

Ice Claw

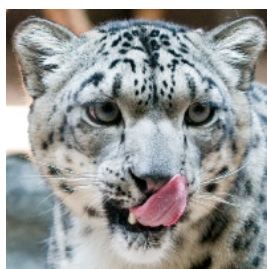
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towards us like waves, as if the foothills had become an ocean of greenskin flesh. The Cadians held our flank and fended them off with lasfire as we did the same with our bolters. And at the heart of our line stood Wolf Lord Ragnar Blackmane.

Ragnar: "Space Wolves, the ork is cunning and without number, but he is still an animal. He has but one tactic in this battle to spend the lives of his fellow greenskins to find a weak point in our line. But he will not find it where the sons of Fenris hold their ground".

(Space Wolves crying in support)

Ragnar: "And you, men of Cadia, they will not find it where you stand either. For there walks the Scorched knight".

Dairos Commatha. The Scorched knight. He alone had stood proud of the knightly houses politicking and pledged himself and his warmachine to the fight when the first orks landed. Ragnar Blackmane saw in Commatha a fellow hunter and asked that the Scorched knight fight alongside him in person.

(numerous explosions, Space Wolves roaring)

Commatha: "The greenskins thought they would find good hunting on Alaric Prime, Lord Blackmane, but now an Imperial knight stands alongside Space Wolves and guardsmen of Cadia and none of us are used to being the prey".

Ragnar: "For every Imperial loss, baron Commatha, I will take ten orkish heads. Can you keep up with that? "

Commatha: "I have never turned down a hunter's wager yet, Blackmane! "

That is much scorn I could pour on the knightly houses for their politics slowed the response to the greenskin invasion. It caused many lives but they produced a warrior of the Scorched knight's caliber and so I cannot show them too much disdain. It was then that I received the vox report from our Storm Wolf wings in the air.

Ulli Ice Claw: "Lord Blackmane, thunderfull squadron is pursuing a wing of ork aircraft. It's a bombing run. We have accounted for half of their number but would still hit us hard".

Ragnar: "Then the greenskin attacks were to keep us in place while they hit us from the air? It passes for a plan by their standards but it will not work! Space Wolves, Cadians, take cover! "

(explosions)

There were more aircraft than the orks should ever have been to field on Alaric Prime. The greenskin technology was possessed of some kind of mad genius that made those rusting crates air worthy. Dozens of bombers bore down on us, hundreds of bombs fell. They hit the Cadians. I could hear the men burning. They lost hundreds in moments, good men, brave men. I saw Lord Ragnar silhouetted by the fire storm as the worst of it came down and then the vox net opened up and I heard the voice of the Scorched knight.

Commatha: "Lord Blackmane, my power plant is ruptured. Plasma is leaking into the thorax and the hatch is jammed. It's not looking too good from where I am sitting".

Ragnar: "Hold fast I shall be with you soon. My Blood Claws can make it, we will get you out of there".

Commatha: "Everything around me is burning. My life is not worth of Space Wolves who will be lost if the plant goes critical. We had a fine hunt, Ragnar! "

Ragnar: "Lord Blackmane does not abandon his brothers. Hold fast and survive! We will be there! Damn it, fix me a jump pack".

Commatha: "It was always going to end this way, Ragnar. This knight has served me well but she does make for a tempting target. Have a? "

(explosions)

Ragnar (crying): "No! "

When the smoke blew off the ridge, the destruction was terrible. Hundreds of Cadians had not reached shelter in time. They lay dead or dying in burning craters but the most awful sight was the Scorched knight. It still stood but the upper half of its chest was a melted ruin. The cockpit was gone. Dairo Commatha was dead. When I think back I still cannot read what I saw on Lord Blackmane's face. It was as if his eyes were flecks of ice and his skin was of cold iron. For a moment there was just silence. Then he turned to me.

Ragnar: "Rune Priest, place the mark upon my blade. Frost Fang hungers".

Ulli Ice Claw: "What rune should I strike, my lord? "

Ragnar: "Vengeance".

Ulli Ice Claw: "The greenskins are massing for another charge".

Ragnar: "Then be quick about it".

It seemed I had placed a thousand runes on the weapons of my battle brothers while we fought for that ridge. I pictured a symbol of chill hatred and I laid my hand on the Frost Fang's blade. The rune burned there in cold fire. I could feel the same rune burn across the heart of Lord Blackmane. I could see the orks approaching, thousands of them in a green tide. In their midst was their warlord, a towering creature riding a tank festooned with gun turrets and blades. I could see its fangs bare as it grinned. I could see through sightless eye the alien's joy at the prospect of slaughter in Space Wolf and Cadian alike.

Ragnar: "Sons of Fenris, the greenskin thinks we are defeated. He thinks we are weak, but all he has done is stoke in us the rage the whole galaxy has learned to fear. Ten ork heads are not enough for one Imperial corpse. I will not take ten! I will not take a hundred, nor a thousand! This rage will not be stoked until every greenskin on Alaric Prime is dead".

I have seen the volcanoes that rise from the oceans of Fenris in the seas of the fire. I have witnessed storms that bring down mountains, but I have never witnessed such rage as burned inside Ragnar Blackmane then. And though I am a Rune Priest I must always strive to keep my soul in check, I felt it too.

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Ulli Ice Claw: "Blackmane's rage is no mere anger, Wolf Priest. It is a force that floods into every Space Wolf. I wanted nothing more than to leap into the fray and kill every ork I could see. Forgive me that anger burned in me".

Ulrik the Slayer: "But what then, Ulli? What of Blackmane? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "The Great Wolf Grimnar was behind our lines leading the battle alongside the Imperial commanders. I had access to the command vox and I heard his response".

CHAPTER 02

Grimnar (over vox): "Blackmane, I have reports of an air attack on your position. What is your situation? "

Ragnar: "The wounds have done no more than bloodier our claws, Great Wolf. I am giving the order to charge".

Grimnar (over vox): "No, Blackmane, your orders are to hold that ridge. If the orks break through, the whole Imperial line could fall".

Ragnar (insisting and interrupting): "The orks have taken our lives for too long. The time has come to slaughter them".

Grimnar (over vox): "Ragnar, hold your position. Ragnar Blackmane, in the name of Russ and the Allfather, your liege lord commands you to hold your position".

Ragnar: "I go now to extract the price of our dead in greenskin flesh. Who is with me? "

(Space Wolves crying in support)

Ragnar (crying): "Then charge, sons of Fenris! By fire and blade, by tooth and claw! Charge! "

Even as the Cadians were pulling their wounded from the rabble, we abandoned their side and joined Ragnar's charge. Brother Einar's Swift Claws leapt into the saddles of their bikes and roared after him. The Sky Claws hurtled in his wake on their jump packs. Even the Grey Hunters and Long Fangs whose rage should have been tempered by the discipline of a veteran ran from cover to join the fight. And of course I was among them.

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Ulrik the Slayer: "It was the death of the Scorched knight that spurred the Blackmane's anger? "

Ulli Ice Claw (unsure): "So it seemed's but I am not certain".

Ulrik the Slayer: "How so, rune priest? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "Whenever lord Blackmane was near I could feel that rage inside him, under the surface. It was quiet while he kept it caged, but it was always there. I wonder now if it needed much reason to be

unleashed. When the Scorched knight fell, was it a terrible enough blow that it could only be answered with such anger? Or did the rage itself simply use Commatha's death as a trigger to take Ragnar over".

Ulrik the Slayer: "But what of the battle that followed? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "It was slaughter".

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(battle, chain swords roaring)

Ragnar: "What vermin are these that stand before me? I am Ragnar Blackmane. I am the young king of Fenris. What senseless animal thinks he can look upon me and live? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "Greenskins are without number, Lord Ragnar. I can see no end of them".

Ragnar: "Then cut them down until there are few enough to count. Stand by my side, Rune Priest, and should I die here, live on that the chapter might know of what I did".

(Ragnar cutting ork's throat)

Ragnar: "That one tasted sweet, but Frost Fang is still thirsty".

(Ragnar cutting down another ork)

Ragnar: "These hellions know our greatness, Ulli Ice Claw! See how they throw themselves on our blades! This one thinks he is clever. He is not so quick to charge in. He wants to find an opening but Frost Fang isn't my only weapon. These are the fangs and teeth of a Fenris lone. The blade through the gut is too good for you, greenskin. A broken neck is all you get".

(dead ork falling down)

Ulli Ice Claw: "Behind you, Lord Ragnar! They are pressing in on all sides. This war machine. The warlord is heading straight for us".

Ragnar: "Ulli, Blood Claws, keep them off me. This one is mine".

(warlord roaring)

The warlord was one of the biggest of its kind I have ever seen. Only the strongest and most vicious orks ever get to lead a whole tribe to war. Lord Ragnar vaulted on to the tank and ran at it as if there was nothing else he wanted in this galaxy but to kill that greenskin. It

wielded a giant hammer. I was sure Ragnar would have to evade it or be crushed flat, but he caught the weapon on his chest and wrenched it out of the ork's hand.

(chainsword roaring)

Then Frost Fang flashed. The ork's hands were sliced off. The warlord stared down at the stumps of its wrists and that moment of shock was the opening Ragnar needed for the kill.

(Space Wolf howling and ork roaring)

Frost Fang sawed through the warlord's neck and its head came free of its shoulders. Ragnar held the head up high so that all the tribe could see what had become of their leader.

Ragnar: "This is the one you followed across the stars to despoil this world? This is the lord who made you cower? Look at it now, greenskins, and know what you are! You are prey!"

CHAPTER 03

Ulrik the Slayer: "So Lord Ragnar had made good on his promise of revenge. Many orks lay dead and their leader was among the slain".

Ulli Ice Claw: "But then I saw how much we had paid. Of Einar's Swift Claw pack half lay dead, dragged down off their bikes and butchered on the ground. As I watched a Grey Hunter cut off from his pack was surrounded, beaten down and torn apart. We had paid for this with Space Wolf lives and there was worse to come".

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(explosions, battle raging)

Ulli Ice Claw: "Ragnar, we are surrounded. The orks have flooded in behind us and cut us off from the ridge. The Cadians could not hold our flank. We have pushed forwards too far".

Ragnar: "Then we fight on, Rune Priest".

Ulli Ice Claw: "Even Ragnar Blackmane cannot kill them all".

Ragnar: "Then we die well".

Ulli Ice Claw: "But what of the people of Alaric Prime? What of all the dead from defeats that would have been victories had we not died

here? For revenge on this day you have sacrificed our future. Half your great company stands here surrounded by foes we cannot defeat. Was it worth throwing their lives away to brandish one orkish head? "

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Ulrik the Slayer: "You spoke thus to him? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "I know, I had gone too far. It was my duty to follow my Wolf Lord into the jaws of hell not pressing as I a headstrong fool. But I could see nothing then save the bodies of my brothers Space Wolves trampled in the mud"

Ulrik the Slayer: "What did Blackmane say in reply? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "Nothing"

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He fixed my with a stare that could freeze an ocean, but then the greenskins attacked hard again. I felt their anger rise to a crescendo and they charged. In the shadow of that warmachine I fought back to back with my Space Wolf brothers and in moments my axe was heavy with woe. The ork bodies piled up into a rampart of the dead but though we might each kill ten of them a hundred eventually, they took one of ours.

(orks roaring)

I saw brother Hafrad of the Gondar's Grey Hunters pack, his head split open down to the collar by an ork's cleaver. The Blood Claws howled and counter-charged whenever they opened up enough space but each time they fell backward, one of their number wounded or dead. I lost sight of Lord Ragnar so dense was the press of orks around us.

Then above the gunfire and the cries of the wounded I heard the sound of engines. Three Storm Wolf gunships wearing the livery of the Great Wolf Logan Grimnar swooped down from the sky and leaning from the ramp I saw Grimnar himself, the axe Morkai in his hand.

Grimnar: "Blackmane, I see once more the Alpha wolf must drag the headstrong out of trouble. Much as I would love for you to learn your lesson I cannot let my brothers die out here surrounded. My Wolf Guard will cut a path for you back to our lines. I trust you can show enough sense at least to follow it".

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Ulli Ice Claw: "The Great Wolf brought with him three packs of Wolf Guard, Grimnar's own personal troops in terminator armor. They were amongst the best warriors in our chapter, our ranks cheered as they leapt down from their gunships".

Ulrik the Slayer: "And did you cheer as well, Ulli ice Claw? Were you as relieved as your battle brothers? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "Eh, I do not know, Wolf Priest. True, where we had faced death, we now had a chance. But with the certainty of death removed my thoughts had left to go elsewhere and I saw how troubled I was. Ragnar was my Wolf Lord, the young king of Fenris. We idolized him. Already my brothers and I have memorized his sagas and sought to emulate the skill and fury he showed in battle. But now I saw something else in Ragnar Blackmane".

Ulrik the Slayer: "You speak of Blackmane's rage, the rage that had cost so many lives and brought a whole great company so close to destruction".

Ulli Ice Claw: "My brothers lay dead. The Imperial line was compromised. All that could have been avoided. Had we held our ground we could have weathered whatever storm the orks threw at us. The cost would have been high, but we would have held. Imperial command had a plan to shatter the army of orks that faced us. Now whatever that plan was, it was intempest for we had not played our part. Instead we had followed a leader driven by headstrong anger and many of us lay butchered in the mud because of it. This might the lord of Fenris in whom I had seen the very exemplar of our chapter, now seemed to me no more than a berserker who would lead us all to a fruitless death".

Ulrik the Slayer: "I have served as Wolf Priest for many years, Ulli, since before you were even been made a Space Wolf. And in that time my purpose has been to minister to the spiritual needs of my brethren, to watch for the sins of the mind that might lead them down the wayward off and off those sins. One of the gravest is doubt. What you saw in Blackmane's conduct planted that doubt in you, that is what I must fight. Just as you fought the greenskins"

Ulli Ice Claw: "But how can I forget the sight of my battle brothers torn apart by orkish hands? How can I ignore the despair I felt to know that we would die out there for nothing? "

Ulrik the Slayer: "Go on, Ulli Ice Claw, your tale does not end there".

Ulli Ice Claw: "Grimnar and his Wolf Guard landed beside us".

CHAPTER 04

With the roar of assault cannon and storm bolters they forced back the first ranks of the orks. The Storm Wolves sectored overhead strafing the orks or peeking out their war machines with pinpoint fire. Then Grimnar held the axe Morkai aloft so that all could see it.

Grimnar: "With me, sons of Fenris, we will cut a bloody canyon through these greenskin flesh".

Ragnar: "Fight beside me, Ulli! The rune you placed on my blade still burns bright! It will take plenty more ork blood to douse that fire".

And so I fought. I had lost count of the orks I had killed. Though their number was pittance compared to Blackmane's tally. We forged through the ork ranks following the bloody wake of Grimnar and the Wolf Guard. Even as the greenskins reeled I saw one of the Wolf Guard fall. He was pulled down by a mass of orks who used crude cutting torches to carve his armor apart.

(Space Wolf crying in pain)

One of our finest was lost to the chapter because Ragnar Blackmane had given in to his rage. We were within sight of the Imperial line. The Cadians had suffered badly and their fortifications were ablate but there were still men. The remains of the Scorched knight still burned. We were gloss and let the hope kindle in my hearts that we would survive this, that this battle was not over.

A great shadow passed over us. I looked up to see an enormous war machine flying above us in a mockery of logic. From its hull hung hundreds of gibbets, each containing an Imperial Guard prisoner, stripped of his war gear, bleeding and left there to die for the amusement of the orks. Its gun turrets blazed and our Storm Wolves had to back away or be blasted from the sky.

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Ulrik the Slayer: "What you saw was called the Sky Gouger. It had led attacks on Imperial positions since the beginning of the war for Alaric Prime. Already it had gained a reputation like death itself, for wherever

it went it left just corpses. Imperial command had tried to track it but some xenos technology made it invisible to our augurs. It was only seen when the orks wished to inflict punishment on Imperial forces and they summoned it to punish the Space Wolves”.

Ulli Ice Claw: “The Sky Gouger? So that is what they called it. To us it seemed their final insult, that orks can even build something that flies is obscene enough. That it should intercept us just when our line was within sight. That seemed calculated to drain us of hope. Perhaps the timing was deliberate. Perhaps the orks wanted us to know hope and then have it snatched away, so we would be weakened in the final moments by despair”.

Ulrik the Slayer: “But Space Marines do not know despair”.

Ulli Ice Claw: “No, Wolf Priest. We do not but the orks were going to try their best to make us know it”.

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There were assault forces launched from the Sky Gouger in their dozens. There were jump pack troops in black painted armor. Where most greenskins fought with wildness and savagery these were disciplined and ruthless. They fell upon our Grey Hunters and Blood Claws avoiding the guns and blades of Grimnar’s Wolf Guard. Cannon on the Sky Gouger rained the fire forcing our formation apart so the greenskin assault could isolate and butcher us. I saw the Great Wolf surrounded by seven or eight of them keeping them at bay with great swings of the axe Morkai. The rest of the orks took heart from the Sky Gouger’s appearance and the massed once more ready to swarm and finish us off.

Ragnar: “No, not now! Not when we are so close! It will not end this way, my brothers! You Sky Claw, you are wounded? Can you fight? ”

The young warrior did not respond. His right arm had been crashed and though I knew that he would fight on with his teeth if needs be, today’s battle was over for him.

Ragnar: “Then give me your jump pack! ”

Ulli Ice Claw: “Lord Blackmane, what are you doing? ”

Ragnar: “If I am to fall here, it will not be in the mud on my knees. It will be taking the fight to the enemy as a Space Wolf should”.

Ulli Ice Claw: "You will die! "

Ragnar: "Not so for I will not be alone. There lies another fallen brother. He will not fight anymore but his war gear can still serve. Take his jump pack and follow me. The rune on my blade has grown dull and I have need of a Rune Priest. Your Wolf Lord has spoken, Ulli Ice Claw".

I buckled on the jump pack. I knew what insanity this was but my Wolf Lord had spoken.

CHAPTER 05

Ulrik the Slayer: "Was that the only reason you followed him? "

Ulli Ice Claw: "In truth, Wolf Priest? I cannot say"

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The Sky Gouger had drifted low to drop off its troops, low enough for a bound of a jump pack to reach it. Ragnar leapt before me. I barely made it onto the war machine. The hull of the Sky Gouger was crawling with ork drop troops massing for the next wave. Ragnar dived into them full of the fury that had caused him to abandon our lines. I felt kindling in my heart again, that same fury. I had not thought it possible for I had seen the cost of such recklessness but I could not deny it. My mind was full of the battle brothers who had died that day. The Blood Claws and Grey Hunters slain as the orks surrounded us. The Wolf Guard who had followed Grimnar's rescue mission, all butchered by greenskin hands. And I wanted what Ragnar wanted. I wanted to kill them all.

(Space Wolf howling)

Ulli Ice Claw: "What alien eyes are worthy to look on a Space Wolf? Look well for it is the last thing you would see. This is my rune axe, an extension of this psyche's mind. I heard your kind can fight on with a severed limb, but how can you fight when I sever your soul? That is the fate of all your kind, to return to red mist and ash".

Ragnar: "Well fought, Rune Priest! We must bring this metal beast down! "

Blackmane reached the prow of the Sky Gouger. He tore the canopy of the cockpit. The ork pilot barely had time to show surprise before Frost Fang took his head. I followed Lord Blackmane inside the hull, this stench was awful rotting meat and sweat, gnawed bones and body parts were everywhere. The Sky Gouger had taken hundreds of the

Imperial Guard prisoners and this was where they had died. Stunted versions of the greenskins scurried away at our approach. Orks tried to bar our way, but Blackmane was possessed with rage. And so was I.

(orks roaring)

Ragnar: "It is an honor greater that you xenos filth deserve - to die on Frost Fang's blade".

Ulli Ice Claw: "We should let one of you live to tell the other greenskin filth of what happens when you make war with the Space Wolves, but not you".

Ragnar: "Press on, Wolf Priest! We need to find something this hulk cannot fly without".

But I did not see the shape in the shadows looming up from the depths of the Sky Gouger's hall. It hit me before I could react.

(Ulli crying and falling in some wrecks)

I saw an ork, one of their leaders by its size. Perhaps even huger than the warlord Ragnar had slain. Around its neck hung a hundred dog tags torn from guardsmen's necks. It had taken their medals too and wore them on its armored chest in the mockery of the brave men it had killed. On its head was a Cadian officer's cap, still stained with the blood of the man who had worn it. The ork's limbs were clad in black steel and each hand was a mechanical claw to tear and crush.

(ork roaring)

The greenskin howled as if in mockery of the noble howls of our chapter and beckoned Ragnar forward. The Wolf Lord leapt. Blackmane and the ork commander clashed and they were matched in strength. In the confines of the Sky Gouger there was only room to wrestle. In the open Ragnar's swordsmanship might have cut the ork to pieces and left him open for the killing blow, but here it was face to face. The claws seeking to grab and crush as the ork's bulk pinned Blackmane to the ground. My head swam and my body would not respond as I wished. I crawled closer.

Ragnar: "Ulli, if this creature bests me, return to the chapter. Tell them how I died".

But this time I did not obey. I placed my hand on the side of Ragnar's breast plate. I wield there a rune of defiance, of honor and fury, a

symbol of the high kings of Fenris from an age remembered only by the stones. I dredged up every drop of will I had. My body was spent but my mind was still a weapon and as the claws crushed home the rune flared bright.

Ragnar: "Fenrisian guile beats xenos prong and Space Wolves's steel beats every".

(chainsword roaring, beast crying and falling)

Frost Fang pierced the greenskin's heart. I saw the light go out in its eyes. I felt the rage filled fires of its life extinguished as it fell to the deck. Ragnar paused to help me to my feet and rampaged on through the carrier. The greenskins's resolve was shattered as they saw their commander fall and they fled before us as Lord Blackmane tore engines and fuel lines apart. I felt the Sky Gouger lunge.

Ragnar: "Come, Rune Priest! It is time to leave".

As we leapt from the carrier and our jump packs slowed at descent I watched the Sky Gouger falling in flames. It crashed into the heart of the orks.

(numerous explosions)

I saw a thousand of them die in that storm of flame and wreckage. The orks fled from us. The Great Wolf led the way back to the Imperial lines with Lord Ragnar fighting by his side. When we reached our positions on the ridge, I saw the Cadians rejoicing that the Sky Gouger had fallen and the orks had been so thoroughly beaten.

CHAPTER 06

Ulrik the Slayer: "But you did not rejoice, Ulli Ice Claw. Though your battle brothers cheered the deaths of so many greenskins I see no joy in your face".

Ulli Ice Claw: "No, Wolf Priest. I thought only of my brothers who had fallen. And of how the rage of Ragnar Blackmane was scarcely less responsible for their death than the greenskins".

Ulrik the Slayer: "But you do not have the perspective of a Wolf Priest. You saw Ragnar's rage bring the Space Wolves to the edge of defeat. But what did you see when Ragnar boarded the Sky Gouger? You felt that same rage then and you saw what it did to the enemy. Do you think

anyone else could have brought down the Sky Gouger? It was Ragnar's rage that made it possible. That anger cost us many lives, but it also brought us a victory where nothing else could have".

Ulli Ice Claw: "Then it is not surprise for you to hear of what this rage can do".

Ulrik the Slayer: "It is not. Long ago we looked on the young Ragnar Blackmane promoted to the Wolf Guard directly from the Blood Claws. An unheard of thing. We knew what would happen if ever rose to the position of Wolf Lord, of how many of our brothers would pay for his anger with their lives, but we also saw how many victories it would bring us. How many enemies would fall before it, who would otherwise survive? And we decided the price of his recklessness was worth the victories it would bring us".

Ulli Ice Claw (hesitating): "I' have but one question for you, Ulrik. If I may"

Ulrik the Slayer: "Speak on, Rune Priest".

Ulli Ice Claw: "You say the Wolf Priests made a decision on Ragnar's fitness to serve as a Wolf Lord, but if the cost becomes too high". If the chapter suffers too greatly from his rages? Could that decision be reversed? "

(beeping alarm sounds)

Ulrik the Slayer: "The orks are charging again, look fast, Rune Priest. We need all battle brothers on the line".

Ragnar (in the distance): "Sons of Fenris, the orks will not stop until this world is barren and despoiled. But the smoke has cleared and the blood soaked into the earth, it is the Space Wolves who will be standing atop the mountain of orkish dead".

(Space Wolves howling, sounds of the beginning of a new battle)