



WARHAMMER
40,000



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The ork fortress had been an ugly sight to begin with, and setting it on fire hadn't improved the view. A scrap-built mass of metal the size of a town squatted on the dusty, lifeless plain, and a swampish lake of filth and toxic waste formed a shallow moat around its jagged perimeter. Its towers and parapets clawed the air, twisted black digits scraping against the reddish blue sky.

The fortress was the base of operations for Stumpgutz, ork warboss and plague of the Alixind system. Now it was aflame, artillery guns in the nearby hills having battered the fortress with incendiary shells for a day and a night. The guns were silent now, but the fires still raged.

It was a terrible place in the throes of dying, and it refused to die quietly or well. Clouds of noxious black smoke, hanging in the windless air above the fortress, lingered so high they almost seemed to touch the four visible moons in the sky above.

As flames licked the unstable walls and teetering battlements, burning chunks began to fall off and tumble down the walls, the orkish architecture fatally undermined by the heat.

It was an ugly sight on an unlovely world. Durrl had been the warboss' first landing place within the system, his first clawhold in a twenty-year campaign against the Imperium. The planet bore the scars of occupation, its cities wrecked and cannibalised to feed the ork war machine, the majority of the population having fled or died years before.

Now it would make a fitting grave, or maybe a funeral pyre, for Stumpgutz and his ambitions. So thought Captain Anju Badya as she looked across at the burning fortress, a rough scarf wrapped around her mouth and nose to hold back the stench from the fiery ruin. Her horse moved restlessly beneath her; it was a disciplined beast of good Tallarn stock, but even a well-trained animal became

uneasy in such a place.

Captain Badya was a rider in the Tallarn 14th, her regimental fatigues complemented by a long overcoat and a red sash at the waist, from which hung a gilt-edged blade. She sat tall in her saddle, and from between the layers of headscarf, her piercing green eyes surveyed the area around her, watching for any movement. It was hard, tense work as the plain was littered with debris and shrouded in smoke. Badya had one hand ready to grab her lasrifle at all times.

The Tallarn 14th, along with an alliance of other forces from the Imperium, had driven Stumpgutz's forces back to the plains of Durrl, and were here to finish the job. The fire was building in intensity, and while the main structures still stood, the increasing damage was causing some of the inhabitants to flee. The orks were ferocious and incredibly dangerous, but also deeply stupid, and only now, at the last stand, was it becoming clear to some of them that Stumpgutz was finished.

Badya's squad, and others patrolling the plains surrounding the fortress, were there to ensure no orks escaped the stronghold's demise. She could hear distant gunfire, orkish bellows and human screams as distant comrades engaged the enemy.

'Captain?' asked Ejad, one of the younger riders under her command.

'I hear them,' said Badya, speaking loud enough that the rest of the squad could hear her as they rode behind, her voice hoarse from the dry desert air. 'You know what to do. We stay on our patrol pattern. Any back-up comes in from the perimeter. If we ride to the rescue, we might let some of these greenskins through.'

'Yes, captain,' said Ejad.

Was he disappointed or relieved that they didn't have to plunge into the smoke to save fellow Tallarns under attack? Badya neither knew nor cared. They had their orders: patrol, kill anything they find and call for support from the perimeter if things went south.

Badya had added her own orders for her squad: stay back, engage from as much distance as possible. Orks were stupid, but they were also savage beasts, squat green creatures with vicious teeth and thick, muscular limbs that could tear a human being apart with one hand. Tallarn riders were highly mobile and usually very able sharp shooters, even on the move, and Badya intended to fire on any orks they encountered from afar.

As the wreckage of a burnt-out ork vehicle exploded, a green fist punched the smouldering metal out of the way. Badya's hopes were crushed. An ork burst

through the obstruction, raising a stumpy pistol and firing at the nearest Tallarn, an older woman called Khai. The shot tore a lump of flesh from the flanks of Khai's mount and the beast bucked in agony, throwing Khai out of the saddle.

Badya didn't wait to see Khai hit the ground. She began to ride in as wide an arc as the debris-strewn plain would allow, staying as clear as she could of the wrecked vehicle from which she could now see a second ork emerging.

As she rode, Badya leaned low in her saddle, cradling her lasrifle under one arm and lifting it so that she had the barrel level. She adjusted the rifle in her grip, compensating for the rhythmic motion of the horse beneath her as she aimed at the first ork, which was now shambling towards the fallen Khai, pistol lowered in meaty hands.

She didn't attempt anything clever while firing mounted, no head shots or other feats of marksmanship. Instead Badya tightened her grip on her lasrifle and muttered some familiar words of reassurance so that her horse knew what was about to happen, then she fired three las shots in close succession, all aimed at the ork's torso. The movement of the running horse made her grip loosen a little, and one of the shots went wide but two hit their target. One shot winged the ork, causing it to drop its pistol, while another hit it square in the chest.

The ork rocked backwards and roared in protest, but it didn't go down. Meanwhile Ejad was trying to ride away from the second ork, firing on it from dangerously close range, while a third emerged from the hole. Was there some kind of tunnel in there, or did the wrecked vehicle mask a channel leading back to the fortress? Badya didn't have time to think. All around her Tallarns were engaging with orks, las shots wounding but not killing the monsters as they attacked.

Badya aimed her lasgun at the first ork once more, but before she could fire, Khai, with one arm limp at her side from falling off her horse, lifted herself up from the ground and fired her hellgun. The kickback from firing it one-handed was enough to throw Khai backwards, but it was close range enough to blow a hole in the ork's face.

Finally, the creature died.

Badya changed targets. The third ork had killed Barro's horse with one neck-breaking punch, and had used its other hand to break Barro's own neck in a stranglehold. The horse had fallen but Barro still hung from the ork's grip, body dangling limply like a doll. Badya resisted the urge to avenge him and searched for someone she could assist who was still alive.

Ejad was still on horseback but had been cornered by the second ork, and

Badya rode straight for him, firing as she came. The ork turned its attention to her, tiny black eyes staring with animal hatred.

The ork pulled Ejad off his horse and threw him at Badya.

Ejad hit Badya hard and the two of them fell backwards off Badya's horse, which panicked and ran away. They landed hard, and Badya felt Ejad shake in agony as one of his bones broke.

Her own body ached from multiple impacts. Badya pushed Ejad off her, ignoring his cries of agony, and searched for her lasrifle. The rest of her squad were coming to the rescue, but the ork that had thrown Ejad was running at them both now, gun raised and drool dripping from its huge yellow teeth.

Badya's ears were ringing, so she barely heard the roar of engines before it happened.

An armoured blue-grey Rhino crashed into view, the squat vehicle throwing up clouds of dust as its tracks ploughed through the sands. The Rhino made a direct line for the ork approaching Badya, crushing it beneath its tracks, and the other greenskins had no time to react when its mounted storm bolter opened up on them, a furious barrage of fire bringing the survivors down in one sweep.

Before their bodies had even hit the ground the Rhino had gone, crashing through the wrecked ork vehicle and rolling off some kind of crude lowered road cutting through the plain that Badya had suspected was there. In the distance she could see the breach from which the orks had escaped the burning fortress.

Still on her knees, she watched from afar as five towering figures emerged from the Rhino, clad in armour the same colour as the Rhino itself and augmented with the furs of great beasts. All five were a head or two taller than a normal human, and broad to match – Space Marines, the Adeptus Astartes, favoured warriors of the Emperor himself.

The five Space Marines disappeared into the depths of the fortress. Its job done, their transport returned to base, leaving a cloud of dust behind it once more. As the Tallarns of Badya's squad pulled together, assisting their wounded and wary of a further ork attack, the Rhino simply rolled past them without pause. The Space Marines clearly had their own mission to attend to, and didn't stop for the Tallarns who cheered them on, grateful for their intervention.

Captain Anju Badya whistled for her horse to return to her and looked up again at the hulking fortress, its charred structures licked by fiercer and fiercer flames. A place even orks would flee.

Only Space Wolves would choose to go the other way.

‘Thank you for your gracious welcome,’ said Sindri, ramming a chainblade into the side of an attacking ork. ‘You do us honour with your hospitality.’

‘You forget your place, Sindri,’ shouted Anvindr Godrichsson, pack leader, over the roar of his own bolter. ‘I have command, it is for me to relay gratitude to our hosts.’

‘Apologies,’ said Sindri, bowing to Anvindr at the same time as an ork swung a red-painted hammer through the space his head had just occupied. ‘Here, you may do the honours.’ He slashed the back of the ork’s right knee with his chainblade, shoving the creature into Anvindr’s line of fire to be gunned down.

‘I am grateful,’ grunted Anvindr, concentrating fire as three more orks rushed at him, ‘but please keep any more to yourself.’

Within seconds of entering the fortress, Anvindr and his pack had been surrounded by orks. They had come almost immediately after the pack climbed through the breach in the outer wall, that uncanny ork talent of sniffing out the chance of a fight drawing them from the hive-like corridors of the fortress to face down the incoming Space Marines. While Sindri spoke with his usual infuriating levity, Anvindr acknowledged that the other Wolf was correct – the orks had prepared a substantial welcome for the Space Marines.

One of the approaching orks came at Anvindr with an axe, and Anvindr shot it down before it even got close, a bolt-round exploding within the ork’s chest in a mist of red blood and green scraps of flesh. Before that body had even hit the ground the other two were about to strike, chunky ork pistols raised to fire at near point-blank range. Anvindr grabbed one of the orks by its gun hand and pulled the great beast forward and down, enough for Anvindr to bring his knee up hard, breaking the ork’s arm and causing it to drop its gun.

He now had the ork in a hold close to him, the creature’s jaws dangerously close to his face. Anvindr was helmless, and the breath coming from the ork’s yellow-toothed mouth was rank as it pushed forward to try and bite his face off. Even against a Space Marine in full power armour, the ork was strong, struggling in Anvindr’s grip, but Anvindr had swung the beast between him and the other ork, which simply tried to fire straight through its comrade.

The ork took four or five ‘friendly fire’ shots to the back, dying with a look of annoyance in its tiny black eyes.

As Anvindr pushed the body away he raised his bolter again, firing twice before the other ork could get a clear shot, killing it instantly. Then he locked his bolter to the leg of his armour and unleashed his chainsword. As more orks charged at him, he wielded the blade back and forth, hacking through limbs and

occasionally grinding against pieces of crude armour.

Around him, the rest of Anvindr's pack was equally busy. They were brothers of the *Vlka Fenryka*, whom the rest of the Imperium called Space Wolves. They had fought so long together, for so many countless winters, that they worked side-by-side like a single organism, staying out of each other's way without ever needing to look, pack instincts driving them forward together as one.

Anvindr was leader of this pack. Like any of his kind he was far taller than a human, and his heavy features were framed by long hair and matching beard, both streaked white and oily with smoke. Signs of age and marks of long service covered Anvindr's body and armour: scars and dents on skin and plate, grey in the beard and lengthening teeth in his jaws, furs and other trophies hanging from his shoulders.

The others fought nearby.

There was Sindri, of course, agile even in full power armour, spinning between opponents, ducking under the arm of one ork to run him through with his chainblade, then bringing it around to cut straight through the knees of another. His blond curls were unusual for a Fenrisian, and even as the decades passed there was something in him that remained unaging. Although this meant he lacked the growing fangs and other traditional signs of a wolf brother's maturity, there was no denying his warrior spirit.

Then there was Gulbrandr, steady as ever with a series of well-placed, thoughtful shots from his bolter that always found their mark, not letting an ork even get close to him. His once raven-black hair and beard showed thin streaks of white, but his impassive expression remained the same as it always had.

At the edge of the group was great Tormodr, heavy even for a fully-armoured Space Marine, wielding his flamer back and forth, roasting countless orks as they crawled out of holes in the wall.

And finally there was red-headed Hoenir, whose presence always surprised Anvindr, even after decades of fighting by his side. Although Hoenir, last survivor of his own pack, had joined Anvindr's many years ago after their own loss, Anvindr still found a part of him always expected long-lost Liulfr to be there instead. Hoenir was no Blood Claw, and was a brother of many battles standing, but he would always be partially a newcomer.

One of Hoenir's hands was encased in a great, red-painted power fist, and Anvindr saw him pick up an ork by the criss-crossed ammunition belts the creature wore across its chest and slam it hard into an already prone ork on the floor, killing both of them.

‘For Russ and for Fenris,’ shouted Hoenir, raising his bloodied power fist.

‘For Fenris!’ boomed Tormodr, and the others echoed the sentiment, even ever-terse Gulbrandr.

‘I think we’re thinning their numbers,’ said Sindri.

He was right. The numbers of orks attacking them seemed to be subsiding, with Anvindr able to count the time between his kills in seconds. However, this was not necessarily reason to celebrate – the smoke was thickening and the air was getting hotter around them. There may have been fewer orks attacking, but the fire consuming the fortress was also getting nearer.

‘We need to move now, while we have the chance,’ Anvindr called to his pack, striking another ork aside.

‘This way,’ said Gulbrandr, indicating an opening in the wall near him. They were all hunters, but the smoke and carnage could spin even a Space Wolf around. Gulbrandr, however, never lost his bearings, and would lead them where they needed to go – straight to the centre of the fortress. Ork hierarchies were simple, and their target would be close to that centre.

Anvindr had looked at the fortress from afar that morning, watching the bombardment from the Imperial cannon, and had decided that the long campaign that he, his brothers and thousands of other souls of the Imperium had fought in could not end like this – not with the uncertainty of a pile of anonymous ash.

Victory required someone to take the head of the warboss, even if it was just hacked from its scorched corpse. Proof of death was required, a trophy to take for the glory of the Emperor, and Anvindr decided that he and his squad would be the ones to take it.

So the artillery guns had been silenced, Anvindr and his pack had crossed the plain, and here they were in smoke and darkness and raging flame.

Initially they made slow progress, fighting every step through corridors that threatened to collapse around them, changing course as one potential route turned out to be blocked by wreckage, but otherwise staying true to their objective. Howls of orkish pain echoed from afar, but the number of orks seeking out the Wolves to attack them lessened as they got closer to the centre of the fortress.

The orks that did try to block their path fought savagely, but in isolation they were no match for the pack fighting as one.

Eventually Anvindr and his pack found themselves in a larger corridor lined with skulls and other trophies. It was ugly rubbish, crudely attached to the walls,

but the meaning of such trophies was clear – these were the displays of the great warboss, whose throne room they approached.

The chamber they entered was more or less round and as tall as the fortress itself, the walls tapering to an opening high above. Any sunlight that reached down from that far was watery, thinned out by the oily smoke that clogged the air. Burning embers tumbled down from somewhere above, as did some larger chunks of flaming rubble.

The walls were littered with long spikes holding skeletons or other trophies, while others were bare. The central focus of the chamber was a crude balcony overlooking the chamber, on which a throne of scrap metal could be seen.

That throne sat empty, and as Anvindr had no idea what Stumpgutz looked like, he could not tell whether the warboss was amongst the horde before them.

His instinct told him that none of the orks before him was Stumpgutz, and that he would know the warboss when he saw it. Rumour was that long ago a captain of the White Consuls had got close to killing him, and had cut through the warboss' legs at the knee. Those rumours also said that Stumpgutz wore that Space Marine's helmet on one shoulder and his skull on the other – trophies of its eventual victory over the Imperium's finest.

Neither Anvindr nor anyone else in the Imperium had any idea how the renamed Stumpgutz had managed to not only maintain his rule while suffering such a disability, but increase his power. Orks were dumb but treacherous, and wouldn't hesitate to depose an injured or crippled leader. For Stumpgutz to prosper, the warboss would have to be something much more than the orks under his command.

The mass of orks that filled the throne room surged towards Anvindr and his Wolves as one tumultuous green mass of savage muscle. Looming over the horde were four great orks, presumably Stumpgutz's bodyguards, dressed from head to foot in crude armour plating, with bucket-like helmets over their heads, wielding hatchets as well as stubby, over-sized pistols.

The gretchin and common orks were the first to reach the Wolves, who found themselves engaging ork warriors hand-to-hand while kicking away the smaller, dome-headed creatures trying to stab at the joints in their power armour.

'Sindri, help me give Tormodr space to clear this rabble,' shouted Anvindr, slamming a boot down on the skull of one gretchin while elbowing an ork in its thick jaw. 'Hoenir, Gulbrandr, take the first chance to engage those big brutes. I want a path to the boss.'

The Wolves all stepped back a little, forming a circle around Tormodr, then as

the big wolf readied his flamer, Sindri and Anvindr surged forward, slashing wildly with their chainswords, sweeping low to hack through the skulls of gretchin and the knees of orks, pushing back the forward line.

‘Make way, make way!’ said Sindri, slashing back and forth. ‘Brother Tormodr has some difficult buttons to adjust. Give him space.’

Tormodr boomed some filthy words relating to Sindri’s tribal ancestry, then shouted ‘Clear!’

Anvindr and Sindri rolled out of the way, letting the ork rabble surge forward over their injured and dead comrades, only for Tormodr to flame the lot of them. The ork advance faltered and tripped over itself, the dead and the dying blocking the way of those trying to both advance and retreat, and the flame scorched them *all* while the other Wolves fired into the carnage.

‘The smell...’ said Sindri in disgust. Anvindr grunted. He hated it too, but it was not very... *wolf-like* to express the sentiment that way. Typical Sindri.

Tormodr’s roasting of the orks was interrupted by a shot from one of the oversized pistols wielded by the helmeted ork guards, which exploded near Tormodr’s feet with enough force to knock the huge Wolf brother backwards, his flamer setting part of the high ceiling alight.

The pack were already returning fire, with Gulbrandr firing precise bolt-rounds over the heads of the shorter orks, but these seemed to do limited damage to the ork guards’ thick armour. One took a well-placed bolt from Gulbrandr to the chest, only to keep walking with just a dent in his plate to show for it.

‘Get close and take these down now, quickly,’ bellowed Anvindr. ‘I want that boss.’

‘Nice easy orders,’ shouted Sindri back. ‘Should only take a second.’

Then the guards were upon them, shoving through the blackened remains that littered the throne room, kicking aside charred corpses. Anvindr ran towards the nearest ork, which thrust its crude dagger towards him. Anvindr lunged to the side, the thick blade cutting the air beside him. Gripping the handle of the ork weapon in one hand, Anvindr lunged forward with his chainsword, aiming for the weak point between the ork’s armour and helmet. The chainsword found some initial purchase, digging in between the lip of the helmet and the chestplate to open up a gap, but began to grind with a hail of sparks. As Anvindr held the dagger out of the way, the ork brought its gun arm around to try and shoot Anvindr at point-blank range.

Anvindr pushed back, letting go of both the chainsword and hatchet, and the ork stumbled without Anvindr to push against. Anvindr drew his bolter and fired

just next to where the chainsword was jammed in place. The bolt-round found the point where the chainsword had created a small gap, and there was a muted thud as it exploded within the confines of the helmet. Blood dribbled from the helmet's eye slits as the ork collapsed to the ground.

Anvindr twisted his chainsword to pull it free and turned to see the rest of the pack overcoming the other ork guards – one was staggering around, smoke pouring out of the seams of its armour after Tormodr set it alight, while Hoenir had torn the helmet off another with his power fist, finishing it off with a bolt pistol.

'Do you think the warboss is one of these?' shouted Hoenir.

Anvindr was about to answer when the double doors at the far end of the throne room were kicked open by a towering greenskin far taller than any present, a grotesquely over-sized ork wearing a mass of armour plating and furs, the skull of a Space Marine on one shoulder and a battered helmet on the other. The ork's huge green hands were encrusted with barbed rings, and were wrapped around the shaft of a long, two-bladed axe.

Stumpgutz.

'Great Russ!' exclaimed Sindri, lost for anything smart to say.

'Now we know how this thing stayed boss for so long,' said Anvindr.

Stumpgutz did not walk in on the legs of an ork, that part of the legend was true. Instead he strode in on two long, pneumatic legs that dripped with oil, released hissing steam from the knees and ended in boot-shaped artificial feet that looked like they could kick a hole in a Rhino.

Anvindr raised his bolter but Stumpgutz jumped, his pneumatic legs carrying him a quarter of the way across the chamber in one leap. He landed with an impact that rocked the whole room, throwing up dust that mingled with the thickening smoke from the fires consuming the fortress.

Stumpgutz went straight for Anvindr, swinging the giant axe around in a long arc, catching the barrel of Anvindr's gun. It was barely a scratch, but the incredible force of the axe blow was enough to wrench the bolter out of Anvindr's hands and nearly pull him off his feet.

As Anvindr righted himself, revving up his chainsword, Stumpgutz was already swiping at the others with his axe, the great warboss stomping back and forth across the throne room with mechanical strides that shook the very ground, bolt-rounds exploding around it. Gulbrandr managed to hit the warboss in the shoulder, causing a howl of rage from the giant ork, but otherwise none of the Wolves' shots managed to hit home. They were on the defensive.

‘Anvindr!’ warned Hoenir, and Anvindr saw the axe swing in his direction once more. He leapt over the huge, flat axe head, then prepared for the return swing, bracing himself against the ground and raising his chainsword. While the previous swing had cut low, this one came in high, and would have taken Anvindr’s head clean off his shoulders if he had had nothing to raise in his defence.

As it was, the chainsword barely stopped the axe. The two weapons clashed with an impact that shuddered through Anvindr’s body, every muscle straining as he struggled to hold his chainsword firm. The force of the blow pushed him backwards, his boots scuffing the dirt. The teeth of the weapon screamed against the rough metal of the axe head, sparks flying and machinery grinding.

‘Yield, you green wretch!’ shouted Anvindr as he forced every iota of his strength into pushing the chainsword.

Stumpgutz roared and twisted the handle in its grip, applying both hands to the job, turning the axe to force it downwards and letting gravity add to the pressure on Anvindr. Teeth began to fly off the chainsword and it sputtered. The chain broke and suddenly Stumpgutz’s axe was cleaving through the metal of the chainsword itself, an increasingly thin strip of metal and component parts between the axe and Anvindr’s skull.

‘Now, while I hold him back,’ said Anvindr to his pack.

Gulbrandr was first to move in for the kill, but Stumpgutz lashed out with one of his mechanical legs, kicking the Wolf in his helmless head so hard his jaw shattered, the bottom half of his face crumpling beneath the blow. The impact knocked him aside, but before he was out of sight Anvindr saw a copious spurt of blood come from his ruined face.

There was no time to worry about Gulbrandr, as both Hoenir and Tormodr were running to Anvindr’s aid. Hoenir used the body of a dead ork as a step to launch himself into the air, raising his power fist high.

‘For Russ!’ shouted Hoenir. Anvindr’s chainsword was about to break in two when Hoenir dropped, bringing his power fist down where Stumpgutz’s wrists overlapped, causing the ork to release the weapon with a howl. Stumpgutz battered Hoenir aside with one huge hand, tremendously strong even with a damaged wrist, but by then Tormodr was in close with his flamer.

‘Burn, xenos filth,’ he rumbled, a torrent of promethium from his flamer causing the ork to bellow further still, stumbling backwards across the chamber, unsteady on his tall artificial legs.

Anvindr knew this was his moment, while Stumpgutz was off-balance. He ran

straight at the warboss, firing a burst from his bolter, and this time Stumpgutz was too busy trying to stay on his feet to dodge. Bolter-rounds slammed into Warboss Stumpgutz's head and torso, some deflected by armour but others exploding within vulnerable flesh. He stumbled again, managing to control his descent enough to land on one knee rather than fall flat.

Then Sindri was in close, rolling beneath the wild flail of an arm by Stumpgutz, swinging upwards to jam his own chainsword into the warboss' neck.

'Hold him!' cried Sindri, and as Stumpgutz scrambled to grab him and pull the Space Wolf away, one long arm was seized by Hoenir's power fist while another was held by Tormodr, who wrapped himself around it to hold it back. Stumpgutz's bionic legs scraped back and forth against the rocky floor but couldn't help him escape.

He roared with rage, unleashing a torrent of incomprehensible orkish insults.

As his brothers held the warboss down, Anvindr ran up to Sindri and put his hands over Sindri's on the chainsword.

'Together!' he cried, adding his strength, helping Sindri to force the chainblade deep into the sinew of the warboss' neck. Blood poured down the blade, the motion of the teeth dispersing it as a fine red spray.

Then any resistance against the chainblade was gone, and with a judder Warboss Stumpgutz, scourge of the Alixind System, finally died.

The ork's limbs went limp, allowing Tormodr and Hoenir to let go, dropping them to the floor. Anvindr let go of Sindri and stepped back.

'They never die easily, do they?' sighed Hoenir, flat on his back.

Sindri put his booted foot to the dead ork's chin and used it as leverage to pull his chainsword free.

'Anvindr,' Sindri said with a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth, 'will you have the honour of taking the head yourself?'

Sindri gestured towards the dead warboss, then gave an exaggerated look of shock at where Anvindr's chainsword lay broken on the floor.

'Careless,' he said, shaking his head sadly. 'Careless, to break your weapon like that.'

'I recognise my failing,' replied Anvindr drily, 'and will be sure to correct it.'

Then he remembered Gulbrandr.

'Take the head,' Anvindr told Sindri, running over to where Gulbrandr had fallen. He could not believe that in his moment of victory he had briefly forgotten one of his pack was down. What was victory if the pack did not claim

it as one?

Gulbrandr was lying still on the filthy ground, face down so that Anvindr could not see his injuries, just the pool of blood spreading beneath him.

Anvindr was about to turn Gulbrandr over on to his back when a gauntlet on his shoulder stopped him.

‘Easy,’ said Sindri. ‘I saw the blow, turn him over without care and you might worsen the wound.’

‘Didn’t I order you to take the beast’s head?’ Anvindr spat.

There was a revving of Sindri’s chainsword from across the chamber, the grinding of the sword digging into thick muscle and bone.

‘Young Hoenir is fit to the task,’ said Sindri. ‘I felt over-dressed still holding my sword, now you have chosen to discard yours. Let’s turn our brother together.’

Anvindr nodded, and he and Sindri carefully turned Gulbrandr over, Sindri reaching under to support Gulbrandr’s neck at the back as Anvindr shifted the bulk of his armoured weight.

It was an ugly wound. Stumpgutz’s powerful kick had indeed crushed Gulbrandr’s jaw and torn open part of his neck, a wound that continued to bleed, albeit slower than before. His eyes were closed, the lids grey.

‘Brother?’ asked Sindri. ‘Do you still live?’

There was a grunt and a cough from Gulbrandr, blood trickling down from the centre of his mouth. He didn’t open his eyes, but tried to speak, finding that the words would not come from his broken face. Gulbrandr collapsed into a further series of coughs, spitting blood.

‘Silence brother, the boss is dead,’ said Anvindr. ‘Do not try and speak, let us help you stand.’

Anvindr and Sindri helped Gulbrandr to his feet. He was a dead weight.

Around them, the smoke in the throne room was thickening. Anvindr heard a rumble and a creak from somewhere nearby. A large flaming pylon toppled from high above, and landed nearby with a crash and shower of cinders.

‘Hoenir, get that head,’ said Anvindr. ‘Tormodr, come help carry Gulbrandr. We need to leave before this place collapses in on itself.’

They regrouped following the attack that had left Barro dead. Captain Anju Badya and her squad had spent hours riding back and forth searching for escaping orks. There had been the occasional individual greenskin, but the squad had not been overrun again.

Their patrols had brought them to a position with a clear view of the fortress. Most of that structure was now a skeleton of blackened wreckage, with only a few visible fires burning.

Captain Badya hadn't seen any ork survivors in a while.

One of her riders whistled for her attention. She turned to watch as a large section of exterior wall collapsed like an avalanche, a stretch covering perhaps a sixth of the fortress perimeter just falling in on itself, huge chunks of blackened metal rolling across the plain, followed by an expanding cloud of ash.

'Nothing's walking out of there,' said Khai, wounded but still alive.

It was then that they saw the figures, the same five that had disappeared into the fortress earlier.

Five Space Wolves, one of whom was carrying one of his fellows on his back, while another carried the largest ork head that Captain Anju Badya had ever seen.

'Ejad,' shouted Badya. 'Ride to the Wolves and tell them that their brothers return, and they have both their prize and injured.'

Ejad nodded wordlessly, pulled on the reins of his horse and rode away back towards camp.

With the head retrieved, the cannons resumed firing for a few hours to pound the remains of Warboss Stumpgutz's fortress into the ground, and then all was silence on the plain of Durr. The Alixind campaign was over.

As night fell, celebrations began in the encampments of the Imperium forces. For the last months of the campaign, the Tallarn 14th and the Fourth Company of the Space Wolves had been encamped here in a sprawling temporary city of tents and mobile support units. Now the campfires burned high, and desert riders and Wolf brothers alike gathered to celebrate their victory.

They did so separately in their own ways. The Tallarns, as was their way, sat close around the fires, conserving warmth against the hard desert night, talking in low whispers of comrades lost in battles both recent and long ago.

The Space Wolves had their own traditions.

'My money is on the youngster,' said Sindri, in between gulps from a large tankard. 'Tormodr may have strength on his side, but Hoenir has youth.'

'Youth?' replied Anvindr, snorting. 'Hoenir has exactly as many winters behind him as you.'

'And am I not still young, even after all these decades?' demanded Sindri in

mock outrage.

Yes, you are, thought Anvindr, looking upon Sindri's unlined face in the firelight. But he didn't say that out loud.

With Anvindr silent, Sindri looked elsewhere for support. He turned as if to find Gulbrandr, who usually sat back from the fire, then remembered that Gulbrandr wasn't there. He was recovering, and would continue to recover, but his absence was felt around the fire. They were a close pack, whatever their differences, and any absence amongst them was always felt.

'Brother Gulbrandr would support me,' said Sindri stubbornly.

'When he wakes, you will already have been proven wrong,' said Anvindr.

Gulbrandr had been lucky. A blow that hard would cut the thread of a normal human, but Gulbrandr was a Space Marine and would recover once his jaw had been rebuilt.

Sindri was about to object to Anvindr, but the fight began before he could speak. Tormodr and Hoenir were wearing most of their armour, but without their helmets or the pelts and adornments that might provide treacherous handholds. They ran at each other and fell into a grappling hold, both trying to bring the other to the ground. When they clashed it was with a great clang and a shriek of metal as their breastplates smashed into each other then ground together.

Sindri made a gagging noise, as if his drink was foul.

'That sound!' he exclaimed over the metallic grinding. 'It's like knives sharpening in my skull, a stink for the ears.'

Anvindr couldn't help laughing.

Hoenir had the advantage, as Sindri had said he would. Hoenir had a better footing, and beneath Tormodr's thick grey moustache his mouth was set in a grimace of effort as he tried to maintain his position.

It seemed to be all over as Tormodr lost his footing and began to be pulled over by Hoenir, but then Tormodr stepped right into a stronger position, and allowed Hoenir's own momentum to cause the red-headed warrior to slip forward. Tormodr took advantage of that momentum to grab Hoenir by the waist and pitch him face forward into the fire with a crunch of burning timber.

Leaving Hoenir face down in the flames, Tormodr walked over to where Sindri sat, plucked the tankard from his grasp, and drained the contents in one swig. He then dropped the empty tankard in Sindri's lap.

'Gracious in victory as ever,' said Sindri, calling for a kaerl to refill his cup.

Tormodr chuckled his deep, low laugh and reached out a hand to help Hoenir stand up.

‘One day, brother, one day,’ said Hoenir, shaking burning embers from his hair. His skin was red from the fire, but already healing. He gratefully accepted Anvindr’s cup, and took a deep swig. He rolled the liquid around his mouth and stared thoughtfully into the cup.

‘Foul,’ he said. ‘Absolutely foul.’

‘Big words,’ said Sindri, ‘from a man who just tasted burning coals.’

‘If you wish to take on mighty Tormodr,’ said Hoenir, ‘I am sure he will oblige.’

Tormodr grunted his assent.

Sindri shook his head.

‘No need,’ he said. ‘After today’s victory we should not be contesting each other, brothers. We should be revelling in our glory! The humans lost this whole system to the greenskins, and we came from the heavens to take it back. We have slain their nightmares, and delivered the head of the monster. No wonder they look upon us as gods.’

‘We are not gods,’ said Anvindr uneasily. ‘We just have a sliver of godlike power gifted to us.’

‘True,’ conceded Sindri.

‘Besides,’ said Anvindr, ‘the mortals fought this campaign as much as we did, and have died in many greater numbers. We could not have won this campaign without the Tallarns or—’

‘True, true, all true,’ said Sindri. ‘The humans die easily, albeit sometimes bravely— this is true.’ Sindri paused for effect. ‘But were they the ones that brought back the warboss’ head?’

Anvindr laughed aloud, and so suddenly that he was surprised by the sound of the deep and rolling laughter that came out of him.

‘No, we took the warboss’ head,’ he told Sindri once his own laughter had subsided. ‘We definitely did that.’

‘Then let us celebrate our great victory,’ said Sindri, raising his cup. ‘As conquerors of this system, who came and took the head of the monster.’

Sindri’s voice was loud enough to reach other campfires, and when Anvindr’s pack cheered together it could be heard echoed by other packs through the dark of the encampment.

Anvindr sat back and watched his pack, or at least most of them, celebrate. Sindri was right to mark the moment. It had been a long campaign, and they had fought well. In an endless life of battle, this had been a good and notable victory to be spoken of and remembered, passed down in the verbal records of the Vlka

Fenryka. There was something in Sindri's manner and humour, his dismissive attitude to lesser mortals and his jokes about being a god, that rankled Anvindr – but then that was just Sindri's way. He was a natural joker, a taunter and a mocker, and in spite of that he had saved Anvindr and every other member of his pack a hundred times over. Let him have his ways.

They had all survived this campaign, even Gulbrandr. That was a reason to celebrate and enjoy each other's company, regardless of faults. The pack fought on.

The one loss the pack had suffered, that of Liulfr, had been long ago but still ached at Anvindr like an old wound in the cold. He still blamed Liulfr's death on the Inquisitor's lackey, Interrogator Pranix. It had been Pranix's scheming and keeping of secrets that had prevented Anvindr and his Wolves from sooner defeating the daemon hidden within Hrondir's tomb, and Anvindr blamed Pranix more for Liulfr's death than the daemon itself.

Anvindr shook his head. This was a night for celebrating recent victories, not for dwelling on ancient defeats.

Something broke the darkness of the sky above, a fiery streak that passed overhead and disappeared past the line of tents behind them.

'See?' asked Sindri. 'The heavens drop stars from the sky in our honour.'

'Perhaps,' rumbled Tormodr. 'But only if stars fire their afterburners to slow their descent.'

'A ship?' asked Anvindr.

Tormodr nodded. 'One that must have landed not far from here, on that path of descent.'

'Let's go find this ship before the mortals do,' said Anvindr, reaching to pick up the scabbard containing his chainsword, before remembering with a curse that he didn't have it anymore. He checked his bolter instead before re-holstering it. 'If Sindri's right and the heavens honour us, it is only fair we should get there first.'

The Wolves had to cut through the Imperial Guard encampments in order to exit the camp on the side the meteor fell. Uniformed men and women rushed out of their way as the four giant Space Marines stomped through their camp and towered over them.

At the perimeter, a group of Cadians were preparing to move out to where they had seen the ship land, and Anvindr spoke to their lieutenant.

'We'll engage first,' he told the mortal. 'Inform your commanders and the

Wolf Lord, so that the camp may prepare.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said the Cadian, and as he went to relay his reports they set out into the desert.

They found it over a bluff, a small space vehicle stuck in the desert sands, embedded at an angle and covered in scars and scorch marks from entering the atmosphere. It was rounded and crude, an unwieldy vehicle, but it bore the aquila and ornamental skull insignia of a vehicle of the Imperium, as well as an unusual sigil with nine interlinked spheres.

‘Lacusian,’ said Sindri, indicating the linked spheres. ‘Remember them?’

‘Remind me,’ snapped Anvindr. So many worlds and armies he had encountered, he lost track. So old now...

‘Lacusians. The Hollow Worlds,’ said Sindri. ‘That’s their mark. Their guard wore green jackets. They were everywhere when we fought the tau.’

Anvindr remembered now. The Hollow Worlds, a system of artificial planets. He had never been there, but Imperial Guard regiments from those worlds had fought alongside the Wolves against the tau, a campaign that had ended for Anvindr in Hrondir’s tomb.

Allies, then. But what was a ship bearing the marks of both the Hollow Worlds and the Inquisition doing here?

The Wolves circled the ship, which was still white-hot from re-entry. Shortly, a rectangular panel in one side of the ship opened and a feeble glow came from inside: the red pulse of emergency lighting. Silhouetted within that dim light was a very dishevelled, but definitely human, man.

Anvindr tentatively lowered his bolter. The man had very little hair on his head, but wore a short, unkempt beard. Anvindr knew little of the ageing patterns of normal humans, but considered this man to be neither a child nor elderly. Beneath the beard, the dirty clothes and the overgrown fingernails, there was also something he recognised about this man.

His memory took him back to when he had stood in Hrondir’s tomb, with the Inquisitor Montiyf and the young Interrogator in his plain robes. This man was older, balder, carrying slightly more weight, but the eyes and manner, those were unmistakable. Anvindr found himself almost unconsciously lifting his bolter back up, taking a bead on the man before him. Sindri had been right in spite of himself, this was a portent of some kind, or a gift from the stars.

‘Captain Godrichsson,’ croaked the man, his voice clearly unused for a long time.

‘Interrogator,’ growled Anvindr through clenched teeth. The rank of captain was one the Space Wolves did not use, and this man knew it.

‘Inquisitor now,’ said the man, leaning on the interior frame of the ship hatch. He was clearly physically weak from his journey, and could not move out of the ship until the exterior had cooled sufficiently to touch. He was stuck standing where he was, in Anvindr’s sights.

‘Pranix,’ the Space Wolf hissed, his finger tightening around the trigger of his bolter.

‘Pranix?’ asked Hoenir. ‘That Pranix?’

‘Aye,’ grumbled Tormodr, raising his flamer.

‘So it is,’ said Sindri, quietly for once, without humour.

They all looked to Anvindr who looked to Hoenir, the only one of them who had not met Pranix before in Hrondir’s tomb. The only one with no reason to have let a grudge stew for long decades.

‘I am with you in whatever you decide,’ said Hoenir, also raising his weapon.

‘Nine worlds,’ croaked Pranix, with something that might have been a parched laugh. ‘Nine worlds fallen to the tyrant, and you think I’m the enemy?’ He leaned forwards, head low, and let out a chuckle, then threw back his head and laughed hysterically.

Anvindr realised the Inquisitor was delirious. Perhaps that was what stayed his hand. Or perhaps it was the memory that he had not acted against Pranix when he had the chance, all those years ago, and it had only been in the intervening decades that his resentment had stewed into murderous hatred. Had he lost his way?

‘I have wasted my journey,’ said Pranix, possibly to himself, but audible to Anvindr’s enhanced hearing. ‘All is lost.’

Then he collapsed backwards into the ship doorway.

Anvindr cursed, lowering his gun.

‘Help me get him out of there,’ he barked to Sindri.

‘What?’ demanded Sindri, outraged, his weapon still raised.

‘Just do it, damn you,’ shouted Anvindr, advancing on the ship, though he sympathised with Sindri’s bafflement.

Anvindr had wanted to kill this man for so long, but the nature of Pranix’s arrival, fleeing some great enemy of the Imperium, overrode Anvindr’s own desires. The Hollow Worlds, fallen to some tyrant? That could not be ignored, regardless of personal enmities.

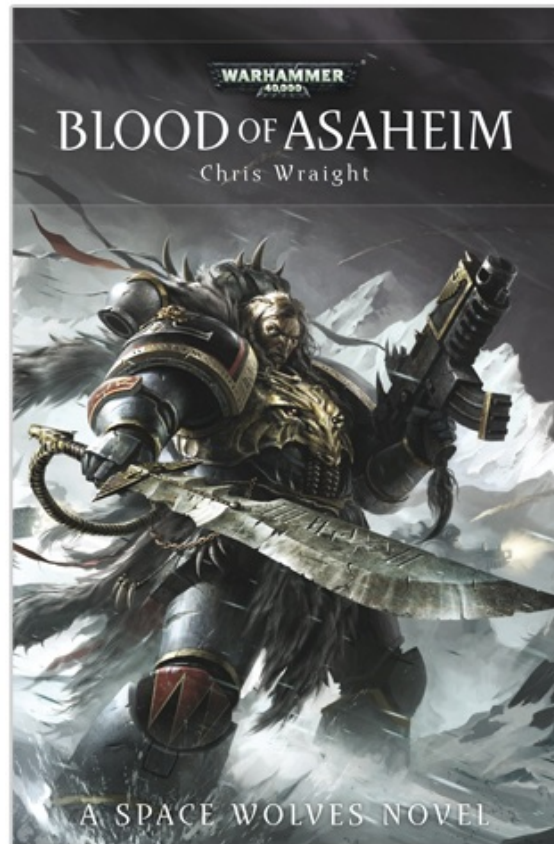
Like it or not, and Anvindr hated it, one thing was certain – for now at least.

If they were to find out what calamity had occurred, if they were to rectify it and save the Hollow Worlds for the Emperor... they needed Inquisitor Pranix alive.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mark Clapham is the author of the Warhammer 40,000 novel *Iron Guard* and the short stories 'The Siege of Fellguard', 'The Hour of Hell', 'In Hrondir's Tomb' and 'Sanctified', which appeared in the anthology *Fear the Alien*. He lives and works in Exeter, Devon.

After a half century serving in the Deathwatch, a Space Wolf makes an uneasy return to his pack-brothers. The Wolves must put their disagreements to one side however, as they are sent to defend a vital Imperial world from an assault by the corrupt forces of the Plague God.



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