

WARHAMMER
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

BLOOD ON THE MOUNTAIN



BEN COUNTER

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A WARHAMMER 40,000 NOVELLA

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

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

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



PROLOGUE

The first Ulli had seen of Alaric Prime was a topographic map projected from the holomat servitor mounted on the floor of the gunship. Now, as the rear ramp of the *Skjaldi's Lament* slid open and the icy wind roared in, Ulli could see the holo-briefing had not done this world justice.

A gleaming panorama of frost and white sunlight flooded the gunship's interior with light, as bright as a magnesium flare. Here, above the layers of cloud, this world's sun reflected up into an ocean of pale fire. The star Alaric, this world's sun, burned icily in a mantle of the most extraordinarily vivid blue.

The peak of Sacred Mountain burst up through the light ocean, a mighty spear of snow-capped stone that pinned Alaric Prime to the sky. No wonder the people of this world, settled in the distant reaches of the Dark Age of Technology, had bowed to this peak as the physical manifestation of the Emperor's will. When the Great Crusade brought Alaric Prime into the Imperial fold, it had been to the vastness and perfection of Sacred Mountain that the Imperium had been compared. The mountain shone as if plated with silver, a counterpoint to the sun above.

Ulli Iceclaw felt his eyes sting as his pupils contracted, his augmented senses correcting to prevent the snowblindness that any normal man would have suffered. The freezing air lashed against his face, whipping the wolf's tooth necklace around behind him. The many trappings of a Rune Priest – talismans from Fenrisian graves, teeth and bones for scrying, books of battle-prayers and meditations – jangled on his belt.

'They say Terra's sky was that colour,' said Brother Tanngjost, who held onto

the handrail overhead beside Ulli. ‘A long time ago. It is like that in paintings and poems.’

‘Tanngjost Seven Fingers was probably there to see it, the old dog,’ said Saehrimnar Brokenaxe. Saehrimnar was grinning beneath his expanse of red-brown beard. He was still strapped into the gunship’s grav-harness and had his weapon, the pack’s massive heavy bolter, across his knees.

‘Not so old I cannot learn some new tricks,’ retorted Tanngjost, pointing at his packmate with one of the remaining fingers on his mutilated hand. ‘Like boxing a fat upstart’s ears!’

Ulli ignored the bickering. It was tension being let off, and in spite of the barbs the pack needed it. They had been together a long time, some of them since they had first come to the Fang as hopeful young Fenrisian warriors, and without some levity they would become jaded and stagnant. Instead the Rune Priest looked back into the passenger compartment, towards Aesor Dragon’s Head.

‘Pack leader!’ called Ulli over the roaring wind. ‘What do you see?’

Aesor unfastened his grav-harness and joined Ulli at the ramp. His long, sharp face was as complete a contrast to Tanngjost’s as the blinding sky of Alaric Prime had been to the gloomy interior of the gunship. Aesor’s was young and unscarred, while age had lined Tanngjost’s face as deeply as the battlefield scars that covered his cheek and one side of his jaw. When the people of the Imperium imagined the Space Wolves, the mighty warriors of Fenris, it was Aesor they imagined.

‘A battlefield,’ said Aesor. ‘A butcher’s block unbloodied. A blank parchment for us to write our glories upon. I see what every son of Fenris desires, a place for us to descend and bring the Emperor’s justice.’

‘There goes the Company,’ said Tanngjost, leaning forward for a view of the cloudscape beyond the gunship’s engine. Streaks of burning light were punching down through the clouds, trailing ripples of flame. They were drop pods, each one in the pale grey livery of Fenris with the black wolf’s head stencilled on the side – the symbol of Ragnar Blackmane’s Great Company. The same symbol Pack Aesor wore on the shoulder guards of their armour.

‘Wish them Russ’s speed,’ said Aesor, ‘and they will wish us his fury. Their battle is on the slopes below and the ballads of this war will speak of what they do. But we shall have our own saga, and though fewer will hear it, it will be ours alone. Pack Aesor! Give thanks, for again the galaxy gives us what we crave! It gives us war!’

‘War!’ cried Aesor’s packmates in response, like a toast drunkenly roared in

the Great Hall of the Fang.

Ulli could feel the fury in them, tempered in the bonds of brotherhood. A Rune Priest could not help pick up the vibrations from the men around him – no psyker could, for psychic power was rooted in human emotions as much as human will. The relish Pack Aesor felt at the coming battle thrummed at the base of Ulli's skull, infectious, eager to be released.

'You know what I see, Rune Priest?' said Fejor Redblade, seated at the back of the compartment. He lifted the sight of his customised bolter to his eye, as if picking out a distant target on the upper slopes of Sacred Mountain.

'What, Fejor?' asked Ulli.

Fejor smiled, revealing the overgrown canines of a Space Wolf. 'Piles and piles of dead orks,' he said.



ONE

Strikeforce Stormfall hit Alaric Prime hard. Beneath the clouds, the massive battle in the shadow of Sacred Mountain had entered its first stages. According to the briefings just before the gunship had launched, the orkish invasion force had made landfall in their hundreds of thousands, crashing to the surface in hollowed-out asteroids and barely space-worthy hulks that had landed more by luck than judgement. Orks cared nothing how many they lost to get to a planet's surface – each death just meant more mayhem for the rest of them. The numbers had been sufficient to force a beachhead there, and now the Imperial forces were desperately trying to contain a growing mass of orks rampaging out from their landing sites. Imperial Knights, war machines crewed by Alaric Prime's warrior aristocracy, had blunted the ork breakouts, but they could not fight on forever.

It was the orks' own war machines that made the difference. Orks could hammer together an engine of war from wreckage faster than the Imperial Guard could get their own tanks loaded and fuelled. Anything the Imperial defenders destroyed just became more spare parts for the greenskins. The Imperial Guard had plenty of veterans who had faced greenskins before and they reported this orkish invasion had with them more armour and greenskin engineers than they had ever seen. That was the extent of the intelligence on the ork invaders on Alaric Prime.

The greenskins had come to this world with numbers and purpose. It was no accident that they had landed at Sacred Mountain, the most storied place on this planet. They had to be defeated here, or Alaric Prime would be lost.

That task of relieving the defenders had fallen to Ragnar Blackmane and the

Great Wolf Logan Grimnar. Blackmane was the young king, a future Great Wolf omened as grandly as any who had ever walked under the moons of Fenris. Grimnar was the Chapter Master and the Lord of the Fang, and while he had more battles behind him than in front he was still a terror of the Emperor's enemies. Together they were the greatest warriors from a Chapter whose lowliest members were ferocious masters of war. They brought with them most of their respective Great Companies, supported by aircraft, armoured formations, and specialists like the Rune Priest Ulli Iceclaw.

The great battle would be for the lower slopes amongst the greenskin landing sites, where there was a great tally of orkish heads to be reaped by chainsword and frost blade. There Blackmane and Grimnar would cover themselves in greenskin blood and hundreds of Space Wolves would glory in the ferocious joy of it. But on the upper slopes, where that battle would be a distant din, Ulli Iceclaw and Pack Aesor would wage a war of their own.

It was Starkad and Fejor who took the lead; Fejor, with his hunter's eyes, and Starkad with the experience of surviving in places just like this. The snow flurries kicked up by the *Skjaldi's Lament* swallowed the guide and the sniper as they jumped down from the gunship. Ulli and the rest of Pack Aesor followed, Ulli reading the winking green runes projected onto his retina by the auto-senses on his armour. In the whiteout he wore his helmet and the icons told him his packmates were nearby, advancing alongside him, close enough to come to one another's aid but far enough to avoid a single missile or landmine taking out more than one.

A Rune Priest stood apart from the rest of the Chapter – he was a psyker, training alone with the secrets of warpcraft. But here he could hunt with a pack of brothers alongside him, and the joy of that cut through the distance he had to maintain. Ulli's mind was shared between the Rune Priest and the son of the Fenris, and the Fenrisian's heart grew to be a pack hunter again.

'I'll keep the peak between us,' came a vox from Sigrund, the Space Wolf who piloted the *Skjaldi's Lament*. 'No greenskin filth will take potshots at my gunship! I shall make for return when the charges are blown and I shall not tarry, so be quick!'

'Don't doze off,' replied Saehrimnar. 'We won't be long.'

'I can see the structure ahead,' voxed Fejor. 'I'm taking cover. The greenskins hold it.'

'Advance, and be swift,' said Aesor. 'The snow will settle.'

Ulli emerged from the whiteout to see Fejor crouching by a rock, Starkad beside him peering through a pair of magnoculars. The pair had reached the edge of a long, sheer drop, a shoulder of the mountain, marking a stage of the ascent towards the uppermost peak behind them.

The departing engines of the gunship were replaced by the roar of rushing water. Below the ledge, a great lake reflected the pure blue of the sky. A dam blocked off what had once been a plunge down a sheer cliff face that vanished into the tops of the clouds hundreds of metres below. Several sprays of water gouted from the dam, the force turning hydroelectric turbines inside the dam that shuddered the rock beneath Ulli's feet.

The dam itself was a massive slab of rockcrete, its curved parapet mounted with battlements wrought into scowling masks like the faceplates of archaic armour. Chunks had been torn and blasted away, bundles of cables crudely slung from the breaches onto the shore at the far side of the lake. There squatted an orkish encampment, ringed with barricades of scrap steel cannibalised from the landing craft that had brought the orks here. The dam powered smoky workshops and motor pools of ramshackle vehicles – tanks, transporters, even aircraft that looked barely sky-worthy parked alongside a rocky airstrip marked out with burning fuel drums. A central building, apparently the bulk of a crashed spacecraft, glowed with bursts of blue-white power and the odd crackling and thrumming from it reached even across the lake to Ulli's ears.

'By the Moon-Wolf's frozen rump,' growled Saehrimnar. 'Our greenskin friends have been busy.'

'They are vermin,' said Tanngjost. 'Once they get a foothold they spread quickly, and they are Hel itself to winkle out. Even so, these orks are not such fools as we imagine. They took the dam early and are powering their workshops. See? War machines for the fight below – a second wave to strike from these upper slopes, where our brethren will not expect it. Blackmane was wise indeed to send us here.'

'I see a dozen greenskins on the dam,' voxed Starkad.

'Barely even sport,' said Fejor.

'Be thankful the enemy gives us such a quick victory,' said Aesor, 'no matter how much you love to shed his blood, Fejor Redblade.' Aesor turned to Ulli.

'Rune Priest. What do you make of our options?'

Ulli unlatched the helmet of his armour. The cold air in his throat felt good, much like the Fenrisian chill on the battlements of the Fang. He breathed in, reading the air. The Codex Astartes, that manual of Space Marine tactics, stated

that the helmet of power armour should be worn at all times, but a Space Wolf knew that his nose was as powerful as his eyes and a battlefield could reveal as much by smell as by sight. He caught machine oil, sweat, the chemical traces of metal melted in a crucible. The mountain itself smelled pure, snow and ice and cold rock.

‘Move in swiftly,’ he said. ‘No need to soften them up. Take them on at close range. That is how the ork loves to fight, too, but it will give the greenskins in the camp no time to respond. We must be in and out before they can scramble those warbikes and flyers. My apologies, Brother Fejor, but there will be no long-range kills made unseen, not for the moment.’

‘I agree,’ said Aesor. ‘Starkad, scout us a way in. The rest, be ready to move. Kill close and swift. Ulli, bless our blades for this one.’

No one even mentioned that Aesor would take the pack’s first kill on Alaric Prime. It was not the sort of thing that needed saying.

The honourable first blood was taken from the greenskin lurking in the dam’s cavernous interior, serving as what passed for a sentry among the orks. Aesor’s footsteps were lost amid the roar of the turbines and rushing water, and the ork did not hear them until the Space Wolf was three paces away. The ork didn’t have time to bring its gun barrel up as Aesor brought his frost blade down past its face, the serrated edge slicing down into its shoulder. The frost blade was cut from a kraken’s fang, and held an edge that could slice through the armoured predators of Fenris’s oceans. It passed right through the upper chest and spine of the ork, and out beneath its arm. The two chunks of the ork’s body thudded to the floor, the red-black mass of its organs slithering out across the rockcrete.

The rest of the pack bounded after Aesor as he ran past the fallen ork into the dam’s interior. Crude orkish technology was everywhere, bolted to turbines or drawing off the power generated by the dam into masses of cables and pipes. Starkad carried one of the squad’s demolition charges and Tanngjost the other, strapped to the backpacks of their armour. A stray shot could detonate one – it was not a task taken on with relish.

‘Here,’ said Ulli as the pack rounded a turbine housing. ‘We’re halfway across the dam. A breach here will do the most damage.’

‘Set the charges,’ ordered Aesor. ‘Fejor, watch our backs.’

Starkad and Tanngjost began fixing the charges, one to the outer wall and one to the inner. A breach in both would flood the dam and send the torrent draining down through the cliff, hopefully taking the rest of the structure with it. Ulli was

no engineer himself, but the Iron Priests of Strikeforce Stormfall had devised this mission and assured him that a strong enough explosion in the right place would bring the whole thing down, starving the ork encampment of the power needed to get their war machines running.

Ulli's thoughts were broken by the howling above him. He glanced up to see an ork looking down from a length of pipework a couple of storeys above, bellowing in alarm. Ulli instinctively drew his bolt pistol from its holster but before he could fire Fejor had taken the shot, punching a stalker bolt round through the ork's forehead and blowing out the back of its skull. The body tumbled to the floor.

Another howl took up the alarm, then another, a chain of them echoing down the length of the dam. Enough war-cries were raised to be heard over the turbine din.

'The enemy wants us,' said Aesor. 'He can have us!'

'Rune Priest,' said Saehrimnar, hefting his heavy bolter level with Ulli's chest. 'Bless the Widow, Brother Ulli!'

Ulli laid both hands on the housing of the heavy bolter Saehrimnar called the Widow. The weapon was too big for anyone unaugmented to carry, and it took a particularly well-built Space Marine to lift it with the ease that Saehrimnar did. Ulli felt his palms tingle with the familiar heat, as if he were laying them against the door of a blazing forge.

Ulli drew the psychic energy needed for the rune striking, calling it down from his mind's rare connection to the warp. He felt the darkness of that realm slithering at the back of his head, its tendrils probing at the mental defences a Rune Priest built up during decades of testing. That darkness was as familiar as the fire spiralling around his arms and out through his palms, the coils of heat and cold running around the inside of his armour as its warding circuits drew off the excess psychic power.

In his mind he formed two runes, taken from the language with which the tombs of Fenris's ancient kings were inscribed. One rune was strength and fury, both honour and the honour-breaking rage, the strength and curse of Fenris's people. The other was focus of mind, decisiveness, the will and the knowledge to strike with certainty. It was the necessary quality of a king, and when applied to steel it meant accuracy and sharpness.

The metal beneath Ulli's hands buckled and he drew them away. Where his palms had been, the two runes were now raised up from the metal. They glowed blue-white with the energy of their making, energy Ulli had drawn from the warp

and forged with his mind.

‘My thanks,’ said Saehrimnar with a grin. ‘Fitting garb for the queen of battle!’

The war-cry of the orks rose to a single wailing bellow, dozens of their voices raised as one. Ulli could hear the rumble of their feet on the rockcrete.

‘Brothers, are we set?’ demanded Aesor.

‘I am,’ said Starkad.

‘A few moments,’ said Tanngjost. He was still fiddling with the detonator on the demolition charge.

‘Starkad, help him,’ ordered Aesor. ‘I would be gone from this place.’

Through the darkness the greenskins approached. Dozens of them loped through the broken machinery and rubble that choked the dam’s interior. Orks were humanoid, but there the resemblance to man ended – their skin was dark green leather covered in scars and scabs, heads hung low on massively muscled torsos. Mouths crammed with too many teeth to fit snarled under red piggish eyes. Every movement was power and anger, for every ork was born with a lust to despoil and destroy that never waned until they died.

‘What sons of a hundred oathbreakers stand before Brokenaxe?’ yelled Saehrimnar. ‘What waits for you beyond death that you are so eager to see it?’ He cocked the movement of his heavy bolter, levelling it at the approaching horde. ‘Do you hunt for oblivion? Fenris obliges!’

The heavy bolter bucked in Saehrimnar’s hands as it rattled off a chain of fire, the barrel flare strobing in the darkness. The din of the gunfire echoed off the rockcrete into a wall of noise. Ulli’s runes glowed hot on the weapon’s housing as shots burst among the orks, ripping open bodies, throwing chunks of torn flesh and limbs into the air.

The other Space Wolves returned fire. Aesor blazed with his bolt pistol. Tanngjost, relieved of his task preparing the charge, stood and unholstered his custom bolter. He added a volley of his fire as Ulli did with his own pistol. Fejor switched to full-auto and sent half a magazine of stalker shells into the orks.

‘Done!’ yelled Starkad into the vox.

Behind the bulk of the horde, smouldering in the shadows, was a great dark shape looming and huge. Ulli felt the crackling psychic mass of the orks, a pulsing insanity like a fire or a stormy ocean, and among it a massive upwelling of rage.

Aesor grabbed Saehrimnar’s shoulder guard and turned him around. The unspoken order was given and the pack withdrew, firing as they went towards

the exit behind them. Saehrimnar sent out short volleys now, aiming as he moved, the bolter shells drawn to their targets by the power of the runes Ulli had inscribed on the gun.

‘What a treat to be shot right through!’ yelled Saehrimnar Brokenaxe between volleys. ‘Feel the breeze on your lungs, my friend! Feel the mountain air on your guts!’

The return fire was ill-aimed and without discipline. The ork preferred to fight up close, and most used guns to soften up enemies and make noise as they charged. A shot rang off Ulli’s shoulder guard as he took aim at a charging greenskin and put a pistol round through its skull.

The rage was growing. Ulli had faced orks before, but he had never felt this. In the swirl of combat he could not focus on it to divine what it was, but even the glimpses he had of it spoke of a scale and intensity beyond the psychic field that always surrounded a mob of orks in battle.

Pack Aesor emerged into the snowy glare outside the dam.

‘Do it, Starkad!’ ordered Aesor. Starkad hit the detonator switch in his hand and twin plumes of rubble and dust erupted from the centre of the dam. The sound hit a moment later, the ground shuddering, hot air roaring from the dam entrance.

Orks charged out of the dam onto the snowy mountainside. In ones and twos, the Space Wolves fell on them and cut them to pieces. Starkad drew his twin drake’s-fang daggers, spinning and lunging as he punctured abdomens and severed spines. Saehrimnar clubbed one greenskin to the ground with his heavy bolter, and the creature was finished off by Aesor’s frost blade thrust through the small of its back.

One ork barrelled towards the Rune Priest. Ulli’s axe was in his hand. The weapon had runes of his own making inscribed on its blade and they glowed with anticipation of bloodshed. The power field around the weapon sparked into life, energy rippling across the blade. The ork was a larger one than most, a leader in whatever tribal system passed for their society. Its face was painted with a crude representation of a white skull, its gnarled fangs were tipped with iron and it wore a filthy mass of skins and matted furs. It was armed with a cleaver-like weapon, its rectangular blade well pitted with old blood.

Ulli ducked its first blow, letting the weight of his body and armour drop him out of the cleaver’s arc. He struck upwards with his axe, burying it in the ork’s chest. He balled up a flare of psychic power, born of anger that this alien would dare single him out, and let it burst up through the psychic circuit in the axe. The

power burst out through the blade, adding itself to the force of the discharging power field.

The ork was blown clean in two. Scorched meat and organs rained across the snow. The upper half landed some distance away, the legs and abdomen flopping wetly to the ground in front of Ulli.

He could not deny how good it felt. Ulli set himself apart from the ferocious Blood Claws, or men like Saehrimnar who revelled in the kill – but Ulli was still a son of Fenris, and the lust and glory of battle was in his blood.

The ground rumbled as the dam gave way. A new waterfall burst through the break, taking half the crumbling structure with it as it poured down the cliff face to plunge through the clouds. Ulli glanced around to see the orks who had made it out of the dam were dead or dying, the last of them shot down by a short burst of fire from Tanngjost.

Ulli could hear the bellowing of orks trapped inside the dam, and the rushing of water inundating the whole structure.

He could hear something else, too. The roar of unfamiliar engines from the direction of the lake. From the camp across the lake a black speck was rising on a column of grey-black smoke, the drone of its engines growing louder as it approached.

‘They have aircraft,’ voxed Ulli.

‘Russ’s teeth,’ snarled Fejor. ‘I’ll never understand how they learned to fly.’

‘Break and take cover!’ called out Aesor. The pack was already moving, scattering for the scant shelter of boulders and rises of rock. Behind them the peak of Sacred Mountain rose craggy and covered in snowy outcrops, but the slope by the lake was open. There was nowhere a man the size of an armoured Space Marine could hide, not from a strafing run from above.

Ulli ran for a rock that barely reached his waist. He was suddenly so open to attack he might as well have been wearing nothing but the ox-hide loincloth a supplicant wore on his Bleeding. He glanced back and saw the ork aircraft knifing across the lake, swooping low. Massive cannon were mounted below its wings and a cluster of fat bombs hung under its belly. The craft had a blunt, lopsided look, the panels of its hull apparently salvaged wreckage, its pilot showing a grin of yellow fangs behind the cracked glass of the cockpit. How such a thing could even fly was beyond Ulli’s understanding. It was as if the orks willed their war machines into motion, and fuelled them with their need to destroy.

The cannon opened fire. Bursts of flame and smoke jetted from the aircraft’s

wings. Explosive shells burst deafeningly along the near shore of the lake, and in a second or two they would fall amongst the exposed Space Wolves.

Ulli felt the hot blast of exhaust washing down over him as he was bathed in the roar of an engine. The cockpit of the ork aircraft shattered, throwing shards of glass and broken machinery behind it in a glittering tail. The ork craft angled upwards, wrenched out of its trajectory, and the shots from its cannon sprayed uselessly towards the mountain's peak. The aircraft spiralled away, its pilot dead, vanishing among the upper slopes and leaving nothing but a contrail of filthy smoke.

'I leave you for five minutes!' came Brother Sigrund's voice over the vox. 'Five minutes and already you need me to save your mangy pelts!'

Skjaldi's Lament banked around over the lake, the lascannon mounted under its nose still glowing from the volley that had shot down the ork. Sigrund brought the gunship down towards the slope, the rear ramp already opening.

'No whelp ever welcomed its mother's milk as we welcome you, Brother Sigrund!' laughed Tanngjost.

Beyond the landing gunship, the centre section of the dam was completely gone. The lake was rushing through the breach, the edge already receding from the shore as the meltwater drained away.

'You made a bloody great mess,' voxed Sigrund. 'As always.'

'Board, brothers,' ordered Aesor. 'I would not tarry here.'

'A shame,' said Tanngjost as he lugged his heavy bolter towards the gunship. 'I'll miss the mountain air.'

And again, welling up below his feet like the molten heart of the mountain itself, Ulli could feel that hate. A rage unbounded, waxing upon itself. It had the stink of the ork, but blacker and stronger, the monstrous will of the greenskin race distilled and made pure.

Smoke billowed at the entrance to the dam, from which howled the rush of water through the breach. The rockcrete entrance was suddenly shunted out of alignment, the lintel forced upwards as a great dark shape emerged through the smoke.

Ulli saw then what that hatred looked like, given a physical form. It was an ork, but that word did not seem to do the thing justice. It was enormous in size, twice the height of a Space Marine even hunched over, as broad through the shoulders as a tank. Its shape was composed of muscle and fang, its skin tattered with scars and almost black with age and smoke stains. Its jaw was so heavy as to look deformed, even among the orks, crammed with too many fangs to fit. Its

eyes were burning coals set into pits of scar tissue.

Ulli had faced giant orks before. The larger the ork, the more powerful it was among its tribes and warbands, and so the hugest specimens formed the greenskins' leadership caste. This one, however, brought with it the psychic wailing of hatred and madness that spoke of the roiling, diseased ocean of rage it had in place of a mind. And there was a terrible intelligence to it, the last attribute one might give to the greenskin. On its back – no, *in* its back, fused to the spine and ribs, protruding from the skin and muscle – were metal protrusions like antennae, around which crackled blue-white arcs of power. It crackled across the ork's steel gauntlets and the metal plates riveted to its skin as makeshift armour. Cogs and flywheels spun amongst the machinery, generating the bursts of power. Sparks ground into the rocks, and snow vanished to steam as it stepped onto the lake shore.

In its arms it carried a weapon that would not shame a main battle tank, a cannon with five rotating barrels connected to an ammunition hopper full of loose shells. Like the aircraft, like everything the greenskins built, it looked like something that should never work, or at the very best that should have blown up in its user's hands as soon as the trigger was pulled. But the will of this thing was enough to make the weapon work as it levelled the barrels at the *Skjaldi's Lament*.

'Hear the thunder straight from Fenris!' bellowed Saehrimnar as he brought his heavy bolter up. He blasted a chain of fire at the ork, and the shots hammered against its massive frame.

The fire sparked off the armour and thudded into its flesh, but the ork was not even pushed onto the back foot. Explosive bolts were swallowed up by the mass of scar tissue and muscle, and the barrel of its cannon came down to aim at Saehrimnar.

The return fire was scattered wild. One shot caught Saehrimnar in the thigh and blew the ceramite open, revealing the wet redness of muscle underneath. Saehrimnar sprawled, his blood spraying onto the white snow.

Ulli was closest to Saehrimnar. He broke cover and sprinted to his fallen packmate, before the ork could bring its cannon to bear again. It could throw out a massive wall of fire but its recoil was such that the ork had to brace itself before it could finish off Saehrimnar. It would be enough time, Ulli was sure of that. He had the instinct of a seasoned warrior; he knew the cruel science of bullets and bodies. It would be enough.

Ulli grabbed Saehrimnar around the waist and hauled him off his feet. He

backed towards the rock he had tagged as cover – it wasn't much against the air attack but it would provide shelter from fire at ground level.

Ulli saw the ork out of the corner of his eye, leaning into its gun to keep it level. It was even stronger than Ulli had imagined.

There would not be enough time.

The gun roared. Ulli felt the massive calibre shells ripping past him. The ork's face was illuminated in the muzzle flare.

Saehrimnar's head and upper chest burst. Ulli was thrown back, a torrent of blood and gore hitting his face. The weight he carried was suddenly less, for a good portion of Saehrimnar's body was gone.

The ork turned back to the gunship, which was rotating in place to aim its nose cannon. The ork brought its weapon to bear first. The barrels blazed and a dozen shots punched through the cockpit, stray rounds bursting among the fan blades of one engine. The engine tone rose to a scream and the craft wheeled out over the lake, belching smoke.

'Sigrund!' voxed Aesor. 'Brother Sigrund!'

The *Skjaldis Lament* pitched into the lake and vanished, drawn under and out of sight by the currents rushing towards the breached dam.

Across the lake, a flotilla of craft had set sail. They were ramshackle motor launches and hovercraft, wreathed in oily smoke, teeming with greenskins from the camp. They held tribal banners high and waved their cleavers and guns, eager to clean up whatever the air assault had left alive.

'Fall back!' ordered Aesor. 'Take to the peak! The upper slopes!'

The ork turned back to the Space Wolves. It shouldered its gun and drew from among the machinery on its back a blade as long as an oak trunk and as wide as a Space Marine. The jagged length of the weapon was corroded and spattered with old black bloodstains. The time for killing from a distance was gone – it wanted its next kill up close.

Ulli hefted Saehrimnar's body onto his shoulders and vaulted over the boulder behind him. The lakeside slope became jagged and broken a good long sprint away, the gradient increasing sharply as the knife-like ridges and outcrops rose towards the mountain's peak. The giant ork could take any of them it wanted if it could outpace them, but that would limit it to one or two. If the pack of Wolves stayed where they were and fought it, they would still be on the shore when the rest of the greenskins arrived.

The scream of tortured engines reached Ulli's ears. The *Skjaldis Lament* rose from the waters, lurching like a wounded sea creature. Behind the shattered

windshield, Brother Sigrund wrestled with the controls as he forced the gunship's nose to point at the ork. A handful of shots blasted at the beast, most missing, one burning through an armour plate and into the greenskin's flank.

The ork bellowed and took up its cannon again, and with a final volley shattered the front end of the gunship. It vanished into the waters, Brother Sigrund having got in a final insult to the creature that killed him.

Ulli used the seconds Brother Sigrund had bought him. He ran for the cover of the rocky slopes, willing his body to ignore the weight of Saehrimnar's corpse on his shoulders and the heat of the blood that ran down his face.

The ork's frustrated roar echoed around the mountainside, mingling with the tumult of the new waterfall and the grinding of the ork flotilla's engines.

It hurt Ulli to flee. But the pack would not survive a battle here, exposed, one of their number down and the orks assaulting in full force. Their shame would burn hot, but it would not go unanswered. In that moment, Ulli knew the giant ork had to die, or the stain on Pack Aesor's honour would never be washed away.



TWO

Pack Aesor gathered an hour later. The way had been hard going, the steep slope forcing them to climb as much as run. But Space Wolves trained in the treacherous foothills of the Fang – they lived in a mountain and it was natural for them to negotiate such terrain. Even before they had been chosen by the Wolf Priests to undergo the tests that made them Space Wolves, some of the pack had lived among tribes who hunted and made war among Fenris's mountain ranges. It was difficult, but it was more difficult for the greenskins, who pursued them slowly up the slopes in an ill-disciplined throng with their enormous leader at their head.

Starkad was waiting for the rest of them on a shoulder of rock where they could gather, snatch a few moments of rest, and plan their next move. He was a natural pathfinder and had made the best progress. Ulli, weighed down by Saeirimnar, was last.

Saeirimnar's head and neck were gone, and most of his chest. The gene-seed organs, which could be preserved and implanted into new aspirants, were gone as well. They had been seated in his throat and chest, from where they regulated the many augmentations of the Space Wolf's body. Saeirimnar would not give those sacred organs, crafted from the flesh of the primarch Leman Russ himself, to the next generation. His legacy had come to an end. It was the worst coda to a bad death.

There was little time for words, and none of the packmates had much inclination to say them. Saeirimnar had been the quickest among them to speak. Without him, the silence he left said more than any of them could. The pack

buried Saehrimnar under a cairn of loose stones, and Aesor took up his heavy bolter.

Starkad pointed up the slope, to where a squat rockcrete bunker occupied a ledge. It was the best shelter they would find up here, probably built by the Knight Houses of Alaric Prime to aid their exploration of the vast mountain.

As the pack made their way in silence towards the bunker, Ulli hoped the orks would not think to search the pile of stones and defile what they found there.

In the light of the guttering fire, the man's eye seemed to be sunk so far into his head that his face was little more than a skull with the skin stretched over it. He wore a rebreather mask, adding oxygen to every breath to compensate for the thin air at this altitude. Looking at him, Ulli thought how easy it was to forget that an environment like this, so natural to a Space Wolf, could be lethal to an unaugmented man.

Pack Aesor had found the man in the bunker, huddling by his fire. It looked like he had been there for days, living off a few packs of emergency rations, waiting to die up there on Sacred Mountain. His name, he had told them, was Frith.

'Time was,' he was saying, his voice almost lost in the shrill wind outside the bunker, 'they were kings of this world. My masters were this world's master. You see this?' he held out an emblem pinned to the lapel of his tattered uniform, a pair of compasses on a field of red enamel. 'House Varlen. Their sons had the most resplendent Knights on Alaric Prime. I, we, we would have followed them through the warp and into the heart of Chaos itself. But now?' The man coughed out a laugh, and Ulli wondered how old he was. He could have been anything from twenty to sixty. 'Now these... these animals have come down from the sky and made us all into normal men.'

Tanngjost looked down from the bunker's firing slit, where he had mounted Saehrimnar's heavy bolter. 'The greenskins don't have your world to themselves any more,' he said. 'The Space Wolves have come to Alaric Prime. Two companies of us. There's not an ork in this galaxy that can stand up to Blackmane and the Great Wolf.'

'And how many of you are there?' said Frith. 'A hundred? A thousand? The orks are vermin. They breed! There will always be another one around the next rock. You could kill a million of them and there would always be more.'

Behind Frith, Starkad drew the long, thin spike he used to clean the barrel of his bolter.

‘You were a mechanic?’ said Ulli hurriedly. ‘For the Knights?’

‘A retainer,’ said Frith. ‘Like all the line of my father. I served Baron Vigilus Varlen, Second Son of his House. I kept his steed, the *Dominus Vult*. Never did a finer Knight walk this world! I hung her with banners of Varlen’s victories and polished her crimson flanks! But she has fallen, Angels of Death. She fell and is gone! How can this world prevail if even the *Dominus Vult* can be prey to the vermin?’

‘How did you lose her?’ asked Aesor.

‘The ork,’ said Frith. ‘The one ork.’

‘You saw it?’ asked Ulli. ‘Their chief, from the camp by the dam?’

‘They must have their gods,’ said Frith, ignoring Ulli. ‘They must look like that ork did. The baron faced him on the mountainside. I watched from our command truck. Already I was thinking how I would bleach the vermin’s skull and hang it among the battle honours. But it was not just a brute! A brute, the baron could have killed. It was cunning. It did not fight an honourable duel.’

‘It’s one of their engineering caste,’ said Aesor. ‘But I’ve never heard of one the size of their warlords. Not an auspicious combination.’

‘There were more of them,’ continued Frith. ‘We saw them sneaking up but we were too slow. They infected my master’s steed.’

‘Infected?’ asked Ulli.

‘With a disease,’ said Frith, leaning over the fire, the flame glinting off his sunken eyes. ‘A disease of the metal. The *Dominus Vult* went mad! I heard the master screaming. She stalked off into the mountain, and blackness bled from her. Then she was gone, and the vermin was laughing. We fled and scattered. I ended up here. I know not where the other retainers are – most likely they are dead. Perhaps I will walk out and take the mountain’s embrace. This is holy ground, Angels of Death. That was why my master took to these slopes, in case the greenskins defiled it. And they have. The mountain weeps.’

‘A machine-virus,’ said Aesor. ‘I have never known an ork to employ such a thing.’

‘Orks are animals,’ said Fejor. Ulli noted with some gratitude that Starkad had put his blade away. ‘That is beyond them.’

‘They are animals who can cross interstellar distances,’ said Ulli, ‘who can capture a hydroelectric dam and use it to churn out war machines within hours. There is a cunning to the creature we faced. It is not like the other greenskins. Its hatred masks it, but there is a... a depth there. An intelligence.’

‘I have known you a long time, Ulli Iceclaw,’ said Tanngjost, ‘ever since

Phalakan. But even now, knowing that you see what you see, it raises my hackles.'

'Well, you aren't the one who has to see it,' replied Ulli.

Tanngjost grunted in agreement, and turned back to the firing slit to keep the watch.

Frith's chin sank down to his chest and he closed his eyes. Only the misting of his breath on the inside of the transparent rebreather mask suggested he was alive.

'I take it we cannot raise the Great Company,' said Ulli.

'Not with the gunship gone,' said Aesor. 'Its communicator could reach Blackmane's command. Our vox-net is not strong enough. On level ground with no interference, yes, but up here we are on our own. They will realise when we do not return, but I doubt our brothers will have the warriors to spare to come and rescue us.'

'Then we are on our own,' said Ulli.

'When are we not?' replied Fejor.

For a long moment the only sound was the crackling of the fire and the whistling of the wind.

'Tell me of Phalakan,' said Aesor, looking at Ulli across the fire.

'Your packmates must have spoken of it,' said Ulli.

'I would hear of it from you,' said Aesor. His voice was level and Ulli could read nothing from it.

'A battle against the eldar,' said Ulli. 'Tough going. We lost many brothers. I was apprenticed to the Rune Priest Torgrim Splitbeard. We were cut off and I found myself fighting back to back with this ingrate here.' Ulli jabbed a thumb at Tanngjost. 'And Saehrimnar. The eldar made Tanngjost rather more handsome.'

'I shall ever be grateful to whatever alien it was,' said Tanngjost, idly scratching the spiral scars on his face as if they itched with the memory. 'I paid him back in kind but I was a bit too generous. There wasn't much left of his head at all.'

'Saehrimnar broke his axe in the fight. The xenos were damned fast, backflipping and dancing all around. So he picked up a heavy bolter from the ground and shot them all down. We called him the Broken Axe after that.'

'And you?' asked Aesor.

Ulli knew Tanngjost from Phalakan, but that had been a long time ago and Aesor had become their pack leader after that. Aesor didn't know Ulli, and it seemed that the word of his older packmates wasn't enough for him. Ulli bristled

at that, a little of Russ's blood reminding him that he was still a Space Wolf, even if he studied in the Rune Halls instead of feasting in the Great Hall. But he could not blame Aesor for his caution. They would have to rely on one another up here, each one placing his life in the hands of all his packmates. Trust had to be earned hard in such circumstances.

'I put the runes on their guns,' said Ulli. 'When their bolters ran dry, I put them on their knives and chainswords. When their blades were dull, I put them on the rocks, and we dashed out the aliens' brains. Few of us lived, but live we did, and Ulli Iceclaw became worthy of the Blood of Russ. I might not boast like the Wolves of your pack, Aesor Dragon's Head, but I have earned the armour that is my pelt and I am proud of it.'

Aesor nodded, the ghost of a smile on his face. It struck Ulli then how, unlike the older Space Wolves who were covered in scars, Aesor was unblemished by war. Almost unblemished, that is.

'Tell me of your ear,' Ulli said.

Behind him, Tanngjost chuckled quietly. Starkad, who was resting in a dark corner, broke a smile, which did not happen very often.

Aesor looked for a moment as if he would curse out Ulli for his presumption, and perhaps if Ulli had been a member of Pack Aesor he would have. But the moment passed and Aesor shrugged.

'You have good eyes,' he said.

'You would not hide your scars by choice,' said Ulli. 'You are not some perfumed Blood Angel ashamed of the marks of battle. It is something that weighs on you. And if you would know about me, then I would know about you.'

Aesor swept the hair back to reveal the dark red snarl of scar tissue where his left ear had been. 'Before my Bleeding,' he said, 'many of us were taken to the foothills of the Fang to look on the place where we would be tested. One of the other aspirants joked he would bet his kraken-tooth knife that I would be the first corpse brought back. I lost my temper, Ulli Iceclaw, and in the scuffle I bit off his ear. My people took tributes from the barbarian tribes of the Shark's Reach fjords, and we did not take kindly to insults. And I was young.'

'I see,' said Ulli. 'And he took your ear in recompense?'

'Ulli, Ulli,' said Tanngjost. 'I thought you were supposed to be the smart one?'

Aesor shook his head. 'No. I tore it off myself. I was taught to pay my debts, and not to visit on any man an insult we would not accept ourselves. My Bleeding was delayed a week and I stood guard on the walls of the Fang in only

a loincloth as punishment. I hide this scar because I would not have it bandied about that Aesor Dragon's Head is not to be insulted, for if that happened I would not know what my brothers truly thought of me. But I could not have it repaired either because then I would not bear the wound I had earned as one I dealt to my brother. So I hide it as best I can, until some sharp-eyed and inquisitive soul decides to point it out.'

'Then I would say we have both satisfied our curiosity,' said Ulli.

Starkad snapped to alertness, his bolt pistol suddenly in his hand.

'What is it?' asked Aesor.

'I can hear them,' said Starkad.

Starkad was from the nomad tribes who walked a belt of glaciers on Fenris, carving survival from the endless ice. They were trackers and pathfinders without compare, many of them serving as Wolf Scouts unless they were too pack-minded, like Starkad. Their senses were considered exceptionally sharp, even amongst a Chapter who could hunt by scent alone. When something caught Starkad's senses, the pack paid attention.

'Footsteps?' asked Fejor, unshouldering his rifle ready to set up at the firing slit. 'War-cries?'

'Engines,' said Starkad.

Ulli pushed open the bunker door as Starkad stamped out the fire. The wind was a thin, shrill whistle but underneath was the grinding of many engines, low and throaty. On a lower slope he could make out a lumbering shape, and as it came closer it resolved into a squat, ugly machine crawling up the rocky slope towards the shoulder of rock on which the bunker sat. The machine was something like a huge, flattened tank, but in place of tracks it had sets of rotating bladed wheels that dug into the rock and hauled it upwards. A crew of orks scabbled across the machine's hull, throwing out chains with grappling hooks to draw tight and keep the tank stable as it climbed.

Hitched to the back of the rock-crawler machine, dragged by ropes and chains, followed dozens of orkish warbikes being towed in the machine's wake. The warbikes were painted in red with the sigils of a crude skull painted in blue. Their riders' leathers and goggles were well stained with oil and smoke. Some of the bikes were fitted with sets of cannon, the kind of crude, loud weapons that orks loved. Ulli guessed about thirty of them were being towed up the mountain.

He could feel the low *thrumm* of orkish minds, bestial but united in purpose. And beneath that, the dark foundation of their rage, the echo of their leader's mind.

‘By Magnus’s broken teeth,’ swore Tanngjost, watching from the doorway beside Ulli. ‘They didn’t waste any time. Where do they get all this junk from?’

‘Some build, some lead, most fight,’ said Ulli. ‘It is as if someone created the greenskins for war. Their mechanics can make a gun or a war machine from a handful of nuts and bolts. Their leader is more adept than most, it seems. Blackmane was wise to send us here. If it continues, it could turn the battle below.’

‘Pack leader,’ said Fejor. ‘I would cover their assault from above us. I can take out a driver or gunner.’

‘Agreed, brother,’ said Aesor. ‘But do not give yourself away for the sake of one more shot.’

Fejor left through the door, staying low as he ran for the snarl of broken rock and fissures that led to the uppermost slopes.

The grinding of the rock-crawler’s engine changed pitch and the machine slowed to a halt, the orks on board hurling grappling hooks to keep it chained to the slope. The host of warbikes behind it gunned their own engines, whooping with the anticipation of speed and destruction.

‘They’re insane,’ said Tanngjost.

‘Their rank and file are,’ said Ulli. ‘Their leader knows exactly what it is doing.’

The first warbikes screamed up the few metres of slope that remained, reaching the sliver of level ground on which the bunker stood. Snow sprayed out behind them as the orks crouched over their handlebars, lips peeled back over yellow fangs.

Tanngjost ducked back into the bunker and manned the heavy bolter. Aesor and Starkad aimed their guns through the firing slit beside him. Ulli stayed by the door, using the rockcrete construction for cover and drawing his bolt pistol.

The heavy bolter opened fire. The lead bike was struck in the front wheel and fairing, pitching nose-first into the snow and catapulting the rider from his saddle. His body impacted against the rocks near Fejor with a crunch of bones.

The survivors drew cleavers and clubs, whooping as they banked to sweep around the bunker. Another fell, caught through the forehead by a shot from Starkad’s pistol. Heavy bolter fire took down another before the bikers roared around to the other side of the bunker.

Ulli held his rune axe tight, feeling the psychic circuitry of its blade echoed in the shape of the sigils he drew in his mind. He judged the tone of the shrieking engines and leaned out from the doorway, bringing his axe up just as the first ork

rounded the bunker.

The rune axe hacked into the ork's chest and shoulder. Ulli didn't need to force his willpower into the axe to shatter bone and shred neurons – the ork's own speed buried the axe deep enough to cut through heart, lung and spine, and the body that thumped into the wall of the bunker beside Ulli was dead before it hit. Ulli wrenched the axe out and brought it up in time to parry the swing of a cleaver from the next biker.

This one wore a mass of teeth hanging from leather strips around its neck, its muscular body cut deep with ritual scars. Its face was painted with blue skull markings. It slewed around to charge at Ulli again, as Ulli knew it could not resist doing.

The ork expected Ulli to duck, so it brought its cleaver down low as it swung. Ulli jumped instead, with an agility granted by the muscle-fibre bundles that let his power armour echo his every movement. He crashed into the ork knee-first, throwing it off the back of its bike and landing on top of it in the snow. He drew back his axe and brought it down into the ork's skull, splitting its surprised face in two.

More bikes were cresting the slope, mounted with cannon slung on either side of the rider. They were slower and their aim was wild as they sprayed shots almost at random. Splinters of rockcrete rained down as they peppered the bunker's side with fire. Tanngjost ignored the incoming fire, loosing off bursts from the heavy bolter to claim two, three more as they roared towards him.

One bike careered out of control and pitched over the side of the mountain. Two more crashed into one another and as the surviving rider got to his feet, Fejor sniped it through the throat from his hiding place above.

The orks were seeking to encircle the bunker, but they had to slow down to negotiate the wreckage of the bikes whose riders Ulli had killed, and soon Starkad was beside him, wielding chainsword and bolt pistol to bring down the bikers. When cornered like this, the level-headed nomad of the Gautreksland glacier vanished and pure Space Wolf came to the surface. Starkad fought with his teeth bared and hands bloody. He rammed his chainsword through one ork's chest, ripped the blade out and threw the wounded greenskin to one side. Another ork leapt down from its bike to leap on Starkad from behind, but Ulli willed a wave of psychic power into the rune on his axe that represented the Fenrisian word for flight and swiftness. A crescent of glowing energy swept out from the blade as he swung it, its leading edge as keen as the axe itself, slicing off the ork's arm at a distance of several paces.

Orks were scrambling from the wreckage of their bikes, taking cover from the heavy bolter fire in the rocky slope. Some refused to leave their machines, slewing around to hammer fire at the bunker even as they were shot down and wrecked.

Ulli was finishing off an ork on the ground with the spike on the butt-end of his axe when he caught a scent on the cold wind. It was one he had smelled before, a mix of old blood and chemicals, decaying flesh and dense, choking musk. He yanked his axe out of the ork's chest and raised his nose to the sky, trying to catch the scent again.

‘What is it, Rune Priest?’ asked Starkad.

‘I smell warpcraft,’ growled Ulli.

‘We have them scattered,’ voxed Aesor. ‘Hold your ground and break them against us.’

‘They are not finished,’ replied Ulli.

The clanking of great metal feet rang off the rocks, and Ulli saw a huge armoured hand finding purchase at the top of the slope. The orks clinging to the back of the rock-crawler machine whooped and cheered as the face-mask of a massive steel head rose up behind it. The face was wrought into the shape of an eagle with deep green lenses for eyes. Its shoulder guards were in the shape of golden-feathered wings and the torso was inlaid with the intricate heraldry of an ancient and powerful house of Alaric Prime.

It was an Imperial Knight.



THREE

Ulli had never seen a Knight in the steel before. Once whole legions of them strode at the head of Imperial armies in the ages of the Great Crusade, the Heresy and the early centuries of the Imperium. Now the secrets of their construction were known only to the Adeptus Mechanicus and only a few aristocratic houses maintained and piloted them. They were bipedal war engines that echoed the enormous machines of the Legio Titanicus, but smaller and more agile, the linchpin of a way of war that was almost extinct.

This one was sick. Ulli could tell that at the first glance. Glistening black oil ran from its joints, like corrupted blood, running from its eyepieces and the joints of its armoured body. The green and gold paint was blistered as if by disease, with pits and craters like old wounds turned bad.

Behind it clambered the giant ork mechanic, and in one hand it held a chain hooked to a collar around the Knight's neck. It was a master leading a slave, and it brought with it the stink of witchcraft and that upwelling of rage that seemed to shake the mountain under Ulli's feet.

'Is that the *Dominus Vult?*' demanded Aesor inside the bunker.

A shuddering Frith appeared at the firing slit. 'No,' he said, his eyes wide with horror. 'It's the *Aquila Ferox*. Emperor on high, they got the *Aquila...*'

'Whatever it is,' said Tanngjost, 'this heavy bolter won't dent it and that thing on its arm is a battle cannon. It will crack this bunker open.'

Ulli ducked back into the doorway to shelter from the fire still coming down from the scattered orks. The bikers had been sent to keep the Space Wolves pinned down in the bunker while the Knight reached them. The greenskin was

not stupid, and it could call upon the corruption of the warp.

‘Rune Priest,’ said Starkad, sheltering beside Ulli, ‘we have need of you.’ He was holding out the final demolition charge, a spare in case the detonator failed on one of the charges they planted at the dam.

‘Brother,’ said Ulli, ‘I cannot...’

‘We will all die,’ said Starkad, ‘if you do not.’

Ulli looked into Starkad’s face. He was one of the newer members of the pack, and had not been a Space Wolf when Ulli had fought alongside Tanngjost and Saehrimnar at Phalakan. Ulli did not know the young Grey Hunter well, but he had seen in him a calm and analytical war mind that could turn to a Fenrisian fury when cornered, a pathfinder who could pick out a trail through the roughest terrain and scout the most cunning enemy. The Chapter would do ill to lose him. But there was no regret in his face, and no pride at being the one to stand alone. There was just the certainty at what had to be done, and that he was the one who had to do it.

Ulli placed a hand on the casing of the demolition charge. He formed the sigils of strength and reckless fury on it, indiscriminate destruction and anger without form. It was not a complicated symbol but it was one that needed raw power, dredged up from the well at the back of Ulli’s mind that was usually kept sealed by the mental discipline of a Rune Priest.

The glowing rune in the shape of a fist was etched onto the explosive’s casing, and Ulli’s hand smouldered with the effort.

‘Cover him,’ ordered Aesor.

The Knight reached the top of the slope, its gait lopsided and uncertain. One arm ended in a battle cannon, a weapon normally carried by the main battle tanks of the Astra Militarum. The mountainside shuddered under its feet.

‘Metal beast!’ bellowed Tanngjost from the bunker. ‘Steel will melt and bend in the forge of war, but flesh and bone will not! And greenskin filth! Your kind are a disease, and in my hands I hold the cure!’

The ork mechanic turned at the sound of Tanngjost’s voice, its face creasing with hatred. It pointed and bellowed towards the bunker and the enslaved Knight followed it, the battle cannon turning to aim. Tanngjost opened fire and heavy bolter fire *spanged* off the Knight’s armoured chest, throwing out sparks but doing no damage.

Starkad sprinted from the doorway, pistol in one hand and the demolition charge in the other. Ulli’s rune left a glowing trail in the air as Starkad ran.

If Ulli could bury his axe in the ork’s skull, would he kill it? Even if he

channelled every drop of psychic power through the blade, was that well of warp-born darkness too great for a Rune Priest to overcome? Ulli had never encountered an ork corrupted in this way before. He had never even heard of such a thing. How could he fight it?

Starkad reached to within a few metres of the Knight before the ork saw him. It roared and stomped up proud of the rocks, drawing the rotator cannon it had strapped to its back to make the climb. Ulli broke cover and ran at an angle to Starkad's path, letting a white-hot flow of power course from his mind into the axe. The weapon was hot in his hand and it was suddenly heavy, the strength of his arm temporarily drained as it was forced out of his body and into his mind.

Ulli leapt and brought his axe down, as if delivering a killing blow to the back of a prey-animal's neck. The blade of psychic energy was projected from the axe, a crescent of white light. It hammered into the ork's gun and shattered its casing, sending components spinning everywhere.

Ulli gulped down air. He abhorred the moment of weakness that followed such use of his power. He saw the ork throwing the broken weapon aside and growling in frustration – but it was not stalking towards Ulli for revenge. Instead it stayed fixated on Starkad, who was now in the shadow of the Knight.

'Here!' yelled Ulli, knowing it was useless. The distraction had bought a few seconds, but not enough for Starkad to do his work. Instead Ulli ran for the ork, his axe for the moment just a mundane weapon until he could catch his breath and feel the psychic power flowing through him again.

The Knight's cannon hammered a volley of shots into the bunker. Unaugmented hearing would have been deafened by the din – as it was Ulli's senses were overloaded for a moment by the noise. Chunks of the bunker vanished in bursts of flame and debris, laying open the interior.

Silhouetted by the muzzle flare of the battle cannon, Starkad clamped the charge to the leg of the *Aquila Ferox*. The ork loomed down on him, bringing his cleaver up to hack Starkad in two.

Ulli dived into the ork's side, tackling the alien shoulder-first. It was an unyielding wall of muscle and scar and Ulli barely knocked the ork back half a pace. He hacked at it with his axe and buried the weapon deep in the ork's shoulder, but the ork flexed the muscle of its arm and forced the blade out. For a moment Ulli was looking into the ork's eyes, and behind them he saw the infinite darkness of the warp, tinted red and boiling over with hate.

The ork aimed a backhand swipe at Ulli and caught him square in the chest. Ulli was thrown off his feet, head reeling with the impact, and it was instinct that

made him throw his hands out to find some purchase in the snow and rock. He arrested his momentum just as his feet swung out over the precipice, a moment before he would have slid over the edge and into a fall hundreds of metres down through the clouds.

The charge detonated. The concussion wave hit Ulli before the sound and nearly threw him the rest of the way off the edge. The impact slammed against his ringing head and everything went red for a moment as the mountain shuddered.

Fragments of rock rained down over Ulli. Through the dust and snow thrown up by the blast he saw the *Aquila Ferox* listing to one side, one leg completely gone below the knee where Starkad had planted the charge. It put out a hand to steady itself but the ork's corrupting machine-sickness had made it slow and ill-coordinated. It toppled to the ground beside Ulli, the greater part of its weight hanging over the edge. It slid across the icy rocks and fell. Ulli heard the sound of stone on steel as it was battered against the side of the mountain and plunged through the cloud layer.

Ulli shook the sense back into his head. Somehow he still held onto his axe – another warrior's instinct. He used it to push himself to his feet.

The shape of the ork emerged from the smoke. In one massive paw it held Starkad up in the air, brandishing him towards the ruined bunker. Starkad's face was streaked with blood and his armour was torn and cracked, but he was conscious. He saw the ork's maw opening wide.

The ork bit down on Starkad's upper body. Its fangs sheared through ceramite and bone. Starkad's head and shoulders disappeared down its gullet. Blood and organs spilled down its chest as the ork threw the body aside.

Ulli could feel its glee. It relished this, not just killing, but killing a foe in front of that foe's allies. The very hatred Ulli felt for the ork brought it joy.

'To the slopes,' said a voice behind Ulli. In the chaos it took him a moment to recognise it as Aesor. 'Upwards. More are following.'

Ulli could hear the engines now, more bikers and war machines crawling up the slope towards the ruined bunker. Through the smoke of the Knight's assault he could see Tanngjost, the insensible Frith thrown over his shoulder, breaking from cover to join Fejor in the rocks above.

'We're running out of mountain,' said Ulli as Aesor helped him to his feet.

'Then we will make our stand at the top,' said Aesor, 'and bleed the greenskins white as they follow us. Move, Rune Priest. Move!'

For the first time, what remained of Pack Aesor could appreciate just how many greenskins followed the mechanic who led them. They had swarmed out of the camp by the mountain lake, thousands of them, released from the workshops to take up whatever weapon they could find and hunt down the Space Wolves.

Two more crawlers ground their way up to the ruined bunker, one bringing more bikers, the other scores of orks clinging to its upper hull. Other orks made the journey on foot, clambering through the ice and snow. From the glimpses of the greenskins massing below, Ulli estimated three to four thousand of them, many hauling their bikes after them, others loaded down with heavy weapons. Ulli saw no more corrupted Knights, for which he dared to be grateful.

Above the Space Wolves now was nothing save for a long snowy climb up to the very peak of Sacred Mountain, a gnarled spear of rock pierced with black caves. When the pack reached that peak, there would be nowhere left to climb.

Frith trudged alongside the pack as they moved. He was slow, but his weight was a fraction of a Space Marine's and he did not have to watch his footing so carefully in the snow.

'I should not look upon it,' said Frith, pointing up at the peak. 'It is a sacred place. Only those who pilot their own Knight may make this journey. We are unworthy.'

'Speak for yourself,' growled Tanngjost.

'What is in there?' asked Aesor.

'In there?' said Frith.

'This is more than just a mountain. It might be the tallest on this world but the Knight Houses are not cowering savages to bow before a mere mountain. I have heard tell the lower reaches were opened up, and there was found the means to summon us to Alaric Prime, but the peak is a mystery.'

'We keep it to ourselves.'

Aesor paused in his climb and turned to Frith, fixing the retainer with a look that Frith couldn't return. 'We could leave you,' said Aesor, 'if you would rather keep it to yourself.'

Frith squirmed for a moment, but Aesor did not have the air of someone who let such things slide. 'It is said that the Omnissiah put his greatest secrets in the peak,' said Frith. 'He walked here before men did. And when the Knightly Houses came, He left them ninety tablets of pure carbon carved with the admonishment never to tread upon the peak. When we are worthy, when we can hear the Omnissiah's truths and not corrupt or abuse them, then the peak of the mountain will open up to us. That is why our noblest sons make this journey and

halt at the threshold, to show the Ommissiah they still hold true to his commandment.'

'And now there will be greenskin filth running all over this place,' said Fejor, who was listening in from his place in the lead a few paces ahead.

'I cannot think of it,' said Frith, 'I must not.' Ulli noticed the labour of his breath and remembered that while a Space Wolf did not care about altitude, an unaugmented human would suffer as the air got thinner. Without rest Frith would probably die before the sun rose the next morning, and he would not get any rest.

'I smell smoke,' said Fejor. Aesor held out a hand and the pack halted. They were in the lower reaches of the long snowy ascent, a trudge of perhaps two hours up to the rocky spike of the summit. Ulli followed Fejor's gaze and saw a smudge of grey against the ice-blue sky.

'It's the ork aircraft,' said Tanngjost. 'The one Sigrund shot down. Our greenskin pilot made friends with the side of this mountain.'

'Take a moment to think,' said Aesor. He kneeled in the snow and ran his hand through it, picking up a handful. 'This is fresh snowfall, on top of old. See up ahead. Near the peak? The snow is cracked where the slope has shifted. It won't come down with our movement but it wouldn't take a lot more.'

'An avalanche,' said Tanngjost. 'Wouldn't mind dropping half the mountain on a few orks.'

'There,' said Aesor, pointing to the side of the pack's path, where a dip in the slope formed a snow-choked valley. 'The orks are many but they are slow and move at different speeds. They will gather there before striking out for the peak. And above them is an avalanche begging to be set off.'

'Set off by us,' said Fejor. 'That ork death trap never dropped its bombs. If they didn't go off on impact then they'll still be there.'

'A fitting tribute to Brother Starkad it would be,' said Tanngjost, 'if we could set off a few more explosions in his name.'

Starkad's death flashed in Ulli's mind. He did not dwell on the deaths of brothers, setting those thoughts aside to be unravelled at the mourning rituals back at the Fang where the fallen were remembered. But the sight of Starkad's body disappearing down the greenskin's gullet, the alien's growl of satisfaction at the taste of a Space Wolf's flesh, those came to Ulli's mind unbidden.

'We have to take out their leader,' said Ulli. 'If that thing lives, it'll bring its warcraft to the battle and the Imperial Knights will become weapons in its hands.'

'Leave that to me,' said Aesor. 'Fejor speaks true. Between Sacred Mountain

and the greenskins we have everything we need. We will not make our last stand on this peak, brother. The greenskins will be making theirs.'



FOUR

The pilot's body was a tangle of skin and flesh, torn open first by gunfire and then by the impact that pancaked the fighter craft's nose back into the fuselage. Smoke was coming from one of the engines that had been torn clear of the main body and burst into flames. The snow was stained a dirty grey by the spill of fuel and oil.

'How can they get anything like this to fly?' asked Tanngjost, peering into the wreck's innards. 'It's just flotsam and junk.'

'The greenskins believe it will fly,' replied Ulli. 'Maybe that's enough.'

Fejor wrenched a sheet of steel away from the hull, revealing the bomb load crushed into the fuselage. 'A couple look intact,' he said. 'Tanngjost, your help, brother.'

Aesor and Ulli kept watch as the packmates unloaded the intact bombs. The bombs were as crudely made as the rest of the craft, just metal barrels with fins welded on and filled with explosives. It was a miracle they had not all detonated on impact.

'Do you see them?' asked Aesor.

All Ulli could see was the long white expanse of the slope, then the snarl of frozen rock that led down to the ruined bunker and eventually the distant blue glimmer of the lake. 'No,' he said, 'but they are there.'

'Greenskin scouts,' said Aesor, pointing towards a dark cleft in the rock where Ulli could just make out movement. 'Received wisdom states the ork is too stupid to scout ahead. That it simply charges headlong into anything put in its way. But you noted the cunning in the creature that leads them, Rune Priest.'

What you sensed, I now see with my own eyes. When the assault on the bunker failed, it changed plans. Now it seeks to trap us and hunt us down, and leave us no hiding place. It has its scouts pick out the best routes up the mountain, so its forces will not become bottled up and congested.'

'But you do not have any admiration for it,' said Ulli.

'No, brother,' said Aesor, 'for it tries to match wits with a hunter of Fenris. Better for it that its greenskins charged blind and raging up at us, for then at least they would have the advantage of shock and fury. No, it has never hounded a quarry like us. It has no trick or tactic that I did not learn as a child of my tribe, let alone a warrior of the Space Wolves.'

'It left no gene-seed for us to take from our dead,' said Ulli. 'Not from Starkad or Saehrimnar.'

'You think that was deliberate?'

'I can conceive of few better ways to dispirit Space Marines than to kill our brothers in such a way that the flesh of Russ cannot be passed on.'

'A coincidence,' said Aesor. 'And crimes for which it will be punished. It should be grateful that we are visiting no more than death on it.'

'There is more going on in that creature's skull than you realise,' replied Ulli. 'The machine-virus was born of warcraft, and wielded with deliberation and focus. Our enemy is no greenskin brute that rules by size and strength alone. That is why it must die, Aesor Dragon's Head.'

'And so all discussion of our foe will be rendered irrelevant,' said Aesor, 'for die it shall, and then there shall be nothing going on in its skull at all.'

Tanngjost trudged towards them from the wreck. 'There are two bombs that are still intact,' he said. 'Fejor's rigging a detonator. They were using a chemical mix as explosives, and bloody volatile too. If it wasn't so cold here it would go up if you breathed on it.'

'Thank Sacred Mountain, then,' said Aesor, 'for another weapon.'

Ulli thought of the cold, and looked around for Frith. He saw the man crouching out of the wind by the side of the wreck, holding the lapels of his uniform around his face. He was going to die, and Ulli thought about mentioning that fact to Aesor – but there was nothing the Space Wolves could do to prevent it, no shelter to provide for him or fuel to build a fire.

Ulli wondered if Sacred Mountain was an auspicious place to die, if it would be a failure in the eyes of the Omnissiah or a blessed end under His gaze. The Space Wolves did not cleave to the Imperial church or the many variations of the Imperial creed, or to the worship of the Omnissiah, that facet of the Emperor as a

god of knowledge and revelation. Ulli did not understand religion of that kind – he had read the runes from tombs of Fenrisian kings venerated as ancestors by the people of his home world, but he did not himself believe their ghosts came to lead the souls of fallen warriors to the afterlife as many tribes did. And the Emperor, while the greatest man who had ever lived and the father of the Space Marines in a literal and figurative sense, was not a god in his mind as the Imperial church would have it. Did it bring comfort or dread to imagine the Ommissiah glowering down to judge at the moment of death? Was there even room in Frith's frozen mind for matters so weighty?

It was not long before Fejor and Tanngjost had buried the bombs at the top of the fractured snow field, where the upper layer sat precariously on an older fall of icy snow. The detonation would bring it all down, sweeping into the narrow defiles that would serve as paths upwards for the greenskins. More of the orks were gathering now, the hardiest and fastest climbers, lurking behind ridges of stone ready to make the final push upwards. Behind them smoke rose from the engines of bikes the other orks were manhandling over the rough climb, ready to scream up the flat slope.

'The bombs need no help this time,' said Tanngjost, 'and our pack leader's frost blade is as keen as it ever will be. But alas, the heavy bolter was destroyed at the bunker and all I have is my darling Frejya. Rune Priest, would you?'

Tanngjost held out his bolter to Ulli. It was a heavily customised model, an older marque from some ancient armoury of the Fang. Its casing was inlaid with red and gold, marked with silver eagle's heads to mark notable kills the weapon had taken. Tanngjost had even had the weapon's name inscribed on it.

'It has been too long, Lady Frejya,' said Ulli. 'Last time I saw you, you were out of shells and Tanngjost was beating an eldar about the head with you.'

'She might not be refined,' said Tanngjost, 'but she's still my girl.'

'What does she wish of me?'

'She is jealous of Brother Fejor's range,' said Tanngjost. 'Not his bite, for sure, for she can blow a hole in any greenskin big enough to spit through. But she'd rather not have to wait until I can see the reds of their eyes.'

Ulli laid his hand on Frejya's casing. He could feel the years on the weapon, the countless alien and heretic lives taken by her, the joy that a Space Wolf took in the decimation of his enemies. Such a weapon took the runes well because half the work was already done – it was already infused with meaning and history, with a patina of age and bloodshed. Ulli created the rune in his mind, taken from the tomb of a long-dead Fenrisian prince who could shoot a snow

hart through the throat from leagues away. Distance, accuracy and cold-heartedness were enwrapped in the symbol now being raised up in light and steel.

‘Fine raiment,’ said Ulli, ‘for a fine lady.’

Gunfire was stuttering up from below. The orks weren’t trying to hit anything, or even fire ranging shots. The noise and the fury was its own reward, raising the blood of the greenskins until they were in a raucous battle-frenzy, with war-cries echoing up from the throng. They were starting the climb up the slope, falling over one another in their eagerness to get to grips with the Space Wolves.

‘Can you see their leader?’ voxed Aesor.

‘Not yet,’ replied Fejor, who was crouched in the wreckage of the crashed aircraft, surveying the enemy through the scope of his sniper rifle.

‘Not right,’ said Aesor. ‘Greenskins lead from the front.’

‘This whole army could be swept away,’ said Ulli, ‘but if that creature survives, all our work here will be undone.’

‘Is it among them?’ asked Aesor.

Ulli knelt in the snow and put a hand to the ground. Though his psychic discipline was not the reading of minds or the perception of the warp, his psychic sense could still react when the touch of the warp was strong enough.

It was there. The dark and monstrous stink of warpcraft, filtered through the mass of hatred that each ork possessed in place of a mind. It pulsed through the rocks and the air. It stained the clear sky. Ulli felt filthy just to perceive it.

‘It’s here,’ said Ulli.

‘Much as I would love to try,’ said Fejor, ‘I doubt we can wade through this many greenskins to get to it.’

‘Then as Russ hauled the Iron-Scale Kraken from the ocean to best it on land,’ said Aesor, ‘just as Hef Shattertusk lured forth the Beast of the Black Fjord, so shall we bring the enemy to us.’

Above the Space Wolves’ position was a promontory of rock, sprouting from the base of the rocky spindle that formed the mountain’s peak. Aesor ran to it and stood on the edge, drawing his frost blade. Ulli could imagine that image in stained glass adorning a chapel, built by Emperor-fearing citizens to honour some act of deliverance from the Space Wolves. Very few of the Chapter were handsome, but Aesor was definitely among that few.

‘Beast of Sacred Mountain!’ Aesor bellowed. ‘I know you can hear me! You have slain my brothers and I have slain yours, and who is either of us to leave such work undone?’

Aesor's words echoed up and down the mountain, as if Sacred Mountain itself were calling out the greenskin. A few whooping war-cries reached Ulli's ears from below.

'My frost blade has not drunk its fill!' continued Aesor. 'And there is space for another skull above the fire of the Great Hall! I think yours will fit perfectly, greenskin. And so I call you out! You will find no fiercer quarry on this planet, you will find no sword keener than mine to test your own! I call you out, and I know you hear me true!'

The orks howled and bellowed, and fired randomly up in the air. And then the din subsided.

Ulli had never seen greenskins cowed into obedience, not when they were chanting their war-cries and ready to spill blood. But these threw themselves face-down into the snow or scurried to the side as the horde parted.

The greenskin leader walked out from the throng. The mountain seemed to shake under its feet. It pointed up at Aesor and bellowed, the sound carrying on the wind like a roar from the warp itself.

'Do it!' yelled Aesor.

Fejor shouldered his rifle and jumped down from the wreckage, where the detonator had been rigged to the bomb load.

The ork grinned and the contraptions on its back glowed blue-white, spraying sparks and arcing into the ground. With a sound like a clap of sudden thunder, it vanished.

The orks around it were thrown aside by the shockwave. A blast of air tinged with the steely taste of ozone and blood hit Ulli, heavy with the greasy feel of warcraft.

'It exploded,' said Tanngjost.

'It teleported,' replied Ulli.

The air was torn apart. The ork appeared on the promontory a few paces from Aesor, bellowing as it brandished the massive cleaver in its fist.

Aesor saluted with his blade – a foolish gesture, but a feint. The ork lunged at him, bringing the cleaver down to cut the pack leader in two. Aesor dodged to the side and turned the cleaver with his frost blade – a mundane weapon would have been shattered but the kraken-tooth blade turned the cleaver aside and the weapon was driven into the rock beside Aesor's foot.

Aesor leapt into the ork, planting a foot on its knee to propel himself upwards. He grabbed one of the beast's fangs with his free hand and headbutted it in the bridge of the nose. Cartilage cracked and the ork reeled.

‘Say the word,’ voxed Fejor from the wreck.

‘Stand by,’ replied Ulli.

Aesor vaulted off the ork before it could tear him off and dash him against the rocks. The separation was enough for Tanngjost to draw a bead with Frejya and blast a volley of shots into the greenskin. Shots punched into the mass of gnarled green scar tissue, but only angered the creature more. It hauled the cannon off its back, the barrels cycling as it levelled the weapon at Tanngjost. The ork had patched the weapon back together using ill-matched spare parts and chunks of welded steel plating. There was no way it should have worked, but there had been no reason for the ork aircraft to fly either.

The cannon blazed. Tanngjost sprinted for the rocky base of the mountain spire as shots erupted around him, throwing columns of snow into the air.

Aesor lunged at the ork. His frost blade was aimed at the place where its heart should have been. But the ork was fast, far too fast for a creature of its size. It brought its cleaver down into the path of the blade and caught Aesor’s arm in the crook of its elbow, levering Aesor to the ground. It let its cannon fall to the rock as it drew its fist back.

Ulli’s axe was in his hand. He had not willed it – it was a reflex action, wired into his hindbrain. Psychic power was pooling into the weapon, illuminating the runes on its blade. They were runes from the ancient peoples of Fenris, sigils of keenness, valour and ferocity, glowing bright against the dark steel.

The ork drove its fist into Aesor’s chest. Ulli heard the ceramite buckling and the stink of warpcraft was suddenly sharp and real, the savage joy of the ork making its corruption flare up.

Ulli charged at the ork. This time he dropped at the last instant, knowing the ork had the cunning to anticipate the attack. The ork’s cleaver swept over Ulli and he hacked the axe deep into the ork’s thigh.

A force weapon, such as the rune axe, was not just a badge of a Rune Priest’s rank. The psychic circuitry built into it was attuned to the wielder’s mind, a conduit for the raw psychic power created by accident of birth and merciless training under the Rune Priests of the Fang. When that power flowed through the blade, it killed. It did not wound or sever – it sheared the enemy’s soul away, annihilated his mind in the torrent of willpower.

Ulli let his mind flow through the axe now, the killing wave, the flood of mental fire, to shred the greenskin’s mind from the inside.

A great black wall of hatred met his mind. The psychic force crashed against it like an ocean against a cliff. Ulli was thrown back, mentally and physically,

hurled onto his back with his vision greying out and fireworks of shock bursting in his mind.

The mass of warp-born corruption had welled up and thrown him aside. The darkness inside the ork was more powerful than Ulli had realised. It was not an ork at all – it was a vessel for that darkness, brimming over with raw hatred that found form in the greenskin's savagery and lust for war. Ulli had faced daemons and witches, and sorcerers of the dark gods on the battlefield, but he had never felt such a magnitude of raw corruption.

'Fejor!' gasped Ulli into the vox, and his own voice sounded far away. 'Do it!' 'Thirty seconds!' came the reply.

Aesor was on his feet. The breastplate of his armour was crushed and split, and blood ran from his mouth. The ork lashed at him with its cleaver and Aesor parried, duelling with the creature blow for blow. They were both fast, both strong. The ork had the greater reach and power, but Aesor's frost blade was the finer weapon and he had the skill of a Space Marine and master swordsman. Ulli rolled onto his front and pulled himself to his feet, picking up his axe from the ground – the weapon's blade was smouldering and the snow around it had melted away.

Aesor was forced back a step. The ork slashed at Aesor at waist height with enough power to cut the Space Wolf clean in two. Aesor jumped back and sliced in response, the frost blade cutting off a good chunk of armour on the ork's shoulder and revealing oozing red muscle beneath the gnarled skin.

Fejor was running to join Tanngjost by the spire. Ulli glanced behind him and gauged the distance to the wreck. He was a little too close, and scrambled across the slope out of the blast radius.

Frith crouched beside the wreck, head in his hands and shivering.

'Frith!' yelled Ulli. 'Move! Move!'

Frith didn't respond. Perhaps fear made him insensible to what was going on around him. Perhaps he knew full well what was happening, and chose not to flee.

The bomb exploded. The wreck, Frith, and a good portion of the mountainside vanished into a column of grey snow and flame. The ground seemed to liquefy under Ulli's feet and he pitched onto his face.

The greenskin stumbled back. Aesor leapt onto its chest, frost blade drawn back to spear it through the heart. The ork grabbed Aesor with one hand, its massive fist enclosing his waist, and slammed him into the rock head-first.

The side of the mountain shifted and slid downwards. Ulli couldn't even

imagine how many tonnes of snow had been dislodged, now gathering speed as it rumbled towards the ork horde below. The greenskin mech turned at the sound to see the avalanche seething downwards.

Ulli took the chance. He sprinted for Aesor, who lay on the rock at the greenskin's feet. Ulli grabbed the collar of Aesor's armour and hauled him away towards cover.

The ork looked back around to see Aesor out of reach. Its face split into a grin, of all things, and it laughed – it laughed to see its quarry escape and its army seconds from destruction. Liquid corruption, oily and black, was slathered around its fangs and glinting in its eyes. It reached behind it and worked the controls of the contraption in its back.

The ork vanished again, leaving the taste of burning metal in its wake. Ulli thought it must appear ahead of him, at the base of the pinnacle, cutting him and Aesor off from the cover of the mountain's caves. But instead, the flash and sound of the teleport came from below. The greenskin appeared in the midst of its army again, in the path of the avalanche that by now had taken the entire slope's worth of snow with it in one boiling mass.

Ulli was sure he could still hear the greenskin laughing as it activated another of the devices it had built into itself. A dome of crackling golden energy leapt up around it, flaring and spitting with arcs of electricity, encompassing a good third of the ork army.

It was a forcefield. The damn thing had a forcefield. Ulli cursed inwardly as he dragged the reeling Aesor towards Tanngjost and Fejor at the nearest cave entrance.

The ork horde vanished in the whiteout. Ulli waited at the entrance to watch, and sure enough, after a few moments of stillness the snow hissed and boiled away, revealing the perfect circle where the forcefield had protected the ork army from its fury. In the middle of hundreds of greenskins their leader stood bellowing orders and pointing up at the pinnacle.

Hundreds had died. Maybe thousands. But more than enough remained. Ulli spat in the snow and headed into Sacred Mountain, knowing the orks were following.



FIVE

Not even the Knightly Houses of Alaric Prime knew what lay inside the peak of Sacred Mountain, nor who had built it or why. The intelligence the Space Wolves had on the world suggested only that it was an archeotech site, full of technology from the Dark Age before the coming of the Emperor, when human innovation ran untempered and great wonders and terrors were made. A few legends suggested those who entered the peak never returned, which made it a less than ideal shelter for Pack Aesor, but one slightly more appealing than facing the orks in the open.

Inside the cave the pack found walls of smooth metallic stone cut into enormous blocks, dark and shot through with silver lines that suggested circuitry. Along the ceiling ran broad metal pipes that looped in and out of the stone. Panels of black crystal made up the floor and sections of the walls, still polished and reflective even after Throne knew how many centuries exposed to the elements. Flurries of snow blew in from outside and melted against the stone, for it was slightly warm to the touch, and Ulli could just feel a faint vibration as if from a power source running deep down in the mountain.

There was no sign of anyone having set foot in here. The cave led down into the body of the mountain, in a wide winding spiral lined with silver glyphs of some ancient tech-language. It was better shelter than nothing, but for real cover the pack would have to move further in and find a defensible location. They had time until then, but not much.

Fejor was kneeling over the stunned Aesor, trying to get his buckled breastplate off so the pack leader could be checked for injuries. Ulli leaned

against the wall, watching the snow swirling outside and listening to the orkish war-cries and bike engines.

‘How many did we get?’ asked Tanngjost.

‘Half,’ said Ulli. ‘Maybe more. A good tally for us this day.’

‘But you do not rejoice in it, Rune Priest.’

‘No. The true enemy lives. With luck it will follow us up here and spare our brothers below a few more hours of whatever evil it can wreak among the Knights. That is scant recompense.’

‘We gave it a bloody good fight,’ said Tanngjost.

‘That would be enough for an Imperial Guardsman with a lasgun and bayonet,’ replied Ulli, ‘to tell himself while he waits to die. It is not enough for a Space Marine. We cannot claim valour as victory, or endeavour, or a fight well fought. Only victory is victory to us, and we are not victorious.’

‘Does a man have to be miserable to join the Rune Priests,’ said Tanngjost, ‘or is it just you?’

Ulli tried to raise a smile, but could not. He could only think of the *Aquila Ferox*, corrupted and lumbering at the greenskin’s command, and how a whole legion of them might look advancing on the great companies of Ragnar Blackmane and Logan Grimnar.

‘How dare you?’ came a voice from behind Ulli.

Ulli turned to see Aesor standing behind him, his damaged breastplate hanging loose, one shoulder guard buckled and split. Aesor’s face was pallid and his eyes sunken, as if he had not slept for days, and Ulli could feel the anger in his eyes – a hot, red tint, flickering behind the pack leader’s mind.

‘I do not understand, brother,’ said Ulli.

‘How dare you deny my combat against the enemy!’ snapped Aesor. ‘The greenskin was mine to fight! The kill was mine, and you denied it to me!’

‘You were wounded,’ said Ulli, keeping his voice level. He had not seen Aesor like this before, but somehow it was not a surprise – that proud predator had always been there, lurking behind Aesor’s eyes, waiting to uncoil.

‘I could have taken it!’ retorted Aesor. ‘I was hurt, but it was distracted. A few more seconds and I would have been on my feet, as I am now, and I would have taken its head!’

‘You would have died!’ replied Ulli, louder than he had intended.

‘Then I should have died!’ shouted Aesor. ‘I should have fallen in single combat with the beast, a glorious death that would crown the legacy of Aesor Dragon’s Head! Do you think I want to become old and lame like this crippled

ancient here?’ Aesor jabbed a finger at Tanngjost. ‘That may be enough for you, but not for me. I was chosen for greatness. I was destined for glory. Now I have been denied it. How many times do we court a death like that, in single combat with a lord of xenoskind? A death deciding the fate of a whole world? Of such things are the sagas of my people written. I might never see it again. My saga might never be written. And that sin I leave at the feet of Ulli Iceclaw!’

‘That is why you fight?’ asked Ulli. ‘For glory, for a song to be sung of you when you die? What of your duty to the Emperor, to the citizens of His Imperium?’

‘A billion die every moment,’ snarled Aesor. ‘What good does it do me to die for billions of ignorant scum who will never know my name, and who will be dead the next day? Only glory remains. Only glory is worth dying for. That is what you robbed from me. I do not expect a Vulture Clan deviant to understand.’

Ulli did not reply. He could not. Aesor spat at Ulli’s feet and walked deeper into the cave, around the curve which led into Sacred Mountain.

‘Pack leader!’ shouted Tanngjost after him. ‘Brother Aesor!’

There was no reply except for Aesor’s footsteps, echoing as they faded away.

Tanngjost leaned against the cave entrance. ‘He had no right,’ he said.

‘He is the pack leader,’ said Ulli. ‘He has every right.’

‘But that does not mean you have to agree with him.’

‘It does not.’

‘Is what he said true?’ asked Fejor, still sitting where he had been working on Aesor’s armour.

‘That I am a lame old cur?’ said Tanngjost. ‘Alas, it is. If no enemy can finish the job, this old body will fall apart of its own accord soon enough.’

‘I meant about the Vultures.’

Tanngjost gave Fejor the kind of look a Wolf Priest might give a boisterous young Blood Claw, when that Blood Claw was bandying insults that others present might take too seriously. But Fejor showed no contrition on his face. If he realised the seriousness of the question, he did not care.

‘It is,’ said Ulli.

‘I did not know any Vulture Clan yet lived.’

‘Hold your tongue, Fejor Redblade,’ said Tanngjost. ‘I might be old but I can knock the fleas out of your hide.’

‘Peace, Tanngjost,’ said Ulli. ‘The truth holds no fear for me. The Wolf Priests descended on the Valley of the Burning Stones and exterminated my people. And rightly so, for they were deviant witches to the last person. Five were young

and strong enough to be salvageable. Three were found corrupted and were abandoned in the snow to die. One did not survive his proving. The last one was me. I have come to terms with it, yet none will speak of it to me. Such an origin is ill-starred indeed and those brothers who know it doubtless assume I would be moved to violence to hear it mentioned. Aesor probably hoped I would strike out at him, so he would have reason to fight me.'

'You are my brother, Ulli Iceclaw,' said Tanngjost. 'No matter what clan whelped you. You are Vulture no longer, not since you returned from your Bleeding a Space Wolf. Aesor might not say the same, but I do.'

'Fejor, set up here,' said Ulli. 'Find something to build a barricade we can defend. We can fight at this cave entrance, where the orks can only assault with a few at a time. There may be somewhere more defensible further in that we can fall back to.'

'I should find Aesor,' said Tanngjost. 'I fear for him. He was always proud, but not like this.'

'Then we are both headed inside,' said Ulli. 'Time to see what the Knights of Alaric Prime were forbidden to look upon.'

'If I smell greenskin,' said Fejor, 'I'll vox.'

Within the peak of Sacred Mountain was a single great machine, a vast and terrible construction around which ran a spiralling pathway. Shafts of massive pistons soared away in every direction, massive cogs meshed in the shadows and the ever-present thrum of power got louder the further in the Space Wolves went.

Everything about it was ancient. The very air smelled of centuries. Drips of condensation had made stubby stalagmites on the floor and here and there the smooth grey stone was cracked where the mountain had shifted.

'Throne knows who built this,' said Tanngjost as he and Ulli emerged onto a long walkway crossing a depthless black gulf, crossed with cables and pipes. On the other side, hexagonal columns framed the entrance to a cave of crystalline datamedium, glittering with flickers of power and information.

'We built it,' said Ulli. 'Another mankind, who existed before the Emperor brought reason to our species. A mankind who had never looked into the gulf that delving too far could open up.'

Ulli paused halfway across the bridge. Something smelled off. It was something like the stink of warpcraft the ork mech had upon it, but far more subtle, cold where that had been hot, metallic where that had been bloody.

Ulli drew his bolt pistol and moved warily. Tanngjost followed, training Frejya

across the crystalline cavern ahead.

At the threshold of the cavern, Ulli saw the huge metallic foot outstretched. He backed against one of the crystal pillars and glanced around, to see the whole massive steel form sprawled on the floor of the cavern. The winking datamedium lights picked out the gilding on its armour plates, and the glistening black oil that oozed from its joints. It was humanoid, three times the height of a Space Marine when it had stood, with massive-calibre guns mounted on the backs of its arms. On its back was an open hatch that led into a cramped one-man cockpit, from which spilled bundles of cables. Its armour plates were lacquered a deep red, emblazoned with the coat of arms of a Knightly House of Alaric Prime.

‘It must be the *Dominus Vult*,’ said Ulli.

‘It looks like it crawled in here to die,’ said Tanngjost, approaching the fallen Imperial Knight. He aimed Frejya into the cockpit as he checked inside. ‘And I think we have made the acquaintance of Baron Vigilus Varlen.’

Inside the cockpit was a corpse, the face blackened by electrical burn. The eyes had burst and the sockets were charred pits, and the lips were drawn back over shattered teeth. The scorched remains of a red uniform clung to the chest, covered in tatters of gold brocade and a rack of medals that had melted into blobs of gold and silver. The body looked fused to the fittings of the cockpit, the hands indistinguishable from the twin control yokes and the legs and lower body lost in the tangle of pedals and pipework.

The black fluid had pooled in the cockpit and fingers of it had reached up into the body, running like dark veins up the arms and neck. Up close Ulli could see the same fluid trickling from every seam and join in the Knight’s body, oozing in questing fingers across the floor. Threads of it ran through the datamedium where it met the wall, and there the glittering lights had dimmed like stars blotted out by a dark moon moving across the sky.

‘Corruption,’ said Ulli grimly. ‘Do not touch it, brother. It is not just a machine-curse the greenskin inflicted on this machine. It is a physical corruption too, born of the warp. I have not seen such a thing before, but I know the source by its smell. It would take an Iron Priest as well as me to exorcise it.’

Tanngjost knelt down and held a hand over the floor, tracing the shape of a swirl of spilled corruption. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘A footprint. Power armour. I might not track as Starkad could but these eyes are not grown dim just yet. The trail goes this way.’ Tanngjost followed the marks to a black smear on the wall. He stumbled here, and put a hand out to steady himself.

The temperature dropped several degrees at once. Ulli's grip tightened on his bolt pistol, and he spun at the sound of metal grinding on stone behind him. The faceplate of the *Dominus Vult* was shaped like the helm of archaic plate armour, with triangular eyeslits over a featureless shield-shaped plate. The eyes were glowing a dim blue, guttering as if a hot flame burned inside the Knight's head. That flame seemed to focus on Ulli, and he was certain the head moved imperceptibly, corrosion and warped metal grinding as the servos forced themselves back to life.

'Brother, beware!' said Ulli and turned back to Tanngjost. But Tanngjost was not there.

Where the datamedium cavern had been, now there was a rocky valley open to a sky that was overcast with grey-white cloud. Packs of carrion birds wheeled over the jet-black mountain peaks that bounded the far end of the valley. It was a dark and chill place where the sun only reached for an hour a day, choked with huts made from whale bones and the flayed skins of enemies unwise enough to raid the narrow mountain passes.

Beyond those peaks were cairns and watchtowers built to warn the unwary of these mountains' tribes, scattered with the skulls of men who had traded with them, shown their captives mercy or tarried with one of their women. Of all the evils, conspiring with the mountain tribes to produce more offspring was the worst, for they carried with them a taint worse than madness, disease or dishonour.

Memory caught hooks into the back of Ulli's mind as he spotted the heap of corpses at the end of the valley. A battle had been fought here, swift and total, with some huts fired, others trampled down, and blood slick on the heaps of bones and trash on the valley floor, but the bodies had all been gathered up into that one heap. Hundreds of bodies were piled up there. The figures that stood around the heap were at once strange and familiar to Ulli, for the youth who had first seen them had not known what they were. They were taller than any man, wearing armour the same colour as the clouded sky, hung with pelts and bone charms. Some wore helmets, as if to ward off the stench of the valley's evil, others went bareheaded to reveal faces burned by decades of wind and lined with battle-scars.

Ulli the Space Wolf, however, knew who they were. They were Wolf Priests of the Fang, among them men he would encounter and recognise years later among his battle-brothers. Neither would acknowledge the connection, but those Wolf

Priests knew full well that Ulli was the skinny, filth-streaked creature they had spared. It was a lifetime ago. It was not to be spoken of.

One priest threw a burning brand onto the pile. The bodies must have been doused with accelerant for they caught fire immediately. The bodies vanished in the flames, casting more light than the Valley of the Burning Stones had ever seen.

Everyone the young Ulli had ever known was in that ball of flame. The other youths spared by the Wolf Priests were ones he did not know, for the strongest of the valley's young were kept separate lest they join their powers and try to break from the clan's authority. Even here Ulli had been feared, because he had the strength to one day overthrow the Vulture elders and take the Valley of the Burning Stones for himself.

Ulli realised his arms were bound behind his back. He had been thrown into the remains of a burned hut, among the blackened bones of the valley's defenders, who had fallen to the Wolf Priests in a few exchanges of gunfire and force blades. Strung along the valley walls above him were more scorched bones – not the recent battle-dead but the sacrifices the Vulture Clan had made to their gods, chained to the rocks and burned in a ritual that gave this valley its name.

The memories hurt. Ulli the Space Wolf's memory was crammed into the young Ulli Vulturekin's skull, sharing a space too small for it with the youth's terrified, angry, confused mind.

Two of the Wolf Priests approached Ulli, their armoured feet crunching through the bones. Though the youth did not understand their Fenrisian dialect, the Space Wolf did.

'We should take this one back to the Rune Priests,' said one. He had a long and battered face, like a length of driftwood.

'No,' said the other. He had a black beard streaked with grey. Ulli recognised the face of Vortigan Breakbone, a senior Wolf Priest who had often presided over the feasting in the Great Hall. 'This one will never be clean.'

Breakbone levelled a bolt pistol at Ulli's chest.

Cold hands grabbed the back of his neck.

'Rune Priest!' shouted Tanngjost. 'Brother Ulli!'

Ulli was shoved against a chill stone wall. His head bounced against the hard surface. The crystal chamber swam back into view and Vortigan Breakbone's gun barrel was replaced with Tanngjost's face, eyes intense, jaw set.

'I slipped,' gasped Ulli. 'I was weak, just for a moment. Forgive me, brother.'

'Your eyes rolled back and you staggered about. You were speaking a

language I did not know.'

'The corruption here is strong. It can entangle more than machines.' Ulli put a hand to his chest unconsciously.

'What did you see?' asked Tanngjost.

'The past. Do you still have Aesor's trail?'

'Yes. He headed further in. There are many paths ahead but I think I can follow him. I would not do it alone.'

'Then we must move on. The greenskins outside will not wait for me to pull myself together. On, brother, on.'



SIX

The datamedium was the information core for an enormous factory, cramped and folded as if ready to unfurl into a vast foundry. Machinery of brass and stone rose in bewildering configurations, with the only light from trickles of glowing data that wound around their crystal pillars. Ulli could make out a huge brass oculus that might grind open for an army of war machines to march out of, huge turbine blades arranged in a spiral that speared down into the darkness, generators and forges that smelled as if they had lain cold for thousands of years.

Aesor's trail was barely perceptible, but drops of corruption led further into the tangle.

'What will this be when it awakens?' said Tanngjost as he trained Frejya's barrel across the shadows.

'The only ones who know that are those who built it,' replied Ulli. 'If it is a weapon and the greenskin corruption takes this place, we could lose this whole world.'

Ulli's vox chirped. 'They are at the threshold,' came Fejor's voice through a crackling vox-channel. 'I can stand my ground a moment but I must fall back.'

'Damnation,' said Tanngjost. 'They don't waste time.'

'We will be with you soon,' voxed Ulli. 'Faith, brother.'

'Take your time, Rune Priest,' came the reply. 'I can kill awhile at my leisure.'

Tanngjost turned to head back the way they had come, through the data cave and across the bridge.

A shifting darkness darted from nearby and hit Ulli hard in the side, knocking him off his feet. He threw out a hand to brace his fall but he found nothing and

slithered off the edge of an engine block, clattering down through layers of machinery.

Ulli knew Aesor Dragon's Head by the smell of him, tainted now with a metallic impurity something like old blood.

Aesor landed on top of Ulli, hands around Ulli's throat. Ulli caught a glimpse of Aesor's teeth bared, discoloured black, the whites of the pack leader's eyes stained with dark threads like spilt ink. Ulli lifted a knee and levered Aesor off him, throwing him aside.

Ulli took stock of his environment. There was enough room to fight, but obstacles and impediments jutted out from every angle. The two Space Wolves had landed on an assembly line, with jointed brass arms and blocks of stone poised to stamp and press. Underfoot was a conveyor belt of steel segments.

'Brother Aesor, you have taken leave of your reason!' called Ulli. He tried to spot Aesor among the machinery but everything was tangled and confused, his mind ringing, the opaque blanket of corruption lying over his senses. 'I am a Space Wolf, a brother of the Fang, as you are! We have found corruption here and it is your enemy. We can fight it together.'

'Ulli Vulturekin dares speak of corruption?' came the reply. Ulli was only vaguely aware of its direction. 'You were steeped in it! You were born to it!'

Aesor stalked out of the shadows. He had his frost blade drawn, a trickle of blackness running down the kraken-tooth blade. Ulli got his first good look at what had happened to Aesor. The warp-born virus had found purchase in him, latching on to some impurity just as it had tried to latch on to Ulli's memories. Aesor's cheeks and eyes were sunken as if in death. The oily darkness oozed from the corner of his mouth and the joints of his armour. The stink on him was overpowering.

'This is not you,' said Ulli. 'Aesor is in there, fighting to be free. I can exorcise this from you, my brother. I can...'

'They killed you!' roared Aesor.

And though he tried to will it down, the old pain flared in Ulli's chest. The pain of those scars that had never completely healed, where the Wolf Priest's bolt pistol had blasted a burning hole in rib and lung.

They had executed him. They had shot Ulli Vulturekin dead and thrown his body on the back of a pack animal, to be dissected at the Fang so they could understand the debasement of the Vulture Clan.

But he had not been dead. Not quite. And the strength that kept him alive had marked him as strong enough to become a Space Wolf.

‘Speak not of me,’ said Ulli. ‘The warp-virus clouds your mind. Think on yourself. Think on becoming pure. You are imprisoned, but you can be free. Aesor Dragon’s Head is no enemy of the Fang! He is a hero who will tear apart the filth that infects him!’

‘And I suppose,’ replied Aesor, ‘that if I do not, you will put down this diseased runt for the good of all?’

Ulli took out his rune axe. While a bolt pistol could kill with a good shot to the head, the rune axe gave him a better chance of an incapacitating or killing blow – but against a master swordsman like Aesor, it still wasn’t a very good chance. ‘I have my duty,’ he said.

‘You still do not understand, Vulture’s cur,’ said Aesor with a smile. ‘I cannot die.’

Ulli had studied the ways of combat enough to know the lunge was coming. It was a thrust to the upper chest, a killer if it hit true. Aesor’s frost blade lanced up at Ulli through the darkness. Ulli knocked it to the side and Aesor stepped inside his guard, driving a knee up into Ulli’s side to knock him off guard, then hooking Ulli’s left arm and throwing him over his shoulder. Ulli rolled as he hit the steel of the conveyor and Aesor followed with a downward thrust intended to skewer Ulli through the back. Ulli spun on his stomach, kicked Aesor’s front leg out from under him and felt the frost blade shearing off a chunk of his shoulder guard as it missed by a hand’s breadth.

The two were a pace apart again as they sprang to their feet, each shuddering with the tension as they guessed and second-guessed the move the other would make.

‘I will not grow old and crippled like Tanngjost,’ said Aesor, more corruption slithering from his mouth. A tear of it ran down the side of his neck and Ulli realised it must be running from the scar where Aesor’s ear had been. ‘I will not become bitter and unheard. This flesh cannot rot. There is nothing in my future save glory and a glorious death. This is what a Space Wolf is supposed to be.’

‘You have fallen,’ said Ulli. ‘The true Aesor can rise again.’

‘I am perfect,’ came the reply. ‘None can rise any higher.’

Ulli let his psychic sense probe the edges of Aesor’s mind. It was like touching a live electrical wire. Dangerous spurts of pain sought to drive him away as the jealous corruption built its mantle around Aesor’s soul. It was pride that had let it in – a Space Marine’s sin, pride and the anger at that pride being wounded. Aesor had been at his most vulnerable when he had come across the greenskin’s machine-virus, and it had used that moment of weakness to infect him as it had

infected the *Aquila Ferox* and the *Dominus Vult*. As it had so nearly infected Ulli himself.

Aesor made the first strike again, a slashing arc at waist height. Ulli drove the frost blade off with the head of his axe but that was not the real kill-stroke. Aesor spun and brought the blade around in a figure of eight, the edge slicing down at Ulli's shoulder. Ulli ducked to one side and Aesor closed, headbutting him in the bridge of the nose.

Ulli fell back a step. His psychic sense shattered and a thousand flecks of perception flickered in his mind's eye. For a split second, he was insensible.

Ulli brought his free hand up to grab the frost blade he knew, by some hindbrain instinct, was aimed at his chest. He caught the blade as it slid in and felt the cold line of pain across his palm as the edge sliced through the ceramite of his gauntlet.

The blade was turned aside just enough to miss his primary heart and the real target, his spine, which if severed would leave him paralysed. The point nicked his heart and punctured one lung, passing out through the backpack of his armour.

Ulli gasped. The breath opened the wound up more and heat flooded into the void the cold had left, as blood filled the ruptured lung.

'That is for the insult, Ulli Vulturekin,' said Aesor. 'For the glorious death you stole from me. But the Wolf Priests did not take the time to make sure you were dead. And they failed again when you awoke and they let you live. They should have cut your throat and burned your corpse. The task they failed on that day, I will finish on this.'

'Only if you die afterwards,' gasped Ulli. He was still on his feet but the cold numbness was spreading through him where his armour dispensed painkillers into his bloodstream. 'Aesor Dragon's Head will only do to a brother what he will inflict on himself.'

Aesor paused. His hand went to the place where his ear had been.

'No,' he said. 'You are no brother. You are...'

The moment of indecision had been just long enough for Ulli to draw his bolt pistol. Before Aesor could react the barrel was up and Ulli blasted three rounds into Aesor's chest.

Aesor fell back. The breastplate of ceramite, buckled as it was, was more than enough to keep the shot from penetrating flesh and bone. But the impact threw Aesor off balance and the shock would addle even a Space Wolf's senses for several seconds.

Ulli threw himself shoulder-first into the tangle of machinery beside him. His weight snapped robotic arms and sent components pinging in all directions. He forged through, seeking a way off the conveyor and out of Aesor's reach. His upper body was numb and his arm would be slowed – he would be second best against Aesor in hand-to-hand combat at the best of times, but wounded he might as well lie down and die if he stayed to face him. He had to get away, to regroup, and seek out his brothers.

He forced his way through the knife-sharp edges of broken machinery, and felt his footing fall away. He pitched forward into darkness, his armoured body clattering off cogs and pistons as he fell. His head spun and he could not tell up from down until he landed, hard, on the pitted steel surface of a giant cold furnace.

Ulli Vulturekin wanted to lie there and wait for the pain to wash away. But Ulli Iceclaw was more than that witch-boy had been. He was a Space Wolf. Pain meant nothing save for the chance to overcome it. And both Aesor and the greenskins still threatened his brothers. He got to his feet, feeling the wound in his chest flare up with the movement.

Ulli had come to rest a long way down, with the thin light of the datamedium barely reaching his surroundings. His superior vision could just pick out the outlines of the huge cylindrical forge beneath him, its door yawning wide enough to admit a tank, with gigantic steel pipes and cables leading up into blackness.

Ulli willed a fragment of his psychic power into the rune axe he still clutched. The runes on its blade glowed blue-white and cast deep, long shadows around him. He could make out more of his surroundings, including one fuel pipe that led upwards in the direction of the datamedium cave and the chasm. From that direction he could hear muted gunfire and yelling greenskins, as Fejor and Tanngjost fought their battle against the attacking orks. There was no sight or sound of Aesor.

Ulli ran through the patterns of pain across his body. He was battered and bruised from the day's fighting even without the wound Aesor had dealt him. His nose felt broken and he had to breathe through his mouth. The sword wound was deep enough not to hurt in the right way – not sharply, like torn skin and muscle should, but with the dull, cold throb of shock and severed nerves. His stomachs turned with it. Every augmentation and sleep-taught survival instinct fought to keep him functioning as a warrior.

He walked along the pipe, then climbed as it got steeper. He could feel the

humming of Sacred Mountain running through the steel, rising and falling in a long, slow pattern like an immense heartbeat. And in the dark cold smell of stone and steel, he could detect the note of corruption that had come to this place with the *Dominus Vult*, seeping and growing.

Perhaps Sacred Mountain was strong enough, and would expel it like a body expelled sickness. Ulli hoped so. There was majesty to this place, even dormant. He understood, cradled in the mechanical darkness, why the Knightly Houses of Alaric Prime had looked on it with such awe. The first of them to explore Sacred Mountain, hundreds of generations ago, had looked on it and realised they were not yet ready to understand what it held, and ever since had stopped just short of the summit in recognition of something greater than themselves.

Huge stalactites of datamedium hung down, columns of jagged crystal fluttering with millions of lights. Even dormant, Sacred Mountain's machine-spirit was alive, running through billions of calculations every second. Perhaps it knew it was invaded, by greenskins without and the machine-virus within. Ulli clambered onto an adjacent bundle of wires to get a closer look, for the scent of the corruption was stronger here, but with a hint of ash and burned skin.

Fingers of blackness ran down the column, but instead of reaching further down, with every moment they split up and turned into dark blotches, indistinct and fading. Lights gathered there, flaring like distant fireworks, and the tendrils of the virus were turned back or dissolved into nothing.

'You fight back,' said Ulli as he watched. 'The Knights are not strong enough, but you are.'

He could feel the anguish of the virus as it was held back from the deepest cores of Sacred Mountain's data systems. It was a fury and a frustration, skittering at the back of his mind, the sound of a prisoner screaming dulled by the walls of his cell. It was not just a collection of machine-code and warp incantations – it was a living thing, drawn from the warp and mutilated by the greenskin mech until it served as a slave weapon. Ulli could taste the concoction of anger and pain, frustration and hatred, all boiling through every dark tendril.

It had almost got him. It had found a way in, and had it not been for Tanngjost, perhaps it would have taken Ulli's reason as it had Aesor's. The wound in his chest throbbed in response to the thought. He clambered upwards, towards where a glimmer of light punctured the shadows and the sounds of battle grew louder.

Ulli had reached the entrance to the datamedium cavern, leaving a trail of coagulated blood behind him as if he had dropped handfuls of rubies to mark his

path. He hauled himself up onto level ground and leaned against the cave wall. The face of the *Dominus Vult* stared up at him. The fire behind its eyepieces was extinguished. Black rivulets bubbled over the edge of the open cockpit, and liquid corruption had almost immersed the scorched body welded inside.

‘Fejor, Tanngjost,’ said Ulli into the vox, aware that his voice was croaking and weak. ‘Report, my brothers.’

‘They attack!’ came Tanngjost’s voice in reply. ‘Wave after wave! We have fallen back to the chasm. I thought you lost, Rune Priest, but we could use your axe with us!’

Ulli hurried through the cavern and across the bridge. At the far side, gunfire hammered and echoed across the mountain’s interior. He could make out the distinct cough of Fejor’s suppressed bolter rounds, and the chatter of Frejya fired at full-auto. And he knew well the sound of bolter shells hitting greenskin bodies.

Across the bridge, Fejor and Tanngjost had drawn wreckage of ruined ork bikes and fallen debris into a barricade. Both Space Wolves crouched there now, reloading their weapons between waves of orks. The corridor ahead of them, leading back up to the mountainside entrance, was so choked with ork bodies the floor was completely hidden and they lay three deep against the walls.

‘Brother Ulli!’ cried Tanngjost as Ulli approached. ‘Alas, you have missed the first of the killing. But there will be more than enough to make up for it. The greenskin must honour us greatly to give us so many targets for our firing range!’ His face fell. ‘You are wounded.’

‘You are not parade-ground-ready yourself,’ replied Ulli. Both Tanngjost and Fejor were covered in ork blood, and their armour was dented and scored from a dozen close calls. Their faces were bloody, some of it their own. ‘I have two working hands, both with trigger fingers. I can fight.’

‘It is your mind we need as much as your hands,’ replied Tanngjost.

‘What of the Pack Leader?’ asked Ulli. ‘He has lost his mind. He dealt me this blow and I could not pursue him.’

‘He vaulted our barricade and ran on,’ said Tanngjost. ‘There was darkness on him, and not just the corruption. What has happened to him?’

‘The same that happened to the *Dominus Vult* and the *Aquila Ferox*. It almost happened to me, brother.’

‘I always thought,’ said Fejor, ‘that if one of us was to fall, it would be me. No right mind takes such pleasure in killing as mine. Of all of our pack, it was Aesor I would have trusted to stay righteous, and to be the one to put me down when I

fell.’ He broke a smile, the first time Ulli had seen him do it, and a very different man showed through for a moment. ‘But I do not think I have long to wait before the greenskin does that job for him.’

‘If Aesor brings this disease back to the Chapter,’ said Ulli, ‘we could lose much more than Alaric Prime.’

Greenskin war-cries echoed down from the mountainside, rising and falling rhythmically. Steel clashed on steel. Engines revved.

‘They’re coming again,’ said Tanngjost. He checked the load in his weapon. ‘Frejya is thirsty,’ he said. ‘We are running low on ammunition. This one will be settled with teeth and knives.’ He drew his pair of combat knives and held them out to Ulli. ‘My two little girls,’ he said. ‘When their mother tires of the fight, they will finish it.’

Ulli let the old runes form in his mind. A Fenrisian prince, a famed hunter and horseman, had been buried in a tomb inscribed with sigils of swiftness, prescience of combat, and the knowledge to strike once and for the kill. These runes appeared on the blade of one knife and glowed deep red. The other received the symbols of spite and revenge, for they came from the monument to a queen of Fenris who, in ages past, had been quick to anger and to seek vengeance, and whose rule lasted a hundred years as a result.

Tanngjost’s old face, with old spiral scars and fresh battle-wounds, was lit up by the light of the runes. They glittered in his eyes. ‘Just what they needed,’ he said.

Fejor rarely fought with his chainsword, always killing at long range when he had the option. But he had only a few stalker shells left, and so he handed his chainsword to Ulli for rune-striking. It was a compact marque, used on boarding missions and other occasions where close confines made a longer weapon a liability. It resembled a workman’s tool more than a Space Marine’s weapon of choice. Ulli gave it runes of raw power and strength, steadfastness and the ignorance of weakness, taken from the great necropolis of Fenrisian fortress-builders.

The roaring of engines signalled the approach of the greenskins. The din grew louder and mingled with the screaming of the orks, whipped up into a killing frenzy.

A single ork was a stupid and ill-disciplined creature. But orks, a tribe or army of them, when directed by one with willpower and cunning became a green tide that no defence could stand against. That was how they fought, wave after relentless wave of them, brutality incarnate. That was how their leader intended

to grind down the last Space Wolves who stood against him on Sacred Mountain.

They did not care how many of their own they lost. There were always more orks.

The orks must have fought among themselves for the right to be the first in this wave. The winner was a scarred veteran, its lower jaw replaced with a slab of jagged metal, clinging to the handlebars of the smoke-belching bike beneath it. It had a massive industrial claw clamped over its left arm and waved it like a banner as it hurtled towards the barricade.

Two of Fejor's last few stalker shells knocked the greenskin off its bike, sending it somersaulting backwards off the saddle. The bike careened off the wall and skidded on its side into the barricade, throwing wreckage everywhere. The bike screeched past Ulli in a spray of sparks. A dozen orks charged in the biker's wake, wielding cleavers and hammers. Ulli blasted at them, unable to miss the wall of green flesh with a volley of bolter shots. They fell and tumbled, but more followed, yelping with joy that they were the new front line.

Tanngjost jumped up onto the remains of the barricade. 'My blades are far too sharp!' he yelled. 'Which of you will help dull their edge?'

And then the orks were on them. A howling press of bodies, of cleavers rising and falling, of teeth and claws raking at power armour. Ulli lashed out with his axe, feeling the shudder up his arm as a head came free of its shoulders. His backstroke cut through an arm.

Ulli had always been apart from his fellow Space Wolves. He was a Rune Priest, and they all held their own counsel, but even among them Ulli was the one who had been marked for extermination and had survived. It was the word of Ulrik the Slayer, the most respected Wolf Priest in the Chapter, that had saved him from being clubbed to death and thrown into the Fang's incinerator. Though none of them spoke it out loud, many in the Chapter thought Ulrik had taken too great a risk and should have completed Ulli's execution himself. And so Ulli had never been close to the heart of his Chapter, never the foremost reveller at the feasting, never held up as the image of a Space Wolf.

But he was still a Space Wolf, and deep within there was the spark of Leman Russ's own fury that Ulli could not deny. It rarely came to the surface but it was there, scratching at the back of Ulli's mind. It was the savage-born warrior, the berserker, the sheer joy of battle that had driven the Primarch to so many victories. It was at odds with the studious mind of the Rune Priest, and so Ulli had caged it, but it had never left him. And in the scrum of greenskin fury, he set it free.

He let the joy of battle kindle inside him as he brought his axe down on the head of the ork that lunged at him, splitting its skull down to the jawbone. It caught fire as he rammed his bolter into the mouth of another ork and blew out its throat. By the time two greenskins leapt onto him and tried to pin him to the ground, he was aflame with it.

Ulli howled with joy. It overcame the pain of the wound running through him. He reared up to his full height, throwing off the orks, letting his bolter fall on its strap and catching one by the neck. He dashed the ork's brains out against the engine block of the fallen bike beside him. Hot blood splattered over his face and he revelled in the feeling like the most vicious Blood Claw, letting himself forget the iron discipline of his calling and allowing the rage of a Fenrisian son to boil over.

Another ork fell to an elbow shattering the side of its face and the rune axe's blade carving up through its sternum. Ulli kicked down on another and stamped on its chest, grabbing the grip of his bolter and hammering three shots into it point blank.

Blood was thick and sticky underfoot. It misted in the air and ran down Ulli's face. It pooled in his eyes and he saw through it as if through a pane of red glass. In the back of his mind a wolf howled, exulting in the freedom it finally had to drive Ulli's fist and blade into the body of any ork that got within arm's length.

Through the melee, he glimpsed Tanngjost's twin blades puncturing torsos and eye sockets. He could hear, amid the orkish bellowing and snapping bones, the screeching of Fejor's chainblade against bone. But they felt far away, the combatants in three battles separated by an ocean of greenskin flesh. Ulli's battle was a cauldron of fury and blood, seething with broken bodies falling away from his axe.

The symbols on the blade glowed deep red now, drinking the fury in the air without Ulli having to will it. The weapon hungered in the hand of the wolf, coming alive with every spray of blood across its runes. Ulli rode the wave of it, and let the axe swing as if it were leading his hand and not the other way around.

He shouldered an ork against the fallen bike, and gloried in the breaking of its ribs. He kneed another in the jaw and whooped with joy as its fangs were driven up into the base of its brain.

The tide hammered home, body after body, corpse after corpse. Ulli lost sight of his packmates in the throng. There was nothing but the stink of torn bodies and the din of dying greenskins.

Ulli felt space open around him. He drew in a panting breath. His body finally

told him how far he had pushed it. His throat was bubbling with blood from his torn lung, and the fires of pain ran up and down the channel punched through his chest. Every joint was wrenched and every muscle was pulled. The pain combined into a red veil that hung over his body, dulled by his augmentations and painkillers, heavy as stone.

The greenskins had stopped pressing forward. Their dead were waist-high around Ulli, and bodies tumbled off one another as he kicked himself free of them. He was slick with blood from head to toe.

The barricade and the wreck of the first ork's bike were buried in bodies. Blood was sprayed up the walls and dripped from the ceiling. Ulli looked around to see the passageway choked with greenskin corpses in both directions. A few groans and dying whimpers came from the bodies.

He could not see his battle-brothers. He called out their names, and his own voice was dull in his ears. There was no reply.

Ulli hauled greenskin bodies away, digging in the places he had seen his fellow Space Wolves last. He spotted a chainblade sticking up from the mass and hauled corpses aside to reveal Fejor Redblade, lying face down. Ulli turned him over and saw his breastplate had been carved open by an orkish cleaver or power claw, and the red ruin within had been torn by teeth and claws. Fejor's jaw was still clenched and set, for he had died denying the pain, fighting on without showing the enemy they had hurt him. His eyes were open. Ulli lifted Fejor off the ground and propped the body against the wall.

A sudden desperation seized Ulli. He dived into the bodies where Tanngjost had fought, where they were piled high and sliced apart by his twin blades. The wounds on the orkish bodies were still smouldering with the power of the runes Ulli had etched on Tanngjost's knives. Ulli's body complained as he dug in a frenzy, like a starving animal clawing through frozen earth.

Ulli's hand closed on ceramite – a gauntlet. He grabbed and pulled, and Tanngjost's body came free, heaved up through the broken limbs and sundered bodies. It was slick and dripping with ork blood.

Unlike Fejor, Tanngjost had died with his fury written across his face. His lips were drawn back, showing the elongated canines grown by every ageing Space Wolf. It could have been any one of a score of wounds that had finally killed him – cleaver wounds into his chest, one leg shattered and bent unnaturally, a deep cut to his scalp, punctures through his back and abdomen. Dried blood beaded, jewel-like, where he had bled and fought on.

Ulli held Tanngjost's body and shuddered. All the pain caught up to him at

once. The red veil dissolved into a million points of pain spreading through his body, pooling in his joints and the wound in his chest, sparking through the back of his mind. For a moment it was overwhelming and Ulli felt he would pitch over into the mass of bodies, his augmented organs finally failing and his mind shutting down, and that he would die alongside his brothers there in Sacred Mountain.

But the Fenrisian cold would not melt away. It demanded Ulli rise and stay alive, just as it had done during his Bleeding, just as when his heart had refused to stop beating when he was executed with the rest of the Vulture Tribe. Ulli did not die but threw back his head and howled, and the sound echoed down to the heart of Sacred Mountain and back again.

The sound of mourning scoured away the red veil. When Ulli opened his eyes the pain was gone, replaced with a deep chill that filled him. His skin prickled with sensitivity and his throat was raw with the cold air.

He laid Tanngjost Seven Fingers alongside Fejor Redblade. The gene-seed organs of both Space Wolves were still intact. Ulli let himself take solace in that. Whatever happened, the flesh of Russ would be taken from their throats and implanted into a new Space Wolf. Their spirits would never truly die.

The orks had stopped. Though the three Space Wolves had killed many indeed, it was just a fraction of the army that had remained after the avalanche. But they had stopped, and it was not at all like the greenskin to hold off in their assault when an enemy still lived. They should still be pouring in to defile the bodies of the Space Wolves, and charge on into Sacred Mountain to loot and destroy.

The dullness of Ulli's senses was gone, and his ears pricked when he heard a familiar sound. It was the roar of engines, the engines of a Stormwolf gunship that could carry a squad of Space Wolves into the heart of battle.

He heard bolter fire and the howling of Fenrisian wolves loosed at the prey. He heard a hunting horn sounded.

Ulli clambered free of the bodies and ran for the entrance to Sacred Mountain. The air was heavy with the stench of newly shed blood, and the rankness of greenskin flesh. The floor was slick with blood and frost. The bodies ran right up to the entrance where Fejor and Tanngjost had begun the fight before falling back. Framed against the stark blue sky, Ulli saw another drop pod falling towards the mountain slope, in the grey livery of the Space Wolves, with its landing jets firing.

The pod bore the markings of Ragnar Blackmane, the Wolf Lord of his Great Company. Reinforcements from below had arrived, in force, eager for revenge.

Ulli reached the entrance, and below him unfolded the whole scene.

The Space Wolves had landed scattered around the lower slopes, their drop pods deployed from a modified Thunderhawk gunship that circled above. They were fighting as they unbuckled their grav-harnesses and leapt from the pods. Grey Hunters formed firing lines mowing down the orks that had broken off their attack on the mountain to storm down the slopes towards the new threat. Blood Claws, with bright red and yellow markings on their armour, shrieked battle-cries and ran with chainswords drawn at the closest orks. A Dreadnought stomped free of its clamps and levelled its assault cannon at the greenskins.

Ulli spotted Lord Ragnar Blackmane himself leaping free of his grav-restraints and drawing his frost blade, which flashed like a bolt of lightning. Blackmane was accompanied by Ulrik, the eldest of the Wolf Priests, his face hidden by his wolf's skull helm, and a squad of Wolf Guard in Terminator armour hung with trophies and honours. Ulli's heart should have leapt to see his Wolf Lord come to bring destruction to the greenskins, but the deaths of his battle-brothers were too raw in his mind to let in any joy.

He heard a familiar howl, one that echoed around the peak even above the gunfire and war-cries from below. On the promontory stood Aesor Dragon's Head, his own frost blade raised, not in salute to Blackmane but in challenge. In the greenskin throng Ulli saw the ork leader stop in its charge forward and return the challenge, raising its cleaver high and bellowing a wordless response.

Aesor wanted his duel with the greenskin. He would die here fighting it, or defeat it and live on forever sustained by the corruption inside him. He could not lose.

Ulli knew the path the future would take if Aesor won. The Space Wolves would run to him and embrace him as a victorious brother, and they would all be exposed to that corruption – all those sons of Fenris who did not have the protection of a Rune Priest's psychic discipline. How many would fall to the corruption entering their minds through their greatest flaw? It would return to the Chapter, that corruption, perhaps to the Fang itself. And if the greenskin won the duel it would continue its campaign on Alaric Prime, escape the mountainside in the confusion of battle and take its machine-curse to the Imperial Knights fighting below.

Whoever won that duel, the Space Wolves and this world would suffer for it. Both Aesor and the greenskin had to lose.

They both had to die.

Ulli could not fight them himself. He was a poor opponent for Aesor or the ork

at the best of times and now he was exhausted and wounded. His fellow Space Wolves were too far away to intervene, and even if they could, would they kill Aesor before they were exposed? Ulli had seen what Aesor had become. Blackmane and the rest of the Great Company had not. No Space Wolf would stay his hand when the kill was necessary – except if the kill were of one of his own. Even Ragnar Blackmane might hesitate.

Ulli had to do it himself, and this time his rune axe would not help him. He leaned against the rock, almost robbed of all his strength by the weight of what he had to do.

The ork bounded up to the promontory and bellowed a war-cry. Aesor howled in reply. The ork vaulted onto the rocky spur and slashed at Aesor, who parried and stepped aside. The duel had begun. There was no more time.

Ulli drew in a breath of the cold mountain air, felt it run like freezing water through his ruined lungs, and ran back into Sacred Mountain.



SEVEN

The datamedium cavern had escaped the bloodshed. The orks had not got that far before Blackmane's assault drew them away. The *Dominus Vult* still lay in its pooling blackness. The charred eye sockets of the dead baron watched Ulli as he limped into the chamber. The sounds of battle were little more here than a dull crackle of distant gunfire.

Ulli knelt on the floor and laid his axe beside him. He tried to divine some reaction to his presence, some flicker of recognition against his psychic sense.

'You tried to take my soul,' he said quietly. 'You were nearly successful. That was when you found your way into my mind with perfidy and deceit. Now, I bid you enter.'

He felt nothing. A drop of blackness, like glistening tar, dripped from the Imperial Knight's faceplate onto the crystal floor.

'My brother saved me,' continued Ulli. 'But he lies dead and I am alone. We both know you can break me. And we both know you cannot turn down a mind like this to ravage. An Imperial psyker, a Rune Priest of Fenris. How many of your kind ever claim a trophy like me?'

There was a response to that. A low whisper, a laugh or a curse, not a sound but a rumbling at the base of Ulli's skull.

If the machine-curse reached the Chapter, it would enter their minds through their pride – through the sin of every Space Marine. And it was also the sin of the daemon.

The chamber began to melt away. Darkness ran down the walls. The floor shifted under Ulli, deepening into the trash-choked base of a deep ravine. Skulls

and long-withered bodies lay in the detritus and Ulli caught the familiar scent of carrion and smoke.

Sacred Mountain was gone, and Ulli was somewhere else.

There was a memory that Ulli kept locked away, using the mental techniques the Rune Priests had taught him. He had not forgotten it entirely, for it was much too important a part of him to abandon. But it was dangerous, and so he had placed it behind a barrier of mental steel, shut away as the keeper of a library might shut away a blasphemous work too valuable to burn.

It was a memory that at all times would create the heresy of doubt in Ulli's mind, except in those rarest cases when it would give him strength. Knowing the difference was a discipline he had learned in long sessions of meditation and sleep-doctrination, before the vigil of the Rune Priests who trained him.

The memory was one of the cold slab against his back, and the heat of the incinerator nearby. The sound of cracking bones and spitting fat in the flames. The sight, blurry and painful, of a stone ceiling above him, flickering orange.

He heard breathing beside him as the thrall, muscular and tanned deep bronze on his shirtless back, hauled another of the Vulture Clan dead into the incinerator.

Ulli had forced his eyes open all the way, and drawn in a weak, ragged breath in spite of the pain in his side. Bolter shell fragments, he would later learn, had lodged in his chest cavity and would need weeks of surgery to remove.

'Stop,' said a voice, deep and commanding. The thrall, one of the thousands who worked maintaining the Fang under the command of the Wolf Lords, halted and looked around uncertainly. 'My lord?' he asked.

'This one lives,' said the other voice. Ulli forced his head around and saw two Wolf Priests overseeing the disposal of the Vulture Clan bodies. One was the same who had shot him at the Valley of the Burning Stones, whose name he would later learn to be Vortigan Breakbone. The second wore a suit of polished black power armour with a wolf's-skull helm, the pale bone grinning down at Ulli as the second Wolf Priest regarded him.

Then, this Wolf Priest had been a vision from a nightmare, an otherworldly power sent to judge the dead. Now Ulli knew him to be Ulrik the Slayer, the most senior Wolf Priest of his generation.

'Damnation,' spat Vortigan. 'This one's stubborn. Be warned, Brother Ulrik, he's a witch-child.' Vortigan drew his combat knife, as long as a sword, but a dagger in his hand.

Ulli Vulturekin had not fully understood their words, but he knew well enough their meaning. He also knew that it was no use reasoning with the man who had killed him once already.

He turned to the wolf-skull helm and forced himself to meet its eyes. Lenses of red were set into its sockets, reflecting the furnace fire. ‘Stop,’ Ulli gasped, hoping this Wolf Priest would understand enough of his tribe’s dialect. ‘You do not know what I can do.’

‘Then tell me,’ replied the wolf’s skull in a version of Fenrisian that Ulli Vulturekin could just understand. ‘But be quick. My brother here has made up his mind about killing you, and I cannot stay him for long.’

Ulli swallowed, a painful movement that reminded him how severe the wounds inside must be. And then he told Ulrik the Slayer just what Ulli Vulturekin was.

Ulli held on to the memory as the new world formed around him. This time it was not taken to a place from his own mind. He was here on the machine-curse’s terms, and it had laid out for him a vision of Hel such as the fieriest Imperial preachers would fear to conjure up.

Crevasses brimming with corpses criss-crossed the blasted landscape, reaching to the foot of the wall that bounded a massive dark city. The bodies writhed and pulsed with decay, bursting like pustules in eruptions of bile and filth, and they screamed in the drizzle of corrosive sludge that fell from a purple-black sky. Faces melted away. Hands reached out, were stripped to bone, and dissolved to nothing.

The city’s towers and cathedrals were vast organs, heaving out over the edge of their confinement like rolls of corpulent belly. Lengths of entrails slithered into the seething death, fanged mouths sucking up the decaying gore. Banners showing the symbols of the carrion insect and the gouged eye hung from the highest spurs of bone, where flocks of enormously bloated flies hung like dark clouds.

Daemons leapt and cackled on the edges of the crevasses, dragging corpses out with hooked spears and throwing them onto the stones like landed fish to be gutted, cut up, and thrown back in. Some choice heads and organs were carried to lords of their kind who sat on palanquins, snatching up the finest and gulping them down. A few were taken by messenger-daemons to the gates of the city, to be passed on for the delectation of its rulers. Each daemon was a vision of decay, a corpse bloated and rotting but animated with a gleeful purpose, and each had a

single yellow eye that bled malicious light.

‘This is where you bring me?’ called out Ulli, knowing the corruption could hear him. ‘A world of daemons and decay? I am a Space Marine and a son of Fenris! I know no fear! And I saw worse than this before I left my crib. Do you seek to challenge me or to make me laugh?’

A tide rose through the rotting bodies and they swelled up into the air in a foetid column of flesh. A face formed in the mass, noseless, with three pits for eyes over a wide frog-like mouth. The whole thing was enormous, the size of a tall building.

‘You lie, Ulli Vulturekin,’ it said, though the voice was not truly sound but something conjured in Ulli’s mind. ‘You despair to know your mind will be lost in a place like this.’

‘Not as much,’ retorted Ulli, ‘as I would despair to be a greenskin slave!’

The face creased with rage. The world the corruption had created flickered and shifted, as if in its anger it lost its concentration for a moment.

‘What did it have to offer to bind you into service, daemon?’ yelled Ulli. ‘A million dead? A billion? A world for you to defile? And was it enough to make you kneel before the beast?’

The daemon’s rage rained down as scalding blood. Its eye pits caught fire, flames consuming liquefying flesh. A Space Marine had pride, but the daemon – and the machine-curse was most definitely a daemon in information form – had rage. That was another of its sins, and it was inflamed by Ulli speaking of how the greenskin must have summoned it forth and bound it into service.

The world melted around Ulli. The sky ran down the horizon like wet paint. The walls sagged under their own weight, spilling the rancid offal of the city out onto the plain. Ulli planted his feet and willed stability around him, so he stood as an island in a churning sea.

The mass of corpses fell apart. Limbs rained down and vanished, drops of corruption in the swirl of bile that now made up the world. The noxious mass churned around Ulli and he dropped to one knee, driving the butt of his axe into the ground to steady himself.

‘Now,’ said Ulli through a grimace of concentration, ‘I will show you a place of my own.’

In his mind’s eye he created it, and around him it took shape. It was a place from his youth, the substance of another toxic memory he kept locked away even more closely than the first time he spoke with Ulrik the Slayer. A cave in the Valley of the Burning Stones, cut of sharp obsidian deep into the valley wall,

stifling and hot. The heat came from the fire in the centre of the room, guttering with blackened bones.

Ulli had been here as a youth. He remembered most the smell of it – even before the enhancement of his senses the stench of the burning offerings had been dizzyingly intense. Ulli was kneeling in the cave just as he had been when the elders of the Vulture Clan had hauled him in there and gripped his shoulders to hold him still.

The elders were there now, shadowy figures half remembered. In the flames leaped a darkness – the darkness they had called forth with the ancient sorceries of his tribe. Even then, ignorant and afraid, Ulli had known the blasphemy of that sight, the long, spindly limbs forming from the air, the many eyes winking white in its substance, the spread of ragged wings behind it filling the cavern.

‘They brought me here,’ said Ulli, still tense with concentration. The memory was delicate and the machine-curse daemon was strong, and he could not let it unravel around him. ‘They conjured it forth. The Spirit of the Burning Stones. One of your own kind. The daemon that enslaved the Vulture Tribe.’

Ulli stared into the eyes of the daemon forming in the fire. Drops of blackness spat and hissed in the fire. Trapped there in his memory was the machine-curse daemon, pinned in place by the force of Ulli’s mind. Ulli had trained for this, for endless hours in the scriptoria and breaking halls of the Fang.

‘No trick can stay me,’ spat the daemon. ‘This is my world, this place inside your head. I cannot be deceived, I who am deceit! I cannot be destroyed, I who am destruction!’

‘Every one of my people was given to the Spirit of the Burning Stones,’ continued Ulli. ‘Brought here and possessed by it, then spat back out again with their minds in ruins. But not me. I resisted it. I looked it in the eye and I cast it out of me. I was the strongest witch-child they had ever borne, and the Spirit could not take me.’ Ulli stood, his head reaching the ceiling of the cavern that had seemed so huge in his youth. ‘And they feared me! I was marked for death when the Wolf Priests came for them! Do you understand now what I can do, daemon? I can crush your kind with the power of my soul, and you are trapped in here with me! Do you despair? Do you know fear?’

‘Blasphemer!’ spat the daemon back at him. It writhed in the flame, trying to break free. Ulli felt it struggling in the back of his head, pounding the inside of his skull. ‘Wretch! Filth! The gods of the warp will tear–’

‘I am the god of this place!’ yelled Ulli, ‘You are the broken slave of a greenskin beast! And I command you to burn!’

The flames leapt up. The chamber was full of fire. The obsidian walls and the Vulture Clan elders bled away and all that remained was the flame, raging white and blue-hot.

The daemon screamed. The sound filled Ulli's skull. It lost any shape, and with it any resemblance to the daemon Ulli Vulturekin had defied beneath the Valley of the Burning Stones. The machine-curse daemon broke apart into the information of which it was composed. Scraps of cogitator code fluttered in the fire like burning insects.

Ulli took the whole world inside him, encompassed in the obsidian cavern, and crunched it into a single diamond-hard point of knowledge. In there was contained the daemon, compressed into white-hot agony. Aside from that there was a void inside him, a pure and endless space where the daemon would find no purchase.

Ulli let his senses reel out. He had the scent of his prey already and it did not take him long to follow the trail up out of Sacred Mountain and onto the slope. He followed the stink of the corruption, the sweat and chainblade oil of a Space Wolf – Aesor Dragon's Head, still fighting his duel with the greenskin lord.

And Ulli could sense the greenskin itself, the reeking hulk of alien muscle, its machinery belching thick smoke. Ulli perceived the burning red anger of the ork's mind and held on to it, drawing his consciousness closer, willing the connection to become stronger.

Ulli took the prison in which he had trapped the daemon, clutching it in a psychic fist. He drew it back and willed all the strength of his arm into that mental grip.

The strength Ulli called upon was what had caused Ulrik to spare his life. It was the same quality that had denied his possession by the Spirit of the Burning Stones – the raw strength that pooled in Ulli's mind, a reservoir of power that he so rarely had the chance to tap. Most uses would destroy him, burning out his brain or tearing a hole through to the warp. But now, with the daemon in his grasp, he could use every drop of it.

Ulli rammed the daemon into the ork's mind. The daemon poured screaming into the ork, clashing with the furnace of hatred within the alien. The daemon took on its shape as the machine-curse and, without room in the ork's skull, it was forced into the only place it could go: the machinery built into the ork's body, the generators and weaponry grafted onto its spine and the back of its ribcage.

Ulli did not see what happened, but he felt it. He felt the daemon, uncaged and

furious, course through the ork's half-mechanical body. He felt the ork's body prised apart by the force of it, the bones splintering, the organs pulping, skin and muscle tearing. Ulli could feel its pain and he felt in himself that savage joy of battle again, that spark of hot Fenrisian fury.



EPILOGUE

Ulli heard later what happened outside on the mountain slope. The other Space Wolves battling there witnessed Aesor Dragon's Head duck a swipe of the greenskin's cleaver and charge shoulder-first into the alien's midriff. The ork wrapped its massive arms around Aesor and the two wrestled, Aesor forcing its jaw open with one hand while the ork tried to crush the ceramite of Aesor's damaged armour. None of those watching could guess who would win, and struggling with the mass of greenskins further down the slope there was nothing even Wolf Lord Blackmane could do to intervene.

The machinery built in to the greenskin's body glowed deep red, and the sizzling of its flesh added to the smoke. The ork howled, a terrible sound that shook the mountain's peak, and flames licked from its body. Black corruption spurted from the joints of the machinery, spattering foulness across the icy rocks.

Aesor fought back, but the death grip was around him. The ork didn't have Aesor's skill as a master swordsman, but it was stronger than any Space Marine. Aesor couldn't break out of the hold and as the flames grew they caught on his hair and the wolf's-tail talismans hanging from his armour.

Then, with a sound like thunder breaking around the peak, the ork's body exploded. The greenskin and Aesor Dragon's Head vanished in a burst of flame and debris, and burning darkness that cast across the snow like a rain of black blood.

The greenskin horde bellowed in rage and grief to see their lord, who to them must have seemed invincible, destroyed in an instant. The Space Wolves echoed the sound as they howled in anger to see the death of the young and noble Aesor

Dragon's Head.

It was the Space Wolves who used that anger the best. Ragnar Blackmane, who was fighting alongside the Dreadnought Karulf the Wized, vaulted up onto the shoulder of the war machine and howled out his fury. The Space Wolves took up the call and leapt into the orks with renewed anger, vengeance adding strength to their arms. The orks were shocked and shattered, and fell back in ill-ordered mobs as Blackmane dived from Karulf's shoulder into the thick of them.

It was a few moments later that Ulli, exhausted, stumbled from the entrance to Sacred Mountain. He saw the blackened circle where Aesor and the greenskin had fought, and smelled the last wisps of the machine-curse daemon dissipating on the mountain wind. Ahead of him, down the slopes, the orks were in rout, fleeing from the Space Wolves and being chased down by the Blood Claws. Ulli held his axe out in front of him and used the last reserves of power inside him to will onto its blade the runes of hatred and rage, the purity of war, revenge and contempt.

The sun by then was low on the horizon, and the rocks around the peak cast long shadows. The burning runes made a pool of light around Ulli as he took up the hunter's howl. He let himself forget what he had done there on Sacred Mountain, the things he had seen, the memories he had dredged up, and replaced them with the hatred of the greenskin and everything it represented.

Ulli ran down the slope at the orks. His mind was full of nothing but the desire to destroy them. The Fenrisian joy of battle was all that mattered now, and it was with a great relief that he felt nothing else as he plunged into the fray.

An hour after the sun had set, the last ork was hunted down around the mountain peak and despatched by a Blood Claw's chainsword. Ulli heard the sound of it dying as he cleaned the blood off his axe in the snow heaped up by one of the Stormwolf gunships. Ulli took a handful of the snow and rubbed it across his face to wash the worst of the ork blood out of his eyes. It was thick and gelid in his hair, smeared across his armour, and its taste was like a mouthful of metal.

A shadow approached, cast by the moon hanging high in the clear sky. Wolf Lord Blackmane approached. He was no older than Ulli, for Ragnar Blackmane's rise to Wolf Lord had been faster than any in memory and the men of Fenris called him the Young King. His face was tanned and noble, the hair pulled back in a topknot of braids, and in spite of his youth his canines were already as prominent as those of a Long Fang.

'Brother Ulli Iceclaw,' said Ragnar. 'You fought well today. Before we reached

you, and afterwards. The Knights of Alaric Prime and your brothers alike owe you much.'

'What victories we won here were not without their price,' replied Ulli. He scraped a goblet of blood from his eye with his thumb. 'I cannot take solace in a battle well fought when of my brothers who came to this mountain, only I lived. I do not know whether to rejoice that I live, or mourn those who did not.'

'There will be a place for both,' said Lord Blackmane.

'How did you find us?' asked Ulli.

'I am not the one to answer that,' replied Blackmane. He pointed to a band of Blood Claws returning from the hunt. 'Brother! Come forth.'

A familiar figure walked out of the Blood Claws – this one was not a Blood Claw, but wore the pack markings of a Grey Hunter, with the eagle's wings badge of the sky hunter on one knee guard.

'Sigrund!' cried Ulli, and jumped to his feet to embrace the pilot of the *Skjaldi's Lament*. 'I thought you lost, my brother. I thought I saw you die.'

'Indeed you did,' said Sigrund. 'But the *Lament* did not let death take me all the way. She lodged in a crevasse halfway down. Her vox-booster still worked and the last thing she did before she died was tell Lord Blackmane here that my brothers needed help.' Sigrund had a broad face, always smiling, and hair shorn close to allow for the cranial jacks with which he interfaced with the controls of his gunship. His face fell a little as he looked up towards the peak. 'Did they die well?' he asked.

'They did,' said Ulli.

'And is what they say true of Aesor? I did not see it myself, but you were closer.'

'What do they say?' asked Ulli.

'That he died that glorious death we always fated for him.'

Ulli's eyes passed across the battlefield strewn with ork bodies, the dense drift of snow at the bottom of the slope where hundreds more were buried by the avalanche. It passed across Lord Blackmane – and behind him, watching from a distance, the black armour and skull-helm of Ulrik the Slayer.

'It is true,' he said. 'The greenskin had harried us all the way up the mountain and slain Saehrimnar and Starkad, but in Aesor it met a foe it could not beat, and it knew it. It must have overloaded the machinery grafted to its body to destroy the both of them. An act of spite from the alien, but an act that proved Aesor was a greater warrior than any ork.'

'Then that is what will be inscribed upon his cairn!' said Blackmane, turning

to the Blood Claws. ‘And sung of in the Great Hall when we come to tell the tale of Aesor Dragon’s Head! He struck fear into the alien too brutal to know fear!’

The Blood Claws cheered at his words, one brandishing the greenskin head he had taken as a trophy of the hunt. They were the last party to return – the force was embarking onto the gunships that had swept in as the second wave, to carry them back down the mountain to the lower slopes where the battle for Alaric Prime was being fought.

Ulli finished wiping the worst of the blood off his axe. The runes on it had grown dim now, but once he joined the main force below, they would have to glow bright again.

It would be good to fight down there. It would be good to let himself forget.

The battle lines had stayed fluid throughout the day. The orks had launched berserk charges from the landing sites of their crude landing craft, each time met by a counterattack from the squadrons of Imperial Knights who charged under the banners of Alaric Prime’s great houses. The Space Wolves had struck hard and fast into the flanks of the orks, deployed by gunship and drop pod and whisked away when the harvest of dead greenskins was reaped. But there were more orks with new landing sites established by the hour, and whole tribes were gathering ready to charge towards the Imperial lines. They were testing the Knights and the Space Wolves, spending greenskin lives to see the war machines in battle. The real fight for Alaric Prime would come later, after these opening moves had yielded no victor. The real battle would be close and vicious, a fight at which both greenskin and Space Wolf excelled.

The battle lines shifted as Blackmane watched through the port of the gunship. A wedge of orks, led by salvaged Imperial tanks and orkish war machines, was grinding across the battlefield in a pall of filthy smoke. Facing them was a phalanx of Imperial Knights, holding their ground in close order as they waited for the command to charge.

Watching the battle beside Ragnar was Ulrik the Slayer, wearing his wolf’s-skull helm as he always did. It was his mark as a Wolf Priest, the barrier between him and the rest of his Chapter, a symbol of how he must remain apart from them as the Rune Priests did, for it was his duty to judge them.

‘I had heard that Ulli Iceclaw was ill-starred,’ said Ragnar Blackmane as he watched the battle unfolding. ‘I do not listen to such rumours. They are foul and base things, not becoming of battle-brothers. But I am glad they will be dispelled now, when the rest of the Chapter learns of what he did on Sacred Mountain

today.'

'It was always his burden,' replied Ulrik. He carried the only part of Aesor Dragon's Head the Space Wolves had recovered from the battlefield – the hilt of his shattered frost blade, the fat uncut emerald gleaming in the centre. 'And he was the only one who could throw it off.'

'Would that Aesor had lived also,' said Blackmane. 'There was no limit to how high he could have risen. He could have succeeded any one of the Wolf Lords, save perhaps Grimnar. But even the Old Wolf will not last forever, and it is men like Aesor who will vie for his post when he is gone. We have lost more than a Space Wolf in him, keen though we feel that loss. We have lost the hero of the Imperium he could have become.'

'He will serve on as an example of his heroism,' said Ulrik. 'Even in death, a Space Wolf fights on.'

'To think that Ulli alone should survive of all that pack,' continued Blackmane. 'I was certain that if any one of them were to return to us, it would be Aesor.'

The gemstone set into the broken frost blade's hilt appeared cracked. On closer inspection, however, it was riddled with dark threads, slowly squirming their way through the emerald. On the hilt, the black marks where Aesor's fingers had gripped the sword looked like scorches inflicted when the ork detonated itself – but they, too, were liquid darkness, as if something had left a stain of living corruption there.

'I am not so surprised the Rune Priest is still among us,' replied Ulrik, glancing down at the blade. 'I know what Ulli Iceclaw can do.'

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Ben Counter is the author of the Imperial Fists sagas *Malodrax*, *Seventh Retribution* and *Endeavour of Will*. He has also written the Horus Heresy novels *Galaxy in Flames* and *Battle for the Abyss*, along with Warhammer 40,000 series featuring the Grey Knights and Soul Drinkers. He is a fanatical painter of miniatures, a pursuit which has won him his most prized possession: a prestigious Golden Demon award. He lives in Portsmouth, England.

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