too much for the other mutants, who scattered in all directions seeking cover from the menace at their rear.

Ragnar saw the opportunity he had been waiting for. He ignited a flare and leapt up from behind the cover of the balcony's metal banister, and sent a fixed-beam transmission on the comm-net to the trapped Space Wolves. The flare stick crackled in his hand, and Ragnar felt his gauntlets heat slightly.

+You down there! There is a way out of the trap! Get your sorry arses up here quickly! Look for the flare!+

He put every ounce of command he could into his voice, hoping that whoever was down there would have enough sense to respond.

They did. As Ragnar had hoped, they were quick to see a way out of their predicament. Instantly, as a pack, they broke from their cover and headed in Ragnar's direction, storming through the remains of the broken mutant band. Ragnar felt a thrill of pride. He had just helped save the lives of some of his battle-brothers.

A massive hand smote him on the shoulder, and knocked him back down into cover. Ragnar snarled and turned to see Sergeant Hakon glaring at him. 'You did well there, Ragnar, but there's no sense dancing around making a target of yourself with that flare.'

Ragnar suppressed a growl, and forced the beast back down within him. He could see the sense of the sergeant's words. He had let his own exaltation blind him to the harsh realities of the situation. He nodded and Hakon grinned. He gestured at Ragnar to toss the flare back down the corridor. He did not want Ragnar to throw it in any direction where the

retreating Wolves might see it, and be misled. Ragnar obeyed. Hakon nodded. 'Right. Let's give the Wolf Lord and his retinue some covering fire, shall we?'

The Wolf Lord, Ragnar thought? Was that who had been down there? Ragnar thought he might not have used such a peremptory tone if he had known. He shrugged, thinking there was nothing he could do about it now, then leapt up into a shooting crouch and sent another burst of fire into the oncoming Chaos horde.



SIX

Ragnar could see now that the men coming up the stairs were indeed Wolf Guard. Normally he would have been able to recognise them by the heavy Terminator armour they wore, but now they were garbed in the standard armour of Space Marines. Doubtless there had not been time to don their wargear when the order to ram was given. Not that they seemed to mind; they were all of them large, fell-looking men, grinning at the prospect of a good fight. Ragnar could smell no anxiety, despite the closeness of the call, only keenness and a desire to shed blood once more.

Sensing eyes on him, Ragnar turned and saw that Berek was looking at him. He realised that the Wolf Lord knew exactly who it was who had so insolently called orders to him. He forced himself to meet Berek's gaze, and to his surprise saw that the Wolf Lord was grinning as he strolled over to him.

'That was quick thinking, lad,' he said, 'and you have my gratitude. The company might have been building a funeral pyre for Berek Thunderfist this very day if you had not intervened, and I am not yet ready to greet my predecessors. I will not forget this, Ragnar.'

Ragnar was even more surprised that the great Wolf Lord had remembered who he was, and felt a surge of pride at this acknowledgement. Berek turned to Hakon and bellowed, 'It's good to see that you have taught your cubs how to bite, Hakon. Now, let's get on with this.'

Ragnar risked another glance at the veterans of the Wolf Guard. He was surprised that he could count only five of them, including Morgrim and Mikal Stenmark. Surely, the rest of those powerful warriors could not be dead? Morgrim caught his glance and seemed to read his mind.

'Our force was cut in two by the ambush,' said the skald. His speaking voice was hoarse and rough and quiet, completely at odds with the clarity and range of his singing. Ragnar noted that silver hair framed his long lean face. His eyes were a strange gold colour. 'The others were driven back through the doorway by a hail of fire. I am certain they have joined up with the rest of our force.'

Ragnar nodded, considering this. He was not entirely sure of the wisdom of the Wolf Lord's decision to lead the vanguard of his force into battle. No one could doubt his bravery but... He shrugged. It was not for him to judge the likes of Berek Thunderfist. If the Wolf Lord chose to lead his troops in the traditional Fenrisian manner that was his business.

Morgrim clapped him on the shoulderpad of his armour. 'No time for wool-gathering, boy. We better get to the heart of this tub before the heretics realise what we are about.'

With that he lengthened his stride, and followed the rest of Wolves into the depths of the ship. Ragnar followed, knowing that he had got all the praise he was going to get for his exploits.

They emerged into a larger gallery. Looking down into the vast space Ragnar could see a massed horde of Chaos warriors assembling, far too many to fight. Like the others he ducked back into the shadows to avoid being seen. He was astounded by the size of the vessel on which they moved and fought. Brought up among the barbarian islanders of Fenris, the word 'ship' had certain connotations in his mind. It conjured up an image of a dragonship, one of the longboats made from the hide and bones of the monstrous sea-going lizards his people hunted. They were perhaps fifty strides long with benches for twenty oarsmen on each side. To some part of his mind, that still was a ship.

This was something else. It seemed larger than any structure ought be, bigger even than one of the vast starscrapers he had seen on Aerius. Entire islands from the world sea of Fenris could have been lost within it. It was a labyrinth large enough to swallow the entire island on which he had grown up.

Ahead, Berek had gestured for them to stop. Ragnar paused just quickly enough to avoid bumping into Sven's back. 'What are they saying, Morgrim?' Berek asked.

'They believe about ten thousand warriors have boarded their ship and are trying to take it from them. They are making ready to repel boarders,' said Morgrim, amusement was evident in his soft voice. The Wolf Guard laughed quietly. The Blood Claws joined in, more to take part than because they understood the joke. It dawned on Ragnar that Morgrim must have patched himself into the heretics' own comm-net and must be able to understand their twisted language. For the first time he understood how

very useful this skill was to have. If they survived this, he would ask Morgrim how he had managed it.

‘They plan to sweep through the corridors en masse, catching us in the jaws of a trap.’

‘We must hurry on then,’ said Berek, ‘and find the power core before they pin us down again.’ He sub-vocalised orders into the comm-net, giving instructions to all of the other squad leaders on the sealed command channels. He spoke so quietly that not even Ragnar’s hyper-acute hearing could pick up the words.

Mikal Stenmark checked the sensor unit on his wrist. ‘We are not more than five hundred metres from the power core now, Lord Berek.’

‘Aye, Mikal, so I can see, but who knows how long it will take us to get there? Those five hundred metres are by the straightest route. These corridors might wind for leagues before we get to the core.’

‘Then best we start soon, lord,’ said Stenmark cheerfully.

‘My thoughts exactly, Mikal. Let us be moving before those Chaos worshippers down there realise we’re here and try and treat us to a tasty meal of hot bolter shell.’

Judging by the roars and bellows from below, the heretics would be only too happy to oblige. Ragnar could see some sort of cloaked priest or officer was whipping them up into a frenzy. There was a sense of ominous power about the man that Ragnar had come to associate with sorcery.

As they moved, Morgrim kept up a running commentary that let Ragnar follow the flow of the battle. It now looked as if the crew of the *Fist of Russ* had managed to stall the Chaos intruders, and it appeared as if the confused heretics were doing their best to hunt down the Wolves who had boarded their own vessel. They were under the impression that they were under attack by a much larger force than was actually the case. As he listened to the skald, Ragnar deduced that Berek had ordered his company to split up into their component squads and spread as much mayhem as possible, to perform hit and run attacks, and avoid becoming bogged down in firefights they could not possibly win.

As he listened, Ragnar became aware of countless tales of heroism and valour. It appeared that Varig’s squad had managed to trap a huge warband of heretics by attacking it from two sides at once and blowing up both ends of a corridor with demolition charges.

Hef's lads had managed to extricate themselves from being encircled by a hugely superior Chaos force by crawling out through the airvents, leaving proximity fused mines to destroy the heretics when they eventually investigated their abandoned position.

Ferek's squad had managed to fight all the way to one of the magazines before being driven back by a withering hail of fire from the defenders. It was possible that if they had succeeded they might actually have been able to blow themselves and perhaps the ship to the other end of the galaxy, so Ragnar was relieved they had failed. There was such a thing as being too enthusiastic, he decided.

The heretics were well and truly confused. As they raced along near abandoned corridors, Morgrim gleefully quoted a Chaos commander claiming to have encountered forces numbering in the hundreds, while Hef reported that the two wings of the Chaos force were being caught in their own crossfire, confused by the smoke of the explosions.

It appeared that in situations like this there were advantages to being a small, compact, well-organised and disciplined force. Ragnar was not sure how much longer their luck would hold but right now things seemed to be going better than he would ever have imagined possible.

He looked over to see if the other Blood Claws were paying attention. In the flickering light of the glow-globes, he could see Aenar looked both worried and exalted in equal measure. His eyes were wide and his mouth hung half open. A frown of near ludicrous concentration marred his brow. He was obviously intimidated by being under the eye of the legendary Wolf Lord as much as at being caught up in his first shipboard action. Torvald looked surprisingly calm under the circumstances, gazing around with a sardonic expression fixed firmly on his face. If not for his scent, Ragnar would never have guessed that he was as nervous as Aenar. Strybjorn looked as grim as always, his brooding features carved from rock. Sven grinned cheerily back at Ragnar. Hakon looked relaxed and confident.

Up ahead Ragnar could see a greenish glow. The scent of the air changed. It tasted now of ozone, and there was a charge to it that made the hairs on the nape of his neck rise. As they emerged into the power core of the Chaos ship he half expected to see that they had entered the boiler room of some mighty steam engine. He was not entirely disappointed.

Enormous cast metal engines towered above them, disappearing into the shadowy recesses of the cavernous ceiling far above. High atop each of them was a huge steely sphere clutched by a massive brazen claw set on a copper spike. As the sphere rotated, greenish lightning flickered across its surface. Every now and again, there was a thunderclap of noise, and a lightning bolt leapt from the sphere to impact on the massive metal tower in the centre of the room. At the top of this tower rotated the largest of the moving spheres, all but invisible behind the curtain of power bolts that danced across its surface. The thunderclaps almost drowned out the roar of the great engines.

On the nearest engine Ragnar could see rotating cogwheels, the smallest of which was larger than his body, the biggest of which was the size of a dragonship. They were fouled with rust, and dripped oil. Occasionally from a massive pipe a burst of superheated steam emerged with a noise like a huge kettle whistling. Ragnar wondered whether even the Chaos engineers who had built this strange device could know exactly what every component did. Maybe. He heard Mikal mutter, ‘How can this work? This is not a power core. It’s more like a factory.’

‘This is the power core, my friend,’ said Berek. ‘Unless my sensor is totally malfunctioning.’

‘It looks like no core I have ever seen.’

‘I doubt that you have seen every form of power core in the galaxy, old friend.’

‘You are right, Wolf Lord, yet... it is all so alien, so strange.’

Ragnar could see what the man meant. His skin tingled. There was something in the eerie radiance from those machines that made his flesh creep.

‘The thing is unshielded and seems to use tainted fuel,’ said Morgrim. ‘No wonder so many of the crew are mutated.’

‘It will be scrap by the time we’ve finished with it. Oleg, Korwin, set those charges. The rest of you keep your eyes peeled and your noses twitching. This is a big place, but I doubt the Chaos worshippers have left it unguarded.’

As if in answer to the Wolf Lord’s statement, a bellow of rage filled the air. Ragnar turned and saw an enormous heretic, garbed in some sort of soiled uniform, a crab-like pincer on the end of his right arm. The mutant

glared at them in fury, bellowing instructions to several squads of burly followers.

‘Looks like we’ve another bloody fight on our hands,’ said Sven, diving behind the cover of the nearest large machine. Ragnar followed him, a hail of bolter fire sparking off the steel plates of the floor behind his feet. ‘At least the Chaos worshippers are good for something.’

‘More than can be said for you,’ said Ragnar, ducking low around the corner and snapping off a shot with his bolt pistol. The shell whizzed past the ear of a charging heretic. His comrades returned fire, forcing Ragnar back into cover.

‘That wasn’t very clever, Ragnar,’ said Sven. ‘You might have lost your head. No great loss admittedly but—’

‘You lot follow me!’ barked Sergeant Hakon, rushing down the corridor away from the central aisle.

‘I think the sergeant has an idea,’ said Sven, as Strybjorn, Aenar and Torvald headed off in Hakon’s wake.

‘Probably means to circle this generator and flank the heretics,’ said Ragnar.

‘I worked that out for myself,’ said Sven, rushing after the rest of the squad.

‘It’s sometimes hard to tell.’

Ahead of them a large flight of metal stairs rose along the side of the structure, disappearing out of sight around its curved bulk. It was a maintenance walkway, designed to give access to the core, but it could be used for other things. Hakon led the Blood Claws up the stairs. Moments later, Ragnar found himself circling the structure with a good view of the battle spread out below him. The Wolf Guard had taken up position behind several of the smaller Chaos engines and blasted away at an oncoming tide of heretics and mutants. They shot with a calm precision, making every shot count, keeping up a hail of fire that twice the number of Chaos worshippers would have been hard pressed to match. Many deaths rewarded their efforts, but not enough. For every foe who fell there was always another to take his place, and they were closing the ground with the outnumbered Wolf Guard swiftly.

‘Grenades!’ ordered Hakon. Instinctively Ragnar obeyed, squeezing the frag grenade dispenser on his belt. A small oval egg of death dropped into his palm. He set the timer for three seconds and lobbed it into the

oncoming mass of heretics. Heartbeats later the rest of the Blood Claws did the same. Severed limbs flew everywhere as flesh was ripped to gobbets. Mutant blood and bile flooded the floor. Incredibly, several of the huge wounded creatures kept coming despite having lost arms or legs. Ragnar could see one armless giant roaring with rage more than pain racing towards Berek. Another missing both legs pulled itself onwards with its arms. One less wounded hopped forward, the stump of one leg leaving a stream of blood behind it.

The remaining heretics glared around to see where the attack had come from until their pincer-clawed leader roared orders and they advanced forward once more. Ragnar readied himself for another salvo of grenades when he became aware that the metal platform on which they stood was vibrating. Shots raised sparks around his feet. He glanced up and saw that another group of heretics had emerged onto a higher platform on the side of the great machine opposite them. They were pouring bolter fire down onto the Blood Claw position. It seemed Sergeant Hakon was not the only one with an idea of sound tactics.

Ragnar saw Aenar fall. An exploding bolter shell had sheared away a chunk of ceramite from the shoulder pad of his armour, exposing red raw flesh below. The young Blood Claw tumbled forward onto his hands and knees. Ragnar made a grab for him, catching him before he could go over the edge of the platform. Aenar looked up at him and smiled weakly. Ragnar glanced around. Sven and the others were already returning fire on the heretics above them, but it was a one-sided battle. They were too badly outnumbered.

Ragnar helped Aenar to his feet. Blood from the wound splashed his armour, but the flow was already starting to slow down as Aenar's re-engineered body began to heal itself. Holding his wounded comrade with his left arm, Ragnar snapped off a shot with his right, as they headed back round the corner and out of the enemy's line of sight.

Now he sensed the metal staircase vibrating with the weight of many booted feet, and he caught the acrid stink of mutants nearby. Apparently they were not the only ones who had decided this ledge would make a good spot for an ambush. Either that or the heretics had guessed they would use it for an attack position, and had divided their forces, one part to pin the Blood Claws down, while the other part closed.

He glanced at Aenar and saw that he too had heard the approaching enemy. As gently as he could Ragnar let go of the wounded man and drew his chainsword. He was going to need both weapons if he was going to keep his companions from being overwhelmed. A quick glance at Aenar reassured him. The younger Blood Claw slapped a synthi-flesh plaster on his wound, and proceeded to seal the breach in his armour with repair cement. Behind him, the other squad members were backing into view, keeping up a continuous rain of fire on their attackers. Ragnar wondered if they were aware of the new threat approaching, or whether they were too distracted by the firefight. Not that it mattered; it looked like it fell to him to do something about it.

He sensed the heretics were already nearing the head of the stairs, and would soon emerge onto the platform. There was nothing for it now, but headlong assault. He rushed forward and leapt into the air, letting momentum carry him downwards. As he did so his stomach lurched. Below him he could see dozens of hideously mutated faces leering up at him.



SEVEN

Ragnar twisted in the air, kicking both feet into the chest of the lead heretic. Not even the mutant's massive musculature could protect it from the power of the blow driven with all the force created by his running jump, augmented muscles and the carapace's hydraulic systems. Ribs snapped, and the heretic was propelled back into the ones behind it, sending them tumbling back down the stairway. At the same time, the force of the kick killed Ragnar's velocity and allowed him to land nimbly on the stairs.

One swift look told him the situation. The mutants were in disarray; one of them had been driven completely off the edge of the stairs and sent tumbling to the hard metal floor below. Another had saved himself by clutching onto the guard-rail as he went over, and now hung on like grim death with one hand, as his legs and free arm flailed for purchase.

Ragnar brought his chainsword down, severing fingers and sending the wretch crashing downwards to join his fellow in death, then sprang forward once more while the mutants were off-balance.

With one stroke, he severed the head of the leading heretic; another stroke split his body in two. Pressed back by falling bodies, the mutants were unable to bring their close combat weapons to bear effectively. Ragnar struck again and again, using his superior elevation and momentum to great effect. The chainsword reaped heretic lives like a scythe swathing corn. The bolt pistol in his left hand spat death into the faces of the mutants beyond.

He could see one or two of the bolder mutants trying to press the ones in front forward. He aimed at them through the gap, blasting one heretic skull to fragments. He chopped at the enemy in front of him. It managed to parry, barely, with its power axe. The teeth of Ragnar's chainsword screeched against the metal pole of the axe, sparks rose where metal met metal. Ragnar twisted his blade round, moving it over the obstruction and burying it in the heretic's throat. A swift left-right movement had the head hanging by a flap of neck muscle. A kick sent the near-decapitated body tumbling headlong into the heretics behind.

It was too much for the mutants. Hampered by the press of their numbers and the falling bodies of their friends, they knew they were no match for the ferocious reaver striding among them. At that moment, Ragnar was a sight to make the bravest heart quail. Covered in blood and brains, moving almost too fast for the eye to follow, slaughtering half a dozen Chaos worshippers in as many heartbeats. The survivors turned to flee back down the stairs. It was then the killing really began. Ragnar pounced like a wolf springing on its prey, smashing his blade through the heretics' undefended backs, severing spines, rupturing spleens, painting the stairway with blood.

The screams of his victims encouraged the remaining mutants to run faster, panic more furiously. They smote each other in their desperation to get away, tripped over the bodies of those they had backstabbed, and stunned themselves as they fell headlong down the stairs. Ragnar saw that he was not going to be able to overtake them quickly enough to kill them all. Instead, he holstered his chainsword and snatched up a bolt pistol from one of the fallen. Pistol in each hand, he braced himself with a leg on either side of the banister and slid down, blasting away with both weapons. Firing into the panicking mass, every shell took its toll, slamming into tightly packed bodies and exploding to cause the maximum damage.

On the way down Ragnar managed to overtake a few of the fleeing Chaos lovers and put shells into them. They fell, hampering their brethren more. Seeing the bottom of the stairs coming, he braced himself and hit the ground rolling, still firing, his superhuman reflexes and quickness of eye enabling him to hit with more than half the shots. At the end of the roll, he dropped the traitor's pistol and unsheathed his chainsword once more, leaping into the fray like an unleashed god of war.

His blade described an enormous arc, cleaving flesh and bone, sending the wounded reeling. His bolt pistol finished off the fallen. A downward stamp of his armoured boot broke a neck. A red haze dropped over his vision now. All of his foes appeared to be moving with painful slowness. He saw one heretic frantically trying to draw a bead on him with a bolter, dropped to his knees out of the line of fire and sprang forward, bearing down onto another heretic, carrying it forward as a shield of flesh, feeling its body flex and spasm as its fellow's bolter shells ripped into its body. Then when his animal keen nostrils told him he was within striking

distance. He tossed the heretic's still twitching corpse at the shooter and followed it through himself.

The heavy body sent the mutant with the gun sprawling. A look of panic crossed its fur-covered bestial features. A kick to the taloned hand sent the weapon hurtling into the distance, a downward stroke sent the heretic to hell.

The berserker gang was on Ragnar now, in full flow. He smote left and right with awful power, the meat-cleaver sound of his chainsword on flesh telling him he did damage with every blow. He lost all track of time and sense of self, becoming an unleashed whirlwind of death and destruction that smashed through the panicking mutants with all the fury of a Fenrisian thunderstorm. He lived only to kill, and he took action to preserve his own life only in so far as it would allow him to slay more. A few shells ricocheted off his armour. He ignored them. A few desperate mutants managed to land glancing blows before he sent them to greet their dark gods. He did not feel them.

He stormed through the survivors hacking and chopping at exposed flesh, blasting with his pistol at point blank range. A god-like sense of exaltation filled him. He ducked and weaved beneath blows, struck with the speed of a lightning bolt. Nothing slowed him down, nothing stopped him.

Suddenly all was still around him. He glared around looking for new prey, and saw only a few wounded. Those who had fled had managed to get out of his sight. He stood panting, blood dripping from his armour and his blade, and bared his teeth. A triumphant howl erupted from his throat and echoed eerily throughout the halls.

The rest of the squad headed down the stairs. Aenar was on his feet once more, moving under his own power. He held a bolt pistol in his unwounded hand, his right arm held stiff by his side. Behind him came Sven, Torvald and Strybjorn. Sergeant Hakon brought up the rear. Aenar and Torvald looked at him with something like awe. The sergeant looked grimly satisfied. Sven grinned cheerfully.

'Bloody hell, Ragnar,' he said. 'You might have left some for us.'

Ragnar realised that the sounds of shooting in the distance had stopped. Did this mean the Wolf Lord and his bodyguard were dead or triumphant, he wondered? Hakon seemed to sense his mood. They began

moving around the huge metal structure, back in the direction they had last seen their company's leader.

As the battle site came into view, Ragnar saw that the Wolf Guard had wreaked even more havoc than he had. Dead mutants lay sprawled everywhere. Berek Thunderfist sat atop a pile of corpses inspecting the severed head of the Chaos leader. The mutant's face looked more daemonic than human. Curved ram's horns emerged from the forehead. The lobeless ears were pointed. Sharp fangs filled the wide mouth.

Several more squads of Wolves had entered the power core and had obviously moved in support of their leader. High atop the various metal towers, Wolf Guard magnetically clamped their demolition charges into place.

Berek looked up. 'Just in time, Hakon,' he said. 'We're almost done here. It's time to head back to the *Fist*.'

The Wolf Lord rose to his feet and discarded the mutant's head without a second thought. He looked over his assembled troops, as if gauging their level of injury. 'You've done well, men,' he said. 'But this was the easy part. It took us twenty-seven minutes to fight our way in here. But now we know the way out, I think we can get back in around half that time.'

He gazed up and saw that all of the Wolf Guard had finished and were coming down from their perches. 'We have fifteen minutes to get back to the *Fist*. Don't get bogged down in any firefights. Don't get carried away killing any heretic scum. Don't stop for loot. The *Fist of Russ* will make its withdrawal in exactly fifteen minutes from when I activate the detonators. I am giving the signal now. *Let's go!*'

Berek pushed a command button on the back of his armoured fist. Ragnar heard a weird eerie cry echo over the comm-net. Everybody knew it was time to be on his way. As one, the Wolves turned and raced from the power core of the doomed ship.

Ragnar glanced at the chronometer superimposed on his vision by the systems within his armour. It was set on a countdown now, ticking off the minutes and the seconds till the charges detonated and the Chaos cruiser was blown to pieces. Thirteen minutes and twenty-six seconds to go.

'What happens if the mutants find the bloody charges we left behind? Think they can defuse them?' Sven panted next to him.

'No. First they will have to work out what we were doing. Then they will have to find all the charges. Since they were proximity shielded that

means they'll have to carry out a visual search – they won't show up on sensors. Then they will have to defuse them all. I doubt that can be done in the remaining thirteen minutes or so.'

'Let's hope so, and let's hope that they don't set a few off trying to disarm them either. That will cook our goose as nicely as any Chaos bloody ambush!'

'You're just full of good cheer today, Sven.'

'Somebody has to bloody well keep morale up around here.'

Ragnar looked around. Aenar looked a little pale and he weaved as he ran. Perhaps his wound was worse than it appeared.

'You all right?' Ragnar asked. Aenar grinned weakly.

'He will be fine,' said Hakon. 'Just you keep your eyes peeled for any mutants. Last thing we want is to be cut off in this metal maze when the *Fist of Russ* breaks free.'

'But sergeant,' said Sven, 'we are Space Wolves. Shouldn't we be seeking a hero's death?'

'Nothing heroic about getting yourself blown up, boy. Stupid, yes. Heroic, no. Not that I would expect you to be able to tell the difference.'

Sven grinned cheerily. If it was not for his scent, Ragnar would never have guessed that he was as nervous as he himself. From up ahead came the sounds of battle.

'Ambush!' said Hakon.

'Good, a bloody battle,' said Sven.

Nine minutes and forty-five seconds. Ragnar wasted a second inspecting the corpses. They lay sprawled everywhere, mingled with the dead bodies of a few Wolves. The mutants were an odd bunch. Most looked normal save that their flesh was covered in boils or warts or their hair had fallen out in clumps. Some had scaly skin or fur. Some were more bestial with bird-like talons instead of hands and feet. Some had faces where the flesh had run together like melted wax.

Ragnar saw a couple of the Wolves collecting gene-seed from the fallen, driving the armoured punches into the chests of the dead, twisting the collar on the top of the punch to open and close the grabbing claws, ripping the tiny tentacled egg from the chest cavity. Even as he watched, the punch's claws enfolded the gene-seed completely and sucked it into a stasis tube, to be hooked onto the collector's belt. Another ten seconds gone, he thought. Best be moving.

Morgrim Silvertongue had broken comm-silence. He had hooked himself into the Chaos net and was translating orders from the enemy leaders as they passed down the command chain.

‘Most of the mutants are scouring the ship for us. It looks like they are thin on the ground in this area because they think we’ve already passed through it. No – Some of them are reporting they have sighted us here. Sounds like their leader is ordering his troops back to meet us. I don’t think they have quite worked out what we are doing yet. We’ve confused them.’

‘From what I have seen, that’s pretty easy to do,’ said Sven.

‘Don’t underestimate them,’ said Ragnar. ‘They may look stupid, but they are fierce warriors. A bit like yourself actually.’

‘Ha bloody ha!’

Eight minutes and fifteen seconds.

‘We’re not going to make it,’ muttered Aenar. ‘Leave me. You’ll make better time without me.’

‘We are not going to do that,’ said Hakon. Ragnar could see that Aenar was right though. Their progress was slower than they had anticipated. Chaos patrols were everywhere and more seemed to be appearing by the second. Even if they had no idea what was going on, the mutants were still capable of getting them all killed by simply being in the way. Right now, Berek’s bold plan was not looking quite so good.

In his mind’s eye, Ragnar saw the demolition charges exploding, vast yellow fireballs ripping through the hull, incinerating everything that got in their way. He saw his own life ending in fire and pain and terror. He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on the task at hand. He could smell mutants ahead. Within his skull, the trapped beast howled with bloodlust. If it was going to die, it wanted to take as many foes as it could with it.

Ragnar did his best to fight down the impulse. Charging headlong into battle now might be satisfying but it would not save them. It would be better to avoid a confrontation unless there were so few mutants they could rush right through them.

‘Take the fork to the right,’ he heard Berek say. The heretic stench came from the left. It seemed that the Wolf Lord was thinking the same way as he was. ‘And pick up the pace, we don’t have all day.’

The steel plates beneath their boots rang as they ran faster. Five minutes and fifteen seconds to go.

‘You think Lord Berek can defuse the bombs the same bloody way as he activated them?’ asked Sven nonchalantly. Ragnar thought he recognised this corridor, thought he could pick up the scent trail of their earlier passage on the way in coming from somewhere nearby.

‘Why? You thinking of asking him to pause the countdown for a few seconds so you can have a rest?’ Ragnar responded, sniffing the air. Yes, they definitely had passed near here before. How much farther could it be to the *Fist of Russ*? He checked the locator on his armour. The signal said it was only five hundred metres, but with all the twisting and turning of the ways, who knew how long that would take?

‘I might. I may need my strength for the last sprint at this rate.’ From somewhere behind them came the sound of bolter fire, heavy and hard.

‘Your powers of prophesy are greater than I thought,’ said Ragnar.

A signal cut in on the comm-net.

+ This is Hef here. Looks like the mutants are about to overtake us, and in force. Must be several hundred of them coming up this corridor.+

Ragnar looked at Sven. His ugly face showed dismay. Hef’s squad were the rearguard. If the enemy had made contact with them then they were not too far behind. Perhaps they were going to have to turn and make a stand here. Once again the vision of those searing yellow flames licking through the corridor leapt into Ragnar’s mind.

+Do you need support?+

Berek’s voice was calm and full of confidence even with the flatness the comm-net imparted. He might as well have been asking whether they wanted a beer.

+No, Lord Berek. We can hold them here for a minute or so, I am certain.+

Even over the net, Ragnar could hear the bolter shells whizzing around Hef. He heard the stutter of the Marine’s answering fire. It was eerie because a split second later, like an echo, he could hear the weapon’s original roar. The signals on the comm-net travelled faster than sound.

Moments later came the sounds of explosions and the death howl of a Space Wolf. It sounded like Hef and his squad were achieving the heroes’ deaths they sought. Another image flashed into Ragnar’s mind, of an onrushing, irresistible horde of Chaos worshippers, racing to overtake

them, brushing aside Hef and his pitiful few as if they were not there. He dismissed it, even as the sounds of combat receded behind them.

Three minutes and thirty seconds to go.

‘This does not look good,’ said Sven, looking at the twisted wreckage of the corridor around them. Someone had been using heavy weapons here. Part of the roof of the corridor had come down, leaving only a crawlspace, barely wide enough for one man. It was impossible to tell how far it might run, or whether it would become too narrow for them to pass through. Ragnar wondered whether it would be worth seeking an alternative route. Maybe they could double back and find another corridor. They had thought this would be the easy way. It was definitely the route they had come by. The scent trail was unmistakable.

Not that the decision was his to make. The rest of the squads had already disappeared into the dark maw. Only Varig’s squad was behind them. The distant sound of fighting had stopped. Ragnar could sense the mutants coming inexorably closer.

‘Move, Ragnar!’ commanded Hakon, putting his hand on Ragnar’s shoulder and forcing him down to his knees. Briefly and instinctively Ragnar resisted, and then realised that by his hesitation he was putting more than his own life in jeopardy, he was endangering his comrades too. He dropped to all fours and crawled forward into the steel lined tunnel.

Two minutes left. The thought was chilling.



EIGHT

Ragnar dived headlong into the narrow tunnel of wreckage. He felt instantly claustrophobic; the walls seemed to press in all around him. He felt their steely embrace constricting the shoulder pads of his armour. Ahead of him, he caught the reassuring scent of his pack, and could make out the movement of men crawling swiftly towards their destination. Behind him he could hear Hakon encouraging the remainder of the force into the tunnel. He guessed the sergeant was going to go last.

Far off in the distance Ragnar thought he could hear the sounds of battle erupt again. Perhaps a few of the rearguard yet lived and had managed to spring a surprise on their attackers. A huge explosion, like a cluster of grenades all going off at once, mingled with the death howl of a Space Wolf, told him this was true. After that there was quiet for a heartbeat and then the triumphant roars of the enemy. The sense of darkness and impending doom increased.

Ragnar crawled on. The walls narrowed around him, scraping against the sides of his armour. It was as if they were gripping him tighter, trying to prevent his escape. He knew this was an irrational fear. He could hear the sounds of men moving ahead of him, some of whom were far larger than he. The tiny daemon of fear whispered at the back of his mind though. The walls were unstable – what if they collapsed further? What if they were collapsing even now? He was going to be trapped, unable to move further. Unable to shift at all and in exactly one minute and thirty-two seconds the whole ship was going to explode. Part of him wanted to simply freeze and huddle down in fear, to cover his head with his arms and wait for the inevitable end.

He fought back, using his own thoughts to fight his fears, as if they were a chainsword and terror was a monster. Even if the walls were collapsing he must go on. That was the only way he was going to get out. The Emperor would not aid him if he would not help himself. He needed to move, not cringe. He was no coward. If he did not do so, he was dooming not just himself but his battle-brothers.

He had never felt anything like this clawing claustrophobic fearfulness before. Perhaps it was because the tunnel was so dark and dank and narrow. Perhaps it was because they were in this alien ship. Perhaps it was because of the pressure of the clock constantly ticking towards death. Perhaps it was some flaw in his own psyche, unrevealed at the Gate of Morkai, or developed since his transformation into a Space Wolf. Perhaps it was some combination of all of these factors. He knew that what he was doing now was far more difficult than fighting those mutants earlier had been.

He forced himself to crawl on, to put one hand in front of the other. He ignored his accelerating heart-rate and the sweat that broke out on his brow.

One minute and ten seconds to go.

Suddenly, blessedly, there was light ahead. He heard the soft movement of men raising themselves to their feet and stretching their limbs into a run. He virtually sprang forward the last few remaining metres, emerged into the light in a half crouch, and sprinted forward towards the welcoming hatchway of the *Fist of Russ*.

Thirty seconds to go.

All around him he could hear the familiar welcoming scents of the company's own ship.

Twenty strides took him there. He sprang through and looked back over his shoulder to see that Sven and Torvald were moving forward, supporting the reeling Aenar. Sergeant Hakon and Varig's squad were racing closer. He could hear Berek shouting into the comm-net, giving orders for their departure. Already the great doors in the bow were swinging shut. Ragnar wanted to shout out 'No!'. It seemed unfair that the others should be cut off now. He wanted to try to hold the gateway open with his bare hands, but he knew that even his superhuman strength reinforced by the hydraulic systems of the armour would not be enough.

Then suddenly Sven and the others were through. Sergeant Varig was last, leaping through a gap that was only just wide enough for him to get through and which snapped closed an instant later. He was strangely aware of the consummate judgement Berek had exercised when giving his orders. The Wolf Lord had left just enough time and no more for the rest of the squad to get through. What if something had gone wrong, Ragnar wondered? Nothing had, praise be to the Emperor.

There was a grinding, tearing noise. The *Fist of Russ* shuddered and shook as if in the grip of some giant daemon's claw. Fear surged back into Ragnar's mind. What if they were trapped? What if the *Fist* could not break free? What if the strain of trying to get away tore the ship apart? Then there was nothing he could do now except pray.

Twenty seconds to go.

He pressed his face against one of the reinforced portholes and looked out. For a moment it was misty; droplets of moisture congealed, hardened then vanished on its surface. He could see that the enemy ship had already receded a hundred metres behind them.

Ten seconds.

Were they far enough away, or would they be caught up in the blast? What if the charges malfunctioned? What if the Chaos ship was not destroyed?

He recognised these thoughts as the last remnants of his claustrophobia-induced terror. He knew that there was nothing he could do now, that if death came all he could do was face it like a true son of Fenris. He pushed the phantoms from his mind and watched the receding vessel. He noticed the vast chasm in its hull that represented the point of impact with the *Fist of Russ*.

Five seconds to go.

As they pulled faster and faster away, Ragnar realised that compared to the huge size of the enemy cruiser, the impact rent was not quite so large. The Chaos ship seemed as large as a floating iceberg, an indestructible mountain of armoured metal. Even as he watched he saw the enemy vessel's turrets, bristling with enormous weapons, begin to swing to bear on the *Fist of Russ*. They were moments from being blasted into eternity.

Time slowed. The tension was almost unbearable. It seemed to be a race between whether the heretics' weapons or the explosion of the power core would send them to their fates. Ragnar fought down the urge to close his eyes and pray to the Emperor. Whatever happened, he wanted to witness it.

Four seconds to go.

Looking back, he saw humanoid figures being swept out into space. Their eyes bulged. Their mouths opened in silent bellows of rage and fear. Of course, when the *Fist of Russ* had pulled away, they had left a huge gap in the walls of the cruiser. It was decompressing. The air was being sucked

out into the vacuum and anything that wasn't strapped down was going with it, and that included any mutants in the area. Doubtless, bulkheads were even now being slammed closed within the ship.

Three seconds.

One of the largest turrets seemed to be pointing directly at the *Fist of Russ*. Was it his imagination or was there a hideous infernal glow visible deep within the barrel of the weapon? He felt the lurch of the ship as the *Fist of Russ* continued to accelerate away.

Two seconds.

It was not his imagination. The hellish weapon system really was activated, and it was pointing their way. He knew that there was no way the Space Wolf vessel could take a hit from such a thing at this close a range and in its crippled state. He bared his teeth in a snarl of rage and defiance, at one with the wolf spirit within. All around him he smelled the fury and rage and tightly controlled fear of his battle-brothers.

One second.

The *Fist of Russ* lurched to one side as the pilot took evasive action. An enormous beam of coruscating radiance flashed past in the darkness of space. It had missed by mere metres, a hairsbreadth in terms of space combat. Ragnar's gaze strained out into the darkness, waiting for the explosion his whole body had become keyed up to expect. As far as he could tell, nothing was happening. He could see nothing. Had the demolition charges failed to go off? Had there been some mistake with the timer? Had the mutants against all odds discovered and disarmed them? What was going to happen now?

Their ship was crippled and directly under the guns of the vastly superior foe. It would only be a matter of seconds before the enemy gunners made the necessary corrections to their arc of fire, and the devastating beams of energy would play over the *Fist of Russ* snuffing out all of their lives. It seemed that all of their hard work had been for nothing. They would have been better off remaining aboard the Chaos cruiser and meeting a hero's death in battle. Now they were destined to be swatted like bugs. Their deaths would have no meaning whatsoever.

Then the whole shell of the Chaos ship seemed to expand. Great gouts of plasma burst out of every orifice, every turret, every airlock, every porthole, every point of weakness on the hull. The slow expansion of the ship continued. It was like watching a pigskin being inflated to bursting

point. Slowly the huge structure of metal began to buckle and twist. The process accelerated as large chunks of the hull were blown into space and the fiery inferno within was revealed. Ragnar thought he saw a few tiny humanoid figures being vaporised but it might have just been his imagination.

The chain of explosions came faster and faster, larger and larger until they all merged into one vast cataclysmic and final eruption. The whole enemy craft vanished, consumed by a fireball brighter than the sun, a sight made all the eerier by the silence in which it happened. Ragnar half expected to feel the *Fist of Russ* rocked by the shockwave, to hear a vast rain of debris clatter into the side of the ship, but they were already too far away. He braced himself for the thunder of the explosion, then realised he was being foolish. There could only be silence in the vacuum of space, even at the death of so mighty a ship. He realised that he had been holding his breath, and that the silence within the boarding chamber was as intense as the silence outside its walls, then he heard Berek Thunderfist speak.

‘We built a suitable pyre for our brethren. What say you, brothers?’

The roar of the Space Wolves was deafening. Ragnar joined in giving vent to all of his joy and relief as well as his pent up fury and grief. He realised that Sven was slapping him on the back, and that Sergeant Hakon had been hoisted on the shoulders of the squad and was being tossed into the air by his followers.

‘We bloody well did it!’ bellowed Sven, and Ragnar could only slap his shoulder pad in agreement.

‘Silence all!’ bellowed Berek, and instantly all was quiet. All eyes turned to their chieftain. He stood there posed, one hand cupped over his ear, obviously listening to a voice coming over the comm-net. He nodded his head twice then grinned.

‘It appears that we were not the only ones who were successful in our mission. We have been joined by the forces of the Imperial Grand Crusade. The Chaos-loving scum have been driven off. We are victorious this day.’

This time the roar of acclamation was even more deafening than the first. Berek was hoisted onto the shoulders of his Wolf Guard, and stood there legs apart, braced on the shoulderpads of two of the mightiest of his warriors, looking as completely relaxed as if he stood on the metal deck of the ship. Ragnar was aware how much this was a pose, intended to impress, to project an image, but he did not mind. Berek had shown

himself to be a worthy and successful battle leader. He was entitled to his foibles.

Now the warrior chieftain gestured for quiet. ‘We must lift a stein and toast our dead brothers. This calls for ale!’

The third cheer was loudest of all.

‘This is the bloody life!’ said Sven, swigging down another tankard of ale. ‘We gave those mutants what for. Although I must confess there were times when I had my doubts...’

Ragnar looked at his friend closely, wondering whether this was the ale talking. This was pure Fenrisian lager, containing ribaldroot, a herb that suppressed the Space Marines’ usual ability to metabolise poisons, even alcohol, and allowed them to get drunk. It was not like Sven to admit to having doubts, or even admit to thinking about anything, so this was quite a confession.

‘There were times when I felt the same way myself, to tell the truth. We cut it a bit fine on the run out!’

‘Well, thank Russ that the Wolf Lord bloody well knew what he was doing better than we did.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ said Ragnar, suiting action to words. ‘Things went pretty well, in our first action of the new campaign.’

‘Aye, they did. You know this was my first boarding action?’

‘Mine too, if you don’t count that space hulk back at Koriolis.’

‘I mean ship to ship, blade to blade, right into the fray, you idiot. I remember the hulk too. Who could forget it and those genestealers?’

Ragnar saw that Aenar was looking at them wide eyed. Torvald was poker-faced but Ragnar could tell from his scent that he too was impressed and hanging on to every word.

‘You fought genestealers?’ queried Aenar.

‘No – we went up to them and gave them a big hug and a hearty hail fellow well-met,’ said Sven, pausing to take another swig of beer. ‘Of course we fought them, idiot boy! What else would we do?’

‘I meant you’ve really seen them, and boarded a space hulk as well?’

‘Haven’t you ever listened to Sven’s boasting, back in the Fang?’ Ragnar asked, not unkindly. The beer was making him feel mellow.

‘I don’t think I have ever heard him talk about it.’

Ragnar considered this. Actually, he did not think he had ever heard Sven talk about this in front of the others either. Perhaps it was not

surprising. The trip to the space hulk, along with their whole quest for the ancient eldar talisman, had affected all of the survivors deeply. It was not something they ever talked about with anyone who had not been there. There had been too many deaths, and too much strangeness. Now under the influence of the ale, and the warm camaraderie that came with shared survival, it seemed easier to talk about it.

He let Sven tell the tale, only correcting a few of his more outrageous lies about his prowess in battle when they arose. He did not see how it was possible for anyone to take Sven's claim to have slaughtered twenty stealers in single combat seriously, but Aenar obviously did, and Torvald at least listened with a straight face.

Ragnar looked down into his beer. He remembered how he had frozen in that fight and had been saved by Sven. It was a secret shame he had never mentioned to anybody, although he kept finding it threatening to erupt from his lips now. It brought back memories of how he had almost frozen back in the tunnel of wreckage back on the mutant ship. He continued to think about this, brooding so deeply that he did not even notice that Sven had finished his tale until he felt a poke in his ribs with an elbow.

'You all right there? You're looking a bit green about the gills. Can't hold your ale, I suppose, just like I always bloody suspected.'

Ragnar glanced around and saw that Aenar and Torvald had gone off to get more drink. 'I was just remembering the fight,' Ragnar said, almost defensively.

'And a bloody good one it was too.'

Ragnar realised that Sven was not the man to discuss his doubts and fears with, no matter how good a friend he was. He would have to wait for another time. Perhaps when he next saw Ranek, the Wolf Priest. After all, listening to such confessions was part of the old priest's duties. Not for the first time though sitting amid his friends, his comrades and the members of his pack, Ragnar felt alone. How could that be, he wondered? How was it possible to feel this way amid the camaraderie and the drinking and the loud singing? He glanced at the high table, where Berek sat, surrounded by his Wolf Guard, smiling and jesting and looking completely at ease. Had the Wolf Lord ever felt this way, Ragnar wondered? Somehow, he doubted it.

His eyes travelled a bit further and came to rest upon Sergeant Hakon's scarred and sinister face. He saw the old warrior was looking at him thoughtfully and he wondered how long the sergeant had been doing so. It sometimes seemed like Hakon could almost read his thoughts. Ragnar hoped he could not read his current ones, or the black mood they were bringing on. He looked away and saw Aenar and Torvald returning clutching several more steins in each fist.

He reached up and grabbed one and swigged it back, hoping to drown out the bleakness with beer. Aenar slammed the remaining steins down on the table.

'I owe you that beer for saving my life,' he said with drunken seriousness.

'You owe me nothing,' said Ragnar. 'It was my duty to a fellow Space Wolf.'

The words sounded a little hollow to him, but the others did not seem to notice.

'It wasn't nothing to me,' said Aenar. 'I owe you more than a beer, and I won't forget it either.'

Sven belched loudly. Ragnar looked at him and laughed.

'I have never seen anybody fight like Ragnar did against those mutants blocking our path,' said Aenar. 'It was like watching a berserker from one of the old sagas.'

Ragnar considered this. Was this another source of his black mood. Was he a berserker? He was not sure he liked the idea. In the old tales, such warriors were always coming to dark fates brought on by their insatiable lust for battle. He was not at all sure he wanted to be like them.

'Drink up,' said Sven. 'When Ragnar's in this mood, he could turn a village fair into a funeral.'



NINE

‘Looks like we’ll be seeing bloody Garm soon,’ said Sven, glancing down at the chessboard.

‘How do you work that out?’ asked Ragnar, considering his next move. Aenar’s hand hovered over his dragonship, preparing to move it forward to take the most advanced of Ragnar’s thralls. Was he really going to fall into such an obvious trap? The youth was a better player than he looked, although nowhere near as good as Torvald or Ragnar himself. ‘You’ve been saying the same thing every day for a week.’

Sven squinted down at the pieces. ‘Aren’t you going to jump that thrall and take the other three pieces behind it?’ he asked Aenar innocently.

‘We’re playing chess, not draughts,’ said Aenar, moving his hand away from the board and frowning thoughtfully.

‘My clan never played chess back on Fenris. Draughts is a man’s game.’

‘Funny,’ said Ragnar. ‘I thought it was for folk too thick to understand chess. And you haven’t answered my question. What makes you think we’ll be dropping on Garm soon?’

‘I’ve been talking with the crew.’

‘We all have. They don’t seem to know any more than the rest of us.’

‘Don’t kid yourself,’ said Sven. He grinned broadly. ‘Some know more than others. Just like us.’

‘And some of us, like you, know less than others, on account of not having a fully working brain.’

Aenar was watching the byplay between the two of them worriedly, as if he actually thought they might come to blows. It showed how green he still was, Ragnar supposed. Back on Fenris, if two warriors from different clans had spoken to each other the way he and Sven did, there would have been a duel moments later. Aenar did not seem to realise that bickering could be just as much a way of passing the time as playing chess.

‘Maybe you should concentrate on the game,’ Ragnar suggested. ‘You are already a keep and a thrall down.’

Ragnar turned his attention back to Sven, who was looking as pleased as a cat that had swallowed a sailor bird. ‘So, who have you been talking to?’

‘Tremont, the Navigator’s apprentice.’

‘He’s not her apprentice. For one thing, he’s part of our fleet, a man of Fenris. For another thing, he doesn’t have a third eye.’

‘So what?’

‘I sometimes wonder if everything the teaching engines put into your head leaked out again, then I remember they need a brain to work on in the first place.’

‘Ha bloody ha! If you had bothered to wait for me to finish, you would have heard me say that whatever he is, he knows what is going on. He’s always on the command deck. He hears what the sensor augurs see in the divinatory engines as soon as they give their reports, and he tells me that we’ve cleared a path through the Chaos fleet and are putting into orbit over Garm within hours. That was why they fired the big engines two hours ago.’

Ragnar considered Sven’s words. They sounded suspiciously plausible and they fit the facts. Or maybe it was just that he wanted to believe them.

Like the rest of the company, he was getting a little fed up with being cooped up on the ship. After the excitement of their battle with the mutants, the past few days had been anti-climactic.

‘I heard something interesting at breakfast this morning,’ said Aenar. His hand was hovering over the dragonship again. Ragnar could not believe he had missed the obvious trap.

‘Are you going to jump the thrall?’ Sven asked.

‘What did you hear?’ Ragnar prompted.

‘I heard that the Great Wolf sends twenty-four Wolves as thralls to the Navigator’s House in return for her services.’

‘What?’ Ragnar almost laughed. The tale sounded ludicrous. No Great Wolf could do such a thing. There would be a rebellion if he even hinted at it. Sven did laugh.

‘Sounds like Strybjorn or one of the others was having you on again,’ said Ragnar.

Aenar looked up at him.

‘Again?’ he asked.

‘Like the time he told you that all new Blood Claws had to polish the armour of a Wolf who had been initiated at least a year before them.’

‘You mean we don’t have to?’

Sven groaned. ‘And Ragnar says I’m dumb.’

‘No – I know you are. But where did you hear this nonsense about thralls and Navigators?’

‘From Sven’s friend, Tremont.’

‘I never said he was my friend.’

‘What did he tell you exactly?’

‘That every time a new Great Wolf is chosen he must send two dozen Wolves to Belisarius in repayment of some ancient debt.’

‘That can’t be true,’ said Ragnar.

‘It is true,’ said Sergeant Hakon striding across the room. ‘At least in part.’

‘How can that be?’

‘Like everybody else, our Chapter needs Navigators to guide our ships through the immaterium. If we did not have them we would be reduced to jumping blind.’

He paused to let his words sink in. All of them knew exactly what that meant. Jumping blind into the immaterium meant a good chance of never coming out again. Only Navigators had the skill to guide ships through the void and bring them safely out the other end. And even they made mistakes sometimes. Ragnar had known this since the tutelary engines had placed the knowledge in his brain, but he could see now that he had never fully assimilated it or thought out the consequences. He had simply assumed that the Navigators were sworn to the Chapter’s service down through the generations just like the ships’ crews. Thinking it through he could see the error in his thinking.

He reviewed the facts the teaching machines had placed at his disposal. Like Space Marines, Navigators were unique, their origins dating back to a time before the Imperium. They were gifted with unusual powers – their psychic talents – available only to themselves. The Emperor and his primarchs had possessed that gift too, but the primarchs had vanished long ago and the Emperor was entombed within his life-giving throne. In effect, the Navigators controlled all commercial and military travel within the Imperium. Were it not for the fact that they were divided into a number of

mutually antagonistic houses, they would have a stranglehold on the human realm.

The thought deeply worried Ragnar. It was all very well having Space Marines, but it would all stand for nothing if the Chapters could not reach the worlds to which they were assigned or travel where they pleased, and when. Ragnar realised that it was possible to wield power without wielding a gun.

The control the Navis Nobilitae had over space travel had made them rich and powerful beyond the dreams of most planetary governments. They had ensured that without them, the Imperium and possibly even the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, would be helpless.

‘Does the Great Wolf really send human tribute to the Navigators,’ Ragnar asked.

‘Of course not,’ said Hakon contemptuously. ‘Such foolish words are unworthy of a Wolf. The tale is an old and complicated one, reaching back to before even the founding of the Empire. We have an alliance with House Belisarius of the Navigators that was forged by Russ himself...’

‘An alliance,’ said Sven, his tone showing that he, like Ragnar, found this far more acceptable and understandable.

‘Aye. There is a pact between us. They provide us with the means to sail our ships between the stars. In return, we provide the Celestarch of Belisarius with a bodyguard.’

This too sounded only fair. For priceless as the service of a Navigator might be, surely the service of a Space Marine must balance it in the scales.

‘The Navigators swear to obey the Great Wolf as they would obey their own ruler. The Wolves, for the duration of their service, obey the Celestarch as they would their own leader, and protect him with their lives if need be.’

‘No one has ever told us any bloody such thing,’ grumbled Sven.

‘Doubtless, when Logan Grimnar feels the need to discuss every aspect of the Chapter’s business with a Blood Claw, he will call upon you,’ said Hakon tartly.

‘I think what Sven meant was that the tutelary engines never taught us this,’ said Ragnar, attempting to drag his friend out of hot water. Sven’s expression told Ragnar that he had meant no such thing, but he kept his mouth firmly shut. Hakon looked at him.

‘The machines are ancient and no one, not even the Iron Priests, entirely understands their workings. They are intended to teach what it is needful for a Marine to know. They cannot fill your head with every detail of our Chapter’s history. Not even Sven’s skull is empty enough to hold all of that. And sometimes there are gaps; the transfer of knowledge is imperfect. That is why people like me are here, to teach what the machines leave out.’

Ragnar considered this for a moment. He could see that there was sense in the sergeant’s words. Moreover, he could see a problem he had never considered before. He would never know if the machines had missed out important knowledge until it was too late. He did not have the ability to know if anything was not there. How could he? Most of what he knew came from the engines themselves.

Hakon’s nostrils flared. Once more he seemed to be able to read Ragnar’s thoughts.

Ragnar wondered whether, if he lived to be as old as the sergeant, he too would be able to read his comrades’ moods and thoughts and feelings so accurately by scent alone? Perhaps Hakon’s ability was a product of age and wisdom more than of his senses.

‘Sometimes the learning is there,’ said Hakon, ‘but it is like a scroll left on a shelf in a library, rather than an epic learned by a skald. If you do not read a scroll, how will you know its contents? And sometimes there are problems with the transfer of knowledge and it lies dormant for many years before it is fully assimilated. The brain is a peculiar thing.’

‘Sven’s certainly is,’ said Ragnar and seeing the sergeant’s expression, wished he had not been so facetious. Hakon seemed unusually communicative today, not his usual taciturn self.

‘Forget my brain, and this talk about machines. How are these heroes who go to the Navigators selected?’

‘Doubtless you will find out if you ever need to know,’ said Hakon.

‘You mean you don’t know?’

Hakon shrugged. ‘Who said they were heroes?’

Sven fell silent for a moment while he considered this. Ragnar wanted to ask another question, but Aenar chose this moment to put the chess piece down and ask a question of his own.

‘When will we be landing on Garm?’

‘We are in orbit over the world now, as you would see if you chose to look out one of the portholes,’ said the sergeant. ‘My guess is that we will be on the surface within hours. The Great Wolf will not want to waste any time in recovering the Spear of Russ or freeing the shrine from malefactors. And we must collect the gene-seed of our brethren.’

‘The gene-seed of our brethren?’ spluttered Sven.

‘Aye, you do not think we would leave our most sacred shrine outside Fenris undefended?’

‘I would have thought that there are few enough Wolves,’ said Ragnar sharply. ‘The Emperor must have more important things for us to do than guarding shrines.’

‘There is a base here, Ragnar. A transit camp. A way station. Garm is an important crossroads and trade route. We have a presence here to repair our ships, to let our troops rest and recuperate. The place was commanded by an old comrade of mine, Jurgen Whitemane.’

Ragnar could tell from the sergeant’s tone that he did not believe his old friend was still alive.

‘If he is dead, we will bloody well avenge him,’ said Sven.

‘Aye, that we will,’ said the sergeant grimly. Ragnar looked at the sergeant. There was something strange about him. He was in a fell mood. Ragnar was reminded of all the tales he had heard of men whose *wyrd* had come upon them, who had walked out to their inevitable doom. He shivered, hoping that this was not a premonition.

The doorway opened. Morgrim Silvertongue stood there. He spoke quietly and with authority. ‘Ragnar, you are to come with me. The Wolf Lord would have words with you.’

As he followed the skald through the metal corridors of the starship, Ragnar wondered what was going on. Morgrim’s face was expressionless and gave him no clue. When he tried to speak, the singer brushed him off, not rudely, but like a man who has other things on his mind. Had he been a fellow Blood Claw, Ragnar might have persisted, but the man was one of the Wolf Guard, and you did not intrude on their thoughts unless asked.

He hoped that nothing bad was about to befall him. Perhaps Berek Thunderfist’s vanity could not stand the tone Ragnar had used when he had been cut off back on the Chaos ship. Perhaps he meant to call him out and have vengeance. Ragnar tried to dismiss these thoughts as foolish. There was no honour for a warrior as renowned as Berek in fighting with a Blood

Claw, and Wolf Lords brawled with their followers only on the rarest of occasions. The thought was simply ridiculous.

And yet, he was nervous. It was not every day a Blood Claw was singled out for the attention of the Wolf Lord. Perhaps he intended to reward Ragnar. Perhaps he intended to promote him to Grey Hunter at last. Ragnar's heart leapt at the prospect. If that were so, as far as he could tell, he would be the youngest Blood Claw in generations to be elevated so swiftly.

Immediately he tried to throttle the hope. It was his youth that made just such a promotion unlikely. Who did he think he was, to be singled out so?

They passed two officers of the ship's company, resplendent in their grey tunics with the wolf's head emblazoned above the sign of the thunder fist on their breasts. They returned the men's salutes absentmindedly and strode on. Ragnar realised he was in part of the ship he had never visited before, the chambers assigned to the company's leader and his Wolf Guard.

A terrible thought occurred to him – perhaps his cowardice had been noticed? Perhaps his fear at entering the corridor of collapsed metal back on the Chaos ship had come to the attention of the Wolf Lord. Perhaps he was about to be punished for this flaw, or ridiculed or... he told himself that this too was a ludicrous concept. He took a deep breath and schooled himself to calmness. Whatever Berek Thunderfist wanted would be clear soon enough. He would just have to wait a few more moments to find out.

They strode into a long, narrow chamber in which warriors of the Wolf Guard worked on their suits of Terminator armour. Ragnar wished that Morgrim would pause for a moment, so that he could inspect these ancient revered artefacts. This was the first time he had ever come so close to one. Like all young Space Wolves, he aspired to wear this armour one day. Only the best of the best, the most trusted and most able of a Wolf Lord's retinue, ever achieved such heights.

As it was, all he managed was a quick glimpse of a suit of armour, far larger than a normal Marine's carapace, powered by the most potent of hydraulic systems, emblazoned with attachments for the heaviest of weapons.

Ragnar caught the smell of ancient ceramite and the overlay of ten thousand years of technical unguents. He felt a sense of near

overwhelming power. A feeling of simple reverence filled his heart.

Even as it did so it occurred to him that perhaps the bard had been instructed to lead him this way. By all accounts, Berek was something of a showman and quite capable of arranging something like this to create the right impression. Again, Ragnar told himself he was being ridiculous. Berek was Wolf Lord; he did not need to do anything to impress a lowly Blood Claw. Ragnar considered this. Perhaps that was true, but Berek was also a great leader, and went to great lengths to secure the loyalty and respect of his troops. Perhaps this only showed his attention to detail.

Ragnar forced himself to relax. He wondered why he had been selected and not Sven or any of the others. Perhaps he was not unique. Perhaps Berek would see them all separately. He was at once disappointed and relieved by this thought. Part of him wanted to be singled out, to stand apart from his companions in the pack. Part of him felt guilty about this, as if he were somehow being disloyal to his friends and companions. Well, whatever it was there was nothing he could do about it now. Matters were out of his hands.

They strode into another larger chamber. A great deal of expense had gone into fitting this one out. The walls were covered in wooden panels; massive wooden beams gave the illusion of supporting the ceiling. In one corner burned a fire, or rather a flickering holospherical illusion. A great trestle table sat in the middle of the floor, surrounded by carved chairs of real wood. A barrel of ale stood ready in one corner. On the walls were various tattered banners, battle honours taken on a hundred fields on a hundred worlds. It was these alone that kept the place from being a near perfect counterfeit of some rich lord's hall, back on the islands of Fenris.

Sitting on a great throne, on a raised dais at the end of the room, was Berek Thunderfist. He was flanked by Mikal Stenmark and another Wolf Guard. Berek's leonine head rested on his massive metal hand. He looked up as Ragnar entered.

'Welcome, Ragnar Blackmane,' he said. 'It's past time that you and I had words.'



TEN

‘What do you want of me, Lord Berek?’ Ragnar asked.

‘First I want to thank you for saving my hide back on the Chaos ship, lad. That was quick thinking and it got me out of a tight spot. If it weren’t for you I might not be sitting here, quaffing ale and toasting my victory.’

‘I am sure you would have fought your way clear anyway, lord,’ said Ragnar. Berek’s answering smile told him that this was exactly what the Wolf Lord thought.

‘Perhaps. Perhaps not. Thanks to you I did not have to try my luck. Just as well. It’s best not to test the fates too often.’

Ragnar waited to see what Berek would say next.

‘It seems to me that you should be rewarded,’ said the Wolf Lord.

‘Doing my duty was reward enough.’

‘I see old Ranek taught you well. That was the sort of answer I would have expected from one of his pupils.’

Once again Ragnar was silent. No words seemed expected of him. The Wolf Lord appeared quite capable of speaking for two. He took one of the golden arm-rings from his bicep. He gestured for Ragnar to stretch out his arm and then clamped it into place himself. Ragnar could see that the torque coiled like a serpent. Its spring-like tension held it exactly in place. He smiled. This was exactly the gesture a Fenrisian chieftain would use to reward a faithful follower. In the old tongue another word for jarl was ‘ring-giver’.

‘Thank you, Lord Berek. I am honoured.’

‘By accepting it, you do me as much honour as I do you,’ said Berek ritually. It was obvious that he was merely mouthing the ancient form of words, but still, it was a princely gift.

Ragnar did not know quite what to say.

‘I am honoured, lord.’ Ragnar said.

‘Of course you are. And rightly so. And now, you will accompany me to the Great Wolf’s ship. The Wolf Lord’s gather. There we will make our final dispositions for the drop on Garm. I mean to see Berek’s company has the place of honour.’

Ragnar was a little shocked. Why was he being singled out for this honour? He felt out of his depth. Was this some sort of test? Did the Wolf Lord want to see how he behaved in front of other great captains, if so why? ‘Surely that is the Great Wolf’s decision, Lord Berek.’

For a moment only, he felt like he had said the wrong thing. Berek was obviously not a man to admit that anyone was his superior. His face grew frosty for a second, then a moment later he grinned and laughed. ‘I am sure even Logan Grimnar can be persuaded, young Ragnar.’

Ragnar realised that he had passed some sort of test. He had been spoken to by name. He was no longer just a lad. He was glad that Berek felt this way, for it was the right and duty of every Fenrisian warrior to speak his mind to his chieftain, and Ragnar intended to preserve that privilege, no matter how intimidating his liege lord was. Fortunately Berek had responded like the clan chieftain he styled himself to be. Despite his initial misgivings, Ragnar found himself warming to the Wolf Lord.

Morgrim grinned. It seemed that the skald thought he had done the right thing. Mikal Stenmark’s cold glance told him a different story. It said, you got away with it this time, lad, but don’t make a habit of it.

The shuttle sped closer to the *Pride of Fenris*, the Great Wolf’s massive flagship. Berek stood at the massive armour-glass window, gazing covetously at the old warcraft. It was a Retribution-class battleship of ancient design, its hull pitted and scarred by a hundred battles. It dwarfed the shuttle like a sea dragon would dwarf a sprat. From where Ragnar stood it looked like the maw of one of its weapons could swallow their whole craft. Obviously this ship would not have had any trouble defeating the Chaos cruiser, one to one. He voiced his thought to Morgrim Silvertongue. Quietly as he spoke, the Wolf Lord still overheard him.

‘Aye, lad, true enough, but then we would have missed out on that glorious boarding action.’

The ten men of the Wolf Guard accompanying them laughed agreement. Ragnar turned his glance back to the *Pride of Fenris*. He did not necessarily agree – if they had not boarded the ship many Space Wolf lives would not have been lost, and Aenar would not have been wounded.

Thrilling as the fight had been, and glorious as the destruction of the Chaos craft was, Ragnar was not convinced it was worth the price. He was enough of a man of Fenris to relish the glory of what they had done, and to

be glad he had earned a place in the legend-maker's chants, but at the same time, another part of him counted the cost. It was an unnatural thought for a Space Wolf, he knew, but he could not help entertaining it.

The shuttle moved closer to the flagship. Ragnar felt someone watching him and turned to see the Navigator. She was a tall woman, pale, slender and exotically beautiful, with long silver hair and eyes like chips of ice. A scarf was draped around her forehead covering the disturbing pineal eye. He smiled at her. She nodded back calmly. He shrugged and looked away.

'Why is the Navigator with us?' Ragnar asked Morgrim.

'Shayara is with us because Lord Berek wants her to be,' replied the skald. There was an undertone of amusement in his voice. 'Her insights are often useful.'

'Is that so?'

'Navigators don't think like we do. They do not see reality the same way either. It is surprising how often they see things we don't. And sometimes Shayara has the gift of foretelling, powerful as any Rune Priest.'

'That could be a useful gift,' said Ragnar.

'And a terrifying one,' Morgrim replied and said no more.

The council hall on the *Pride of Fenris* was like Logan Grimnar's chambers back in the Fang, a little smaller, a little less ornate, but nonetheless they belonged to the Great Wolf just as recognisably as Berek's belonged to him.

As Berek and his men entered they were greeted by a great roar of approval from the assembled Wolf Lords and their guards. Even Logan Grimnar and his entourage of priests banged their chestplates with their fists in warriors' applause. It was obvious that all had heard and greatly approved of Berek's destruction of the Chaos warship. All that is, except Sigrid Trollbane. He applauded but his face was twisted, his expression that of one who has swallowed a lemon.

This was Ragnar's first opportunity to study his liege lord's great rival and he took advantage of it. Sigrid was a tall man, spare and thin. All excess flesh seemed to have been burned from his face. His hair was dark and straight, his features sallow, his lips thin and unsmiling. His eyes were large and cold and glittered with a chilly introverted intelligence. The overwhelming impression he gave was of concentration. He looked like a

racing hound straining at a leash. For a moment his eyes met Ragnar's and there was a shock of contact. Ragnar felt he was the focus of all the Wolf Lord's attention. It was like feeling a searchlight play over him, or suddenly knowing that he was in the sights of a sniper's rifle.

Sigrid tilted his head to one side, and considered Ragnar as if he was an interesting new form of insect life. A faint frown of puzzlement graced itself on his brow. He was obviously trying to work out who the newcomer was and why he was here.

Ragnar refused to be the first to look away. A cold smile played across Sigrid's lips and he turned and said something to the chieftain of his bodyguards, a huge bear of a man with a bristling beard and a shiny bald head. The giant laughed loudly at whatever his lord said. Ragnar could not help but feel he was being made the butt of some joke, but here, under the eyes of the Great Wolf and his retinue, was not the time or place to do anything about it.

'Welcome, Berek Thunderfist,' boomed Logan Grimnar. 'Your presence gives us honour.'

'And we always appreciate the drama of your entrances,' said Sigrid. His voice was deep, resonant and surprisingly powerful. There was a sadness to it, and an ironic mockery as well as a touch of hatred. 'Last to arrive, as always.'

Logan Grimnar cast a warning look at Sigrid. He obviously did not appreciate having his speech of welcome interrupted. Was the Trollbane's dislike really so intense that he would risk the lord of the Chapter's ire, Ragnar wondered?

'You know what they say: first in battle, last in council,' said Berek, smiling amiably. Ragnar studied his chieftain closely. There was a change in his manner again, doubtless for this new audience of influential lords. Now he was the picture of the bluff Fenrisian warrior, his natural intelligence hidden behind an ingenuous manner. If he was deliberately contrasting himself with Sigrid's sneering intelligence he could not have done a better job. Ragnar saw the room respond. Many of the other Wolf Lords looked at Berek approvingly, and at Sigrid with something like disdain.

'Well spoken,' said Logan Grimnar, smoothing over the obvious rift. 'And now that we are all here it is time to discuss the drop on Garm.'

Ragnar felt a thrill of excitement pass through him. The drop was going to go ahead soon. He stood now at the hub of things. This was where the decisions would be taken that would affect the lives of himself and his comrades, and he would be among the first to know of them. It was a heady feeling.

‘I have had a request from the Imperial field commander for our Chapter to spearhead the drop...’

A roar of approval greeted this news. It was after all only appropriate that Space Marines be called upon to lead the Imperial attack. Surprisingly Logan Grimnar raised his hand for silence. At once, the Wolf Lords went quiet. The Great Wolf gestured again. Some technical adept was obviously working his wizardry for at once a glowing sphere, recognisable as Garm, appeared in the air above them. It was twice as tall as a man. Ragnar could see the blue-black of the seas, the white of the clouds, and snow-fields, the multi-coloured blisters that were the cities.

‘Lord High General Durant has suggested that we attack here, at point alpha-four-omega.’

As Logan Grimnar spoke their point of view dropped towards the planet. It swelled in their field of vision to become a topographic map of a huge hive city. Parts of it were colour coded – blue was loyalist, angry red was enemy. At this point, there was far more red than blue. A shimmering circle pulsed at the point where the general wanted them to drop.

‘I have regretfully declined his request,’ said the Great Wolf. ‘I have told him it is our first duty to free the sacred shrine of Russ from the clutches of the heretics and to recover the Spear. Only then can we move to cleanse this world of the filth who are the Emperor’s enemies.’

Once again the assembled Wolf Lords roared their approval. Ragnar understood the Great Wolf’s decision. At one and the same time the Great Wolf had put the Imperial general in his place and established their real priorities. He had let Durant know that the Space Wolves were with his command, not part of it. They were outside the normal Imperial power structure and would act as the supreme lord saw fit. Ragnar had been taught how the rest of the Imperium worked. Doubtless General Durant thought in terms of his own plans and priorities, and would like nothing better than to see the Space Wolves subordinated to his aims. Logan Grimnar had let him know this was not the way it was going to be.

The Great Wolf gestured again and the view in the holosphere changed once more. It showed the ruins of an enormous pyramid-shaped building. A statue of a rampant wolf had stood on the top of the roof; now it lay smashed in three pieces. In the side of the building, a monstrous set of metallic double doors had been blown open. The skeletons of dead warriors lying amid the rubble put them into scale. They were near five times as high as a man. The whole building was riddled with shots. Thousands and thousands of bullet holes pockmarked the walls. Massive craters had been ripped out of the wall. Here and there enormous duralloy girders jutted from the plascrete like broken ribs sticking through skin.

Ragnar heard gasps from some of those present, men who obviously recognised the building. It did not take much guesswork to tell him that this was the Shrine of Garm's Skull. As far as he could tell someone had done a pretty good job of storming it. As Grimnar continued to speak the view panned backwards and outwards.

Ragnar could see the structure of fortifications surrounding the shrine. The flatness of the plascrete plain was broken only by turrets, emplacements and bunkers with interlocking zones of fire. Enormous fortified walls, bristling with turrets, enclosed the plain forming a killing ground almost a kilometre square.

Now the whole area was full of wreckage and dead bodies. The twisted remains of tanks filled the ground. Corpses lay bloating in water-filled craters, their weapons still close at hand. Huge chunks of plascrete had been ripped out of the earth by artillery fire. Amid the flotsam and jetsam of war, patrols of men moved, scavenging from the dead. Amid the burned out remains of the bunkers, war-weary men huddled around trash-fires and warmed their hands at gas braziers. The air had a hazy, polluted look. A blanket of strangely discoloured snow covered most of the ground.

'We can't get an internal view of the shrine's inner sanctum,' said the Great Wolf. 'The shielding is still effective.'

'It's fair to assume that in so short a time there can have been no internal modifications,' said Berek. 'We can use the architectural schematics we already have.'

'We can assume nothing,' Sigrid contradicted. 'It is merely wishful thinking to believe that nothing has changed.'

Logan Grimnar looked at his two bickering captains like a parent regarding two squabbling children. 'The schematics are the only things we

have to go on currently. Nothing from the orbital divinatory engines suggests anything has been changed. When we seize the shrine we will proceed as always within hostile terrain until the Iron Priests have time to perform cleansing and purification rituals.'

'How are we going to do it?' asked a voice from the back that Ragnar did not recognise.

'The same way as always,' said Logan Grimnar. 'With bolter in one hand and chainsword in the other.'

That got a laugh from everyone except Sigrid, though even he gave a sour smile.

'To give the tale a true telling, we shall begin with a short orbital bombardment at these points.'

The map returned. Red skulls appeared at each corner of the building until the whole shrine was cordoned off.

'How brief?' asked Sigrid.

'Thirty seconds. No more. We go down thirty seconds later. The bombardment should detonate any mines or other nasty surprises the tech-augurs have missed and give us a clear landing site. I want five companies on the ground in drop pods. There will be Thunderhawks for air support. Three transport shuttles will bring the armour in once the perimeter is secure. I am allowing two minutes for that.'

'What about the shrine's defences?' asked Sigrid. 'Is there any possibility they have been subverted?'

'All our divinations tell us that most of the defences were destroyed in the initial attack. The last signal broadcast before the shrine was overrun tells us that Brother Jurgen managed to purge the datacores and self-destruct the major weapon-systems.'

'My company stands ready to enter the shrine and begin purification of the heretics,' said Berek. Ragnar looked at his chieftain, sensing the tension. Berek wanted very badly to be first into the shrine, he wanted the glory of reclaiming it for the Chapter. 'We have recent experience of such action on Xecutor.'

'All our companies have such experience,' said Sigrid. 'I too volunteer my company.'

Immediately a chorus of voices made it clear that all present were keen to have their companies perform this duty. Logan Grimnar spread his arms wide for silence.

‘Berek and Sigrid, you both make the assumption that you are going in the first wave.’

Both of the Wolf Lords openly stared at the Great Wolf. At that moment it looked like they were both considering challenging him. Grimnar’s steely glance quelled them. Once he was sure they were not going to say anything stupid, he smiled. ‘Fortunately, you are both correct in your assumptions. You will be going in with Grimblood, Redmaw and Stormforge. I don’t want to hear any challenges from those in the second wave either, before anybody speaks. Time is short and we need to get the wheels in motion.’

‘Who will begin cleansing the shrine?’ asked Stormforge.

‘Given their recent spectacular performance on the Chaos ship, Berek’s company will have the honour.’

Ragnar looked over and saw a look of pure hatred written on Sigrid’s face. This did not bode well for the future, he thought.



ELEVEN

Ragnar leaned back inside the drop pod and surveyed the rest of the squad. For the duration of the landing, it seemed, he was back with the Blood Claws, and he was glad. When it came to fighting, he would rather be alongside Sven and Hakon and Strybjorn – who he knew well and had fought alongside many times.

They were all strapped into the cramped interior of the pod. Space was so tight that they were pressed up against each other in the dark. The familiar smell of his pack filled the recycled air reassuringly. He glanced around at faces old and new, and was glad he trusted everyone present. All it would take was one tiny error, for one bolter to go off accidentally within the confines of the pod, and the results would be catastrophic.

Sergeant Hakon caught his glance and nodded grimly. Ragnar found the gesture strangely reassuring. He had followed Hakon into many tight spots before and had always come out. He saw no reason why this time should be any different. Then he too smiled grimly. Not unless something went wrong...

The drop pod could malfunction in a hundred different ways. The heat shields could fail and they could burn up on atmospheric entry. They could be caught by defensive fire as they made the drop. The reverse thrusters could malfunction and they could be flattened like crushed bugs by impact with the planetary surface. They could...

Hastily he concentrated on the Litany of Acceptance, using the ancient words to drown out all the niggling little voices that worried away at the back of his mind. He concentrated on breathing, on regulating the beat of his double heart, on preparing himself for arrival.

The orbital bombardment could fail to clear the minefields. They might land on a killing ground between defensive bunkers. They might go too soon and be caught by their own orbital support weapons. They...

‘What’s the matter, Ragnar?’ asked Sven. ‘You look like you just remembered you left all your ammo back in your cell.’

Ragnar glanced across at his friend. Sven read him all too easily, just like he could read Sven. Despite his pose of ferocious indifference, Ragnar

could smell Sven's own uneasy fear. It might simply be a natural response to being confined in this small space or...

Ragnar smiled suddenly. It was obvious now why his mind was racing more than normal: it was being in the drop pod. He did not like it all.

Once more he was hemmed in on all sides, but this time it felt worse. Now that the purity seals on the pod were fastened, there was no way out until they hit the surface of Garm. The pod was their only protection against heat and altitude and the dangers of enemy fire. It was a tiny island of security in a deadly ocean of peril. The operative word was 'tiny'. Now more than ever Ragnar was aware of his dislike for being enclosed. It was too much like being entombed. At least now he was aware of the source of most of his fear and unease and could resist it.

'It's just the smell of your breath, Sven. You've been at the curdled goat cheese again, haven't you?'

Sven grimaced. 'A man has to eat. Best to go into battle on a full stomach. Who knows when we'll see decent rations again.'

'I'm sure there's plenty to eat down there,' said Aenar, his face glowing with a mixture of good cheer and apprehension. He looked very young, Ragnar thought.

'We'll soon find out,' said Torvald. 'If I am killed in the first minute, don't anybody forget to say the rites over me. It would be just my luck to go down to hell unblessed and have the old hag who cursed me waiting there.'

Ragnar glanced around the inside of the pod. Overhead was the gargoyle encrusted control panel, familiar from a hundred practice drops. The internal walls were all inscribed with murals depicting familiar scenes from the Chapter's legends. Behind Sven, Ragnar could just make out some details of Hengist Torvaldsson's battle with the great serpent of Doomflare. Doubtless the product of some Wolf's long leisure hours between combat practice and the meditation cell.

'Synchronise,' said Sergeant Hakon. A low bell-like chiming sounded in Ragnar's ears as the ancient technical systems checked that the chronometers of his armour were perfectly synchronised with those of the sergeant and his battle-brothers.

'Aye,' Ragnar responded, and listened to the familiar litany of replies from his comrades. 'Russ be praised.'

‘One minute,’ said Hakon. Immediately the chronometer countdown was superimposed on Ragnar’s field of vision. He closed his eyes and the clock remained there, its gothic lettering ticking away the time until the pod was expelled from the *Fist of Russ* and began its atmospheric entry. He reviewed his pre-battle preparations one last time.

All of his equipment was primed and ready. He would break left when they hit the ground and give supporting fire as the others advanced. In his mind’s eye he could picture the pattern of the drop that Berek had outlined to them. They would be slightly closer to the entrance to the shrine than the Wolf Guard and were to advance immediately into it, securing the company’s way into the depths.

He checked his physical responses. His heartbeats were perfectly relaxed now. His mind was clear. His anxieties were under control. Glands in his implanted lymphatic systems manufactured hormones to enhance healing and trace chemicals to speed his reflexes and dull pain. All familiar programmed changes before battle. In the past, he had not had enough experience to even be really aware of them, he had just known he felt better, faster, stronger. Now, he was capable of distinguishing each small new response.

He was aware that Hakon had begun the Prayer to Russ, and found that he had joined in, mouthing the words without really realising it. ‘Lend us the strength to smite the Emperor’s foes. Grant us the grace of an honourable death if our hour is come,’ he muttered. ‘The Emperor be praised.’

Even as the old sergeant spoke, there was a loud clang, and a juddering sense of movement. ‘Drop pod away,’ murmured Sven. ‘Garm here we come.’

At first, there was the immense pressure of continuing acceleration as the drop pod arced downwards on its approach trajectory. Hakon reached up and touched one of the controls on the board above. Suddenly in the air in front of them a holospheric image appeared.

Ragnar saw the fleet retreating behind them, and all of the other drop pods leaving the blast-tubes of the fleet and rushing downwards like so many burning flakes of thistledown. Ahead of them loomed the great glowing shield of the planet. Great oceans of white cloud drifted over the face of the continents.

Hundreds of tiny runes glittered below the image, giving out myriad bits of information to those who could understand them. Some of their meanings had been lost in the dim mists of time in the days when such systems had first been devised, but Ragnar knew enough of the symbols to be able to pick out those which displayed their speed, altitude and ambient temperature. Outside now it was cold, the chill of interplanetary space.

They were away. It would take long minutes for them to reach the insertion point for atmospheric entry and many more minutes after that for them to penetrate the atmosphere. In that time, the fleet would have moved on to a position over their drop point, and if the Navigators had got their calculations right, would begin the support barrage, stopping mere seconds before the course of the falling drop pods intersected with the blast of their mighty weapons.

Ragnar told himself that this was all a long-established ritual, that the Chapter fleet and its warriors had done this thousands upon thousands of times, but this was his first long drop in anger, and the thought of mistakes being made troubled him deeply. As the drop pod reached its final angle of attack, the sensation of acceleration and of its associated weight vanished, leaving him drifting upwards from his seat, free of gravity, restrained only by the tug of his harness.

Within the drop pod all was silent now, save for the muffled breathing of the men. There was no turning back now; they had passed the point of no return.

The first faint tremor in his seat drew Ragnar out of his brief reverie. The whole pod vibrated slightly. His training told him that it was merely the first tickling touch of the atmosphere on the pod's shell, but for a moment a deep primordial fear reached up from the depths of his being and screamed that the pod was malfunctioning and they were all going to die.

'The breath of the wind,' said Sergeant Hakon, in his calmest and most reassuring tone of voice. From the sudden relaxation of the tension all around him, Ragnar knew that he had not been the only nervous battle-brother. The sergeant's next words were less than reassuring. 'Best brace yourselves. Things could get rough.'

Ragnar glanced around him to see how the others were taking this. The sergeant looked calm, and as stone faced as ever. Sven grinned like a lunatic, fangs glinting in the light of the holosphere. Aenar looked pale

and nervous. Torvald kept a small cynical smile on his face. Strybjorn looked as grim and calm as Hakon. A glance up at the holosphere showed Ragnar that the planet was no longer visible as a disk. They were now racing down into the atmosphere and the wind demons of the upper air had them firmly in their grip.

The whole pod shuddered and shook. A faint creaking sound fretted at Ragnar's nerves. It sounded as if any moment the whole ceramite and duralloy structure might crumple inwards and crush them all. Much as he knew how unlikely this was, the thought still haunted him. He also found it all too easy to imagine the blazing beams of defensive lasers reaching up to burn them from the sky. At least such an end, if it came, would be quick. Once more the sense of being trapped in a confined space returned, redoubled. Ragnar fought down the urge to rip at the restraining straps and lash out about him.

Now flames licked all around the hulls of the drop pods above them. The heat shields on the bottom of the drop pods were starting to glow cherry red. Streamers of super-heated hair flickered all around them. This was no normal atmospheric entry such as a shuttle or a Thunderhawk would make. This was a swift insertion, designed to get them on the ground as quickly as possible and with little fuss. They were flying on minimum power, easy to mistake at this altitude for a shower of meteorites.

Even as Ragnar watched, bits of the pods above them burst away. The whole pod shook as if hit by a gigantic hammer, and something hot and metallic fell away from them too, its contrail visible on the viewscreen. For a moment it looked as if they were disintegrating, but he knew this was not the case. This was merely the pod shedding its outer skin, creating decoys that would show up as multiple images on any sensor system that might be observing them. The theory was that this proliferation of targets would make it difficult for the defenders to pick them off as they came in to land. At this altitude it would also increase their resemblance to a meteor shower breaking up under atmospheric impact.

Ragnar hoped that it would work. For the first time, in all of the times he had ridden groundwards in a drop pod, his life might depend on the success of this stratagem.

Now the view in the holosphere flickered alarmingly. Either there was some problem with the power circuit or it was simply being obscured by

the plasma trail of the pod itself. The shaking of the pod increased. The runes orbiting the holosphere told Ragnar that their velocity was increasing at an alarming rate as they plummeted through the thin upper atmosphere of Garm. An eerie high-pitched whine rose to audibility, swiftly followed by small thumping noises as if rain were pattering against the outside of the capsule. Ragnar knew it was not rain, merely the turbulent air.

The thumping noise grew and along with it so did the shaking. It sounded now as if the fists of thousands of air daemons were pummelling the drop pod's side. The whole craft shook and echoed. Ragnar felt the craft veer and swerve minutely as it dropped. He clutched the seat with both fingers to give himself some sense of stability. The flickering light of the holosphere illuminated the faces of his companions. Their features all seemed frozen in expressions of excitement, dismay or exaltation.

Sven opened his mouth and let out a long wolf howl. It echoed around the confined space like the wail of some demented spirit, drowning out for a moment even the whining of the wind and the pounding of the turbulence. Aenar joined in and, within moments, the whole pack was howling save the sergeant.

Hakon was busy making minute adjustments to the control panel above them. Ragnar watched him. The drop pod was moving through the thin air at a far greater speed than a human body would fall normally. The resistance of the air was too small to slow it much at this height.

The turbulence became much worse. Now it seemed like the pod was caught in the fist of a giant who was determined to shake the life out of the tiny people trapped within it. Without their restraining harnesses the Blood Claws would have been tossed helplessly around within the pod from floor to ceiling. As it was, Ragnar could see the flesh on the faces of his companions wobble like jellies. They continued to howl now, maddened by excitement and the prospect of imminent action.

Ragnar knew the massive orbital bombardment would begin soon. It had been carefully timed to start just before their drop, so as to not give the enemy too much advance warning. By the time the heretics realised it was over, the Space Wolves would be on the ground and swarming over them. That, at least, was the theory.

In his mind's eye, he pictured the titanic wave of las- and projectile fire blazing down from orbit, cratering the ground, smashing their foes'

defences, clearing the way for them. He tried not to imagine an error that would result in this fragile pod being caught in the deluge of destruction.

‘One minute,’ said Sergeant Hakon. The words came over the comm-net and were audible even over the thunder of the turbulence. The howling stopped abruptly. Ragnar felt a tension in the pit of his stomach and a deep-seated excitement surge through him. Another glance at the runes told him that the drop pod had decelerated enormously. The turbulence must have come from increased air resistance. The view in the holosphere was becoming clear again. Wisps of red and grey and yellow marred by inky stains of black were all around them.

Clouds, he thought. Clouds mingled with pollution. We’re almost down. Relief warred with tension. This was the point of maximum crisis. If the defenders had spotted them, this was when they would be shot down. Destruction could take them unawares; they would be removed from existence instantly and there was absolutely nothing they could do about it. Such a sense of helplessness was not something Space Marines were used to. The only protection now was prayer; the only shield was faith.

An enormous wash of yellow light blazed through the holosphere. For a moment Ragnar was disoriented, then he realised that he had just caught the final blaze of the barrage before it cut out, as they passed through the lowest band of the polluted clouds. Beneath them he could see the astonishingly large towers of Garm. In a glance he got some idea of the geography of this part of the world.

The land beneath them was divided into hundreds of small islands, separated by channels of water and industrial run-off. Massive metal and plascrete structures – factories, hab-units, power cores and industrial temples – covered each island. Some were mere blackened hulks, plasteel skeletons lying amid the rubble that had once clothed them. Others showed huge gaping holes, the result of artillery fire or internal explosion.

At one point, around their drop-zone, it looked like the barrage had set the whole polluted river alight. Flames danced unnaturally along the surface of a fluid that bore little resemblance to water. Arcing into view he could see the blasted craters of the place where they would land. Far, far off in the distance he thought he saw massive war machines moving. It appeared that loyalist ground forces were mounting a diversionary attack to cover their landing. No. That had not been mentioned in the planning session. Perhaps it was simply some opportunistic warlord taking

advantage of the distraction provided by the barrage. Perhaps it was merely coincidence.

Sporadic fire from building-mounted defence lasers leapt into the sky around them. None came close to their drop pod. Had they been spotted or was this merely some form of automated point defence system, designed to fire on anything that dropped into this particular airspace? If so, Ragnar was glad that the barrage had done its work. Normally such networks covered the entire sky over a city. This seemed to be functioning only sporadically.

Sporadic or no, he thought, offering up a prayer to Russ, all it would take would be one shot and this world would be rid of them. There was no way the armour of a drop pod could withstand the impact of a blast from a defence laser.

‘Suspensor failure,’ said Hakon over the comm-net. ‘Brace yourselves.’

Looking at the runes on the holosphere Ragnar suddenly realised they were not slowing down. The gravitic suspensors which were supposed to slow the final stage of their descent had not automatically cut in. In moments they would be smashed to bloody pulp against the ground. This was not looking good, Ragnar thought.



TWELVE

Panic briefly threatened to overwhelm Ragnar. His worst fears all seemed to have come true. He was trapped in this tiny pod with no way out, about to smash into the earth after dropping from a great height. Then the moment passed; self-control returned. If he had only moments of life remaining then he would not give way to fear. He would meet death like a man, even if it was not the death he would have chosen.

Sergeant Hakon had other ideas. He reached up and flipped the emergency handles on the panels above his head, manually activating the suspensor drive. For a moment, nothing happened, then Ragnar felt as if a giant hand were crushing him into his seat as the suspensors wrestled with the planet's gravity. A smell of ozone filled the air, and Ragnar thought he heard a high pitched scream as the ancient machine's overloaded generator quit. Acceleration returned sickeningly. The sensation of dropping twisted Ragnar's gut. The hope that had flared briefly died, only to return a moment later as the secondary power system cut in.

'Brace yourselves!' Hakon bellowed again. 'This is going to be touch and go.'

The altimeter runes told Ragnar that impact was imminent. He held himself in the crash position, thinking they were still going too fast. Seconds later he was thrown tight against the restraining straps with enormous force. He felt the harness flex but hold. His neck muscles strained to prevent whiplash. The force of the impact was enormous.

Any moment, he expected to feel a tidal wave of agony rip through his body. It did not come. Instead, the drop pod began to roll end over end, finally coming to rest with a jarring bump. After a few seconds, the sides groaned open, like a metal flower unfolding its petals to greet the sun.

'Disperse,' said Hakon in a cold commanding voice. Ragnar hit the buckle of the restrainer harness and sprang clear, drawing his weapons and readying them. A wave of steam greeted him as his feet touched the plascrete covered surface of Garm, the snow boiled away by the heat of the drop pod's impact. Ragnar thought it was the heat shield cooling, but a quick glance told him a different story. Part of the side of the capsule

glowed cherry red. It looked like one of the enemy las bursts had come a lot closer than he had thought, hitting the drop pod a brief glancing blow.

Probably why the automatic systems failed, Ragnar thought, as his eyes searched for a target. He knew just how lucky they had been. If that ravaging energy beam had kissed the cupola of the drop pod for more than a micro-second, they would have been vaporised.

The stutter of small-arms fire from nearby told him that some enemies at least were still battle ready.

He stood knee-deep in snow and took a breath of the cold air of Garm. It was chill as Fenris in winter, but smelled of rotten eggs, sulphur, and all manner of pollution. A faint wave of nausea told Ragnar that his body had already started the process of adapting to it, of filtering and purifying. Strange, he thought, what small things attract the attention after moments of crisis.

Despite the danger, exaltation filled him. The cause was not merely the chemicals his altered glands were pumping into his bloodstream. He was on the ground. He had survived the rough passage through the high atmosphere and he was here with a foe in front of him and a weapon in his hand. Dangerous the situation might still be, but at least here was a danger he could do something about. It felt like his destiny was once more within his own hands.

With another quick glance, he took in the situation around him. The other drop pods were on the ground. The Wolves were out, weapons spitting death in all directions.

Small groups formed up to assault the Shrine of the Spear. At this range it looked more like a fortress than a shrine, and one that had recently been taken. The burned out remains of automatic defence systems dotted its sides. Ragnar could see uniformed heretics on fortified balconies. The snouts of las-rifles poked out through windows.

Here and there runes, the signs of Chaos and heresy, polluted the sacred walls. Ragnar snarled a curse and prepared to advance.

As far as he could tell there had been no casualties among Berek's company. The only slight problem was that due to their drop pod's malfunction, they had fallen far out of the cluster pattern, and they were much closer to the massive doorway than they were supposed to be. Behind them, craters and rubble rose from the plain. Here they were on a level killing ground, the only cover being the remains of their drop pod.

A stream of shells hit the plascrete in front of him, sending rock-hard chips clattering against his armour, raising small fountains of snow. Ragnar raised his head and spotted the shooter, mounted on the high battlements above the door. With one fluid motion, he raised his bolt pistol and fired. His single shot smashed through the sniper's skull and decorated the carved wall behind him with brains.

'Nice shot,' he heard Sven murmur. 'Now all we need is twenty more like it.'

A hail of fire sent Sven scurrying behind the still glowing pod. Ragnar leapt to join him. He could see that Hakon and the others were pinned down on the open ground in front of them. Unless they could take out their attackers it looked like life was going to be short for the rest of their squad.

Suddenly there was a roar of rockets and streaks of fire smashed into the enemy emplacements on the walls. Briefly the guns fell silent. Clouds of smoke billowed.

'Looks like the Long Fangs finally decided to unpack their rocket launchers,' said Sven, grinning cheerfully. He glanced towards the remains of the massive shrine doors. 'You thinking what I am thinking?'

Ragnar nodded. He vaulted over the side of the pod and raced towards the steps, Sven right beside him. Seconds later the rest of the squad had joined them, taking advantage of the confusion the Long Fangs' heavy weapons had wreaked among the defenders.

Within moments they were on the stairs. Suddenly a hail of fire erupted all around them. He saw the sandbags in the doorway and the nest of heavy guns within it. Acting instantly he threw himself flat on the massive steps, and lobbed a grenade towards the foe. A chain of explosions told him he was not the only one who had had this idea. Moments later he was back on his feet again, running forward towards the emplacement.

Bullets churned the ground around his feet. One clattered off the shoulderpad of his armour with enough force to spin him around and send him to the ground. Sven raced past, blazing away with his pistol at the surviving heretics, chainsword already keening in his hand. As he picked himself up, Ragnar watched his fellow Blood Claws vault the half-demolished wall of sandbags and go ravaging through the shocked enemy.

Obviously the defenders had not expected an assault of this speed and ferocity.

Ragnar got his first real glimpse of them now. They were normal enough looking men, garbed in white and grey camouflage uniforms, padded against the cold. Thick dark goggles protected their eyes, and filter masks covered their mouths giving them a sinister insectile look. In their hands most of them clutched well-used autorifles tipped with serrated edged bayonets. Many of them shrieked and wailed and tried to run as the Wolves smashed through them, but one or two had the presence of mind to keep fighting.

As Ragnar watched, one man who had obviously been feigning death – quite convincingly judging by the amount of blood covering his tattered uniform – leapt to his feet and aimed a bayonet at Sven's back. Calmly Ragnar took aim and put several bolter shells into him. The force of their impact crumpled the man like a ration carton crushed in a Marine's fist.

Ragnar raced forward to join the fray, diving into the midst of the struggling bodies, lashing out at the men around him with his howling chainsword. Within seconds the machine gun nest was clear and the Blood Claws were fanning out towards the others behind the makeshift sandbag emplacement.

With a disgusted look on his face, Sven examined his chainsword. A stray shot must have hit the power source for the blades no longer rotated. Black smoke belched forth from the hilt and the mechanism wobbled and came apart in his hand. It had taken more damage than was apparent. Sven looked around for a moment, and then an evil grin appeared on his face. Nearby lay a heavy autogun. Somewhat miraculously, it did not appear to have taken any damage from the grenade explosions. What were the chances of that, Ragnar wondered, then dismissed the thought. In war, given enough time, most events, no matter how improbable, could happen.

Sven raised the heavy automatic weapon one handed, and smiled, looking very pleased with himself. It appeared that he had not picked up the weapon a moment too soon. Deeper within the shrine the defenders had rallied and now a wave of them, hundreds strong, was surging across the chipped marble flooring back towards the gateway. Despite the natural feeling of superiority drummed into him by his training, Ragnar suddenly felt very outnumbered. There were five Space Wolves in the remains of the machine gun nest, versus several hundred foes.

‘I make the odds about five to one,’ said Sven.

‘Nice to see your arithmetic is as good as ever,’ said Ragnar deciding that Sven had the right idea. Perhaps he too could find another functioning heavy weapon in the rubble.

‘Let’s just cut those odds a little,’ said Sven. He raised the machine gun one handed and opened fire into the oncoming mass of infantry. It cut through them like a scythe, chopping bodies in two, punching bullets right through the chests of oncoming men to bury shells deep in the bodies of the warriors behind. Sven let out a long howl of pleasure. The muzzle flare of the machine gun underlit his face, making him look daemonic. He stood in the middle of a storm of bullets, completely unfazed by the death whizzing all around him. Amazingly he began striding forward, ignoring the bullets, blasting away at their foes, causing unbelievable amounts of destruction.

It was like watching a hero from the ancient sagas. There was something terrifying about the mechanical way in which Sven walked forward mowing the foe down as he went. For a moment, the sight halted even that enormous mass of men. It seemed for a few seconds that Sven might rout them single-handed.

Then from the back came a shout and the sound of firing. Ragnar made out a man in a white winter uniform who resembled an Imperial commissar, bellowing instructions to his followers and they began to come on again, firing away. Now the weight of lead hurling past him was too much even for one of Sven’s insane bravery. He began to step backwards towards the emplacement, firing as he went, until he tumbled backward into the pit alongside Ragnar.

Looking down, Ragnar could see his friend was not entirely unscathed. His armour was cracked in a dozen places and blood leaked from the gaps. A bloody slash marred Sven’s cheek, another had torn away a whole chunk of his crested hair. Still his eyes blazed with feverish battle lust. He reached forward to pick up the machine gun again, and pulled the trigger. For a few seconds it roared and spat out a hail of death, but then it stuttered and died.

‘What in the name of Russ...’ muttered Sven.

‘It’s overheated,’ said Ragnar. ‘The barrels have fused. You kept firing too long.’

Sven lobbed it viciously in the direction of the enemy. 'Bloody useless thing!' he shouted. From the distance came a crunch of bone and a shriek of pain. Ragnar guessed that Sven's throw had been accurate.

'Congratulations,' he said. 'You've invented a new way of fighting. Instead of shooting enemies with heavy weapons, we'll throw them instead.'

'Wouldn't you be better off fighting than bloody talking?' asked Sven with surprising mildness. He was already scouring their position for some new means of offence.

'Your mastery of tactics astonishes me,' said Ragnar, poking his head over the wall of sandbags and letting fly into the tightly packed mass of bodies. As he did so, a blast of fire surged all around him, forcing him to pull his head back into cover. It looked like someone on the other side possessed the sense to set up more heavy weapons to cover the enemy's push forward. They were pinned down until the infantry swept over their position. Things were not looking good.

Well, more than one way to skin a dragon, Ragnar thought, setting down his pistol and tapping his grenade dispenser. He was a Space Wolf. He was more than capable of judging the position of the onrushing enemy by their footfalls and their scent. He lobbed a handful of grenades over the sandbags out towards the enemy. Moments later a wave of screams and explosions filled his ears.

'I think you might have got one,' said Sven. 'Lucky throw.'

Sven lobbed a grenade over his shoulder too. Another explosion. Another scream of agony. 'That's how it's done,' he said.

Ragnar looked at him. 'Things would go a lot better if we could take out their supporting fire.'

'Really. I would never have thought of that,' said Sven sardonically. He lobbed another grenade. Another explosion ripped through the inside of the building. Ragnar could tell that their foes were close.

'They'll have to stop firing soon or they'll hit their own men,' said Ragnar.

'And when they do—'

'This!' said Ragnar. As soon as the support fire stopped, he leapt up and began blasting away with his bolt pistol. The heretics were so close that he could see his own distorted reflection in their goggles: a twisted grey-clad figure splattered with blood. The muzzle flash of his gun was

dazzling. Almost as soon as he had popped up he saw the oncoming infantrymen ready their autorifles to blast him. They were obviously just as prepared for the moment when the support fire stopped as he was; what they lacked were his superhuman reflexes.

He was hunkered down again before any of them could pull the trigger. A tidal wave of bullets passed over him, and thumped into the sandbags behind his back. He could feel the structure shudder under the impact.

‘That was smart,’ said Sven sarcastically, lobbing another grenade. ‘I hope the others are doing better.’

The grenade blast was so close behind them that it was near deafening. ‘Best get ready for hand-to-hand combat,’ said Ragnar.

‘With what? My fists?’

Ragnar tossed him his bolt pistol, and activated his chainsword.

‘Even you ought to be able to do something with two pistols, Sven.’

‘I imagine something will come to me,’ said Sven with a crooked grin.

‘It had better. They are just about on top of us.’



THIRTEEN

‘Let’s give them a warm welcome then,’ said Sven, springing up just as the shadow of a man with a bayonet loomed over him. He began blasting away, bolt pistol in each hand. Shells blazed out at close range burying themselves in human flesh before exploding. Sven stepped sideways, still shooting, spraying their foes with both pistols. Ragnar took one more moment to watch him then twisted and sprang out over the sandbags, landing in the middle of the oncoming wave of infantry.

Holding the chainsword with both hands, he cut right and left, shearing limbs and breaking bones, splattering himself and everything around him with bright red blood. A howled battlecry erupted from his lips as he surrendered himself to the fury of close combat. All of his pent up aggression, all of his earlier worries and fears during the descent, powered his rage. He struck with tigerish swiftness, moving through the mass of foes like an unleashed daemon. For a few brief instants he was unstoppable, but then the sheer mass of onrushing troops bogged him down. The enemy were all around him, stabbing with bayonets, pumping out bullets at close range, too intent on preserving their own lives against this unleashed berserker in their midst to worry about hitting their own comrades.

Ragnar ducked and weaved, but the ground was slick underfoot with blood, and it was hard to keep his balance, avoid his enemies and get power behind his blows. He tried his best though. Even as he felt a bayonet find the gap between shoulder-plate and upper armguard, he hacked down one man and smashed in another’s face with a punch. Teeth sprayed everywhere under the impact of his gauntleted fist.

A stab of pain behind his knee told him that another of his foes had managed to find a weak spot in his armour. A backhanded slash with the chainsword ensured the man would never do anything else again. Already he could feel the wounds beginning to clot but the healing process was slowing him. He lashed out again and again and with every stroke a foe died. But for every man who fell there were two to take his place. There

were just too many of the heretics for one small squad of Blood Claws to hold back.

A bullet from out of nowhere grazed Ragnar's temple. It felt like someone had just hit him with a sledgehammer. He shook his head to clear the falling blood from his eyes, and in that moment, a crowd of men seized him, trying to immobilise his limbs and still his deadly blade. With a roar, he lifted two of them and dashed their heads together with a sickening thump. As he did so he felt an arm go round his neck, as someone tried to drive a knife into his throat.

Ragnar threw himself forward, hoping the momentum would toss his assailant from his back but the man held on for grim death, and drove the knife home once more. Blood slicked Ragnar's chestplate – and it was his own.

Now a real killing fury settled on Ragnar. He was no longer fighting to preserve his life but to take as many of his foes down to hell with him as he could. He shook his head and rolled his shoulders trying to throw off his attacker, and as he did so he lashed out with his chainsword, catching another man in the belly. Ropes of entrails slid from the man's gut but Ragnar advanced anyway.

In his fury he lost his footing on the slick intestines and tumbled over backwards. There was a crunch as something cushioned his fall, and Ragnar realised it was his dagger wielding assailant. The man's arm now dangled limply around Ragnar's neck.

Above him loomed a huge man with a rifle. Before Ragnar could react, he smashed the butt of the gun into Ragnar's skull. The blow would have caved in the head of any normal man, and even his reinforced bone structure could not entirely protect Ragnar. Sparks flickered before his eyes, and for a moment all he could see was blackness. He sensed rather than saw the man draw back his rifle for another blow and stabbed forward and upward blindly with his blade. He felt it connect with something, and pass through the moist sack of the man's flesh and cleave through his innards. The man screamed, and voided his bowels and bladder.

At that moment, Ragnar's sight returned and he rose to his feet. His fist smashed into the man's face and sent him toppling over backward. Ragnar reeled forward, howling with anger, chopping at any foe within reach. Still they came on, an endless tidal wave of enemies. He could see none of his battle-brothers, and their smell was lost among the scent of

heretics and cordite. Perhaps they had already fallen. Perhaps he was the last of his squad still left alive. If so, he resolved, he was going to make the traitorous heretics of Garm pay dearly for the lives of himself and his comrades.

Ahead of him, he could see the man in the commissar's uniform. It no longer looked white and clean. It was stained with blood and blackened with smoke. Somehow he had lost his mask. The man's cold face paled a little as he saw Ragnar staggering towards him but he raised his chainsword defiantly, and advanced to meet the Blood Claw with the powerful confident step of a skilled warrior.

As their blades crossed Ragnar realised that he faced a worthy foe. The man's skill was tremendous. Normally, he would not have physically have been a match for a Space Marine, but Ragnar was bruised and battered from his earlier battles, and the Garmite was fresh and hungry for glory.

Sparks clashed and chainswords screamed as they met. The commissar ducked below the sweep of Ragnar's return stroke and lashed out, catching the young Wolf on the arm. The vambrace of his armour smoked as the friction of the chainsword bite heated it unbearably. Ragnar stepped forward, grabbing the man's sword arm with his free hand and closing his grip tight. With a sickening crunch bones gave way. The commissar did not utter a sound although his face went pale and sweat beaded his brow. Ragnar thrust his own head forward in a swift butt to the bridge of the man's nose, breaking it. As the Garmite fell backwards, blood leaking from his nostrils, lips tight with self control, Ragnar lashed out with a kick that broke the man's hip. As the man fell, Ragnar's stamping foot crushed his skull.

One or two of the Garmite soldiers looked upon their dead leader in horror, but they were filled with confidence and their morale held. It did not matter how strong Ragnar or any individual Marine was, there were just too many foes. Like angry ants swarming over an armoured beetle, they came on, stabbing, hacking, pumping bullets at Ragnar with startling disregard for their own lives and the lives of their comrades. The sheer mass of flesh moving inexorably as a sea pushed Ragnar back towards the emplacement. He felt like a swimmer caught in a riptide, but still he fought on, blood and sweat threatening to blind him.

From out of nowhere something caught Ragnar behind his weakened knee, and he collapsed into a half crouch. Something heavy crashed into

his skull again. Stars novaed across his field of vision. He felt suddenly weak and nauseous, barely able to keep upright. In all his time as a Space Marine he did not think he had ever felt like this. The knowledge that he was about to die sparked fury within him but pinned by the press of bodies, weakened by wounds and loss of blood, he could not summon the energy to turn his bloodlust into action. Instead he kept chopping and hacking, lashing out with fist and foot and head as well as blade. He knew it was a hopeless struggle. His limbs felt heavy as lead. His opponents seemed as numerous now as when he had started.

Still a grin came to his lips, and a howl erupted from his throat. This was a warrior's death, better by far than being charred to a crisp within a super-heated drop pod. No Space Wolf could ask for more.

His howl was answered by a war-cry from close by. 'For Russ and Berek!' he heard someone shout and was surprised to see the man in front of him cloven in two by the blow of a chainsword. Sergeant Hakon stood there, looking like some daemon of slaughter. Blood covered him from head to foot, his armour was painted almost totally red by it, and his grey hair was the colour of rust. He picked up another Garmite and tossed him back among his fellows, bowling them with the sheer force of impact, then he charged among them, lashing right and left and leaving Ragnar a clear space among the carnage in which to catch his breath.

Ragnar stood panting for a moment, watching as the sergeant slew every infantryman within reach, before tossing his head back and emitting a monstrous howl of triumph. Even as he did so, a lash of tracer fire whipped in from somewhere to the left and took the sergeant in the skull. The whole side of Hakon's head was blown away, leaving exposed fragments of brain. Like a mighty tree toppling the sergeant fell forward and was still.

For a moment, shock paralysed Ragnar. It seemed impossible that the sergeant was dead. He had been there, invincible and indestructible from the first day Ragnar had arrived at Russvik. He had trained and fought alongside the Blood Claws until they knew his face almost as well as they knew their own. He was part of the squad, its leader, and guiding light... and now he was gone.

Ragnar stood frozen as the tidal wave of Garmite infantry surged back in his direction. Part of him had lost heart at the sight of Hakon's fall. Part of him simply wanted to stand still and let the oncoming soldiers slay him

as they had slain the sergeant. What was the point of fighting? He was just going to die like the squad leader.

Even as these thoughts flickered briefly across his mind, he savagely suppressed them. The fury he had felt earlier returned, his rage felt boundless. From deep within himself he drew on reservoirs of strength he had not known he possessed. The weakness fell from his limbs. Hakon had bought him a respite that had allowed him to recover. It was time now to repay his debt to the old man.

He leapt forward, bullets clattering off his armour with a sound like a blacksmith's hammer falling on metal. Seeing his face contorted with rage, a few of the Garmites panicked but most of them were brave men. They kept firing and braced their bayonets, readying themselves for the colossal impact of Ragnar's charge. Even as he sprang forward, praying to Russ that no bullet would wound him mortally before he could kill more foes, Ragnar heard more Space Wolf war-cries from close at hand.

Suddenly he was aware of mighty figures nearby, crashing through his enemies with weapons blazing and chainswords shrieking. Dozens of Wolves had closed with the foe, emerging from the haze of gunsmoke and dust to smite the enemy. They swept into the melee alongside Ragnar, smashing through the Garmite line like a thunderbolt through rotten timber.

In a heartbeat, the whole complexion of the fight around the shrine's entrance changed, as the Garmites' initial success turned into a rout. Tough, battle-hardened warriors the natives might be, dedicated to the cause of wickedness beyond sanity, but the sight of a mass of Space Marines surging through them was enough to break even their morale. The great mass of them turned tail and tried to flee, and then they were dead.

'We bloody well won,' said Sven, looking at once pleased and angry. It was a typical response. He still glared around him, sensitive to the slightest movement, reacting to the smallest noise or change of scent. An hour after Logan Grimnar had declared the shrine cleared, he was ready for combat in a heartbeat. Even the re-shaped metabolisms of Space Marines took time to calm down after the fury of battle had passed. There was an aftershock, Ragnar realised. He felt that way himself.

'At what cost?' Ragnar asked.

'You're still bloody well here aren't you? So am I.'

'How about the others?'

‘Aenar was wounded again. Torvald is fine. Strybjorn took a couple of knocks, but he’ll be all right once the healers look at him.’

Ragnar shifted his weight. There was pain there, far worse than anything he had experienced during the battle. Then, it was as if his mind had shut out anything that would not help keep him alive. Now it was more difficult to ignore. He had removed his greaves and sprayed the wound with synthetic flesh. The skin was already starting to knit as his body healed itself. There was a dull ache in his stomach that he realised was hunger. He removed a ration-tube from his belt and began to suck on it. The taste was bland, and it did not feel like he could get any sustenance from a mere paste, but he knew it contained all the nutrients he needed. More than that, it contained the alchemical ingredients that would help him heal. He recognised that hunger; his body craved the raw materials with which to repair itself.

‘Good idea,’ said Sven and began to slurp loudly at a tube of the food-paste. ‘Some beer would be even better.’

Ragnar glanced around. They were on the outskirts of the field hospital. In airtight tents, the Wolf Priests worked their rituals on wounded Marines. Dozens of the less badly wounded sat around. A priest moved among them, deploying medical augurs. His examinations were quick but thorough, more in the nature of simple checks to make sure his patients were all right. While it was true that a Space Marine would heal naturally and swiftly from almost any injury that did not cripple him, there was no sense in taking chances. It was not unknown for men who had taken blows to the head to walk around normally for hours afterwards then keel over and die.

‘What about Hakon?’ Sven asked.

‘He’s still in there,’ said Ragnar. ‘The priests would not let me stay while they performed the rituals. One of them told me he is most likely going to join his ancestor spirits.’

‘Look over there,’ said Sven. Ragnar glanced in the direction of Sven’s pointing finger. He saw Berek Thunderfist and Morgrim Silvertongue stride forward. The Wolf Lord paused here and there to exchange smiles, jokes and words of encouragement with the wounded. Every time he did so, the man’s spirits would perceptibly rise. As if sensing Ragnar’s eyes upon him, he looked up and gave Ragnar a cheerful wave. Ragnar waved back and the Wolf Lord strode over towards him.

‘No, don’t get up,’ said Berek as Ragnar and Sven made to rise. ‘You have both taken honourable wounds in battle. You deserve to rest.’

They stayed in place. ‘Sergeant Hakon is in a bad way,’ said Berek. ‘He is in a coma. His spirit hovers over his body.’

‘Will he recover?’ asked Ragnar.

Berek shook his head. ‘No.’

‘Will he die?’

‘We do not know. Even if he lives there has been too much damage to his brain. He will not be fit for war ever again.’

‘It is not the end he would have wished,’ said Ragnar.

‘Nor any of us,’ said Berek. ‘But these things happen. It is not Sergeant Hakon’s fate that I wished to talk with you about, Ragnar.’

‘No?’

‘Now that Hakon is gone, your pack needs a new leader. Things are in a very fluid state at the moment, and we are expecting the Garmites to counter-attack at any hour. Until I have time to assign someone, you are in charge of the squad, Ragnar. I will make the announcement after the evening rituals.’

Ragnar simply stared at Berek. This was not the way things were usually done, but then again, it was the Wolf Lord’s choice. Ragnar was sure that there must be better, more experienced men for the task available, but it seemed that for reasons of his own, Berek had chosen him, for the moment. Perhaps this was why he had been asked to accompany him to the *Pride of Fenris*. Perhaps Berek already had him in mind for command. Who could tell?

‘Thank you, lord,’ said Ragnar.

Berek clapped him on the back. ‘I am sure you will do well. You fought bravely today. And this is an auspicious place to get your first promotion.’

Sven gave Ragnar a sour look but kept his mouth clamped firmly shut. Ragnar was surprised by his restraint. Berek turned and strode away, bellowing greetings and jokes to the men. It did not surprise Ragnar that he seemed to know all of their names. Morgrim followed.

Ragnar looked at Sven; Sven looked back at him. ‘I fought as well as you bloody did. Why did he not pick me?’

‘Maybe he wanted someone with half a brain,’ said Ragnar.

‘He could have picked Hakon then,’ said Sven and grimaced. Even he seemed to realise that the joke was not funny under the circumstances. Ragnar stared at him for a moment, feeling like a gap was opening up between himself and his friend. Sven met his gaze levelly for a second and then grinned.

‘I can think of worse men to follow,’ he said.

‘Who?’ asked Ragnar.

‘Give me an hour or two and I am sure someone will come to mind. Or maybe a day.’

‘If you have any stray thoughts give them a warm welcome. They will be in a strange place.’

‘Ha bloody ha. I can see that becoming a leader of men hasn’t improved your sense of humour.’



FOURTEEN

Ragnar stared in wonder at the inner sanctum of the shrine. Ahead lay the avenue of heroes, its wall niches filled with statues of famous leaders of the Space Wolves, and tapestries depicting scenes of their most famous victories. He was glad the place did not seem to have been much touched by the heretics. It had been stasis sealed when the complex was invaded, and it had taken the attackers time to burn their way through into the massive fortified vault. And they had got what they came for too. The Spear of Russ was missing! Even now, the Great Wolf and his captains and the priests discussed what to do next. They had freed the shrine but its most precious treasure was gone. It was a calculated insult to the honour of the Chapter.

How would the primarch feel on his return to discover his weapon in the hands of enemies? Could he return at all, if the prophesy could not be fulfilled? Ragnar was suddenly glad that such questions were not for him to debate, or answer. He had a more personal mission here. This was a pilgrimage and a time to consider his place in the Chapter and in the world.

Ragnar limped forward. His leg still ached a little from his wounds although they were healing fast. It was a walk, not so much as through distance as through time. Every step took him deeper into the past. At the beginning of the walk, near the entrance hall, he passed the most recent heroes of the Chapter. He recognised the figure of Anakron Silvermane, who had directly preceded Logan Grimnar as Great Wolf, and looked in wonder at the tapestry depicting his last stand, fighting grimly against the eldar host that had surprised his command position on Melkior. Stranger yet was the realisation that he recognised some of the other figures depicted in that near legendary event. There was Grimnar himself, bloodied but unbowed, fighting some gaudily clad eldar assassin. There was even Sergeant Hakon, garbed as a Grey Hunter, battling with an eldar guardian. The death of Silvermane had taken place nearly four centuries before. It was strange to think that some of the men in the shrine today had been there. It was one thing knowing that the process that turned a man

into a Space Wolf could vastly extend the span of his years. It was another encountering evidence of the fact.

Ragnar smiled. He was glad he had chosen to make this pilgrimage alone and in the darkest watches of the night, while most of his battle-brothers slept. He felt the need to make this journey, for the weight of responsibility that had fallen on his shoulders wearied him. It was reassuring to stand in the presence of these ancient artefacts and feel himself part of a long procession of men who had walked this way in the past. He had something in common with the generations of fearsome warriors that had preceded him. It made him feel as if he were connected to something greater than himself. He needed something to bolster his self-confidence. From now on, until he failed or was replaced, his decisions would affect the lives of his comrades and friends. If he made a wrong choice, Sven or Aenar or any of the others might die. Once he would not have minded, indeed would have exulted at being in a position to engineer the death of Strybjorn, but he did not feel that way now.

If anything, he knew he would feel worse if his former enemy died because of his orders, for he would never be able to tell whether he had secretly wanted the man's death and caused it. That would be a great dishonour.

He strode past several more statues of Wolf Lords, looking for faces he recognised but found none. Hardly surprising, for a man had to be dead to get his likeness sculpted from stone in this part of the shrine. He asked himself if he should have turned Berek down and refused the promotion no matter how temporary. He knew that, despite his doubts, he would not have. Although part of him was near paralysed by the thought of his new responsibilities, another part of him revelled in the fact that he had been picked out from among so many worthy warriors and given this opportunity. It was a great honour to be singled out in such a way by Berek Thunderfist. He knew that he was being tested in the field, and that if he did well here, he could expect further recognition, perhaps one day even become part of the Wolf Guard. Did Berek see that potential in him? Would that not be a great thing?

He paused for a second to consider it. Once there had been a time when it had seemed a great enough honour merely to have been selected to be one of the Wolves. Now, he wanted more. Was his whole life destined to be like this? Would it always be a case of climbing one mountain, only to

discover a greater peak lay beyond, and that he must climb that too? Where would it end – when he was a Wolf Lord, when he was Great Wolf? He smiled at the thought, even though he knew that part of his mind was seriously considering it. And why not? Someone had to be Great Wolf. Even Logan Grimnar had been a Blood Claw once, difficult as that was to imagine now.

He allowed himself to consider it for a while. He pictured himself on Logan's throne, issuing orders to the Wolf Lords, listened to respectfully by the warriors of the whole company, commanding a fleet, standing as an equal to any of the great lords of the million worlds of the Imperium of Man. He pictured himself not as he was now, but grown old and grey and rugged, with features hewn from stone, and a voice that sounded like granite cracking. He pictured himself giving orders that affected the fate of worlds, striding heroically through desperate battles on a hundred planets, writing his name in the annals of Chapter history. He saw himself immortalised here in statue and tapestry and painting. There was a thought that thrilled his young heart, and not his alone. He knew that every Wolf, even Sven, must think these things sometimes.

He strode on for a dozen paces wrapped in his dreams of glory, but as he did so, other thoughts filtered into his mind, less bold, less bright, more chilling. He turned and looked up at the massive oil painting of the Battle of Balinor, a canvas depicting one of the most famous fights of the 38th millennium. Beneath it stood the statue of Great Wolf Fenrik Grimheart. The statue held a battered old helmet under one arm, and a notched chainsword in the other. It was the same sword that the painter had depicted covered in blood in the picture.

Where was Fenrik now, wondered Ragnar? Gone, along with all the others whose statues lined this corridor. They had found glory and they had found greatness, but in the end the grave had claimed them too. No matter how famous, men had still sung their funeral songs, and toasted them with the burial cup. Their gene-seed had been returned to the Chapter just like the gene-seed of the common warriors who had followed them. Yes, they were remembered in song and saga and the annals of the Chapter, but they were gone. Their thrones were occupied by a different man. In the end, what had all their striving got them but the same reward as everyone else?

Even as the thought occurred to him, Ragnar knew that it was not so. Those men were remembered. They had written their names in history in

blood and fire. They had shown themselves to be worthy companions of Russ on the day of the Final Battle. But had not the warriors who followed them done that too? It would not just be the Great Wolves remembered here who would fight on the Last Day. Others whose names had not been remembered, who had perhaps been even more worthy would be there too.

Ragnar looked on down the corridor, to the almost endless parade of statues, to the hundreds of works of art and battle honours that lined the way. Strange, he thought, he had expected to find glory here, but he had not expected to discover melancholy at the same time. Perhaps the two were inextricable. He was contemplating the greatness of elder days, but in doing so he was also being made aware that such days had passed. It was at once a depressing and a reassuring thought.

The old days were gone. The future was a palimpsest on which nothing had yet been written. He found his mood had come full circle. Men always passed on, always had, always would. Only the Emperor was eternal. One day, Logan Grimnar would be gone, and someone else, maybe Berek, maybe Sigrid, would sit in his place. And they in turn would be gone, and a new man would stand where they had stood. Why should that man not be Ragnar?

Still there was a kernel of sadness in the thought now that had not been there when thoughts of future glory had entered his mind. In order for him to reach that distant goal, good men would have to pass away. Men he liked, or at least respected. It was one thing to tell yourself that such was the way of the universe. It was another to think about what it really meant.

He tried to bring back his earlier bright dreams in all of their radiance. He tried to feel as he had felt but a few short minutes ago that this first promotion was but one first step on the long march that would lead him to the Great Wolf's throne. He brought them back but now he found them grimmer and darker. For he knew that command was not simply going to be an endless series of heroic deeds committed with the eye of history upon him. It also involved great responsibility and great weariness.

Logan Grimnar looked old. Not feeble, for he was as hale as a gnarled and weather-beaten old oak, but still old. There were other men in the Chapter as old as he and they did not seem so obviously ancient. Command had weighed Grimnar down, and carved some of those lines on his face, and even from his own limited experience of it, Ragnar was beginning to understand why. By his own decisions, Ragnar might bring

death to himself and his comrades, but the Great Wolf could conceivably bring ruin to the entire Chapter, and end the existence of something that had endured for ten millennia. The thought of it made Ragnar shiver. It was not a good thing, on this dark night, to contemplate such things, particularly not in this place. Perhaps the loss of the Spear was an omen. Perhaps far worse things were yet to come.

He paused for a moment, about half way along the great approach, for he could see figures coming towards him. It seemed he was not the only one who had chosen this late hour to make his devotions. As the figures approached he could see that it was Sigrid Trollsbane and his hulking bodyguard.

Ragnar was not surprised. Sigrid had a reputation for piety. As he stalked closer, he noticed Ragnar and the company markings on his armour and his face froze. His scent acquired a slight acrid under-taste of hostility. He swept past Ragnar without a greeting, not even appearing to notice him. Ragnar shrugged. If a Wolf Lord deemed him beneath his notice, it was none of his business.

Perhaps though there was more to it than that. It seemed all too possible that the man was hostile because of the company to which Ragnar belonged. If so, that was madness. They were in a war here, and they were all on the same side. Internal dissension could easily prove fatal.

Ragnar knew he was being unrealistic. Such tension was common, perhaps even normal, given the structure of the Chapter. All of the companies competed with each other in many ways, as did their Wolf Lords. There were many competitions and tournaments between companies, and much good-natured banter too. Within companies, the various clans and packs would often develop rivalries as they attempted to prove their superiority. And, of course, it was not unknown for there to be long-standing rivalries between individual soldiers. All warriors wanted glory: for themselves, for their squads, for their company, for their Chapter, and probably in that order, unless they were very unusual men.

Ragnar found himself remembering an old saying among his people: ‘When a man seeks the hand of a woman, he may have at most a dozen rivals. When a man seeks glory, the whole world is his rival.’ And Ragnar supposed, all of history too, for the Wolves constantly measured themselves against the mighty deeds of their ancestors. In this place, with

the footsteps of Berek's great rival fading behind him, such thoughts came easily.

Ragnar wondered exactly why Berek and Sigrid had so great a dislike for each other. It seemed more than they were simply rivals for the position of next Great Wolf, or at least, they perceived themselves to be. Perhaps it was just their wildly varying personalities. The two seemed polar opposites, as different as night from day. There were rumours that once, long ago they had even been friends, and that a rift had sprung up among them. Ragnar decided that, when he had the time, he would investigate.

He strode on, passing figures of men from the dawn ages of the Chapter, and scenes from the first two millennia after its founding. He hurried his footsteps, keen now to see the inner sanctum itself, resolving that he would return to look upon these ancient artefacts later, when he had more time.

Ahead of him, he could see a blue glow, flickering through the mighty archway. The arch was surmounted by the head of a wolf, and each massive stone was marked with the runic writing of his Chapter. The stones themselves radiated an aura of awesome age. Ragnar knew he was approaching the very heart of this mighty temple complex.

He stepped into one of the most ancient shrines of his brotherhood. It was a vast chamber with a vaulted ceiling and odd crystalline slits in the ceiling through which lights descended in mighty beams. The way to the sarcophagus of Garm was worn smooth by the feet of all the Wolves who had approached this sacred site over the preceding centuries. The enormous coffin was also a shrine. It dominated the northern part of the sanctum. The rest of the vault was plain and undecorated save for the tiled floor which depicted a scene of the heads of four mighty, fearsome wolves, opening their mouths to swallow a gigantic moon.

The sacred flame leapt almost ten times the height of a man above him, and it glowed with a chill blue light that illumined the fane. He stood before a sarcophagus carved from the tusk of a gigantic, long extinct sea monster, the notorious dragon whale of Garm which it was said Russ had slain with a single cast of the Spear.

A sculptor of genius had turned the tusk into an amazing work of art. Its entire surface was carved with an incredible level of detail. Ragnar looked closely and saw scene after scene of battle and conflict in which

thousands upon thousands of Space Wolves in the antique style of armour favoured during the Great Crusade fought with hordes of monsters, aliens and daemons. Ragnar knew from his studies that each and every warrior who had still been alive when Russ had strode this world was represented here. Every suit of armour bore its own individual markings. Every visible face was different. If you looked closely you could see character and emotion expressed on their miniscule features.

Here was a Wolf Lord, his mouth open in a bellow of rage as he slew the mutated worshippers of Chaos. There was a sergeant smiting the monstrous tyrannids. There was Russ himself, larger than any mortal, wrestling with Magnus the Red, the wicked cyclopean primarch of the Thousand Sons. The intricate sculpture made it obvious how little some things had changed in ten thousand years.

Here were Rhino armoured personnel carriers, looking exactly the same as the ones stationed outside the shrine now. There were Thunderhawk gunships that might have been the craft that Ragnar himself had ridden in recently. The products of the great templates of the ancients represented a peak of engineering perfection that had never been surpassed, and most likely never would.

The top of the sarcophagus was a representation of Garm as he had been in life. His image lay like an ivory giant atop the casket that held his bones. Its open hands were held on its breast in such a way to be obviously clasping something. Ragnar knew without being told that they had held the Spear of Russ.

Standing on this spot, Ragnar could feel its holiness. Russ himself was said to have had some part in the creation of the sarcophagus, imbuing it with a portion of his power, granting his blessing to the master sculptor Corianis. A flickering flame of light burned in the air above the shrine, illuminating it, and by the casting of shadows lending the battle scenes an illusion of life, making the figure on it seem almost alive.

But there was definitely something missing. This was the place where the Spear of Russ had rested. If something could make you aware of itself merely by its absence, it was the Spear. This whole shrine was meant to be its resting place, and with the sacred weapon gone, it seemed somehow meaningless. No, that was not true. It just did not feel whole. Even Ragnar, who had never been here before, could tell something was missing, and could have done so even if he had not known the significance of the place.

Ragnar reached out and touched the shrine. He thought he felt a faint tingling pass through the tips of his gauntlet. It was amazing to think he was touching something that Russ himself had touched, that he was in the presence of something the primarch had created. He closed his eyes and felt renewed. Energy flowed into him from the shrine. The ache of his wounds dulled. He had no doubt whatsoever that he was in the presence of holiness.

He closed his eyes and breathed in the cool air of the shrine. The flame gave no warmth, merely light. The tingling in his fingertips increased and he made to draw his hand away but could not. Strangely, he felt no sense of panic. The warmth continued to flow from the tomb. He tried to open his eyes, but they felt as if the lids had been glued shut.

Strange patterns flickered across his darkened field of vision. The silence intensified till his own heartbeat felt like a drum. The smell of ambergris from the censers drowned out all of the scents around him. Perhaps he was having some sort of delayed reaction to his wounds. Perhaps he should try and break away and seek help. He dismissed the thought. He did not feel as if anything were wrong. In fact, he felt a growing sense of wellness, of rightness, of benison.

The glow increased. The warmth deepened and flowed through him. He knew that in some strange way he was reaching out and touching the spirit of Russ, that all of the years intervening between the Primarch's time and his own meant nothing. In some timeless time and spaceless space, a spirit still hovered and looked out on his followers. He knew that he was touching the divine directly, and the feeling awed him. The ground on which he stood, and the shrine which he touched, were both holy. He knew that for as long as he lived he would not forget this moment.

His eyes opened. His grip was freed. He turned to depart the sacred place, renewed. They would find the Spear, he knew. They had to.



FIFTEEN

‘Why are you looking so bloody happy, Ragnar?’ asked Sven. He waited only a moment for a reply and returned to squeezing the tube of field rations into his mouth.

Ragnar leaned on the fortified parapet of the outer wall and looked out into the distance. He was troubled and Sven knew it. He just did not quite know how to express himself.

Bluish snow, tainted by alchemical pigments, fell in chill cold flakes. Ragnar stuck out his tongue and tasted one. It tingled in his mouth as he swallowed. He studied their surroundings. Enormous buildings disappeared into the monstrous, low-hanging purple and black clouds that filled the sky, roofing the city. In the distance he could hear the crackle of a firefight.

Ragnar felt strangely reluctant to answer his friend’s question. There had been something personal and sacred about his experience at the shrine and he did not want to share it with anyone else at the moment. He wanted time to think about what had happened.

Ragnar glanced around. The rest of the Blood Claws were huddled along the wall, staring into the distance. Aenar raised brass field magnoculars to his eyes and looked out for a moment, before handing the viewing instruments to Torvald. It was obvious they were looking for some sign of the battle going on out there. Strybjorn held his weapon at the ready, looking relaxed yet alert. The rest of the pack lay sprawled along the wall, taking their rest while they could. It was a trick they had learned from the Grey Hunters – sleep when you can.

Behind them the previously empty space around the shrine was filled with the massive bulk of Imperial spacecraft, each disgorging its cargo of men and machines. Now the Wolves had established a safe beachhead, General Trask, the Imperial field commander, was prepared to reinforce it. Tens of thousands of Imperial Guard, hundreds of massive battle tanks and dozens of heavy artillery pieces were being deployed on the plain around the shrine. Not nearly as many as were holding the spaceport twenty kilometres away, but enough to make the shrine all but impregnable.

From up here Ragnar could make out the standards of the 12th Maravian Guard regiment, the twin-headed eagle holding a solar disk in its claws. The Maravians themselves lined the emplacements in the walls nearby. Tall, broad shouldered men in light blue winter combat uniforms, they held their lasrifles as if they knew how to use them. A veteran regiment according to camp rumour, they held themselves apart from the Space Wolves, seemingly a little in awe of them.

One of them, obviously a green recruit, had actually asked Ragnar whether the Wolves really had cleared the shrine in the teeth of ten times their number. Ragnar had told them it was only five times, but that had been enough to silence the lad. Lad! Ragnar smiled. The man was probably older than he was.

Another glance showed Imperial Guard officers in braided uniforms and commissars in thick, black coats moving among along the battlements, come to inspect the position for themselves. The officers smiled and talked, at least until they got close to the Wolves; the commissars looked stern and forbidding. One of them caught Ragnar's glance and gave him a tight-lipped smile. Ragnar grinned, showing his fangs, and the commissar looked away. He was not sure whether it was because the man was intimidated, or he thought Ragnar might be some sort of mutant to be cleansed. Ragnar would not have bet against it being the latter. Not all servants of the Imperium regarded the Space Marine Chapters with awe, or even liking.

Not that it mattered under the circumstances. Ragnar felt sure that if it came to fighting, the Wolves could take out this entire regiment, no matter how badly they were outnumbered. He pushed the thought from his mind. Everyone was on the same side here. Out beyond the walls were hordes of heretics and daemon-worshippers. There were enemies enough to go around without looking for any closer to hand.

Sven had had enough of being ignored. 'Are you just going to stand there with your mouth open and wait for a Thunderhawk to fly in or are you going to answer my bloody question?'

'I was thinking about what to say.'

'Are you ill? You don't usually take so long to answer.'

Ragnar looked back at Sven for a moment, and wondered whether he should tell him. He looked significantly at the Moravians for a moment and Sven nodded, and gave them time to pass way off along the parapet,

then slowly, in halting stumbling words, Ragnar tried to explain what he had felt in the shrine the previous evening. Sven belched loudly but said nothing. When Ragnar finished speaking, he looked up at him searchingly.

‘I’ve heard that others have had the same experience. Some of the Wolf Lords, some of the Long Fangs, one or two Grey Hunters. Never heard of it happening to a Blood Claw. Maybe you should talk about it with Ranek or one of the Rune Priests. Maybe it means you’ll be the one to find the Spear.’

Sven’s tone suggested that for once he was not joking. Ragnar considered this for a minute. Sven was only echoing what he himself had thought in the minutes after he had left the shrine. Then he had felt like running to find Ranek and tell him what had happened. Some instinct had stopped him, and he had gone to sleep instead.

‘The priests are all in the sanctum with the Great Wolf and his retinue, working divinations, trying to find out where the Spear is. Who knows when that will be done?’

‘When you get the chance, talk to them,’ said Sven.

‘I will,’ said Ragnar.

‘Maybe I should go and look at the old pile of bones,’ said Sven stifling a yawn. ‘Maybe Russ will appear and promote me to Grey Hunter.’

Ragnar shook his head. Sven did not seem capable of taking anything seriously for more than a few minutes. No, Ragnar corrected himself, maybe he just hid what he took seriously behind a screen of levity.

‘Think they will find the Spear?’ Sven asked eventually.

‘They have to.’

Slowly a thought seemed to work its way from Sven’s brain to his tongue. He looked almost embarrassed to voice it. ‘Would it not be terrible if we were the ones, our generation, this Chapter, I mean, who lost the Spear of Russ.’

So, despite appearances, some things did weigh heavily on Sven’s soul.

‘We will find it, and when we do, the ones who took it will pay.’

‘Why did they take it, do you think?’

‘Because it’s ancient and sacred.’

‘To us. To the folk of Garm, yes. But to heretics?’

Apparently, thoughts also found their way into Sven’s head sometimes.

‘Maybe they will use it as a rallying point. Claim that they are the ones blessed by Russ. Chaos worshippers have done such things before. Their

holy one, Sergius, is claiming that the Emperor has forsaken Garm and that only Chaos can save the world.'

'He's probably praying for Chaos to save him, now that I am here.' Ragnar could almost see the thought return to trouble Sven's mind.

'Wasn't the Spear supposed to be magical? Garm did wound Magnus with it, after all, and Russ used it to kill a heap of monsters. Could it not protect itself? And why couldn't old Lemman Russ leave it at the Fang like any sensible Space Wolf would have done?'

'I am not Lemman Russ, Sven, I can't answer that. Maybe he left it here for some purpose. Was it not as a mark of his respect for Garm?'

'I mean, the locals did not exactly make a good job of protecting it, did they?'

'They did for ten thousand years.'

'Aye, I suppose so.'

Silence fell again. Ragnar considered Sven's words. What could the heretics be doing with the Spear? Ragnar had at first thought they had taken it merely to spite the Wolves, but Sven did have a point. If the Spear was a mystic weapon in some way, then what other things could they be up to? He shook his head. He was neither a mystic nor a scholar. It was not for him to answer such questions.

Ragnar returned to studying the distant cityscape. The buildings were huge, larger even than many of those he had seen on Aeriis. They also looked much older, as if they had been hewn from enormous chunks of granite eroded over the millennia. Their exteriors were soot blackened and scarred by acid rain. The ancient gargoyles clinging to their sides were mere blank outlines. Everywhere black clouds puffed from enormous high chimneys. Even though war raged all around, the forges of Garm continued to work.

That was another part of their current problem. Garm was a major centre of weapons production, and had been since the time of Russ. As long as those factories kept working they would churn out an endless supply of munitions that would keep the war going, perhaps even allow it to be taken to other worlds. There was no shortage of armaments here. No shortage of men to use them either, judging from what he had seen. Then his mind returned to the question of the Spear.

Rumour had it that interrogation of the surviving heretics revealed they were little more than bandits, a horde made up from the local militias

who had been driven from their destroyed factory keep. There had been tens of thousands of them in the initial attack, spurred on by this Father Sergius, who had since vanished along with his acolytes and the holy relic. All that Ragnar could gather was that Sergius had once been an Imperial priest, high in the temple hierarchy. He had been a well-respected scholar too. It just went to show, anybody who was not a Wolf could be a heretic. You just never knew.

Looking through the magnoculars, Ragnar could see the evil sign of the Eye of Horus blazoned across the sides of one of those cloud-piercing keeps. Just the sight of it made him feel sick with hatred and anger.

Focusing on the building showed him the fighting that was under way. Shots blazed from the slit-like windows at the tiny figures advancing across the cratered concrete plain below. Heavy weapons lashed out at Predator tanks. It was hard to judge whether those men there were loyalist or rebel. The banners told no story. They bore a white bear on a blue background. From the briefing he had received before they made the drop, Ragnar knew that these were supposed to be a faction loyal to the Imperium, but that meant nothing. The situation here on the ground was fluid.

Another complication was that every factory keep was an independent kingdom ruled by its own Merchant House, in theory owing allegiance to the Imperial governor, in practice contributing only tithes and conscripts to the planetary levies. Each Merchant House had its own private army, its own weapons, and its own legacy of grudges and hatreds with rival Houses. It seemed that the assassination of the governor and the breakdown of planetary order had given everyone the excuse they needed to start paying off those grudges. This was civil war on a scale that almost defied comprehension. Alliances shifted daily.

From reports they had received it seemed that it mattered less whether a House was loyal or rebel than whether it was prepared to help you smash your hereditary enemies. Treachery was the rule; savagery the law. So far the fighting had been contained on the western continent, and even here there were still large pockets of stability, but as the fighting wore on, it was spreading across the map like a stain of spilled blood. Soon, the whole world would burn, if steps were not taken to prevent it.

‘Looks like they’ve got themselves a nice little fight going on over there,’ said Sven. ‘Wish the Great Wolf would let us go and join in.’

‘I’ll be sure to mention that the next time I see him,’ said Ragnar. ‘I’m sure he will give you leave to go and sort out the Garmites.’

‘Bet he won’t,’ said Sven. ‘We’ll need to stay here and play nursemaid to the Guards.’

Another glance backwards showed him massive cloth-metal pavilions erecting themselves automatically. Mess halls, administrative centres, field temples to the Machine God. Among them he could see inquisitors, spacefarers and soldiers of all ranks.

It looked like the entire paraphernalia of the Imperial war machine was being dropped onto Garm. Rumour even had it that a Titan legion would join them soon. Ragnar hoped so. He had long wanted to see one of these mighty man-machines from up close.

Overhead, Thunderhawks flashed across the sky, striking at distant positions. The action seemed more like a vast tiger unsheathing its claws, a swipe in the air to test its strength rather than a considered attack on the enemy. In time the Imperial tiger would roar and strike. At the moment it lay quiescent, surveying its prey.

‘I think I have seen enough bloody snow for one day,’ said Sven. ‘I think I’ll go to the shrine and see if Russ will talk to me. Most likely he will, I reckon. He will say: “Sven, you’re a bloody hero. Go out and show this world what Space Wolves are made of.”’

Ragnar was beginning to wish he had never told his friend of his experience back in the holy of holies. He could see he was going to take a lot of joshing about it.

‘He’ll say: “Sven, if you had a brain you would be dangerous.”’

‘I am bloody dangerous, Ragnar. So are you. So is everybody in this stronghold. I just want to know when we’ll get a chance to prove it to the enemy.’

Ragnar looked into the medical sarcophagi, wondering why Hakon had sent for him. The old sergeant lay stiff and unmoving. Gurgling tubes, filled with greenish fluid, snaked from the walls of the ancient bio-magical machine into the sergeant’s flesh. His carapace had been peeled away, giving him a strange vulnerable look. His skin was pallid, like that of a corpse. A metal mask covered one half of his head, hiding the great hole in his skull. The scars on the remaining side of his face stood out even more strongly. Only his eyes looked alive. They burned with fury.

The Wolf Priest nodded to Ragnar, telling him it was all right to speak, and then retired to his duties. A few moments later, Ragnar could hear him muttering medicinal incantations over some of the other patients.

‘How are you?’ Ragnar asked. Hakon’s lips quirked into a tight smile, but the fury never left his eyes.

‘I have been better,’ he said.

‘You will be so again.’

Hakon gave a near imperceptible shake of the head. ‘I do not think so, Ragnar. I have heard the healers speaking; there is too much damage for my body to heal. Parts of my brain were blown away. My spine is damaged. I will never fight again. Or walk for that matter.’

There was no self-pity in Hakon’s manner, only truth. Ragnar did not know what to say. Confronted by the magnitude of the sergeant’s loss, he suddenly felt very young and inexperienced.

‘I heard you were field promoted,’ said Hakon. ‘That is why I asked to see you.’

‘I would have come anyway.’

‘No matter. I think you will do well, Ragnar, if you live and learn to control that fury of yours. It’s a great thing in a warrior to be a berserker; it is not such a good thing in a leader. A leader needs to be able to see clearly at all times. It’s one thing to throw your own life away in combat, even if it’s not a very clever thing; it’s another thing to throw away the life of your pack.’

‘I know, sergeant. I do not think I am ready for this...’

‘No one ever does, no matter what age they are. Do not think that way. I can see you have it in you to be a great leader one day, Ragnar. You are a thinker, perhaps too much of one, and the Chapter has need of men who can think as well as fight.’

Ragnar did not know what to say, so he kept quiet.

‘I would have recommended you for Grey Hunter soon. You and your packmates Sven and Strybjorn are about ready for it. It seems Berek Thunderfist has already seen that.’

‘What do you mean?’

The sergeant’s voice was soft and rasping, and Ragnar realised there was a certain underlying sadness in it. Hakon was speaking like a man who knows he is going to die soon, he realised.

‘I had some doubts, but I do not think Lord Berek has any. I think you are just about ready for Grey Hunter, but I am not totally sure. Because of your fury; it can be a terrible weakness in a man. Berek seems to think differently, but then he always lacked a certain prudent caution.’

Ragnar opened his mouth to say something, feeling that he should defend the Wolf Lord, but Hakon interrupted. ‘Don’t misunderstand me. The Wolf Lord is hungry for greatness, but he has other virtues that make up for it. He is a great leader whatever flaws he may have and you can learn from him, if you watch him. You’ll learn from his flaws too, if you are as smart as I think you are.’

‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Because I am an old man, Ragnar, and I do not have much more time in the flesh. I can see something in you, Ragnar, Ranek could as well. I am not sure that it is something good, but good or no, I believe you will have a great impact on the Chapter – if you survive. I am trying to make sure that you do more good than harm.’

‘I will always do my best.’

‘Aye, and that might be your undoing, Ragnar. For you are headstrong and have very distinctive views of what the best is. It’s a failing that most Wolves have, until we get some grey hair and a little sense.’

Ragnar wondered whether the healing potions were making Hakon’s mind wander. They sometimes did that even to men with constitutions as strong as a Space Marine’s. Under the strain of injury even their bodies’ ability to metabolise poisons and drugs sometimes behaved strangely.

‘Is that all you have to say?’ Ragnar asked.

‘No. Despite what I just said, I wanted to tell you that I was proud of you. You were the best batch of aspirants I ever trained at Russvik. Maybe the best I ever saw. See that you live up to that.’

Pride filled Ragnar at the old man’s words. Hakon had always been a rough-tongued man, and never spared a word of praise for anybody. Apparently, he had hidden his true feelings.

At this moment, two Iron Priests entered. Something about their attitude told Ragnar that they had come to take Hakon away. They gestured for him to leave. Hakon saw this and nodded.

‘That’s all. Go now, and may Russ watch over you.’

Ragnar nodded and made the sign of the wolf. He could see Hakon flinch as he tried to do the same and his body would not respond. Ragnar

halted for a moment then turned to go. As he left the medical bunker, he knew for certain that he would never see the old man again, and that left him greatly saddened.



SIXTEEN

‘Whose bloody brilliant idea was this?’ muttered Sven, as they slid quietly over the lip of the crater and into the night.

‘Yours,’ said Ragnar. The Thunderhawk had dropped them off kilometres from their target to give them a chance of surprise. The darkness was nearly total. The red glare from the chimneys of the distant factory keeps underlit the clouds, but here in the vast space between the buildings all was shadow. Ragnar tasted the air, hunting for the scent of enemies; he found none. He cocked his head and heard only the scuttling of the giant rats moving between the buildings.

‘What?’

‘You did say you wanted action so I asked the Great Wolf–’

‘Is that right? Did you also suggest this bloody stupid mission?’

‘Quiet!’ Ragnar held up his hand for silence.

‘Yes, your majesty,’ muttered Sven.

A glare told him that Ragnar meant it. ‘There’s something over there. Next crater,’ he sub-vocalised into the comm-net. ‘Bearing north, north-west. Distance about two hundred metres. Looks like the augurs were right.’

Ragnar looked back at his small squad. He knew they had all been listening in on the sealed link. Ragnar gestured for them to keep moving. He was certain now that he had heard something. He was not sure what, but he was certain it was not rats. He picked his way forward carefully, alert for the booby traps and landmines that dotted this cold, empty no-man’s-land. He considered how the crater might have come to be occupied without orbital surveillance spotting anyone moving into it. Suddenly someone had just been there.

Old maintenance tunnels and subway systems ran under the plascrete plains. Most had been sealed off, some had been flooded with toxic waste, but a few were still in operation. Some of them had even been exposed to the surface by the blast craters. Ragnar could remember seeing gaping tunnel mouths and masses of twisted girders in some of the aerial holoprints of the terrain. Anyone trying to make a night approach to the

shrine would probably use them. Or there was always the possibility of magic, he supposed. The Chaos worshippers might have used sorcery to teleport themselves in. But why?

Ragnar dismissed the thought. That was what he and his squad were here to find out. All they needed to do was investigate and report back their findings. If it was a problem they could deal with, they would. If it wasn't, the Chapter would. All nice and simple, which made a change. Little seemed to be straightforward here on Garm. The place was a seething hotbed of intrigue, treachery, betrayal and shifting alliances.

So far the Rune Priests' divinations still had not been able to locate the Spear. To all intents and purposes, Father Sergius and his minions had disappeared from the face of the planet. All the priests had been able to work out was that something terrible and evil would happen if the Spear was not returned. Such portents were hardly surprising under the circumstances.

Of course, there were hundreds of rumours flickering over the comm-net, but so far none of them had checked out and many had been set-ups for ambushes. Ragnar smiled savagely. The would-be ambushers had learned to their cost how unwise such attacks were.

Ragnar held his weapons ready and tasted the air. The wind had changed and brought new odours to his nostrils. Yes, there it was. Amid the chemical tang he could pick out the faint odour of unwashed bodies, the pheromone traces of fear and anger. There were men out there, in the nearest crater. Not many, but enough to spring an ambush.

Ragnar's flesh crawled. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. At this very moment, an enemy might be sighting a bolter at him. In a heartbeat, its shell might pass through his head and send him to greet his ancestors in hell. The rest of the pack sensed the change in him, and crouched down, making their silhouettes smaller. A moment later they too caught the scent. He could tell by the tiny pack noises they made, and the change in their own scent.

Who was out there, he wondered, easing his weight down gently, making less noise than a cat. Another patrol? This no-man's-land was full of them at night, the orbital augurs spotted the heat trails of many groups of men. All of them had learned to avoid the killing ground around the shrine, but that still left this whole vast industrial wasteland to fight over.

Judging by the signs of firefights they had witnessed, they often encountered each other as well. Or it might just be refugees fleeing some broken factory keep, seeking shelter amid the debris of a world shattered by war. Or it might be something else.

Ahead of them the lip of the crater loomed. Whoever was inside it had not spotted them yet. Hardly surprising for they lacked the night sight and the enhanced senses of the Space Wolves. Ragnar told himself not to be overconfident. He did not know this was the case. They might have night vision magnoculars. They might have all manner of divinatory sensors. They might be mutants with night-adapted eyes. They might have the aid of evil magic. They might just be waiting until he reached point blank range before opening up with every weapon they had. He recalled the words of Ranek: 'In war, you cannot afford to make the easy assumptions, to see only what you want to see. You need to engage with the world as it actually is, not as you think it should be. Anything else, and you will find yourself quite quickly dead.'

The lip of another crater rose above them now. He could see it was made up of packed rubble and interspersed with torn and twisted girders, and the thick steel mesh that had once reinforced the surface. Among the broken stonework bones gleamed brightly, and the burned out remains of a few groundcars lay like the carapaces of monstrous metal beetles. Ragnar paid close attention to them, for they provided good cover for any potential ambushers.

Quickly he advanced onto the slope, testing the rubble carefully with his foot, knowing that if he displaced any, if it gave way beneath him, he might as well light a flare to give away his position. Cautiously he moved up the slope in a half crouch, until he came to the crater's rim.

So far, so good.

Nothing had gone wrong. No one had opened fire. An ambush now seemed unlikely. Still, the hardest part was yet to come. He needed to get over the rim without being spotted, and without silhouetting himself against the skyline for anyone taking refuge in the crater to spot. Here the night's blackness should help him.

He eased himself down until he was flat and then slowly, gradually, raised his head above the rim. He could see the dim shapes of men below him. A gentle snoring told him that most of them were asleep. Not exactly an alert patrol, but the smell of gunmetal told him that they were armed.

There were at least a dozen men down there too. Under the circumstances it would be easy enough to take them out. A group of sleeping men with one or two dozy sentries would hardly be any challenge for a group of Blood Claws. All he need do was give the signal and those men down there would be sent straight to hell. But...

There was something about these men. They smelled scared and weary, but there was no taint of Chaos to them. Of course, this did not mean anything. There were plenty of heretics who showed no outer stigmata of their evil and there were an equal number of perfectly human dupes who believed in the cause of Chaos. At the same time, there was the possibility that these men were allies. Again, that presented a problem, for a man could die just as easily from a friend's bullet as a foe's. Those men down there were scared and armed and might just start blazing away if a stranger spoke to them out of the night.

Briefly, Ragnar considered his options. What should he do? He could order the squad to open fire and wipe the strangers out. Had he been certain they were heretics, he would have done so without a qualm. Considerations of honour did not enter into account when you were dealing with daemon worshippers: you squashed them as reflexively as a man would squash a venomous spider. But he was not entirely certain, and that being the case, he could not bring himself to order their deaths.

'Keep me covered, I am going in for a closer look,' he sub-vocalised silently into the comm-net. Affirmatives rang in his earbead. Keeping himself low, he slid over the rim of the crater, and down into the bowl. These men were careless, he thought, to have left no sentries on guard, and no sentinel devices. Tired or no, under war conditions there was no excuse for it. Silent as a shadow, he moved closer to the group, taking advantage of every bit of cover. A stalking wolf could have been no quieter.

His every nerve was stretched to the sticking point. Every sense was ratcheted up to the keenest. Even as he moved, he realised he had made an elementary mistake. He was the squad leader now. He should not be risking himself. He should have sent one of the others forward. It was too late to worry about it now.

Instead he pushed all such thoughts from his mind and concentrated simply on keeping quiet and alive. The men who were awake were huddled around something. His nose told him it was a small smokeless stove, powered by some chemical oil. The strange acrid tang of it made his

nostrils twitch. They were cooking something: meat of some sort. As he moved closer, he picked out more details. All of them were wearing thick insulated uniforms, covered in fur lined greatcoats, and their breath steamed into the cold night air.

Since Ragnar's body had adapted to it, he had never given the cold here a second thought, but he could see these men were wrapped and muffled like tribesmen for winter back on Fenris. Several of them wore two greatcoats, and had their hands muffled in great furry gloves. All of them wore filter masks over their faces to protect against the heavily polluted air.

One of the men was an officer. He wore a high fur hat with earflaps to cover his face, and epaulettes of rank showed on the shoulders of his tattered coat. A cloak of thick fur was draped on one shoulder. Ragnar assumed this was another emblem of rank, for it would have been far more practical for the man to have wrapped it around himself.

Ragnar was so close now he could almost reach out and touch the officer, and still no one had noticed him. These men almost deserved to die for their carelessness alone, he thought. Then again, few of them possessed the superhuman senses and reflexes of Space Marines either, and none of them had learned the craft of stealth hunting the wild beasts of Fenris.

'Cold tonight!' said one of the men. The accent was so thick and guttural as to be almost incomprehensible, but it was still recognisably Imperial Gothic. 'Cold enough to freeze the nadgers off a snow dog.'

Ragnar froze in place, keeping low, wondering if one of the men would spot him. It seemed unlikely; most of them had been huddled around their stove staring at its small purple flame. Their night vision would not be good. 'We should never have left Ironfang Keep,' said another.

'We did not have much choice,' said the officer. His voice was higher and his accent clearer than those of the common soldiers who had spoken. Ragnar had studied enough of the ethnography of the Imperium to know that he most likely belonged to the ruling class here. At the very least he was of a higher social strata than the first two. 'Not with Sergius's dogs running the show now.'

Ragnar felt a surge of excitement. Perhaps this man knew the location of Sergius? He tried to think calmly. Maybe not. Every loyalist on the planet talked about the heretics as Sergius's dogs.

‘Begging your pardon, sir, but we should have stayed on and fought.’

‘Stayed on and been killed is what you mean,’ said the officer. ‘Like Lord Koruna and the rest of the clan.’

His tone said that he wanted no argument, and so did the way his hand played with the flap of his pistol’s holster, but his men were tired and scared and obviously a long way from home. Discipline was fraying fast.

‘Some of our people are still holding out. We could have stayed with them.’

‘If we are successful we can fetch help. There’s no way we can hold out against the heretics now that the priest and his infernal minions are there.’

‘How do you know those ships we saw coming down were not more heretics? The Emperor knows we’ve seen enough of them come out of the Eye of Terror. Those comm-net broadcasts could be a trick. It could all be a trap by the Chaos lovers to lure us to our doom. We don’t know the Wolves have come back to take their shrine.’

‘We don’t know for certain. That’s what we’re here to find out. If those ships are loyal to the Emperor, we might be able to get aid.’

‘And if they are not, sir?’

‘Then we go back to Ironfang and die alongside our people.’

Ragnar had heard enough to tell him what he wanted to know. These men did not talk like heretics, and he doubted they were play-acting for his benefit. There was no way they could even have spotted him. And any attempt to get closer to the shrine would be suicidal now. He decided it was time to intervene. The officer strode away from the fire to urinate. Ragnar followed him into the darkness and waited for the man to complete his business.

The Space Wolf rose slowly and placed his bolt pistol against the officer’s neck while clamping his hand firmly over his mouth. The man briefly tried to struggle but it was as futile as a mouse struggling in the mouth of a wolf; the Space Marine’s strength was simply too great. Ragnar carried the man deeper into the darkness at the crater’s edge, then spoke quietly and rapidly into the man’s ear.

‘I have a bolt pistol at the base of your skull. If I pull the trigger your eyes will have a second looking at your brains before you die.’

Ragnar could smell the man’s fear now. He controlled it well but it was there. He tried kicking at a rock to make a scuffing sound, but Ragnar

lifted him clean off his feet.

‘Your troops are covered and my men are on a hair-trigger. If you make any noise, or try and alert them, they will die. Do not do anything foolish again.’

Ragnar felt the man relax. The tension went out of him. He could also see that the man was now trying to work out what was happening. He was thinking that if things were as Ragnar had said, why were he and his warriors still alive? Ragnar allowed him a moment’s silence to give the thought time to sink in, then spoke again: ‘You are loyal to the Emperor?’

Again the man hesitated for a second. Ragnar did not think it was because he was a heretic; the officer was trying to decide what would happen if he said yes. He obviously felt his life was in the balance. A wrong answer would most likely prove fatal. Ragnar decided not to give him any help with his response. The reply would be an interesting indicator of his character. He could feel the man’s neck muscles move as he tried to nod. Ragnar let him move his head.

‘That is very fortunate,’ said Ragnar, ‘since I am too. However, the situation here is tense, and it would be unfortunate if two forces loyal to the Emperor were to come to blows because of a misunderstanding. I am going to let you go, but don’t do anything stupid. If you do it will be fatal... for you and your men. Do you understand me?’

The man nodded once more. Ragnar let him go, and he whirled to confront him. Even in the gloom Ragnar saw the look of shock on the man’s face and smelled his bewilderment. Ragnar was at least a head taller than he was and much broader and heavier. His captive was doubtless wondering how such a presence could have possibly snuck up on him. Realisation dawned slowly, and the man’s confusion was replaced by wonder.

‘You are a Space Marine,’ he said.

‘I am a Space Wolf,’ Ragnar corrected him. The officer’s knees threatened to give way so great was his relief. At the last second he regained control of himself, and Ragnar did not have to catch him.

‘The Emperor be praised,’ the man muttered. ‘The Emperor be praised.’

‘Are you all right, sir?’ came a voice from around the fire.

‘I am fine,’ the officer replied. There was a burst of laughter from the nearby soldiers. It was just as well the officer did not have ears as keen as

Ragnar's, otherwise he would have caught the coarse jokes his men were making about how long he was taking. Sven was probably enjoying them though, Ragnar thought.

'You're from the shrine,' murmured the officer. 'It was your ships that we saw landing.'

Ragnar nodded.

'The Emperor be praised indeed. Some of the rebel scum claimed it was reinforcements for their own side. Maybe now we have a chance.'

'Tell your men that we are coming into the camp. Tell them not to shoot. Then we can talk.'

The officer complied, yelling that he was about to come back with an ally, and not to shoot otherwise there would be hell to pay. Ragnar sensed the confusion among the soldiers. They were wondering whether it was some sort of trick or trap. Ragnar decided that he had better take a hand. Many of the sleepers were rising hastily, reaching for their weapons.

'I am a Space Marine and an ally. We have you surrounded but there is no need to worry. As long as you do not shoot there will be no trouble.'

Again he sensed confusion, anger and fear. The situation could easily turn nasty, so he decided to take a risk in order to keep it under his control. He pushed the officer ahead of him and strode confidently into the group of men. Lasrifles pointed at him, fingers tight on their triggers. Then he saw looks of wonder, fear, even awe on the men's face as they recognised him for what he was. The long links between Garm and Fenris had left all the natives capable of identifying that.

'By the Throne, the Wolves have come,' said one man. He sounded very pleased and relieved.

'Now we can sort out those heretics!' said another. In moments they had swarmed around him, slapping his back, clutching his arm. They seemed utterly relieved, like men who had been lost in a desert and suddenly encountered a guide. Within moments their earlier mutinous attitude had completely disappeared. Ragnar was almost touched by this show of the faith that the people of Garm had in the Wolves. He supposed those ten millennia of history had done something to instil it.

Looking closely at them now, he could see that their faces were pinched and starved; the hands clutching their weapons were painfully thin. Most of them had a slightly feverish look in their eyes. These were

men who had obviously endured great hardship, and who were relieved by his presence.

‘The Emperor has sent his warriors to save us from the heretics,’ said one man.

Ragnar considered this for a moment. He supposed in a way, that it was true. ‘Aye,’ he said. ‘That is true.’

‘Just in the nick of time too,’ said another. ‘The rebels were bad, but those daemon worshippers are the worst of all.’

‘Daemon worshippers?’

‘Aye. Sergius and his men. They have a temple in Ironfang Keep. How they kept it secret so long I will never know. They are down there performing some evil ritual night and day. The Gods of Darkness alone know what they are up to. Some say they are opening a way through the warp storms to the Eye of Terror. Others say they are summoning a legion of daemons.’

‘A temple to Chaos?’ Ragnar asked. The men all spoke in affirmatives.

‘Then it shall be cleansed,’ he said.



SEVENTEEN

Ragnar's Blood Claws took up position among the local militiamen, positioning themselves as sentries so they could watch all the approaches. Ragnar could see Aenar and Torvald talking to the men reassuringly. Sven and the others kept watch on the crater's rim.

Like children in the presence of protective parents, most of the Garmites lay down to sleep, possibly their first decent night's rest in many days. Ragnar sat down near the oil stove, careful not to look directly at the flames. The officer sat opposite him. He fumbled inside his greatcoat, then removed a flask that smelled of strong alcohol and politely offered it to Ragnar.

Ragnar considered for a moment. He could smell no poisons, other than the usual toxins that filled the air and water here. It was still possible, he reckoned, for there to be some subtler narcotic within the flask, but the officer's scent gave no hint of treachery. More important was winning the man's trust and finding out what he knew. Ragnar realised that he was not doing this for purely military reasons. This was the first approximately friendly Garmite he had had any contact with, and he wanted to get the man's views on what was happening here. He took the proffered flask and swigged away. The alcohol burned against the back of his throat, and he felt the usual flush of heat and faint wave of nausea as his body compensated for it. The officer took his flask back and helped himself to a generous mouthful before stoppering it and putting it back inside his coat.

'The real stuff,' he said. 'Not made from brake fluid or vat alcohol.'

'Good,' Ragnar said, more because it was expected than because he agreed. He had tasted much better booze on his travels. If truth be told, he preferred Fenrisian beer.

'Jan Trainor, captain of the Iron Fang Industrial Militia,' he said, placing his hand over his heart in a gesture of greeting.

'Ragnar of the Space Wolves.'

'I am very glad to have met you, Ragnar of the Space Wolves. You do not know how glad.'

Even over the thick cloud of fuel fumes and alcohol, Ragnar could smell the man's fear. He did not judge Trainor a coward. The man's bearing suggested toughness and courage. His scent spoke of weariness, and his bearing of a man who had been living with his nerves stretched to the breaking point for too long.

'Why?' Ragnar asked.

Trainor looked around to make sure they were not being overheard, and lowered his voice as he replied. 'These past few weeks have not been easy. There have been times when I thought we were all going to die.'

'We are all going to die,' said Ragnar. 'Nothing in life is certain save death. It is how we choose to meet it that matters.'

Trainor gave him a bitter smile. 'You are a Space Marine, and I would expect you to feel that way.' The Garmite raised his hand in a gesture of appeasement. 'I mean no harm by that. It's just that I am no more than half a soldier. I put in my time in the keep militia, and because I was born into one of the high clans I am an officer, but if truth be told, I am really a forge-machine supervisor who has been given a gun and sent out to fight.'

Ragnar considered this. He had enough schooling now to understand most of what the man meant. He realised how much he had changed over the past few years. The unlettered barbarian who had grown up amid the islands of the world sea of Fenris would not have been able to grasp the concepts, even if he could have spoken this man's language.

'It looks like you have been doing your share of fighting,' he said, to encourage the man.

'There has been enough to go around.'

'Tell me about it.' Ragnar wanted to ask about Sergius but he also wanted a chance to judge this man and the worth of his words, so he moved towards his goal slowly.

'Even during the best of times there is always tension among the high clans who rule the keeps. Trade disputes, infractions of mining claims, arguments over transit tithes on merchant caravans, the usual thing.'

Perhaps for you, thought Ragnar. It all sounded outlandish enough to him. He tilted his head and considered for a moment. Perhaps not. Where resources were scarce, men always fought. He understood this well enough; even on Fenris it was the case, although there it was for possession of islands and fishing grounds. This place did not sound too different, in its own way.

‘And there are always bandits, cultists and mutants. When I put in my basic two years in the militia we were forever hunting them down. Sometimes it was hard to tell where banditry started and politics began. Sometimes the bandits were financed by other keeps, or even disgruntled factions within our own, but you just try proving it...’

Ragnar realised the man was talking because he needed to talk. He had kept this to himself for too long, and could not share it with his troops, and now he was with someone he considered at least an equal, he wanted to get it off his chest. Ragnar nodded encouragingly and let him speak. He was learning more from the way this man spoke, from his attitude and his bearing, than he could ever learn from a hundred intelligence auguries, no matter how detailed.

‘From time to time, the cartels, the tower leagues, would go to war to settle their differences. I fought in one. I saw thousands of men killed. I thought it was war. I had no idea. I had no idea...’

‘Go on.’

‘There have always been tensions among the keeps... Always. There have even been wars before that have ended up with Imperial intervention. Sometimes by your Chapter. I have studied these things; I know. It was that devil Sergius and his acolytes, always stirring things up behind the scenes while preaching peace and loyalty on the surface... When this all started I thought it was just going to be another one of those, bad enough in its way, but understandable. I was wrong. I don’t think anything could have prepared me for the ferocity of it.’

So far Ragnar had seen nothing that matched the ferocity of any of the engagements he had fought in during his career, but this young man was doubtless judging things by a different standard.

‘It started with a trade dispute between those Bronzehelm bastards, and Ambershield. The two big regional cartels were drawn in. The League of the White Bear for Bronzehelm. The Fists of Garm for Ambershield. Then they called on their allies, and we all waited for war. That’s when we first started to hear the rumours.’

‘Rumours?’

‘Human sacrifice. Daemon worship. Cannibalism. Both sides were accusing the other. No one knew what to believe. Incidents grew worse. There were massacres of merchants, raids on outlying communities. People would be found with their hearts torn out and horrified looks on

their faces. The old governor, Coriolanus, sent in his own men to investigate. They vanished. He announced he was sending off-world for the Inquisition, shortly afterwards he was assassinated. That was when the real trouble started.'

'Real trouble?'

'Father Sergius began preaching that the last days were here, that soon Chaos would come. At first, he told people merely to make peace with their souls, that the end was nigh. I heard the man speak on the comm-channels and his sermons were awesome. There is something in his voice that compels you to believe him, that dispels doubt. His charisma is incredible. And his cult had grown very strong amid all the anarchy. His preachers were everywhere, ministering to the wounded, aiding the poor and the sick. In the beginning we thought they were just another splinter sect of the Imperial cult – there are hundreds here, and they have always been tolerated...'

'But?'

'But we were wrong. Sergius's words spread more despair than you could imagine. Everyone believed that the final battle was nigh. Soon the Wolves would come, and Russ to lead them, and the last days would be on hand. Russ is not with you, is he?'

Ragnar laughed and shook his head but then studied Trainor intently. Obviously Sergius had made a very deep impression on him. He was quite a preacher indeed. Ragnar wanted to know more.

'No – the primarch has not returned,' said Ragnar.

'But the Wolves are here?' There was a feverish intensity about the man now.

'We came to free our shrine and aid the people of Garm. Sergius did not need immense powers of prophesy to foretell we would do that.'

Trainor looked relieved, although what Ragnar was saying was only common sense. It was a testimony to the compelling nature of this heresiarch's words that he had not considered that fact for himself. Perhaps there was sorcery at work here. Or perhaps, in the atmosphere of mass hysteria surrounding this unholy civil war, all sight of common sense had been lost.

'Sergius's followers changed their tune after that. Little by little, day by day, the message changed. Soon, it was inevitable that Chaos would

win. After that it was folly to oppose Chaos. Then it was suicide. Then it was only sound common sense to side with the victor.

‘The strangest thing of all was that so many believed him. There was power in his voice. Even if your faith in the Emperor was strong, it somehow compelled belief. There was such sincerity and passion and belief there. It was almost magical.’

‘Perhaps it was magic, evil magic.’

‘Aye, perhaps. Sergius’s followers went from aiding the poor to fighting their enemies, and they seemed invincible. It was said that bullets could not harm them, and that their cloaks turned blades, and when they were wounded they healed almost instantly. If I had not seen that myself I would not have believed it...’

‘Tell me more,’ Ragnar prompted. ‘You said Sergius is based in your home keep.’

‘Aye, and has been for days. It’s supposed to be a big secret but he’s there.’

‘That’s not just another rumour.’

‘No – I saw him with my own eyes.’

Ragnar held his breath. Perhaps he was closer to finding the location of the Spear than he could have hoped. ‘When?’ he asked, keeping his voice flat, calm, slightly disbelieving.

‘Lord Koruna massed all the loyalist forces to drive the heretics out of Ironfang, nearly ten thousand men, all loyal to the Emperor.’

‘We drove downward from the upper halls, clearing them as we went. We would have succeeded too had it not been for Sergius. We drove them all the way back to the temple doors. The heretics were all but beaten when Sergius and his bodyguard appeared – and the things they had brought with them.’

‘Things?’

‘Daemons, monsters, mutants from the lowest depths, in their thousands. They used sorcery, they were unstoppable. I shot at Sergius myself but some evil spell turned my lasbeam, just as it turned the bullets aimed at him. He killed Lord Koruna himself in hand-to-hand combat and that broke our morale and we turned and fled the field. No one wanted to face an invulnerable man in close combat.’

‘After that?’

‘The heretics hunted us through our own keep. We fought back, but it was hopeless. For every heretic we killed, two more took his place. They even laughed at us as they died. One prisoner spat in my face and told me that soon we would all regret choosing the wrong side. That Lord Sergius was performing a ritual that would bring Chaos to Garm and make all his followers immortal. That was when...’

Ragnar could smell Trainor’s shame. ‘That was when you killed him?’ he asked gently.

‘Aye, I killed a prisoner, an unarmed man. It was a dishonourable thing to do.’

‘You did the right thing. The man was a heretic. Death was his inevitable fate.’

‘I wish I could believe that. He seemed to think immortality was. The Emperor preserve us, what if he was right?’

‘He was *wrong*.’

Trainor looked at him doubtfully and then spoke. ‘After that we fought from tunnel to tunnel and hab unit to hab unit, until eventually we managed to get into the old transit network and make our way here. We encountered some patrols but I don’t think we were followed.’

‘Could you get us back in?’

‘Aye – I worked in the tunnels for years, doing maintenance. There are dozens of entrances if you know them, for transit and repairs on the geothermal power routes. I have the maps in my satchel. It’s how we got out.’

‘Good – we will need them.’ Trainor did not look too happy about the prospect of going right back to the place he had just fought his way out of. Silence fell between them. Ragnar knew that he had to get this man back to the shrine. The Rune Priests would want to talk to him and probe his mind, to verify the truth of what he had said. By Russ, if it was true. Suddenly a voice spoke over the comm-net.

+Sven here, your lordship. It looks like we’ve got trouble.+



EIGHTEEN

Ragnar threw himself belly down beside Sven. Looking out from the crater's edge, he could see what had his battle-brother worried. There appeared to be several hundred warriors approaching. They were accompanied by huge hounds, enormous mutated mastiffs with sharp teeth and long, lean bodies. The dogs sniffed at some sort of trail, and proceeded quietly.

'We're downwind of them,' said Sven. 'Take a sniff.'

Ragnar already had. His senses were keener than Sven's. There was a corrupt stench to both the dogs and their masters that went beyond the basic pollution saturation common to everything on this world.

Ragnar knew the stink, he had smelled it before in other places and other times.

'Chaos,' he said.

'Nothing gets past you,' said Sven. 'Looks like they came out of the big hole to the under-paths over there.'

'They might not be following our lads.'

'And I might take to drinking milk rather than beer,' said Sven. His expression showed exactly how likely he considered both eventualities. 'That's the way our militia friends came – no doubt about it.'

'What are we going to do?' Sven asked. 'There's too many of them for even me to fight with any hope of victory.'

'A realistic assessment of the situation,' said Ragnar dryly.

'There's no need to be so bloody sarcastic.'

'I think it's time to summon a Thunderhawk,' said Ragnar. 'Maybe more than one.'

Sven nodded. Under the circumstances a hasty retreat, either on the gunship or under cover of its weapons, seemed like a good idea to him too. Ragnar patched himself into the comm-net.

'This is Squad Ragnar calling Castra Fenris. Position alpha-twelve-gamma-two. Requesting Thunderhawk cover. Position under pressure from approaching hostiles. Am accompanied by some locals with important information. Praise the Emperor.'

There was a delay of only a few seconds as he was patched into the company's command core. The people at the other end knew that no Space Wolf would be making such a request frivolously.

+Castra Fenris. This is Brother Gundar. A Thunderhawk is on its way. Hold your position. Activate your beacons. Praise Russ.+

'Ragnar acknowledging. Out.' Ragnar switched channels, dropping to the squad level. 'Ragnar to battle-brothers. Prepare for Thunderhawk pick-up. Switch on your beacons.'

A line of icons flashed on his field of vision letting him know that all of the squad had activated their beacons. The Thunderhawk would now be able to locate them. 'Sven, get the Garmites back up here, weapons ready. We may have to fight our way out of here, and I want every gun on those mutants.'

Sven made no comment. All humour had disappeared. He moved to carry out his orders. As he did so Ragnar focused his magnoculars on the hunters.

In the bluish light of the ancient viewing lenses he could make out their pursuers now. They were garbed in a manner similar to Trainor and his men, although they looked better fed and equipped.

The leaders wore ornate metal masks, moulded to resemble slightly distorted human faces. Instead of mouths they had grilles that indicated filtration systems. Ragnar had seen pictures of those masks before; these men were followers of Sergius. The men the cultists commanded were unmasked and their features were blotchy, as if they were suffering from the early symptoms of some hideous pox. Ragnar had seen that look before, on the faces of the followers of Chaos: the men were in the early stages of mutation. The hounds too carried the mark of the mutant.

He could see they did not quite resemble the hounds of his homeworld, for they looked more rat-like. Their tails were hairless, their features rodent-like. Hideous boils erupted through their mangy fur. Sores wept on exposed patches of skin. In spite of this, they appeared strong and hungry.

It was obvious that they were following Trainor's trail for now they were moving directly towards the crater in which Ragnar and his companions were concealed. Mutants or not, the men were well armed and well equipped, and there were far too many of them for Ragnar's liking. He glanced back over his shoulder in the direction of the shrine,

wondering how long it would be before the Thunderhawk arrived. Not too long, he prayed.

The scuff of boots and the scent of soldiers told him that Trainor and his squad were moving into position near him. Some shouldered las-rifles. Two men wheeled a heavy autogun into position. The weapon looked battered and badly maintained. Ragnar hoped it was in better condition than it looked. Such a weapon could wreak awful havoc on a large body of men approaching over relatively open ground. If it worked.

Ragnar looked over at Trainor. 'Tell your men not to fire until the heretics are well within range. That way we'll get more of them.'

Trainor nodded acknowledgement and gave the orders. Ragnar was already making calculations. It did not look as if the Thunderhawk was going to arrive in time. If that was the case, he wanted to make sure they killed as many heretics as possible. Their position was not a bad one. They held the higher ground, and they possessed a heavy weapon. The lip of the crater provided a natural parapet. The real problem was that there were so many of their opponents and so few of them. Ragnar had only his own small squad, and Trainor had about two dozen men, at maximum.

They were outnumbered by perhaps ten to one, and he could see that their enemies had heavy weapons too. Plus it was always possible that they possessed some of those uncanny powers with which Chaos gifted its followers. Ragnar had seen those in action before, and knew that they had better be ready for anything.

Even as these thoughts raced through his head, the wind changed. The mutant hounds caught their scent and sent out an odd chittering sound. One of the masked men immediately gave orders. The heretics began to fan out, units moving in both directions to encircle the crater. They intended to attack from both sides at once, perhaps even encircle the position. Ragnar let out a long breath. There was not much he could do about that. He only had enough warriors to hold a small section of the line. The best they could do was sit and wait for the Thunderhawk to arrive – if it did.

No. There had to be something more. At the very least, he could set men to watch the flanks and give warning. A glance told him that Sven and Aenar were already doing just that.

'Strybjorn and Torvald – keep an eye out and make sure no one gets behind us without you seeing them.'

+Affirmative. Praise Russ. Out+ the two Blood Claws responded in near unison.

The heretics moved upslope now, slowly. They were being cautious, taking advantage of all the cover provided by the rubble, but there was something else. They moved like men who were more than a little nervous. Every now and again one or two of them would glance fearfully at the sky. Were they expecting the Thunderhawk too, he wondered? Had they somehow broken the encryption on the comm-link?

No. Ragnar had seen Trainor and his men do the same thing when they moved. After a moment, he realised what it was. They were simply nervous because of the night and being in the open. Ragnar supposed that for people who had grown up within the walls of the great factory keeps, and only gone abroad in armoured vehicles, moving across an open plain, even one made of concrete, must be a strange and unfamiliar experience. And the unfamiliar often made men nervous. He patched himself into the Chapter level comm-link and spoke again: ‘Squad Ragnar to Castra Fenris. Can you tell me when that Thunderhawk will be here?’

+Castra Fenris to Squad Ragnar. Estimated time of arrival: two minutes and thirty seconds standard.+

Ragnar let out his breath in a long sigh and checked the time on the chronometer superimposed on his field of vision. There was enough time, he thought – just, if only the heretics would continue the slow pace of their advance. Of course, once the gunship arrived there would be trouble. He could not imagine the heretics letting them board and get away without a fight.

He turned to Trainor. ‘When the Thunderhawk arrives. I want you and your men to board first. We will cover you.’

The soldier nodded and moved off to tell his men. They seemed a little relieved, although the smell of their tension continued to increase. Ragnar spoke into the comm-net once more on the squad channel.

‘Brothers – be ready to cover the militia when the Thunderhawk arrives. They board first. Sven: after your performance back in the shrine I want you at that heavy autogun. When the militia start to climb aboard the Thunderhawk, I want you to cover them. The gunship will be here in two minutes.’

+Bloody affirmative, praise bloody Russ+ said Sven. More affirmatives arrived over the link.

Far off in the distance Ragnar could hear the howl of mighty engines. He recognised the sound, it was a Thunderhawk, coming closer at speed. He glanced backwards and saw nothing. Not surprising, the gunship would be coming in low, using all available cover and showing no running lights.

The sound of shouting from down below told him that he was not the only one who had noticed the sound. The heretics had paused in confusion, wondering what the noise was. Ragnar tried to put himself in the position of the enemy commander. What must that metal-masked man down there be thinking?

He was probably wondering what was approaching. He could work out it was an aircraft, and the chances were it would not be friendly.

What would I do, Ragnar asked himself? Unless the objective was very important, I would order my men to take cover and wait, to see what happens. That seemed to be the heretic's response. He bellowed something to his men, and they hunkered down in small potholes and behind large boulders, using every available scrap of cover. Ragnar could see some were unlimbering their heavy weapons, rocket launchers and heavy autoguns. The rocket launcher might certainly be able to take down a gunship. There was a small chance the autoguns might be able to do the same despite the vehicle's armour.

+Squad Ragnar, this is the *Hawk of Asaheim*. We are on your beam. Expect to be there in one minute. Honour to Russ.+

Quickly Ragnar came to a decision. 'We are in a large crater. The traitors have heavy weapons. Pick us up in the centre of the crater. Target on beacon five. Praise the Emperor.'

'Affirmative. Glory to the Wolves.'

'Everybody except Aenar, switch off your beacons. Aenar, get back there into the centre of the crater.'

In a heartbeat the Blood Claws had responded. Ragnar bellowed, 'Trainor – take your company to the middle of the crater. My brothers will cover you!'

Trainor looked confused. Doubtless he was wondering what company Ragnar was talking about. There did not seem any point in telling him that that had been for the benefit of any enemy listening. 'Go now, man!'

Trainor did not need a second telling. He set off in the direction in which Aenar was already loping. Almost panicking, his men did the same. Their withdrawal sent rocks clattering down the sides of the crater.

‘Sven, get that heavy gun!’ said Ragnar but the Wolf was already moving towards it. Behind them the roar of the Thunderhawk was louder. It must be almost on top of them now. Looking back Ragnar could just make out a black shadow dimming part of the sky. It skimmed up over the crater’s far edge, and with a blast of its landing jets, gave away its position.

A fiery contrail marked the rocket that erupted from the heretics’ position. Ragnar prayed that the firer had not had time to draw a proper bead. Now would not be a good time for the gunship to go down. He raced over and slid into position alongside Sven. ‘The rocket launcher – take it out now!’ he shouted, pointing to the enemy heavy weapon.

Sven grinned evilly and pulled the trigger. A stream of tracer blasted across the night, just as an enormous explosion ripped the sky behind them. Ragnar risked a look back. The Thunderhawk was still there. It had dropped below the level of the crater as the rocket blast cut through the sky above it. Even so, the shock wave had unbalanced the craft, and as Ragnar watched it, dropped like a stone towards the ground. Ragnar ground his teeth in frustration. Inside the cockpit, he could see the Wolf pilots wrestling with the controls. At the last second, a lateral jet flared into life, and the gunship righted itself before settling none too steadily on the ground.

Beside him Sven kept blasting away, howling challenges and threats at the Chaos worshippers. For a few heartbeats it looked like he might be able to hold back the enemy all by himself, then answering streams of tracer ripped the night, and the hard plascrete of the crater lip began to disintegrate under the weight of enemy fire. Ragnar hauled Sven back with one hand as fountains of flame flashed above his head.

‘Time to go,’ he said into the comm-net and loud enough for Sven to hear him. ‘The Thunderhawk is waiting.’

Acknowledgements filled the earbead. Sven looked up at him and snarled. The madness of battle shone in his eyes. His lips were open and saliva gleamed on his fangs. He did not want to go, Ragnar could tell, he wanted to stay and fight. Ragnar could understand, part of him felt the same way. There was no joy like the joy of battle. Even as the thought crossed his mind, an odd smell, reminiscent of garlic and curdled milk, reached his nostrils. He felt a tingling within his skull and the hairs on the back of his neck started to lift.

‘Sorcery,’ he said, wondering what evil the heretics were about unleash upon them. He did not have long to wait. The evil odour intensified. There was more than a hint of rotting meat to it now. Unbidden the image of hordes of maggots gnawing through his dead flesh sprang into his mind, so vividly that he knew that it could only be the product of evil magic. The gleam faded from Sven’s eyes to be replaced by nervousness.

‘Time to go,’ said Ragnar and they both turned to race towards the gunship’s landing point. Half way there, Ragnar risked a glance back over his shoulder. Tendrils of oddly glowing mist, strangely reminiscent of the tentacles of some massive beast, swept along the lip of the crater. Moments later clouds of glittering yellow and green boiled up from the depths in a choking nauseating fog.

‘They might just as easily have used bloody smoke,’ muttered Sven. ‘Bastard bloody show-offs.’

Ragnar was not quite so sure. Certainly the roiling mist would cover any advance the heretics were making but it might easily have some other purpose. He did not like the look of it all, and did not fancy the idea of being plunged into it in the least.

‘Well, one thing’s for sure,’ he said. ‘We know now that Trainor was not lying when he talked about the Chaos cults.’

Sven looked at him as if he had just said something particularly idiotic. As the words left his lips, the mist boiled towards them, one mighty tentacle sweeping out faster even than a Space Marine could run. It sought them with uncanny intelligence, for all the world like the limb of some monstrous kraken. Ragnar took a last glance to fix the direction of the gunship in his mind and raced on, as the mist swept over him.

It was like being plunged into a murky sea. Suddenly his sight was obscured. He could just make out the shadowy figure of Sven running beside him, then he became aware of a burning in his lungs and a stinging sensation in his eyes. There was some sort of poison at work here. His head swam as his system attempted to adjust to the presence of the toxins. Without thinking, he rammed his helmet on his head, and sealed the systems of his armour. He wanted to take no chances with being slowed down now. Every second might prove vital. There was a click as the vents in the helmet shut and his armour’s sealed systems kicked in.

At once, his senses became less keen. His sense of scent was completely cut off, and his hearing was muffled. For a Space Wolf this

was like being blinded twice. He relied as much on his ears and nose as upon his eyes. Now he was no more gifted in this area than Trainor or any of his men. Swiftly he spoke orders into the comm-net, warning of the mist, telling his brethren to be prepared. Hopefully they had spotted what was happening as swiftly as he had, but he was taking no chances.

Behind him he heard the baying of those enormous hounds, and the sound of pawed feet crunching forward on loose plascrete. He glanced backwards, hoping not to trip, and thought he made out a long loping form racing towards him. Whatever it was, it did not seem to have any trouble tracking him in the gloom. He raised his pistol for a snapshot but then a burst of heavy autogun fire chopped it in half. Its death cry was answered by the howls of massive beasts all around. Somehow the helmet did not seem to make these any quieter. If anything they had become louder. Perhaps it was just another trick of the mist.

Sven raised himself from one knee and raced along beside him again. 'You're getting good with those things,' said Ragnar.

'Must be all the practice I am getting. I'll make Long Fang before I make Grey Hunter at this rate.'

Ahead of them, the Thunderhawk bulked large in the gloom. Ragnar sprang in through the open hatch and glanced around. Things looked bad. Many of Trainor's militiamen were down. A few of them were coughing up blood or an awful greenish slime. Most of the Wolves present had their helmets on, and stood by the door, weapons pointed outwards, ready to shoot at any threat revealing itself in the gloom. The Thunderhawk shivered under his feet, like some mighty beast readying itself to leap into the sky. From beneath them came the roar of the autogun, audible even above the howl of the engines.

'Sven! Get in!' Ragnar bellowed, as the other Blood Claw stood below them, blasting out into the gloom with the heavy weapon. Near the vents of the gunship's jets the mist was thinning and Ragnar could see the beasts closing on him.

Even as Ragnar watched something sprang from the darkness and locked its jaws around Sven's throat.



NINETEEN

The huge beast's fangs had barely closed on his neckguard when Sven bludgeoned it with the butt of the autogun. The monster's head broke open, spouting blood, but it still would not let go. Ragnar jumped from the gunship, chainsword ready, and swung it downwards. The weapon sliced through the beast's chest sending gore streaming everywhere.

'I told you to get in!' he shouted to Sven.

Sven rolled to his feet. 'The hound had other ideas.'

'The hound is in no position to argue.'

'True,' said Sven. His eyes widened and he raised the gun to fire. It sputtered a few rounds of tracer then began to make an awful grinding noise. It sounded like the mechanism had jammed. 'Bloody shoddy thing,' said Sven. Ragnar turned his head and saw what he was looking at. More of the great hounds raced closer, their long lean shapes visible in the mist only as shadows.

Sven leapt through the open hatch of the gunship. Ragnar decided he had better join him quick. As he did so the Thunderhawk lurched skyward. What was wrong, wondered Ragnar? Were they caught in an updraft? Had the rocket explosion damaged the steering mechanisms more than he had thought? Were they engaged in some sort of evasive action?

He sprang upwards, clutching the bottom of the doorway with his left hand. It clamped into place as the Thunderhawk rose still further. Ragnar felt a heavy weight impact on his lower leg, almost pulling him free.

He saw one of the hellish hounds had leapt up, gaining purchase on his ankle with its teeth. More of them sprang below but could not quite reach. The Thunderhawk started to drift downwards again. Something needed to be done about that, Ragnar decided. First things first, though.

He lashed out with his free boot and caught the hellhound in the ribcage. There was a sickening crunch and the creature dropped. Ragnar pulled himself up one handed and flopped over the lip of the open hatchway. As he did so Sven finished fiddling with the mechanism of the autogun and leaned out of the doorway, blasting away at the hounds beneath. Quickly Ragnar patched himself into the comm-net.

‘We are all aboard, *Hawk of Asaheim*. Time to go. Russ be praised.’

+Acknowledged. The Emperor is good.+

The Thunderhawk gained speed. The acceleration rolled the off-balance Ragnar back towards the door, as the gunship pulled into a tight turn. Sven stood there, legs braced and continued to blaze away. Ragnar caught sight of the mist churning like a storm-tossed sea below him. It filled the crater now and swirled unnaturally round its edge, leaving the ground clear below. Certainly there was proof, if he needed any, that it was in no way natural. All around in the distance he could see the hulking shape of the keeps.

‘Get away from the door, Sven!’ Ragnar ordered. His battle-brother stepped back and Ragnar slammed his hand onto the pressure pad that slid it closed. He glanced around the inner cabin.

‘Any casualties?’ A chorus of negatives sounded from the Blood Claws. The militia did not look so lucky. More than half of them were bleeding from several orifices; more were vomiting on the floor. Ragnar did not feel so good himself. Nausea churned in his stomach, and he felt feverishly dizzy. Sven looked about as bad as he felt. His face was pale, and sweat beaded his brow. Whatever had been in that mist must have been potent to cause such distress to a Space Wolf.

He moved over towards the militiamen. Trainor and a few others looked alright. Ragnar noticed that the breather masks on their faces looked different from the others, obviously of better quality. ‘Have you encountered that killing fog before?’ Ragnar asked.

‘We have heard of it,’ said Trainor. ‘I thought the heretics were using poison gas, but I have never seen any sort of fumes act like those.’

‘Nor I,’ said Ragnar. ‘It was evil magic.’

‘Nothing our enemy could do now surprises me,’ said Trainor. ‘Their wickedness knows no bounds. Sergius is a daemon in human form.’

The hull reverberated to the sound of an enormous explosion, and the Thunderhawk lurched to one side. That was rather too close for comfort, thought Ragnar, wondering whether the missile had come from the heretics they had left below or from some other source. Not that it mattered much – it would only take one direct hit with a sufficiently powerful weapon, and they would be done for. Still, there was nothing he could do about it. Their fates lay in the hands of the crew. At least there was something he could do for the poor devils in front of him.

Ragnar reached into his utility belt and pulled out his medipack. There were broad spectrum anti-toxins inside it, for use by Wolves whose poison processing glands failed. He hoped they might be of some use to the men dying in front of his eyes.

The Thunderhawk dropped and swerved once more, and Ragnar was thrown to one side as it pulled into a high-gee turn. Another explosion echoed through the night. The gunship skittered over the shockwave like a man running on the shore of an earthquake-tossed island.

‘You’d think they would have bloody well learned to fly properly by now,’ complained Sven, as he was thrown backwards into the metal wall. ‘I could do a better job myself. Oi! You lot up front there! If you’re not more careful I’ll come up and show you how it’s bloody well done!’

‘That’s a threat I would take seriously,’ said Strybjorn dourly.

‘Then I really would know my curse was at work,’ added Torvald.

‘I never knew you could fly a Thunderhawk, Sven,’ said Aenar, all innocence.

If the pilots heard they gave no sign. Instead the gunship banked left and dropped like a stone. Ragnar clutched at the restrainer bar, and wondered whether they had been hit, or whether the engines had failed and they were even now making the long drop to the ground. There came the sound of another explosion nearby.

Ragnar glanced out of the porthole. He could see how low they were now, skimming along close to the ground, flashing between the craters, jinking around the piled wreckage and other obstructions. Surely they must be clear of their attackers by now, he thought.

He waited for long moments, and the Thunderhawk raced onwards. Ahead of them, he could see the shrine and the vast armed camp surrounding it. The gunship decelerated and then dropped rapidly to the landing circle. Ragnar looked around at his battle-brothers.

‘We made it,’ he said.

‘They didn’t,’ said Sven pointing to the corpses of some of the militiamen lying on the deck.

As he let himself out of the hatch, Ragnar saw a number of Imperial vehicles speeding towards them. There was a Rhino APC with the sign of the Imperial medical service, a groundcar bearing the sigil of the Inquisition and, thundering in from the distance, a land speeder from his own Chapter. Ragnar removed his helmet and sniffed the air. The night

smells of the camp greeted him. There was a faint residue of the poison mist on his armour but that was only to be expected.

‘Looks like someone’s been listening in on the comm-net,’ murmured Sven.

Trainor was supervising as his surviving men were carried down from the Thunderhawk. Ragnar walked over and clasped his shoulder. ‘Stick close to me for the moment,’ he murmured.

The Inquisitorial car arrived first and a tall man, cowed and masked, emerged from it. Several soldiers of the Maravian regiment accompanied him. He strode confidently towards Ragnar, his men following close behind like well-trained dogs. Medics jumped out of the Rhino and raced forward to begin examining the sick militiamen.

‘Well done, Space Wolf,’ he said. ‘I will take charge of the prisoners now.’

Ragnar smelled Trainor’s shock. This was not the reception he had expected. Ragnar looked at the inquisitor. He immediately disliked the man’s arrogance and his easy assumption that his commands would be obeyed.

‘These men are not prisoners, they are allies.’

‘That has yet to be determined by competent persons,’ said the inquisitor.

‘Meaning you?’ asked Sven. His tone bordered on the insulting.

‘Meaning me. Meaning my Order. Meaning the representatives of the Imperium on this planet. You would do well not to get in our way.’

‘The Emperor picked you personally to speak for him?’ asked Sven truculently. Ragnar saw the inquisitor’s hand flex and come to rest on the butt of his holstered pistol. The soldiers behind him smelled a little nervous.

‘Who are you?’ asked Ragnar.

‘I am Inquisitor Gideon.’

‘Well, Inquisitor Gideon, I am Ragnar of the Space Wolves, and these men are with me. If they wish to go with you, they may, otherwise they are staying with me until the Great Wolf tells me differently.’

Gideon turned to Trainor. ‘You will come with me,’ he said.

Trainor rubbed his head with his gauntleted hand. Ragnar could not help but notice that his hands were shaking. Obviously Trainor feared the inquisitor. It was hardly surprising – the Inquisition did not have a

reputation for either gentleness or discrimination when it came to those in its charge. No sensible man would willingly give himself up into its clutches. On the other hand, no sensible man refused an inquisitor unless he had a very good reason to. Or the protection of some equally powerful ally.

‘I will stay with Ragnar for the moment, as will my men.’

‘You are making a mistake,’ said Gideon. There was a definite note of threat in his voice. Ragnar heard the militia officer gulp audibly. He guessed that the inquisitor was smiling beneath his mask. ‘Obstructing the Inquisition is always a mistake.’ He turned his cold gaze meaningfully on Ragnar.

‘Threatening the Adeptus Astartes is always a mistake too,’ said Ragnar. This bickering was stupid, they were all on the same side.

Perhaps he should have given Trainor up, but he had not liked the inquisitor’s manner, and he sensed something else going on here. He was not sure exactly what, but he was not about to surrender any Space Wolf prize to an outsider, until he was ordered to by his commanders, and he guessed the information locked in the militamen’s heads was valuable. And if Trainor had information that would lead to their finding the Spear of Russ his battle-brothers would skin him alive for giving it up.

Behind him, the pilots of the Thunderhawk had pulled themselves out of the hatches on top of their cockpit and were listening with interest. Although technically speaking they were Grey Hunters and both of them must outrank Ragnar, neither had chosen to take part in the discussion which meant either they approved of what he was saying or they were allowing him to make a complete fool of himself for reasons of their own.

‘The medical Rhino is ours,’ said Gideon.

‘We have our own healers,’ countered Ragnar.

‘While you debate this, those men are dying,’ said the inquisitor.

‘It takes two to make a bloody quarrel,’ said Sven.

At that point the land speeder dropped to the earth and Ragnar was surprised and not a little relieved to see Berek Thunderfist and his personal skald Morgrim climb out.

‘What is going on here?’ boomed Berek. Ragnar told him.

‘You are quite correct, young Ragnar,’ said Berek. ‘These men are allies and guests of our Chapter, and they will tell their tale to the Great

Wolf. If Inquisitor Gideon wishes to come along, also as our guest, he may. We are of course requisitioning the use of the Rhino to bear off the needy.'

Inquisitor Gideon stared hard at Berek but said nothing. Obviously giving commands to a young Blood Claw pack leader was different from arguing with a Wolf Lord, and a famous one at that. He transferred his gaze to Ragnar and the meaning was clear. Ragnar had made himself an enemy this day. More fool you, thought the Wolf.

Berek strode over and clapped him resoundingly on the shoulder pad with his gigantic metal hand. The impact almost sent the Blood Claw flying. Berek spoke in the tongue of Fenris, so low only he could hear it. 'Well done, youth. Give these vultures nothing that belongs to the Wolves.'

Ragnar was not sure Trainor would like to hear who he now belonged to, but he kept the thought to himself. 'Let us be away!' boomed Berek. He gestured for Ragnar and his brothers to accompany him, as they loaded the sick and unwounded militiamen into the Rhino and headed off towards the shrine.

Inquisitor Gideon and his men accompanied them.

As he clambered out of the Rhino, Ragnar saw more large ships had descended from orbit. They were even more vast than normal transport ships, and it soon became obvious why. The sides of one of them had swung open to reveal the monstrous humanoid figure of a Warlord Titan within. The mighty machine's weapons were stowed parallel to its body for landing.

Like a monstrous insect emerging from its cocoon, the Titan strode forth. As it did so, massive frames extended outwards from within the Adeptus Titanicus ship. Attached to these were trolley-mounted cranes and repair systems. As the Titan moved, the earth shook beneath its massive metal foot. Its carapace weapons raised themselves into the ready position. The huge multi-melta in its right fist swung to bear. Looking on it Ragnar suddenly understood the superstitious reverence so many held the Adeptus in. The Titan might have been some living manifestation of the Machine God himself. Perhaps it was.

Trainor and those of his men still capable of moving were ushered from the Rhino towards the great sheet-metal tent reserved for visitors to the shrine. Inquisitor Gideon followed swiftly on their heels as if afraid his

prey would somehow elude him. The others were carted off to the medical bays by half-mechanical thralls, brought down from the Wolf fleet above.

As they approached the entrance to the shrine, two Rune Priests stepped forward. In their hands they held long carved staffs which they used to bar the way of Trainor and his men. A moment later Ragnar sensed the presence of sorcery as the priests used their unusual talents to probe the minds of the newcomers. Such a precaution was only natural before outworlders were allowed into the presence of the Great Wolf.

‘You may pass!’ announced the senior Rune Priest, before turning his attention to Gideon and his men. The inquisitor submitted to the same inspection as Trainor although with less grace. As he noticed this Berek smiled grimly, then they hurried into the depths of the shrine.

Ragnar immediately noticed the number of people coming and going. They were not just garbed in the armour of the Wolves. Here were commissars, officers of the Imperial Guard and fleet, even a few in the elaborate uniforms of the Adeptus Titanicus. The shrine was now the nerve centre for the whole Imperial force. Everyone around him moved with purposeful strides, and that special excitement and nervousness that told they were in a war zone on an alien world.

Within minutes they had made their way into the great reception area, where Logan Grimnar and his retinue waited. The Great Wolf lounged on his massive floating throne, surveying the crowd like a jarl looking upon a mass of petitioners. His priests flanked him; his Wolf Guard stood ready to defend him. For this occasion they were garbed in massive suits of Terminator armour, the most powerful man-sized combat armour in the Imperium.

As Ragnar and his crew moved forward, a path was made for them through the crowd. No matter how high ranking, they parted to allow Trainor and his escort to pass. A hundred strides brought them to the foot of the dais over which Logan Grimnar hovered.

As he got closer Ragnar could see the others who stood just below the dais. They were powerful men indeed. One wore the uniform of a Princeps Maximus of the Adeptus Titanicus. He was a massive man, who seemed more than half machine. One entire side of his body seemed made of metal. The left half of his face was a metal mask, a long bionic arm protruded from the left sleeve of his uniform. The trousers of his left leg

had been cut away just below the knee to reveal a long, slender mechanical limb that ended in a massive claw.

‘Lothar Ironheart,’ murmured Morgrim from close by. ‘And yes, one entire half of him is dedicated to the Machine God. The man has no heart, only a bionic pump.’

Ragnar had heard the name mentioned before. Ironheart and his Titans had fought alongside the Wolves before on several occasions, which was hardly surprising since the Salonus forge world was located close to Garm and his legion owned a supply depot on the planet. The man had made his reputation amid the blazing deserts of Tallarn, and was said to have destroyed three ork Gargants in the battle which had cost him most of his humanity.

Shimmering in the air above the dais was the massive face of Imperial General Balthus Trask, which Ragnar recognised from before. Supervising his troops from his flagship in orbit, he could not be in present in person, but he was making his presence felt over the comm-net. Several lesser Imperial field commanders were present in the flesh. None of them managed to project half the air of command of Trask’s image.

Ragnar had not quite realised how much importance was being placed on his prisoners. He had expected Trainor to be interviewed in private by Ranek or another of the Rune Priests. Now all eyes were on them: those of the high commanders and all of the lesser officers. Several of the Wolf Lords stood ready as well, and Ragnar did not doubt that those who were not present would have representatives here who would patch them in over the comm-net.

‘Well, Berek,’ said Logan Grimnar, ‘it appears your cub has done well. Let’s hear this Garm man’s tale.’



TWENTY

From the hovering Thunderhawk, Ragnar watched the massive build-up of troops. It was the first time in his life he had seen an entire Imperial army massed for combat, and the sight stirred his heart. Troops covered most of the plain before the shrine. A dozen Warlord Titans dominated the force, towering over the mass of warriors like men looming over a swarm of insects. The single massive Emperor Titan dwarfed even them. Its long shadow seemed to lie over half the army. The shimmer of its void screens was bright enough to see. Loping swiftly on the edges of the force, lean, wolfish, Warhound Titans took up position for their race towards the enemy.

The Thunderhawk maintained a level altitude, circling over the Imperial army, affording Ragnar a fine view of the action below. A flight of Marauder bombers skimmed past and then were lost in the polluted clouds. Despite their stubby appearance they gave the impression of infinite deadliness.

Already the huge Earthshaker assault guns battered at the enemy position, sending monstrous shells smashing into the walls of the distant keep, not even visible through the snowy mist of the Garmite dawn. The weather diviners on the fleet had prophesied that the mist would clear soon. Ragnar hoped so. The weather here was a two-edged sword. It would slow down most of the vehicles save for the largest tanks and Titans, but at the same time it would help shield their advance. It was not the best of days to try and break into Sergius's stronghold, but it was as good as they were likely to get given the season. And the runes had assured them that time was getting short, whatever the heretic leader was up to, he would do it soon.

Most of the infantry below were in the Rhinos, ready to move into the battle zone. The Imperial Guard might lack the skill and superhuman ferocity of the Space Wolves but it made up for it with numbers. Tens of thousands of men were down there, ready to do battle in the Emperor's name. As Ragnar watched he saw more tanks drive through the snow. They were Baneblades, so large that not even the Titans could dwarf their

massively powerful presence. He saw Shadow Swords too, ready to engage any enemy armour that might show. Not that any was expected at the moment. Today they were assaulting a fortress, moving in to liberate Trainor's home keep from the grip of Chaos and reclaim the Spear of Russ.

At least that was the message the Imperial forces intended to send to the enemy.

If the attack was a success and the keep was taken, well and good, but that was not really expected today. The defences were powerful, and the heretics numerous. The real purpose of the exercise was to give the Wolves a chance to infiltrate the fortress, spread fear and terror among their enemies, and locate and reclaim their artefact. After hearing Trainor's tale, the Great Wolf had decided this was what must be done. The Imperial general, seeing that the best chance of crushing the heresy was by striking off its head, had given his support. The death warrant of Sergius had been signed. Now all they had to do was capture the arch-heretic.

Ragnar glanced around the interior of the Thunderhawk. His squad was there along with several others. There was Sergeant Joris, Hakon's replacement and Ragnar's new superior. He was short and squat for a Space Wolf, but his arms were thicker than Ragnar's thighs. He was reputed to be the strongest man in the company and Ragnar saw no reason to doubt it. His head was half bald, leaving only a crescent of hair around the crown of his skull. Joris made up for this by having exceedingly long sideburns and long braided moustaches. His cheeks were ruddy, and his manner was deceptively pleasant and cheerful. He grinned, showing exceedingly long fangs.

Ragnar had been surprised to find the sergeant consulting with him. It seemed he was still regarded as something of a leader for the Blood Claws.

It was the Wolf's way. Once you were in a position, you stayed there until you were promoted or proved yourself unfit for it. If a man can lead, let him lead.

'This is it,' muttered Sven from Ragnar's side. 'This is when I make Grey Hunter. Now is the day, now is the bloody hour.'

'You think so?' asked Strybjorn. Even the prospect of battle did nothing to light his grim visage.

'Yes. Today begins a new chapter in the saga of Sven.'

‘Sven the Boastful’s saga,’ said Ragnar. ‘I like the sound of that.’

‘You’re lucky,’ muttered Torvald gloomily. ‘There’s no chance anyone will make me a Grey Hunter. It must be my curse at work again.’

‘It’s because you’re just out of bloody Russvik,’ said Sven.

‘Look on the bright side,’ said Aenar. ‘Our day will come.’

‘Yes, when we’re old enough to be Long Fangs,’ said Torvald. ‘If I live that long. Which is not likely.’

Troll loomed over him. ‘Don’t worry, little man, I will protect you.’

Ragnar closed his eyes and offered up a prayer to Russ. This did not feel right. There was something missing. He glanced over again at Joris. It was odd to see him sitting there. Ragnar half-expected to be looking at Hakon’s scarred face. He shoved the thought aside. Never again in this life. Well, he had fought beside other sergeants than Hakon. There was Hengist who had led them into the Chaos temple beneath the Fenrisian mountains for one. There had been Lothar, that time on Xecutor. Doubtless there would be others in the future.

‘You’re looking pretty bloody cheerful,’ said Sven, nudging him in the ribs. ‘What’s the matter? Missing the thrill of command?’

‘Something like that.’ Ragnar considered this for a moment. Was that part of his strange mood, he wondered? Did he miss the thrill of command? His initial reaction was to say that he did not. Part of him was glad that someone else was now responsible for the lives of his comrades. Reflecting further, he thought that maybe part of him did. There was something heady about being the leader, about giving orders and having them obeyed, about being master of your own destiny and the destiny of those about you.

Was that why Berek had made him the patrol leader, Ragnar wondered? To give him a taste of command, to see how he reacted, to let him see for himself what it felt like? Had it been some sort of test? It was certainly possible. For all his bluff manner, Berek was a good leader.

Ragnar glanced over at Trainor, glad that the young officer had been assigned to their pack. All of the surviving militiamen had been divided up and assigned to the companies going in. Their knowledge of the inside of Ironfang Keep might prove invaluable.

Trainor did not look well. He seemed to have aged ten years over night. Ragnar guessed that his investigation by the Rune Priests had done that. The ancient sorcerers had deep probed his mind and those of all of his

men. They were taking no chances of a traitor leading the Wolf companies into an ambush.

Ragnar felt a surge of sympathy, remembering his own ordeal at the hands of those terrible old men when he had passed through the Gate of Morkai. He doubted that facing Inquisitor Gideon would have been any easier.

Trainor must have passed with flying colours otherwise he would not have been here. One of his men had not been so lucky. Ragnar was not sure he wanted to know what had happened to him. Trainor met Ragnar's gaze levelly with his haunted, suffering eyes. This could not be easy for him, going back to his lifelong home as part of an invasion force, preparing to fight former friends and neighbours who had turned against him. A warrior's lot was rarely easy.

Ragnar thought back to the long hours in Grimnar's throne hall, as the various Imperial commanders had thrashed out their plan of attack. It was an inspiring thought that Trask, who notionally had supreme command of that vast force on the ground down there, had deferred to the Great Wolf's wishes and gone along with the plan to attack the Chaos stronghold and recover the Spear of Russ. It seemed that the worth of the Wolves counter-balanced all of the massive Imperial force.

Of course, Ragnar quickly realised that things were not quite as they seemed. Trask might well be the Imperial Guard commander, but neither the Wolves nor the Titan legion were bound to obey him. Both were proudly independent forces and had let him know it. The Princeps Maximus recognised no authority but the Grand Master of his order. Logan Grimnar recognised none save that of the Emperor. This made Ironheart and the Great Wolf natural allies. It seemed to Ragnar that Trask had gone along as much to keep the peace, and his force concentrated, as to get the sacred artefact back.

In a way, it was a very sensible decision politically as well as militarily. Once the Wolves had recaptured their treasure they would be far more likely to go along with the rest of the general's plans, and if the Wolves went, that made Ironheart more likely to. It seemed that one had to be as much a diplomat as a strategist to lead Imperial armies. Thinking about the rival Wolf Lords in the Chapter, that probably applied to the Great Wolf too. A man would have to be skilful in negotiation as well as

war to lead a Space Marine Chapter. It was something that bore thinking about.

Ragnar guessed that Trask too had his own problems. Certainly some of his field commanders had seemed just as keen as Logan Grimnar to attack the Ironfang Keep. Doubtless they wanted the glory, to write their names in Imperial history alongside those of the Chapter. And doubtless they too were as keen to outshine their rivals as Berek and Sigrid. War among the stars was not quite so simple as it was back home in Fenris. There it had simply been a case of the jarl lining up his warriors and ordering the charge. Or perhaps he had simply been too young to understand then. Perhaps all forces of men were like this. Sometimes he felt like he had aged a hundred years since being chosen.

Nearby he saw other Thunderhawks circling. Most of the Chapter's gunships were in the air this day, which was hardly surprising. The plan was a bold one, and it required extreme mobility, the sort that only Thunderhawks could provide. Once they were within the keep then it would be pure infantry work, there would be no room for land speeders, assault bikes or dreadnoughts. There would not even be any use for Terminator armour. This operation required speed, stealth and extreme precision – a series of hit and run attacks on major enemy communication centres, power cores and weapon emplacements, a set of attacks that would demoralise and terrorise the enemy. They would need to locate entrances to the Chaos cult shrine, and then enter it to reclaim the Spear.

To be honest Ragnar was not so sure that the followers of the Dark Ones could be terrorised. He doubted that anything would scare a man who had already given his soul up to the powers of Chaos, not even the righteous wrath of the Emperor's chosen. Fortunately though, they would be in the minority. The deluded fools who had chosen to follow Sergius and his acolytes were not so nerveless. And they still provided the bulk of the enemy's troops. Or so Ragnar hoped.

Once more he ran through the holomaps he had memorised. All of them were stored within the matrix of his armour, but in the heat of battle they could not always be called up, and sometimes armour got damaged. It was better to carry the information in your head. Ragnar visualised the keep as it had first been shown to him. It was a huge structure of the type favoured by humanity on these industrial worlds, basically a cube, a kilometre per side. The cube was joined to the earth by a tangled web of

pipes and cables that resembled the root structure of some massive plant. These were power systems drawing thermal heat from Garm's fiery core, and water from underground reservoirs and transit tubes for grav-trains. The tubes clambered up the side of the structure like vines clinging to the walls of some ancient stronghold.

At each corner of the keep's roof, four enormous towers thrust into the sky like spears aimed at the belly of the clouds. These towers were part fortification and part chimney, venting enormous clouds of pollutants into the sky. From the centre of the roof jutted a truncated pyramid, as massive as many islands back home on Fenris. This was the place where the keep's nobility dwelled and where many of the control systems for the entire structure terminated.

He reviewed the access points to the keep that had been overlaid on the holomap. One of them was going to be the entrance for his pack. Below them, the army had started moving forward across the icy plain. In the distance, plumes of smoke, ash and snow rose where the shells impacted. Hell touched Garm there.

The Thunderhawk began moving forward in formation with the rest of the Chapter's gunships, keeping pace with the army, flying so low that the scars on the shoulder carapaces of the Titans were visible. As far as the enemy was concerned, the Wolves would just be part of the attacking force. Looking down, Ragnar got some idea of the scale of the great machines. Close up they seemed even larger than he had imagined.

'Now that is what I call a bloody gun,' said Sven, pointing to the massive cannon clutched in the Titan's enormous metal fist. Ragnar nodded. In all the days since he was chosen he had never wished to be anything but a Wolf, but at that moment, he thought if he had to choose to be something else, it would be the Princeps of a Titan. He tried to imagine what it would be like to control that behemoth of steel and ceramite. It must be the closest thing to being a god that any man could ever experience.

'I don't think you could lift it,' said Torvald gloomily.

'I don't think the entire Chapter put together could lift it.'

Sergeant Joris heard the exchange. 'One Marine in the right place can do ten times the damage one of those things can.'

He spoke with the utter certainty of a man who had experienced the truth of his words. Ragnar supposed it was true.

‘Aye, but it’s a bloody lot more difficult for us to get to that place,’ said Sven.

‘And I have a sore foot already,’ said Torvald.

‘You’ll have a sore head as well if you don’t stop whining,’ said the sergeant.

Torvald grinned to himself. The Thunderhawk juddered and shook as it turned into the wind for a moment, and then slipstreamed the Titans.

‘Could they fly any slower?’ Torvald asked.

‘They could but we would be going backward,’ said Sven.

‘Like your brain,’ said Ragnar. Despite the banter, the tension within the cabin was rising. The words had a brittle quality, and the scent of his pack spoke of excitement and anxiety in equal measures. Aenar had closed his eyes. His lips moved in silent prayer. Trainor had joined him. Strybjorn stared bleakly off into the distance like a man with a premonition of his own death.

Joris moved along the line, checking weapons and armour, making sure the Wolves were ready for battle as soon as they deployed. Ragnar felt a slight surge of resentment. Sergeant Hakon had never done that, at least not so obviously. He had trusted them to look after themselves. With Joris, it was obvious that they were mere Blood Claws, and that he was the veteran. Ragnar found himself looking forward to the day when he became a Grey Hunter, and would be beyond such things.

Suddenly there was the sound of an explosion. To the left a plume of black smoke arose. Ragnar glanced out of the porthole and saw that one of the tanks had been hit. He had no idea by what. As he watched a few tiny crewmen bailed out, and ran for cover. A few seconds later, the tank exploded, sending metal debris fountaining skyward.

‘Looks like the heretics finally woke up,’ said Sven. ‘I was starting to wonder if they were all asleep.’

The other Baneblades started blasting away in response, although Ragnar was not sure what they hoped to achieve. No matter how powerful those guns were, they could do little damage to the walls of the keep.

‘Look at that,’ said Aenar, pointing out of the right porthole. Ragnar glanced over. He could see that a Warlord Titan was bringing its weapon to bear. The air was filled with an enormous humming sound as the Titan’s generators peaked at maximum energy, and then its gun sent a spear of energy lancing at the distant building with a sound like a thunderclap. The

sound reverberated like thunder as the rest of the Titans opened up. Ragnar wished he were up in the cockpit now, so that he could get a view looking forward. It would be interesting to see the effects of the Titan's incredible firepower on the enemy.

The battle had begun in earnest now. The Imperial army was firing at will, and their enemy responded in kind. A wave of explosions ripped through the Imperial line as some kind of multiple rocket launcher targeted the onrushing Rhinos. Looking down into the maelstrom of explosions, it seemed impossible that anything could have survived, but when the dust and snow settled Ragnar could see that not a single Rhino had been touched, and all were now far beyond the point of impact. Such were the fortunes of war, he thought.

'My grandmother could bloody well shoot better than that,' said Sven conversationally. 'And she was blind.'

'It would be just my luck to be targeted by the only heretic with a decent aim,' said Torvald. 'I've never been lucky, you know.'

'It's those who know you who are unlucky,' said Strybjorn.

'My mother was cursed by a Bear Clan witch woman before I was born. Have I mentioned that before?'

'About a hundred times,' said Strybjorn.

'What was the curse? That she would have to put up with the gloomiest bastard on the face of Fenris?' asked Sven.

'She would never tell me. She would just look at me and shake her head sadly.'

'I can understand that,' said Sven. 'I do the same myself.'

'Maybe the same witch woman cursed your mother, Sven,' said Ragnar. 'There has to be some reason her son was born so ugly.'

Another explosion sounded. A huge crater appeared in the carapace of the Titan in front of them. Chunks of ceramite flew past the Thunderhawk.

'That was close,' said Aenar.

'It's going to get closer yet,' shouted Joris. 'We're going in.'



TWENTY-ONE

The Thunderhawk rose above the shoulder of the Titan, and Ragnar caught sight of the Ironfang rising out of the snow and mist. All along its sides, huge guns blasted away. City defence missile launchers sent payloads of death smashing into the Imperial army. It was an imposing sight.

‘Less than half of the turrets are firing,’ said Ragnar.

‘There must still be fighting going on in the city,’ said Trainor.

‘Unless it’s a trap,’ said Torvald with a certain amount of relish. ‘That would be just like my luck.’

The Imperial barrage was taking its own toll. Many turrets on the keep had been blasted into smithereens. Flames leapt from their hardpoints. Pools of steaming metal marked where some had been reduced to slag by the Titans’ firepower. Massive explosions carved huge chunks from the sides of the building, exposing twisted girders. Steam poured from broken pipes large enough for Rhinos to drive inside.

Now components of the Imperial force raced ahead, Rhinos and lighter tanks hurtling towards the holes in the lower walls. Land speeders and battle bikes probed even further forward, plumes of snow and ash rising in their wakes. Tens of thousands of autorifles and bolters opened up, as infantry within the building joined the fray. Ragnar saw the contrails of rockets from man-portable launchers as their projectiles tore through the Imperial ranks.

The fury of the Imperial barrage increased. The Titans concentrated all of their firepower on the areas around the weak points in the keep’s defences. The tanks added their fire to the weight of hot metal death streaming towards the heretics. The roar of weapons crescendoed, drowning out even the sound of the Thunderhawk’s engines. Billowing clouds of smoke and the dazzling glare of explosions hid the keep from sight. It seemed impossible that anything could live amid that storm of death, but it did.

From out of the cloud came an answering hail of fire. Ragnar saw a Titan stumble and crash to the ground, for all the world like a vast

wounded soldier. Dozens of Rhinos became blazing coffins for the brave men within. The Warhounds reached the outskirts of the shantytown surrounding the keep, crushing flimsy structures beneath their massive paws, their weapons spitting death towards the enemy.

Hundreds of heretics concealed within the hab bubbles poured out, blasting away at the huge machines with their pitiful weapons, trying to stop them with grenades and weapons intended only to take out tanks and other lesser engines of destruction. They were met by a host of Imperial Guard disgorged by the first wave of Rhinos. The fighting swiftly became close and brutal, fought with bayonets, blades and the butts of guns. All the while, the turrets on the side of Ironfang kept firing indiscriminately into the melee, wreaking havoc on friend and foe alike.

Still the rest of the Imperial army came on, smashing through the shacks and hab bubbles like a drunken man reeling through an insect hive.

Logan Grimnar's calm, clear voice sounded over the comm-net.
+Wolves, prepare for battle. Praise Russ.+

The Thunderhawk dropped downwards, lurching slightly as it sent rockets and heavy autogun fire scything into the enemy position. Ragnar grinned at Sven as he made ready to deploy. Already the hatch in the gunship's side had slid open. Cold polluted air and strangely discoloured snowflakes drifted in. The ground rose to meet them. The swarm of men battled below. Ragnar clutched his weapons to his chest, readying himself for the leap into the fray.

Moments later the Thunderhawk halted a metre above the ground. Sergeant Joris sprang through the hatchway, followed by half a dozen Blood Claws. Sven joined him, then Ragnar and the rest of his pack. Ragnar flexed his legs slightly to absorb the impact, and glared around seeking a target. His keen eyes spotted a sniper moving along the domed roof of a nearby hab bubble. He raised his bolt pistol and sent a shell hurtling at the man. At the last second his target rolled back out of sight. Ragnar knew it was only temporary. Moments later the long barrel of the man's rifle peeked into view, and then his head followed it. Ragnar did not miss this time.

He glanced around. Dozens of Thunderhawks had landed and were disgorging entire companies onto the ground. So far everything was going according to plan. They were exactly where they supposed to be, close to the manholes covering the access tunnels into the geothermal pipes shown

on Trainor's maps. The battle raging around them provided all the cover they needed. Already Marines were lifting the manholes and dropping into the darkness below. Ragnar kept hunting for targets as he prepared to join them.

For the first time he began to get a sense of how big the factory keep really was. It loomed like a mountain above them, its massive shadow falling for kilometres. It had a cold, monumental presence like the Fang back home. Great fountains of industrial slag had gushed down its side, like molten lava. As the slag solidified it became another layer of armour on the keep's side, except where it had been mined by the scavengers who dwelled in the bubble towns. Looking up, Ragnar could see dozens of strange icons painted across its side, and fluttering banners descending from its towers.

This close, the keep looked most unlike a cube. Thousands of lesser structures, turrets, observation points, lift shafts and metallic pipes erupted from its side like a profusion of strange inanimate blossoms. Huge holes gaped here and there. Massive piles of hardened slag rose up the sides like waves frozen in the moment of battering a cliff-side. It seemed almost folly to contemplate attacking such a fortress, but not only were they doing so, they expected to succeed.

Already most of the Wolves had vanished down the holes, and into the darkness below. Ragnar knew it was time to join them.

Below ground it was dark, warm and humid. The air smelled of rotten eggs. Ragnar reached up and with his left hand touched the inside of the massive pipe. It was so hot it would have seared naked flesh; it felt warm even through his ceramite gauntlet.

Ahead of him, he could smell Trainor sweating. The militiaman had removed his greatcoat and jacket and was stripped to the waist. Conditions down here were exactly the opposite of those on the surface. Ahead of them long lines of Wolves disappeared off into the distance. Each man looked ready for battle. In theory, these tunnels were clear, but no Marine ever chanced such a thing. They were ready for combat at any moment.

They followed the main geo-thermal vent for only a few hundred paces, and then ahead of them some of the militiamen moved in to remove another manhole cover. This one was ancient and encrusted with grime. It led into a darker, narrower, lower tunnel that obviously had not been used for a very long time.

Ragnar had to stoop now, for the tunnel was built so that a native of Garm barely had room to stand upright, and the Space Wolf was a head taller than any of them. As he made his way through it, Ragnar felt a growing nervousness and tension within him that he recognised. He did not like being in this enclosed space. He breathed deeply, and offered up a prayer to the Emperor, and his racing heartbeat slowed.

It was not any cooler in this ancient tunnel, and a thick brown noxious-smelling sludge filled the corridor to knee height. Faint wisps of foul smelling smoke rose from it. Beyond any shadow of a doubt, this was toxic.

‘What was this place?’ Ragnar asked Trainor.

‘Who knows? The ancients built these corridors long ago. A web of them extends below the surface of the planet. Most believe they are the relics of ancient mining operations. Certainly some of them lead down into abandoned mineshafts and galleries. We found new ones all the time when we were doing maintenance.’

‘You don’t believe that? About the mines?’

‘I think it’s at least as likely as any other explanation. The first keeps predate the Imperium. They were here when Russ walked this world. A lot can be forgotten in ten thousand years.’

‘Why are they unwatched?’

‘Some of them are monitored. But no one can keep an eye on tens of thousands of leagues of tunnel, not when they are fighting a war on the surface, and with their own people. And most people have forgotten that these tunnels exist. The militias knew of them but up there, right now all is confusion. And anyway, not all of these tunnels are empty.’

That got Sven’s attention. ‘Really – who would be bloody stupid enough to live down here?’

‘Cannibal scavvies, outlaws, forbidden cultists, and it’s not just people. There are giant rats, starback spiders, tunnel dragons, all sorts of mutant beasts. Some say they are haunted by the ghosts of the ancients as well.’

‘Cheery place,’ said Sven glancing around.

‘It would be just my luck to be eaten by a tunnel dragon,’ said Torvald gloomily. ‘Maybe that way the curse will be fulfilled.’

‘The curse of Sven’s fist will be fulfilled if you don’t bloody shut up,’ muttered Sven.

‘Look up there,’ said Trainor.

‘What?’ Ragnar asked.

The militia officer was pointing to a moving clump of flesh that Ragnar had already scented but not paid too much attention to. When he looked closer, in the light of the pencil beam from his shoulder-pad lamp, he could see the clump was about the size of his fist and moved along on eight legs.

‘Starback,’ said Trainor. ‘One drop of its venom can kill a man.’

He moved extremely cautiously as he went below the spider. Sven raised his pistol as if to shoot it, and then restrained himself. Not even he was crazy enough to send a bolter shell ricocheting around in this confined tunnel. ‘Wonder what it tastes like,’ he muttered.

‘Its flesh is poisonous too.’

‘Can’t taste any worse than our field rations,’ said Sven.

‘I bet it would,’ said Torvald.

Suddenly the whole tunnel shook. The vibration caused the surface of the sludge to ripple and made the spider drop into the murky liquid. Ragnar imagined it swimming through the sludge close to his leg. The thought was fairly nauseating but did not frighten him. He doubted the beast’s fangs could penetrate hardened ceramite. Trainor obviously had the same worry. His face went even paler than usual, and the sweat fairly dripped from him. Hardly surprising really. He was not wearing sealed armour, and he did not possess a Space Marine’s immunity to poison.

‘What was that?’ he asked shakily.

‘Big explosion on the surface,’ said Ragnar. ‘Most likely a Titan got hit, or maybe a power core.’

He wished he had a clearer idea of what was happening above, but they were maintaining comm-silence, determined not to give the heretics within the keep any clue of their approach.

On the surface the forces of the Imperium might be triumphant or they might have fallen. They would have no way of finding out until they were out of these tunnels, and could get a decent view with their own eyes. The plan was for the Imperial forces to hold on to their gains if they could, break through if they could, but, if not, fall back until they got the signal from the Wolves.

‘I wish we were out of here,’ said Trainor nervously. His eyes kept scanning the sludge, looking for the spider. Sven groped about in the liquid and pulled out the struggling creature. He held the thing in his fist. Its long

legs reached out and stroked his forearm. Long polyped feelers extended from its head.

‘Is this what you are looking for?’ he asked the militiaman. Trainor looked at him as if he were mad.

Sven opened his mouth as if he were considering eating the spider and then closed his fist, crushing it instead. ‘Nothing to worry about.’

‘Its blood is poisonous too.’

Sven looked at the remains covering his fist, and gave a look of fake horror before reaching out to smear them on the walls. ‘Best not touch what’s left then.’

They pushed on down the long dark smelly tunnels.

‘This is the bloody life,’ said Sven. ‘This is the true calling of Russ’s chosen heroes.’

The sludge was up to their chests now, and there were large and nasty looking centipedal things moving across the surface with a snaky undulating motion. Trainor had assured them these were poisonous too.

‘My mother said I was cursed,’ said Torvald from the gloom.

‘I certainly curse you,’ said Sven.

‘Look on the bright side,’ said Aenar. ‘We can’t have too much further to go. We’ve been down here for hours.’

Ragnar studied the rest of the Wolves up ahead. It looked like Aenar was right. The thin probe lights had begun to rise out of the murk, and as Ragnar closed the distance he could see that the Marines ahead of him were clambering up out of the sludge-filled trench onto a long stone platform.

‘Looks like our bath is over for the day,’ said Sven.

Ragnar climbed up behind the others. The walkway ran off into the distance, and he could see that lights glowed there. Like the others, he automatically cut off his shoulder-lamp. He reached down and helped Trainor up. This last section was not going to be too easy for the militiaman. He did not have the Wolves’ keen night sight and heightened senses. Like the rest of the men, he was going to have to be guided. ‘Grab hold of my belt,’ Ragnar told him.

The last section of the advance took place in eerie silence, considering there were hundreds of armoured men moving through the gloom. There was little doubt they were in the keep now. The walls around them were thick, and crusted with the accretions of centuries of hardened pollution

and industrial effluent. The air had taken on the subtle hum of industry. Judging from the smells and the vibrations, massive machines were at work all around. And there were the signs of all the other creatures that shared man's space wherever he went in the universe. Along the bronze pipes overhead, red-eyed rats scuttled. The whine of something suspiciously like a mosquito sounded close to Ragnar's ears.

'Civilisation at last,' muttered Sven with heavy sarcasm.

'Not yet, but we're almost there.'

The section of the keep they had emerged into had seen heavy fighting. The corridors and tunnels here were as wide as the streets of many cities and as high as they were broad. Openings gaped everywhere; shutters lay buckled near the windows they had once protected; metal doors had been torn from their hinges. The remains of small food stalls lay half-melted in pools of congealed slag in the middle of the street. Masses of unburied, unburned corpses lay nearby. A few unbroken glow-globes burned in the ceiling overhead. By their light, Trainor saw his look.

'Not enough people left alive to take them to recycling.'

'Recycling,' said Ragnar with some disgust. He knew customs varied on different worlds, but this was not one he thought he could ever get used to.

'Aye, their bodies have not been sent back to production.'

Ragnar tried hard not to imagine how this worked, but failed. Images of huge dumpsters full of bodies being tipped into pools of recycling fluid to be broken down for their proteins and nutrients filled his mind. On hive worlds everything was considered a raw material, even the flesh of the dead. He must have muttered the words softly for Strybjorn said, 'That's one raw material of which there is no shortage around here.'

'And doubtless we'll be giving them a delivery of even more soon,' said Sven, a cold grin twisting his ugly features. Down the tunnel, moving in single file on each side, spread out in case of booby traps or grenade attack, the Wolves advanced.

Scent told Ragnar that this place was empty. They had chosen the spot for their entrance well. The fighting had spread through these lower tunnels like a forest fire, and having consumed everything in its way had died out, or maybe simply passed on to where there was more fuel.

They were in, thought Ragnar, inside a place where they were outnumbered a thousand to one. Not that it mattered much. They were not

expected, and those overwhelming numbers could not be brought against them at one time. Now it was simply a matter of making their way towards their objectives, reclaiming what was theirs and excising the cancer of the Chaos temple from the flesh of the city. Without their leaders, without central control, the heretics would collapse into dispersed undisciplined bands and be easy prey for the Wolves and their allies. If there still were any allies left in this dead, deserted place, he added mentally.

For a moment, the scale of the task seemed daunting. This was just one keep among thousands. Many more would have to be pacified. It was a task that could take a lifetime. Then his training reasserted itself. It might take the lifetime of a normal man, but he had many times that number of years, so what did it matter? And the chances were that it would not take that long.

If the Chaos temple were the source and inspiration of the rebellion, then destroying it would leave the whole heretical organisation headless. Seeing the Imperial victory, those who had sided with the rebels out of opportunism would soon change sides. It would have a snowball effect. The more rebels who repledged their loyalty, the more difficult it would be for the rest to keep fighting with any hope of victory. The whole rebellion was a flimsy structure that could be toppled with one good push.

Or so he hoped.



TWENTY-TWO

All around was silent. Ragnar felt the emptiness more now that the great companies had dispersed to their objectives. It was an eerie thought that all around him his battle-brothers were moving through the abandoned corridors and ventilation systems of the keep, cutting power lines, blowing up magazines filled with ammunition, destroying comm-centres, assassinating officers, and sowing the seeds of terror amid their enemies. He wished they were closer to their objective, and that he could find release for his tension in battle.

He knew he should be proud. Berek's company had been handed a prime role, taking out the main power-hub for the western wall. Ragnar knew this would cut the energy supply to the great turrets and beam weapons up there, put the supply lifts on manual operation, and force the whole sector to use back-up power batteries for life support functions such as air filtration and circulation, and water pumping.

It was a tactic calculated to strike fear into the heart of any keep citizen. They knew that once the power was off, they had only limited time before the storage batteries ran out, and life support went off-line for good. The time period would get shorter as the Wolves destroyed more of the reserve systems. The awareness of what was going on would be as deadly for morale as the knowledge that an implacable foe was within their defences, destroying their essential systems. And, if worst came to worst, it meant that the enemy would simply die of oxygen starvation, thirst, and all the other ailments that hit hive cities when their life-support failed. Hitting a hive this way was like stabbing a man so that his lungs filled up with blood. He might be able to last for a short while, but eventually he would stumble and fall. It might take weeks but it would work in the end, providing of course, the heretics did not manage to effect repairs. Ragnar doubted they would. When the Wolves destroyed something, it stayed destroyed.

And all the while the heretics were dying, the Wolves would be there – protected by their armour, moving silently and inexorably through the darkness, and killing, killing, killing.

Some aspects of this situation disturbed Ragnar. Any loyalists trapped in the keep would suffer as much as the heretics, as would any civilians. He tried reminding himself that the loyalists would be doomed anyway if the Imperium had not come, and that in war of this sort civilian casualties were inevitable. It did nothing for his peace of mind.

He glanced around as the company jogged along the silent deserted corridors, wondering what this place must have been like when it was occupied. From the residual scents, he could tell that it had teemed with people. They had lived and loved, eaten and drunk, bought and sold in the tens of thousands around here. Now there were only corpses.

They had carved the bare rock of their walls to represent prominent figures from their history. Lovingly painted statues filled niches between shops. Ragnar recognised some of them: Russ and Garm and many of the others from history, fighting against daemons, beast-headed mutants and hideously mutated heretics. Of course, there were local touches. As far as Ragnar was aware neither Russ nor any of the brethren ever had pale blue skin, just marginally lighter than their armour, nor had they possessed red-glowing eyes with pupils like jewels, but that was the way the locals had chosen to depict them. Nor had they ever been quite so broad or muscular, and he sincerely doubted that any brother had ever owned fangs quite so large as these, or that their features had been quite so bestial and wolf-like.

Ragnar was not offended. He recognised the art for what it was, a form of religious devotion. The history of this world had long been intertwined with that of the Wolves. These sculpted scenes depicted the ancient struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, the Emperor and his enemies, and the Wolves depicted in them were not meant to be realistic. They were demi-gods sent by the Emperor to battle his daemoniac enemies and in a way they had to look just as fierce.

Ragnar wondered if some day, when all of this was over, some Garmite sculptor might depict him, just as unrecognisably. Doubtless the inspiration for many of these figures had been some long dead brother. Long after his own death, would some stone Ragnar rush into battle with a painted daemon, or stand guard, weapons ready, over the doorway of a weaponsmith's shop?

'He's almost ugly enough to be you,' said Sven, as if reading Ragnar's thoughts. The barrel of his bolt pistol pointed to one particularly unprepossessing blue-skinned Space Marine.

‘And that thing he’s fighting could almost be you, save for the fact it’s a little too handsome.’ Ragnar pointed to a beast that possessed the head of a particularly ugly goat, and hooves to match.

‘Do you two always have to fight?’ asked Aenar. ‘Why can we not all get along like brothers in the name of Russ?’

‘I do my best,’ said Ragnar, ‘but he always does something to spoil it.’

Sven said, ‘As ever Brother Ragnar distorts the truth to his own wicked bloody ends. I am blameless in this. I respond only in self-defence when he miscalls me.’

Trainor laughed. It was the first sign of mirth the Garmite had shown since they entered the keep. All the while his eyes had kept their haunted look, and the expression of horror on his face had increased. Ragnar guessed that seeing the conditions inside his home city-state could have done nothing for the young officer’s peace of mind.

Remembering how he had felt when he looked on the ruins of his home village after the Grimskull attack, Ragnar could appreciate his feelings. There were few things in this life worse than surveying the wreckage of what had once been your home. As he remembered Ana and the friends he had left behind, something he thought he had long forgotten twisted in Ragnar’s heart. Quickly he pushed it away; this was not the time or the place for maudlin memories. Soon they would face the foes responsible for this, and would pay them back in their own coin.

Ahead of him, Ragnar could see Berek consulting with the Rune Priest Skalagrim. A halo of fire surrounded the old man’s nearly bald head, turning every single straggling hair into an incandescent filament. A similar nimbus tipped his staff and each of his hands.

‘What is going on?’ Trainor asked.

‘The Rune Priest is invoking Russ and the Emperor to shield us from any divination spells used by our enemies,’ Ragnar told him. He was glad that the old man was there. Many other members of Logan Grimnar’s great company had been attached to the various Wolf Lords. Every single one of them had at their disposal several Wolf Priests, a Rune Priest and a clutch of Iron Priests who would control the detonation of the explosive devices.

Each of the Rune Priests was equipped with knowledge that had been plucked directly from the memories of Trainor’s men, and each could contact his brother priests by virtue of his mystical powers should such a necessity arise. It made Ragnar aware of the depths of resources and

knowledge his Chapter possessed. He doubted that any other organisation in the Imperium, save their fellow Adeptus Astartes Chapters, had access to such things. It was one of the things that made Space Marines such deadly foes.

The old man nodded and said something to Berek. It was obvious from the Wolf Lord's response that he had received the response he was expecting. He glanced at Morgrim who pawed the silver horn at his neck, as if he was just dying to put it to his lips and blow. Instead, Berek gave the signal for them to move. It was time for the attack to begin.

Ragnar surveyed the wreckage all around him. Dead heretics lay everywhere. Iron Priests moved through the remains of the massive power core, treating those brethren who were wounded, administering the last rites to those who would not live to see another dawn.

Ragnar glanced around at his own small pack. Considering the ferocity of the fighting they had got off relatively lightly. Aenar had another head wound. The ceramite of Torvald's armour had blistered and run in several places, and he complained loudly to anyone who would listen about the agony he endured, save when a healer was close enough to overhear the words. Sven had a bandage wrapped round his face, covering the empty socket where he had lost an eye. Ragnar had heard the healer say that he was lucky, that the nerve was still intact and that in time a vat-grown prosthetic could be grafted on. At the moment, a metal optical lens lay under the bandage. In another few hours the implant would be attuned well enough for the wrapping to come off, and let Sven see properly again.

Strybjorn sat sullen and grim nearby, unwounded but apparently having trouble controlling his fury. Ragnar understood. Sometimes in the aftermath of battle, he had difficulty remaining calm too, although it had become markedly less common with every moon that separated him from his joining with the beast within and his ascension to Space Wolf.

Things had gone pretty much according to plan. The Rune Priest had spirit walked and mind controlled the men guarding the entrance to the power core into opening the massive armoured gate. The company had poured in, overwhelming ten times their number of foes in a matter of minutes. Surprised panicky men were no match for Space Marines who knew exactly what they were doing. They had been cut down with brutal efficiency. Save for a few officers kept alive so that their minds could be drained of knowledge by Skalagrim, all of the heretics had been put to

death, swiftly with a single bullet. Such was the penalty for rebellion against the Imperium.

And there had been a bonus. One of Sergius's acolytes had been supervising the power core, obviously an important strategic location. Taken off-guard, he had been overwhelmed and blasted into unconsciousness by Skalagrim. When the Wolf Priests revived him, the interrogation would be fierce.

Ragnar surveyed his own body. All of his limbs were attached. He had barely taken a scratch in the attack, and he felt a little guilty about it when he considered the pain Sven was in, and the deaths of some of the brothers. Still, casualties had been light. Only two fellow Marines had gone to greet their ancestors. A few more were so badly wounded that they would be unable to fight for the next few weeks. And the enemy was about to pay.

Even now the massive extractor fans in the ceiling above were whining as they spun themselves down to a halt. The lights had flickered and gone out for a few moments until the emergency power reservoirs had cut in. Soon this whole area of the keep would be uninhabitable. And sooner than that, the massive weapons holding the Imperial army at bay would no longer have the power to fire. The keep had fallen, their enemies just did not know it yet.

'What now?' Trainor asked. He looked a little disappointed. He had not taken much part in the fighting. There was no way he could keep up with the sheer speed and ferocity of the Space Marines. He had snapped off a few shots at his enemies, but compared to the battle-brothers his contribution so far had been negligible, and it rankled. 'The heretics will soon assemble a force to retake this place.'

Ragnar smiled. Doubtless even now their enemies were massing troops to strike at them, and regain this vital strategic location. 'They will find us gone. And there will be a few nasty surprises for them.'

Ragnar indicated the Iron Priests. They had already seeded the area around the obvious entrances with proximity mines and other booby traps. Those were the least of the nasty surprises that awaited the enemy. Once they penetrated the heart of the power core the whole place was rigged to blow.

'What if they succeed in disarming the main trap?' Trainor asked. 'They'll have this place again, and all your work will have been for nothing.'

Ragnar could not miss the bitterness behind the phrase, ‘all your work’. ‘The core is already wrecked beyond repair. Trust me. The Iron Priests know what they are doing.’

That was true too. A few well-placed charges in critical components had seen to that. They had just left the machinery looking as if it might work, in order to lure their foes into the trap. Berek gestured for them to get up. Ragnar glanced at his troops and then at Sergeant Joris, who nodded.

‘Get up,’ he said. ‘It’s time to go.’

From a long way behind them came the sound of a chain of explosions. A moment later, the lights flickered and the floor shook, as if the keep had been hit by an earthquake.

‘Looks like the heretics found our little surprise,’ said Ragnar.

‘Maybe it was some innocent locals,’ said Trainor.

Ragnar looked at him. ‘Innocent locals would not go anywhere near that power core.’

Even so, he was a little surprised that the idea had never really occurred to him. He had been so certain that what the Wolf Lord’s crew was doing was right.

Up ahead, Morgrim sounded the silver horn. Its long sweet note rang triumphantly through the corridors. Somewhere in the distance Ragnar thought he heard the screams of dying men.

‘Greetings, Ragnar,’ said Berek. The Wolf Lord sat with his guard, giving every appearance of being a man enjoying his evening meal. The whole company was taking a rest to eat before returning to the fray. It had been a long evening of marching through the increasingly stale air. Judging by the enthusiasm with which he ate, he might have been tearing a haunch of venison from a roasted elk, rather than squirting nutrient paste into his mouth. Everything Berek did, he did with gusto,

‘Greetings, Lord Berek.’

‘How went the day?’

‘Very well. We passed through the battle at the core with no casualties, and only the lightest of wounds.’

‘Very good. You are a lucky one, Ragnar. I have heard men say they would rather follow a lucky leader than a skilled one.’

‘It would be better to follow a leader who is both, surely.’

‘Aye, such men are rare.’ His tone left no doubt that he thought Ragnar was looking at one. For some reason, Ragnar refused to take the bait and say the obvious thing. The silence lengthened, and then Berek gave a loud laugh and spoke once more, ‘You are doing well, young Ragnar. I do not doubt that sooner rather than later you and your companions will make Grey Hunter.’

In spite of himself, Ragnar felt pleased. Berek noticed his smile. ‘Go! Eat! Then make ready to leave! In ten minutes we will be on the move again. Hopefully once that apostate priest comes to, we will learn something of importance.’

‘Are you sure that is what the Wolf Lord said?’ asked Sven for the fifth time. He was as excited as a Wolf brother getting ready for his entrance into manhood. He kept rubbing at the metal eyepiece glaring from his left socket. A rim of scab had formed around it, and seemed to hold it embedded into the flesh. It was a disturbing sight.

‘Yes. He said that some of us would surely be made Grey Hunters by the end of this campaign.’

‘Did he say which ones?’ asked Sven.

Ragnar glanced around and sniffed the air. He did not like this place. Not only was the air unpleasantly still and humid, but it had started to stink of human waste as the recycler systems failed. And underneath it all lay the subtle, unpleasant odour of Chaos that he was starting to become depressingly familiar with.

Sven was not going to be ignored. ‘Did he say which ones?’

‘No – but I can give you a clue.’

‘And what would that be?’

‘He will almost certainly choose from the ones who are still alive.’

‘Ha bloody ha!’

Strybjorn came striding up. ‘I’ve been talking with some of the Grey Hunters,’ he said. Obviously Strybjorn had news of some importance. Or at least rumours.

Ragnar was starting to suspect that any place you put two soldiers together in a campaign, you would get three rumours.

‘And?’ Ragnar asked.

‘Seems somebody overheard Berek talking with Skalagrim.’

‘And?’

‘I am getting to it, Ragnar. I am getting to it.’

‘Well, bloody well get on with it,’ growled Sven.

‘There’s been a big breakthrough on the outer wall. The Guard are in.’

‘About bloody time,’ said Sven. ‘After we did all the hard work.’

‘The story of my life,’ said Torvald gloomily.

‘It won’t be long now till the heretics are brought to heel,’ added Aenar chirpily. The rest of them divided their glares equally between Aenar and Torvald.

Sometimes Ragnar could not decide which of the two was more annoying, then he saw the cynical grin quirk Torvald’s lips, and realised that he was just rising to the younger Blood Claw’s bait.

‘It also sounds like there’s some trouble two levels down.’

‘Yes?’ said Ragnar.

‘You know, Ragnar,’ said Strybjorn, ‘being made acting squad leader has not made you any more pleasant.’

‘Or you any less long winded.’ Ragnar realised he was being a bit unfair. Strybjorn was anything but wordy. He was rarely anything but terse, but there were times when his old rival and former enemy’s mere presence just annoyed him, and made him want to needle Strybjorn.

‘Let the man bloody finish, Ragnar,’ said Sven. Strybjorn nodded and continued.

‘Seems like Sigrid’s lads had some trouble with their objective, and had to be pulled out of the fire by two other companies. Berek just laughed when he heard about it.’

Ragnar was not sure that was an appropriate reaction. On the other hand, he had no doubt that if Berek had been the leader of the nearest company he would have gone to Sigrid’s rescue without hesitation. He said so aloud.

‘Aye,’ said Sven, ‘if only to have the pleasure of gloating about it afterwards.’

Ragnar glanced at Sven. He had not realised that he was capable of being so astute. ‘Let’s hope Sigrid feels the same way, in case we need rescuing ourselves.’

‘We’re the bad bloody bastards of Berek’s company. What could we need rescuing from?’ asked Sven.

‘I am sure we might soon get a chance to find out,’ said Ragnar, and as he did so a shiver of premonition passed through him.

Joris strode over. ‘The heretic has regained consciousness. It’s time to see what he can tell us.’

‘I want to see this,’ said Ragnar.

‘You and half the bloody company.’

Without his mask, the heretic looked somehow naked. His face was pale and pasty and his eyes glittered with a mad light. There was no stigma of mutation on him, but he reeked of Chaos and its unholy power. Even bound, and immobilised by the power of the Rune Priest, he looked dangerous. Ragnar was glad they had taken him by surprise, he was not so sure that they would have captured him otherwise.

‘Talk, heretic, and your death will be quick,’ said Berek. He loomed over the traitor like an angry giant and yet, unlike most men, the Chaos worshipper did not quail.

‘Sergius has guaranteed me life eternal,’ the heretic priest said. ‘Chaos has guaranteed me life eternal, but you – you all shall die finally and forever, and after you die, your souls will be devoured by daemons. The Lord of Change will see to that.’

Ragnar had heard this phrase before. It referred to Tzeentch, the daemon god of mutation and magic. Ragnar had encountered others who worshipped the power on distant Fenris, in the caves below the mountain that had become known as Daemonspire.

‘We will see how quickly you die,’ said Berek.

‘You can kill my flesh, but my soul will come back,’ said the heretic defiantly. ‘Sergius has seen to that. I will come back. They will all come back. They are all coming back.’

As the heretic spoke a change came over him. His voice deepened, his eyes glowed. The Rune Priest’s face grew strained, and the nimbus of power playing around his head brightened. All of the watching Wolves tensed and readied their weapons. The temperature around them was sinking fast, and there was a strangeness in the air that made Ragnar’s hackles rise. The heretic’s skin aged visibly, wrinkles appeared where none had been before. His hair grew greyer.

‘You are fools,’ said the subtly altered voice. ‘You were lured here to your destruction. The way has been prepared. The hosts have been anointed. Red Magnus will claim back his power from the Spear that wounded him, and all of his sons will return. And then you will all die.’

There was no doubt about it, the man was possessed by a daemon. Already Skalagrim had begun the ritual of exorcism, chanting the words of the ancient litany. Ragnar raised his weapon to shoot. All of his brethren did the same.

‘Death waits here. Death for you and all your Chapter.’

The man threw back his head and bellowed with mad laughter. A hundred bolter shells riddled his atrophying body. He danced backwards, juddering under the impact, and then came apart. No flesh hit the ground; no blood spilled. Instead only a thick, oily vapour rose upwards and dispersed rapidly, disappearing and leaving no trace the heretic had ever been there.

Skalagrim stood there looking appalled. His mouth was open. His eyes stared into space. The strain of containing the daemon must have been enormous. Or perhaps it was something else. The old man spoke, ‘I touched its mind. Before it was cast back into the warp I saw a little of their plans. I know where the Spear of Russ is hidden. We must get it now, or this whole world is doomed!’



TWENTY-THREE

‘Think this could possibly be a trap?’ asked Sven sardonically, as they rushed through the darkened tunnels, following Berek and the rest of the company. They were close to the temple now. The way had been all too open. It was as if all the enemy in the area had been told to let them pass.

Judging by the scent, every heretic in this sector of the keep had passed this way, en route to the temple. What was going on?

What massive ritual was about to be performed, and what had the daemon meant when he talked of Red Magnus? He could only have meant the primarch of the Thousand Sons, the arch-enemies of the Wolves. If that Chapter of traitorous Space Marines were involved something terrible was about to happen.

‘The daemon all but told us it was,’ Ragnar replied.

‘And yet old Berek is racing in there anyway. Makes you bloody well wonder, doesn’t it? Not even waiting for the rest of the Chapter to gather.’

‘If Skalagrim is right, we don’t have time! Berek has broadcast the alarm. They will come as quickly as they can.’

‘Aye, just in time to see Berek heroically recover the Spear of Russ, or so our beloved bloody leader is thinking.’

‘Most likely.’

‘You don’t seem too bothered.’

‘I notice you’re right beside me.’

‘I’m not going to let a couple of thousand heretics stand between me and becoming a Grey Hunter.’

‘An admirable thought.’

All around them ran the Wolves of Berek’s company. Ragnar could sense them; the smell of the vast pack was perceptible even through the filtered air of the keep, and the toxic taint of corruption swirling all around. He wondered how it had been possible for the men of Garm not to notice it. The stench of Chaos was so blatant that even a normal human nose ought to have been able to pick it up. Ragnar pushed that thought away. There was no comparison between the sensitivity of what his nostrils could detect and what a normal man could smell. It was too easy

to forget that sometimes, which was alarming considering there had been a day not too far in the past when he himself could not have followed a trail by scent or picked out a faint outline in darkness.

It was strange what one could get used to. There had been a time when his sensory impressions had been so vivid and overwhelming as to be painful. Now they were merely the way the world looked to him. He sometimes wondered what things would seem like if he could be returned to his old mortal perceptions. He suspected that the world would seem flat and grey and dull. He did not want that. It occurred to him that he would not trade places with his old self even if he was given the opportunity, even if it meant he could get back Ana and his father and the whole Thunderfist tribe. That thought seemed disloyal to the ones he had lost, but it was how he had felt. Time had dimmed the pain of his memories and let him adapt to his new life. Even faced by the prospect of imminent death, and confronted by the possibility of conflict with the forces of Chaos, he realised he was happy.

Perhaps even because of those prospects. He suspected, not for the first time, that the changes wrought within him went beyond the alteration of his organs and his muscles. He suspected that his brain had been warped too, changed so that he took pleasure in danger, and thrilled to the siren song of battle.

He glanced around and saw the same expression written on the face of his squad. They too were filled with expectation as they moved forward through the dark, crouched down ready for action as they bypassed the empty strongpoints and guardposts of their enemies. He suspected that a similar expression would be etched on the features of every man in the Chapter from Berek Thunderfist on down. Another thought occurred to him. Maybe the reaction had nothing to do with the process that had turned him into a Space Wolf. Maybe it was simply one sane response to a lifetime committed to war in the Emperor's service. If you were going to fight constantly, you might as well enjoy the process.

The more cynical part of him felt that it was not likely that a thousand men would all respond in the same way without some encouragement. Even amid his old tribe there had been those who loved battle, but there had also been those who fought only when they had to, who had actually disliked it despite all the encouragement of the hero sagas. Many of them

had not been numbered among the worst warriors either. Some of them had been stalwart men with an axe when they had to be.

Of course, they had not been surrounded by an organisation that encouraged them to be dedicated to warfare. They had not been chosen to fight the enemies of humanity. They had not known that the fate of worlds, and more than worlds, might rest on their shoulders. And they had not gone through the long process of selection and hardening, tempering and training that the battle-brothers had. Most of them would not have survived it.

Perhaps that was where it came from. Perhaps the process of becoming a Space Wolf was like salmon swimming upstream to spawn in the highlands of Fenris. There, only the strongest and the most determined survived to reach the breeding pools.

Perhaps with the Space Wolves the process of selection winnowed out all those who could not thrive on a steady diet of battle.

Perhaps that was where the similarities came from. Only those who actually thrived on the challenge of warfare, and enjoyed the thrill of combat could survive that long deadly process. Perhaps that was one reason why the training camps were so cruel and unforgiving and why the survival rate was so low. Perhaps that was where the real difference between Ragnar and men like Trainor came in. Perhaps it was that the Wolves really were chosen from among the most natural and fiercest of killers. No one else could survive their training. It was worth thinking about. Ragnar wondered how the guardsman was able to keep going. The Wolves would have left most men behind hours ago, unable to keep up with the killing pace set by the Marines.

All around them, the air was getting thicker and more polluted. It was not just the stench of Chaos. Even though the temple was located in an area served by different power cores than those the Wolves had destroyed, the air was still nasty. It seemed that all over the keep, the air filtration systems worked close to their capacity, and in many cases far beyond tolerable safety limits. The destruction of one part of the system caused an increased burden to the rest of it, causing polluted air to flow from one part of the building to the other. The keep was not quite as hermetically sealed as it was supposed, as the Wolves' passage through airshafts and other communicating tunnels was proving. It occurred to Ragnar that with

the right sensors, it would probably be possible to trace all the breaches in the system's integrity simply by following the flow of polluted air.

Trainor and his men, reunited as their old unit now, were showing signs of wear and tear. Constantly having to live in filter masks was proving a strain even for men who had grown up under the strict air disciplines of the keep. They had to sleep in their masks, and squeeze food pastes into their mouth pieces through the same long metal straws they used to suck in the vile stagnant water. Still, they were keen to come and take the fight to those who wrecked their home.

Ragnar did not blame them. He felt the same way about taking the fight to the Thousand Sons who had desecrated the sacred soil of Fenris and who had now stolen one of his Chapter's most sacred artefacts.

'Not much longer now,' he told them in a cheery voice. 'We'll soon cleave a path of ruin through these Chaos worshipping bastards.'

'About bloody time,' muttered Sven. 'And by the way, Ragnar, you sound like you've spent too much time talking with Berek Thunderfist and his skald.'

Ahead of them the way opened into what looked suspiciously like an Imperial temple.

They entered a vast atrium, larger than some of the islands in the world sea of Fenris. In the days before the insurrection, it must have been a place for monks to meditate and perform mass rituals. It was littered with the bodies of men, and the shattered remains of machines. Even as Ragnar watched, the crumpled shell of an aircar emitted a stream of blue sparks and consumed itself in a halo of blue fire. Ragnar could see the corpses of the men within vanish in the eerie flames. An energy pistol still dangled from the fingers of one man. His arm had been thrust out through the open window of the vehicle to allow him a better shot at his targets. Now his fingers burned black and withered. There was a dazzling flash of light as the magazine exploded, its internal energies interacting explosively with those of the damaged aircar.

Ahead of them, Berek and his Wolf Guard were already vanishing into the temple's mighty maw.

The temple was more vast than he would have believed and the deeper they went the more convoluted it became. Massive bridges carved with hideous leering gargoyles leapt across chasms where industrial sludge flowed lava-like a hundred metres below. Enormous vaulted ceilings

depicted scenes that parodied the interiors of Imperial temples and mocked Imperial dogma. Gigantic statues of cowed and masked men loomed out of the clouds of steam from the heating vents. How much of this was merely a product of monumental Garmite architecture and how much a product of the warped and feverish minds of heretical cultists Ragnar could not guess.

The air stank of Chaos. Ragnar knew that an enormous number of heretics had come this way. Why? What could be so important as to drag them down here while an Imperial army invaded their city. Why were they not up above fighting? Why were they not opposing the Space Wolves now?

Ragnar knew he was not going to like the answer when they found it.

The temple had become a maze. Archways pierced most of the walls, leading off into vast hallways full of colossal architecture. The tide of heretics had flowed this way, passed through many of the entrances. They had separated into different groups for some reason, Ragnar could not guess why. Just looking at the entrances, he sensed something sinister. It felt like bad things waited down there, that something unpleasant was just waiting its moment. He was not the only one to view them suspiciously.

‘Ragnar, you and those Blood Claws check out those vestibules,’ ordered Berek. ‘Make sure no unpleasant surprises are going to come from there.’

Ragnar moved to obey the order, as Berek commanded other packs to check out other archways.

‘I’d say we’ve come to the right place,’ said Sven as they passed into the vestibule. Already most of the Wolves had gone ahead. The Blood Claws had been dispatched to check out the side passages and make sure Berek and his Wolf Guard were not ambushed, en route to their date with destiny.

Ragnar saw at once what Sven meant. Intricate and disturbing murals covered the walls. Mosaics of shattered, multi-coloured glass glittered in the light of the glow-globes. It took more than one glance to appreciate their evil. They appeared to be nothing more than normal religious scenes such as might be depicted in any temple of the Imperial cult, showing men performing the normal rites of prayer and worship, wielding the usual censers, reading from the usual volumes.

But when Ragnar looked closer he saw that the faces of the mass of the congregation were twisted in blank idiotic expressions of stupidity and malice. Peering closer still, he could see the intelligent-looking ones leading the rituals had horns and hooves and the stigma of mutation. Some of the altars depicted leering daemonic faces visible only when viewed from a certain angle.

It appeared to be a commentary on the Imperial religion, a parody, suggesting that behind the façade of truth lurked the madness of Chaos, and that all of mankind's most cherished beliefs were merely a veil behind which daemons lurked, a fact that the clever ought to be able to perceive. A subtle and devious genius had gone into the production of these works that invited the viewer to join in its cleverness, to share the joke, and so be seduced to its point of view.

Ragnar could see, as he glanced at the works from the corner of his eye, how easily the Imperium could be misrepresented by its foes. After all, its mightiest organisations worked behind a veil of mystery. Its most sacred rituals were hidden from the view of the mass of its citizenry, most of whom were shielded even from the knowledge of the evil from which the Emperor's servants protected them. Was not what had happened here a subversion of what already existed?

If heretics penetrated a temple, how easily they could pervert the whole apparatus of Imperial ritual to their own foul ends. The shattered glass glittered hypnotically. Something in the pattern caught Ragnar's attention and lodged within his mind. He paused to contemplate the mural once more, stopping in his tracks, knowing from the sound of the footsteps all around him that the others were doing the same. An idea surged into his mind, stunning in its significance, near overwhelming in its profundity.

Was there not an element of truth in what was being suggested by the murals? Was not the whole Ecclesiarchy a charade? Were not all the mysterious rituals designed simply to bamboozle the ignorant and cow the credulous? Were not those brave souls who saw the truth right to fight against the corrupt organisation that claimed to represent the Emperor, an Emperor whom no one had ever seen, and who it was claimed had been imprisoned in his golden throne for ten thousands years? Surely by now the Emperor was dead? If he had ever existed at all. Was it not possible that he was simply a convenient fiction created by those who wanted to

rule in his name, a promise of protection and salvation that was counterfeit?

Ragnar contemplated these truths, wondering why he had never seen them before. Like the sheep depicted in the picture he had been duped. He had been lied to by those who would use his strength and courage to further their own ends, by those who were unworthy to lick his boots, and who by all rights should grovel before him. Perhaps those who believed in these childish lies deserved to be ruled over by their superiors. Certainly those who knew the truth were more worthy to rule, had proven their superiority and fitness.

Pride in his own intellect, in the power of his own perceptions, filled Ragnar. He was a natural leader, a natural ruler, a man destined for great things, a man who could see the underlying pattern of existence, who saw the vast scheme of reality in its entirety. He should forge his own destiny. After all, everything changes. The corrupt old regime would be swept away, and something new, pure and shining and good would replace it, a true of commonwealth of humanity ruled over by the elect, the greatest of whom would be him...

All he had to do was acknowledge the profound truth that the Changer of Ways ruled over all, and he would be given dominion. His realms would be vast, his power great as a god. He need only kneel before Tzeentch and praise him and his reward would be eternity. Kneel, thought Ragnar, the spell suddenly slipping from his mind. Why kneel to any power? He was Ragnar, mightiest of warriors, greatest of leaders. He would kneel to no one.

Suddenly Ragnar laughed. As swiftly as the madness had come over him it passed. He saw the thoughts for what they were, a snare set by Chaos to appeal to the vanity that lurked in the hearts of all men. There was a spell worked into this glowing glass that reinforced the pride of proud men and used their strength against them. It praised the clever and so sought to win them over. It was a thing of daemonic subtlety, and in his case had been too subtle for its own good. It had puffed up his pride to the point where he would not give way to anyone, or acknowledge anything to be his superior, and then the spell had been broken, burst like a bubble, seen through like a cheap conjurer's trick. He turned to look at the others, to explain it to them, to share the joke, when he noticed by their

expressions that they were taking it seriously. Hostile eyes glared at him.
Weapons levelled.



TWENTY-FOUR

‘It’s a spell,’ shouted Ragnar, glaring at the rest of his squad. ‘The mural is cursed!’

He could see a look of glazed comprehension entering Sven’s eyes and by their scents he thought he was getting through to the rest of his battle-brothers. He was not so sure about Trainor and his men. He knew he had mere heartbeats to act before everything exploded into violence.

Acting on instinct he threw himself to one side and lashed out at the mural with his chainsword. The blade screeched as it hit the glittering glasswork. There was a high-pitched screeching noise and then a wail like that of a lost soul in torment. Everything slowed. He sensed resistance to his attack from the enchanted mural, a powerful daemonic will pressing back against his own, resisting his blow with a force that was as much mental as physical. The strain was near intolerable: a bone-deep ache that settled on his body and made it vibrate in time with the glass, that echoed the stress he placed on it and amplified it.

Gathering all his willpower he forced his arm to straighten despite the excruciating pain, and drove the blade into the wall with as much force as he had ever used against a foe’s body. For an instant nothing happened but then cracks appeared in the mural with a sound like a glacier breaking apart. An enormous explosive force pushed outwards, sending individual bits of coloured glass flying like shrapnel. They pinged off his armour and forced him to cover his eyes with his forearm. Even so bits cut his cheek drawing blood, causing a stinging, tingling pain that reminded him of poison. With every cut, images flickered through his mind like snowflakes in a storm.

He caught flashes of memory, saw scenes of an unspeakable ritual in which souls were offered up to the Lord of Change leaving a concentrated psychic residue in the glass from which the unspeakable mural drew its power. He saw cowed figures chanting around octagonal altars. He saw warriors in over-elaborate Space Marine armour that could only belong to one group: Chaos Marines of the Thousand Sons order. He saw daemons dance and caper in sealed and unholy chambers far from the sun. He saw

evil rituals enacted to sanctify this place with unholy power. Once more he caught glimpses of a vast and intricate pattern, a scheme concocted by a Prince of Schemers, a lie told by a Lord of Untruth. His mind seemed to expand under the impact, consciousness streaming away into an awareness of his surroundings that was almost cosmic.

He sensed the raw evil that permeated the very stones around him, which had seeped in and tainted the place since it was a small and secret shrine, a cancer growing within the body of the factory keep, a tumour that had swollen and grown over centuries until it had metastasised and spread throughout this whole sector of a world. He saw the generations of heretics who had toiled away in secrecy in the heart of Garmite society, plotting the day they would overthrow the old order. He saw a man who he somehow knew to be Father Sergius come here but a decade ago, a hollow man, a priest of the Emperor who had lost his faith, a holy man who had fallen from sanctity. He saw the evil of the place touch the priest and fill him, and send him forth renewed with a faith far darker and far more intense than his old one. He saw the things the old man summoned and caught behind him a glimpse of what waited beyond the gates of hell.

He saw something of the old and unholy order of things, caught glimpses of distant hells in which bird-winged, bird-headed daemon princes ruled over worlds reshaped by the power of their wills, where mortal souls and mortal forms were clay to be worked on and reshaped at the whim of supremely potent masters.

He had a sense of the ancient evil power which he opposed, caught a glimpse of the sheer immensity of the enemies of mankind and, for a moment, his soul quailed. Then from somewhere far off, he sensed an opposing power, a beacon of pure shining power which pulsed unimaginably far off, and which opposed the wills of those who would destroy mankind. Its power flowed into him, and pushed him backwards and downwards into his flesh.

He felt suddenly heavy and immensely old. His limbs weighed as much as planets. His breathing was a hurricane within the immense cavern of his chest. His veins were rivers carrying cataracts of blood through the continents of his limbs.

He opened his eyes, feeling like he was uncovering the orbs of glowing suns and looked upon the face of Sven.

‘You all right, Ragnar? You look like you’ve eaten something that did not agree with you.’

He forced himself to sit up and survey his surroundings. The mural was gone. The glittering glass now was multi-coloured ash that swirled away in the convection currents from the ventilation system. The rest of the squad were dazed and more than a little confused. The Garmites looked at once shaken and ashamed, like men who fear that they have revealed some deeply held and very dark secret. Ragnar felt a little like that himself. He has seen some truths about himself in the dark mirror of this Chaos artefact that he could well have lived without knowing.

Hardship makes us stronger, he told himself. It was an old Fenrisian proverb and useful under many circumstances.

‘Don’t go all mystical on us,’ said Sven, as Ragnar realised he had spoken aloud. ‘No need to go and apply for the priesthood just because you broke some daemon’s bloody toy.’

‘Did you see it?’ Ragnar asked, unable quite to keep a hint of wonder from his voice.

‘I only saw you smack the bloody picture as it attempted to take our souls. And a good job you did too.’ For all the jovial tone of his speech, Ragnar could tell his friend was shaken. He too had felt the temptation the artefact offered. How real was it all, he asked himself?

‘Too bloody real for my liking,’ said Sven, and Ragnar realised that he was going to have to get a better grip on himself. He was still speaking aloud.

‘You did a mighty deed here, Brother Ragnar,’ said Aenar with what sounded like real respect. ‘Strength is not given to every man to smite the works of darkness.’

‘It is given to every Wolf,’ Ragnar said. He found himself wondering about what had happened, about the beacon he had sensed, and he felt an obscure sense of sadness too at having destroyed the mural. It was an evil thing, but it had been a kind of window onto the infinite, a thing that offered a glimpse of dark wonders even in its destruction, and now it was gone from the universe.

‘And a good thing too,’ said Sven. ‘How many men have paid with their bloody souls for those glimpses.’ Ragnar swore he was definitely going to stop speaking his thoughts aloud now.

Over the comm-net came Berek's cheerful voice. +All Wolves to me. I think we have found the Spear of Russ!+

In the distance, the sounds of battle erupted, reminding Ragnar that there was work to be done. He saw that the Wolf Lord had activated his beacon. It was time to home in on it.

'Follow me,' he said. 'It sounds like the Wolf Lord has found our foes.'

In the aftermath of smashing the crystal mural, everything had taken on a surreal quality, a nightmarish air of unreality that left him not quite sure of his bearings. Perhaps it was the odd quality of his mystical experience, perhaps it was something else, but Ragnar thought he could sense all around him flows of mystical energy.

Ominous powers gathered ahead, of this he was as sure as Skalagrim had been. He guessed that whatever obscene ritual the cultists were intending, it was close to completion. From the corner of his eye, he began to catch sight of flickering outlines that flowed into odd daemonic shapes before slithering out of his line of sight. The stench of Chaos grew stronger in his nostrils with every stride. All around he could feel the presence of many foes.

They entered another vast hallway. The ceiling loomed a hundred metres above them. On the far side, steps led up into the sanctum of this temple. Now Ragnar could see battle being fought, as Berek and his embattled company fought their way into the core of the complex against more than ten times their number. The sense of cosmic evil here was almost overwhelming. The daemonic shadows had multiplied in the corner of his eyes, and seemed somehow more tangible. Ragnar could see heavy weapons fire erupt from the Wolves' position on the stairs, and see the flicker of energy as Rune Priests drew on their powers to blast aside their foes.

'Come on!' he shouted, and led his pack at a blazing sprint across the chamber. Beams of hot light seared the stones around him as las-fire erupted from turret windows above the entrance to the sanctum. Snipers, he thought veering erratically to disturb their aim, knowing there was not much else he could do at the moment. The range was too great for a snapshot.

'Nice to see some of the heretics are putting up a bloody fight,' said Sven. 'I thought they had all gone on holiday.'

‘They probably heard you were coming and decided they could not let you in,’ said Ragnar. At least he knew now the purpose of one of the groups the heretics had been divided into. They were guards. What was the purpose of the others?

Somehow, he made it to the stairs, and saw why the Marines were currently hunkered down there. The rise of the stairs provided cover from fire from within the temple. The enormous projecting lintel prevented snipers from firing down on them from overhead.

He heard Berek bellowing orders in the battle tongue of Fenris, and saw sergeants move quickly to see them carried out. As Ragnar arrived, Berek turned and gave him a feral grin. For all the madness and sense of impending doom about him, he gave the impression of a man enjoying himself greatly. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘Blood Claws! Just in time. We’re about to storm the door and more assault troops are just what we need.’

Ragnar nodded. Berek turned and gave orders for the Long Fangs to lay down a curtain of fire for a minute, while two supporting squads lobbed a mixture of frag, flash and smoke grenades to disorientate their enemies. Ragnar knew when the explosive screen peaked they would go. He paused for a second to take a look around at his company, suddenly aware that this would be the last time he would see some of them alive.

He breathed in the scent of the massive pack, and noticed the quick confident way in which every man moved, instinctively knowing what needed to be done, and what his part in it all was. Ragnar could see through that illusion now. The co-ordination was in part a product of long years of training, and part a product of the complex subliminal web of olfactory signals that tied the pack together.

Already the big grizzled old men of the Long Fangs were manoeuvring their massive weapons into position to send a concentrated hail of fire onto their enemies when the signal was given. Without having to be told twice the Grey Hunters were moving up with their grenades and bolters. Already the Blood Claw packs were running into positions in the fore, throwing themselves down to take advantage of cover until the moment when they would rise up and charge. Skalagrim summoned his powers. The Wolf Priests made ready to confront their foes and see to the wounded. Trainor and his men took up position amid the mass, looking as out of place as children on a battlefield.

Perhaps it was the after-effects of his encounter with Chaos, but it suddenly struck Ragnar how many more Blood Claws there were than Grey Hunters and how unlikely it was that many of them would live to be raised to the grey. Not that most of them would ask for anything different. A short glorious life and a mighty death was all most of them desired. Indeed, for men raised on Fenris where few lived to an age where they got grey hairs, it was all most of them had expected anyway.

Ragnar grinned. What did it matter when you entered Russ's halls? Every man here would die sooner or later. Nothing was more certain. What mattered was how you entered. All men wanted an end that would be worthy of a song, and a tale you could tell to the other ghosts as you swigged ale with the heroes of legend around the long tables.

In the back of his mind something niggled, though. He was not yet ready to leave this life. There were still things he wanted to do, places he wanted to see, before he passed through the grim grey portals. He pushed those thoughts back. The time and place of his falling were not his to choose. If it was ordained by fate that he die this day there was nothing he could do about it, and no way to protest. He needed to ready himself. He nodded to Berek, turned to the Blood Claws of his pack and moved towards the van, trying to get as close as possible to the centre and the front. He sensed some objections to him taking the place of heroes, and he was not about to start a fight about it at this late stage. It served him right for coming late.

Sven and the others fell into place alongside him, as the barrage of heavy weapon fire reached a crescendo. He wondered what it must be like to be on the receiving end of it. To have to face that hail of death, of heavy bolter shells, and micro-missiles and heavy las-fire, without the benefit of heavy ceramite armour, without the confidence of being a Wolf.

For a brief instant he caught a glimpse of what it must be like for ordinary men to see Space Marines coming at them. They faced an unrelenting foe that came on implacably in the face of superior numbers, a foe much faster and stronger and tougher than they were, who showed no trace of weakness. It must be like facing gods, he thought, and wondered if the spell of pride still clouded his mind, and then realised that it did not. His was an accurate assessment of the situation.

The return fire seemed to have died under the barrage of death thrown down by the Long Fangs. He risked a glance up and saw a massive cloud

of smoke and thunderous explosions. Some of the wicked looking gargoyles around the entrance had been reduced to shapeless masses, chiselled away by the sheer weight of bolter shells thrown at them. Some had been melted to slag by the reflected spray of heavy las-fire. Dead bodies lay sprawled in the dirt. Chain lightning danced across his field of vision as the Rune Priests called on the fury of the heavens. It did not seem possible that anything could survive in there. And yet the sense of ominous tension had increased. Something dark and evil lay within this final sanctum. It waited for them there. A cold flash of fear flickered down Ragnar's spine.

A long, eerie, ululating cry echoed from behind him. It was the signal. The time to advance was upon them.



TWENTY-FIVE

Surrounded by his comrades, Ragnar raced into the smoke. It billowed and swirled around him, turning his fellows into shadowy outlines. Had it not been for his heightened sense of scent he might have felt isolated, but as it was he could smell and hear his comrades and was reassured by the presence of the pack.

Like an avalanche of unleashed fury, the Blood Claws hurtled forward. Terrifying yips and howls filled the air and echoed away. As he emerged from the cloud, Ragnar threw himself flat, hoping to confuse any enemy who might have targeted him. He hit the ground rolling, and let his momentum carry him ten strides before coming to his feet again. Once more he was astonished. Only a few hundred warriors opposed them, and the Blood Claws smashed through them like a spear through a body. The heretics were no match for the Blood Claws nor the hardened Space Wolf warriors who swarmed in behind them.

Ragnar bowled over one foe, chopped down another and then the momentum of his rush carried him through the defenders and into the nave of the temple. Hundreds of ecstatic faces turned to stare at him, confused. Each belonged to a red-robed heretic whose head had been shaved and whose brow had been marked with the twisted rune of Tzeentch.

The air stank of incense and sweet perfumed oils. The cultists had the blank, delirious look of the drugged, or of zealots awaiting a manifestation of their god. At a guess, Ragnar would have said that these were the 'anointed' of which the possessed heretic had spoken.

Thousands of the cultists occupied the vast empty space within this sanctum. Huge masked figures leered down from alcoves, rebel gods spectating on what was about to unfold. The sense of gathering power that had surrounded the temple was focused on this spot, Ragnar realised. The air fairly pulsed with magical energy.

Before he had a chance to comprehend fully what was going on the battle swirled into the sanctum itself. A masked soldier aimed a bayonet at him. Ragnar cut him down with a back-handed swipe, took out two of the man's companions and looked around for his battle-brothers. In moments,

the tiled and mosaic floor was taken up with the bodies of the wounded, and the surviving heretical fighters cowered away from their attackers.

No, Ragnar realised, not just their attackers. It was not merely the spectacle of the Wolves arriving that had terrified them, it was what was happening within the temple. The ritual being enacted here had seared even the sin-blackened souls of these cultists. Seeing what was going on, Ragnar was not surprised.

A dazzling aurora shimmered in the air, rainbows of multicoloured light reflected in the gleaming marble walls. At the end of the chamber, a monstrous altar, a blasphemous parody of that to be found in every Imperial temple glowed with evil might. Around it stood five men. All of them were garbed in heavy crimson robes, trimmed with gold and covered in flickering symbols of hallucinogenic complexity. One of the men held the burnished crystalline skull of some horn-headed daemon. The other held what looked like the bones of a massive hand, held together by wires of finest spun silver. The third carried a glowing orb shaped like an eye. The fourth carried a chalice of bronze. It was what the fifth man carried that drew Ragnar's eye.

He was a huge bearded old man, with the face of a prophet and the eyes of a daemon lord. It was Sergius, without a doubt. In one massive tattooed hand, the cultist held a huge spear. It was carved all of some dark wood worked with the runes of Fenris. The runes now glowed with an evil ruddy light, obviously the work of Chaos. The spearhead looked as if it were carved from the fang of a monstrous dragon. It glowed with an unearthly radiance, a chill-bright glimmer that recalled the light of Fenris's sun save that it too was being polluted by the taint of Chaos. Ragnar knew that he looked upon the Spear of Russ, and that the man who held it was the leader of this pack of heretics. The urge to face the apostate in single combat, and claim back that which he had stolen was near overwhelming. There was something about the Spear, even in its polluted state, that caused a sense of reverence in him, something that seemed to have been burned deep into his flesh, perhaps implanted within the gene-seed itself.

Sergius turned to glare at them. He was a huge man, so broad that he seemed almost obese, with arms thick as tree trunks and a neck like a bull. Under his massive cowled cloak he wore shimmering armour embossed with the eye-dazzling, stomach churning runes that were the mark of Tzeentch. Curving ram-like horns emerged from his helmet, and Ragnar

was not sure whether they were part of it or actually grew from the man's head.

Above the heretic's head, a rift had appeared in reality, and through it something else was visible, a realm of shifting constantly changing lights in which Ragnar caught sight of daemon faces leering and gibbering. Even as Ragnar watched, the faces all flowed together forming one massive face, its features as yet formless save for an enormous gaping mouth and a single massive eye. Through the rift of the mouth streamers of Chaos stuff gushed out into the chamber and flickered around the room. The very light seemed tainted by the presence of daemons.

Seeing that the ritual was about to be interrupted Sergius returned to his work, chanting alien words in a deep powerful voice, words never meant to be shaped by human tongue. The words echoed within the cavern of Ragnar's skull, and brought back a flood of images from the smashing of the mural. The Wolf shook his head and fought off a momentary dizziness.

More and more streamers of incandescent radiance leapt through the rift. One of them touched a shaven-headed cultist kneeling near the altar and the man screamed as if his soul were being ripped from his body. A reddish light flickered in his eyes, and a foul frothing cloud of many colours emerged from his mouth. His body spasmed, as if he was in the grip of some powerful fit. His muscles rippled and expanded like balloons, bursting out through flesh in a tidal wave of red dripping meat, and bluish pulsing vein. With one hand, the man reached into a split in his flesh and tore it free, leaving him stripped and skinless, blood pooling on the floor near his feet. Despite a pain that must have been near indescribable, he still stood, and then, most horribly of all, he laughed, a chilling sound that rang through the chamber like the mad mirth of some demented godling.

The transformation was not over though. The possessed man opened his mouth and the stuff of Chaos slid down his throat and again his body glowed briefly, the bones glowing so bright they were visible through his flesh. As Ragnar watched, they thickened and grew denser, the joints becoming heavier as if adjusting to compensate for the additional mass of muscle on the body. The whole process was oddly familiar, and reminded Ragnar of something he had learned once before. Then it came to him – the bone structure and the increased muscle mass were almost exactly the

same as the changed form of a Space Marine. The cultist seemed to be creating a wicked parody of the foes that sought to stop him.

More of the coloured stuff of Chaos flowed around the doomed human sacrifice, knitting itself into a new layer of flesh, gleaming and scaly, at once suggestive of something reptilian and something insectoid. His eyes became deep eerie pools of dancing flame that reflected the glow of the hell-lights about him. He gestured and the blood pooled at his feet washed upwards in a wave, congealing and clotting as it did so, covering him in a layer of blackened slime that hardened into a carapace very similar in appearance to the one Ragnar knew was beneath his own armour.

Another complex gesture and more and more of the scraps of Chaos stuff flowed towards him, flapping like monstrous batwings as they wrapped themselves about the man. They gleamed bright as metal hot from the forge and the man screamed once more like someone dropped into a vat of molten metal. The light surrounding him was so brilliant that Ragnar could not look at him with his naked eyes, and dropped his gaze, leaving only a horrific after-image burned on his retina. In the last second before averting his eyes, he saw what the man had turned into, and recognised it. He looked up, knowing already what he would see. Knowing that there would be recognition too in the burning gaze of the thing he faced.

A Chaos Marine stood there, clad in ornate armour of ancient design, hundreds of leering metal daemon heads emerging from his armour. He clutched a runesword that glowed hellishly in one hand, and a bolter of ancient aspect in the other. His helmet was horned. He looked much the same as Ragnar remembered from the caverns below the most accursed mountains on Fenris.

‘Madox!’ he bellowed, challenging the Chaos warrior he thought he and Strybjorn had killed many moons before.

‘It’s always nice to be recognised,’ came the silky mocking voice he knew and loathed. And still the rift in the air above the spear glowed brighter. The face it had formed was more recognisably human now. Ragnar had seen its image before in the most ancient ikons of his Chapter. It was the visage of one of the greatest of all mankind’s enemies, the rebel Primarch, Magnus.

More and more scraps of Chaos stuff, the souls of undying warriors, flashed out like meteors, striking cultists left and right. The glare Ragnar

had seen earlier, repeated itself, once, twice, a dozen, a hundred times.

Ragnar knew in that moment that at least a company, perhaps a Chapter of Chaos Marines were warping into being all around him.

All around the heretics screamed as they were possessed, their physical forms warped, their souls displaced. Whatever they had been expecting from the ritual, this was not it. Doubtless they had been promised apotheosis, or power beyond their wildest dreams. Ragnar supposed they were getting it, just not in the way they anticipated.

Even when Chaos keeps its promises, it finds a way to break them. The shaven headed acolytes panicked and ran, but the glowing fireballs of Chaos stuff followed them, consuming them utterly and transforming them into something else. Perhaps it was his imagination, but Ragnar thought he could see the visages of long-dead Traitor Marines within each incandescent sphere. The cultists rushed past seeking to escape their doom. Screaming and bleating like frightened sheep they threw themselves headlong at the Wolves.

The rift in the air widened. The chief heretic chanted louder. Ragnar thought he could see other things swirling about within it, massive daemonic forms that sought entrance to this world. His sense of foreboding grew. It was like watching the mouth of hell open in front of him. He heard Berek shouting from behind him, 'Kill them. There will be fewer bodies for the daemons to possess!'

A cultist standing in front of Ragnar was sliced in two by a black, glowing hellblade. Ragnar found himself confronting Madox. 'An admirably brutal and ruthless thought,' he said. 'But I am afraid living or dead these bodies will serve. Of course, my returning brethren won't thank me for cutting this body in two, but I could not restrain myself. Imagine my joy in seeing you once more. I just could not wait to greet you appropriately.'

The hellblade lashed out at Ragnar, licking towards his face. Frantically he parried with his chainsword. Sparks flew as the two blades met. The black blade moaned. 'I do believe you have improved since last we fought, youth. Excellent. This will make your death all the more satisfying.'

Madox aimed a mighty two-handed cut at Ragnar's head. Ragnar ducked and struck back, shearing a brazen skull from the Thousand Sons'

armour. ‘Let me show you how much I have improved, loathsome spawn of Magnus!’

‘Loathsome spawn of Magnus?’ The Chaos warrior’s tone was amused. ‘Spoken like a true Space Wolf – all mindless bigotry and unreasoning hatred.’

‘Die, Chaos spawn!’ shouted Ragnar, chopping at Madox with a blow that would have cut the evil Space Marine in two had he not parried. Their blades met with a crash like a hammer hitting an anvil. All around combat had become close and general as the Wolves fought with the resurrected Chaos Marines.

‘I would not be so quick to condemn Chaos spawn,’ said Madox, unleashing a hail of lightning fast blows that sent Ragnar reeling back into Sven. ‘The longer that gate stays open, the more likely it is that you will become one yourself. Of course, you don’t need to worry about that, since I will be obliging enough to kill you before you suffer what you would regard as a fate worse than death.’

The black blade gouged an enormous chunk out of Ragnar’s shoulder pad. It slid free leaving the armour’s internal working exposed. ‘Don’t thank me,’ added Madox. ‘Anything to oblige. Of course, when I kill you here, your soul will go straight to the warp.’

‘Doesn’t he ever bloody shut up?’ cried Sven, suddenly stepping through the press of bodies and aiming a swing at Madox. A second Chaos Marine aimed a blow at Sven as he did so. Ragnar leapt into the breach and blocked the blow that would have killed his friend. It left his arm feeling numb. Sven’s attacker was a huge brute, larger than Madox and far stronger, if a lot less skilful.

‘Being dead is an interesting experience,’ Madox added conversationally. ‘Everyone should try it at least once.’

His blade found its way around Sven’s guard and caught him at the wrist. The blade glowed more brightly as it drew power from somewhere to cut through the hardened ceramite and sever the hand at the wrist. With a howl of pain Sven fell back and the Chaos Marine’s blade took him in the chest. Blood erupted from Sven’s mouth. He fell forward along the blade that was killing him, trying to get his good hand around Madox’s throat. The Chaos Marine headbutted him and sent him reeling backwards, blade still protruding from his chest.

‘Of course, it’s a little corrosive to the soul. I am not sure I would want to endure it for all those millennia like most of my brethren here. Some of them have been trapped since the Burning of Prospero and Horus’s rebellion. I fear all that waiting, and wrestling with daemons has driven them a little mad and not a little vengeful. On the other hand, we will soon have every Thousand Son killed in the Long War back in the flesh, and believe me, that’s a lot. True Chapters were so much larger than your puny latter day imitations. That’s it, Boriseon. You almost had him there!’

Ragnar sprang backwards, away from the sweep of an enormous runic axe. Shock and anger at Sven’s death filled him. He felt wild rage and anger start to fill him, a fuse burning down to an enormous keg of explosive. He knew that the relentless mocking banter of the Chaos Marine was intended to goad him but he did not want to resist. He felt that his chainsword was starting to become laden with the power of death.

‘Ironic really that Russ’s spear should be used to resurrect so many of those he helped destroy. It took millennia for Magnus to solve all the details and instruct our minions accordingly. I am pleased to report that I did my part spreading the word to this benighted place.’ Madox strode over to Sven’s recumbent form, placed one heavy metal shod foot on his chest and pulled his sword free. Over his shoulder Ragnar could see that the rift had widened, and a mighty one-eyed visage had come fully into focus. From its roaring mouth it spat the returning souls of its dead followers. Ragnar knew now that without question he was looking on the awesome visage of Magnus the Red, primarch of the Thousand Sons, a warped creation of the Emperor, who rivalled any daemon prince in power and malignity. Sensing that wicked cyclopean eye on him, his soul shrank. Had it not been for the fury burning within him, he might have quailed.

‘Once we’ve disposed of you and your pathetic brethren we shall conquer this world. It will be the first of many. This will be the new Prospero. It sits right astride the main routes from the Eye of Terror to the Imperial hub. Still, I suppose you knew that. I say, Boriseon, that was a good one. Give me a few moments and I will help finish him off.’

The force of the giant Chaos warrior’s blow nearly flattened Ragnar, even though he parried it. Ragnar stepped back and gazed at his opponent, feeling cold anger and hatred fill him. He had fought long enough to know Boriseon’s weaknesses now. The huge armoured warrior was lumbering

and slow. He could probably destroy a tank with a blow of his axe but first it had to connect.

Ragnar sprang forward, ducked beneath the sweep of Boriseon's axe and drove his chainsword up through the gorget of his armour, severing the brute's head. 'When you get back to hell,' he snarled, 'tell them Ragnar sent you.'

He did not wait to see the results of his attack but continued his berserk rush at Madox. His blade arced in and smashed into the blood-dripping hellsword, knocking it aside. His armoured fist connected with Madox's helmet, smashing the Chaos Marine to the ground.

But the Thousand Son was not to be so easily defeated. Millennia of combat experience lay behind his every move. As he fell he lashed out with one foot, catching Ragnar behind the knee and sending him sprawling. Before Ragnar could recover, the maelstrom of battle had flowed over them, and swept them apart. Ragnar found himself in the centre of a swirling melee where a compact mass of Wolves chopped its way through the still assembling hordes of Chaos Marines. All around the meteors of Chaos stuff fell, impacting on corpses, consuming them, restructuring them, reanimating them. Even through the rage that filled him, Ragnar could tell that things were not going well for the Sons of Russ.

Moments later, he found himself fighting alongside Berek, Morgrim and the old Rune Priest Skalagrim. The Wolf Lord and his bodyguards were overwhelming their foes by sheer ferocity but numbers were slowing them down, and for every foe who fell there was another to take their place. Amid the packed masses of screaming heretics and their trampled corpses there was no shortage of bodies to possess.

'We've got to close that gate!' Ragnar shouted at Berek.

'As soon as we get there,' said Berek confidently. Skalagrim smiled bleakly as he lashed out with his runestaff and broke a Thousand Sons' head. 'The youth is right. Those madmen do not know what they are doing. If that warp gate is allowed to run loose much longer it will break free of all control and consume the planet. This world will become a daemon world like those in the Eye of Terror.'

Ragnar shuddered. It was a fate worse than anything Madox had promised him. The daemon worlds were places where hell invaded the material universe, warped by Chaos, ruled by the whims of daemon

princes. He wondered whether Magnus and the Thousand Sons had any idea what they were doing, or whether they even cared. Perhaps this had been part of their insane plan all along. Perhaps that was what Madox had meant when he had talked about the new Prospero, the planet that had been the original home world of the Thousand Sons. Perhaps Magnus intended to create a new capital here, in the image of the original, formed by his will from the raw stuff of Chaos. Could he do that? Did he really have that sort of power? Who knew what a primarch was capable of?

‘We need to get the Spear. It is providing the power for the ritual, anchoring the gate to the warp, and Magnus to the gate,’ said Skalagrim.

‘I am open to suggestions,’ said Berek. His smile was becoming a rictus of fury. His weapons dripped with the gore of dozens of slaughtered foes. He looked like a god of battle descended among mortals. Every stride took them closer to the altar, but not close enough. Ragnar raised his bolt pistol and sent a shell hurtling towards the heretics, but the air around them shimmered, a glowing sphere of light became visible and some force deflected the shells.

‘I already tried that,’ shouted Berek. ‘We’re just going to have to do this the old-fashioned way. Right lads, cut us a path to that altar.’

‘If you can get me into proximity with it, I might be able to do something,’ said Skalagrim.

‘Always reassuring to know,’ said Berek. He let out a long, low and terrifying howl and began to charge. If Ragnar had thought Berek had been ferocious before, he had a surprise coming to him now. The Wolf Lord’s unleashed fury was truly awesome. He moved with eye-blurring swiftness through the mass of materialising Chaos warriors, smashing them down with thunderbolt-like blows of his blade. He fought with no thought of defence, a true berserk, living only to kill. Morgrim and Mikal Stenmark flanked him and protected him from the consequences of his all-out attack, turning aside blows intended for their war-chieftain, blocking them with their own bodies if necessary.

‘Stay by me, boy,’ said Skalagrim. ‘Once we are close enough I will need someone to guard me while I work with the runes.’

‘As you wish,’ said Ragnar. ‘So shall it be.’

Following the massed ranks of the Wolf Guard they cut their way through the throng of Chaos Marines, while in the air over the altar, the

face of Magnus hovered like the severed head of some evil god. There was a triumphant look in that one mad eye.



TWENTY-SIX

All around them, the resurrected Chaos Marines pressed hard. Ragnar fought like a man possessed, always keeping an eye open for Madox. He swore that no matter how long it took, he would pay back the Thousand Son for slaying Sven. Given a chance he would carve the blood dragon on his back.

Ahead of them the altar loomed larger, but as they closed their advance became ever more difficult. Some force seemed to be repelling them, and the numbers of the Thousand Sons increased. Fortunately, most were disoriented by their recent emergence from the warp, and this gave the Wolves of Berek's company a chance to overwhelm them while they were off-balance. Had it not been for this, Ragnar reckoned the battle would already have been lost.

He chopped down a mortal cultist, putting his chainsword blade through the back of the man's head, smashing it to tiny bits. A burning orb from the warp gate landed on it. For a moment, a field of fire limned the corpse, and then the Chaos thing withdrew, crackling with frustration. It seemed that without a brain to enter, the spirits of the Chaos warriors could not take control of the bodies.

Madox had lied about that. Now, there was surprise, Ragnar thought sourly. A follower of Tzeentch lying, how unusual. What else had he lied about?

'Shoot them through the heads!' Ragnar roared. 'That will put them down and keep them down.'

Another glance showed him something else. Where the glowing spheres landed on the fallen, they only took hold on the shaven-headed heretics with the sign on their head, and Ragnar guessed they could only possess those marked in this way. Perhaps they needed it to root themselves to. Ragnar did not know. He was not expert on dark sorcery but he knew what he was seeing and he spread the word. 'It's the rune on their foreheads that lets them be possessed,' he shouted to Berek. 'Destroy it and they cannot change.'

Berek nodded to show he understood. The order rippled out over the comm-net. His battle-brethren acted on it instantly. Perhaps it was too late now to make a difference. Perhaps too many of the Thousand Sons had already returned for Berek's embattled company to make a difference. He could not see any way in which they were going to be able to stop the ritual, or overcome the sendings of that daemonic presence hovering over the altar, and spewing out the souls of his long dead followers.

Despair almost overcame him, he felt ready to give up. Only his thirst for revenge and for a glorious death kept him fighting in that dark instant while every fibre of his being cried for him to give up.

'Fight it, lad,' said Skalagrim. 'It's the daemon's power. It seeks to overwhelm your soul with despair. Do not give in to it!'

At first the old Rune Priest's words did not sink in, then their meaning struck Ragnar with the force of a blow. He was not going to give in to the will of a daemon, no matter how powerful. He snarled and drew strength from the scent of his pack. He saw how furiously the Wolf Guard fought, and the god-like ferocity that Berek brought to the fray. They were not giving in, and neither would he. By Russ, he would prove himself worthy to fight and if need be die in their company.

Ragnar howled his battlecry and glared about him. Nearby he saw a heavy flamer held in the grasp of a fallen Long Fang. He leapt over to it, snatched it up and pulled the igniter that brought it to life. A jet of incandescent chemical fire leapt out. He squeezed the trigger and the jet lengthened. He turned it on the nearest foes, cultists and returned Chaos Marines alike. He wondered how those who had just returned from hell would like a taste of its fires.

The flames licked out, setting light to the heretics, melting the armour of the Marines. Within seconds Ragnar had burned a path forward. He advanced swivelling from the hip, clearing a channel ahead of him with the flames. Twenty strides took him within striking distance of the altar. He sensed Skalagrim at his shoulder.

'Enough, lad. Well done! I must strike now, while the heretics are distracted – while all their power goes into maintaining and controlling the gate!'

So saying he raced forward and struck at the altar with his staff. A blue flame rippled outwards. Chain lightning flared, dancing along the outside of a sphere that winked into visibility every time the bolts hit it. The air

stank of ozone and death. The sphere flickered for a moment, vanished and returned. Fleeting triumph vanished from Ragnar's heart. They were not going to make it.

With a growl of frustrated rage, the Rune Priest struck again. Once more the lightning flashed, once more the force sphere flickered. This time, Ragnar was ready. He leapt forward, springing through the briefly open barrier and landing atop the altar.

An instant later the deafening hubbub dimmed. The sound of battle muted and became distant. He was within the barrier now, cut off from all aid. Before him stood the five servants of Tzeentch. Ragnar grinned. He knew exactly what he was going to do now.

Only Sergius looked at him. The others were too busy trying to maintain the gate. This close Ragnar could see the strain they were under. Their limbs quivered, and their knees seemed weak. He could smell their weariness and hear the harsh rasping of their breath. One of them turned to look at Ragnar and he sensed the man's fear. As he did so, the gate flickered and the sense of the awful presence of the primarch weakened a little.

'Don't let him distract you, fools. Maintain the gate at all costs. The legions of Magnus must be resurrected if we are to win our eternal rewards.'

'Your only reward will be death,' said Ragnar, leaping forward and striking the nearest cultist. His attack was a blur so fast that the man had no hope of avoiding it. Somehow, with desperate quickness he managed to raise the burnished skull he held. Ragnar's blade connected, and instead of smashing it in two as he had half expected, the blade recoiled, bounding back as if it had hit something hard as diamond. Worse yet a surge of sickening pain and nausea, mingled with a bubbling daemonic energy, passed up the weapon and through Ragnar's body like an electric shock.

Overhead, he sensed something happening. The feeling of immense power intensified, became less controlled. He heard a distant roar, like surf pounding on a beach. It was as if he could hear the voices of every sailor who had ever drowned, screaming and howling within the sea's rage. He somehow knew, without being told, that he was hearing the voices of all those long dead Chaos Marines, waiting to be resurrected.

'No, idiots!' shrieked Sergius. 'Don't let your concentration slip. The gate must not close until all of the Blessed Ones are returned to us.'

Ragnar gritted his teeth. ‘How are you going to stop me?’

The cultist did not reply. Instead he made a twisting complex gesture with one hand. Trails of fire followed the intricate movements of his fingers. A small portal to somewhere else appeared to open, and as the heretic pointed the raw stuff of Chaos spurted through, like water gouting through holes in the dragonskin hide of a ship.

Ragnar threw himself flat and let the stuff pass over head, not willing to risk the slightest contact with it. Doubtless it would sear through his armour like hot lead through cold butter. Such stuff was not meant to be in the mortal world. Just its presence made his skin tighten and a spasm of fear pass up his spine.

He rolled forward along the top of the massive altar, catching one of the cultists behind the leg with the blade of his chainsword. The man dropped his chalice and fell screaming.

The cord of light connecting him to the portal stretched and broke. The swirling vortex of Chaos stuff lost shape around the edges. Ragnar was not sure he was doing the right thing. If the portal ran out of control, it might swallow the world. On the other hand, he could not see anything else to do. He could not simply allow these wicked men to proceed with their ritual, not while his battle-brothers fought and died outside the shield that separated them.

He risked a quick glance outwards, to see how things were going. Not well. The resurrected Thousand Sons outnumbered the Wolves, and more and more sprang into being despite the killing and decapitation of numberless cultists and corpses by his brethren. One for one, the battle appeared to be equally matched, but soon the weight of numbers would begin to tell. It seemed too much to hope for that the rest of the Chapter would arrive in time to make a difference.

He noticed Skalagrim locked in combat with a black armoured ancient Marine. The old Rune Priest was shouting something at him. The sense was lost in the mad roar of battle, muted by the magical shield around him. It seemed to Ragnar that he should be able to understand the old man’s mouthing, but he could not.

He lashed out with his foot, catching another cultist in the groin and sending him flying. The robed heretic hit the force wall surrounding them and bounced back to lie unconscious on the altar itself. Overhead, the roaring of the Chaos gate intensified. It was losing the semblance of the

primarch's head and become a shapeless shimmering mass of raw, primordial Chaos. The frustrated voices of the waiting souls clamoured in anger and frustration and perhaps fear. They did not want this to happen.

A shocking pain passed through Ragnar and he looked up to see another cultist had stabbed him through his shattered shoulderpad with a black, rune encrusted dagger. The agony was intense, poisonous magic swirled away from the wound. Ragnar used the butt of his chainsword to smash the man's skull. It collapsed like an eggshell hit with a hammer, splattering Ragnar with gooey jelly and fragments of bone and blood. Knowing he might only have seconds to live, Ragnar came to a quick decision. Two lightning fast strikes killed two more of the ritual workers and left him face to face with their leader. He struck at Sergius's head but the hulking man leapt back and Ragnar's blow succeeded only in ripping the helm from his head and leaving a dripping, bone-deep cut on his brow. Even as Ragnar watched the wound closed. It was true then, – mortal weapons could not harm the daemon lover.

The poison in the wound slowed him now. He could feel his limbs grow heavier and stiffer with every heartbeat. Whatever it was, it was no normal venom. Even his altered Space Marine body was unable to cope with it. Perhaps it was not poison at all but magic. And if it was magic, it could be resisted by the strong of soul, Ragnar told himself. Offering up a prayer to Russ, he drove himself onwards by pure force of will.

The arch-heretic looked at him and snarled. His mouth was a red gash. Most of his teeth were small and white and very sharp but two of his canines were as long as Space Wolf fangs. 'You fool,' he said. 'You know not what you do! You have doomed us all, and this very world.'

'It would have been doomed anyway, if the Thousand Sons returned.'

'It would have lived an eternity in glory. I would have lived an eternity in glory, sitting at the right hand of Magnus. Now there will only be ruin and destruction.'

'There will always be that,' said Ragnar, circling, looking for an opening. The cult leader held the Spear of Russ in his right hand, as if considering throwing it at his assailant. Inwardly Ragnar quailed. His armour would not be able to withstand that legendary weapon even if wielded by a heretic. The Chaos worshipper came to his decision. He drew back his arm for the cast. Everything slowed. Everything became perfectly clear.

Ragnar could make out every little detail of the man's movements, the way his weight shifted from front foot to back foot and then returned. The way his cloak swept back over his shoulder and fluttered in the wind. The mad melee was visible behind the man, frozen for a split second, a tableau of mayhem in which Berek's company fought the black armoured minions of Chaos.

Sergius threw. Ragnar could feel the death in the weapon, sense the weight of it, knew that when the weapon struck a life would end. It hurtled towards him like a thunderbolt cast by an angry god. He watched it come, knew that on its current trajectory the glittering point would pierce his heart.

Still he stood, watching like a man who sees his death approaching but whose wyrd is upon him and can do nothing. At the last moment, he reached out and snatched the Spear from the air, catching it just behind the head. He felt its momentum and its mass, far greater than anything he could have expected. He let the weight of it turn him around in a half circle, bringing him to face the heretic once more and with a snap of his arm he set it onwards to bury itself in the Chaos worshipper's chest. Even Sergius's vast, sorcery riddled body could not withstand the weapon that had wounded Magnus himself. It passed right through him and almost out of the other side.

At that moment, the force wall dropped and the roar of battle flooded in, temporarily drowning out the sound of the portal. The screams of the dying, the bizarre chants of the Chaos Marines, the howls of the Wolves warred with the blast of bolters, the thunder of grenades and the grating whine of chainsword on armour. The scents of blood, excrement, incense, ceramite, explosive charge and the raw stuff of Chaos assaulted his nostrils. The air vibrated with the power of the Chaos gate and the detonation of munitions.

Overhead the gate blazed with power, gouting forth the souls of Thousand Sons and the raw stuff of Chaos in equal measure. As Ragnar watched it started to widen. Shimmering coruscating light flickered across the chamber, reflecting off armour and stained glass and marble, limning everything in hellish light.

Ragnar stared at it in awe and wonder and terror. He could see things moving up there. He could see the outlines of daemons coalescing and fading along with the faces of the damned. All of them appeared to be

components of a greater face that leered down on him, the one-eyed face of Magnus the Red. At times that greater face lost shape and the gate grew wider. At other times, the features swam together and he reappeared and the gate appeared to stabilise.

All of the time, the swirling mass of lesser faces and beings seemed somehow to be components of the primarch's face, as if somehow contained within him. The primarch's face now showed the strain, and it occurred to Ragnar that wherever he was, and whatever he was doing to perform his part in this insane ritual, Magnus did not want the gate to give way, any more than Ragnar did. Ragnar could only guess why. Perhaps he did not want the gate to open until all of his warriors were resurrected, or perhaps interrupting the ritual had somehow placed the gate outside even his god-like control.

For whatever reason, it was obvious that the renegade primarch was under enormous strain. The eye that glared down balefully on Ragnar contained a measure of uncertainty, of doubt. Perhaps the primarch had tied himself to the gate and now as it ran out of control, the unleashed energies were capable of destroying even him. It was an awe-inspiring thought to contemplate the death of a being coeval with the Emperor, who had lived for centuries.

Ragnar shook himself. This was getting him nowhere. This was not his field. He was a warrior not a priest. He glanced around for Skalagrim, to see if the old man was doing anything about the gate, but the old man was locked in combat. Ragnar was about to spring to his aid when a blast of mystical energy washed over him and the whole gate began to shimmer and pulse, expanding and contracting uncontrollably. The tide of Chaotic energies seemed about to wash in and over them, and Ragnar knew that if that happened they were all doomed.

There must be something he could do, but what? He glanced around frantically, praying for help from the Rune Priest but none came. Instead, he found his eye irresistibly drawn to the Spear of Russ. This was the anchor, the focus of the ritual, the thing from which the dark ones had drawn their power to open the gateway. Surely it was the key to undoing it.

Ragnar was not sure what inspired him to his next action. Some instinct sent him springing to the corpse of the chief heretic. He wrested the ancient weapon from the body, hefted it and then threw it with one perfect cast, directly into the one mad eye of the primarch. The spear

vanished into the raw stuff of Chaos, sinking slowly from sight like a stone vanishing under water. The scream of a god in agony filled the temple, booming across the room with such force that Ragnar had to cover his ears with his hands. The voice of Magnus seemed to contain the voices of all that multitude beyond the gate, and in it, underlying it, he could hear echoes of all their prayers, entreaties, threats and promises. It was like listening to the voice of pure undiluted madness, and for a moment his own sanity teetered on the brink.

Then came a moment of shocking silence. All combat ceased. The air around the gate began to shimmer and swirl, spinning inwards like a whirlpool. The blazing fireballs that were the souls of the Thousand Sons were drawn back into the vortex. All of the air was sucked out of Ragnar's lungs. His armour's life-support systems kicked in automatically to compensate. A terrible gravitic pull began to lift Ragnar from his feet to suck him upwards into the collapsing gate. Desperately he clung to the edges of the altar. He knew that if he let go he would be sucked into the maw of Chaos to join all of those other damned souls there.

The pull became near unbearable. He saw several men – Chaos Marines, Space Wolves and cultists alike – sucked upwards and inwards. Anyone nearby was being drawn in, as the Chaos gate gave way. They vanished into the gaping mouth of hell leaving barely a ripple amid all of those leering faces. The corpse of Sergius hit the gate and vanished into the depths. Ragnar felt his legs being lifted and grasped by something and kicked at them. He did not look back, but kept his eyes locked on the ground below him, as if that would anchor him as surely as his gauntleted grip on the altar.

Slowly, inexorably, he felt his grip slip as the very stones crumbled beneath his fingers. He knew that he did not have a moment longer to live. The stone gave way and he felt the terrible suction lift him upwards towards the waiting gate. He snarled in defiance and then felt his wrist gripped by a strong hand, and looking down he saw Berek gazing up at him, his massive metal hand braced on the altar.

A moment later there was a thunderclap of inrushing air and the gate closed. The drag was gone and Ragnar fell to the altar, his armour clanging on the stone like some great bell.

He glanced around. There were still Thousand Sons here, and the battle raged on, but now there seemed to be far more Wolves. Looking over at

the entrance he could see Logan Grimnar and the rest of the Chapter had arrived.

‘How is it going?’ Ragnar asked a battle-brother he did not recognise, someone from Redmaw’s company.

‘It is all but over. A few of the Thousand Sons may have escaped into the tunnels, but we will hunt them down.’ The man turned and walked away with a curious unfriendly expression on his face.

Ragnar nodded. He was as weary as he had ever been in his life. The two hours’ rest he had had since the battle ended was not nearly enough. The fighting after he had closed the Chaos gate had been gruelling and deadly. Try as he might, he had not been able to find Madox, which galled him, for the thirst for revenge was strong in him, and hatred of that evil Space Marine burned bright. His wound pained him, and he was weary as no Wolf ought to be.

He caught a familiar scent and turned to confront Morgrim Silvertongue. There was a curious grim expression on the skald’s face.

‘Thunderfist wants to see you,’ he said. ‘Come with me to the field hospital.’

The hospital was small and isolated, the apothecaries and priests dour and determined. They looked as if they had entered a personal conflict with death, and battled every step of the way to deny him. Judging by the number of bodies being carried away, they were being less successful than the Wolves had been against the remnants of the Thousand Sons.

One of them, a grim faced ancient called Wothan, looked at Ragnar as he entered the small chamber. There was a look of awe and revulsion on his face that Ragnar had come to recognise on his march to the chamber.

‘This him?’ asked the priest, running a medical sensor over the area of Ragnar’s wound. He already knew the answer, Ragnar could tell. He was speaking only to have something to say.

‘Looks clean. The hellblade has left no taint, I would say.’ He sounded oddly disappointed.

Of all the men he had seen so far, only Berek looked at him with unrestrained friendliness, and the man whose bed the Wolf Lord knelt beside. It took Ragnar a moment to realise that it was Sven. Relief warred with guilt. Relief that Sven was still breathing along with guilt for not having visited his friend sooner. Berek seemed to read his thoughts and shook his head.

Sven was pale. Sweat beaded his brow and there was a distant look in his eye as if he contemplated worlds beyond this one. The stump of his hand was bandaged. He looked as if he had aged twenty years. His hair was greyish, and his face lined. Once more Berek seemed to read his thoughts. 'It takes a lot of a man's strength to recover from a hellblade wound. Even with the help of Rune Priests it is draining.'

'Ragnar,' said Sven weakly. 'I might have known you would show up to take all the credit. Lord Berek was just telling me that it is certain that we will make Grey Hunter. Once I'm back on my feet, I'll get a new hand fitted and then I am going to go and find that Madox and stick my blade up his—'

'I get the picture, Sven.' Ragnar could barely conceal his joy that his friend was still alive. His voice came out gruff but he could tell by Sven's expression that he understood. Berek gestured for Ragnar to come closer.

'I would have summoned you here sooner had I known myself, but I had other duties to attend to.' For some reason the mention of other duties made the Wolf Lord look embarrassed. It was an expression as out of place on his confident features as guilt on the face of a lion.

'Now Ragnar we have matters to discuss, you and I. None of them pleasant. Walk with me.'

'What is it, Lord?' Ragnar asked. Berek continued to look grim as they strolled through the ruined corridors beneath the temple.

'You have set our brother priests and our Great Wolf quite a conundrum, Brother Ragnar.'

'And what would that be, Lord Berek?' said Ragnar trying to match his liege in formality.

'You closed the gate and most likely saved us all from being dragged into hell, and to be frank for this I would see you rewarded. If I had my way you would have been made a Grey Hunter at the same time as Brother Sven and Brother Strybjorn.'

'But—'

'Yes, Brother Ragnar there is a "but". It is this: you have destroyed one of our most sacred relics, an act which some of our elder brethren in the priesthood consider quite blasphemous.'

'It was not my intention to do so, lord.'

'I know, Ragnar, I know.' Berek sounded almost kindly now. 'You must understand though that the Spear of Russ was a most precious and sacred

thing. It was created for Russ, Lord of Lords, Wolf of Wolves. It contained part of his power. It is said that on the day of his return he would claim it and use it to smite the Great Evil One in the last days. I think he will find that a bit difficult now.'

Ragnar felt a deep-rooted sense of shame take him. He thought he had been a hero. He thought he had been saving the world. He thought he had made the right decision. Instead he had committed an act of blasphemy and sacrilege. A sudden flash of anger passed through his mind. No – he had made the right decision, the only decision under the circumstances. He had stopped the Chaos gate running out of control. He had stopped this world being overrun by the raw stuff of Chaos. If called upon to do so again, he would. He said as much to Berek.

'And I agree with you,' said the Wolf Lord. 'And I was there. Unfortunately not all of our brethren were. Some of the priests are not so sure that the gate would have run out of control. Some of them feel that it would have collapsed harmlessly in on itself once the summoners were slain. And who is to say that is not true? I am not an expert on such things. Are you? The only man who might have said so for sure was Skalagrim and he was so badly wounded he is not expected to recover.'

Ragnar shook his head. Perhaps he had been presumptuous after all. Perhaps things would have turned out well without him.

Was it possible he was really going to go down in the annals of the Chapter as the man who had destroyed the Spear of Russ? He would most likely become the most reviled brother in the history of the Chapter. It was not a pleasant thought.

'Regrettably there are other influences at work here too,' Berek added.

'What do you mean, lord?'

'In any mighty organisation there will always be politics, Brother Ragnar, even among the Russ's Wolves. There are those who see discrediting you as a means of discrediting me. After all, it means my company goes from being the one which saved the world of Garm well-nigh single-handed to being the one which lost our Chapter's most precious relic.'

'You mean Sigrid is behind this.'

'In part, he and his allies are behind this. I am sure of it. They are pushing for punishment and exile. Some of our more... devout... brethren wish to see the blood eagle carved on your back.'

‘If such punishment is deemed fair by the Great Wolf, I will face my destiny like a Space Wolf.’

‘Spoken like a true Son of Russ,’ said Berek. ‘We go to face Logan Grimnar now.’



EPILOGUE

‘What happened then?’ blurted Mikko from the crowd of rapt faces, forgetting his status in his eagerness for the tale to continue. The Blood Claw had an expression on his youthful face that made it plain he wanted to hear so much more. As the tale had continued, the young Blood Claws had joined the circle of veterans, barely daring to make a sound. ‘I mean, lord, would—’

Ragnar shook his head and looked around, almost as if seeing his battle-brothers arrayed before him for the first time. The sounds of the encampment rose up around him once again. The day had passed and his throat was dry as dust. The old memories of comrades long dead had come flooding back and filled him with memory and sadness and a sense of loss. Just as the day had ended, so his desire to revisit those dark memories had faded.

‘That is a tale for another day,’ Ragnar said, rising from beside the fire. ‘Besides, if we do nothing but tell tales of what has already been, how will we create the heroes to be talked of tomorrow? Brother Mikko, you are anxious to learn what it is like to be made a Grey Hunter, but I do not think you need hear of such an occasion from another’s lips. Form up your squad. We must see if the brotherhood will accept you and your comrades into their pack.’

He could tell by the young warrior’s face how delighted he was, and Ragnar envied him that, never having experienced it himself. The Space Wolf was silent for just a moment longer, then he gestured for the men to follow him to the place the priests would have purified for the ritual.

As he walked, Ragnar thought of all the men he had known who had been worthy to be Grey Hunters and had never undergone the ritual because they had died too soon. Brave warriors all, now lost, fallen upon one gore-strewn battlefield or another. And he thought about himself, and wondered at what he had lost by never undergoing it, and all the strange adventures he might have missed if he had done so.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William King is the author of the *Tyrion* and *Teclis* saga and the *Macharian Crusade* trilogy, as well as the much-loved *Gotrek & Felix* series and the *Space Wolf* novels. His short stories have appeared in many magazines and compilations, including *White Dwarf* and *Inferno!*. Bill was born in Stranraer, Scotland, in 1959 and currently lives in Prague.

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Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Warhammer 40,000](#)

[The Space Wolf Omnibus](#)

[Space Wolf](#)

[Prologue – Assault on Hesperida](#)

[One – The Sea of Dragons](#)

[Two – The Temple of Iron](#)

[Three – The Festival of Passage](#)

[Four – The Last Stand](#)

[Five – The Chooser of the Fallen](#)

[Six – The Chosen](#)

[Seven – Hunting](#)

[Eight – Trials](#)

[Nine – The Gate of Morkai](#)

[Ten – The Cup of Wulfen](#)

[Eleven – The Spirit of the Beast](#)

[Twelve – The Ultimate Test](#)

[Thirteen – Acceptance](#)

[Fourteen – In the Field](#)

[Fifteen – In the Dark](#)

[Sixteen – The Temple of Chaos](#)

[Seventeen – Fighting Retreat](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ragnar's Claw](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Grey Hunter](#)
[Prologue](#)
[One](#)
[Two](#)
[Three](#)
[Four](#)
[Five](#)
[Six](#)
[Seven](#)
[Eight](#)
[Nine](#)
[Ten](#)
[Eleven](#)
[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Fifteen](#)
[Sixteen](#)
[Seventeen](#)
[Eighteen](#)
[Nineteen](#)
[Twenty](#)
[Twenty-One](#)
[Twenty-Two](#)
[Twenty-Three](#)
[Twenty-Four](#)
[Twenty-Five](#)
[Twenty-Six](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Legal](#)

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Warhammer 40,000](#)

[The Space Wolf Omnibus](#)

[Space Wolf](#)

[Prologue – Assault on Hesperida](#)

[One – The Sea of Dragons](#)

[Two – The Temple of Iron](#)

[Three – The Festival of Passage](#)

[Four – The Last Stand](#)

[Five – The Chooser of the Fallen](#)

[Six – The Chosen](#)

[Seven – Hunting](#)

[Eight – Trials](#)

[Nine – The Gate of Morkai](#)

[Ten – The Cup of Wulfen](#)

[Eleven – The Spirit of the Beast](#)

[Twelve – The Ultimate Test](#)

[Thirteen – Acceptance](#)

[Fourteen – In the Field](#)

[Fifteen – In the Dark](#)

[Sixteen – The Temple of Chaos](#)

[Seventeen – Fighting Retreat](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ragnar's Claw](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Grey Hunter](#)
[Prologue](#)
[One](#)
[Two](#)
[Three](#)
[Four](#)
[Five](#)
[Six](#)
[Seven](#)
[Eight](#)
[Nine](#)
[Ten](#)
[Eleven](#)
[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Fifteen](#)
[Sixteen](#)
[Seventeen](#)
[Eighteen](#)
[Nineteen](#)
[Twenty](#)
[Twenty-One](#)
[Twenty-Two](#)
[Twenty-Three](#)
[Twenty-Four](#)
[Twenty-Five](#)
[Twenty-Six](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Legal](#)

Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[Warhammer 40,000](#)

[The Space Wolf Omnibus](#)

[Space Wolf](#)

[Prologue – Assault on Hesperida](#)

[One – The Sea of Dragons](#)

[Two – The Temple of Iron](#)

[Three – The Festival of Passage](#)

[Four – The Last Stand](#)

[Five – The Chooser of the Fallen](#)

[Six – The Chosen](#)

[Seven – Hunting](#)

[Eight – Trials](#)

[Nine – The Gate of Morkai](#)

[Ten – The Cup of Wulfen](#)

[Eleven – The Spirit of the Beast](#)

[Twelve – The Ultimate Test](#)

[Thirteen – Acceptance](#)

[Fourteen – In the Field](#)

[Fifteen – In the Dark](#)

[Sixteen – The Temple of Chaos](#)

[Seventeen – Fighting Retreat](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Ragnar's Claw](#)

[Prologue](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)
[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[Grey Hunter](#)
[Prologue](#)
[One](#)
[Two](#)
[Three](#)
[Four](#)
[Five](#)
[Six](#)
[Seven](#)
[Eight](#)
[Nine](#)
[Ten](#)
[Eleven](#)
[Twelve](#)
[Thirteen](#)
[Fourteen](#)
[Fifteen](#)
[Sixteen](#)
[Seventeen](#)
[Eighteen](#)
[Nineteen](#)
[Twenty](#)
[Twenty-One](#)
[Twenty-Two](#)
[Twenty-Three](#)
[Twenty-Four](#)
[Twenty-Five](#)
[Twenty-Six](#)
[Epilogue](#)
[About the Author](#)
[Legal](#)