

WARHAMMER
40,000



LUKAS

THE TRICKSTER

JOSH REYNOLDS

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LUKAS

THE TRICKSTER



JOSH REYNOLDS



BLACK LIBRARY



WARHAMMER 40,000

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.

PART ONE

HELWINTER



CHAPTER ONE

THE WOLF

640.M41

Wolves howled.

Pack leaders crashed together. Avalanches of muscle and fur, sweeping together from opposite sides. Inevitable as death. Their shadows spun and fought across the walls of the *Aettergeld*, a narrow chamber of rock with high sloping walls and a massive nave set between the two halves of an immense horseshoe-shaped table.

The chamber was lit only by the glow of the firepits that ran down its centre, lambent shadows crowding the edges as if trying to creep away from those of the combatants. Ancient battle-banners hung from the ceiling, rippling in the intense heat. Weapons and other, less obvious trophies marked the roughly carved walls. Cheers and whistles pierced the air. The benches were packed and *mjod* flowed freely.

Naturally, there was an audience. Wolves didn't have secrets from each other. At least, not that they would admit.

Lukas the Trickster sat well back from all the excitement, near the largest of the firepits that dotted the chamber. He leaned on a massive wolf, idly scratching it

between the ears. ‘Who do you think it’ll be, then?’ He glanced down at the wolf. The great beast grunted and made to roll over, uninterested in conversation. Lukas chuckled and set his legs across the back of another wolf.

He leaned back amid the massive hairy bodies that lay about him in untidy piles. The smell of wet fur and animal musk enveloped him. In the close environs of the chamber, that smell wasn’t unpleasant, but it was impossible to ignore. There were a dozen or more sleeping wolves around him, a full pack. The brutes often sought the warmth of the Aett in the colder seasons, where meat and water were freely available as well. Wolves were opportunists at heart – it was one of the reasons Lukas enjoyed their company.

‘You are most hospitable companions, for all that you smell awful,’ he said, turning to study the ancient banners and battle-worn trophies hanging from the walls. Since the setting of the Fang’s roots, the Aettergeld had been used as a place of judgement and sentencing. Sven Ironhand had declared his exile here, and Garn Felltooth had bared his throat to the Great Wolf’s axe. Disputes were weighed, blood-prices paid and the guilty condemned. It was a place of debts owed and restitutions made.

Lukas had been in this chamber a hundred times before, and would be a hundred times more before his thread was at last severed by Morkai’s jaws. That was his wyrd, and he was content in it. He was a sour note in the song of heroes, a fact he prided himself on. Of what possible interest was a perfect song? Better to be interesting than perfect.

Lukas knew he was many things – lazy, disrespectful, often unhygienic – but never boring. He was the only man living who had killed a doppelgangrel by hand, and the only warrior to ever have taken a punch from Berek Thunderfist and remain standing.

He was the Jackalwolf. The Strifeson. The Laughing One. The Trickster. The warriors of the Rout collected names the way a child might collect shells. Each name came with a story, a saga of heroism or foolishness. Sometimes both. Every warrior was a collection of stories, with the same beginning and only one end.

A roar went up from the gathered Wolf Guard as one of the combatants was sent rolling through a firepit. The warrior leapt to his feet and tore his burning shirt from his frame. Even un-armoured, the strength of the fighters was such that they could burst stone and warp metal. One ill-timed blow and a Great Company would be electing a new Wolf Lord before the day was out.

Benches had been upended in the struggle. Braziers spilled crackling embers

across the floor, and a rug made from the slick pelt of a sea troll was burning. In the centre of the chamber, the two mighty figures came together again, snarling and cursing. The gathered huscarls stomped their feet, adding thunder to the storm.

Helwinter had come round at last, and it was time for the Jackalwolf to find a new pack. Or, rather, for a new pack to be burdened with the Jackalwolf. The jarls drew sticks until only two remained. Then, as was tradition, those two would beat each other bloody until one yielded. A simple procedure, and an entertaining one.

Lukas felt a faint vibration as the storm outside lashed at the mountain. The few lumens in the hall flickered. No one noticed, preoccupied as they were by the sight of two Wolf Lords pummelling each other into bloody surrender. The two warriors were of a similar size and bulk, giants among giants. Leathery faces tanned by glare and hardened by age rippled in savage snarls. Distended jaw lines bulged as fangs snapped. Yellow eyes glared with kill-lust. The other jarls circled the combatants, shouting encouragement.

Not all of them were in attendance on this momentous occasion. He knocked on a wolf's head with his knuckle. 'No sign of my old sparring partners, Hrothgar Ironblade or Berek Thunderfist. Gunnar Red Moon is in hiding. And Egil Iron-Wolf is nowhere in sight, which is something of a relief, if I'm being honest.' Part of Lukas dreaded the day he would be foisted on that pack. The smell of machine oil alone would kill him.

'No sign of the Great Wolf either. Of course, while Grimnar often boasts of sharing the burdens of duty with his subordinates, he has ever avoided this one.' Lukas snorted and ran his hand through the crimson tangles of his beard. 'Given that he was the one who made it a tradition, maybe he's exempt – or maybe he has simply had a bellyful of me.'

The absences left only a few familiar faces. Engir Krakendoom, obviously. Lukas paid little attention to his current jarl. Despite his best efforts, he looked like a condemned man on the cusp of reprieve, something Lukas took as a compliment.

From where he sat, he could hear the wagers that flew fast between the huscarls, weighing the merits of both warriors. Kjarl Grimblood was the older, his slate grey hair and beard whipping about as he drove a crushing blow against the side of his opponent's skull. Bran Redmaw staggered, but replied in kind almost instantly. His mane of hair stood up stiff on his scalp, and his veins bulged like tension cables. He champed his teeth spasmodically as he struck

Grimblood again and again, pummelling him.

‘You are the one who can see the future, Grimblood,’ Redmaw roared, his words echoing through the chamber. ‘You know how this ends.’

‘The future the fire showed me wasn’t this one,’ Grimblood snarled. His big fists, scarred and gnarled, struck like pistons, matching his opponent blow for blow. ‘He isn’t my wyrd, not this season. Take him and be damned!’

‘If I were not used to it, I might be insulted,’ Lukas murmured to one of the wolves. The beast yawned at him, and he scratched it behind the ears. ‘Still, that too is tradition, and who am I to gainsay it, eh?’ The wolf didn’t reply. Then, they never did. Another reason he preferred their company to that of his brothers. Lukas chuckled as Grimblood struck Redmaw a resounding blow. ‘Another hit like that, and the decision is made.’

Lukas was interested to see who would win this time. Who would he be this season? ‘Not all Wolf Lords need a Jackalwolf,’ he said, idly stroking one of the wolves. ‘Some are in want of a Laughing One. Others need the Strifeson. Different faces for different places.’ The wolf passed gas and kicked gently, showing what it thought of that. Lukas waved a hand in front of him, trying to disperse the smell. ‘You still smell better than Iron-Wolf.’

Lukas was many stories tangled together, and the one he told depended on the audience. For Krakendoom, he had played the part of instigator and agitator, shaking his self-satisfied warriors out of a long complacency. What part he would play in the coming season depended on who lost the fight.

Redmaw snatched up a bench, scattering those members of the Wolf Guard who had been sitting on it. He struck Grimblood with it, hurling him to the floor in a cloud of splinters. Grimblood groaned and rolled over, spitting blood. He sat up and waved Redmaw away as the other jarl stalked towards him. ‘Enough, brother. Enough. I can feel my brains sloshing in my skull from that last hit.’

‘Do you yield, then?’ Redmaw demanded.

‘Aye, I do. Give me a moment – the world is spinning.’ Grimblood accepted a helping hand from one of the other jarls and was hauled to his feet. He tenderly probed his jaw. ‘I yield,’ he said more formally.

Redmaw thrust his fist up, and those warriors loyal to him began to cheer louder still and slam their fists on the table. Redmaw looked at the other Wolf Lords. ‘You heard him. I win. The Jackalwolf is his burden for the coming season.’ Lukas frowned, resolving to stick something unpleasant in Redmaw’s mjod when next the opportunity presented itself.

‘It is done, then,’ Engir Krakendoom said. Dark of skin and temperament alike,

the Krakendoom had a voice as deep as the seas. ‘He is your burden now, the way he has been mine, and Goresson’s before me.’ He gestured to Finn Goresson. The other Wolf Lord was tattooed from head to toe and stank of bear grease and weapon oil. He tugged on the crimson braid of his beard and narrowed his amber eyes.

‘Aye, and you’re welcome to the bastard.’

‘My thanks, brother,’ Grimblood spat. Lukas almost laughed to see his expression. He restrained himself, though. Best to let tempers cool.

‘We all agreed to share this... responsibility,’ Krakendoom rumbled. He glanced back towards Lukas. Lukas waved cheerily, and the jarl looked away.

‘We swore an oath before the Lord of Runes and the Great Wolf.’

‘I remember,’ Grimblood growled.

‘Of course you do. You’re just being petulant.’ Redmaw grinned, and Grimblood started for him again. Krakendoom stepped between them, his dark features stern.

‘Stop it, the pair of you. Bickering like Blood Claws. Is this so onerous a duty that you take it as an insult?’ It was, and they did, whatever Krakendoom liked to pretend. Lukas took no offence. Such was his wyrd, and theirs by extension.

‘Ask Hrothgar,’ Grimblood said. ‘Wait, you can’t, because he isn’t here, and so has managed to avoid this whole farce. And for the second time in a row. Just like that fat bear, Gunnar, or that cog-toothed brute, Egil.’

‘They have their duties, as we have ours.’ Krakendoom crossed his arms. ‘Will you yield to your wyrd, Kjarl Grimblood? Or will you force another to take your place?’

Grimblood let loose a snarl of frustration. His shoulders slumped. ‘No. No, the burden is mine, and bestowed fairly, as I said. I will take responsibility for the Jackalwolf until the next Helwinter. But not a day longer!’ He glared about him. ‘And I’ll damn well make sure each and every one of you is here to take your own chances with it.’

Redmaw laughed harshly. ‘You’ll have to catch me first.’

Lukas threw back his head and laughed at that. All eyes turned towards him. One of the wolves whined, and Lukas thumped the beast cheerfully. ‘Finally,’ he called out. ‘I was getting bored, waiting for you to come to a decision, brothers.’

He wondered which mask Grimblood warranted. Looking at that sour face, he thought he knew. Grimblood was a warrior of ominous mien. It was said by those deep in their cups that he could read the future in flames. He saw portents and carved the future to his liking, with blade and whisper alike. Seers always

took themselves too seriously.

‘On your feet, Blood Claw,’ Grimblood rumbled as he stalked towards the newest member of his pack. His beard was stiff with drying blood, and his gaze was hot with barely restrained fury. ‘You could stand, at least, when your fate is being decided.’

Lukas’ smile widened. He made no move to stand. ‘No, I am comfortable here.’

Grimblood grunted and looked down at the wolves. ‘I wonder why they haven’t eaten you yet.’ He glared at Lukas. ‘Perhaps you are too venomous, even for them.’

Lukas grinned. ‘Maybe they just appreciate my jokes.’

‘I suppose someone must.’

Lukas rose. ‘Oh, I have some fine jokes in mind for you, Grimblood, never fear,’ he said softly. ‘We’ll have such fun, you and I.’

‘No. We will not.’

Lukas peered at him. ‘You know better than that, Grimblood.’ The close air was thick with the stink of fading violence mingling with filter-engine lubricant and the harsh tang of promethium that clung stubbornly to Grimblood. It was said that the warriors of Kjarl Grimblood’s Great Company exulted in the smell of roasting flesh. Lukas thought that perhaps they had simply grown so used to it they no longer noticed it.

‘You will not. Not this time.’ Grimblood glowered at him. ‘No more of your pranks.’

Lukas cocked his head. ‘And who will stop me, brother? Not you, I think. Not unless the flames say otherwise.’ He laughed again and bent towards the fire. ‘Well? How about it, eh? What do you think?’ He cupped his ear and made a show of listening. He frowned and straightened. ‘They say I’ll keep you chasing your tail for months.’

Grimblood lunged and caught Lukas by his beard. He jerked the Blood Claw forward and drove a punch into his face. Lukas flopped back onto his backside with a strangled yelp. Several of the wolves heaved themselves upright, snarling. Grimblood snarled back, silencing the beasts.

‘I am your jarl. You will respect me, fool.’

The chamber had fallen silent. Lukas laughed thickly. ‘You are easier to provoke than Krakendoom, jarl. That bodes well for one of us.’ The blood from his shattered nose had already ceased its flow, and as he sat up he twisted his snout back into place in a flurry of popping cartilage. He grinned up at the Wolf Lord, and Grimblood’s hands curled into fists, ready to strike again.

Lukas rose smoothly and dragged the back of his hand across his face, smearing more blood than he removed. Idly, he reached out and wiped his hand on Grimblood's furs, never taking his eyes from their owner's face. 'Respect,' he said finally. 'Respect is only earned, jarl. Never given. Now come. There is a tradition to be upheld. Let us get it over with.'

For a moment, he thought Grimblood would strike him again. Instead, the jarl turned away. 'You are not here to give orders, Strifeson,' he growled dismissively. 'You are here to follow them.'

'Then command me, oh seer.' Lukas bowed low, eliciting a chuckle from several of the Wolf Lords and the gathered huscarls. Krakendoom silenced them all with a sharp gesture.

'Bare your throat and be silent until asked to speak, Laughing One.' Lukas inclined his head, not quite respectfully, and waited. Krakendoom cleared his throat. Around the chamber, huscarls and thegns began to strike the tables with their flagons, setting the rhythm of the saga to come. 'Before us stands the accused. I shall speak his list of crimes.'

And so it began, another tradition. A slow recitation of his every misdeed committed during his time with the Krakendoom, accompanied by the crashing of flagons and the stamping of feet. There was some laughter, for even the most humourless of jarls could see the comical joy of rerouting waste pipes into private chambers, or shearing the locks of a sleeping warrior so that his proud mane was reduced to stubble. Fewer laughed at the hiding of hard-won battle trophies, or the vulgar altering of the deep-scored runes on a boastful warrior's battle-plate. None voiced any support of the dousing of an unlucky Long Fang in troll pheromones and the unfortunate occurrences that followed.

Through it all, Lukas smiled. He bared his fangs in a joyous grin. A challenging grin. It was always the same, this ceremony. A mock court, condemnation without punishment. It was up to his jarl to punish him, when and if he saw fit. Krakendoom had once tied him hand and foot to a length of tow cable and kicked him out the back of a Stormfang gunship. He had been left to dangle above storm-tossed seas as the ship completed its patrol of the skies around Asaheim. Others had done worse. Some didn't bother.

When Krakendoom had finished his recitation, he said, 'You have heard the list of your crimes. What say you?'

'Only that I am sorry I couldn't do more with the time allotted to me.' At Krakendoom's snarl of rage, Lukas threw back his head and gave a howl of laughter. Huscarls stomped and clapped, or jeered mockingly. Their jarls roared

for silence. Lukas raised his voice to be heard over the clamour. 'But our time will come again, my jarl. Like Fenris itself, my orbit is set, and endless.'

'Keep laughing and it won't be,' Redmaw growled. 'Perhaps we should end this useless farce once and for all, and you with it.' He looked around, seeking support from the others. 'I cannot be the only one wondering why we must endure this madness. He should have been dealt with long ago, and we all know it.'

Lukas laughed harder. 'And what will you do, Redmaw? Gobble me up?' He clapped his hands and whistled. 'I'd like to see you try, Cursed One. I'd cut my way out of your overstretched gullet before the next cycle.'

Redmaw started to reach for Lukas, but the sharp sound of an iron ferrule striking stone stopped him. Lukas' laughter trailed off as the sound was repeated. His hackles stiffened and he glanced at the doors, knowing what he would see even before he did so.

A tall figure stood at the end of the hall, and the fires there dimmed as if something had drawn the strength from them. A murmur ran along the tables. The Rune Priest was clad in full battle-plate, as if for war. Runes had been hammered into the grey ceramite, and savage totems hung from the recesses of his armour. He held a staff topped with a wolf's skull, its surface marked with twisting sigils. His beard was like frost, spilling down his chest-plate, and his face sagged with ritual scars where it wasn't hidden beneath faded tribal tattoos. 'Has the choice been made, jarls?'

Grimblood cleared his throat. 'You honour us with your presence, Hrek Galerunner.' Lukas could smell the magic clinging to the newcomer. It caused the air to twist and stalk itself in confusing ways, the firepits dimming as the Rune Priest passed them and flaring anew in his wake.

'Has a choice been made?' Galerunner growled again.

Grimblood nodded. 'Aye, for better or worse.' He shot a glance at Lukas. 'He is my burden this season. My responsibility.'

'Good. All is well, then.' The Rune Priest thumped the floor with the ferrule of his heavy staff once more, and the stones rang like bells. The air stank of ozone. He drove the staff down a final time, hard enough to crack the stone beneath. 'The thread is spun. The runes cast. And this farce is ended. I come to escort him to his new pack, as tradition dictates.'

Grimblood bowed his head. 'As it has always been, so will it be.' He turned to Lukas. 'Go. And if you are wise, I will not see your face until the next Helwinter.'



CHAPTER TWO

BLOOD CLAWS

640.M41

Lukas sang something bawdy and inappropriate as Galerunner led him through the corridors of the Aett. The Rune Priest remained determinedly silent for much of the journey, no matter Lukas' provocation. Lukas didn't mind. He was used to it.

Galerunner didn't approve of him, for reasons of his own. Then, Rune Priests weren't known for approving of much. They were a stern lot, with no appetite for jokes. Even the Stormcaller, mightiest of them all, went out of his way to stay as far as possible from Lukas.

He grinned. He knew it had been old Njal's suggestion to pass him from one company to the next, so that none might have to bear the burden of his presence for longer than a few seasons. The Lord of Runes obviously thought him a necessary evil. 'And what can I say to that, save thank you?'

'What was that?' Galerunner asked.

'I said, are we almost there?'

Galerunner grunted. Lukas laughed and resumed his singing. Kaerls and thralls scrambled from their path, seeking other places to be. Whether that was due to

his singing or Galerunner's glowering, Lukas didn't know.

Every Great Company maintained its own halls and armouries in the mountain, and the Grimbloods were no different. The communal chambers of the company's Blood Claws were as far from those of the rest of the company as possible. They clung to the outer edge of the Aett, on the borderland between Jarlheim and the Hould, lost in a maze of long transit corridors and access passages crudely hacked out of bare rock.

Galerunner tugged on his beard, now visibly trying to tune out the noise of Lukas' singing. Lukas began to sing louder, so that his voice carried along the corridor, its echoes racing ahead of them. Galerunner sighed. 'Cease, Lukas. Please.'

Lukas did. He was getting bored, anyway. He grinned at the Rune Priest. 'A timely intervention, by the way. I think Redmaw might have taken my head off if you hadn't arrived when you did.'

'He wouldn't have. Even Redmaw has more respect for tradition than that.' Galerunner looked at him. 'But you should not provoke them. They do not truly hate you, however it might seem. It is the Helwinter, gnawing at the roots of their composure. As it gnaws at us all.'

'But there is truth in the thunder,' Lukas said. 'And I don't mind bearing the brunt of their hate.' He chuckled. 'That is my wyrd, after all. And better me than another, eh? Isn't that what the Lord of Runes decided in his wisdom? That I am to play scapegoat for their frustrations?'

Galerunner snorted. 'Are you truly that content in yourself, brother?'

Lukas shrugged. 'What warrior knows contentment, save on the field of battle?'

'An artful dodge, brother, especially coming from you. But you cannot avoid my blows forever.' Galerunner glanced at him, his eyes dark with the shadow of hard-won knowledge. 'Morkai stalks your trail, as he does us all. He pads after you, inevitable and inexorable. What will you do when you meet him at last? Will you make him a meal worthy of memory? Or will he gulp you down as he has countless others?'

Lukas grinned. 'He will do as he wills, I imagine.'

'And what do you will?'

'I will that I do only as I will.'

'Your path is a crooked one. And few dare follow you down it.' Galerunner looked away. 'I have often wondered what would happen if we did. Once, we might have walked it gladly. Now, we are too far along the path laid out for us by Ironhelm and Grimhammer, and by Russ. The path that stretches straight until it

winds back on itself.' He gestured, and his finger traced a knotwork of electricity in the cold air. It faded, and he said, 'That path is both our salvation and our doom. Grimblood isn't the only one who can see portents in the fire.'

Lukas shrugged. 'Time is a saga, and its ending is one no man can predict.'

The Rune Priest smiled. 'There is a quick mind inside that head. You will need it in days to come.'

'Is that what your runes tell you?'

'No. Merely common sense.' Galerunner sighed. 'Do not pretend that your wyrd was thrust upon you. You chose it, as much as any warrior can. If you are a scapegoat, you are a willing one, demanding that more troubles be added to your burden.'

Lukas grunted and looked away. He brushed aside a thick tangle of power cables descending like loops of vine from the corridor's sub-structure. Lumens flickered dimly along the corridor walls, casting skewed shadows. Cold air whipped through unseen shafts, carrying with it the bite of icy rain and the sound of thunder.

Vast as it was, the Aett was in a constant state of repair, and had been for centuries. Its size was such that it required almost constant maintenance by successive generations of thralls. And with each generation, the knowledge required for such maintenance became rote and ritualised. Whole sections of it had collapsed, or had been flooded during the savage seasons, and would remain so for centuries to come.

The descendants of those first thralls brought in to complete construction of the great fortress still toiled in its depths, their efforts bent to the same tasks their forefathers had begun. There was a crushing sense of monotony to the whole thing.

The thought of such tedium extending across the centuries made him itch. But maybe that was just the sense of confinement getting to him. He had been in the Aett too long. Too many cycles since he had loosed the kill-urge and let the beast inside him have its way.

The corridor shook slightly and the lumens dimmed. Ice pattered across his shoulders. Asaheim was the only constant on Fenris, but it endured its share of upheaval even so. In his youth, he had been told of the Time of Making, and how the Allfather had cast Fenris into the Sea of Stars. He had listened in awe as the skjalds spoke of how Fenris felt the cold of the great darkness and fled back to the warmth of the Wolf's Eye.

But soon, the gaze of the sun grew overly warm, and the world faded into the

cool of the dark. So it was, over the course of the seasons, that Fenris flung itself from heat to chill and back again, and in the process came the savage season – the Helwinter, when the seas rose wild, the ice shifted and the mountains crumbled. A part of him was still that boy, crouching against the coarse wood of his mother’s longship, listening to the others singing to hide the sound of something great and terrible passing beneath the hull.

The storm made his skin itch and his teeth ache. Beneath its growl, he could feel the echoes of the forges ringing upwards from the Hammerhold and the heat of the great geothermal reactors that fed every part of the Aett, from the lowest holds to the sub-orbital docking platforms high above. Nothing would be leaving those platforms for the foreseeable future. Not until the weather cleared. Fenris was never more isolated than in this season.

He shook his head, pushing the thought aside. They had come to an access corridor more damaged than most. The thralls had marked the walls around it with warning runes. Lukas studied them. ‘They like pranks, these pups.’

‘What Blood Claw doesn’t?’

Lukas could feel Galerunner’s eyes on him. ‘The corridor is booby-trapped.’

‘Almost certainly.’

‘How many Blood Claw packs are there under Grimblood’s command?’

‘Six at the moment,’ Galerunner said. ‘They have probably already heard that you are coming. You know how fast news travels in the Aett.’

‘Do you suppose they might throw me a welcome feast?’ Lukas flexed his hands, his knuckles popping like bolt-rounds. Every Blood Claw – save himself – longed to rise in stature among the packs. Headstrong and wilful, most sought to do so in the heat of battle. But others were either more cunning or more determined, and they were quick to take advantage of whatever opportunities came their way. Like, say, attempting to claim the scalp of that most reviled of beasts, the Jackalwolf.

‘Do not kill any of them,’ Galerunner said.

Lukas looked at him. ‘What do you take me for?’

‘Answering that would require more time than I care to waste. I know you, Strifeson. And I know what hides behind that smile. Leave them in one piece – or just don’t touch them.’

Lukas snorted. ‘I give you my oath, priest. Does that satisfy you?’

‘It might, if I thought you had any honour.’

Lukas laughed. ‘Wise. Still, I will not kill any of them. I cannot make such promises in regard to maiming, however. They are Blood Claws, after all, and

lacking in common sense.’

‘Which you would know all about, of course.’

‘Of course. And who better to teach them than me?’ Lukas rubbed his hands together. ‘It will be a gentle lesson, never fear. So soft they will think their mothers have come off the ice to visit.’

‘No one would ever confuse you with their mother, Lukas.’

‘And thank Russ for that.’ Lukas clapped. ‘Probably best I go alone from here. Think of what it would do to my reputation to have a nursemaid with me when I arrive.’ He smiled, but there was no mockery in it. ‘Thank you, brother.’

‘I did nothing, Lukas.’ Galerunner turned away. ‘For good or ill, your wyrd is your own.’ Lukas watched the Rune Priest stride away. Then, shaking his head, he stepped into the access corridor. He stopped almost immediately.

A post had been thrust into the floor ahead of him. Mounted atop it was a skull. Human, but brown with grime and age. On the dome of the cranium, a single rune had been carved – *Hloja*. ‘Laugh’.

A warning, perhaps. Or simply a joke. It was hard to tell with Blood Claws. Lukas stepped past the skull, his eyes sweeping the walls and floor for any sign of tampering. He paused, stooped and scooped up a handful of dust from the drifts that gathered where walls met floor. He took a deep breath and blew the dust ahead of him.

A web of photon beams was revealed. He grinned and stripped off his doppelgangrel pelt. He stepped forward, whirling it about him. Something clicked, and he felt an impact against the folds of his cloak as he was struck by some reeking mass hurled from an unseen launcher. By its smell, he thought it must be the carcass of some small animal. The mass came apart at the point of impact. He heard the hum of many hard little bodies, and caught a whiff of a familiar, acrid odour.

‘Bloodlice.’ He laughed, quickly containing the swarm in his cloak and flinging the carcass away. When he was sure it and they were gone, he gave his cloak a flap and swung it back over his shoulders. ‘Clever, pups. Very clever.’ The creatures usually nested in the corpses of vermin. They would crawl into a ball of twitching bodies, waiting for something to disturb them. Then they would swarm, sting their prey to death, and make a new nest. While the toxins produced by their sting could be dangerous to a mortal, it was merely an irritant to a Space Marine’s enhanced physiology.

At the end of the corridor, a pair of great double doors sagged on their hinges, busted open with too much exuberance one too many times. Lukas carefully

forced them aside, with much groaning of abused mechanisms.

The chamber beyond was a large communal space, crowded with furs and racks of armour and weaponry. Great fireplaces had been gouged into the walls, and unseen flues sucked the smoke up through the porous body of the Aett. Everything was a wash of red and gold, and the smells of cooked meat and spilled mjod mingled with the more pungent odour of excitement.

There were nearly thirty Blood Claws in residence, in various states of drunkenness. The various packs intermingled with little regard for seniority. Some wrestled with one another, sliding and struggling across the stone floor, while others sang loudly and off-key. A few tended to their weapons, or devoured the meat that piled the serving platters lining the great tables of granite and wood. Machine-thralls trundled soundlessly among them, dispensing mjod or removing empty platters.

The noise of their revelry assaulted Lukas' ears. The Blood Claws were wild with youth and strength. Most didn't yet fully understand the changes that even now surged through them. They would grow in might and cunning, if they survived long enough. Most wouldn't. That was the way of it. Death could not be avoided, only postponed.

Silence fell as the more sober Blood Claws registered his presence at last. Whispers raced from one side of the hall to the next as the more observant among them recognised him, their yellow eyes fixed on him.

'Well, this is a disappointment.' Lukas stepped forward and sniffed insolently. 'I was promised a brotherhood of wolves. But all I see before me are mewling pups, barely weaned and all but blind.'

The whispers turned to angry mutterings. Lukas grinned at the tension in the air. Blood Claws were never far from violence. The kill-urge ran hot through them. With age came the ability to control it, but these had yet to learn such a skill. And he was doing his level best to provoke them. 'Well, then – which of you is in charge?' he asked.

'Me.' The Blood Claw was bigger than the others. He had likely been big as a mortal, and had become massive as an aspirant. He pushed himself to his feet. He had shaved half of his scalp, leaving the other half of his hair to jut out from his head like a drake's hood.

Scars and tattoos covered his bare arms and chest, warring for space with thick patches of dark hair. By the smell emanating from his pores, he had been drinking long enough to lose what few inhibitions he might otherwise have had.

'And who are you?'

‘Kadir.’

Lukas bared his teeth and strode into the sea of tables as if he owned them. He flipped the nearest with an easy gesture, spilling drinks and eliciting curses. ‘Well, you’re wrong there, my friend. You are not in charge. I am.’

‘And who are you?’ Kadir snarled.

Lukas spread his arms. ‘Come and find out, pup.’

Kadir bounded towards him with a howl, his long arms outstretched. Lukas sidestepped gracefully, one arm extended. His limb caught the Blood Claw’s throat like an iron bar and flipped the youthful warrior head over heels. He rolled on the floor, gagging. Lukas kicked him in the head. Bone gave with a wet crunch, and Kadir went limp, his heels drumming on the flagstones.

Lukas bent and dragged his unconscious opponent to his feet. ‘He’s fine. Someone sit him in a corner and put a tankard in his hand. He’ll need it when he wakes up.’

‘Blood is coming out of his ears,’ one of the others said hesitantly.

‘As long as it’s just blood,’ Lukas said, shoving the dead weight towards the speaker. ‘Now, someone get me something to drink. That was thirsty work.’

‘Who put you in charge?’ someone growled. Another Blood Claw edged forward, yellow eyes gleaming. His hands flexed as if they were claws. He was shorter than his fellow aspirants, with flat, pugnacious features. His head was a lump on a thick twist of neck, barely visible within an excessively greased and spiked mane of crimson hair.

‘Me. Just now. Weren’t you watching? Shall I do it again? Drink, pups, and be quick. My temper is short and my thirst is long.’ Lukas looked at the one who had spoken. ‘What is your name, little one?’

The Blood Claw lunged. Quietly, this time, without ceremony. They learned quickly. ‘Get him, Ake,’ someone shouted. Lukas met Ake, and their skulls connected with a hollow thud. The Blood Claw reeled, and Lukas’ foot rose to catch him somewhere sensitive. Ake yelped piteously and hobbled back, his eyes watering.

Lukas caught him by the nape of the neck and ran him face-first into the wall. He turned to the others and cracked his knuckles. ‘Next.’

They came in a rush, howling and snarling. Not all of them, but most. Lukas laughed and snatched up a nearby stool. He wielded it like a battle-axe, filling the air with splinters and blood. They fought like heroes. He didn’t. Eyes were gouged, nethers smashed, noses broken, skulls cracked and fingers stamped flat. He trod on feet, dislodged kneecaps and dislocated shoulders. The first wave fell

back, cradling injured limbs and cursing.

‘First lesson, pups – Lukas is in charge. Always. Something to remember, even when your pelts turn grey.’ He sniffed the air. ‘What is that smell?’

It proved to be coming from a young warrior who wore an inordinate number of luck tokens hanging about his neck and threaded through his mane of greasy hair. The Blood Claw shoved his way out of the crowd and stepped forward. Lukas blinked back tears and waved a hand in front of his nose. ‘You smell like something a cave bear left to mark its territory, pup.’

‘I am Halvar, Trickster. I am your doom.’

Lukas raised an eyebrow. ‘Taking this seriously, then? Good.’ He gestured. ‘Come on, then. But not too close. Your stink might kill me before you get a chance to.’

Halvar roared and lunged, tattooed fingers reaching for Lukas’ throat. ‘Not that way, boy, I’ve got reach on you,’ Lukas snarled, hurling the shattered remnants of the stool into the Blood Claw’s face. Halvar clawed at the splinters in his eyes and Lukas jabbed him in the midsection, hard enough to result in an explosive wheeze.

‘Now I’ve stolen your breath. What good are armoured lungs if there’s nothing in them? Go sit down.’ Lukas caught an awkward punch on his forearm and bent, driving his own fist into the side of the Blood Claw’s knee. There was a crack, and Halvar fell, howling, to join several others on the floor.

Another leapt on Lukas from behind and yanked him off his feet. Lukas glanced at him, a tight grin on his face. ‘You look familiar.’ Pale and lean, with jutting, pointed features, he put Lukas in mind of one of the half-starved vulpids that prowled the high places of Asaheim. Lukas snapped his head back and was rewarded with a loud crack. The Blood Claw released him and stumbled away, his nose flattened. Lukas spun to face him. ‘Yes, definitely familiar. Perhaps I met your mother in another life.’ The Blood Claw gave a choked howl and leapt. Lukas dodged to the side. ‘Yes, I recognise those eyes. Are you one of mine, then? I have so many, it’s hard to keep track. What’s your name?’

The Blood Claw wheeled about, eyes bulging. ‘Dag,’ he snarled. ‘I am Dag.’ Lukas ducked a looping blow and drove a fist into the young warrior’s abdomen. The force of the blow nearly lifted the aspirant off his feet.

‘Hello, Dag. I am Lukas.’ The Blood Claw reeled, trying to put some distance between them. Lukas padded after him, smiling. The other warriors – those still on their feet – drew back. They’d had their fun, and there was precious little glory to be won here. Best to let what came next decide it.

‘I take it back, Dag. You’re not one of mine. If you were, you would be able to take a joke.’ Lukas kicked the Blood Claw’s legs out from under him. He crouched over the warrior, took a handful of his hair, and very deliberately slammed his face into the floor.

Lukas rose, a smile on his face. He looked around at the circle of injured and unconscious Blood Claws. ‘I trust I’ve made my point, pups. I am Lukas. And I am in charge now. If anyone disagrees, step up.’ No one did. Lukas nodded. ‘Good. I think we will get along well. I have much wisdom to impart.’ He wiped the blood from his hands onto his clothes. ‘Now... Where’s that drink?’



CHAPTER THREE

THE SERPENT

640.M41

The Duke opened his eyes when the screaming stopped.

The sound spiralled down into hoarse gurgles and then, finally, ceased. ‘Time?’ he asked, without rising. He glanced at the lithe body beside him on the bed and smiled in memory of the pleasures of the night before.

His Sslyth bodyguard hissed something in his own tongue. The serpentine beast slithered into view, the ornate kabalite armour it wore over its narrow, not-quite-human torso rasping softly against its thick scales. A long-fingered hand – one of four – rested on the sculpted pommel of the falchion-like blade sheathed against the Sslyth’s undulating abdomen.

The Duke smiled. ‘Two hours better than last time. Exquisite.’ He rose from his bed, stretching languidly. Muscles popped in pleasing ways, and Traevelliath Sliscus, late of Commorrhagh and its environs, chuckled in anticipation of the day to come.

Sliscus shone with a cold and startling aura, his form restored to the height of perfection by a night spent indulging in the pleasures of pain. Proud of feature and lean of limb, he fancied that he was, in all ways, the epitome of his race,

shorn of pretension and weakness. In him flowed the blood of a lost empire and the wisdom of a race that had been old before the light of the first stars pierced the firmament.

He studied himself in the reflective facets of one of the contorted crystalline figures that stood arrayed about his quarters. Similar expressions of shock and terror marred the narrow features of the statues. Unsurprising, perhaps, given the nature of the art in question. The glass plague turned its victims into living statues, and slowly enough that they could enjoy the experience. He examined his reflection, taking in his lean, vulpine features. It was important to ensure that no flaw marred his face, save by design.

It wasn't vanity. Or, rather, not merely vanity. Imperfection would be viewed as a weakness. Beauty, composure, these were the watchwords of strength. And only the strong survived to ply the Sea of Stars for as long as he had. He turned. 'Is it dead, or merely exhausted?'

The Sslyth glided towards the captive hanging from the wall of the bed chamber. A clawed hand wrenched the dangling head up by its bristly scalp, exposing slack, ruined features. A string of drool dripped to the floor from the zygo's bifurcated jaws, and its ovoid eyes were empty of all awareness. The multi-armed ophidian hissed something. The Sslyth tongue was a deceptively complex language, consisting as it did of a limited vocabulary with innumerable possible inflections. Sliscus had a working knowledge of it, something few of his peers would even consider bothering with.

He nodded idly. 'Not dead, then, but its nerve endings are. Which means it is worse than useless for entertainment purposes.' He gestured. 'Make note of the time and see to its disposal, Sleg. Then fetch another for this evening's entertainments.'

Sleg bowed low, all four hands pressed flat to the deck, before rising and seeing to his task. The Sslyth was laudably efficient in the art of disposal. The ophidian and his coil-kin were coldly professional, unlike many of his followers. They could be relied upon not to get out of hand with his property, so long as they were allowed to indulge their simple-minded desires at a later date. Sliscus commended himself for his foresight in acquiring their services when the opportunity had presented itself.

'Foresight,' he murmured. 'Forewarned, forearmed.' He rubbed his cheek, feeling the smoothness of his flesh, knowing that it wouldn't last. It was a constant battle to remain in fighting trim, out here in realspace. She Who Thirsts prowled at the edges of his consciousness, nibbling delicately at his soul and

vitality. It seemed to require ever more effort with every passing cycle. The more he fed the need, the hungrier it became.

But that was all part of the fun, wasn't it? What good was immortality without challenge? What was life without danger?

He heard the hiss of flesh against silk and the delicate rasp of metal. 'Case in point,' he murmured, turning. His courtesan was awake. The Lhamaean was a thing of chill beauty. A mane of amethyst hair draped her head and shoulders, bound into tight, serpentine locks by lengths of golden wire. Those wires were deadly sharp, he knew, the better to ward off unwelcome caresses. Her veins pulsed dark against pale flesh, and by the faint flush of her cheeks he could tell she had imbibed something while he was distracted. 'Myrta,' he said.

She was on him before he could react, moving with a speed that was chemical in origin. The blade she held was a small, flat thing, easily concealable. Laughing, he slapped her hand aside with his palm. The blade skittered away. He lunged, catching her by the throat. He pivoted and sent her flying, back onto the bed. 'Oh, very good, my lady. As close as you have ever come.'

'Closer than you think,' Myrta said. Her voice was a harsh rasp. Some toxin had scoured her vocal cords long before he acquired her services, roughening them to a brittle edge. She gestured, and he saw that the blade had kissed his chest before he disarmed her, scraping a dark line across his pectoral muscle.

Blood trickled sluggishly from the thin wound, and he smiled as he felt the poison burn through his system. It was swift, but lacking in nuance. He dabbed at the blood and licked it from his fingers. 'A piquant appetiser, dear lady, but not, I fear, at all satisfying. Not up to your usual standards at all.'

'A new mixture,' the courtesan said. She tossed the knife aside, embedding it in a wooden panel. 'Subtlety sacrificed for speed.'

Sliscus nodded. 'Such is the story of us, from beginning to end. Still, a worthy try and another day of life earned.'

'But not freedom.'

'There is no freedom in this existence, my lady. Merely a choice of masters. And you could do worse.' Sliscus smiled benignly and spread his long arms. 'Now, bring me my walking robe, if you would be so kind.'

The robe was a soft thing of sensual, shimmering colours, only some of which could be perceived by the mortal eye. It had been woven from the hair of some species long since exterminated by the barbaric mon-keigh. Its rarity made it even more pleasurable to own and display. Psycho-mesh armour lined its folds, providing discreet protection in the event of early-cycle assassination attempts,

and the material itself was tougher than it looked.

Thus clad, he left his quarters, his courtesan in tow. While Sliscus was content with his robe, Myrta had dressed herself in a suit of intricately decorated kabalite armour over a robe of nocturne-weave. It drank in the ambient light around them, draping her in permanent shadow and making his radiance seem all the brighter. A pair of matched Shaimeshi blades were sheathed on one hip, opposite a gilded splinter pistol.

Slaves shuffled from their path, their cortical control implants clattering. The slaves were chosen without regard to race or gender, though they were colour-coded daily in anticipation of his whims. Today, their flesh was caked with a crimson dust scraped from the dry canal beds of some distant dead world. When mingled with perspiration, it produced a pleasingly pungent musk that accompanied the omnipresent odour of their fear.

‘I believe I shall take my repast in the gardens, Myrta. Would you care to join me?’ Though he phrased it as a question, they both knew it was anything but. Myrta was bound to his whims, whatever her own wishes. She had only the freedom he chose to give her. No more, no less. Only their long association allowed him to read the displeasure on her perfectly sculpted features, and he laughed all the way to the gardens.

The pleasure gardens had been a gift – a bit of arcane technology salvaged from somewhere in one of the Dark City’s tributary realms. The discordant tiers were contained within a dimensional tesseract that occupied one of his ship’s non-essential holds. The artefact had been installed in his flagship by trusted artisans who had subsequently been mutilated in the traditional fashion and cast into the lowest gardens, taking the secret of its construction with them.

It was a space within a space, and inviolate save by invitation. Sliscus had only extended that invitation to a handful of souls, many of whom were even now wandering the dark places of the gardens, lost to poppy dreams and chemical nightmares, their finery long since worn to ragged tatters. A never-ending party that swelled and subsided according to the whims of its host. He inhaled, drinking in the miasma of sweet suffering that inundated the gardens, and felt the ever-present pull of She Who Thirsts abate.

He took a seat at his table among a grove of fungal trees, and eyeless slaves brought him his repast. Myrta stood behind him, alert for any sign of danger. One could never be too careful, even in one’s own home. He could hear the clash of weapons and the hum of music echoing from deeper within the collection of tiers. Packs of bestial khymeras ambled through a forest of prismatic vegetation,

and flocks of razorwings and stab-beaks nested in the highest tiers. The air was thick with the pungent stink of life at its rawest, and he inhaled deeply, savouring it.

Beneath it all, the systems of the *Incessant Agony* purred like a contented predator. His flagship was one of the original three cruisers he had claimed upon his self-imposed exile from the Dark City. He leaned back in his seat, indulging in a moment of delicious nostalgia. Port Carmine had shuddered at his departure, and the flames had filled the false horizons – a celebration worthy of him. He had taken the vessels for his nascent fleet from three different kabals, all at the same time. A masterstroke that had crippled their ability to raid realspace and simultaneously earned him the well-wishes of the Kabal of the Black Heart and its lord and master, Asdrubael Vect.

Even now, he wasn't absolutely sure that the idea to depart in such a flamboyant manner had been entirely his. Vect was as subtle as a shadow, and wove a hundred schemes where a lesser mind wove one. Still, it had been Sliscus' daring that accomplished the deed and won him an immortality that many craved but few achieved.

And now, he was free. Free of the tedium of Commorragh. Free of the grind of kabal against kabal. Free to explore and raid as he saw fit. To indulge his every whim, without the worry that it might lead to later difficulties. He held out his goblet and a slave refilled it, whimpering slightly. He sniffed the liquid and took a deep swallow. Made from the oily secretions of an immature Galg, it had an invigorating effect, if one didn't mind the occasional hallucination.

Smacking his lips, Sliscus called up a star map from the hololithic projector built into the centre of the table. He could access all of his ship's systems from the garden, if he wished. He had once conducted an entire raid from the warmth of a hot spring, overseeing operations even as he indulged in more intimate pleasures.

A number of pre-selected worlds swam into view, haloed by slow crawls of pertinent information. None of it interested him. 'Mon-keigh worlds have a dreadful sameness to them, don't they?' he murmured. Several of the selected worlds paid him a tithe in return for his protection. Others had refused. Sometimes he spared the latter and attacked the former, just for the fun of it. Once, he had even engineered a war between several worlds and worked for both sides, playing one against the other. It had been interesting, for a time. Then boredom set in, as it always did, and he destroyed both sides in a fit of pique.

He looked at Myrta. 'I seem to suffer from a paucity of interesting opponents.'

Where are the cunning space lords and the scheming corsair kings of my youth? Surely I have not killed them all.'

'You are quite greedy,' she said.

'Yes. That has ever been a failing of mine.' His smile faded, the old ennui setting in. For all its restrictions, Commorragh had, at least, never been boring. There had been opponents aplenty, before he made the city too hot to hold him. Perhaps he needed to return, to renew himself in the deep waters of the Dark City. No, better – he would make them come to him. Yes. Delightful. 'It is approaching midwinter, I believe,' he said, swirling the liquid in his goblet with a loose gesture.

'No, it isn't,' Myrta said. She sounded resigned.

Sliscus ignored her. He gestured, tracing routes of transit across the star map, looking for anything of interest. Nothing stood out. A hundred humdrum worlds, fit only for the culling. 'I haven't been to a midwinter celebration in the longest time.'

'Yes, you have.'

Sliscus smiled and took another swallow. Chemicals flooded his system. The world was turning a pleasing shade at the edges, and he could taste the music rising from the lower tiers of the pleasure gardens below. 'We should hold a party. A modest one, a few close acquaintances – no one who has tried to kill me lately.' He frowned slightly, trying to think who that might be.

'Is that wise, my lord?' a new voice intruded. It was like the rasp of stone across metal. 'There is still a bounty for your head.'

Sliscus set his goblet down. One of his more recent guests stood nearby, examining a cascade of pale flowers that clung to a nearby statue. The effigy, an armoured, winged figure, had been acquired on some tedious little mon-keigh world. Whether the figure it depicted was supposed to be male or female, Sliscus couldn't tell. It was ugly, regardless, even covered in the fleshy blossoms.

'And what would you know of it, Jhynkar?'

'Only what I have heard, my lord Duke.' The haemonculus was a twisted, crooked thing. A tall, hunched form with long arms and an elongated neck. His face, such as it was, was a pale stretch of unblemished skin, pulled unnaturally taut by a cowl consisting of hooks and wires. More wires pierced the hollow flesh of his cheeks and brow, carrying electrical impulses from the cowl to withered facial muscles.

Jhynkar was, like Sliscus, a voluntary exile from Commorragh. He had never revealed why he had left the demesnes of his fellow torturer-

alchemists, and Sliscus had not cared enough to inquire. A haemonculus, whatever his sins, was useful to have around. And Jhynkar had made himself quite helpful. He had overseen the population of the pleasure gardens with all manner of delightful surprises.

‘And what have you heard, crook-bones?’

‘That you are not beloved in the spires of the mighty.’ Jhynkar spoke with obsequious earnestness. Myrta snorted. Sliscus laughed.

‘Tell me something I didn’t already know. What is life without danger?’

‘Long, my lord.’ Jhynkar smiled and lifted a flesh blossom with a thin finger. A tinny scream echoed from somewhere within the pallid folds of the flower. ‘They are so fragile,’ he murmured. He pulled back his finger – it was wet with something that looked like blood. ‘The best art always is. It is only through observance of the finite that the infinite can best be contemplated.’ He licked the tarry substance from the digit and turned. ‘Don’t you agree, my lord?’

‘I prefer something with colour,’ Sliscus said. ‘And besides, your flowers keep me up with their incessant trilling. I have stimulants for that. I don’t need a concert every time I enter my gardens.’ He gestured dismissively. ‘Burn them.’

Jhynkar frowned. ‘These took me years to cultivate. I scoured hundreds of worlds for the correct genetic sequences.’

Sliscus smiled. ‘Observance of the finite, remember? Burn them.’ He kicked his legs up onto the table and let his head fall back. ‘Make me something new, fleshweaver. My mind stagnates among these pallid vines. Give me a forest of bone instead, or sculptures of living glass. Something, anything to alleviate this consuming tedium.’ He made a lazy gesture. ‘Something to impress my guests.’

The haemonculus paused. ‘Guests?’

‘For my party.’

‘What about the bounty?’

‘I expect some of them will try to claim it. It will be quite entertaining, I am sure.’ Sliscus sat up, and was on his feet in a moment. He was fast, faster than any crooked fleshweaver could hope to be. Jhynkar stumbled back into his flowers, which squealed. Tendrils caressed his grey flesh lovingly as Sliscus leaned towards him, a vulpine grin on his pale features. ‘It will be the talk of Commorragh. A midwinter feast of such artistry that generations to come shall gnaw their vitals in envy that they were not invited.’ He paused. ‘No. No, better than a feast. A hunt, I think. Yes, a midwinter hunt.’

‘It isn’t midwinter,’ Jhynkar stuttered.

‘It is if I say it is,’ Sliscus said mildly. He patted Jhynkar’s flaccid cheek. ‘I

shall need some lovely decorations, my friend.’ He reached past the haemonculus and grabbed a handful of the pallid blossoms. They screeched in agony as he uprooted them and squashed them to a twitching pulp. ‘Something more substantial than this.’ He smeared the mess against Jhynkar’s robes. ‘Best get to work. You don’t have much time.’

Jhynkar hurried to his chambers, deep within the pleasure garden.

His laboratory was well hidden within a thicket of bloodmetal thorns. Pheromone dispensers kept the more inquisitive beasts from stumbling into it, and his wracks kept watch for bipedal intruders. The laboratory was an open chamber, crafted from woven roots and vines and sealed with a layer of vat-grown flesh. The capillary webs that stretched through the flesh flushed in silent greeting as he entered. He caressed it, and was rewarded with a shudder. The nerve endings of the meat shroud were especially sensitive, reacting to the gentlest touch as if it were the edge of a blade.

The flesh rustled in delicious agony, and he drank it in. Its torment nourished him and kept his withered frame in fighting trim. Not that he did much fighting, if he could help it. He much preferred to spill blood under controlled conditions.

At the centre of the chamber, hidden among folds of rippling meat, rose a tree. Not a true tree, but one of metal and meat grown from a techno-organic sapling. It now stretched up and out and over his lair. Its cabled roots and branches crawled across the floor and reached to every part of the pleasure gardens. Photonic screens bulged from the trunk like blisters of glass, and on them he could see every tier of the garden simultaneously. Soon, the tree’s reach might even escape the tesseract and permeate the ship itself. If he was careful, and if Sliscus was truly as unobservant as he appeared.

The haemonculus grimaced. Nothing was as it appeared. He had learned that much, at least, from his old masters in the Hex, before they turned on him so cruelly and forced him to become a vagabond. Jhynkar had long ago come to the realisation that he wasn’t cut out for such hardship. Few haemonculi were. They were creatures of the mind, of theory and structure. When he managed to ingratiate himself with Sliscus, he had hoped it would lead to greater things. Instead, his hardships had redoubled.

‘He’s insatiable,’ he said. ‘His demand for innovation far outstrips the limits of possibility. If we were in Commorrhagh, an equilibrium could be maintained, but here – like this – no. Intolerable.’ He stared up at the photonic screens, hoping inspiration might strike. Around him, his wracks went silently about their tasks.

The twisted creatures were all that remained of a crew of corsairs who had crossed Sliscus. They had been refashioned into living instruments of torture at the Duke's behest. An evening's entertainment that had tested Jhynkar's endurance to the limit. After Sliscus had had his fun, he had generously allowed Jhynkar to keep his new pets.

Ordinarily, such creatures would have been volunteers, sacrificing their pitiful lives in order to escape the enemy known as ennui. These, being rather more resistant, had required more thorough methods of taming. Each of them was now but one part of a whole – their minds had been enslaved to a single neural network based on his own brain patterns.

Instinctively, he touched the small, sharp outline of the neural emitter inserted into his skull. The signal it broadcast controlled the wracks, as well as a number of his deadlier creations. Besides allowing him to streamline the practical necessities of his work, it cut down on the number of assassination attempts he was forced to endure. He had learned that there was safety in numbers, so long as that number was one, and it was him.

'I cannot work to my fullest potential under these conditions,' he said. The wracks murmured sympathetically at his mental nudge. The lack of free will made for wonderful sounding boards. Even better, they were fully aware of what had been done to them. Their silent suffering was exquisite. Much more satisfying than Sliscus' brutish efforts.

On the screens, the pleasure gardens came to life. Shafts of false light speared down through jungle canopies, and slumbering beasts awoke. The tesseract's cycle was linked to Sliscus' moods, sliding between day and night at his merest whim. Soon he would set out on his morning's hunt, seeking to whet his appetite for the bloodshed to come.

Among Jhynkar's other responsibilities was the selection of appropriate hunting grounds for Sliscus' amusement. He gestured, calling up a free-floating hololithic projection of the system. Of those he had screened, none had seemed to elicit any interest from his patron. He had chosen them specifically for the profusion of certain genetic markers in the populaces, all of which he desired samples of for his own work.

But Sliscus had no interest in such mundanity. In many ways, he reminded Jhynkar of the mad aesthetes who had populated his old coven. The Hex were known for their flair for the dramatic. They fed on applause as much as agony. Their realspace raids were inspired performance pieces on a vast and often shocking scale.

Dilettantes, the lot of them. Their art was immature and shallow, lacking in any real thematic resonance or urgency. Would-be epicureans, wallowing in mediocrity. Jhynkar had more talent in a single finger bone than the entirety of the Hex. That was why they had exiled him, of course. They feared the truth of his art.

And now, here he was, forced to serve the whims of a lunatic hedonist. He sighed and continued scrolling through the hololithic map. There had to be a suitable world here. He would find it, and then Sliscus would vent his whimsy on its populace. If Jhynkar were lucky, he might be allowed to extract raw materials from whatever was left.

One of the worlds caught his eye. It sat on the outer edge of the map, isolated. There were smaller worlds nearby, but it stood alone regardless. He enhanced the view, studying the information that surged up in answer to his interest.

Jhynkar smiled.



CHAPTER FOUR

HELHUNT

641.M41

Grey shapes crept along the rock face, intent on the icy expanse below. The howl had gone up, echoing through the halls of Jarlheim. It was the season of monsters, of wyrms and drakes and kraken. It was time for the Helhunt. And no warrior, whether Blood Claw, Grey Hunter or Long Fang, wanted to be left behind. As the Helwinter reached its zenith, monsters rose out of the dark of the world. And the warriors of the Rout raced eagerly into the depths of the Underfang to meet them.

Lukas looked out over the ice from his perch. The Underfang encompassed incomprehensible distances, immeasurable even to his battle-plate's augurs. Contradictory measurements spun across the internal display screen of his helm as his armour tried to accurately gauge his surroundings. Annoyed, he banished the display with a blink. He didn't need the augurs to tell him what he already knew.

As large as the Aett was, as high as its peaks stretched, its depths were even greater. The roots of the *volda hamarrki* drew nourishment from the planetary core itself. There were kingdoms tangled among those roots, distinct and

inviolate.

And greatest among them was the Midnight Sea.

To either side of him, dozens of packs made their way slowly, carefully, down the rocky slopes towards the dark expanse below. Lukas was in no hurry, though he could sense the irritation of the Blood Claws crouched around him. He grinned. They needed to learn. A good hunter had patience.

The surface of the Midnight Sea was marred by plates of thickening ice and banded on all sides by crooked cliffs. Rising from the black expanse were great towers of metal, the artificial capillaries that conducted superheated rock and magma from the mantle of Fenris to heat those incredibly cold waters. The ice was boiled to slush and steam around the magma conduits, but as hard as stone everywhere else. Ridges and crests of frozen water extended as far as the eye could see. A cold desert stretching beneath a sky choked with stalactites – the roof of the world, a monster’s maw.

Here more than anywhere else, Lukas felt Morkai’s breath on the back of his neck. This was a place where the sons of Russ were no more than another link in the food chain. Of course, that was the lesson all good hunters had to learn. There was always something bigger and hungrier than you, waiting just out of sight. Not just here, but everywhere. There were monsters in the Sea of Stars, and worlds more savage than even Fenris.

Lukas smiled and traced the scars that marked the surface of his grey battle-plate. He could tell the tale of each, if pressed. He had carved the totems welded to its flat planes with his own hands, and collected the wolf tail talismans that swung from his belt and shoulder-plates himself. He and the armour were one, and the massive wolf claw he bore was an extension of them both. He flexed the claw, watching the crackle of cryonic energies play across the talons. Between it and the plasma pistol holstered on his hip, there was little he couldn’t handle. He frowned. Save boredom, of course.

Granted, he wasn’t alone in that. Most jarls tried to avoid being trapped on Fenris during Helwinter. When they couldn’t, they had to find ways to occupy the attentions of their disgruntled warriors. Without something to kill, the sons of Russ grew temperamental. Hunting drakes and kraken in the roots of the mountain was a good use of their time, and better training than the sparring halls could provide.

Such activity kept blades and wits sharp, and if it cost a few lives – well, what was a hunt without some danger? Danger kept the blood cool and tempers even. Violence, like laughter, was a release valve for the Rout – a way of easing the

thunder in their hearts.

A skirl of static suddenly echoed in his ear. He tapped the side of his helm and turned to the hulking Blood Claw behind him. 'Stop it, Kadir. Just say what you want to say.'

'I thought I did.'

'Not with the vox, pup. You know better. The storm crashed the terrestrial communications network a week ago.' Internal communications had become erratic at best, and even the Chapter's astropaths found their witchery put under undue strain. 'Now, what is it? Do you see something?'

'We are bored.'

Lukas snorted. 'Who's "we"?''

Kadir gestured. Dag and Ake crouched behind him. Unlike Kadir, neither wore helmets. 'We are supposed to be hunting monsters,' Ake grunted. 'I'm getting stiff just sitting here.' He slammed a fist into his battle-plate for emphasis.

'Sitting is a part of hunting,' Lukas said, turning away.

'Says you.'

Lukas laughed. 'Well, I think it's better than wringing yesterday's mjod out of my beard. But feel free to wander off if you're bored.'

Ake grimaced. 'Maybe I will.' But he made no move to do so. Lukas shook his head, more amused than annoyed. Of all the Blood Claws bound to the Grimbloods, Kadir's pack were his favourites. They were troublemakers and misfits. And they had made for apt pupils, once they got over the beating he had given them. They hadn't yet allowed their thinking to become ossified and bogged down in tradition and rite. There was much to be said for living in a mountain, but it did lead to a certain narrowness of thought.

He had taught them much in the months since he had joined the Great Company, and had come to know them well. Kadir was in charge, mostly because none of the others had bothered to challenge him yet, and he was the smartest. Ake would challenge him eventually. He had a fire in his belly. Halvar and Dag were born subordinates, and would anchor any pack they joined. And then there was Einar.

Lukas glanced aside, studying the Blood Claw, who crouched nearby with Halvar. Thankfully, both of them were downwind. Einar was shaped like a keg, with equally thick arms and legs. He didn't lope so much as stump, and he lacked the swiftness of his brothers. But he didn't need speed, given the flamer he clutched in his big hands. The flame gun had been wrought in the shape of a mountain drake, the barrel jutting between its jaws. A semi-flexible feed-hose in

the shape of a coiling tail was connected to a heavy promethium canister attached to the bottom of his power pack. Extra canisters clattered against his chest-plate and thighs when he moved, and he radiated a fug of spilled fuel wherever he went.

Lukas looked back at Ake and gestured to Einar. ‘Einar doesn’t seem to mind sitting.’

Ake frowned. ‘How could you tell if he did?’ Einar didn’t talk much. He also hadn’t taken part in the initial brawl, when Lukas had joined the pack. He was either smarter than the others or he simply didn’t care. Lukas was still trying to determine which.

Before Lukas could reply, a howl thundered over the slope. He rose smoothly to his feet. ‘Well, pups, you’ve got your wish. Our jarl calls to us.’ Grimblood was making his way down the slope, accompanied by his Wolf Guard. The baying of the huscarls was all but lost to the vastitude of the cavern, and they fired off weapons or boosted their vox-systems to the edge of tolerability to compensate.

‘Maybe we’ll see some blood now,’ Ake growled.

‘Careful it’s not your own.’ Lukas leapt lightly from his perch. Rock crunched beneath him as he slid down the incline towards the edge of the ice. Ake and the others followed him, howling as they went. They weren’t so graceful in their descent. Dag skidded the last few metres on his back and came to rest in a cloud of ice particles and loose stones. The others yelped laughter as they hauled him to his feet.

Ident-runes spun across Lukas’ visual feed. The shore was thick with grey shapes. Dozens of packs, aspirants and greypelts alike, paced impatiently. Even with his armour’s filtering systems, he could tell that the air stank of kill-urge. Chainblades shrieked and bolt pistols barked erratically as their wielders gave in to their growing excitement.

Grimblood stalked through the crowd, a towering presence. His heavy battle-plate was marked with totems and runes where it wasn’t daubed with char. The sigil of the Fire Wolf was displayed prominently on one shoulder-plate. Thick pelts streaked with ash and blood-markings hung from his shoulders, and he wore no helm.

Lukas noted the way the jarl spoke to certain warriors by name and singled them out for praise as he passed by. Grimblood was a cunning old wolf, at times. He bestowed his favour where it would do him the most good.

Hierarchy among the Vlka Fenryka was a more fluid thing than most liked to admit. It ebbed and flowed according to the whims of the pack members. A wise

leader brought his warriors together and shaped them to his will.

Grimblood stalked onto the ice and turned to face the packs. He spread his arms, gesturing for silence. His huscarls slammed their fists into their armour or stamped on the thick ice, the pounding rhythms silencing those who were less than respectful. ‘Oh, good, he’s preparing to make a speech,’ Lukas murmured. ‘Just what this outing needed.’ Behind him, he heard the pups snicker.

Grimblood threw back his head and made a show of scenting the air. ‘Smell that?’ he roared, his voice thunderous even without the aid of a vox-booster. ‘Drake ichor and troll dung! There are beasts aplenty in these rocks, and they are all cowering, waiting for us to drag them out of their caves. They heard us coming, brothers – they smell death on the wind!’

At this, the gathered warriors gave voice to a communal howl. Boots thudded down against the ice and fists struck chest-plates. Grimblood laughed wildly. ‘But it’s not drakes or trolls I’ve dragged myself down here for,’ he roared. ‘Not like Redmaw or the others. There is bigger prey in these frozen waters.’ He pointed out across the ice with the heavy blade he clutched in one hand. ‘Last Helwinter, Thunderfist dragged a kraken the size of a longship out of the ice with his own two hands. Its barbs still hang in our trophy halls, and he still boasts of it at every opportunity, the bastard!’

Shouts and jeers greeted this. Grimblood laid his blade across his shoulder. ‘I would match his boast – aye, and exceed it! So go, brothers – go and find me a kraken to kill!’

Another great howl went up from the warriors on the slopes. Lukas glanced at Ake and the others. ‘You heard him, pups. Let’s go do the work so he can have the credit, eh?’ Without waiting for a reply, he turned and loped onto the ice.

A pale mist rose from the frozen surface of the sea, opaque and smelling of sour water. It muffled sound as much as it obstructed vision. The only noise was the crunch of their boots on the thin layer of frost that blanketed the thickest patches of ice. The extremes of temperature played havoc with the sensors. Ident-runes faded and blinked in and out of visibility as the packs spread out across the ice.

Between the mist and the interference, Lukas soon lost sight of the other packs. Just as well. No need to share their kill if they could help it. He was careful to keep Ake and the others in sight. It would be depressingly easy to lose one down here. The ice was dangerous enough, but the caves that rose like citadel walls on the distant shores were a constant temptation to glory-hungry young warriors.

‘Stay alert,’ he said. ‘Trolls prowl here, and worse things besides.’

‘I’d like to kill a troll,’ Ake said.

‘Trolls are taller than a dreadnought, and angrier too,’ Lukas said. ‘They use pine trees for clubs and their teeth can crack ceramite.’

‘All the more reason to kill one, then,’ Ake barked. He glanced towards the caves. ‘Ake Trollslayer. A good name, that.’

‘Better than Ake Trolldung, I suppose. Which is what you will be if you try it.’ Lukas nudged the Blood Claw. ‘Besides, we’re hunting kraken, remember?’ A flash at his feet caught his eye and he gave a bark of laughter. ‘Or maybe they are hunting us. Bare your fangs, pups – we’ve got kraken-sign.’ He pointed to the ice.

Cobalt striations of what looked like lightning ran beneath it, barely visible in the gloom. Lukas knelt, one palm pressed flat to the surface. He could feel the chill of it, even through his gauntlet.

The cold of the Underfang would snatch the life from an unaugmented and unprotected mortal in a few moments. For a Space Marine, it was uncomfortable but bearable. For the kraken, it was perfect. The creatures thrived in the cold, shrugging off temperatures that would freeze a starship solid. They came to the surface for reasons known only to them, most often in the Helwinter. Lukas suspected the kraken were simply seeking refuge from something even larger and hungrier that had been stirred from the depths by the constant tectonic upheaval of the season.

‘What are you doing?’ Dag asked, his head cocked. He was the most curious of the pack. More willing to learn. Lukas looked up.

‘Listening. Here, put your hand on the ice. All of you, gather round. This is a lesson that will serve you well, and on more worlds than this.’

Dag did as he was told. His eyes widened. ‘The ice is vibrating.’

Lukas grinned. ‘That’s because something is moving beneath it. Rising towards the surface.’ He looked around. ‘It will be hungry after such a long trip. Kraken normally feed on the trolls and drakes that lair in the sea caves, but sometimes you’ll get a clever one that will climb the magma conduits up into the utility halls. Best to kill them before they get that far. I’d wager that’s why Grimblood really brought us down here. He’s a cunning old wolf.’

‘This is about pest control, then?’ Ake snarled. ‘Where is the glory in that?’

‘Did you have something better to do?’ Lukas asked. Anticipation built in him. He heard no ringing howls of triumph, no rattle of bolter fire from the other nearby packs.

Kadir leaned over him. ‘We’re the first, aren’t we?’ he asked eagerly. Lukas nodded, and Kadir bared his teeth. ‘We’re the first to make a kill?’ He appeared

to be almost salivating at the thought.

‘We haven’t killed it yet,’ Lukas said. As he rose to his feet, a sharp smell stung his nose. For a moment, he thought the kraken was closer than he had assumed, but it was just Halvar. The Blood Claw smelled so foul that Lukas thought it a wonder that any of the others could stand to fight alongside him. ‘Go over there,’ he said, waving a hand.

Halvar did so, peering about warily. ‘I dreamt I was circled six times by a carrion bird,’ he said loudly. ‘What do you think it means?’

‘That you should bathe more than once every hundred cycles, and in something other than bear milk and rancid fat,’ Ake said. ‘Step back. My eyes are watering.’

‘I’ve been bathing in bear milk since I was a pup,’ Halvar protested. ‘It keeps the evil spirits out of your pores.’ He looked down at himself. ‘My pores are very susceptible to evil.’

‘Is that what that smell is?’ Lukas asked, shaking his head. ‘I thought something had died in your armour.’

‘Only his dignity,’ Dag said, laughing. ‘Maybe a kraken will drag you underwater and give you a bath.’ He shoved Halvar playfully, and the other Blood Claw turned on him with a snarl.

‘I would wish the same on you, Dag, but you would make barely a mouthful for the poor beast.’

Dag flushed. He growled at Halvar and faced off with him, until Einar bulled between them. The bulky aspirant shoved his smaller fellows aside with casual ease.

‘Heat?’ Einar asked. He had smeared char on the grey ceramite of his helm, turning it black. The red lenses of his visor flashed as he raised his flamer.

‘Not yet.’ Lukas clapped Einar on the back. ‘Anyone hunted kraken before?’ He looked around. When no one replied in the affirmative, he snorted. ‘What are they teaching you these days?’

‘How to be warriors of the Rout,’ Dag said.

‘And how can you be proper warriors if you have never hunted kraken?’ Lukas unhooked a grenade from his belt. ‘We need to force it to the surface. Einar, sweep the ice. Just enough to loosen it. Everyone else, do as I do.’

‘Grenades?’ Dag asked. ‘There won’t be anything left of it. How are we supposed to make a trophy of rags and tatters?’

Lukas bounced the frag grenade on his palm. ‘The concussive force will be muted by the water, but the sound will carry for leagues. Kraken hunt by sound

as well as smell. We want to make sure its beady eyes are on us.’

Distant howls pierced the air. Lukas grunted. ‘Especially since it sounds like others have caught the scent.’ He thumbed the activation rune on the grenade. ‘Einar.’

Flames washed across the ice, weakening it. Cracks opened in the surface, but it was already beginning to refreeze. ‘Grenades,’ Lukas barked. Frag grenades tumbled into the newly opened gaps, in some cases even as they closed over. The ice trembled beneath their feet, the surface throbbing with the muffled echo of the explosions. ‘Remember – we have to draw it up onto the ice. Keep it from fleeing.’

‘I don’t think that will be a problem,’ Kadir said, staring at the ice. Lukas looked down. Beneath the surface, something was moving. Something hungry. He had the impression of a grinding maw of razor-points, and then the ice cracked and shifted as something slammed into it with the force of a geyser. The surface shook, and the servos in Lukas’ armour whined as they compensated for the sudden unsteadiness.

The ice bulged upwards. A crack zigzagged between his feet, widening as it extended. A sound like the roar of an engine filled the air. Frigid water spewed up, followed by a glistening tentacle. It was black and gleaming, its pale underside lined with barbed suckers. The tentacle lashed out at Kadir fast enough to split the air. It coiled about the young warrior as he tried to dart aside. It contracted, dragging its prey towards the ruptured patch of ice. Kadir howled and dug his fingers into the surface, trying to wrench himself free.

Lukas severed the tendril in a gush of ichor. He quickly hauled the Blood Claw to his feet. ‘Get back,’ he snarled. ‘All of you – back!’ His warning came too late. More tentacles burst through the surface of the floe and flailed about, seeking prey. It was bigger than he had expected. One of the old ones, then. Kraken lived until something bigger or meaner killed them. Some of them got to be the size of mountains, or so he had heard. This one was definitely larger than the one Thunderfist always boasted of; at least twice the size of a gunship.

Bolt pistols thundered and war-cries sounded as Ake and the others joined the fun. ‘Watch yourselves,’ Lukas shouted, lopping the tip from another questing tendril. He cursed as Dag was knocked off his feet by an undulating length of kraken flesh and sent sprawling. ‘What did I just say?’

The tentacle swept down, smashing into the Blood Claw with bone-crushing force and shattering the ice beneath him. He vanished in a surge of water. Lukas ducked beneath a twisting tendril and darted towards the widening crack in the

ice. The tentacles there thrashed, as if trying to get a grip on something. He hoped that meant the Blood Claw was still alive.

Lukas pulled his plasma pistol as he ran, and fired a searing blast at the ice ahead of him. Steam billowed upwards as it disintegrated, and a moment later he struck the water like a bolt shell. Frost immediately patterned the planes of his armour, and he felt the internal temperature controls kick in. Manoeuvring jets, normally meant for void combat, expelled short bursts of pressurised air from concealed ports, keeping him from sinking too swiftly.

He activated his stab-lights, piercing the gloom. A thicket of writhing tendrils struck out at him. Ichor clouded the water as he clawed at them. Barbs crashed against him, scraping paint from his armour. Through the mass of twisting limbs he saw the kraken itself. The creature's razored beak was three times the size of a man, and its bulbous eyes blazed like comets within filmy sockets. Its segmented carapace was a yellowish hue, with jagged markings of blue and green that grew darker the closer they came to its massive wedge-shaped head. It darted towards him, jaws wide.

A chime sounded inside his helm, signalling that his plasma pistol had recharged. He fired. The coruscating beam of heat seared a path through the cold water, and the kraken jerked backwards with a shriek Lukas felt in his bones. As it retreated, he caught sight of Dag, tumbling stunned through the murky water, a thin contrail of blood stretching from his temple. The Blood Claw's manoeuvring jets seemed to have been damaged, and without the thrashing of the tentacles to keep him aloft he was slowly sinking into the darkness below.

Lukas holstered his pistol and swam down. Static crowded the edges of his display. The cold crept through his armour, vent by valve. At the outer edge of his stab-light's beam, he caught a glimpse of vast shapes moving through the dark. More kraken, perhaps, rising to the surface. He could detect the vibrations from above as the other packs dropped grenades into the water or blasted the ice open.

Just before Dag slipped out of reach, Lukas caught hold of the exhaust port of his armour's power pack. Hauling the Blood Claw's dead weight behind him, he kicked towards the surface. Warning runes blinked, alerting him to the kraken's pursuit. It was rising towards them. Lukas found himself caught by the kraken's velocity. He and Dag slammed into the ice above and then through it, hurled into the air by the force of the kraken's ascent. They crashed down moments later.

Lukas' visual display spun wildly as the kraken exploded out of the ice just after them, its curved beak snapping, frustrated by the lack of food in its gullet. It

probably wasn't used to this much of a fight from its prey. It shrilled, and his vox-systems crackled as they sought to compensate for the noise.

Rolling to his feet, he caught hold of Dag and began to drag him back. The Blood Claw's flesh was blue where it wasn't coated in crystals of frozen blood, but he was awake. He wheezed and spluttered, still out of sorts. Bone hooks set into the kraken's underbelly dug into the crackling ice. The hooks contracted and the creature began to haul itself after them.

Lukas saw Kadir and the others racing to meet them. 'What are you waiting for?' he roared. 'Shoot it!' Bolt pistols thundered and flames licked across the ice, slowing the creature's pursuit.

The kraken screamed in rage. Quicker than thought, it lunged towards the Blood Claws, and a lashing tendril sent Kadir and Ake sprawling. It seemed to have hundreds of tentacles, and all of them were now reaching for Dag and Lukas.

Lukas dropped the Blood Claw and tore at the questing limbs, cursing every time his talons bounced away from the rubbery flesh rather than biting into it. A blow caught him on the back, knocking him to one knee. He threw himself aside. The tentacle struck the ice where he had been standing, bursting it. He heaved himself to his feet, the servos in his armour complaining. The tentacle speared towards him as he rose, and he interposed his claw at the last moment, bifurcating it. Blinking ichor from his eyes, he saw the beast rear up, the spines lining its body clattering as they flared. The kraken was hurt, but it wasn't giving up.

'Einar, thin the forest,' he roared. The Blood Claw set himself, and a plume of fire spewed from the dragon's mouth of his weapon. It licked out, enveloping several of the tendrils. Their thrashing grew worse, and dollops of burning meat splattered across the ice. The kraken shrieked and humped towards Einar, beak clacking. He backed away, spraying the maddened beast with flames, as Kadir and Ake hacked at its body with their chainblades.

Halvar warded Einar when his promethium tank ran dry. The Blood Claw reloaded the flamer with quick, precise movements while his brother kept the seeking tendrils at bay. Lukas watched approvingly. They were fighting as a pack ought.

Seeing an opening, he sprang towards the cephalopodan monstrosity. Kadir and Ake cleared him a path, battering aside threatening tendrils. The kraken heaved itself up, one bulbous eye fixed on him. It shrilled out what might have been a cry of challenge.

Lukas ducked aside as a tendril split the air where he had been standing. With a roar, he brought his wolf claw down on the kraken. The talons of the outsized gauntlet crackled with cobalt light as they punched through the rubbery flesh.

The kraken whipsawed in agony, its coils heaving out in all directions. Lukas wrenched his claw free and twisted back. While he was confident that the battle-plate he wore could withstand the beast's talons, there was no reason to chance it.

He lunged beneath the kraken as it reared up, and slashed at its underbelly. Black ichor splattered across his battle-plate, and the acrid stink of it burned his eyes and nose. He grinned through the foulness and kept tearing. Best to keep at it, once the right spot had been found. Especially with kraken. The beasts rarely admitted when they were dead – you had to be convincing if you wanted them to stay down.

The creature retreated, its hooks chopping into the ice as it sought the safety of the water. It slapped him backwards in its haste to escape. He fell with a bellow, and the beast slithered past him, towards the hole in the ice. He attempted to grab a tentacle, but his claw closed on empty air.

'Cut it off – don't let it get back to the sea,' Lukas roared. Howls rose up around him as Kadir and the others raced to intercept the slithering horror. More howls erupted from the mist, and a spatter of weapons fire prevented the kraken from heaving itself into the water. Lukas leapt to his feet as half a dozen grey shapes burst into view, swiftly surrounding the polypus creature. '*Skítja*,' Lukas snarled as he recognised Grimblood and his huscarls.

Like the cunning old predators they were, they had waited for the Blood Claws to weaken the beast before striking. As it flopped back, screaming angrily, the jarl hewed away at it with his frost blade. His huscarls kept a respectful distance, intercepting any overeager Blood Claws who might interfere. Lukas snorted. This was to be Grimblood's kill alone, then. Such was the way of it – wolves gave up their kill to the leader of the pack.

He heard a shout, and saw Ake barrelling towards the fray. One of the huscarls shoved him back. 'You have done your share of bloodletting, pup,' the Wolf Guard said, chuckling. 'Now let a true warrior make the kill.'

'That's our kill,' Ake snarled, bumping chests with the towering huscarl. The older warrior's battle-plate was heavy with trophies and the marks of war, and he carried a heavy two-handed axe. He shoved Ake back another step and gave a booming laugh.

'Then you should have gone and made it, instead of playing with the beast,

pup.’

Ake lunged towards the Wolf Guard and received a clout on the head. He dropped to the ice, pole-axed. The Wolf Guard rolled him over with a boot and called out to his fellows. ‘They are more fragile than I recall, these pups.’

‘That’s because you’ve never known your own strength, Hafrek,’ Lukas said. He stepped over Ake, and Hafrek retreated a step. ‘Even when you were a stupid pup, accidentally crippling thralls while in your cups.’

‘Guard your tongue, Trickster,’ Hafrek growled.

‘Or what?’ Lukas spread his arms. ‘Come, brother, shall we spar like we used to? Is your memory as dull as your wits, that you don’t remember how badly I beat you then?’

‘I am not a pup now,’ Hafrek said warily.

‘True enough. That means I don’t have to take it easy on you.’ Lukas took another step towards the huscarl. They stared at one another for long moments, until Hafrek snarled and turned away.

‘Begone, Trickster. I have no time to waste on you.’

Past Hafrek, Grimblood was making his kill. The master-crafted weapon in his hands flickered with an azure radiance that left contrails of cold in its wake with every slash. The kraken, already wounded, was little match for a warrior as old and as skilled as Grimblood.

His blade bit into the black, blister-like eye. Ichor spurted and the kraken’s cries spiralled up into a wail of agony. The smaller, frond-like tendrils clustered closer to its jaws and head slammed into the Wolf Lord, their barbs gouging his armour.

Grimblood wrenched his blade loose and drove his free hand into the gaping wound. Lukas knew what he was after. There was only one way to kill a kraken – go for the brain.

Despite the creature’s thrashing, Grimblood found what he sought, and he wrenched a mass of pulpy ganglia free in a spray of gore. The kraken convulsed, cracking the ice all around it in its death throes, scattering its attackers.

The jarl stumbled back, still clutching its brains. It twisted towards him, its beak wide, before it at last collapsed like a torn air bladder. For a moment, the only sound was the crackle of settling ice. Then Grimblood threw back his head and howled.

The call was echoed across the ice as the packs heard and celebrated their jarl’s triumph. Hafrek and the other Wolf Guard moved to congratulate their lord. ‘There will be a saga about this great victory before the cycle has finished,’ Lukas said as he hauled Ake to his feet. ‘I wonder whether he’ll mention us?’

‘I wouldn’t wager on it,’ Ake muttered, rubbing his skull.

‘I could give you odds, if you like. How’s your head?’

‘Hurts.’

‘Good. Maybe you’ll remember to wear a helmet next time,’ Lukas rumbled. Despite the mist that still obscured much of the ice, he could see columns of smoke rising towards the cavern roof, and his helmet’s autosenses detected traces of burning kraken flesh. Theirs was the only kill the jarl had seen fit to poach.

He grinned. ‘Go find the others. Get Dag on his feet.’

Ake looked at him. ‘Where are you going?’

‘To speak with our jarl.’

Lukas stalked across the ice. It wasn’t anger he felt, but relief. Grimblood had struck first. That meant whatever happened next was on his head. The jarl had kept his distance these past weeks, since their initial confrontation, and Lukas had confined his entertainments to the Blood Claws. An uneasy truce, and an unspoken one, but a truce nonetheless.

And now it was broken.

Grimblood turned as Lukas thrust aside two of his huscarls. They snarled at the disrespect, but stayed their blows at Grimblood’s curt gesture. ‘What is it, Trickster?’

‘You’re welcome, Grimblood.’

‘For what?’

‘The kraken we bloodied for you.’ Lukas held up his hands as Grimblood growled. ‘No, no, think nothing of it, my jarl. It was our honour to hold the poor beast down while you so courageously seized the glory full in your jaws.’

‘Careful, Jackalwolf. I can stomach only so much of your foolishness.’

Lukas glared at him. ‘It was their kill, Grimblood. They earned it.’ He leaned close. He could feel the anger radiating from the other warrior. It beat at his senses like a wave. ‘We must prove our worth. We must earn our sagas, and howl them into the teeth of the void. That is what we are taught. You steal the beginning of their saga from them with this act.’

‘If you were anyone else, I might be shamed by that,’ Grimblood said after a moment. ‘But I know you, Strifeson. And I know that you don’t give a damn about such things. I took the kill, for it is my right to do so. They should be honoured, for their names will be a part of my saga.’

‘They will be delighted to hear that.’

Grimblood shook his head. ‘Sometimes I wonder why they bothered to scrape

you off the ice, brother. What did old Ulrik see in you that day?’

‘I often ask myself that same question,’ Lukas said. ‘This mountain is full of ghosts who want to make us something we are not. To bend us into shape, fit for sagas and the songs of skjalds. I, for one, prefer to tell my own saga. Not be a part of someone else’s.’

‘You talk about sagas as if you are free of them. But what are you, save the thing they have made you?’ Grimblood snorted and poked a finger into Lukas’ chest. Lukas frowned. ‘The Jackalwolf. Do you know why we call you that?’

‘Because you’re jealous of my looks?’

Grimblood glowered at him. ‘No. Because you remind us of bad days and black deeds. You do not listen, you do not heed your betters. You snap at them instead. The way we once did, before Russ took us in hand.’ His voice rose, and Lukas cursed inwardly as he noticed the grey shapes gathering in the mist to listen. He had made a mistake. Grimblood had wanted a confrontation – had baited him into it with a stolen kill.

‘Our name was a joke, Trickster. The Rout – it is a joke. An insult. A term for a pack of jackals, or the pariah dogs that haunted the dry seas of Terra. We were beasts in those days, and named for beasts. That was the beginning of our story. The names we bear are sagas in and of themselves, links in a chain stretching back unto the opening of the Wolf’s Eye.’ Grimblood frowned and clenched his fist. He was making a show of it, impressing their brothers with a display of strength and control. ‘We are stories, Jackalwolf. We are sagas unwritten, and it is our duty to play the parts the Allfather intends for us.’ Grimblood fixed him with a steady gaze. ‘Even you have your part to play.’

‘Aye, and I know it well. Without me, you would sink into melancholy and spend your days reciting sad sagas of glories past. I give you something to look forward to.’

‘Your eventual death, you mean?’

Lukas laughed. ‘Why not? I’m not planning on dying, but it gives you something to growl over. Like a wolf with a bone.’ He thumbed his nose and stepped back, out of reach. ‘I am what I choose to be, Grimblood. And nothing more.’

‘And that is where you are wrong, Jackalwolf. You are what I say you are, while you are a part of my pack.’ Grimblood drove his sword point-first into the ice.

Lukas glanced at the sword, and then at Grimblood. ‘It’s going to be a long Helwinter for both of us, I fear,’ he said, baring his teeth in a wide, slow smile.

He heard the huscarls growl at the implied threat, but Grimblood might as well have been carved from stone.

‘Go back to your pack, Blood Claw.’

Lukas bowed mockingly, then turned and trotted away.

‘Ake was right, then?’ Kadir asked bitterly as Lukas rejoined them. Halvar was supporting Dag, who was cradling his head.

‘Right about what, pup?’

‘That the jarl has claimed our kill for his own.’

Lukas nodded. ‘As he has just reminded me, that is his right as jarl.’

‘The glory was ours. It isn’t fair,’ Ake said.

‘No, it isn’t. It merely is, or is not.’ Lukas turned and studied Grimblood. Already a plan was beginning to form. ‘Still, you are right. Grimblood oversteps himself. Occasionally even Wolf Lords need to be reminded that they are part of the pack – not above it.’

‘Chieftain,’ Einar said.

Dag nodded. ‘Einar is right. He is jarl. He is above us.’

‘No,’ Lukas said mildly. ‘He is in front of us. A good leader is always in front. But never above.’ He laughed.

‘Which is why he will never see it coming.’



CHAPTER FIVE

BAITING THE HOOK

641.M41

Sliscus ran across the sheet metal rooftops, his steps as light as the oily rain that fell across the city. He drew his sword as he went. The blade was a work of art, as singular in the universe as its wielder. He had made sure of it. It had been crafted especially for this day, and he'd had the swordsmith executed to ensure there would never be another like it.

Unfortunately, his prey wasn't where he had hoped to find them. He pursued them now down through the tiers of the gravity-defying arcology, from gilded palaces to these dank slums.

The dark, faceted armour he wore caught and reflected the lights of the cityscape like black glass. A luxurious cloak of dark fur rippled in his wake, the individual hairs stiffening and twisting in strange patterns. Sliscus had adorned himself in a panoply of blades and curves so that his merest twitch might catch and scatter the light. He wore no helmet, preferring to taste the carnage unfiltered by autosenses.

He wasn't the only corsair on the rooftops. His warriors were scattered across the slums, hunting for prey and plunder. Raiders swooped low over the plazas

and avenues, and the night was alive with the music of slaughter. Sliscus slowed, taking it all in.

The Autocracy of Pok spread out around him like a scum of grey slime on stagnant water. The world was a gas giant, but the mon-keigh had colonised it readily enough despite the lack of anything resembling solid ground. The city was a floating conglomeration of a dozen crude arcologies, bound to one another by massive tensile causeways. Great engines fuelled by the chemicals pulled from the atmosphere kept the Autocracy aloft. All very primitive, but efficient in its way.

It was almost a shame to destroy it, but there were some insults that simply could not be borne by any right-thinking corsair. A world like this could not be allowed to get above itself. There was a very strict hierarchy to the galaxy, and Sliscus was its faithful servant. In this instance, at least.

Far above him, something exploded. Reavers and hellions tumbled through the virulent gases of the atmosphere like brightly coloured birds of prey. They spun about the upper tiers and towers of the city, preventing any escape from the docking platforms that extended outwards from the high places like dull halos. Sliscus allowed himself a paternal smile at their antics.

He attracted all the wrong sorts to his banner. Rebels and spire-gangers, cutthroats and criminals. Renegades, even among the hedonistic kabals of the Eternal City. They made poor soldiers, but fine pirates. Some would eventually make their way back to Commorragh, wiser and bearing the scars of their experiences. Others would die. But while they served him, he made good use of them.

A chunk of burning debris slammed down nearby, and he quickly sprang to the left. He caught sight of his quarry and slid down the incline of the roof. Just before he hit the edge, he leapt upwards, arcing out over the street. He tore his splinter pistol from its holster as he landed and fired without looking. His prey died all the same, and he shuddered in pleasure as the echoes of their agonies washed over him.

They were mon-keigh, so the repast was less satisfying than it otherwise might have been. They died too quickly, and their agonies were but crude emulations of those of higher species. They lacked the sensory capacity of an antedil or the pain receptors of a sza. Nonetheless, they served their purpose.

He felt the pull of She Who Thirsts dwindle and fade for another moment. He straightened and laid the flat of his sword across his shoulder. 'Well, what have we here?' His voice carried easily along the avenue, despite the cacophony of

battle. ‘Is that you, Gymesh? Fancy meeting you here, old friend.’

Gymesh, High Autocrat and Lord of Pok, sat hunched in a gilded sedan chair supported by four spindly automatons. That such ephemeral-seeming machines could support his great bulk spoke to the hardiness of their construction. Behind the chair, a loose maniple of machine-warriors spread out to protect Gymesh’s courtiers. Or perhaps to use them as cover, it wasn’t clear which.

The handful of warrior-drones were not like the household guards he had just dispatched. These were a stunted, blood-simple warrior-caste, their meat minds scooped out and replaced with glorified targeting computers. Their souls flickered but dimly within the cybernetic husks they had made of themselves. Gymesh had risen to his current exalted state on the back of such pathetic creatures, but their lack of initiative ill served him now.

The courtiers were a motley lot clad in soot-stained finery, and some clutched weapons that were more akin to props than implements of death. The last vestiges of the old mercantile houses were retained to add a sheen of respectability to Gymesh’s governance. Birds of paradise in gilded cages. Sliscus could understand why Gymesh was dragging them along – their contacts and resources were worth a bit of trouble, especially if Gymesh had an eye to rebuilding elsewhere. He had an almost Commorrite cunning, did the Lord of Pok.

‘Ah, ah, ah. Trying to escape. What sort of tyrant are you?’ Sliscus strode forward. ‘We could have had this moment among the burning ruins of your palace, Gymesh. Instead, we must dirty ourselves in a rancid alley like common cutthroats.’ He extended his sword. ‘I am quite put out, you know. I had this sword made especially for this occasion. I had it all planned – a thing of sublime artistry. And you had to go and ruin it.’

‘We had an arrangement,’ Gymesh said. His voice shuddered through the damp air like a skirl of feedback. ‘We paid for your protection.’

‘Yes, but you were very rude about it. And I was getting bored, watching your fat little gas-scows trundle back and forth through the system so arrogantly.’

‘You could have taken one. I would not have protested. Gas-crews are cheap.’

‘But if I had, we might not be having this moment here. A pleasure denied is a pleasure redoubled, as the great sage Um’shallyah penned in his treatise *The Principles of Pain*. A delightful work, if academic.’ Sliscus smiled.

‘I have not read it.’

‘I doubt you would understand it if you had. Now, alas, you will never have the chance.’ Sliscus took a quick step towards his prey, and the cybernetic guards

stiffened slightly. He fancied that he could feel their targeting sensors sliding over him, and he shivered in anticipation. The facets of his armour were angled just so, to make target locks all but impossible. To them, he might as well have been a mass of confusing signals.

‘I might, if you were of a mind,’ Gymesh said. Sliscus felt a grudging admiration for the creature. Panic normally set in at this point. But Gymesh radiated nothing but resignation and irritation. Perhaps he had foreseen this. He would have been a fool if he hadn’t.

‘What are you offering?’

‘This world. Its bounty. Take it as a gift. I will leave it to you.’

Sliscus shook his head. ‘You offer what I already have.’

Gymesh sighed. He shifted in his chair and glanced at his courtiers. ‘But you do not have these. Highborn flesh fetches high prices in the slave markets.’ Shouts and screams of protest arose at this, but at a gesture from Gymesh his cybernetic warriors beat down the loudest of them. Sliscus smiled thinly as he realised why the warriors had deployed as they had. Gymesh, cunning old rogue that he was, had foreseen this. But such foresight would avail him little today.

‘No, I’m afraid that won’t salve my pride,’ Sliscus said. He extended his sword. ‘It is time for a parting of the ways, Gymesh. We have had a good run, you and I, but new stars beckon and I have more interesting souls to reap. So draw your blade, meat, and let us commence closing negotiations.’

‘I see you will not be reasonable.’ Gymesh flung back the edges of his ornate robe. He had spared no expense in modifying his pathetic flesh. Cybernetic augmentation wasn’t unknown among the higher echelons of the Eternal City, but it was considered somewhat gauche to make it obvious. Gymesh, on the other hand, had obviously wanted to see what he was paying for.

Beneath his robes, he was a nightmare of primitive modifications. His jointed legs seeped steam from pneumatic vents, and the pistons of his claws dripped sparks as he flexed his hands. The armoured plates fused to his corpulent frame dripped a tarry substance that might have been blood or oil or both. The rain made curious trails through it.

The High Autocrat heaved himself up out of his sedan chair with a bone-rattling groan. Pumps wheezed as chemical hoses flushed darkly. Prosthetic eyes whirred, focusing on Sliscus. ‘That it has come to this is a disappointment, Traevelliath. Our arrangement was most efficient.’

‘For you.’ Sliscus swept his blade out, parting the rain. ‘For me, it was pure tedium, enlivened only by the thought of a glorious ending. But even that you

have denied me. So now, I must take what small pleasure I can from you in these last moments.’ He darted forward, moving more swiftly than the human eye could follow.

Gymesh roared something in binary, and his automatons dropped the sedan chair and jangled to intercept Sliscus. They were thin things, designed for looks rather than lethality, but still fast. Blades sprouted from tube-like limbs and internal gyroscopes whirred to life, turning them into spinning dervishes.

To a mon-keigh, they would have seemed impossible to predict or avoid. To Sliscus, they might as well have been moving in slow motion. The drugs in his system enhanced his perceptions to an almost painful degree. He could see everything, and reacted accordingly. A single blow was sufficient to send one whirling blade-storm into its fellow, and the two automatons tore each other to pieces in a cold frenzy. A third was dispatched with a precise shot to its central processing node. The fourth he simply avoided. It spun off down the street, making a doleful noise, unable to compensate for his evasion.

Sliscus clucked his tongue. ‘Such shoddy workmanship.’ He heard the whine of the automaton as it finally circled back, and fired his splinter pistol without looking. The automaton exploded somewhere behind him.

‘Kill him,’ Gymesh growled.

Courtiers scattered as the six cybernetic warriors darted towards him. They wore cowls and leather coats over their mostly artificial bodies, and segmented carapace armour. They were a parody of the more efficient killing machines produced by the mon-keigh tech-adepts. Crudely stitched and implanted, they were built for obedience and brute strength rather than combat efficiency. The work of gifted amateurs rather than experts.

As they closed in, Sliscus gave a brief thought to calling for aid. Sleg and his coil-kin were close, shadowing their employer. The Sslyth were all the guards he needed, though there were Raiders full of corsairs within easy communications range should necessity warrant their aid.

Their auto-carbines barked, filling the rainy air with hornets of lead. Sliscus darted to the side, running up a wall and flipping over the head of the first to reach him. He drove his blade into the warrior’s body as he landed and spun him around. The warrior spasmed as the shots from his fellows struck him. Sliscus braced the twitching corpse and advanced, absorbing the fusillade, until he was close enough to respond in kind.

Unlike the machine-men, he needed no targeting array to place his shots. Two pitched backwards, their heads cracked open by the shards of splintered crystal.

Three remained, and they advanced more slowly, firing steadily. Sliscus laughed as the body shielding him continued to twitch, and slid the barrel of his pistol beneath its flopping arm. He fired, knocking the legs out from under one.

When he was close enough, he pivoted, wrenching his sword free. He leapt up, slashing as he landed. A gun barrel slipped to pieces, and its wielder staggered back in dull surprise. Sliscus lunged, piercing one of the machine-warrior's artificial eyes and the brain behind it. He dragged the dying creature towards him and kicked it in the midsection, sending it crashing into the remaining warrior.

Before the hapless machine-warrior could disentangle itself, Sliscus shot it through the head. The one he had shot in the legs lay where it had fallen, squalling in pain. Nevertheless, it kept trying to rise. Sliscus set a foot between its shoulder blades and slowly slid his sword through the back of its neck. It only had a dull understanding of pain, but waste not, want not. A corsair learned to take his pleasures where he could.

He heard the grinding of gears and ducked. Gymesh snarled and swung his other hand. A hidden gun barrel emerged from the meat of his forearm with a wet sucking sound. It spat death, or would have had Sliscus been there to meet it. Instead, he was already moving. He holstered his pistol as Gymesh turned.

'I will crush you,' the tyrant roared, his amplified voice echoing from the surrounding buildings.

'If you could, you would have by now,' Sliscus said mildly. He bobbed and weaved, avoiding his opponent's wild blows. Gymesh had been a terrifying warrior in his youth, but time had eroded his ability. He was slow now. Boring. 'This is highly unsatisfying, Gymesh. I had pictured a rather more engaging duel. Where is that skilful murderer I once fought beside in the Arconis Tributary?'

'Stand still and I will show you, you preening lunatic.' More weapons sprouted from Gymesh's mottled flesh. Built-in stubbers and las-packs cycled up, spitting fire. The weapons had only a few shots apiece before they ran dry or burned out. His claws, however, never ran out of ammunition.

Growing bored, Sliscus darted beneath Gymesh's groping lunge and sliced through the feed cables that controlled his claws. Gymesh howled, and Sliscus repeated the manoeuvre, this time on his opponent's legs. Gymesh sank down with a petulant groan. He shook his flabby head. 'No,' he mumbled. His heavy frame sagged as feedback from the damaged cables resonated through his life-support systems.

'Yes,' Sliscus said. He lifted Gymesh's chins with the flat of his blade. He

wanted to look his old ally in the eyes. The Autocrat's optic lenses clicked and spun.

'Why?'

'I told you, I was bored. And all things come to an end. Goodbye, Gymesh. Take some small pleasure in knowing that you provided poor sport.'

'Wait--' Gymesh began.

Sliscus flipped the blade about and chopped through Gymesh's neck. Gore spurting and his head rolled free. Sliscus sighed. He held the sword up, studying the fluids that dripped from it. It wasn't every day that one killed an old friend. But Gymesh had ruined it.

'Feh,' Sliscus grunted as he cleaned the blade with the edge of his cloak. Still, disappointing as this had been, he had other things to look forward to. Thoughts of his impending celebrations surged to the fore. There was so much to be done. Invitations to be sent, preparations to be made. 'Myrta,' he called out.

'Here, my lord.'

He smiled and turned. His courtesan was stepping unhesitatingly over the bodies. Behind her, he could see Sleg and the other Sslyth corralling those mon-keigh courtiers too stupid to flee. The ophidians were coldly professional, unlike many of his followers. They could be relied upon not to get out of hand with his property, so long as they were allowed to indulge their simple-minded desires at a later time.

Nearby, shuffling, broken shapes slipped out from between the buildings. Sliscus frowned as he caught sight of Jhynkar and his wracks. Trust the fleshweaver to wait until the fighting was done to swoop down. The wracks had prisoners of their own, and as they stepped towards the cringing courtiers, Sleg grumbled a warning. The ophidian reared up, drawing his blades. The barbed swords could part metal as easily as flesh, and Sleg was a master of their use. Sliscus had often employed the brute as a sparring partner, and he thought Sleg a better swordsman than most.

Sliscus moved to head off the confrontation, Myrta falling into step behind him. Sleg settled as he approached, and Jhynkar waved his wracks back. 'My apologies, my lord, I assumed that your warriors required aid...'

'As you can see, they do not.' Sliscus studied the cowering humans. Noble birth meant something different among the mon-keigh, obviously. 'These are not for you, Jhynkar. Content yourself with the specimens you have already acquired.' He gestured to the prisoners the wracks held. The humans had the look of gas-miners, their wasted frames clad in ragged environmental suits. They were

bound by a fleshy cable that emerged from the back of one of the larger wracks. The meat-chain flexed and contracted constantly, compensating for the struggles of those ensnared in its folds.

Sliscus smiled, decision made. 'We shall make a gift of these royal survivors, I think. Parcel them out according to the status of my intended guests, and send them with my compliments. Myrta, you will see to it.' He used the flat of his blade to lift her chin. 'But do enjoy yourself before then, my lady. Let it never be said that Duke Sliscus is not as considerate as he is charming.' His smile could have cut steel. He swept the blade aside, nearly cutting her as he did so. Then, laying it across his shoulder, he turned and strode away, accompanied by Sleg and several of his hulking coil-kin.

There were some pleasures yet to be had on this depressing mud ball before they departed, and he intended to sample each and every one.

Myrta watched her master go. She sighed and turned to watch Jhynkar extract genetic matter from the captives, as the remaining Sslyth saw to chaining the rest.

'Do not sigh so, my lady,' Jhynkar said. 'Freedom is a burden on the soul.'

'And what would you know of it?'

'More than I care to. What is the name of this world?' he asked as he removed a syringe from a dying human's spinal column. 'I require it for my records.' He shoved the limp body towards his wracks, who began to efficiently butcher the carcass.

'Perhaps you should ask one of them,' Myrta said as she kicked a loose head from her path. She looked up as the dark sky was riven by the shriek of Reavers and hellions. The cackling spire-gangers filled the skies like scavenger birds, and she could hear the screams of those seeking safety in the heights of the floating city.

'I do not speak mon-keigh. Do you?' Jhynkar gestured to one of his slaves, and the tongueless brute shuffled forward, pulling the edges of its ragged shift away from its back. With the tattered cloth moved down, it revealed a tumorous mass of knotted muscle, studded with contact-ports, each one holding a syringe. The haemonculus inserted the syringe he held in an empty port, eliciting a thin whine from the creature, before drawing another from its quivering back.

Myrta frowned. The question was ludicrous. 'Of course not. Why would I debase myself in such a manner?'

He chortled. 'Knowledge is its own reward, my lady. And it cuts as keenly as

any blade, in the right hands.’ He flicked the end of a fresh syringe, and signalled for his wracks to bring him a new human. ‘How long have you been his slave, then?’

‘Courtesan,’ she corrected.

‘It is much the same thing, is it not? He will not let you leave him, whatever you or your sisterhood might wish.’

‘If I am a slave, then so too are you.’

Jhynkar nodded absently as he bent to his task. ‘Oh, of course. There is no denying that. I sought refuge in servitude, as so many do. If you are not a master, you must be a slave. That is the nature of things. Rule, or serve. Some end up doing both.’

‘Vect,’ Myrta said.

Jhynkar thrust his syringe home, into the squealing human’s back. He kept a tight grip on the creature’s neck as it arched itself in agony. Myrta closed her eyes, relishing the sensation. ‘Or our own dear Duke.’ He glanced at her, over the human’s twitching head. ‘Though, there are some who think his rule has been overlong.’

‘You?’

‘Never. Long may Duke Traevelliath Sliscus reign,’ he said loudly. ‘May he stride the stars, a colossus, mighty and untamed, until the firmament crumbles and all songs reach their end.’ A cruel smile twisted his features as he jerked the now-full syringe free and eyed the substance within. ‘I was talking about you.’

Myrta’s hand fell to her blade. ‘Careful, fleshweaver. I am his, and my blade serves him.’ But her words sounded hollow, even to her. If she had a chance to free herself from her eternal servitude, she would take it. There was no question of that.

‘Oh, to be sure, to be sure. I am no traitor, no backstabber. I am but a humble horrorist, cultivating entertainments for my betters.’ He deposited the second syringe as he had the first, and drew a third. ‘And it is in that spirit that I speak to you now. I have a name for you.’

‘A name?’

‘A world. A world of monsters worse than any I can conceive. A world fit for a hunt.’

Myrta frowned. ‘Why not tell him yourself?’

‘I make the blade a gift,’ Jhynkar said. A third human stumbled towards him, propelled roughly by the wracks. He caught the creature and easily forced it to its knees. The haemonculus was far stronger than he looked. Without pause, he

thrust the syringe through the top of the mon-keigh's hairy skull and into the brain meats within. The human gave a strangled groan and slumped. Only Jhynkar's grip kept it from toppling over.

'What do you mean by that? Speak plainly.'

He looked at her, his stretched features expressionless. 'Sliscus has ever been one whose reach exceeds his grasp. He drives himself to greater heights of arrogance, and ever closer to oblivion's edge. It is his nature. Give him a sharp enough blade and he will cut himself.'

'You think this world might mean his destruction?'

'I think that if it happens, no one will blame you.'

Myrta paused, considering his words. Then she smiled. 'And what do you get out of this? I lose an enslaver, but you lose a protector.'

'I lose nothing.' Jhynkar jerked his syringe free and cleaned the tip with a fastidious gesture. 'There is something on the world in question that will buy me forgiveness.'

She laughed. 'And there it is. That is why you need me to suggest it? So that he does not suspect your obvious ulterior motivations?'

Jhynkar smiled. 'Even so, my lady. Is my gift satisfactory?'

Myrta returned his smile. 'What is this world called?'

Jhynkar watched Myrta depart, hurrying to catch up with her self-absorbed patron. If Sliscus died now it would be amusing, but unsatisfying in the long run. Better that he perish at a time and place of their choosing.

'My choosing,' Jhynkar murmured. 'Melianes, come here.' One of his wracks shuffled forward. 'Open a channel to my laboratory.' The wrack shuddered, and the featureless faceplate of his helmet flickered with bands of light. The disparate sections of the faceplate slid aside with a wet hiss, revealing a flat screen behind. The helmet was a broadcast amplifier of sorts, and its wearer a living communications array. Melianes had been most put out, until that first transmission burned out most of his higher brain functions. Now he was merely one more piece of equipment.

Jhynkar bent forward and fiddled with the control nodes implanted in Melianes' chest and neck. He located and activated one frequency among the plethora stored within the wrack's organic databanks, and his servant shuddered again. Melianes stiffened, and a stream of light erupted from the screen.

The motes of light swirled about erratically for a moment before condensing into familiarity. A lean form, bent over its latest masterpiece. Jhynkar sighed,

pleased that the signal was still active after all this time. He cleared his throat. 'Honoured Xhact?'

The hololithic shape turned from some unseen labour and sighed. 'Who dares disturb me at my work? I am right in the middle of something.' A thin hand gestured, and the something groaned weakly.

'It is I, most esteemed master.' The honorific tasted bitter in Jhynkar's mouth. Khaeghris Xhact was no more his master now than he had been centuries ago. The master of the Hex was a dilettante and an unskilled provocateur, by Jhynkar's standards.

Xhact leaned forward. Jhynkar knew he was studying a similar hololithic projection. All members – or former members – of the Hex possessed means of discrete communication with other members of the coven. 'And who are you?'

'Jhynkar, master.' He gritted his teeth. 'Your protégé.'

'The exile?'

'Yes, ancient one.'

Despite his pretence, Jhynkar knew Xhact recognised him well enough. It was Xhact who had sold Jhynkar into slavery, after all. Jhynkar knew the ancient haemonculus found his hardship amusing. Jhynkar was also well placed to feed useful information back to his old coven, when the mood took him. Many great works of art had only come to fruition due to his diligence.

'It has been some time since your last visit, Jhynkar. I feared you dead.'

'Really, revered one?'

'No. I had, in fact, almost entirely forgotten that you still existed. Why have you reminded me?' There was a familiar undercurrent of menace in Xhact's tone. Jhynkar cringed dramatically, and was rewarded with a slight twitch of a smile on his former master's lips.

'I come bearing gifts, oh honoured teacher.'

'Wise. Something interesting, I trust.'

'A world, revered one.'

Xhact snorted. 'And what would I do with another of those?'

'It is a special world. A vibrant, savage world, unlike any other,' Jhynkar said. Quickly, before Xhact could reply, he sent the information. Xhact raised an eyebrow as he studied the data stream.

'This is a mon-keigh world.'

'But unique.'

'Perhaps. Of what interest would such a world be to me, Jhynkar?'

'I should have thought it would be obvious, revered one. The landscape alone is

an inspiring riot of ferocity. Not to mention the inhabitants. The dichotomy between savage and civilisation, between superior and inferior – quite stimulating.’

The hololithic Xhact turned, his eyes narrowed. ‘Oh?’

‘Even better is the opportunity that comes with it.’

‘Go on.’

Jhynkar licked his lips. ‘There is a... ah... a bounty, I believe, on a certain individual of our acquaintance. Quite a hefty one, as well. There may be an opportunity to collect it.’

Xhact nodded. ‘I wondered when your treacherous nature would assert itself, Jhynkar. Have you grown tired of exile at last? Are you finally prepared to humble yourself before your teachers?’

Jhynkar hesitated. ‘My talents will be put to best use in service of yourself and the others. Only through your guidance will I reach the heights to which I aspire. To that end, I bring you a bond price.’

‘A bribe, you mean. To forgive you your many and varied trespasses.’

‘If you wish to be blunt about it,’ Jhynkar said, frowning.

Xhact smiled. ‘It is best to speak simply, I think. What are you offering?’

‘A world of raw materials such as we have never plundered, and the life of one who has delivered insult upon insult to our coven. Not least of which is daring to give sanctuary to one the Hex has cast out.’

‘You,’ Xhact said pointedly.

Jhynkar shrugged. ‘I don’t make the rules.’

Xhact laughed hoarsely. ‘No. Vect does. And he has raised the bounty on the Serpent’s head considerably since Sliscus’ last visit to the Dark City. Something about the theft of a tesseract device intended as a gift for the lord of one of the other kabals. But you knew that, I expect.’

‘Sliscus might have boasted of it once or twice.’

‘That sounds like him, preening fool that he is. It would raise us much in the esteem of the mighty if we were to give him a suitable ending. Something amusing, and fitting.’

‘I may have just the thing, revered one. But I will require aid.’ Jhynkar hid a smile, knowing what the answer would be even as he raised the matter. Xhact was no fool, but he was greedy for influence.

A true artist was above such things, but Xhact and his followers were leeches of the first order. Their art was not conceived for its own sake, but designed to elevate them in the eyes of those whom they might serve as fleshweavers and

bodycrafters. Such undignified scrabbling reduced creativity to mere mercenary endeavour.

Understandable, in its way. Commorrhagh was a sea in which a soul without influence quickly sank. The covens and kabals scrambled constantly in an eternal game of power and pressure, each seeking its own advantage. It was almost beautiful, like some intricate mechanism of gloriously malign purpose, when looked at from a certain angle.

There was an art to such manipulations. His time with Sliscus had taught him that much. Every word in the right ear was a brush stroke on a canvas as wide as the dark between the stars. And when he had completed that great work, it would be spoken of in whispers until the day the last tower of Commorrhagh crumbled into dust.

But first, Xhact had to agree.

The master of the Hex nodded slowly. ‘An intriguing prospect, I will admit. Much to be gained, and so little to be lost.’ He paused, as if something had just occurred to him. ‘And you will oversee it, will you?’

‘I merely proffer the information, honoured master. Make use of it as you will.’ Jhynkar bowed his head with what he hoped was proper subservience.

Xhact snorted. ‘I shall consider it. In the meantime, make your preparations.’ The image flickered and dissolved. Xhact had cut the connection on his end. Jhynkar’s wrack slumped with a guttural moan, and he absently patted the creature on the head.

‘Oh, I will. I will indeed.’



CHAPTER SIX

FEAST AND FIRE

641.M41

Feasting was a tradition. One more ritual among thousands, one more bar on the cage. To feast was to sit with your brothers on long benches, eating, drinking, singing. And at the high tables, where all could see them, the thegns and jarls would be doing the same. The only ones not singing and drinking were the thralls, forced to navigate a maze of fistfights and hungry wolves, bipedal and otherwise.

Lukas crouched in the high rafters of iron-hard wood above the chamber and watched it all. From above, the feast resembled nothing so much as a mechanism of many parts. He could see the wheels of influence and aggression upon which the whole of the Aett turned. He wasn't the only one who could see them – even he wasn't so arrogant to think that. But he fancied that he was the only one who saw them for what they were.

A trap. A trick, played on those long-dead warriors by their Wolf King. Russ had taken a legion of brutal killers and convinced them that they were heroes. He had twisted the ancient superstitions and sagas of Fenris into a cage of words to contain his wild sons. It was a chain of illusion, holding them fast, though they

could neither see it nor feel it.

All except Lukas. He rubbed the back of his neck, as if he could feel the collar chafing him. His perch creaked beneath his weight, and he glanced up. Five shapes crouched nearby, scattered across the rafters. A familiar stink tickled his nose and he sighed. ‘Halvar,’ he sub-vocalised. The name flew across the encrypted vox-link he had devised for his pack, and the shapes froze.

‘How’d you know it was me?’

‘If you want to sneak up on someone, maybe wash first.’ Lukas looked at the Blood Claws. ‘Why are you fools up here?’

‘We followed you,’ Kadir said, creeping closer. ‘What are we doing?’

‘I am preparing to teach Grimblood a lesson, as I promised. You are going back the way you came.’ He tensed. What he was planning was bound to have consequences. Grimblood could suffer wounds to anything save his pride, and that was where Lukas intended to strike.

Kadir snorted. ‘No.’

‘You’re lucky I don’t boot you off these rafters,’ Lukas snarled, but softly.

Kadir frowned. ‘We came to help. He took our glory.’

‘And I’m going to punish him. But it’s better if I incur his wrath alone, don’t you agree?’ Lukas frowned. ‘Get out of here, and leave me to it.’

‘No,’ Einar said.

‘He’s right,’ Ake said. ‘We won’t let you fight our battles for us. What do you need us to do, Trickster?’ The others growled agreeably, united against a common foe. Lukas hesitated. But they knew the risks, and they were right. It was their battle as well. He wasn’t a jarl, to steal their glory.

‘Fine. You want to help? Here.’ He tapped at a plate on his thigh. It popped loose from his armour with a hiss of displaced air, revealing a hidden port. Inside were a handful of crystal spheres. Lukas held them out to the Blood Claws. ‘I’ve been looking for an excuse to use these. Take one.’

Kadir took one and looked at it. ‘What is it?’

‘A holo-flash. Projects a sort of hololithic mask over whoever is holding it. Doesn’t last long. Only a few moments, and then it burns out.’ Lukas handed them out to Einar and the others. ‘I got them from a trader of my acquaintance. She brings me all sorts of gifts in return for... certain favours.’ He grinned. ‘These she got on some feral backwater. Archaeotech, probably. They have skjalds there, of a sort. They use them when they perform before their chieftains.’ He closed the port on his thigh. ‘These are keyed to my appearance.’

‘So we’ll look like you?’ Kadir asked warily.

‘Aye, though it won’t last long, more is the pity.’ Lukas smiled. ‘Still, you’ll get to know how it feels to be this handsome, at least for a few moments.’

‘And what do you want us to do with them?’ Dag asked. Pale as he was, he looked positively sickly in the glow cast up by the fires below. He grinned, eager to participate in whatever Lukas was planning. For a moment, his lean features resembled a skull. Lukas blinked the image away, banishing it from his thoughts.

‘I want you to sneak back out of here the way you came and wait for me outside. Don’t activate them until I give the signal.’

‘What’s the signal?’ Ake asked, nervously bouncing his crystal on his palm.

‘You’ll know it when you see it. Now go. And be quiet.’

As the Blood Claws crept away, Lukas turned back to the feast below. It was in full swing now. Normally, feasts were held to commemorate the dead, to celebrate a victory or to rejoice in a hunt yet to come. Helwinter feasts were a more energetic sort of beast – all that excess energy boiled over into a mad celebration full of noise and violence. Any thrall not serving food and drink stayed well away from Jarlheim during festivities like this.

Below, Grimblood stood and came to the centre of the chamber. He raised his hands, and a respectful silence fell. Whatever his faults, the jarl had a firm grip on the throat of his Great Company. One gesture was enough to put them in their place. The warriors of the other companies fell silent as well, eventually, as their own jarls glared or shouted for quiet.

It was hard to deny that Grimblood cut an impressive figure. His battle-plate was burned black in places, and red runes had been carved on these scorched areas. They caught the firelight and shimmered eerily, exactly as the Wolf Lord had likely intended.

Lukas snorted. He knew what came next. Every feast, Grimblood liked to ruin the fun with a long-winded ramble on his favourite subject. The jarl circled the great firepit that occupied the heart of the chamber. ‘The fire speaks to me,’ he rumbled. His voice carried through the chamber easily, reaching every ear. ‘The galaxy burns. And if we fail, it will be consumed. Luckily, failure is not something we are known for, eh, brothers?’

A shout went up at this. Fists thumped tables and tankards crashed down. Grimblood smiled. He struck his chest with a balled fist. ‘We are the sons of Russ, and failure is not in us. Whatever the battle, whatever the cost, we stand true. Always and forever.’ He held up his fists and brought them together. ‘We are the iron of two great worlds, of Fenris and Terra, hammered together by the hands of the Wolf King and forged into a killing blade.’

Roars now. Bellows of agreement from those too drunk on mjod to hold their tongues, or to notice that Grimblood was lifting lines from one of the most famous speeches ever given by their primarch. ‘We are the Wolves that Stalk the Stars, and the beasts of void and darkness fear us. They burn their worlds lest we catch their scent. They flee at the first glimpse of us, at the first sounding of our howl. They prefer the agonies of Hel to the touch of our fangs. They fear us!’

Lukas settled back on his haunches as a solid wave of noise rose from the feasters. His ears ached with the din. Below, Grimblood turned as he spoke, casting his gaze across every table. ‘Aye, they fear us, and they are right to do so, for once a wolf bites, it does not let go until its prey is dead. They come seeking slaughter, and we give it to them, brothers, measure for measure.’

Someone had begun to pound rhythmically on a table. Others joined in. Grimblood spread his arms. ‘Feel the ground tremble and quake, brothers. Feel the echoes of the storm cascading through the stone of the mountain. Feel our world twist in its rage – it is a gift, that rage. It makes us strong, it is what our enemies fear. It is our fire, burning cold at the core of us. But like every fire since the first, it must eventually consume us.’

A voice rose in a dirge and was soon joined by others. Dolorous and proud, like the groan of a dying animal. Lukas winced. Grimblood turned to the fire and swept his hands through it, as if to capture the flames between his fingers.

‘Our fire is the wolf in our blood. It is ever hungry, and will devour us each in its turn. But that is how it must be. Morkai comes for every man, and he cannot deny it, no matter how he might wish it. Our enemies deny death, they deny the truth of things, and so make themselves into lies. But we are the truth made flesh.’

The dirge grew louder and wilder. The kill-urge rose suddenly, beating at Lukas’ temples and choking his throat. He forced it back, fighting for clarity. Grimblood continued to speak, but Lukas ignored him. It was too easy to get swept up in these self-aggrandising refrains. Not truth, but boasts and lies. Grimblood was just teasing the beast, so that when the Helwinter released its hold on the Aett, the companies would burst forth and harry the stars with appropriate vigour. It was his duty, and he was good at it.

‘And this is *my* duty,’ Lukas muttered as he reached into one of the pouches on his belt. The pouch was specially insulated, and inside rested a neat, gelatinous sphere. It fit easily in his palm, immediately losing its shape as he wrapped his fingers around it.

Lukas warmed the solution between his palms. It had the consistency of rubber,

but with less tensile strength. As it warmed, its surface began to ripple and bubble. He grinned. The substance was made primarily from kraken ichor and drake blubber. Combining them in the correct quantities along with some form of accelerant made for a potent, if largely harmless, flammable gelling agent. He rolled the solution once more into a tight ball and dropped it into the firepit.

When it landed, the fire sprang up and out, blazing wild for a brief moment as the solution exploded. Grimblood whirled, and droplets of the gelling agent splattered across his face and armour. The jarl staggered back as his beard burst into flames. The rest of his hair went up like a torch, and he howled. He stumbled over a wolf, and the animal scrambled away, yelping. Its cries set the other wolves to similarly voice their confusion. The shouts and curses of the warriors at the tables only added to the furore.

Lukas laughed. It was going better than he had expected. Still, he hadn't intended to set Grimblood's whole head on fire. That was a failing on his part, and one he needed to address swiftly, before things got out of hand. He sprang from his perch and dropped to the floor.

Lukas landed opposite the bellowing Wolf Lord. He howled out his laughter as he scooped up a barrel of mjod from a nearby table and bounded towards Grimblood. The jarl's eyes widened as he realised what Lukas was planning. 'No!' he sputtered.

Lukas slammed the foamy barrel over Grimblood's head, putting out the flames with a heavy splash. The Wolf Lord threw a wild punch, but Lukas easily avoided the blind blow. Still laughing, he leapt up onto another table. 'All this talk of fire, and no thought given to putting it out? For shame, my jarl – what would Russ say?'

Grimblood tore the barrel apart, splattering liquid everywhere. What was left of his singed hair and beard was plastered to his skull in limp knots. He roared in fury. Warriors grabbed at Lukas, hurling themselves across the table as he ran down its length. Lukas leapt and slid, kicking up platters of food and knocking over tankards in his madcap dash for the door. Grey Hunters moved to cut him off. One rushed him with a beef bone, and Lukas was forced to defend himself with a platter. He kicked his attacker's legs out from under him and leapt for the wall beyond the table.

As the soles of his boots crunched against the stonework, he twisted and pushed himself towards one of the ancient chandeliers that hung from the rafters. He stretched out a hand, catching the black iron rim. Still laughing, he swung himself towards the exit. When he reached the apex of the swing, he let go and

landed in a crouch. Without hesitation, he scrambled to his feet and towards the doors. He heard Grimblood roaring behind him and felt the floor tremble as warriors galloped in pursuit. He didn't look back.

Lukas hit the doors full tilt, scattering thralls. As he raced into the corridor, he heard a familiar howl and saw a flash out of the corner of his eye. A moment later, five copies of himself were racing alongside him. Lukas threw back his head and laughed. 'Split up,' he barked. 'Let's lead them on a merry chase, brothers. *Hloja!*'

The howls of the Rout pursued them into the dark.

Galerunner pushed the great bronze-banded doors open and entered the Hall of Silences. Jarlheim was in an uproar. Packs of Grey Hunters scoured the tunnels and corridors, seeking something. Or someone. Galerunner knew well enough who that someone was without having to be told. No doubt that was the reason he had been summoned.

'I told him,' he said softly to his shadow. 'But he didn't listen.' He had warned Grimblood about provoking the Jackalwolf. Anger was the Rout's vice, and Lukas played on it often. Whole packs of vengeful Grey Hunters had been led into the depths of the Aett by a laughing shadow, only to return some hours later, shame-faced and smelling of troll piss or worse things. Brondt Rocktooth had pursued Lukas through the Bloodfire Gate and vanished for three cycles, eventually staggering back with his battle-plate stained black with kraken ichor and a haunted look in his eyes.

Only the mad and the desperate tried to catch the Jackalwolf by the tail. Lukas could be endured if you were clever. Other jarls had managed it, in their time. But not Grimblood. And now he was paying for it. Galerunner sighed.

The Hall of Silences lived up to its name. The Aett echoed with noise. All save this place, where silence seemed to swell in on itself, drowning out all sound. It sat on the eastern slopes of the mountain, a shrine to forgotten things, built by men who forgot nothing. Galerunner frowned. 'No matter how much we might wish to,' he muttered.

Here was the battle-plate of a warrior who had fallen in the Months of Shame, shorn of totems and markers, for reasons known only to the Great Wolf. There, the tattered blue uniform of a Delsvaan Warden, killed in the fall of Masaanore-Core, a decade before Lemman Russ had taken his Legion in hand. The walls were heavy with shameful trophies and tokens of bitter remembrance. The air was pregnant with stories untold.

It was the Wolf King who had given the Hall of Silences its purpose. To ensure that his warriors tasted not just the sweet, but the bitter as well, or so the Wolf Priests claimed. It was one of many such shrines that dotted the slopes and crags of the Fang, tributes to past mistakes. Few warriors of the Rout visited the hall these days, however.

Galerunner could find no fault in that. The air here stank of regret. The battered suits of armour that decorated the crudely carved stasis-alcoves were reminders of the worst moments of Legion and Chapter.

He found Grimblood waiting for him. The Wolf Lord was gazing at the contents of an alcove, his face marked with soot and burns. His hair and beard had been scorched to stubble, and his armour stank of something. Trails of grimy residue marred the grey plate, smoke still rising from it in places.

‘You called, jarl. I have come.’

‘I have eyes, Galerunner,’ Grimblood said. He trembled with barely restrained violence, as if he wanted nothing more than to tear flesh and break bone. He fixed his yellow gaze on the Rune Priest. ‘This is a place of contemplation. I came here so that my anger might bleed out safely.’ His eyes flashed. ‘It is taking longer than usual, for obvious reasons.’ He indicated his burnt features. ‘I need your wisdom, priest.’

‘Lukas,’ Galerunner said.

‘Yes,’ Grimblood said.

‘I warned you. But you had to prove that you could take his throat in your jaws.’

Grimblood closed his eyes. ‘I didn’t ask you here so that you could deliver recriminations.’ He ran a hand over his scalp, displacing motes of ash and burnt skin. ‘I have sent my *vaerangii* to look for him.’

‘They will not find him. He has been sighted in at least five different places.’

‘Bad enough that he ruined the hunt with his pranks,’ Grimblood snarled. ‘He filched the scent-glands from a dead kraken and marked Hafrek’s armour. Besides the stink, it lured more of the beasts right to us, drawing them up out of the ice by the dozen!’

‘A potentially lethal prank,’ Galerunner said.

‘That wasn’t even the worst of it.’ Grimblood shook his head. ‘Then he and those half-witted pups mimicked the cries of a wounded drake. They led Redmaw and his warriors into an unstable cavern and trapped them there with an ice shelf rigged to collapse. It took us hours to dig them out.’

‘Was anyone hurt?’

Grimblood smiled slightly. ‘Only Redmaw’s pride, I admit.’ The smile vanished. ‘They also dropped nests of bloodlice down onto Krakendoom and his huscarls, and pushed Goresson into a troll lair.’

‘Pity the poor troll,’ Galerunner said.

Grimblood didn’t laugh. Galerunner understood. The hunt had sputtered to an ignominious halt. The deep caverns were unstable thanks to the increasing tectonic pressures. The hunters had been driven back up into the mountain, where they steadily pickled themselves in mjod. Or worse, got into brawls. The Wolf Priests were hard pressed to keep things on an even keel. There were too many warriors in too confined a space.

‘He has only got worse since. He has started at least three brawls and instigated at least one honour-duel. Every jest he makes, every prank he pulls, reverberates outwards, its effects cascading through the Aett.’ Grimblood sighed and scrubbed at his scalp. ‘The other Wolf Lords have demanded that I do something – anything – to rein him in.’

Galerunner said nothing. Grimblood knew he was to blame, and the Rune Priest felt a flicker of sympathy. The jarl looked at him. ‘Krakendoom wants me to break his limbs. Goresson wants him imprisoned until the Helwinter is done. Redmaw had a different suggestion.’ He gestured to the alcove before him. ‘Do you know this armour, Galerunner?’

Galerunner looked up. The battle-plate was a dull charcoal grey. It lacked the savage ornamentation so common to the power armour worn by the warriors of the Rout. It was utilitarian. Functional. The only symbols it bore were a blocky company designation on the chest-piece and a Terran Raptor insignia. ‘Yes. It is the battle-plate of a Consul-Opsequiari. A battlefield overseer.’

Grimblood nodded. ‘For a time, before Russ taught us our place, those who wore this armour held our leash. They were granted the power of life and death over their brothers, and many a warrior was made to lie down on red snow by their will.’

‘They are gone now,’ Galerunner said.

‘The last of them died millennia ago.’ Grimblood stared at the armour. ‘We cast off old ways, and were taught new, better rites. No more would the kill-urge be silenced with a bolt round. Instead, it was shaped and forged into something useful. Something better.’ He looked at Galerunner. ‘But still, that urge is in us. The beast is at bay. Stronger in some than others.’ He was silent for a moment. Then, ‘Redmaw wants him dead. I think the others agree, though they have not admitted it. I thought I had him in hand, but clearly I was wrong.’

‘We are not as we were, jarl. We do not kill our own.’

Grimblood shook his head. ‘Why do we put up with him? He is insubordinate, foolish, arrogant and harmful. He throws packs into discord and flouts all laws and rites. Again and again, he has done things deserving of death, and again and again, his life is spared.’

‘Is he not punished?’

‘Not enough. Never enough.’

‘He is a lord of misrule,’ Galerunner said. ‘A clown. The fool in the court of Russ, speaking truth where it is neither wanted nor acceptable.’

‘Then why let him do so?’

‘Because it must be done. There must be one voice, at least, that howls against tradition, else we grow complacent.’ The Rune Priest leaned heavily on his staff. ‘Lukas’ wyrd is to move out of step with the Rout. That is the thread of his fate, spun so long ago when first he was dragged off the ice. Even then, there were those who thought it best that he die.’

‘Maybe it would have been better if he had.’

Galerunner looked at him. ‘Unworthy words.’

Grimblood frowned. ‘Aye, but there is truth in them. And yet you speak as if he is a stone against which we sharpen our blades.’

‘Morkai haunts us,’ Galerunner said after a moment. ‘He has dogged our trail for time out of mind, and draws closer with every century. We grow old, and our claws and fangs grow dull from overuse. Even our lair crumbles around us.’

‘Nothing is forever. Not on Fenris.’

Galerunner smiled. ‘No. Nor should it be. It is the first and last lesson our world teaches its sons. But between these lessons, we forget. We lull ourselves with tradition and forget that things cannot remain as they are, that change is the only constant on this world, or in this galaxy. Sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse, but always changing.’

His smile faded. ‘With every Great Year that passes, more packs return from their hunts diminished,’ he said. ‘Death was once a glorious thing for us. Now it is a tedium.’ Grimblood nodded with obvious reluctance.

‘Once there were as many packs as there are stars in the sky. But as the stars gutter in the firmament, so too have we dwindled and ebbed. Fewer Blood Claws survive their wild years.’ Galerunner studied the armour. ‘Weaned on legend, they seek to rip sagas from the flesh of war, to match their predecessors’ deeds. Few understand that those deeds, mighty as they are, have but grown in the telling. And thus, pups die for pride. Unless someone teaches them otherwise.’

Grimblood snorted. 'And that's the Trickster, then?'

'He shows them a different path. Not all of them will follow him. But some will.'

'To what end?'

'Old wolves have one thing in common,' Galerunner said. 'Cunning. Strength and valour earn a glorious death. But cunning earns a long life.' The Rune Priest gestured to the armour before them. 'Once, this was a tradition. A solid fact of our existence. Now it has been discarded. We learned new ways. Different ways.'

'He is a fool.'

'Yes. And sneaky. Unprincipled. An inveterate liar and a thief. But brave and loyal to the Rout.' Galerunner sighed. 'He will not be our salvation, Grimblood. But he might ensure that some of us are there to see the Wolftime when it rolls around at last.'

Grimblood sighed and looked away. 'He cannot go unpunished. They cannot go unpunished. It is not our way.'

'So punish them.' Galerunner tapped the jarl in the chest with the end of his staff. 'But be cunning about it. Do not confine them. Let them go. When they come back, perhaps they will be wiser.'

'Or wilder.'

'Either way, we get a bit of peace.'

Grimblood laughed.

PART TWO
HUNTERS



CHAPTER SEVEN

POISON GIFTS

641.M41

Lady Aurelia Malys, mistress of the Poisoned Tongue Kabal, fluttered her bladed fan before her face. There was poison in everything here, and coating every surface. It was in the wine, dripping from the pores of the slaves and wafting like pollen on the musky air. Not unexpected, and somewhat invigorating. Already the weak of constitution had fallen supine to twitch and froth, much to the amusement of their peers. They would survive, probably. Still, what was a party without a few fatalities?

The tesseract pleasure gardens of Duke Traevelliath Sliscus had been the talk of the Dark City for some time. He had stolen the tesseract realm right out from under the nose of one of Vect's favourites and left an entire district of Low Commorrhagh in flames in the process. Traevelliath had always known how to make an exit.

Malys turned slowly, studying the gardens with the detached air of one who had seen more than her share of social disasters. Her calm demeanour was more for the benefit of anyone who might be observing her than a true measure of her state of mind. In fact, she was excited. Traevelliath was nothing if not

entertaining, and many of the great and powerful of Commorragh had come slinking through their webway gates, looking to be entertained.

She stood at the heart of a wide plaza of dark stone connected to the tiers above and below by deceptively fragile-looking sets of curving steps. They had been crafted from living bone, grown and carved into shape by cunning hands. Nodules of calcification encrusted the wide curve of the edifice, forming eye-catching patterns. The whole structure rustled eerily as slaves ascended and descended in a continuous line bearing great trays of food – cooked meats and floral delicacies from a thousand lesser cultures. Their host had spared no expense in displaying the extent of his palate.

The slaves slipped swiftly through the crowd. As one drew close, Malys saw that it wore a delicately engraved golden mask wired into the flesh of its head. The mask bore bejewelled sensors that acted as the slave's eyes and ears. Its body was covered in a fine latticework of scars that proved to be line upon line of poetic verse. The other slaves were similarly decorated, each of them bearing a unique work of undeniable artistry upon their flesh. Among his other vices, Traevelliath had always fancied himself something of a poet.

She took a cup from a tray as it passed by and sniffed the carmine liquid within. A good vintage, likely stolen. That made it all the sweeter. She sipped from it, grimacing only slightly at the bitter edge of whatever toxin had been added.

She scanned the crowd, noting the odd familiar face here and there. Representatives from many a Low Commorragh kabal were in evidence. The rabble always had the most to gain from events like this. But they weren't alone. There were some rather more influential faces in attendance, unsurprisingly.

S'aronai Ariensis, archon of the spacebound kabal known as the Severed, nodded bleakly to her. She ignored the overture, as was only appropriate. Ariensis had botched a coup that had cost him his position, his stronghold and most of his left hand. Malys had no interest in such a creature, whatever he had made of himself in the interim.

Of more interest, though not by much, was Lord Xerathis. The archon of the Kabal of the Broken Sigil stood giggling in a corner, lost in a haze of intoxicants as some witless flesh-artist described her newest work. Likely the talentless fool was seeking a new patron. Malys wished her well. As long as it was suitably shocking or stomach-churning, Xerathis would fund it. Anything to cause a bit of discord.

Malys stopped her circuit of the plaza as someone gestured and caught her attention. An apparition of venomous alabaster, Archon Thyndrak raised her cup

in greeting to Malys. Sable hair spilled down from her narrow skull, its dark length shot through with threads of deepest crimson. She was clad in a suit of close-fitting armour, its contoured plates delicately inked with intricate and fashionably revolting designs. Malys joined her at the edge of the tier. ‘Thyndrak. You’re looking well, my dear.’

Thyndrak smiled, displaying teeth sheathed in black crystal. ‘As are you, my Lady Malys. Though I am surprised to see you here.’

‘Really?’ she said silkily. ‘Traevelliath and I are old friends.’

Thyndrak arched an eyebrow. ‘He has many friends.’ She gestured with her cup. Malys made a show of looking around. She had already taken stock of her fellow guests and found them wanting. Like Thyndrak, they were mostly the mad, the bad and the dangerous to know. Or so they fancied themselves, at least. Malys knew most of them for dilettantes and braggarts. Though several evoked something like curiosity in her.

No minor archons, these, but wyches and haemonculi from various cults and covens. She saw a strutting succubus clad in the turquoise and gold of the Cursed Blade, as well as a thin, malformed-looking creature she knew to be Khaeghris Xhact of the Hex – or one of the artfully crafted doubles he was reported to employ.

There was even a troupe of Harlequins present. The warrior-troubadours in their gaudy colours danced, sang and juggled for their appreciative – if somewhat unsettled – audience. Though the clowns were undeniably eldar, they owed no allegiance to any kabal or craftworld. They were a common enough sight in Commorragh, but were not of it.

These were clad in onyx and viridian and bore the rune of the inverse enigma. It was one she was familiar with. She’d had some dealings with this particular troupe before. She watched them mingle, and smiled. The presence of the Harlequins spoke to their host’s influence.

While there was something to be said for Vect’s cunning, Sliscus might well prove his equal in manipulation. He was able to wound an opponent with nothing more than a smile and gain allies with an appropriately timed laugh. It was a lucky thing for them all that Sliscus had no interest in being in charge of anything more than his own destiny. Nevertheless, he was still a danger.

That was why she had come, in the end. Things were coming to a head in Commorragh. She could feel it in her bones and hear it in the whispered reports of her spies. Vect might have declared this an age of plenty, but she saw through his boasting. He was worried. And if the Tyrant was worried, so too was she. But

worried or not, she saw no reason not to take advantage of the situation. And that meant gathering allies and identifying potential enemies. She hadn't determined which of those categories Traevelliath fell into just yet, but she would. And once she had, she would deal with him appropriately.

Malys felt a presence at her elbow and turned. One of the Harlequins was standing unsettlingly close. She wore a mirrored cowl, and Malys was careful not to seek her reflection in its subtle facets. She had met Shadowseers before and knew the dangers all too well. 'And what do you want, clown?' she asked, ignoring Thyndrak's look of amused curiosity. Let the other archon think what she liked.

'We ask only an introduction, oh Lady of the Poisoned Tongue.' The Harlequin bowed low, almost mockingly so. 'A heart in the chest is worth a word in the ear, no?'

Malys touched her chest, feeling the dull pulse of the thing inside her. 'An introduction?' The crystal heart beat with its own strange rhythm, ever-changing and unpredictable. She had won it at great cost to herself, through means she still didn't entirely understand. That time was like a dream to her, with one memory bleeding into the next until it was nothing more than a riot of colour and sound. A whirling, disordered dance of fragmented recollections that she could only just comprehend. Of late, she had begun to doubt that she had won anything at all.

'To our host, most gentle lady,' the Harlequin clarified.

Malys smiled. They often came to her with some request or other. It seemed only prudent to acquiesce, and on the rare occasions that she refused they accepted with great equanimity. As if it had been foreseen, or not unexpected. In some way, she was a part of their great dance. It frustrated her to no end, though admittedly it made an often otherwise interminable existence somewhat entertaining.

'And what would a troupe of vagabonds such as yourselves want with him?' she asked slyly. 'What corkscrew scheme twists away behind that pretty face?' She gestured to the Shadowseer's featureless mask with her fan.

'Do you truly wish to know the answer, oh Bearer of the Blade?'

Malys' eyes darted down to the sword sheathed on her hip. It was the same one she had used to dig out her own heart so that she might replace it with the crystal one now throbbing in its place. Like the crystal heart, it had a mind of its own at times. She dropped a hand to the grinning face that acted as its pommel and frowned. 'No, I don't suppose I do,' she said slowly. 'Though it had best not interfere with my own plans, clown.'

‘The gods forbend, sweet lady,’ the Shadowseer said obsequiously. ‘It is all part of the same great dance, though the steps are separate.’ As if to emphasise the point, the clown did a little jig, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Malys frowned, then nodded. ‘I will introduce you.’ She flipped open her fan and waved it briskly. ‘If only to see what happens next. Traevelliath is quite volatile. He may well take offence to you and confine your troupe to his garden.’

The Harlequin hesitated, and Malys smiled. She folded her fan and tapped the clown on the chest. ‘He does so like his little jokes, our Serpent.’ A sharp whistle brought the Harlequin around. The rest of its troupe had gathered nearby, and slaves were quickly clearing a space for them.

The Harlequin bowed to her. ‘I hope you will enjoy the performance, mistress. It is an old one, but of great meaning in these fraught times.’

‘I’m sure I will. Be off with you.’ Malys gestured dismissively. The Shadowseer spun away, not quite dancing back towards her fellows. One of the more off-putting habits of the Laughing God’s servants was their seeming inability to remain still for very long. It was as if they were moving to a beat only they could hear.

The Shadowseer rose to her full height, surrounded by her troupe as they knelt about her in a wide circle. Thyndrak leaned towards Malys, and she hid a start. She had almost forgotten that the other archon was there. ‘It has been some time since I last saw a troupe of Harlequins perform. Sliscus truly spared no expense.’

‘If I thought he had invited them here, rather than them just showing up of their own volition, I might agree with you.’ Malys waved her fan at the other archon. ‘Shush now. The dance is beginning.’

It was hard to say just how it began, or what the first step was. One moment, stillness. The next, a reeling, chromatic gavotte. As the Harlequins moved they left blurred after-images in their wake, ghostly echoes of each twist and turn in their grand coordination. Each step and gesture established characters whose arcs were completed by the next pirouette, a self-contained universe of transitory events bestriding an ever-shifting array of worlds. Slowly, surely, the crowd fell silent.

Malys pressed her fan to her chest and tried to ignore the sudden thump of her heart as the rhythm of the dance sped up. It was hard to follow all of the nuances of the performers’ body language – she suspected the meaning was different depending on where you were standing. The one she saw was familiar – a mythic saga, the journey of a young prince exiled and become king of exiles. Appropriate, perhaps, given their host.

As the dance reached a crescendo of frenetic motion, there was a low, deep tolling, as of some great bell. The toll shuddered out, causing the glass in her hand to quiver in sympathy. Trays rattled and slaves quailed, sinking to their knees. The Harlequins broke apart, dispersing swiftly like a flock of startled birds.

Sliscus made his entrance in grand style. Clad in shimmering raiment made from the glistening hide of some alien beast, he descended from on high. His Sslyth bodyguards undulated after him, their progress slow. The steps had not been designed with serpentine bodies in mind. Sliscus quickly outpaced them, moving with light-footed grace.

‘They say the Harlequins taught him to dance,’ Thyndrak murmured, watching him. ‘And that he has done so under a grinning mask for the unknowing entertainment of the highest of the high.’ She glanced at Malys. ‘Have we seen him, I wonder?’

‘I feel certain we would know. Traevelliath has never been one to conceal his light, even for a joke.’ Malys studied the corsair. Sliscus had not changed much since their last encounter. He was still the same Serpent. Tall and regal, as only a scion of the semi-extinct noble houses could be, with sharp, high-planed features. His hair had been bound into hundreds of thin plaits, each wrapped in gold wire. The plaits splayed out across his shoulders and cascaded down his back and across his bare chest.

A pair of swords hung from the stacked half-sheaths of the ornate gem-studded harness he wore over his shimmering coat. The weapons were old and cruel-looking, their pale blades curved and hooked like talons, and they rasped against one another. The gems in the harness flickered strangely as the light struck them. With a start, Malys realised that they were spirit stones. She laughed softly in delight, wondering if the stones were occupied. If so, she hoped the souls within were enjoying the view.

Holstered opposite the swords was a heavy liquifier pistol with ivory framework and a gilded barrel. The pistol, like the swords, was old, and radiated the malice of ages. Fingers heavy with rings tapped against the pistol’s grip, and Sliscus’ other hand rested atop the pommel of the uppermost sword.

‘I have arrived,’ he said, his voice a soothing purr. ‘Now, let the revelries begin.’

Duke Sliscus took in the crowd at a glance, savouring their adulation and envy. The barely restrained rage of jealous Commorrites was like a palate cleanser

after the unsubtle emotions he had been forced to subsist on. So many different permutations of desire and resentment. And all for him.

‘My friends,’ he said, spreading his arms. ‘Be welcome. All that I have is yours. Enjoy yourselves to the fullest. I ask only that you leave behind a little of the happiness that you bring.’ A smattering of applause greeted his words, as he had known it would. As he studied the crowd, noting the familiar faces, he wondered which of them would be lost to the pleasure gardens. He hoped it was someone interesting this time.

Before he could continue, a voice cried out, ‘Death to the Serpent!’ A moment later, a splinter pistol crackled. The shot struck the force shield surrounding him, and the thin shards of crystal scattered across an unseen curve. He chuckled.

‘Oh, are we getting this out of the way early? How thoughtful.’

Several guests laughed. Others drew back, eager to witness the confrontation. It wasn’t a real party until someone tried to kill the host. There was a disturbance at the back of the crowd as his attackers forced their way towards him. An archon and his retinue – three kabalite warriors, likely favoured – if not trusted – dracons. Sliscus recognised the burgundy armour and flowing azure silks of the warriors instantly.

‘Is that you, Xomyll? I thought I recognised your distinctive squeal. Still angry about the tesseract, I take it?’ Sliscus waved Sleg and his coil-kin back as he descended the final steps. ‘I can’t blame you – it is very nice.’ He gestured about him for emphasis, and an appreciative titter ran through his guests.

‘Thief,’ Xomyll spat. He was a pinch-faced trueborn, haughty and arrogant. He and his cluster of warriors bore the sigil of the Kabal of the Black Heart proudly, as if their allegiance to the Supreme Overlord of Commorrhagh was all the protection they needed. And in most cases, it was. But not here. Vect had no power here, whatever a fool like Xomyll might think. The archon spat on the floor and gestured with his smoking pistol. ‘I name you thief and traitor, Traevelliath Sliscus. I name you coward.’ He holstered his weapon and let his hand fall to the sword sheathed on his hip. ‘Asdrubael Vect sends his regards, corsair. Will you answer his challenge?’

A murmur swept through the crowd. Sliscus smiled. ‘Asdrubael sent you? How considerate.’ He let his hands drift towards the swords on his hip. ‘Come, then. Let us commence, before the roasted haemovore cutlets grow cold.’

Xomyll snarled an order, and his warriors drew their blades and surged forward. There was another murmur at this. It was bad form to involve others in a direct challenge. But neither Xomyll nor his master were known for caring much about

form, and in the end, results were all that really mattered.

Sliscus sprang to meet them, drawing his swords. The blades were light in his hand, and the pale steel was lined with thin filaments of red. The psycho-vampiric circuitry woven into the metal could leach the vitality from anything the blades bit into. He spun the swords, indulging his sense of melodrama. But as the first of his assailants reached him, he was already moving. Not to kill, but simply to incapacitate. He twisted away from a lunge and chopped through the back of the warrior's legs. His blade easily bit through armour and flesh, and the crippled warrior collapsed with a gasp of pain. Sliscus tore his blade free as he used its mate to parry a blow. Without slowing, he dealt his second attacker a deceptively gentle blow on the shoulder.

As the second reeled, the third pounced. Sliscus caught her blow on his crossed blades. He jerked his swords apart, chopping through her own. She stumbled back, and he pursued. His blades licked out – knees, elbows, thighs, shoulders – and she fell with a wail. The second warrior cursed and sprang at his back. Sliscus reversed his blades and thrust them to meet him. The weight of the dying fighter crashed against him, and Sliscus shuddered as he drank in his opponent's death agonies. He tore his blades free as Xomyll tried to capitalise on the momentary distraction.

Invigorated by the pain of the warriors he had wounded, Sliscus easily avoided the thrust. Xomyll was not quite the swordsman he fancied himself. He was a better bootlick by far. Sliscus wondered what had given him the courage to attempt so bold a murder. Maybe it wasn't courage so much as stupidity.

'How he must dislike you, Xomyll,' he said as he stepped around the archon. His blade licked out lazily, and Xomyll parried it with desperate speed. 'Sending you here like this. I did wonder, you know. The last time I invited him to a party, he sent Mandrakes. They made quite the mess. But this – you – this is more in the way of an apology.'

Xomyll bared his teeth and attacked. Sliscus ducked and twisted, evading the darting blade in a swirl of robes. 'I wonder, is this punishment, perhaps, for losing the tesseract in the first place? It was a gift, after all. Bad form, to lose a gift from the Tyrant.'

'You stole it,' Xomyll snarled.

'Yes. From you. So whose fault is it, truly? Whom does he hold responsible, hmm?' Sliscus parried a clumsy blow and stepped past Xomyll, slicing through his calf. Xomyll sank to one knee with a groan. Sliscus turned and swept the tip of a blade across Xomyll's wrist, cutting tendons. Xomyll dropped his blade.

The archon threw himself forward, clawing for his splinter pistol. Sliscus didn't give him a chance to fire. He leapt and pinned Xomyll's hand to the floor. He kicked the pistol away and smiled down at his would-be assassin. 'I think we both know the answer to that.'

Xomyll gaped up at him. Sliscus waited for him to curse, to protest, something. Instead, Xomyll whimpered as the psycho-vampiric circuitry did its work. Sliscus frowned, suddenly bored of the whole affair. He sighed and thrust his other blade through the wounded archon's eye, ending the game abruptly.

'Well, that was disappointing. Still, no reason to let it ruin the party.' He nudged the body out of the way with his foot and looked around. 'Eat, my friends. Drink! Make merry. For tomorrow, you might wind up like poor Xomyll there.' Laughter swept the gardens as his guests set to enjoying themselves.

He cleaned his blades on his raiment as slaves came to drag the bodies away – both the living and the dead. The survivors might yet find a place in his fleet if they lasted the night. Or he would toss them into the depths of the gardens to live out the rest of their days as hunted beasts. It would depend on his mood.

As he sheathed his swords, Myrta came forward, holding a new robe for him. This one had been made from the soft flesh of Morralian younglings, and its folds were dark and supple. He dropped his blood-spattered raiment to the floor and slipped on the new robe. Slaves squabbled over the discarded one, though whether to clean it or claim it, he couldn't say. Either was acceptable. He rarely wore the same thing twice, and even then only under protest. He tapped the hilts of his swords, feeling the last ergs of stolen vitality seeping away. The spirit stones that encrusted the sheath pulsed despairingly, and he smiled.

'Pleased with yourself, then?'

He turned, his smile widening. 'Aurelia, you came. Oh, how delightful.' He held out his hands to Lady Malys and she took them, looking him up and down. Malys looked as regal as ever, clad as she was in ornate ceremonial armour and a flowing dress of archaic style. A bustle draped with streamers of ur-ghul hide completed the ensemble. He ignored a flicker of jealousy. She had always known how to dress for a party.

'How could I miss this? Your parties are legend, Traevelliath.'

'Not everyone agrees, sadly.' He glanced meaningfully at the new bloodstains on the floor. 'Asdrubael always did know how to hold a grudge.'

'Or maybe it was a gift. Xomyll has been agitating to send a fleet after you. To punish you for crimes against the Eternal City. He has – had – something of a following.'

Sliscus laughed. ‘And if he had succeeded?’

‘Then Vect would have been rid of an admittedly charismatic annoyance.’

‘Aurelia, your mind is as crooked as ever. It has always been the whetstone against which I sharpen my own not-inconsiderable intellect.’ He rubbed her cheek, leaving shallow scratches.

Malys snorted. ‘Flatterer.’ She frowned suddenly and touched her cheek. He wondered if she had detected the harsh taste at the back of her throat already. She licked her lips. ‘Poison?’ she asked.

‘Nothing dangerous. Not for such as we, my lady.’

She slapped him, hard enough to draw blood. ‘Ask first.’ She licked the taste of him from her fingers. ‘As sweet as ever, I see.’

He rubbed his cheek and smiled. ‘I’m delighted you came.’ A slave passed by bearing a tray of drinks, and he took one.

‘I was surprised to receive your invitation, I admit,’ Malys said, sipping from her own drink. ‘Especially after I put those Groevian assassins on your trail.’

‘I wondered who was behind that. It was a disappointingly sloppy attempt, Aurelia.’

Malys cocked an eyebrow. ‘They came highly recommended. However did you escape them, Traevelliath?’

‘Oh, I might possibly have caused their navigational system to malfunction. The last I saw, they were plunging into the heart of their homeworld’s star. Bit of a joke, there.’

‘Was it?’

‘Well, you had to be there.’ Sliscus smiled at her over the rim of his goblet. ‘I thank you for the diversion, however momentary.’

‘I thought you might find it entertaining,’ Malys said. His smile widened a fraction.

‘As I hope you will find this modest celebration entertaining.’ Sliscus bowed slightly. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me, we must mingle before I make my grand announcement, lest I be accused of monopolising your time.’ He took her hand and brushed his lips across the gilded steel barbs that covered her knuckles before moving to greet his other guests.

For the most part, they were a tedious lot. They reeked of ambition, and their desperate politicking offended his sensibilities. Even here, among such splendour, they could not break free of the cage Vect had thrust them into all those millennia ago. The Tyrant had trapped them all behind bars of fear and paranoia. All save himself. Like his namesake, he had slithered free. He lived for

himself, not for some artificial purpose bestowed by a domineering paranoiac.

But he was polite. He traded barbs with clever Thyndrak and gifted Xerathis with the recipe for a more potent form of hallucinogen. Borrowing a pair of matched blades from a leering wych, he met another eager gladiatrix in a dance of thorns, though only briefly. A few shallow cuts and a round of applause later, he was climbing the stairs, beckoning for silence. It came in fits and starts. They all wanted to hear.

He drew the silence out, savouring it for a few moments. Then, hands clasped before him, he began. ‘Midwinter is a special time, or so the old stories say. When the seasons bleed into one another – back when we had seasons – and the line between the living and the dead grows thin and weak. It is a time when hunters seek great prey grown sluggish and torpid. How fitting, then, that we see this time as one to celebrate – for are we not hunters, kinsmen? Are we not the most deadly things in all creation?’

He gestured flamboyantly, and there were a few cheers as some of his guests grew overexcited. He nodded indulgently. ‘When the gods made us, they cast aside their tools and wept. For we are perfect in our lethality and unrivalled in the arts of death. We are the sword that made existence itself bleed, and the wounds we opened in reality will never heal. They stand as memorials to our power.’

Murmurs now, among the cheers. Sly looks passed between rivals. He had them, and he could taste their eagerness. They knew what was coming. It was tradition. Other archons had hosted similar hunts in their time, but this would be the greatest of them all.

‘Midwinter has always been our most sacred of times. A joyful indulgence amid the bleakness of death’s season. A reminder of what makes life worth living. And so I have invited you all here not simply to partake of my stores, but to indulge in that which sustains us. A hunt, kinsmen. A great and savage hunt, such as few have ever enjoyed.’ He lifted his goblet high, and his guests lifted theirs in celebration. It had gone beyond anticipation and into expectation.

‘We shall tell great lies in the days to come, my friends. Even now, coordinates to our hunting grounds are being sent to your vessels. A heavily defended world of savage beasts and even more savage inhabitants. A world of tempests and turbulent seas.’

He clapped his hands and descended, his robes trailing behind him. At his gesture, a vast photonic image blurred to life above the pleasure garden. A world of greys and blues. A murmur ran through his guests, and he grinned, displaying

fashionably sharp teeth. He tossed his half-empty goblet over his shoulder and spread his hands, as if to receive the world.

‘They call it Fenris. A hearthworld for a legion of those crude augmented warriors that the slave races seem to birth by the million.’

He gestured, and the holo-image began to turn. ‘It is currently caught in the grip of seasonal upheaval. They are blind, deaf and dumb. They who fancy themselves predators are now nothing more than prey, and we shall treat them accordingly. We, who at our height once hunted the gods themselves. Shall we lower ourselves, brothers and sisters? Shall we deliver unto them a lesson as to their place in the vastitude of all known space?’

A raucous cheer went up at his words. It never failed. The easiest way to win over the average Commorrite was to appeal to their vanity. He smiled and reached out, as if to embrace them all. ‘It will be great fun. But for now, eat, drink and make merry, my kin. Make a joyful noise, such that those who refused my invitation hear and gnaw their vitals in darkest envy.’

As the crowd broke apart, Sliscus caught sight of Malys sidling closer and smiled indulgently. Aurelia Malys had a mind as sharp as a blade, coated in poison besides. Even Vect was wary of her, and with good reason, for all they had once supposedly been paramours. Malys was one of the few things Sliscus missed about Commorrhagh.

Of course, Vect had tired of her, as he did all his favourites. He had ejected her from his confidences and left her isolated on the fringes of Commorrite society. Sliscus could almost smell the desire for revenge radiating from her. Like many of his guests, she had come hoping to rope him into some scheme or other. Just as he had hoped. Among so many plotters, there was bound to be something that might cure him of his ennui.

‘What did you think of my speech, Aurelia?’ he asked, taking her hands.

‘Magnificent. But then, you have always been a superb orator, Traevelliath.’ She glanced over her shoulder, and he spotted a colourful figure loitering nearby. He raised a plucked eyebrow as Malys continued. ‘I wish for you to meet someone. Or rather, they wish to meet you.’

‘I don’t recall inviting any of your sort,’ he said mildly to the figure.

‘But you didn’t forbid us, either.’ The clown danced and strutted about him, half in challenge, half in invitation. He caught a glimpse of Myrta, watching from nearby. His courtesan looked disconcerted. Concerned, perhaps, that he was going to throw her over for something... stranger. Or maybe that he was going to get himself killed before she had a chance to do it.

He smiled. ‘I suppose I can overlook it. Just this once.’

The clown stopped, bobbing on her heels – at least, he thought it was a ‘her’. She rocked back and forth for a moment, studying him from behind her shimmering mask. She leaned forward. ‘I am pleased to hear it, Duke Traevelliath Sliscus, Serpent of the Skyways and Prince of Many Colours.’ Her voice reverberated oddly, and he studied her garments more closely. He had dealt with the followers of the Laughing God often enough to know a Shadowseer when he saw one. Storytellers and seers, or so he had heard.

‘And what is your name, little clown? Something suitably enigmatic, I trust.’ Sliscus drew his blade and laid the flat of it across the Shadowseer’s shoulder. She swatted it aside and ducked beneath his arm. The length of her staff hooked his throat, but gently. She pulled him back, and Sliscus chuckled appreciatively. A moment’s pressure and his throat would be crushed. A warning, or a tease. Perhaps both.

‘I am one who walks between the veils of time and space, back and forth, up and down. I have seen black stars rise and cold suns set. I have heard the melodies spun by the eternal pipers in the court of deepest slumber, and tasted the fruits of an impossible tree. Is that name enough, Duke Traevelliath Sliscus?’

‘Are those names or stories?’

‘Is there a difference between the two? And what are my stories compared to yours, oh Serpent? You crawl through time, leaving a trail of fire and blood across the body of the universe. So must it be.’

Sliscus jerked forward, breaking free of the staff. He spun around, his sword raised, the tip set between where he imagined the Shadowseer’s eyes to be. ‘If that is the case, why are you here? What do you wish of me?’

‘What makes you think I wish anything?’

‘Pragmatism.’

She laughed. The sound echoed against itself, as if that mask hid a multitude rather than an individual. She glanced at Malys, and Sliscus frowned. There were stories – there were always stories – that Malys knew more about the Harlequins than most. But he had never given it much thought. What was it to him if Malys entangled herself in the petty schemes of such vagabonds?

‘I wish to pass along an ending before the story is begun – will you forgive me?’ The Shadowseer batted his sword aside and sidled close. There was a rhythm to her movements. A practiced saunter, as if this were not the first time, or even the second, that they’d had this confrontation. Sliscus found it aggravating and intriguing in equal measure.

‘For such an artist, I would forgive almost anything,’ he said. He set the point of his sword against the ground and leaned on it. ‘Spoil the story, if you will. I do not draw satisfaction from endings.’

‘Wise.’

Sliscus threw back his head and laughed. ‘I have never been accused of that.’

‘And I do not make it an accusation now. Merely an observation.’ The Shadowseer cocked her head, and the bells that hung from her cowl clinked softly. ‘You must take the Wolf’s heart, oh Serpent.’ She stepped close. Her form seemed to blur and twist. For a moment, he thought there were other shapes there, standing in the same spot like visible echoes. Individuals who had never been or ever would be. Pieces of stories yet untold.

Sliscus hesitated. ‘And is that the ending you have seen? Or the one you desire?’

‘One and the same, one and the same,’ the Harlequin half-sang.

Sliscus laughed and stepped back, putting space between them. He could taste the chemicals of the Shadowseer’s *creidann* – a minor hallucinogen, and one he had long since developed an immunity to. ‘The Wolf’s heart, you say. Easy enough to discern the meaning there – the heart of these mon-keigh warriors resides in their gene-chattel. They need them the way we need fresh materials for the body-vats. So, I am to take their future from them, am I?’ He laughed again and sheathed his sword with a flourish. ‘Delightful! I am to steal fire from gods and meat from the mouths of beasts.’

‘A good story,’ Malys said.

Sliscus glanced at her, smirking. ‘I am only in the good ones.’ When he turned back, the Shadowseer had rejoined the widening gyre, her slim form lost among the kaleidoscope of her troupe. He frowned. ‘She didn’t even ask to be dismissed. How deliciously rude.’

‘Planning to punish her, Traevelliath?’ Malys asked pointedly.

Sliscus chuckled. ‘Is that jealousy I hear, Aurelia?’

‘Curiosity,’ Malys said.

He shrugged. ‘One leads to the other, I have often found.’ He looked at her. ‘Will you join me, then? On this expedition, I mean.’

Malys pouted elegantly. ‘It has been some time since I last participated in a raid. Commorragh has its claws tight in my attentions, I fear.’

‘Then it is long past time you indulge yourself.’ Sliscus took her hand and kissed it with mocking gentleness. ‘Come, Aurelia, let us savage the primitives together, as we once did in more innocent times.’

‘We have never been innocent, either of us.’

‘No, we have not. And I am glad of it.’ Sliscus brought her hand up and stepped back. ‘Come. One last sarabande before the party’s end.’ Malys allowed him to draw her into the circle of Harlequins.

‘It would be my pleasure, Traevelliath.’



CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WAY OF THINGS

641.M41

The hunt was going well.

Ake had tracked his prey through the dense forests that covered the lower slopes of the Asaheim Mountains, finally cornering it in a bald patch where the trees began to give way to rocky scree. It had given him a good run, but they were both tired of the chase and he had brought it to bay at last.

The ungulate was a massive beast, battle-scarred and standing head and hands taller than Ake. An enormous rack of antlers rose above its proud skull like some pagan crown, and its shoulders and chest were nearly three times the size of his own. Its hide was pale with age. Most elk rarely lived so long. This one was either exceedingly lucky or exceedingly tough. Perhaps both.

His stomach grumbled. A Space Marine could go a long time without filling his belly, but too many months in the Aett had accustomed him to eating regularly. Then, he had always thought hunger made the meat taste better.

It had been almost a week since they had been banished. How Grimblood had howled! Ake grinned at the memory. It was no less than he deserved, jarl or not. And out here was better than in there, anyway. Even if they had to find food for

themselves.

He bared his fangs and took a step towards the elk. He carried no weapons. His chainblade hung across his back, and his bolt pistol was holstered. He reached for neither. Hands and teeth would suffice. 'Well,' he growled, 'what are you waiting for?'

The elk bugled a challenge. He answered it with a bellow of his own. The moment stretched. Then, with a thunderous snort, it began to bear down on him in a flurry of churned snow, razor-sharp antlers lowered for the charge. The ground shook slightly from the force of its approach. The elk called again as it drew near, and he could smell its musky stink.

He braced himself. Even clad as he was in battle-plate, the elk nearly outweighed him. He had a dim memory of seeing one of the beasts burst through a heavy palisade wall as if it were no more substantial than a morning mist. He spread his arms as it drew close, and at the last possible moment lunged to meet it with a snarl.

The impact rattled through him from muscle to marrow. Even with his armour's internal stabilisers, he was nearly thrown from his feet. He had caught the elk by the antlers, and the servos in his armour whined in protest as he tried to break the beast's massive neck. The animal snorted, and the hot mist of its breath rolled over him, stinging his eyes. Up close, he could make out each and every variety of scar that marked its head and neck. There were claw and fang marks aplenty. There were even the ringed sucker marks of a kraken on its shoulders and forelimbs. It was old, this beast, and had beaten more than its weight in foes.

But it would not beat him. There was nothing that walked, swam or flew that could defeat one of the Rout. And especially not him.

The elk strained against him, groaning with effort. He began to twist, hoping its neck would break before its antlers did, but he couldn't find the leverage. The prongs sawed against the palms of his gauntlets, etching grooves in the ceramite.

The beast bugled fiercely, as if in denial. Then, with a scream of effort, it wrenched him off his feet and sent him stumbling to the side. Ake staggered, surprised. It lunged, crashing into him. One of its prongs splintered, but the beast kept going, slamming him back. There was no time to brace himself, and he was soon driven against a tree. The impact jostled ice loose from the branches above and it pattered down over them.

Snarling curses, he clawed at its skull, hoping to break something. But it was like punching the hull of a Rhino. He heard a howl and saw grey shapes circling them. Something struck the tree above him, and he glanced up to see a familiar

grin. Then Lukas was plunging down, landing on the elk's broad back. The animal screamed as its bones splintered. It spun, trying to fling him off. Lukas caught its antlers and gave a sharp jerk.

'No,' Ake roared. 'It was mine!'

Lukas rode it to the ground as it finally succumbed. Even so, Ake stayed well back as its legs twitched and kicked in a final spasm. When it had at last fallen still, Lukas climbed off it and rolled it onto its side. 'A good ending to a good hunt, eh, pup?'

'I was going to kill it,' Ake growled. He flexed his hands, the kill-urge still singing through him. 'It was my prey.'

'It was our prey,' Lukas said. He was calm, which only made Ake angrier. 'We are a pack, pup. Not lone wolves. We fight together, we hunt together, we feast together. Whether you like it or not.'

'Is that why you punished Grimblood?' Ake snarled. 'He stole our kill – how is this any different?' He slammed a fist against his chest-plate.

'Because we all agreed to share the kill, brother,' Kadir said, stepping out of the trees. 'It wasn't his to steal or yours to have. It was ours.'

'Who asked you?' Ake snapped, glaring at the tall Blood Claw. Kadir's arrogance grated on him. The tall warrior had assumed leadership as if it were his birthright. Ake wanted to grind his face into the dirt for that.

It never ceased to surprise Ake that the others couldn't see that he ought to be in charge. Maybe not Dag. Dag was a halfwit. But Halvar and Einar had more sense. And yet, they were content to trot after Kadir. And Kadir was content to trot after Lukas.

'Enough,' Lukas said. 'The meat is cooling. Best we share it now.' He drew his combat blade and began to cut open the elk's chest. 'And I would have punched this brute's brains out and already had it dressed and roasting over a fire by the time you caught up with me, pup.' He grinned at Ake. 'No need for argument then.'

Ake looked at the beast, fighting down his bloodlust. 'It fought hard,' he growled after a moment.

'Not as hard as you, brother,' Dag said. The other Blood Claw was grinning hungrily as he crouched nearby, watching Lukas saw the elk's heart out of its chest cavity. Dag was always hungry.

Blood turned the snow pink, and Ake inhaled appreciatively. The smell would carry far and wide, and soon might bring other predators. But they would have dressed and cached the kill by then, as they had done many times since they had

left the Aett and lost themselves in the wilds of Asaheim.

The tang of promethium alerted him to Einar's presence. The taciturn warrior clapped him on the shoulder. 'Good hunt,' he said. 'Good chase. Good meat.' After a moment, Ake nodded, accepting the compliment.

'The best meat.' Lukas stood, the elk's heart in his hands. 'Why is the best meat that which you chase down yourself? Do any of you ever wonder that?'

'No,' Halvar said. He tapped one of his many totems. 'It is as the Allfather wills it.'

Lukas nodded. 'Even so, my head is full of questions.'

'And my belly is empty of meat, Trickster. Are you going to share that?' Ake gestured to the heart. 'If so, be quick about it.' Lukas talked too much. He filled the air with words where none were needed. If Ake didn't know better, he would have suspected that the Jackalwolf was getting maudlin.

Lukas tore a lump from the muscle and tossed the rest to Ake. He looked out over the wilderness. 'I think it is the wolf in us. Once, we fought to prosper. Now, we only fight to survive. We sink back into our own shadow. We take legend and lore as the whole truth and only the truth, and seek to add to them, whatever the cost.'

'Are you a philosopher now?' Ake grunted. Lukas seemed to delight in leading them into metaphorical brambles. Ake had no patience for that. A proper warrior didn't waste time thinking about such things. Not when there was prey to hunt, or enemies to kill. They weren't skjalds.

He took his share and passed the heart to Dag. The pale warrior took the lump of meat eagerly and tore a chunk from it. He tossed it in turn to Halvar, who snatched it out of the air with a whoop. As he made to bite into it, Einar tackled him and the heart plopped into Kadir's waiting hands. The tall Blood Claw tore off a piece and pitched it overhand back to Ake, who caught the heart with a laugh. 'All the fresh air is getting to you, Trickster.'

Lukas looked at him. 'Maybe it is.'

Lukas tore up a handful of tough grass and raised his hand. Opening his fingers, he let it whirl away in the wind. He inhaled, tasting the storm and the forest. Asaheim rose wild around him, spreading out forever beneath a shroud of black clouds.

The mountains stretched across the spine of the world, like a crest of stiff hair on a wolf's back. Besides the seven great peaks that ringed the Aett like loyal thegns, there were hundreds of smaller mountains. Those tribes blessed or lucky

enough to find sanctuary on the polar continent often made their homes in the shadows of the Aett's smaller kin, down where the air wasn't so thin and the cold not so biting.

He looked up. Snow and rain fell hard through the cracks in the canopy, pelting his face. The wind had died down somewhat. The Helwinter was losing its hold on the high places as Fenris drew closer to the Wolf's Eye and the climate warmed. The storms would continue, and the ice would begin to melt. The seas were already lapping at all but the highest shores, and soon many of the tribes would take to the waters, looking for safety.

Fenris was beautiful, and fierce, and untamed. But it could have been so much more.

'Just like us,' he murmured. 'We could have been something greater.' Behind him, the others ate and talked and laughed. Lukas was glad. A few weeks in the wild would be good for them. Blood Claws didn't do well with too much confinement.

The elk meat rested nicely in his belly, smoothing his thoughts. He studied the forested slope, seeking something familiar. Old pathways, not followed in decades or centuries, lit up in his memory as if he had traversed them only days ago.

The mountains rose heavy above the trees, their names solid weights on his memory. Thunder Mountain. The Fire Breather. Broddja, and southwest of it, Krakgard. They loomed up, immense phantoms barely visible in the snow. The names rolled off his tongue as he recited them quietly. As a boy, his mother had told him that wisdom sat in such places, waiting for those who had the wit to listen. The mountains had seen the oceans form and the clouds take shape, and felt the first kiss of the wind.

The mountains were older than Lukas, older than Grimblood or even Russ. They abided beyond all stories and rites. He spotted the smoke a moment later, rising through the rain and sleet. There. He smiled and turned. 'Get the rest of that elk up. Tie its hide, so we don't lose anything.'

'Where are we going?' Ake demanded.

'To pay our respects. Come on. Up. Up!' He kicked Ake in the backside, jolting the Blood Claw to his feet. Ake whirled, snarling, but backed down when he saw the smile on Lukas' face. Lukas tapped the young warrior in the chest with a claw-tip. '*Hloja*, brother. Laugh. This is fun, eh? Better than being stuck in the mountain.'

'At least it was dry in there,' Halvar muttered as he heaved himself upright with

a rattle of totems and medallions.

‘A bit of weather will do you good, brother. Air you out a bit.’ Lukas reached out and caught Dag by the neck as he rose. He kissed the startled Blood Claw roughly on the top of the head before releasing him. ‘It might put some colour in those wan cheeks of yours, Dag. And it might even disperse some of those promethium fumes that cling so tightly to poor Einar.’ He looked at Kadir and shrugged. ‘No help for you, though, brother. Not until your hair grows back out.’

Kadir touched the shorn side of his scalp and frowned. Before he could reply, Lukas was already moving.

‘Where are we going, Lukas?’ Ake asked again.

Lukas grinned at the wariness in the Blood Claw’s voice. ‘There’s a village down there. The Jahtvian tribe. I take them gifts, sometimes. Food. Weapons. Little things, here and there, when I’m in the area.’

‘You feed them?’ Ake looked aghast.

‘It *is* Helwinter.’ Lukas peered at him. Ake was just two yellow eyes in the snow and shadows. ‘The beasts are seeking the safety of high ground as the seas eat the land. Food is scarce. Unless you happen to have a taste for kraken.’ Ake grimaced. Lukas laughed. ‘It doesn’t taste that bad.’

‘All my people used to eat was kraken. I know exactly how it tastes.’ Ake glowered at Lukas. ‘We shouldn’t be doing this. It isn’t the way of things.’ He looked around, seeking support from the others.

Lukas laughed. ‘And who decided that?’

‘You weaken them.’

‘You haven’t even seen them,’ Lukas said. ‘And come to that, it’s been almost a decade since I last saw them myself.’ He shook his head, scattering snow. ‘Or more than a decade. Time slips away when you’re not paying attention.’ He shrugged. ‘You don’t have to come with me.’

‘Yes, I do.’ Ake spat onto the ground. ‘We’re a pack, remember?’

‘Then by all means, follow along.’ Lukas hefted the elk up onto his shoulders with ease and started off through the snow. Every so often the ground shook and the branches cracked and shed ice. While Asaheim was more stable than the rest of the planet’s landmasses, it wasn’t by much.

The Blood Claws followed him. They walked in silence for a time, until Ake asked, ‘Do you do this often?’ It wasn’t quite an accusation.

‘What?’

‘Feed them. Coddle them.’ Ake peered at him. ‘They say you’ve been banished from the Aett at least six times over the past two centuries. Is this what you do

with yourself when you're out here alone?'

Lukas shifted the elk's weight. 'My interests are many and varied.' He chuckled. 'Sometimes I climb the highest peaks and just... sit, watching the stars chase one another across the heavens. Other times, I put on my helmet and go for a walk in the Worldsea.' He glanced at Ake slyly. 'I have even been to the Cavern Cities beneath the mountains.'

Ake hesitated, at a loss.

Halvar spoke up. 'That is forbidden. One of Russ' first edicts.'

Lukas nodded. 'And with good reason, pups. There are monsters aplenty in those dark tunnels. No place for young Blood Claws.' The smell of cooking fires and cut wood wafted through the trees. They were getting close.

'These aren't the only ones,' he said after a moment. 'Some, I don't feed. Some, I torment. Only the ones that deserve it, obviously.'

'Obviously,' Ake said.

Lukas glanced at him. 'Some of them become arrogant. The ones for whom we are more than myth. The favoured tribes. You know them as well as I do, pups. Ulrik has his pet tribes, as do the other priests. So too do the Wolf Lords, in their ineffable wisdom. We play at neutrality, but what warrior doesn't favour his own bloodline?'

Kadir grunted. 'Unlike you, most of us don't remember ours.'

Lukas grinned. 'Well, whose fault is that? Myself, I managed to avoid that by spreading my favours across many tribes.' He laughed. 'Those were good times.'

Ake frowned. 'You don't still...'

Lukas leered at him. 'Still what? Play the divine visitor? Cloak myself in furs and trust in the hospitality of mortals, the way some do?' He shrugged. 'What of it?'

'That wasn't what I meant.'

'I know. But you wouldn't like the answer, so I avoided the question.' Lukas stopped. The trees had thinned, and the slope had degraded into a hilly plain. The mountain rose up into the storm, and the walled steading at its base crouched warily among the foothills.

The forest had been cleared back from a stout palisade wall that encircled the steading. The wall was tall and thick, capable of surviving the attentions of an enemy tribe or a hungry troll. The steading straddled a river running down out of the mountain. Several tails of smoke rose above the walls.

'Big,' Einar grunted.

'That's what happens when you don't have to run for the longships every thaw,'

Ake said somewhat bitterly. He spat. ‘They’re probably farmers.’

‘Someone has to grow the foodstuffs for other tribes to steal,’ Lukas said. ‘I’ll go alone from here. You five, stay here, out of sight.’ His tone brooked no argument, and, to their credit, they didn’t try. Not even Ake.

Satisfied, Lukas trudged across the uneven ground, scanning it instinctively for any sign of sentries. He didn’t expect there to be any, not out in the storm like this. While the sleeting rain felt like pinpricks on his bare face, to a mortal it would be like knives.

When he reached the wall, Lukas leapt, catching hold of the top of the palisade and hauling himself – and the elk – over with ease. He paused at the top. Contrary to Einar’s assertion, the steading wasn’t large – a few longhouses arranged around the river, in the protective shadow of the mountains. Just big enough to house a few extended families. Lukas’ own tribe hadn’t been much larger, even in good years.

The river was iced over but already starting to thaw. Thin serpents of smoke rose from the flues built into the roofs of the longhouses. There was no other sign of life. The temperature was more moderate here, and the mountains and trees blocked the worst of the wind, but it was still cold enough to form a sheath of frost on his armour when he stood in one spot for too long.

Lukas leapt from the palisade onto the nearest rooftop. He could hear faint singing rising up from below him. The soles of his boots scraped on the frosted thatch as he made his way carefully up the incline. He nearly lost his balance, and cursed softly. The roof creaked beneath his weight, but he had little fear of it breaking beneath him. Fenrisian craftsmanship wasn’t pretty, but it was tough. Just like the tribes themselves.

Lukas crept towards the nearest smoke flue and looked down through it. His enhanced senses easily pierced the thick folds of smoke, and he studied the inhabitants. They were singing and telling stories, loudly. The longhouse was crowded, but that was to be expected. Winter was cold, and more bodies meant more warmth. He could smell roasting meat and spilled mead, human sweat and the ripe odour of unwashed clothes.

He pulled the elk off his back and snipped the bindings. He gripped it by one leg and lowered it through the flue, swinging it gently. ‘And be welcome to it, my kinsmen,’ he growled softly. With a twitch of his arm, he sent the heavy body crashing down onto one of the tables below. Men and women cried out in alarm, and he laughed, low and long, as he ran back towards the palisade, not caring now who heard him.

Lukas heard the doors to the longhouse crash open as he leapt over the palisade. Then he was running back towards the forest, moving with inhuman speed. No mortal could match the quickness of a warrior of the Rout. Given the weather, they likely wouldn't even be able to see him. Even so, he heard the hiss of arrows cutting through the snow. He laughed as he bounded through the trees.

The Blood Claws were waiting on him. 'Think they'll follow you?' Kadir said, peering warily at the steading.

'Would you, if you were them?' Lukas shook his head. 'No. They fear the forest, and with good reason.'

'Cowards,' Ake said.

Lukas looked at the young warrior. 'Is that what you think?'

'I would have hunted you,' Ake growled pugnaciously.

'Aye, maybe you would have.' Lukas looked away, back towards the steading. He watched a knot of black figures hurry back to the safety of their hearths. 'Have you pups ever wondered why we let them live like this? Why we let them suffer hardship and cruelty?'

'To make them strong,' Ake said, as if on cue.

Lukas laughed. 'Pride,' he said. 'We have convinced ourselves that suffering builds character. Suffering builds nothing but walls. We settle for beasts when we could have men. All for pride.' He looked around. 'And that's the biggest joke of all, pups. Best you remember that.'

Ake frowned. 'I don't think it's funny.'

'No.' Lukas spread his arms. 'Pride eats at us, every one. Like a maggot in a wound. Russ was proud, and so too must we be proud, whatever the consequences.'

'We must endure, we must persevere, we must be worthy,' Ake said stubbornly. 'That is the way of it, Trickster. Else why were any of us chosen?' He struck a tree with the side of his fist. 'Because we survived. We were worthy.'

'Survival is a test of nothing more than endurance. If it were anything else, I would never have been chosen, and yet I was. Luck.' Lukas smiled as he spoke. This wasn't the first time they'd had this argument since they were cast out of the Aett. Nor would it be the last. But at least they were listening. Maybe they had even learned something.

'It has ever been thus,' Halvar began.

Lukas laughed again, louder this time. 'Maybe. But why?' He brought his palms together in a loud crack. 'Pride. Down here, mortals suffer for our pride. On other worlds, controlled by other Chapters, they live in peace. They don't

suffer as we suffer, and yet they produce warriors of equal skill.’ He noted the frustration in their faces. The lack of comprehension.

‘None are greater than the Rout,’ Dag said. Not angrily, but as if it were no more than simple fact. ‘We are the Allfather’s chosen warriors.’

‘Oh, we like to pretend that we are better – that our savagery makes us strong. But it’s a lie, told by old men who were themselves lied to by those who came before. Worst of all, we all know the lie for what it is. But we accept it, because to do otherwise is to admit that somewhere along the way we made a mistake.’ Lukas grinned. ‘More than one.’

Ake bared his teeth. ‘And your answer to this revelation is... What? Mockery?’

Lukas shrugged. ‘Can you think of a better response? We are nothing more than the largest, strongest pack of wolves on this frozen mud ball. And that is all we will ever be.’

‘A poor life,’ Halvar said. ‘Muddying the glories of others.’

‘Glory is for the dead,’ Lukas said. ‘The living must be reminded of that, so that they don’t lose themselves in sagas.’ He thumped his chest. ‘So that we don’t become that which we fear most – beasts, and worse than beasts, following a false scent to our doom.’ He pointed to the steading. ‘That is why I feed them. They are my pack, pups, as you are. Do you see?’

Looking at their faces, he knew they did not. Not really. Not yet. But they might, in time. He shrugged, and smiled. ‘Or maybe this is all a lie, a ruse to make my pranks seem more than they are. Maybe I am simply the spiteful Jackalwolf, content to rip at the guts of my own pack for my own amusement.’

‘The other one makes for a better saga,’ Dag said after a moment.

Lukas clapped him companionably on the shoulder. ‘That’s what I tell myself, brother.’ He smiled. ‘Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry again. Let’s go find another elk.’ He grinned at Ake. ‘Maybe I’ll even let Ake make the kill this time.’



CHAPTER NINE

HUNTING GROUNDS

641.M41

Pinpoint lance fire obliterated the spinward augur platforms. Their destruction was timed down to the last micro-second to coincide with a solar flare from the system's star. With a gap opened in the augur network, the Sky Serpents entered the Fenris system unnoticed, hidden behind mimic engines and shadow fields. They remained that way as they navigated the tumultuous celestial tides.

Sliscus lounged in his command throne on the bridge of the *Incessant Agony*, watching the frost-blue marble expand in the forward view screen. The world sang to him, luring him on. He longed to experience its pleasures. But other matters needed tending before then. 'Prod the beasts,' he said to a member of the crew standing attentively nearby. 'Let us draw them from their lair.'

At his command, a second fleet, much smaller than the first, erupted into realspace near one of the gigantic semi-mobile star-forts that bracketed the world. Swarms of Razorwing jetfighters and Voidraven bombers would harass the star-fort before quickly withdrawing towards the edge of the system, where the *Ribald Blade* waited. The Torture-class cruiser was one of the three he had stolen upon his first exile from Commorrhagh. The cruiser and its escorts would

make a show of putting up a fight when the system battlefleet responded before drawing the mon-keigh vessels away.

By the time they returned, *Incessant Agony* and the rest of his fleet would be safely hidden within the disruptive halo of the system's central sun. From there, he could orchestrate similar raids at the few inhabited planets in the system, keeping the battlefleet occupied while he and his guests enjoyed themselves.

The trick wouldn't fool the Wolves for long, a few weeks at most. But that was long enough. He reclined in his seat as the first reports came in. Contact was immediate, and bloody. He smiled.

'Pleased with yourself?' a feminine voice purred.

Sleg, looming beside his master's command throne, stiffened with a hiss and rose up, his hands on the hilts of his weapons. Sliscus waved the ophidian back and said, 'Always.' He turned and looked at Lady Malys as she strolled across the command deck, alone. No kabalite guards were allowed here, not even those belonging to his subordinates.

She looked around at his assembled captains. 'A motley crew, this, Traevelliath. They aren't even all Commorrites.' A mutter ran through them, and not a few angry glares were cast her way, much to Sliscus' amusement.

Sliscus smiled. 'Some of them play the part well enough. I don't recall inviting you to the bridge, by the way.' Only a few of his subordinates – the most favoured – had been invited to sit with him as they approached their chosen hunting grounds.

'Oh, Traevelliath, you know I rarely let the lack of an invitation stop me,' she said. 'If I did, I would never go anywhere at all.'

'I assumed you would be seeing to your own warriors. How many did you bring?' Sliscus asked, turning his attentions back to the view screen.

'Enough. Your assault bays are full of Raiders from more than half a dozen kabals, including mine. Reavers and Venoms as well. All waiting impatiently for the webway portals to open and allow them to spill out over this little world.' She leaned against the back of his throne, her fan fluttering slowly to stir the air about her.

Sliscus caught sight of Myrta standing nearby. His courtesan waited with Jhynkar, attentive to his whims. She stood out even among the gaudy corsairs of his court. Myrta was a prize among prizes, and he favoured her with a fond smile. She didn't return it. His smile widened and he turned back to Malys.

'And your question is...?'

She snorted. 'What exactly is your plan, Traevelliath, dear? You were most

unforthcoming with the details earlier.’

‘No one else seems all that bothered.’

Malys looked down at him. ‘Then they are fools. Worse than fools. They may as well be cattle.’ She folded her fan and traced his cheek with it. He batted it aside.

‘They are simply excited. And why shouldn’t they be? This will be a most delightful outing, don’t you think? Look at it, Aurelia – isn’t it beautiful?’

‘It’s a world, like any of the thousand others we have plundered.’

Sliscus sighed. ‘You have no soul, Aurelia.’

She laughed. ‘Oh, but I do, Traevelliath. And I have worked very hard to ensure that it remains right where it is. Part of that is making sure that I ask the right questions when the opportunity presents itself.’ She stepped back and unfolded her fan. It was almost – but not quite – a challenge.

Sliscus pushed himself to his feet and turned to face her. His captains drew back, and he smiled tightly. He could almost smell their uneasiness, and the faint tang of anticipation. They were half hoping that she was planning on challenging him. They’d had hundreds, if not thousands, of successful raids under his aegis, but even so, they chafed. As he had chafed. But they lacked his courage, and so waited for others to make the first move.

But Malys wasn’t here to challenge him. No, he had known that the moment he saw her among his guests. She had come to him for help. He smiled indulgently and led her towards the tactical display plinth. Chained slaves squatted beneath it, inputting data as it reached their communications implants. With every twitch of their pale, thin fingers, the image of the world and what awaited the revellers there became clearer.

Other slaves waited nearby, trembling. They carried his armour, a more utilitarian set than he had worn on Pok. The facets flashed, changing colour as he allowed the slaves to dress him. The ridged plates sliced through their palms and fingers as they worked, eliciting soft whimpers of pain. He drank it in with a sigh. ‘Tell me, Aurelia. How would you go about it?’

‘The entire planet is unstable,’ Malys murmured, studying the data. ‘Save this single continent.’ She expanded the view of the landmass that the humans called Asaheim, as he had known she would. ‘It makes for interesting hunting, at least.’

Sliscus nodded. ‘We shall require shelter from the storm, obviously. Some place from which to conduct our celebrations in a fitting manner. Ah, there.’ He tapped a marker on the map. His words were for Malys’ benefit. He had chosen the spot days earlier, after studying all the available information about Fenris gleaned

from his library – he had pillaged hundreds of human worlds in his time, and had built quite the collection of tithe reports and data compilations. The mon-keigh were worthless beasts, but they kept fine records.

‘An isolated outpost of whatever passes for civilisation on this barbaric idyll. Far enough from the main hub of the mon-keigh to avoid notice, but still on relatively solid ground. The storm will interfere with their primitive planetary sensor net, and we can baffle their eyes easily enough.’ He smiled, pleased with his own cunning. ‘We shall nestle among them, and they will not see us until it is too late.’

‘Like a serpent, one might say,’ Malys said idly.

Sliscus looked at her. ‘A trifle obvious, Aurelia.’

She laughed. ‘But apt!’

Sliscus turned away. ‘Your wit grows dull, my sweet poisoned tongue. Perhaps you need cleverer partners to help you hone it.’

‘Is that an offer?’

Sliscus shrugged, still studying the map. ‘An offer of what? Speak plainly, Aurelia, or not at all. All this doublethink fatigues me.’

She quirked an eyebrow. ‘You could return to Commorrhagh. It has been too long since your last visit.’

‘Has Vect forgiven me, then?’

‘Do you care if he has?’

Sliscus threw back his head and laughed. ‘I care nothing for the Tyrant, and he cares nothing for me. Save when I can be of use to him on some matter or other. Much like you, dear Aurelia.’ He peered at her, the light of the hololith making his face look skeletal. ‘You are not so opaque as you believe, dear heart.’

Malys bristled. ‘And what does that mean?’

‘Is it time, then? Have you at last come to it – the great moment for which you have been preparing since Vect cast you aside, so many years ago?’ Sliscus smiled. ‘It was the talk of Commorrhagh at the time. Some thought he might take you as his consort. Not me, though. You are the sun, Aurelia, and he is the moon. Two great bodies moving in eternal opposition. You thrive on it, and I was not surprised when he tossed you over for something more pliable. Only that it took him so long.’

‘Is that a compliment or an insult, Traevelliath?’

‘A bit of both.’ Sliscus stepped back and turned away from the hololithic projector, his hands behind his back. ‘My question stands, dear one. Did you accept my invitation hoping to secure my allegiance in whatever internecine

conflict you are planning?’

‘And if I did?’

Sliscus closed his eyes, savouring the moment. It was an exciting prospect, and not unwelcome. He had been getting bored, wiling away his eternity plundering chattel worlds. He needed a new challenge. Something with more meat to it.

He looked at her. ‘Then we will have much to discuss over the cooking fires. We shall hunt an agreement even as we hunt beasts. It will add a more subtle pleasure to the visceral thrills to come.’

‘I don’t trust her,’ Myrta said, watching Sliscus converse with Malys. She stood on the command deck of the cruiser, close to hand but far enough away that no one could accuse her of eavesdropping. Slaves bustled about her, eyes downcast, as overseers barked orders. Thorn-whips lashed the flesh of any who didn’t move fast enough for the overseers’ liking, and a pleasing aura of pain and despair hung over everything.

‘And?’

She looked at Jhynkar. The haemonculus wasn’t paying any attention. Instead, he was studying the photonic projection of a genetic sequence floating above his hands. Like Myrta, he stood ready for Sliscus’ call, though unlike her, he didn’t seem to care overmuch. He had been distracted since the party. She had seen him in close if not convivial conversation with Master Xhact of the Hex. Why Sliscus had invited such a creature Myrta didn’t know, but she guessed it was some suggestion of Jhynkar’s.

Myrta frowned and slashed her blade through the haemonculus’ projection, scattering the motes of light. Jhynkar grunted and glared at her.

‘How rude.’

‘She might be a problem.’

‘Who? Malys? Perhaps.’ Jhynkar grinned. ‘Getting nervous, my lady?’

‘Why should I be nervous, Jhynkar?’

‘I’m sure I have no idea.’ He leaned towards her, close enough that she could smell the stink of the chemicals he used to preserve himself. ‘But you seem in need of a confession. So I place myself at your disposal. Speak, and I shall do my best to set your mind at ease.’

Myrta snorted. ‘I have no need of your condescension.’

‘Then why are you bothering me?’

Myrta had no answer to his question. At least, not one that wouldn’t make her seem weak. He was right – she was nervous. The plan, such as it was, was a

tenuous thing. A nudge here, a suggestion there. Sliscus was immune to traditional methods of manipulation. She couldn't seduce him, or tease him. She was his slave, bound to him by rites as old as Shaimesh himself. As Lhilitu was bound to the void, so too was Myrta bound to Sliscus.

Even now, she didn't truly understand why. Some bargain made by those of greater influence in the Lhamaean sisterhood. She was payment for services rendered. A not uncommon state of affairs, but one normally rectified with a dab of poison at a time and place of the sister in question's choosing. No sister served the same master for long if the latter proved unsuitable. Ownership came with certain responsibilities, and few archons could manage it for any great length of time. Invariably they would strike or insult their courtesan, and she would punish them according to the ancient laws of the sisterhood. That had always been the way of it. But Sliscus defied even those traditions.

He refused to die. Whether it was due to spite or stubbornness, he refused to release her from her servitude. Until he perished, she was trapped.

Jhynkar chuckled at her reticence. 'Patience, dear lady. Patience. All art takes time. And this will be a masterpiece. The Serpent impaled on his own hubris.'

'So you keep saying,' she hissed. 'Yet there he sits, intact.'

'The hunt has not yet begun,' Jhynkar protested.

Myrta considered cutting off one of his hands. Just the one, to ease her frustrations. Even so, she was forced to admit that he was right. She was impatient. There was time yet. The augmented warriors of the mon-keigh were dull-witted and slow by eldar standards, but they were also determined and spiteful opponents. A hunt of this sort was sure to elicit a hostile response from them – especially these particular mon-keigh. The savages in their storm-grey armour were barbarians among barbarians.

She had often seen their sort fight in the arenas. They were the inevitable favourites of the masses, eliciting cheers with their fierce displays and crude behaviour. Barbarism was often confused with heroism at a sufficient distance. Individually, they were little match for a Commorrite warrior. But they travelled in packs.

For a moment, she lost herself in a much-cherished fantasy of Sliscus being torn apart by the savage monsters of the blue-grey world below. She would try to protect him, of course. But she would be half a second too slow. An instant too late. Apologies and commiserations, then... freedom.

'He tells me it was your suggestion.'

Myrta turned, startled, but hid it beneath a carefully composed expression of

elegant boredom. Lady Malys stood behind her, fluttering her bladed fan before her face. The archon of the Poisoned Tongue Kabal was taller than Myrta and clad more richly. 'It was, my lady,' Myrta said.

'And how did you come by the idea? Such a thing would seem to be beyond the knowledge of one of your sisterhood.' Malys delivered the insult with gentle ease. Myrta could tell she had done so intentionally. Malys did everything intentionally.

'We are not so provincial as you seem to think. And in any event, I have learned much in my time with the Duke, my lady.'

Malys nodded, as if that were the answer she had expected. 'I wondered to see one of your sort with him, and so far from the Eternal City,' she said. 'Of course, Sliscus has ever been needful of certain comforts.'

'Much the same has been said of the Tyrant, at times,' Myrta said.

'I wouldn't know.'

'That isn't what I heard.' It was a low blow, and crude. But Myrta was in no mood for subtlety. 'It is said that Vect cast you out when he grew bored with you.'

'I left of my own choice, little courtesan,' Malys said. 'Unlike you, I am free to choose my own path in this universe. But you, sadly, are bound by the whims of another.' Malys reached out and took hold of Myrta's chin. 'And such whims they are. Is it true that he immolated a world because its ruler mispronounced his name?'

Myrta stepped back, out of reach. 'He has burned many worlds, and spared many more. His reasons are his own. He rarely shares them.'

Malys smiled and folded her fan with a snap. She turned. 'No. He is quite close-mouthed. Hard to tell what he's thinking, our Serpent.' She glanced back at Myrta. 'But I suspect you might have some guesses.'

Myrta stiffened. 'I would not presume to do so.'

Malys tapped the Lhamaean on the chest with her fan. 'No? Then maybe your companion will share his own.' She turned to the haemonculus. 'Your name is Jhynkar, is it not?'

Myrta glared at Jhynkar, willing him to silence. The haemonculus cleared his throat and cocked his head. 'I believe I hear someone screaming my name. If you will excuse me...?' He bobbed low in a jerky bow and sidled away. Malys didn't try to stop him.

'You came to seek his help,' Myrta said.

Malys looked at her. 'Am I so obvious, then?'

‘I am observant,’ Myrta said.

‘You do not approve.’

‘It is not my place to approve or disapprove. Merely to serve his will.’

Malys tapped her lips with her fan, her expression speculative. Before she could speak, the sudden appearance of Sliscus interrupted her. Myrta made to kneel, but Sliscus waved her to her feet. ‘Now, now, none of that, my lady. You might be a slave, but you are a queen among slaves. Never forget that.’ He brushed a stray hair from her face, his smile unpleasant. She resisted the urge to reach for one of the many blades hidden about her form. ‘You know what to do?’

‘Of course,’ she said. It would be her duty to clear the way for the rest. The Raiders of the Sky Serpents would emerge from the webway somewhere above their target and descend swiftly to take captives and ensure that none escaped to warn anyone of their coming.

With the base camp established, the full force of the hunt, led by Sliscus’ guests, could safely spread across the world at their leisure. It was a rare thing for a raid to take more than a few hours, but not unknown. In such a case, a central rallying point was invariably set up for the inevitable retreat. Sliscus had chosen the spot himself, days earlier, after studying the cartographic scans of the world.

That Sliscus was bestowing the honour of establishing the base camp upon her could be taken as a sign of his favour. In reality, she knew that it was because his guests would view it as an insult if any among them was chosen without the agreement of the others.

‘Good,’ he said. ‘Be wary. I am given to understand that not all in my service are best pleased by my choice. They see only insult, where honour was intended.’ She stiffened as the warning sank in. Before she could ask, his smile widened. ‘Smile, my lady. It is midwinter, after all. A season of red pleasures, for master and slave alike.’ He stroked her face, the edges of his armoured fingers drawing blood. He traced the blood across her cheek and above her eyes, like primitive war-paint. ‘Go. And be swift. Be sure.’

She nodded stiffly and departed. She felt Malys’ eyes on her the entire way.

The assault bay was a riot of noise and celebration when she arrived. Half a dozen Raiders painted in the subtle colours of the Sky Serpents waited in their berths. The crews of the anti-gravity skiffs drank and crossed blades, challenging one another for the honour of the prow position. Only the best of them could man the weapon that was mounted there, whether it was a dark lance or disintegrator cannon. The rest would have to make do with their splinter rifles

and blades. Gantries stretched like a web of iron across the bay, connecting the Raiders to refuelling and rearming stations.

She glanced towards the far end of the cavernous bay, where an immense webway portal hung suspended against the interior of the hull in a web of chains and massive clamps. The dimensional doorway was a barbed edifice of black stone shot through with veins of pale green. It hummed ominously, and the chains that bound it rattled constantly. When it was activated, the Raiders would plunge through and into the webway beyond. That the webway itself would have a pathway to their target was a given.

Even so, Myrta felt a familiar vague sense of uneasiness at the thought of traversing the ancient sub-dimension for even a short amount of time. But she was careful to keep her feelings to herself. For all his seeming impulsiveness, Sliscus had carefully orchestrated this raid, as he had all the others. He had left nothing unaccounted for.

Warriors greeted her with ironic cheers as she stalked across the gantries. She was as much a mascot as a war-leader. Only Sliscus would see fit to turn command over to a courtesan, and for some among his forces this was simply a sign of his infamous changeability. A point of humour, a great jest. For others, it was a subtler cue – Sliscus was no fool, to bestow such responsibility without regard for capability.

‘Hold, wench. I did not give you permission to come aboard.’

Myrta continued to climb the boarding plank of the lead Raider, its crew falling silent as their commander strode across the open deck of the anti-gravity skiff with one hand on her sword. ‘Did you hear me, courtesan?’

‘I heard you, Kakaroth,’ Myrta said. ‘I simply do not care.’

Sliscus’ reputation for cunning didn’t stop some from challenging her when she was given command. While normally such incidents were postponed until after the conclusion of a successful raid, some corsairs lacked the pragmatism of their Commorrite kin.

Kakaroth was one such – an exile from some minor craftworld, still wearing the armour of her warrior path, though much altered now by whim and circumstance. She wore a cloak of black silk over armour the colour of blood, adorned with trophies plucked from the dying – broken spirit stones, ork tusks and the like. And buried among them, her spirit stone winked a dull amber. She strutted to meet Myrta.

‘So good of you to honour us with your presence, courtesan. Though I fear you will find no captain’s bed to warm here. Only cold steel.’ Kakaroth looked

around expectantly. Some among the crew let desultory laughter slip, more to avoid offending her than because she had said something amusing. Kakaroth was not liked, but she was deadly with a blade, and that more than made up for a lack of interpersonal skills.

Myrta sighed and rested one hand on the pommel of her blade. She had known this was coming. It was inevitable. Though Kakaroth had left her craftworld behind, she had brought its foolish prejudices with her. True, she had not served Sliscus long, but ignorance was no excuse. ‘How droll. I assure you, Kakaroth, that I would much rather be in bed than here dealing with you. But we are all slaves to our master, and he has commanded me.’

There were murmurs at that. Arrogant as they were, few of the corsairs fighting under the flag of the Sky Serpents liked to be reminded that they were servants. It was part of Myrta’s duty to remind them on occasion. Kakaroth seemed determined to be the latest example. ‘You are a slave,’ Kakaroth said. She still wore her tall, crested helm, her jasper eyepieces winking in the dim light of the assault bay. ‘I am free. More, I have walked the warrior’s path for centuries. You, in contrast, have spent most of your time in this life on your back. What do you say to that?’

Myrta laughed in her face. Kakaroth cursed and went to draw her blade. Myrta was quicker. Assassins had to be quick – they had to seize their moment in the instant it presented itself. Her blade sprang into her hand, its delicate curve wet with a toxin of her own devising. It was slightly acidic, to aid the blade’s entry.

‘I may have spent it on my back, but I assure you it was no less arduous,’ Myrta said, sweeping her sword out in a shallow slash. Kakaroth grunted and slid back. The wound wasn’t fatal – she had twisted aside at the last moment. Her blade came up, and she lunged with a snarl. Myrta blocked the blow, but only just. Kakaroth was strong, but arrogant. It would take time for the poison to work.

She decided to stall. ‘Why now, Kakaroth? Have you finally lost all patience with our ways? Or did someone put you up to it?’ She laughed. ‘You are no more than a petty killer with only a handful of followers. You command only a single Raider among dozens.’

‘But I have ambition. It should be me leading this assault, courtesan. I am an experienced war-leader. I have killed more enemies than you, led more raids. And still he favours you!’ Kakaroth lunged. Myrta sidestepped gracefully.

‘Jealousy, then? Is that all? How pedestrian.’

‘He insults us,’ Kakaroth said. Her voice had a ragged edge to it. The poison was doing its job. ‘Putting his doxy in charge of a raid. He is mad.’ *Us*, she had

said. Who did she mean? It might be useful to know, if things didn't go as she hoped.

'As are you, for willingly bending knee to him.' Myrta swayed aside, avoiding a blow that would have decapitated her. 'I was sold to him. What's your excuse?' She stepped back and circled the corsair, her blade licking out with almost teasing grace. Kakaroth grew more enraged with every light cut, and centuries of training were washed aside in a murderous frenzy. She had been exiled from her home for good reason. Many, in fact, but the rage was a large part of it.

'Perhaps if you had spent more time on your back, you might not be so eager to throw your life away, exile.' Myrta lunged, her blade hissing over Kakaroth's shoulder. She could hear the jeers and shouts from the crew. Wagers were flying fast and heavy. The odds were in her favour. Kakaroth wasn't the first to have challenged her, and she wouldn't be the last. The key was to make each death as memorable as possible.

Myrta lapped at Kakaroth's agony as the poison took hold, eating away at her discipline and coordination. She began to slow, and the strength of her blows faded. Myrta caught Kakaroth's blade on her own and stepped close, momentarily trapping her opponent's sword. 'Take off your helmet, sister, and let me kiss you,' Myrta said. 'A moment of pleasure before the end.'

Kakaroth hissed and shoved Myrta back, slamming her against the rail. The Lhamaean twisted aside as the corsair attacked. She reversed her blade and drove it into Kakaroth's side. There was enough toxin left on it to eat a hole in the corsair's armour. The blade slid home, grating against bone. Kakaroth stiffened and tried to move away, but Myrta pulled her into a gentle embrace, sawing the sword up through the corsair's abdomen and chest. It was a more merciful death than the poison would have granted her, but the opportunity had been impossible to ignore.

Kakaroth shuddered and died, still standing at the rail. Her blood pooled onto the deck. Myrta drank in her opponent's final moments, then, with a sigh, she plucked loose the former craftworlder's spirit stone and tipped the body over the side. She watched it fall to the deck below. Kabalite warriors swooped down to strip the body of anything of value before letting the slaves remove it. Here, unlike in Commorragh, there was no way back from death for a corsair. 'And even if there was, you are not worthy of it,' Myrta murmured as she kissed the spirit stone flickering in her hand.

She slid the stone into her armour as a keepsake and turned to face the rest of the crew. 'I trust everyone was sufficiently entertained? Good. It's time to go.'

She gestured towards the front of the bay, where slaves waited on the gantries above and around the webway portal. At her signal the portal was activated, flashing with a familiar eerie aura, and the omnipresent hum increased in volume and resonance.

A warning klaxon sounded, and the last of those taking part in the initial raid hurriedly clambered aboard their vessels. Myrta watched impatiently as almost a dozen Sslyth glided onto the deck of her Raider, clutching their weapons and bobbing their wedge-shaped heads in excitement. They hissed among themselves, seemingly eager for what was to come. Besides Sleg, she didn't trust them. Come to that, she didn't trust Sleg either.

Despite that, she couldn't deny that having the ophidian mercenaries nearby made her feel somewhat better. It wasn't likely that someone would try to take vengeance for Kakaroth's death, especially during a raid, but that didn't mean it was impossible. Someone might have been fond of her, improbable as that was.

There was a sound like stone splitting, and the webway portal crackled with emerald energies. Lightning crossed the surface, and the flat plane of stone became like black glass. The surface turned cloudy, and a cold, alien wind raced through the bay. Distant thunder rumbled, echoing out from the deep places between the stars.

Myrta turned and signalled to the helmsman, who gave a shout. The ethersails unfolded with a hollow thump. The repulsor keelblade activated and the Raider rose from its berth as the anchoring clamps released, ready to enter the gateway.

She closed her eyes, enjoying the growing impatience of the nearby warriors. For a moment – just a moment – she wondered why she didn't simply commandeer the Raider and slip away, deep into the webway. Sliscus wouldn't search for her, of that she was certain. But where would she go? As a slave, she had purpose, at least. Without it, she was nothing. She extended her sword.

'Forward,' she said. The Raider slipped from its berth with a fervent moan and dived towards the portal. In its wake came the others, accompanied by Venoms and jetbikes. The first of many.

Sliscus was right. It would be a hunt to remember.



CHAPTER TEN

STORIES IN THE DARK

641.M41

Breath puffed out from between Dag's teeth, forming a warm halo about his narrow skull. The Blood Claw stalked through the knee-high snows of the forest, following the path laid out before him. It was the easiest thing to do when you didn't know what needed doing. He frowned, trying to recall where he had learned that saying. Vague faces and familiar voices slipped through his mental clutches like melting ice.

All he remembered of the boy he had been was the faintest impressions. Vague sensations of hard stone against soft flesh. Heat washing over unprotected skin. The taste of warm mead and the hum of insects. He held tightly to those memories, using them as a whetstone to sharpen himself into something new.

He couldn't remember what he had been, and wasn't yet certain of what he would become. He was a ghost of future glories. The thought fled as someone shoved him. Reverie broken, he glanced at Kadir. The tall warrior grinned. 'Pay attention, or you'll lose yourself in the forest.'

Dag showed his teeth. 'If it gets me away from Halvar's stink, it's worth it.'

Halvar grunted discontentedly. 'My stink, as you call it, is the only thing

keeping the night-devils from swooping down on us.’ He lifted one of his many amulets and shook it. ‘You’re welcome.’

‘The only devil out here is the Jackalwolf,’ Ake snarled, shoving past Halvar. ‘And it’s already too late to escape him.’

Dag ignored his grumbling and searched the trail ahead. Through the swirling snows he could see Lukas forging the path they followed. It was hard to separate the reality of Lukas from the legend. The longest-surviving Blood Claw. The greatest of them, and the worst, with all that entailed. Dag couldn’t help but admire him.

Granted, there might be some bias there. When the kraken dragged him beneath the ice during the hunt in the Underfang it was Lukas who fished him out. He had been closer to death in that moment than he liked to think. And not a good death, or even an especially worthy one. Being crushed into paste by the rubbery coils of a beast was no sort of ending for his saga, short as it was. Luckily, Lukas had been there to tear him free.

He recalled those moments of... not panic, but as close as a warrior of the Rout could come. The crushing dark, the breath escaping his straining lungs, forced out of him by the kraken’s strength. And that snapping maw, large enough to devour him whole. The fact that something actually wanted to eat him had been eye-opening, to say the least. It had given him a whole new perspective on things. For a few moments, at least. Then, a slash of light and a brief glimpse of a grinning face as he struggled to the surface.

Dag watched Lukas, trying to see him clearly through the distortion effect of the doppelgangrel pelt he wore. Up close, the oily furs smelled worse than Halvar after a training bout, but Lukas didn’t seem to mind. He moved with a rough grace through the snow, face set in a half-grin.

‘I can’t tell what he’s thinking,’ Ake muttered. Dag glanced at his fellow Blood Claw. Ake’s scarred face was pulled tight in a puzzled frown.

‘I don’t think he knows either.’ Dag tapped the side of his head. ‘Too many thoughts. They get all tangled up.’

‘Something you’ll never have to worry about.’ Ake looked around, squinting against the icy wind. ‘We could be drinking mjod and telling lies. Instead, we’re stuck out here in the thrice-damned dark.’

‘You didn’t have to come, you know,’ Dag growled, annoyed now. ‘You could have stayed in the warm if it was so important to you.’

‘Are you calling me a coward?’ Ake demanded. Dag was fairly certain he wasn’t, but it didn’t matter. The kill-urge was closer to the surface in Ake than in

Dag or the others. Few days went by without him using some pretext to throw a punch at one of his packmates.

Dag looked at him. He tried to think of a clever way to avoid what was coming next. Nothing came to mind. He sighed inwardly. ‘No?’ he tried.

‘That’s it! I’ve had enough of you, skull-face.’ Ake turned and crashed into him, bearing him backwards. The two Blood Claws slammed into a frost-covered tree, shaking the snow from its branches. The tree, already weakened by the storm, snapped in half, and they rolled through a hail of broken bark and splinters. Ake was shorter, but stronger. Dag tried to put some distance between them, but Ake was tenacious. At least he hadn’t gone for his weapons this time.

They traded blows for a few moments, but there was no joy in it. Ake was angry, and Dag wasn’t in the mood to fight. ‘Get off me,’ he roared, trying to break away. Ake slugged him and he pitched backwards, crashing against the ground.

Halvar dived at Ake, trying to catch his arms as he made to rise, but Ake’s blood was up and he wasn’t in the mood to go quietly. He turned, still kneeling, and drove a blow into Halvar’s midsection, doubling him over.

Einar didn’t bother with niceties. He booted Ake in the face before he could rise. As Ake flopped back, cursing, Einar snatched up a branch and broke it over his bare head. Even then, Ake refused to calm himself. He lunged awkwardly for Einar, hands groping for the other Blood Claw’s throat.

Kadir intervened then. He caught Ake by the throat and pivoted, tossing the angry warrior over his hip. Before Ake could rise, Kadir planted a boot on the back of his head and ground his face into the snow. Ake flailed, trying to get up. After a few moments, Kadir stepped back, and Ake popped up, spluttering. ‘You...’ he began, clumps of snow sliding from his flushed features.

Kadir dropped to his haunches. ‘Me. You can calm down, or we can keep feeding you snow. It’s your choice.’

Ake growled, but looked away. Kadir snorted and helped Dag to his feet. ‘You shouldn’t have provoked him,’ he said.

‘Just as soon as someone tells me how to avoid doing that.’ Dag looked up and saw a string of ice-covered skulls hanging from a branch overhead. The bones clattered in the wind, looking for all the world like they were laughing.

Halvar cursed and made a gesture. ‘Death-markers. This is cursed ground.’ Dag’s fingers instinctively found the necklace of teeth he wore about his neck. All of them had been inscribed with warding sigils to keep Morkai from scenting his soul. Halvar wasn’t the only one who found comfort in such things.

‘So?’ Ake said derisively. ‘We are beyond death or curses.’

Halvar glared at him. ‘Morkai comes for us all. No warrior escapes him forever.’

‘Then why try to ward him off with your superstitious gestures?’ Ake laughed. He spread his arms and turned. ‘Come and get me, you two-headed bastard!’ He slammed his fists against his chest. ‘Here I am. Try to take me, if you dare!’

Dag shook his head and looked up at the skulls. There were others, nailed low on the trunks of almost every tree or hanging from branches. Many of the skulls were marked with runes – warnings, mostly.

Ake was still yelling at the storm, despite Halvar’s protestations. ‘I challenge you, Morkai. You hear me?’

Out in the dark, something answered him. The howl quavered through the trees, momentarily drowning out the rustling of the bones. Ake gaped for a moment before grinning in excitement. He threw his head back and howled in response. More howls joined the first, and there was a definite challenge in the sound.

‘Blackmanes,’ Einar said.

‘How can you tell?’ Dag asked. Einar shrugged.

‘They say Blackmanes serve Morkai,’ Halvar said, his hand dropping to the hilt of his blade. He shot a glare at Ake. ‘Perhaps he has decided to answer your challenge, fool.’

‘Good. Let them come. I am ready.’ Ake set himself and made to draw his chainblade.

‘I doubt that.’

Lukas’ voice echoed through the trees. Dag turned to see him watching them. The Trickster grinned and said, ‘Some of those Blackmanes get as big as a Rhino. They’ve got a bite like an ice-shark. Bigger head, you see.’ He gestured to his own head for emphasis. ‘Bigger jaw muscles. Their teeth can puncture ceramite if they’re in the right mood.’ He shrugged. ‘Or so I hear. Never been stupid enough to challenge one myself.’ He reached up and tapped a dangling skull with his wolf claw. ‘Maybe you know something I don’t, Ake.’

‘Maybe I do,’ Ake growled, lifting his chin pugnaciously.

Lukas’ smile widened. ‘Then by all means, show me.’ The howl sounded again, ricocheting through the trees. It seemed to echo from all around them. The storm made it impossible to tell which direction the sound was coming from, or how close its originators were. Dag turned. He thought he had spotted eyes as big as a storm shield, blazing in the dark. The wolves might already be on them. For a brief moment, he wished he had kept his helmet on. Sometimes his battle-plate’s

autosenses came in handy.

The howls grew louder. Halvar had drawn his own blade, as had Kadir. ‘They probably think we’re a rival pack, intruding on their territory,’ Lukas said as he sank to his haunches. ‘They’ll be looking to drive us off.’

‘You don’t seem worried,’ Ake said.

‘Because I have a wisdom that comes only with experience. I know exactly what to do in this sort of situation.’ His grin was feral. ‘I’m going to run while they’re busy eating you.’ He rose and moved off through the trees.

Ake stared after him, momentarily nonplussed. Suddenly, Einar laughed. The heavy-set Blood Claw swatted Ake on the shoulder, nearly knocking him from his feet. Then he started after Lukas. Kadir chuckled. ‘He has the right idea. If you want to fight starving wolves to prove your own strength, go right ahead, Ake. But you’ll do it without me.’

Halvar sheathed his blade. ‘You called this doom down. Deal with it yourself.’ He turned away, glancing at Dag, who shrugged and followed after his fellow Blood Claws.

‘Cowards!’

Einar made a rude gesture over his shoulder. Dag and the others laughed.

‘We’re a pack,’ Ake shouted.

‘And the pack is leaving, brother,’ Kadir called out.

‘Cowards,’ Ake snarled again.

‘Is that the only word you know?’ Halvar shouted back.

After a few moments, Dag heard Ake hurrying after them, cursing the entire time.

The howls faded after a while. Whether they had left the Blackmanes’ territory or the beasts themselves had only been passing through, Lukas didn’t know. Nor did he care. So long as the wolves kept their distance, he was content to leave them be. The wolves had more right to these forests than they did.

And wonder of wonders, Ake kept his grumbling to himself, for which Lukas was thankful. The Blood Claw had more courage than brains. He glanced back at the young warrior and chuckled. ‘He’s a fierce one.’

‘Too fierce,’ Kadir said. He had been quiet for several days, rarely speaking save when spoken to. Lukas wasn’t worried. Kadir was a thinker, unlike the others. ‘Ake seems to be spoiling for a fight at the best of times.’

Lukas shrugged. ‘The kill-urge is strong in him.’

‘I feel it too. But not like him.’ Kadir shook his head and swiped snow from his

shoulder-plates. 'Where are you leading us, Trickster? You said you knew these lands.'

'And I do. Don't you trust me?'

'No,' Kadir said with a smile. 'Where are we going?'

Lukas laughed, and pointed. 'See for yourself. We're here.'

The trees thinned, revealing what looked to be a tumbledown pile of stones. As they drew nearer, it revealed itself to be far larger than it had first appeared. It was half buried in snow and rimed with ice, a heavy, crude archway composed of a long slab balanced atop two others of similar size and mass.

'What is this?' Kadir asked.

'It's a barrow,' Lukas said, ducking beneath the archway.

'I can see that. I'm not blind.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' Lukas said as he followed the tight curve of the passageway beyond. Though it was all but pitch black within, his enhanced senses would have shown him the way easily enough if his memory hadn't. 'Come in, if you'd like to get out of the weather. Make yourselves at home.'

'I meant, why have you led us here?' Kadir demanded, stooping beneath the archway. The smell of dry stone and earth greeted Lukas as he went deeper into the barrow. A half-turn led him into a wide, sloping chamber. The space was circular in design and built of solidly piled stone beneath its shroud of concealing soil. He stroked the wall. They had built it to last, those ancient folk. Even with the whole world against them, they had made sure their resting places would survive where other structures might not.

'Are you sure you're not blind?' Lukas called out. He leapt up onto one of the flat slabs that occupied the centre of the chamber. They were laid out in curious fashion, at wrong angles to one another as if placed in some haste. Some were mostly sunk beneath the ground, while others rested atop it. All of them were marked with worn runes and pictographs.

Barrows, cairns and tombs of all types dotted the lowlands. All of them were marked with runes telling the history and deeds of those interred within. Great lords and heroes, for the most part. Though this one, with its markings scoured flat by time and wear, didn't seem to identify the resting place of anyone Lukas had ever heard of.

'Was this a king's grave?' Kadir asked.

Lukas laughed. 'No, not a king, I think. Some Reaver lord, maybe. Or someone worse. There were runes of binding on the outer walls, before they cracked off from age and tectonic stress.'

Halvar cast a wary glance around as he entered, muttering beneath his breath. 'Runes of binding are not for the graves of men. Not good ones, at any rate.'

'Whoever they were, they're nothing but dust now,' Lukas said. 'And no worry to the likes of us.' He reclined on a flat rock. 'I have laired here before, the last time Goresson banished me. It's dry enough. And the Jahtvians and the other local tribes have avoided it these past few decades, so there's plenty of privacy.' He placed his hands behind his head and lay flat on a slab.

Kadir lifted something from among the stones. 'What's this?' Piles of crude jewellery, ceremonial weapons and armour lay scattered about in the dark, heaped up against the slabs.

'Offerings,' Lukas murmured, taking the beaded necklace from the Blood Claw. It was made from bits of gold and polished stones. Worth a chieftain's ransom, to a mortal. He flicked it back onto a nearby pile and turned.

Kadir frowned. 'Offerings? For whom?'

'The dead,' Ake said disapprovingly.

'This place is cursed,' Halvar began, but the others pelted him with loose stones and jewellery. 'Well, it is,' he insisted sullenly.

'Not for us,' Lukas said. 'For us, it's blessed. Move that stone.' He pointed towards one of the slabs. Einar and Dag did as he ordered, and Ake hissed an oath as the ancient stone shifted and came up from its resting place with a groan.

'Is that—'

'Mjod,' Dag whispered, peering around Kadir's shoulder. 'Kegs of it!'

'Not quite the mjod you're used to,' Lukas said as the excited Blood Claws hauled the steel casks out of their hiding place. 'My own recipe. Has a bit of a kick.'

Ake looked at him suspiciously. 'What kind of kick?'

'Promethium.' Lukas scratched his chin.

'Promethium?' Einar asked with an unhealthy interest.

Kadir tapped one of the casks. 'How many of these caches do you have hidden away in the mountains, Trickster?'

Lukas shrugged expansively. 'A few hundred. I make a batch every time I come out here. It helps to pass the time.' Lukas had everything he needed to brew mjod in his battle-plate and in his head. It required some effort, to be sure, but he had never been afraid of that.

Granted, the first few batches had almost killed him, but he didn't see any reason to worry the others with that little admission. He had perfected the mix over the hundreds of batches since, and now it was as smooth as a mica-dragon's

hide.

The Blood Claws rolled the casks out into the middle of the barrow. There were eight in all, sealed in wood reinforced with kraken ichor. Without the ichor, the mjod would eat through the wood. He had gone through a good many batches before he figured that out. Trial and error, that was the way of it.

‘What now?’ Ake asked. He gestured to the kegs. ‘Did you bring us out here just to sit and drink?’ He didn’t sound entirely bothered by the prospect. Maybe he was mellowing after all. Lukas smiled. One could only hope.

‘We sit, drink and swap sagas, the way we would if we were in the Aett.’ Lukas leaned back, his power pack scraping against the stone. ‘I thought you might enjoy it.’ He swept a hand out. ‘Consider the mjod my apology for getting you banished, if you like.’

Ake snorted and sat. ‘I would prefer not to have been banished at all.’ He reached out and caught up one of the casks, lifting it over his head. He thrust a thumb through the wood, puncturing a neat hole, and opened his mouth to gulp at the pungent, dark liquid that spilled out. Only when his pate was dripping and his hair sodden did he set it down, his thumb plugging the hole. He grinned at Lukas. ‘But it’s a start.’

Lukas laughed and the others joined in. Soon the mjod was flowing nicely, and their tongues had been loosened enough to talk. Lukas started things off with an only somewhat exaggerated story about the time he had tricked Berek Thunderfist into eating wolf dung. The others howled their laughter, and he sat back, allowing someone else a turn.

That too was part of the tradition. One tale apiece, as the drink flowed and the dark pressed close. A tradition begun in ancient days and appropriated by Russ. Another tool to hammer his warriors into shape. A good trick. Sagas shaped them, whether they knew it or not. Gave them something to emulate, and hold on to when needed. A good thing, mostly. But sometimes they believed too hard. And in believing, were caught fast. It was like the old tale of the magic box and the ice-cat. The sagas were a square drawn on the ice with a shaman’s stick, and the warriors no wiser than the ice-cat who had climbed into something that wasn’t there and been trapped, to die of starvation.

Einar’s story was the shortest – a monosyllabic saga of but ten words – but amusing enough. Ake boasted of his combat prowess, fighting orks on some hell-world. Not an original tale by any means, but told with passion and drunken gesticulation. Dag told the longest story, reciting every twist and turn of a highly embarrassing if entertaining situation involving a rogue trader’s daughter.

Lukas listened to them all, boastful and rueful alike. These were the foundations of sagas to come. Stories that would grow in the telling, if their tellers survived. By the time Kadir had finished his tale, Lukas had thought of a way to help them do so. As the jeers faded, Dag caught his attention. ‘Your turn again, brother.’

Lukas sighed. ‘Very well.’ He upended the cask he held and drained the last of it. He set it aside and hunched forward. ‘I will tell you of Fenksworld, a hive world in the Calixis Sector. Cities stacked upon cities, rising from the core to the clouds.’

Dag whistled. ‘It must have been a sight to see.’

Lukas grimaced. ‘It was a tomb in all but name. The wind was artificial, stirred by great fans, the weak light of the sun captured and reflected through a billion solar emitters, the waters so processed and polluted they might as well have been poison.’ He spat and rubbed his nose. ‘I can still taste it in the back of my throat.’ He tapped one of the talons hanging from his shoulder-plate. ‘An uprising. Xenos influence. Genestealers turning the downtrodden and luckless from the honest light of the Allfather to a darker faith. They swarmed through the underhive like vermin, polluting everything they touched with foul markings and the bitter stink of their alien masters. We came at the behest of the world’s masters, and we killed for them.’

The Blood Claws were hanging on his every word. They had all seen their share of war, but they were greedy for tales of bloodshed and glory. Lukas watched their faces and wondered if he had ever worn such an expression. He doubted it.

‘My pack was to move forward, to take a position. To hold it until reinforced. But the others wanted to attack, to go on the offensive. That was the proper way of it. The enemy were fleeing – broken, easy meat.’ Lukas frowned, remembering. ‘We gave in to our kill-urge, and paid for it. They led us into an ambush. Xenos monsters came pouring out of the dark, and we fought them.’ He traced old marks on his battle-plate, grisly gouges made by the talons of things that could rend ceramite as easily as paper. ‘I learned then that the proper way was not always the right way...’

He trailed off. He had heard something. A faint sound, far away but drawing closer. A hum that caused the roots of his teeth to itch. He looked at the others and saw that he wasn’t the only one who had detected it. ‘You heard...?’ he began.

‘Vehicles,’ Ake grunted. ‘And not Adeptus Astartes.’

Lukas was on his feet an instant later, racing for the entry way.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

VARAGYR

641.M41

Hetha, shield-maiden of the Jahtvian tribe, ran through the gloom, her broken sword heavy in her aching hand. The forests seemed darker now, even given the season, and the trees clutched at her. Rain fell in thick sheets, the ice with it, and the ground shook underfoot, making it hard to stay upright. She blinked the cold from her eyes, trying to stay focused on the patch of shadow ahead. She could hear the others running with her, panting heavily. They could not allow themselves to be separated.

‘Keep going, the barrow is close,’ she shouted, fighting to be heard over the storm, her voice harsh with fear and exhaustion. ‘We’ll find shelter there.’ Grunts of assent reached her ears. They were too tired – too frightened – to argue with her. Good. It was the only way they were going to survive the night.

The barrow was forbidden to them. It was the haunt of fell spirits, and on many a night laughter and howling had been heard emanating from its depths. Whoever slept there did not do so peacefully. But they had no other choice. They were being chased by worse things than ghosts. The *svartalfar*, the night-devils, rode the storm winds, and no steel could stay them, no prayer could ward them

away. They had found that out the hard way.

The creatures had already taken Floki and Asger. If she strained, she could still hear them screaming, somewhere up above the trees. They would not die soon. That sent a chill worse than the wind through her, and she tightened her grip on her broken blade. There was blood on it, though she wasn't certain that it belonged to one of the night-devils.

Things had become confused in those final moments. Men screaming, hacking at the shadows as their torches were doused by the wind. Bodies falling into the snow, or being dragged backwards into the dark by unseen hands. And above it all, the laughter. She had cut herself a path to freedom, striking at anything that sought to hinder her. Her sword had struck something – or been struck – and snapped in two, even as she stumbled free of the melee.

Despite the damage to it, no thought of discarding the weapon passed through her mind. It was one of the few iron blades her tribe possessed, brought at no small cost from the Isle of the Iron Masters many hundreds of winters ago, before the tribe had found their way to Asaheim by the will of the gods. She had grown to womanhood listening to her grandfather's stories of Fire Mountain and the great, belching metal vessels that had greeted her ancestors' dragonships.

She had hoped to see that strange island for herself one day. But that had been before the fire in the east and the screams in the night. Before the svartalfar. She could hear their great spectral vessel riding the winds, like a dragonship but crewed by unseen daemons and growling like a wounded wolf. It skimmed across the treetops despite the weather. The night-devils clung to it, their cruel blades bared and their pale faces twisted in monstrous glee. She shuddered, remembering those smiles.

Hetha had faced trolls and drakes – aye, and men as well. Cruel men, and wild ones. But none of those had been filled with such unholy mirth as they went about their business. Such malice could not be fought. It could not be reasoned with. It could only be fled from, though the thought of it twisted within her. The tribe needed to be warned. They had to abandon this land and seek the sea. Surely the night-devils would not follow them.

That thought alone kept her moving, despite the growing numbness in her limbs and the ache in her chest. They had to escape. To bring word. Some of them must make it back to their steading. If not her, then one of the others. The thought died in a scream as something rose up beneath her. A grip like iron caught at her and dragged her swiftly down, to where a drift of snow had formed against the trunk of a tree. She struggled, but couldn't break the grip. She tried to

yell a warning to the others, but a wide, flat palm covered her mouth, stifling her calls.

‘Shhh, sister,’ her captor growled in the common dialect of the tribes. The hand pressed over her mouth covered almost the whole of her lower face. She could feel his enormity and the terrible strength in that grip. She smelled sour meat and weapon oil. ‘Quiet, little one. If you scream, the trick will be ruined.’

She squirmed in her captor’s grip, and he pulled his hand away from her mouth. ‘I will not scream,’ she hissed. ‘Are you a troll?’

A sound vibrated through her back, shaking her to her bones. It took her a moment to realise that it was a low, basso chuckle. ‘Do I look like a troll?’

‘You smell like one.’

‘That would be Halvar. Wave, Halvar.’ Something twitched in the dark, and Hetha swallowed. She and the others had run right through these beings without spotting them. They crouched in the snow, as still as the loose stones that littered the ground. She caught glimpses of the others, held like herself, their faces white with fear. Squinting, she made out patches of grey, pale against the dark. ‘Your steadying,’ her captor said, his voice unsettlingly close to her ear. ‘Has it been attacked? Is that why you’re running?’

‘No,’ she said, her voice cracking. ‘But something is in the forest. It took our people. Carried them away. Laughing.’

‘Hnh. Never heard of a troll that laughed.’ Her captor leaned down, and she caught a glimpse of a fiery beard and thick braids the same colour as her own roughly cropped hair. Yellow eyes flashed. She knew those eyes. Every son and daughter of her tribe did.

‘*Varagyr*,’ she whispered.

Her captor laughed softly. ‘Aye, that we are, little one. The Wolves That Walk the Stars, in the flesh. You know us. May we know you?’

‘H-Hetha.’

‘Hello, Hetha. I am called Lukas.’ He sniffed. ‘Jahtvian, are you?’

‘I–yes,’ she said. Of course he would know. The gods knew everything. Especially this god, if he was the one she thought he was.

‘Why are you out in the woods, Hetha?’

‘We... we came looking for our lost people.’

‘Did you find them?’

‘Yes,’ she gasped, trying not to remember. She squeezed her eyes shut, but that didn’t block out the echoes of the screams. Lukas’ grip on her shifted, his arm tight about her. It was a comfort rather than a binding.

‘Easy,’ he murmured, and she felt the word rumble through her. ‘Easy as it goes. Tears will come later. For now, I must know how many. What they looked like. How close.’

Hesitantly at first, but with growing satisfaction, Hetha began to speak. The Varagyr had come, and soon it would be the svartalgar who screamed.

From where he crouched, half sunk in the snow, Kadir listened silently as the woman spoke. Her words came in a rush, one tumbling over the next. He could smell her fear, sharp and sour. He studied her. She wasn’t some milk-pale daughter of the southern sea, but a woman of the taiga – raw-boned, with skin burned brown by the intemperate weather. Her hair, raggedly shorn, was as red as Lukas’ own. And her eyes were a dark amber, like dollops of melted gold.

And there was something in her face – a certain leanness, not the result of privation. He glanced at Lukas and saw a similar leanness there. He restrained a grin of understanding. Of course. He wondered how many generations had passed since Lukas had last visited the Jahtvians for longer than it took to drop off a deer.

As she finished her tale, he met Lukas’ gaze. ‘Well, what are they, then? Not trolls.’

‘No. Worse than that. Eldar.’

Kadir blinked. ‘Eldar? Here?’ He had never faced that breed of xenos before.

‘Corsairs,’ Lukas growled. Nearby, Halvar made a gesture of warning. A moment later, Kadir heard the low hum of an anti-gravity engine piercing the storm. And something else – laughter.

Kadir felt his hackles stiffen at the sound. It was shrill to his ears, and full of malice. An unhealthy sound that scraped against his hearing, it sent a wave of revulsion roiling through him. ‘If we can hear them, that means they’re flying low,’ Lukas muttered. ‘Good. Makes things easier.’ He looked at the woman. ‘I need you to scream, Hetha of the Jahtvian tribe. As if you were hurt. Can you do that?’

Kadir caught Lukas by the shoulder. ‘Are you certain of this plan, Strifeson? We don’t know how many there are.’

‘Well, I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?’ Lukas bared his teeth in a wide grin. ‘If I’m wrong, feel free to point it out, pup.’

‘Oh, I will, be sure of that,’ Kadir growled.

Hetha pushed away from Lukas. Her fear was apparent, but it didn’t stop her. She moved quickly, rising to her feet and running away from them at an angle.

She shouted and screamed as she ran, doing a good impression of a woman out of her mind with panic. Of course, that probably wasn't far from the truth. The hum of the engine grew louder as the keen hearing of the hunters caught the screams of their prey.

Trees were forced aside, reduced to broken husks by the armoured prow of the xenos skiff. The broken bodies of mortals had been impaled on narrow butcher's hooks or ensnared in barbed chains and left to bleed out along the curved ridges of the hull.

Wild laughter slipped through the air, and Kadir could see thin shapes clinging to the hull or crouched on the deck. Eldar. Just as Hetha had described them. They looked fragile, but he knew better than to take such creatures at face value.

Halvar and the others had released Hetha's companions. Hopefully the mortals would have enough sense to stay out of sight. The Blood Claws readied themselves, their eagerness palpable. Kadir gestured, and Ake nodded. They would have to be quick.

Lukas and Kadir rose up out of the snow as the skiff slid past, antigravity generators humming. Softly, quietly, they padded towards it. The crew were too busy looking for their prey to notice Kadir catching hold of the side. The Raider bobbed slightly as he hauled himself up with one hand, the other wrapped tightly about his chainblade.

The eldar saw nothing, heard nothing, until it was too late.

Kadir leapt over the rail, and his blade struck the steersman in the head. The teeth of the blade growled, tearing through armour and flesh with ease. The alien died in a burst of gore. As its grip on the tiller slackened, the vehicle began to list. Kadir drew his bolt pistol and put a shot through the chest of the eldar in the fanciest armour. The creature flew backwards and over the rail. He kept shooting until the weapon clunked empty and he was forced to holster it. Eldar rushed him, trying to retake the controls before the Raider crashed.

Kadir held his ground. The first xenos to reach him moved with a lethal grace, and its serrated blade carved gouges in the plates of his armour. It struck him twice before he realised it, and the eldar leapt back gracefully from his counterstroke. Splinter shots sparked off his armour as its fellows tried to divert his attention. They scrambled along the railing, seeking to surround him. Kadir howled and slashed at his opponent.

Chainblade met xenos steel with a grinding shriek. The creature was stronger than he had expected, and for a moment it held him back. Its face was exposed, a pale, thin mask twisted in an inhuman snarl. Whorls of ink marked its flesh, and

its teeth were capped with red metal. Kadir forced the blades aside and drove his head into the eldar's. Bone crunched and blood sprayed his features as the impromptu headbutt crushed its skull.

As the body fell, he turned and swept the legs out from under a xenos crouched on the rail. His chainblade severed the creature's limbs at the knee, and the eldar tumbled howling into the forest. He ducked his head as more splinter fire cascaded over him.

Kadir chopped through the barrel of a rifle, reversed his blade and drove the weighted ferrule into the chest of the eldar wielding the gun. Its armour crunched gratifyingly, and the creature fell, twitching. As he stepped over it, something grey clambered over the edge of the prow rail. Several eldar turned, but too late. A plasma shot erased the head of one, and a second fell with its torso torn open.

Lukas grinned at him. 'Well done, pup.' He dragged an eldar to its feet. 'See? Even he is impressed.' The xenos hissed something that might have been a curse and tried to stab him with a curved knife produced as if from thin air. Lukas lifted it easily and tossed it over the rail. 'Maybe not.'

The skiff was making a strange sound. Its hull scraped against the trees, and it began to list even further. Without someone to steer it, it was at the mercy of momentum and circumstance. Kadir staggered as the prow dipped sharply, striking the ground. The skiff shuddered and something within it exploded.

Flames shot across its hull as it shook and tumbled through the air, striking trees and the ground like a child's toy. Without waiting for Lukas, he leapt from the dying vessel. He struck the ground, but a moment later rolled awkwardly to his feet, his armour's servos groaning. He didn't see Lukas anywhere. The skiff struck a rocky scree and flames blazed up, bright against the snow.

The surviving eldar were rising to their feet as well. Fewer of them had died in the crash than he had hoped. 'Take them!' Kadir bellowed. They were practised killers, and moving already. His chainblade thudded down, narrowly missing his chosen opponent. The xenos moved like black lightning, whirling and slashing with the curved blade it wielded. Kadir found himself disarmed in a moment, the blade spinning from his hands to embed itself in the ice nearby. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ake and the others fall on the eldar, bursting from the snow to pounce on their disorientated prey.

Kadir fell back, absorbing the blows on the ceramite plates that protected his forearms. He grunted at the force of the eldar's attack. It laughed harshly as it pressed its assault. It must have thought him helpless because he lacked weapons.

Its blade skidded forward, drawing fat sparks from the ceramite. At the last moment he thrust his arm up and away, smacking the weapon aside. Before the eldar could recover, he lunged. His free hand caught it in the throat, and its armour crumpled in his grip. It clawed for the pistol-weapon on its hip, hissing curses. Kadir snapped its neck before it could draw the weapon. He tossed the body aside and turned to retrieve his blade.

As he wrenched the weapon free of the ground, a shot glanced off his shoulder-plate. He spun, slinging his blade like a discus. It bisected the alien warrior before clattering off a nearby tree. Kadir cursed and hurried to reclaim it. The whine of engines was growing louder. Lukas' trick had been loud, and the plume of fire lit up the night for leagues in every direction. He could hear the others cursing and fighting.

As he snatched up his blade, a smaller vehicle – a bulky jetbike with several eldar perched on its hull – shot into view. Its weapons spat, and he lunged behind a tree. The jetbike slewed past, its pilot skilfully manipulating the controls to avoid slamming into the trees. As Kadir hurtled away, its weapon chewed the ground in his wake.

The vehicle sped after him at breakneck speed, easily sweeping past him. As it did so, one of the xenos clinging to its side loosed a loop of barbed chains hooked to the jetbike's hull. The coil caught Kadir's armour and he staggered. He managed to retain his footing for a moment, but the snow crumbled underfoot and he was yanked off his feet despite the weight of his armour.

He slammed into a tree, and then another. His teeth rattled in his jaws and his bones quivered with each impact. Desperate, he blindly whipped out his blade. It bit deep into the trunk of a tree, and Kadir held tight to it, trying to pull himself free of the chains. The jetbike plunged on, the chain playing out until it hauled taut. There was an echoing shriek of abused metal. Kadir felt himself losing his grip on his chainblade, and with a roar he caught hold of the chain and twisted, trying to buy himself some leverage. The tree creaked as his weapon began to work itself free, chewing the bark to pulp.

There was a flash, and Kadir whipped around, suddenly free. He crashed into the tree and tumbled to the ground, his blade landing beside him. He saw Lukas racing towards him, smoking plasma pistol in one hand. The Trickster veered away as the jetbike sped to intercept him. Its splinter cannon fired, shredding trees. As it shot past Kadir, he shoved himself to his feet and caught the broken length of chain.

He quickly looped it around a tree. It pulled tight and the jetbike shuddered. Its

engines moaned like a lost soul, and several of the eldar leapt off as the pilot fought to keep the vehicle steady. The one standing on the rear platform attempted to spin the splinter cannon around to fire at the chain.

Lukas tackled the eldar off the firing platform. The ones who had already dropped to the ground moved to attack the Trickster, but Kadir reached them first. As he blocked a blow, he saw Lukas grasp a dark eldar by the ankle and sling the squalling xenos into a tree. Kadir dispatched another one with brutal efficiency, his blade whipping out in a tight, roaring arc to crunch through its thin frame and send it tumbling to the ground, broken.

He ducked as the chain snapped at last. The broken end caught the remaining eldar in the head, killing it instantly. That left only the pilot. Flames washed across the jetbike's canopy as it tried to shoot away, engulfing the screaming xenos. The vehicle crashed and slid, scattering burning debris to mark its trail. Einar stepped past the wreckage, the light casting bands of shadow across his helmet. 'Alive?' he called.

'If I wasn't, I wouldn't ache this much,' Kadir said, rotating his arm. Something had pulled loose inside him – he could feel a stiffness that hadn't been there before. He would heal, thankfully. He looked down at the bodies and spat. 'Xenos filth.'

'Eldar,' Lukas said. His armour, like Kadir's, was streaked with blood.

'That's what I said,' Kadir growled, kicking a body onto its back. 'What is it doing here? This is Fenris, not some backwater frontier world!'

'Hunting,' Lukas said. Kadir and Einar followed him through the trees, back towards the downed Raider. Ake and the others stood around it, their weapons wet with blood. The eldar were dead. Hetha and her companions huddled nearby, staring at the bodies as if not quite believing that the creatures were no longer a threat.

'I know this breed. They drink suffering as we drink mjod,' Lukas said softly, staring at the bodies on the burning hull. For once, he wasn't smiling. None of them were. The kill-urge was gone from them as quickly as it had come.

Lukas began to remove the pitiful remnants from the hull, avoiding the flames that still licked at the crumpled metal from within. He did so with more care than Kadir had ever known him to display, and he moved to follow suit.

'Why waste time on the dead?' Ake spat. 'This filth didn't come here alone.'

Lukas turned, a body cradled in his arms. 'We waste the time because someone must,' he growled, low and fierce. 'Fenris is ours, pup, and we are responsible for it. Responsible for them. These have suffered twice over what you or I did

when we endured the tests of Morkai.’ His voice rose to a snarl. ‘They have earned your respect.’

Kadir glanced at the woman, Hetha. She trembled, staring at the bodies. She was born of Fenris, and so did not flinch from death. But this wasn’t death. It was agony. The monsters of the sea and ice didn’t normally torment their prey. He looked at Lukas. ‘Ake is right. There will be more of them, somewhere.’

‘I know,’ Lukas said. ‘Which is why we need to alert the Aett.’ He smiled at the expression on Kadir’s face. ‘What? You thought I would insist on hunting them myself? I might be the oldest Blood Claw in the Rout, brother, but I’m not an idiot. Grimblood and the other jarls must know of this. Fenris must be defended.’

Kadir shook his head. ‘We have been banished, remember?’

Lukas snorted. ‘And so? I come and go as I please. I know ways into the mountain that no one else does. Secret, swift routes. Forgotten roads. All easy enough to reach if you have the wit.’ He tapped the side of his head. ‘Still, we will need proof.’ He looked at Hetha. ‘You will return to your tribe, little one. We will rouse the Wolves.’

‘My people—’ she began hesitantly.

‘Will be safe. Won’t they, Kadir?’

Kadir looked at him, puzzled. ‘What?’

‘You and the others will escort these mortals back to their tribe. Then you will watch over them. Guard them. I’ll take Halvar with me.’ Lukas turned to Hetha. ‘Send runners to the closest tribes, even those you’re at war with. Most will have already moved to escape the rising sea, but some won’t. Alert them.’ He looked at Kadir and the others. ‘You will accompany the runners. I want the tribes aware of what lurks in the night.’

‘And if they don’t listen?’ Kadir asked.

‘Be persuasive.’ Lukas’ grin was wide and savage. ‘Grimblood thought he was going to have an easy time of it with us gone. I can’t wait to see the look on his face when we dump these bodies in his lap.’



CHAPTER TWELVE

CROSS PURPOSES

641.M41

The great beasts ran across the ice. Growths of abnormal muscle stretched across twisted lupine frames, lending strength and an exceptional grace. They ploughed through the curtain of icy rain, leaping heavily over the splintering dunes of ice. In places the white expanse had been ruptured by tectonic pressures or falling meteors. The ice bucked and cracked beneath their massive paws, throwing up typhoons of freezing water. But they didn't slow, and their howls split the air.

The dark eldar Raider coursed in their wake, following close behind the fleeing pack. The occasional shot from a splinter cannon served to keep the beasts from scattering into the storm. The vessel's anti-gravity fields kept the worst of the weather off its passengers and crew, though the craft couldn't avoid being buffeted by the high winds.

'And they were once mon-keigh, you say?' Malys asked, mildly interested in the loping beasts. 'How intriguing. Some sort of failed attempt at fleshcrafting?'

'Genetic, if Jhynkar is to be believed,' Sliscus said, sipping from his goblet. They sat together at a table at the prow of the Raider. Slaves waited on them attentively, several holding a weather screen aloft. 'What you see before you is

the result of the primitive alchemy the mon-keigh insist on referring to as 'science'. They take men and make them monsters.'

'But not on purpose?'

'No,' Sliscus said with an air of incredulity. 'Can you imagine?'

'Quite well. You have seen what the humans are capable of when left to their own devices. Fiendishly clever little apes.'

'Yes, some more than others.' Sliscus had bargained with and butchered humans enough to know that they had a certain cunning. Not equal to his own, but easily exceeding that of many noble archons of his acquaintance. Still, cunning or not, they were nothing more than prey.

He looked out over the rail, watching the beasts flee before him. Two other Raiders kept pace with his own, their anti-gravity engines carrying them silently across the ice. Their crews shouted and cheered, eager to make the kill. Jhynkar was aboard one with his wracks, while Myrta commanded the other.

He smiled at the thought of the latter. Like Malys, she was a clever woman. Too clever, too sharp. She had been forced to kill a number of rivals since they had started the festivities. Occasionally, one of his captains took umbrage at being ordered about by one they took to be a mere servant.

Despite the deaths, the hunt was going well. The storm made for ideal cover and added a certain thrill to the aerial pursuits of the Reavers and hellions. Watching them smash into one another, or be blown into a looming crag, proved to be of modest entertainment.

The primitive humans who occupied many of the semi-stable landmasses made for good sport. Such brutes rarely had the wit to flee, and instead tried to fight. Such bravery often led to a bounty of fear, pain and despair. His guests attacked night by night, never for long, and only taking what plunder they could easily carry.

Some, like Archon Thyndrak, were more particular about what they sought. She and others had focused their efforts on the scattered training camps of the Space Marines that dotted the foothills and valleys of the main continental landmass. These 'aspirants', as they were called, made for deadly sport. Thyndrak had some notion of capturing as many as possible for her arenas. Sliscus wished her well, but had little interest in risking so much for so little gain. He had no need of such imperfect meat when hardier fare was close to hand.

He leaned forward, watching as his prey ran themselves to death. The wolf-things were beautiful, in their way. The epitome of function over form. That such creatures had come to exist by accident only proved the malign indifference of

the universe. They would find life more satisfying by far in his gardens. If they survived the next few moments, at least.

‘How long, do you think, before someone makes a mess of this wonderful outing of yours?’ Malys gestured towards one of the nearby Raiders with her fan.

‘A few more days, at least.’

‘You don’t seem concerned.’

‘Why should I be?’ Sliscus laughed. ‘We will be long gone by the time our hosts realise the scale of what they face.’ He shook his head. ‘This is not an invasion. It is a raid. There is no goal here save indulgence. We will hunt and enjoy ourselves for what time we can. Then you will return to the stultifying safety of the Dark City, there to lose yourselves in lesser pleasures.’

‘Is that truly how you see the city of your birth, Traevelliath? As a cage?’

Sliscus sighed. ‘Do you know why I left Commorrhagh the first time, Aurelia?’

‘I know the rumours that fly about like gloomwings wherever archons gather. Some say that you were one of Vect’s bastards, and that when you learned the truth, he tried to have you killed. Others, that you are the last of the old aeldari bloodlines, and that you left to rebuild the empire, one realm at a time.’

‘And what do you say, my dear?’

Malys paused. ‘You were bored. Tired of the same games, on the same board. We play them so often that the moves and gambits have become instinct.’

Sliscus nodded. ‘Vect rules because the rest of you are so obsessed with the game that you cannot see beyond the board. You cannot see that the only way to win is simply not to play.’ He gave an elegant shrug. ‘You are right, of course. I was bored. Nothing more.’

‘I’m surprised Vect never came after you.’

‘Why would he?’ Sliscus smiled, and Malys laughed.

‘Ah. That clears that up. It’s true, then. Those ships of yours weren’t stolen, were they? Vect gave them to you.’

Sliscus grinned. ‘Say, rather, he let me steal them.’

‘And how many upstarts like Xomyll have you tweaked and later butchered?’

Sliscus didn’t reply. He could almost see the wheels turning in her head. This was always the part he enjoyed the most – that moment of revelation as they realised just how cunning he truly was. But, as ever, Malys was full of surprises. Rather than the obvious question, she simply asked, ‘And now?’

‘Now what?’

‘Are you bored again? It has been several centuries, Traevelliath, dear. Enough time that even you might once more long for the shadows of Commorrhagh.’

‘And why would you be interested in that?’

Malys fluttered her fan. ‘Suppose I were to offer you the chance to once again enjoy the largesse of the Eternal City?’

‘At your side,’ Sliscus said.

‘Where better?’

‘That depends entirely on the situation.’ Sliscus leaned forward. ‘You would not be here if you did not need me. Ergo, I have the advantage.’ He dipped his finger in the goblet. Delicately sucking the liquid from his digit, he continued. ‘One thing I have learned in my time as a corsair is to always exploit every advantage to the fullest.’

Malys sat back. ‘I’m not the only one who has sought your aid, am I? How many of them, Traevelliath?’

‘Why... all of them, my dear. Every single guest, save those I killed, obviously. They all want something from me – that’s why they came.’

‘Obviously. I simply assumed you would know better than to align yourself with such lesser lights.’ She frowned. ‘Though you never have been what one could call sensible.’

Sliscus laughed. ‘Oh, you wrong me, Aurelia. You really do.’ He turned in his seat, looking at the captives who hung from agoniser-racks mounted on the deck. The racks were an invention of Jhynkar’s – thin frames to which captives could be manacled and then wired into a multiplicity of pain amplifiers, tox-injectors and chem-pumps. A handful of native Fenrisians hung from them, their bodies marked by bloody welts and bruises. Their moans had dwindled to silence, and he frowned speculatively.

‘Is that why you held this little party, then? To tease your many suitors?’ Malys paused. ‘Or perhaps as a way to winnow out those who might prove a danger to Asdrubael?’

Sliscus stood, drawing a knife from his sash. Malys tensed, but Sliscus had eyes only for the captives. ‘No. Merely to exploit every advantage,’ he said simply. ‘You are right, of course. I am bored. But that doesn’t make me a fool, Aurelia. I’m no revolutionary. Vect is a fine enough tyrant, and I am quite content to leave his narrow posterior firmly affixed to his garish throne. Why should I trouble myself, when he no more rules me than I rule him?’

‘And the bounty on your head?’

‘It is for show, mostly. I doubt he would weep to see me dead. But only the stupid and the ambitious would seek to claim it. By killing them, I aid him in separating the weak from the strong. Indeed, by abetting his tyranny, as I do, I

ensure my own freedom from it.’ He pointed the knife at her. ‘You should take a lesson from that, really.’

Malys frowned. ‘Now you presume to teach me lessons in subtlety?’

Sliscus snorted and turned to the captives. ‘I would not presume to teach you anything, my dear.’ Flesh parted, and one of the cattle whimpered. Sliscus clucked his tongue. ‘Stay still. How am I supposed to finish this stanza if you keep squirming?’

‘You owe me,’ Malys said, as if it were no more than a statement of fact.

‘We owe each other nothing, and I have no reason to endanger myself in serving your ends. Were the situation different, I might, in fact, bow to the yoke of honour.’

It was Malys’ turn to snort derisively. ‘What do you know of honour, Traevelliath?’

He spun. The blade left his hand, and her fan snapped up, trapping it before it reached her face. Malys glared at him. ‘You dare?’ she hissed, rising to her feet.

She stopped as Sleg and the other Sslyth tensed visibly, their flat eyes watching her with brute anticipation. The dry rasp of their coils against the deck was as good a warning as the hiss of a blade from its sheath.

‘Aurelia, of *course* I dare. I am Duke Traevelliath Sliscus. I have danced with daemon-women on the hulls of dying ships and cut the heart from a trueborn prince while his kabal watched. I have tweaked the nose of the Tyrant not once, but twice, and got away clean. And do you know why?’

‘He favours you,’ Malys said.

‘Because I serve a purpose, as do you. Do not allow your ambition to blind you to the realities of your situation, Aurelia. You know as well as I that Vect has spared you all these years not out of affection or fear, but because you have a use.’

Before Malys could reply, one of the Raider’s crew shouted and pointed. Sliscus laughed and strode to the prow, taking a splinter rifle offered up by one of his slaves. The rifle was a thing of jagged beauty, like all of his weapons. Its stock was inlaid with ivory and gold, and the barrel was covered in ornate scrollwork carved by his own hand. The design had come to him in a dream, and he had endeavoured to capture it in metal.

‘What is it?’ Malys asked, turning in her seat.

‘They have been brought to bay, at last.’ He lifted the rifle and peered down its length. The wolf-beasts had been driven into the lee of a stone cleft rising from the ice. Such miniscule islands marked the frozen seas like tombstones. This one

resembled nothing so much as two axe-blades of stone thrust into the ice, one beside the other.

The other Raiders had surged ahead of the pack and cut them off. The wolf-things now crouched among the icy rocks, snarling at the sleek vessels that circled them like birds of prey. Sliscus took aim at one of the beasts as it burst from cover and lunged for a gap between the Raiders. He fired. The creature gave a mournful howl and tumbled, hindquarters over head. It slid across the ice, leaving behind a smear of blood.

‘Ha! Take us down.’ Sliscus lifted the rifle and grinned, pleased with himself. It was no easy thing to hit a moving target under conditions such as these. The snow was falling more fiercely as the wind picked up. The Raider drifted towards the ice, juddering slightly, but Sliscus paid it no mind.

He and Malys stepped onto the ice a moment later. It crackled softly underfoot as he strode towards the wounded beast. There was still some fight in it, despite the gory wound in its flank. The splinters had torn open its side, and he could see the pale slash of bone within the mangled flesh and muscle. On the rocks, the other beasts had set to howling as his warriors kept them at bay with bursts of splinter fire.

The wolf-thing was twice his size. It stank of sour blood and spoiled meat. It whined, acidic slaver dripping from its blunt muzzle, as it scabbled to face him. The whine spiralled up into a grating snarl, and the beast heaved itself in his direction. Inhuman muscles bunched and stretched, claws like knife blades cracking the ice. It lunged for him, yellow eyes wide and empty of anything save feral rage.

Sliscus laughed and made to fire, but the beast was too quick. It crashed into him and sent him sprawling backwards. The ice cracked threateningly beneath him as he slammed down. The lupine monstrosity snapped at him, and he thrust the length of his rifle between its jagged teeth. He heard yells and saw warriors racing across the ice to his aid. ‘Stay back,’ he shouted, shoving the beast away. Its strength was fading as its blood spilled across the ice. ‘This is my hunt – my kill!’ Still gripping the rifle in both hands, he got his feet under him and rose. The creature slipped back, growling.

With a wrench of its head, the beast pulled the weapon from his grip and hurled it away. Sliscus leapt back. He considered drawing his liquifier pistol, but discarded the idea. Instead, he reached for his swords. The spirit stones pulsed with agitation as he drew them.

The wolf-thing leapt, roaring. He ducked beneath it and let his blades slice

across its belly. It landed in a heap, its paws tangled in its own intestines. It wailed like a dying man and spun, quicker than he would have thought possible given its condition. It snapped at him, tearing at his cloak as he danced out of reach. He slashed at its snout, filling its nose with blood. It struggled on, pursuing him, leaving its life on the ice. He darted in and out, flicking his blades across its hairy form, carving it to pieces even as it lunged and grunted.

He could hear his warriors cheering as he tortured the beast. They enjoyed such displays. Sliscus preened, stretching the moment of execution, allowing them to drink in the creature's agony. It was just human enough to have some dim grasp of what was happening to it, almost as if the pain were awakening that part of it that had long been lost. Things that might have been words tumbled from its frothing muzzle, lost among the wheezing snarl. Was it pleading with him? Cursing him? He couldn't say, and didn't care.

Sliscus ended the dance with a skill that left his audience breathless. The lupine monster made a half-hearted lunge, propelled more by stubbornness than strength. Sliscus reversed his blades and thrust them down through the beast's glaring eyes, extinguishing their baleful light forever. The massive engine of meat and savagery went limp, with only a resigned sigh to mark its passing.

He extricated his swords with a flourish, casting droplets of blood about him in a dark halo. He bowed low, accepting the enthusiastic applause as his due. Sleg and several of his coil-kin slithered to the body, their blades ready to skin and gut the creature. Its altered organs would make for a unique meal, and its hide would make a fine coat. Leaving them to it, Sliscus strode back towards the rocks where the rest of the pack still crouched.

Jhynkar was waiting for him there. 'Yes, yes, these will do perfectly,' the crooked fleshweaver said as the remaining beasts were brought to bay by his wracks. His malformed assistants wielded a variety of restraint devices – shock-staves, barbed nets and neuro-chains. 'So much potential, stifled by circumstance. They are almost art in and of themselves.' He studied the snarling, snapping creatures fondly. 'Oh, what wonders I might make of such raw materials.'

'And it is wonders I demand, Jhynkar. Wonders and horrors such as no other's eyes have witnessed. Unique and without equal.' Sliscus slapped the haemonculus on the back, nearly flattening him. 'I want something exceptional to remember this hunt by.' He looked at Jhynkar, his gaze calculating. 'Can you do it?'

Jhynkar nodded hastily. 'Oh, absolutely, my lord. I shall torture my muse to the

utmost, in your name.’

Sliscus smiled. ‘That’s what I like to hear. Now, how is your former master getting along? I understand the Hex have acquired their own pets?’

Jhynkar bobbed his head. ‘Oh, yes, several less devolved examples of the altered template. They are still in the throes of genetic transmogrification into the advanced form – not quite mon-keigh anymore, but not yet transhuman. Their minds are engines of instinct. Easy prey for Xhact and his pain-engines.’

That Xhact had gone for such prey was not surprising. The master of Hex had little love of a challenge. Still, Sliscus admired his creativity – Xhact had a way with flesh and bone that few others could match. That was why he had allowed Jhynkar to convince him to invite Xhact. That Jhynkar was undoubtedly hoping to somehow worm his way back into the coven’s good graces was neither here nor there.

‘Good, good,’ Sliscus said. ‘So long as everyone is having fun, yes?’

Myrta stood on the ice, watching as Jhynkar’s wracks muscled the last of the snarling beasts into the Raider’s hold. Shock-staves crackled as the wracks jabbed the creatures into barbed nets and dragged them bodily up the loading planks. Several of Jhynkar’s slaves were dead, but there were always more where they came from.

The beasts were destined for the pits at the base camp. There they would join the many other prisoners taken in the days since the arrival of Sliscus and his guests. She thought of the humans crouched in their stinking cages, awaiting branding and transport to the *Incessant Agony*. The beasts would suffer a different fate than the rest of the meat. Sliscus would want to keep them. He did so enjoy his monsters.

She frowned slightly. Sliscus was an avid collector of monsters. Sleg and his scaly kin. Jhynkar and his wracks. The broken collection of cast-offs, turncoats and lunatics that made up his fleet. Herself, even. There were some among the nobility of the Eternal City who considered her sisterhood an abomination. They thought them a throwback to the old pleasure-cults that had supposedly doomed their ancestors to a twilight existence. And perhaps they were right.

Myrta pushed the thought aside. She lacked the hedonistic tendencies of many of her sisters. She preferred the poisoner’s blade to the courtesan’s dance. Perhaps that was why she had been gifted to Sliscus. As punishment. Her jaw tightened, and her fingers gripped the hilt of her sword.

A burst of laughter caught her attention, and she glanced at a nearby knot of

corsairs. They were dressed in colourful silks and armour that was more decorative than functional. They were watching her, and she had little doubt that their laughter was directed at her.

She drew her splinter pistol smoothly and fired. Ice cracked and sprayed across their armour. They leapt back, their jeers turning to cries of alarm. She smiled prettily and holstered her weapon. They turned away from her, pulling the tatters of their dignity about them. She left them to it. She had killed three captains already, not counting Kakaroth, as well as two archons. And twice that number of petty corsairs and trueborn aesthetes. Some, like Kakaroth, had attempted to kill her. Others had insulted Sliscus, either to his face or behind his back. At least one had committed the ultimate sin of choosing an outfit vaguely reminiscent of the one the Duke had worn that day.

All of them had died. Some by poison, others by the blade. One by the weapons of his own crew. The role of executioner was just one of the responsibilities Sliscus had foisted on her since their arrival. To her had fallen the task of organising the camp and making the mon-keigh dwellings fit for purpose. She had arranged for the dozens of disparate hunting parties to stay in some sort of contact despite the storm's interference.

She watched as slaves bearing platters of food and drink circulated among the laughing corsairs. Despite the wind and the snow, the dark eldar were enjoying themselves. The smell of blood was on the air, and prey was plentiful. She turned away from their laughter and went to where the Sslyth were butchering the Duke's kill.

Myrta looked down at the beast in annoyance. If that was the best this world could muster, she was doomed to disappointment.

‘You were hoping it would kill him.’

Myrta turned. Malys stood behind her. The archon gestured with her fan. ‘Do not deny it, courtesan. I saw the eagerness on your face as the beast lunged for his throat. The others may have been watching the battle, but I was watching you.’

Myrta tapped the pommel of her blade. ‘And what of it?’ she said petulantly. ‘He knows I wish him dead, so if you seek to hold your suspicion over me, you are sadly out of luck, my lady.’

Malys clicked her tongue. ‘Your sisterhood has ever prided itself on its wisdom. Yet in matters such as this, you are as children. Sliscus is no Low Commorrhagh archon, with a paltry kabal and reach exceeding his grasp. He is called the Serpent for good reason. He is amoral, despicable and impeccably dressed. If

Vect himself could not kill him, then what hope has this world?’

Myrta frowned. ‘Then what would you suggest?’

Malys laughed. ‘Suggest? Nothing. There is no hope for you. Accept your fate, or dive into the wolf’s jaws if it displeases you so.’

Myrta’s hand fell to the hilt of her blade. She yearned to draw it and show Malys the extent of her displeasure. But something in the archon’s expression stopped her. ‘You misunderstand me, courtesan,’ Malys continued quietly. ‘I mock you, true, but not out of cruelty. Merely to point out the flaws in your scheme.’ She chuckled. ‘Indeed, I will help you, if you will let me.’

‘I thought you wanted him alive,’ Myrta said.

‘I want him in my debt,’ Malys corrected. ‘He listens to you, as he will not listen to others. He does so because he thinks he has nothing to fear from you. He knows your secret desire, and it makes him arrogant. So I will help you humble him.’

‘But not kill him?’

‘Why kill what can be useful?’ Malys smiled. She looked down at the dead creature. ‘No. You do not want such a beast dead, my dear. You want him... *tamed.*’



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ROUSING THE PACK

641.M41

The tunnel was a tight fit, especially given their burdens.

‘This isn’t how I imagined we would be doing this,’ Halvar said as he adjusted the weight of the mjod cask hanging from his back, just beneath his battle-plate’s power pack. Rather than delicious amber liquid, it contained the broken body of one of their foes.

Lukas thought forlornly of the last dregs of mjod sloshing at the bottom of the cask, now never to be drunk. But only briefly. Some things were too painful to consider. ‘They’re not likely to let us in without an argument. And time is of the essence.’ He had his own cask, filled with a similar weight of dead meat. Lukas patted it, causing it to gurgle unpleasantly. ‘Besides, it keeps them from stinking too badly.’

‘We’re pickling them. We could have drunk that.’

‘At least we’re not eating them afterwards.’ Lukas’ expression became speculative. ‘Though we could, I suppose.’

‘No.’

‘Seems a waste to burn them, is all.’

‘No.’

‘Where is your sense of adventure, Halvar?’ Lukas asked. ‘New experiences are what life is all about.’

‘Not our lives. I just kill xenos – I don’t eat them.’ Halvar hesitated. ‘Except ork, on occasion. Very rare occasions,’ he added hastily.

‘No need to be ashamed, pup. We’ve all eaten an ork at one time or another. They cook up nicely.’ Lukas concentrated on navigating the narrow, uneven corridor. It was a natural bore hole, worn open by tectonic pressures, weather or some long ago disaster. One of the secret paths that wolves and other things used to sneak into the Aett.

This one wound its way into the refectories. Using the front gate had been ruled right out. Grimblood and the other jarls needed to be alerted to the presence of the xenos on Fenris, but they wouldn’t be inclined to listen. Not that he could blame them.

The tunnel abruptly came to a dead end, a thin circle of light marking the rough-hewn wall. Lukas pressed himself against the rock face, his hands moving slowly. ‘When I found this tunnel I spent some time making sure no one else could do so,’ he said. Unseen tumblers clicked and the rock face shuddered. The circle of light expanded, the rock hissing. Lukas lifted part of the wall up and away.

The heat of the refectory washed over them as they stepped out of the tunnel. Lukas breathed in, tasting the mingled aromas of cooking meat and off-world spices. While meat was often roasted over the great firepits that marked the heart of every gathering chamber, that was more for show than anything else. The bulk of every meal was made in the refectories by the sure hands of trusted bondsmen.

Few of his kind came down here. The plethora of smells alone could easily overpower the senses of a Grey Hunter, let alone a Blood Claw, unless he was prepared for it. Heat blasted from open ovens, and the air throbbed with the noise of culinary industry – the thunk of knives, the rattle of pans, the sound of hundreds of voices raised in effort.

There were servants for whom these refectories were the entirety of their world. The flames of the ovens were the sun, while the waters pumped up from the icy floes below the Fang and poured into the storage butts were the oceans. Lobotomised machine-thralls trundled through the maze of preparation slabs, hunched beneath industrial serving trays.

Lukas hefted the section of wall back into place, using cleverly carved crannies

in the rock. It snapped into position with a grinding sound. Lukas stepped back and nodded. 'There,' he murmured.

'And how many of those do you have secreted about?' Halvar asked.

Lukas laughed. 'More than one.' He gestured. 'Come on. This way.'

They navigated the maze of preparation slabs, moving quickly. But just before they reached the doors, a woman's voice called out. 'You are not supposed to be here, my lords.'

Lukas froze. He turned, a sheepish look on his face. The woman was tall for an unaugmented human, with the pallor of one who had never seen the sun. She had silver hair pulled tight over high-boned features, and the faint blue of faded tattoos curled down one side of her face and neck. She glowered up at the two warriors, as if they were nothing more than overlarge scullions. Lukas grinned weakly. 'Berla! How fortuitous!'

Berla had been comely in her youth. She was still comely, though his appreciation was more aesthetic than primal. There was a strange sort of beauty to unaugmented humans. They grew more interesting the older they became, unlike the Vlka Fenryka, who all grew to resemble wolves – or worse, the same wolf. Their gene-sire had a shadow that stretched over millennia and the generations that rose and fell within them. But there was a variety to the mortals that never failed to fascinate him.

He stepped towards her, ignoring the servants who scuttled fearfully from his path. She didn't retreat. She had grown to womanhood in the kitchens, as had her mother and grandmother, unto seven generations. An unbroken line of hearth-mistresses whose word in the refectories was law. 'My lord,' she said. 'It has been many cycles since you last visited my kitchens. To what do we owe the honour?'

'Just passing through, I assure you,' he said, looming over her.

'What is that?' Berla asked, pointing at the cask on Lukas' back. There was precious little respect in her tone. Any other Space Wolf might have killed her out of hand for the insult. But she knew Lukas of old, and knew that he rarely took insult, even where it was damn well intended.

Lukas stepped back, giving her space. 'What is what?' he asked, his eyes wide.

'On your back, my lord.'

'There's something on my back?' Lukas spun, tilting his head quizzically. Berla didn't so much as crack a smile. Instead, she looked at Halvar.

'You stink. What is in the cask?'

Halvar looked back and forth between them, clearly at a loss. His fingers

fidgeted with his totems. Lukas realised that the noise levels in the hall had dropped. The eyes of every thrall in the refectory were on the confrontation. He sighed. 'You are well within your rights to tell someone about us.'

She shrugged. 'I am a mortal. A thrall. Who am I to offer an opinion about where and when a Sky Warrior chooses to go?'

'You are a queen, and this is your kingdom,' Lukas said, looking down at her. 'As it was your mother's, and hers before then. If you speak, the jarls will listen, whether they like it or not.' He gestured to Halvar. 'Even Blood Claws have sense enough to be afraid of you.'

'And if they catch you here, they will beat you bloody. The pair of you.' She favoured Halvar with a frown. 'He has led you into trouble, my lord.' With a snort, she turned away. 'I saw nothing.' At her gesture, the thralls relaxed and turned back to their tasks. Lukas glanced at Halvar and smiled.

'See? I told you it would be fine.'

'Get out of my refectory, my lords,' Berla said, not looking at them. 'It's very hard to see nothing if you insist on standing there, growling at one another.'

'Right, yes, we'll just be going. You saw nothing!' Lukas said, slipping towards the doors. He snagged a chunk of meat as he went and took a bite before tossing it to Halvar. 'Eat up, pup. Best to do this sort of thing on a full belly.'

They climbed up into Jarlheim by secret paths and water-logged access corridors. They avoided contact with anyone and everyone, save a few startled thralls and a servitor who watched them blankly.

When they at last reached the great doors that led to the Grimbloods' feasting hall, the sound of celebration beat at the stone of the corridor like the fists of a giant. Halvar hesitated. 'How do we get in there without being seen?'

'We don't,' Lukas said. He hefted his cask onto his shoulder. 'Let's go spoil their fun, shall we?' Without waiting for a reply, he stalked towards the doors and kicked them open. As the boom echoed through the hall, Lukas strode between the tables towards the high seats where the jarl and his thegns sat, Halvar hurrying in his wake. 'Hail, Jarl Grimblood!' Lukas bellowed. 'I see your hair has grown back.'

Warriors heaved themselves to their feet, querulous questions on their lips. Shouts and roars echoed through the hall. At the high table, Grimblood rose, his face thunderous. 'You dare show your face here, after I have cast you out?' he thundered, shaking off a warning hand from Galerunner. Lukas smiled as he caught the Rune Priest's eye. Galerunner didn't look surprised to see him. Maybe the spirits had told him to expect trouble.

‘Did you have any doubt I would?’ he said, letting his burden roll off his shoulder. He wrenched the cask open and poured the body out onto the table. Grimblood let out a snarl of disgust. Lukas caught the corpse’s scalp and pulled its head up so that Grimblood could see it. ‘At least on this occasion I come bearing gifts. See?’

Grimblood leaned forward as silence fell throughout the hall. ‘Where did you find this filth?’ he growled, studying the body.

‘In the high forests, near the edge of the sea.’

‘Impossible.’

‘And yet here they are.’ Lukas sat on the table and tore loose a chunk of meat from a still-steaming platter. He chewed thoughtfully, gesticulating with the bloody bone. ‘And they didn’t come alone. They are probably all over the forests, like vermin in the rutting season.’ He gestured, and Halvar emptied his own cask onto the floor.

Galerunner looked troubled. ‘The Helwinter is interfering with the planetary communications array. If they managed to slip past the system fleet...’ He fell silent.

Grimblood growled. ‘They could be anywhere.’ He spun. ‘Gather the jarls. Tell them to meet me in the Chamber of the Annulus.’ He pointed at Lukas. ‘You. Come with me.’

The Chamber of the Annulus sat near the very summit of the Fang. It was the gathering place of the gods, where the Great Wolf and the Wolf Lords came together for their war councils. The chamber was dominated by a great circle of stone panels that spread outwards from its heart. The Grand Annulus represented the organisation of the Chapter, with each panel bearing the sigil of one of the Wolf Lords.

Each of these slabs was as large as a battle-tank, and it took dozens of warriors to lift them when circumstances called for it. Only one lacked any image or marking, and everyone in the chamber steadfastly ignored it. All save Lukas, who chose to stand on it, knowing how uncomfortable it would make everyone else.

It hadn’t taken long for the other jarls to gather. They were grateful for anything that interrupted the tedium. None of them met Lukas’ gaze except Krakendoom, who nodded tersely to him as he entered the chamber.

They growled and snarled over the news he had brought. ‘It is almost impossible to conceive,’ Krakendoom said. ‘They are daring, these xenos.’ He

looked around. ‘What do they gain by testing us so?’

‘What does it matter?’ Redmaw said contemptuously. ‘They dared, so they must die.’ Others growled in agreement.

‘They did the same to Chogoris, long ago,’ Galerunner said. He leaned on his staff. He was the only Rune Priest present, though he spoke for them all. ‘They stole away much from our brothers, whole generations of kin and potential aspirants. We cannot allow that to happen here. Whatever the cost to us, future generations must be preserved.’

‘We must hunt them and dash their brains upon the snow,’ Redmaw roared, slamming his fists on the meeting table. The stone cracked, and he hit it again. ‘Skin them and make totems from their bones.’

‘Redmaw has the right of it,’ Goresson growled. ‘We should loose the packs and sweep them from the hearthworld.’ He looked at Grimblood. ‘You hold the Aett, brother. But howl, and we shall lope forth and make the snow red.’

‘Agreed,’ Grimblood said. He looked around. ‘A full four Great Companies stand ready to defend the hearthworld. But these enemies do not come in the spirit of honest war. They will not allow us to bring them to battle. So we must go hunting.’ He gestured sharply. ‘One company will remain at the Fang, ready to lend aid wherever it might be needed. And to await the moment when communications are once more free of the Helwinter’s grip. The system fleet must be alerted.’

‘And who will that be?’ Redmaw growled. Lukas could tell he was already readying himself to argue. The jarl glared about him, stinking of challenge.

‘Me,’ Grimblood said bluntly. ‘Someone must coordinate your efforts. I will do it.’ The other jarls growled their appreciation of the sacrifice. He gestured dismissively. ‘Galerunner is right – nothing matters save the preservation of Fenris and its people. There is glory aplenty in the universe, but only one Fenris.’

‘Well said,’ Krakendoom grunted.

‘For once,’ Redmaw remarked.

Grimblood ignored him. ‘Divide your companies as you see fit. Protect what you can. Avenge what you must. Let no xenos survive our fury. Feed them to the winds and the waves, as befits such filth.’ He heaved himself to his feet. ‘This is our place. Our territory. We shall teach them the folly of stealing meat from the wolf’s jaws.’

Fists struck the table as the Wolf Lords howled their assent. Once a decision was reached, they moved swiftly. They had the scent, and they would follow it

until they tasted blood. Granted, given the foe they were facing, that might take longer than they hoped. Lukas laughed at the thought of Redmaw racing blind through the storm, chasing shadows.

‘You find this amusing, Trickster?’ Galerunner said. He and Grimblood had remained behind when the others dispersed. ‘You think this a fine jest?’

‘And if I do?’ Lukas said.

Galerunner frowned. ‘Innocents will die.’

‘Innocents die every day on this world. You and yours have seen to that.’

‘Enough,’ Grimblood said, before Galerunner could reply. ‘Attend me, Strifeson. I would speak with you, warrior to warrior.’

Lukas hesitated, then stalked after Grimblood. The Wolf Lord led him to the immense firepit that warmed the hall. It was set at an angle against the far wall. During feasts, meat would occasionally be roasted over it. Grimblood stared into the flames. ‘You needle one of your only allies in this citadel.’

‘He is not my ally,’ Lukas said flatly. ‘He serves another.’ He smiled. ‘Did you know it was old Stormcaller who tested my worthiness? The Lord of Runes and the Slayer both have had their snouts in my affairs since the beginning.’

‘And you think you are alone in that?’ Grimblood asked. ‘We are all weighed down by fate, Trickster. We are the heroes of unwritten sagas, and our spirits are marked for greatness. Even yours.’

‘Saw that in your ashes and sparks, then?’

‘When I was a child, I heard voices in the fire,’ Grimblood said softly. ‘Some would scream, and others would sing. I thought the voices had died with the old me. But they came back, twice as loud. The fire has something in it – a power. It raises up, and casts down. More, every fire comes from the same place. It is all connected. And it is those connections that I see.’ He looked up at Lukas. ‘A cascade of moments, the ashes of future fires as yet unlit. I have seen your fire, Lukas.’

Lukas felt a chill run through him. Despite his mockery of Grimblood’s supposed gifts, he knew there was some truth to them.

‘I have seen your wyrd in the flames, Trickster.’

‘I know my wyrd, jarl. And I follow it already.’

‘Even you are not so arrogant as to think you can truly choose your own fate, Strifeson. You play at being outside the skein, as if you have no place. But we both know better, don’t we?’

‘The only thing I know is that I don’t know anything.’

‘Then know this – your thread is soon to be cut short.’ Grimblood didn’t smile

as he spoke, but his eyes glinted merrily. 'I saw your heart burst, in the flames. You will die, and gloriously. Your name will live forever in the halls of the Aett, a hero to those who come after.' He leaned forward, teeth bared in a snarl of satisfaction. 'You will die, and we will forget the Jackalwolf, and remember only the saga of Lukas the hero.'

Lukas glared at him. 'Will you cut my thread yourself, then, jarl?' He spread his arms. 'Come then, cut it. Eat my hearts and scatter my bones to guide you to a more convivial future, if you wish.'

'You are angry, Strifeson. And yet, this is fate.' Grimblood laughed. 'Though it lessens me to admit it, I must say that I am filled with good cheer. I had feared that one of us might snap your neck in a rage, but it seems the Rune Priests were right. You have a mighty wyrd ahead of you, and I think it has finally come around at last.'

Lukas tensed, anger flooding his veins like boiling magma. He wanted to leap and tear, to teach Grimblood a lesson in violence. The kill-urge rose, and his lips peeled back from his teeth. Grimblood continued to laugh, though Lukas knew the Wolf Lord could sense his growing rage. Grimblood swept a hand through the flames, causing them to rise up in strange, crackling shapes.

'It is almost fitting that it comes now, against foes such as these, slippery as they are. They are almost as tricky as you. Perhaps more so. Perhaps you have met your match at last. There is no shame in it. Morkai pads after us all, from the highest to the lowest.'

Lukas grunted and tore his gaze away from the flames. He quashed the kill-urge, forcing it down. His hands curled into fists, and he held them tight to his sides. Grimblood was watching him, his amber gaze reflecting the light of the flames. 'You are trying to prick my pride,' Lukas said. 'To catch me in another trap of words, as you did before.'

'A weapon from your armoury,' Grimblood said. 'Is it working?'

'What do you want of me?'

'I want you tamed, Strifeson.' Grimblood's smile faded. 'I do not hate you, brother. But I do not understand you. You have it in you to be a warrior of renown, fit for service in any jarl's Wolf Guard. Even that of the Great Wolf's company. Grimnar himself has spoken often of your skill. And yet you are content to remain... this.'

Lukas stared into the flames. 'It is my wyrd,' he said after long moments.

Grimblood stared at him. Then he nodded tersely. 'So Galerunner says. And the flames say you will die, and so you must. But there is purpose in death. You

have alerted us to the enemy in our midst, and we will harry them from our lands. *You* will harry them.'

Lukas looked at him. A slow grin spread across his face. 'Me?'

Grimblood nodded. 'I will unleash the packs, yours among them.' He gestured. 'This is my gift to you, on your death-day. Freedom, to run and hunt where you wish. Turn your tricks on them, Jackalwolf. Make them regret the moment they decided to intrude upon our hunting grounds. I think it will mean your doom, but I suspect you will not refuse.'

Lukas laughed. Then he bowed low. 'My thanks, Jarl Grimblood. I shall bring you a scalp-price equal to that boon.'

'I want nothing save word that you have met your wyrd at last.' Grimblood turned away. He motioned towards the doors. 'Go, Lukas. Run while you can, and do as you must. Your doom races to meet you, and I would not see you miss it.'

Halvar was waiting for him outside the chamber. 'You are in one piece,' he said, sweeping greasy locks out of his face. 'Allfather be praised.'

Lukas glanced at the Blood Claw. 'You sound like you mean that, pup.'

Halvar stared at him. 'Why wouldn't I?' He slapped the blade at his hip, making the totems attached to the sheath rattle. 'This is by far the most fun I have had since I passed my trials.' He grinned. 'You have led us a crooked path, Trickster, but it is no bad thing. We all think so.'

'Even Ake?'

Halvar grunted. 'Maybe not Ake. I think he meant to challenge Kadir, before you arrived. But your presence appears to have put him off.' He smiled mirthlessly. 'It would have been a shame if one of them had killed the other.'

Lukas laughed. 'You think it would have come to that?'

Halvar nodded. 'Ake only respects strength. Kadir is too cautious for his liking.'

'And what do you think?'

Halvar shrugged. 'It doesn't matter to me which of them is in charge. So long as it isn't me. Or Dag.' He shook his head. 'I have never fought the eldar before. Is there much glory in it?'

Lukas frowned. 'Some.' He scrubbed at his scalp and glanced back at the chamber. Grimblood's words hung heavy in his mind. Death didn't bother him – Morkai caught up with even the fastest warrior eventually. But the thought of his death becoming just another saga to feed the Rout's ego was a hard one. 'We

won't learn from this, you know. We will win, because we can do no less. But every victory comes with a cost, and it is a bit steeper every time. We boast of Fenris' sovereignty, of how enemies fear to come against us. And yet here they are, raiding us at their leisure.'

'And we will punish them for that arrogance.'

'Not all of them. They'll run, because that's what they do. And we'll claim we defeated them. We'll howl a song of triumph, and forget everything else.'

Halvar sighed and played with his totems. 'You might be right, for what it's worth. We are arrogant, and we never seem to learn the lessons the Allfather tries to teach us.' He tapped a set of rune-etched fangs. 'We are humbled again and again, and every time we climb back up onto the pedestal.' He looked at Lukas. 'But did you ever wonder if that was the true lesson?'

Lukas was silent for long moments. Then he laughed. 'We chase weighty prey, my brother. It will feed us well, if we catch it.'

Halvar snorted. 'When.'

Lukas clapped him on the back. 'Spoken like a true son of Russ. Let's go.'

'Aren't we going to rejoin the others?' Halvar asked as he followed Lukas down the corridor.

'Yes, but one stop first.'

'Stop?'

'The armoury, Halvar. If we are going hunting, we will need the proper equipment.'

Every Great Company had its own armoury, and the Grimbloods were no different. It was located through a narrow cleft cut into the substance of the Hould. The augurs in Lukas' battle-plate noted the heat of rerouted power conduits, and his autosenses compensated automatically for the spillage of steam that hung thick in the air. He detected faint tremors in the walls and floor, the echoes of tectonic upheaval.

Hidden sensors flickered to life as they passed through the cleft, scanning them and taking note of the identity signatures of their battle-plate. A set of heavy iron doors shuddered back into rough slots cut into either side of the cleft. A well-lit stone chamber waited beyond. Racks and rows of weapons in partial states of repair were visible. Purifying incense spewed from small grates, filling the air with a thick, sweet fug.

Metal clanked, and a pair of gun-servitors trudged into view from behind the racks. The hulking automatons had been men, once. Now, condemned for some unknown crime, they were twisted out of shape by hundreds of cybernetic

modifications designed to increase strength and durability. Halvar grunted in disgust. ‘Russ’ bones,’ he growled, reaching for the hilt of his blade. Lukas caught his wrist.

‘Don’t. It’s fine.’

The servitors stared at the two Blood Claws with blank looks devoid of interest or intent. Their flesh was dry and papery, stretched over cabled artificial muscle. Each bore a pair of assault cannons hardwired into their enhanced frames. Ammunition feeds dangled like purity scrolls, clacking softly as the servitors approached. Laser sights flickered from the targeting arrays that clung like barnacles to their heads. The red beams traced erratic patterns across the flat panes of Halvar’s armour.

‘Ho, Thymr, we come in need of good steel,’ Lukas called out. ‘Call off your guardians, Iron Priest, or I’ll do something destructive.’ He flexed his claw meaningfully.

A sharp whistle echoed through the armoury. The gun-servitors halted and sank to their haunches in a chorus of whining servos. The barrels of their assault cannons swung upwards and their targeting arrays went dark. Lukas glanced at Halvar. ‘See? It’s fine.’

Halvar didn’t take his hand off the hilt of his blade. ‘I don’t like the way they are looking at us,’ he said.

‘They’re not looking at you, pup. I am.’ Thymr had a voice like stones falling into a well. There was a faint mechanical burr to his words, the result of an augmented larynx. He stalked into view from behind his servitors, tugging idly on his black beard. He wore heavily modified battle-plate, and the thick cog-wheel limbs of a servo-harness flexed and turned over his shoulders.

The Iron Priest was young, as the Vlka Fenryka judged such things, and part of his skull gleamed chrome. A cybernetic eye whirred and clicked, scanning Lukas and Halvar. He tapped the metal part of his skull. ‘Slaved sensor feed. I see what they see. They shoot what I tell them to shoot.’ He paused. ‘For the moment, that’s not you. What do you want?’

‘Weapons.’

‘You have them, unless I’m going blind.’

‘More weapons,’ Lukas clarified. ‘Grenades, ammunition, spare blades, energy packs... that sort of thing.’

Thymr’s organic eye narrowed. ‘Why?’

‘I know you’re patched into the Aett’s vox-array. You must have heard – we have visitors. I would throw them a feast of welcome, with all the finest fruits of

your forges.’ Lukas grinned widely and bent to examine one of the racks of weapons. He hefted a boltgun and peered down the length of the barrel. ‘A few of these as well, maybe. Do you still have those noise suppressors you were toying with?’

Thymr frowned. ‘You sound as if this celebration is to be a private one.’

‘So my jarl has commanded, and so I will obey.’

Thymr guffawed. ‘Those are words I never thought to hear from your lips.’

Lukas set the bolter back on the rack. ‘And yet they have been said. I go to war. I need steel. I would prefer yours, for it has never failed me.’

‘And why should I give you anything, Trickster?’

‘You owe me, brother.’ Lukas paused. ‘For Fenksworld, remember? When I pulled you out from under the claws of the genestealers?’

Thymr touched his throat, frowning. ‘Fine. But we’re even.’

Lukas laughed. ‘I saved you from more than one xenos, Thymr. There were at least four of them.’ He held up three fingers. ‘That will be three more favours owed, by my count. And I—oh, that looks interesting.’ He turned towards a suspensor plinth, where an object floated in a state of partial disassembly. ‘What is this beauty, Thymr? Is it something to make a loud noise with?’

Lukas leaned forward. The object was roughly the size of an Adeptus Astartes’ heart and the shape of an egg. Multiple plates of thin metal floated about a core detonator and several mechanisms he didn’t recognise.

Thymr growled in warning. ‘Don’t touch it. It’s a stasis bomb. Or it will be, once I have finished reassembling it.’

Lukas blinked in surprise.

‘What’s a stasis bomb?’ Halvar asked, staring at it wonderingly.

‘What do you think, pup?’ Thymr growled. ‘An explosive. But of a type not mass-produced since the Dark Age of Technology.’ Thymr smiled grimly. ‘When it explodes, it emits a disruptive field of unquantifiable energy, halting the flow of time for everything within the blast radius. The effects last anywhere from a few moments to forever.’

‘And where did you get one?’ Lukas asked. ‘The last I heard, the Lion’s sons were the only ones who knew how to build these things. And the Dark Angels are not the sort to share their secrets, especially with us.’ Lukas traced a claw-tip across the suspensor field, eliciting a snarl from Thymr.

‘As if I’d ask one of those arrogant, pox-ridden eunuchs. No, my servitors scraped it up off some thrice-damned battlefield we shared with those green-armoured whoresons. The detonator failed – the device never activated. They

must have left it.' Thymr sniffed. 'Their loss is our gain.'

'If you can ever get it to work,' Lukas said, glancing at him. 'Which you haven't yet, have you?'

Thymr glared at him. 'What of it?'

Lukas laughed. 'Merely making conversation, brother.' He turned away from the stasis bomb with a final tap to the suspensor field.

'Now, how about those weapons?'



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

STAMPEDE

641.M41

Archon Kas'queil grinned toothily as he strode across the ice. He followed the river's frozen undulation, his fur cloak flaring in his wake. The wind pulled at him, but he ignored it. He had faced stronger winds and endured colder temperatures than this planet boasted. As master of the Red Seed Kabal, he had sown terror across a thousand worlds and harvested the fruits of that labour accordingly.

He had walked the *thyllian* ai-kelethril – the path of shards – with undisputed grace for centuries without number. His skills were indisputable. The facets of his armour were black with the inscribed names of those who had fallen to his blade in honour-duels and assassinations. The weapons he carried had been torn from the grasp of his predecessor, as was tradition, and refitted to suit his needs.

Around him, his warriors moved with lethal grace, laughing and making light of their prey. Crooked, scaly hunting beasts – the best money could buy – loped ahead of them, their fang-studded jaws wide with hunger. The mon-keigh were fleeing across the ice, racing for some perceived safety further downriver. Their path was littered with the dead. He had given the order to wound rather than kill,

and had enjoyed the tantalising spoor of their crude agonies.

There were settlements beyond the river, Kas'queil knew. Not many. The humans lived in isolation, scattered about the heaving flanks of this world of leaden skies and tearing wind. Most seemed to be in a constant state of war, due to lack of resources. Possibly made worse by the unpredictability of the season.

They were ideal prey, in that regard. Too primitive to be of any threat, and too vicious to flee when they caught wind of what lurked in the dark. Instead, they fought. And were duly broken. Kas'queil took joy in that labour. He regarded it as something of a duty – who better than a trueborn son of the Eternal City to teach the chattel their place?

He had burned two settlements so far, driving the survivors on ahead of him. Inevitably they would lead him to a third lair, where he would repeat the entertaining process. He intended to do so until tedium replaced titillation.

Thus the humans fled and the dark eldar followed. Always at a distance, but ever in sight of the mon-keigh stragglers. Kas'queil wanted them to be seen. Needed it. The fear was intoxicating, the growing despair and the muted resignation... exquisite.

Seeing little danger from such brute prey, Kas'queil had decided to disembark from his personal Raider with his warriors and their hunting beasts. All the better to enjoy their prey's desperation as it fled. The skiff floated in the wake of his forces. 'Such tenacity is almost impressive, is it not, Th'tysh?' he said, glancing at his subordinate.

The dracon, clad in armour reminiscent of his master's, nodded eagerly. Th'tysh wore the bloody furs of several wolves, hacked less than skilfully from the beasts' bodies. The trophies stank, but the cold moderated the smell somewhat. 'It is as if they cannot conceive of their own doom, my lord,' Th'tysh said cheerfully.

'What can you expect of such primitives?' Kas'queil scoffed. 'Their lives are but the tiniest embers compared to our own roaring flame. It is only right that we consume them and add their miniscule heat to our own.' He spread his arms, laughing. As if in answer to his jocularly, something out in the storm howled. He paid it no mind. Something was always howling on this world. 'I'm glad I decided to accept the Duke's invitation.'

It had come as something of a surprise. He had only met Sliscus once, on some raid or other. He had been impressed, even then, by the Serpent's noble rapacity. It had been a sad day when such a creature had chosen exile. But also fortunate, in many ways. Sliscus' departure had left a sizeable gap in Commorragh's web

of influence. A gap many archons, not just Kas'queil, had attempted to fill.

There was a rumour going around the campfires that this hunt was a way for Sliscus to test the waters for a grand return. Why else would the Lady of the Poisoned Tongue have deigned to attend? Why else would the Harlequins have shown themselves?

But such tales were whispered every few centuries since the Duke had departed Commorrhagh, leaving Port Carmine in flames. Kas'queil didn't waste his time worrying about such things. Let others weave plans that might never see fruition. He would act as his impulses dictated. He might bend knee to the Duke and swear his sword to the Sky Serpent banner. Or he might seek to take Sliscus' head and deposit it at Vect's feet as a token of his fealty.

This reverie was broken by the sudden, dolorous howl of the hunting beasts. The ice shifted beneath him, and several of the creatures lost their balance. Their cries were echoed by deeper, more resonant ones, somewhere on the far shore. He tensed. Sliscus had warned them about the animals here – vicious beasts, whether they ate flesh or not. Kas'queil had paid the warning little mind. He had not come to hunt beasts, after all.

He looked down. The frozen surface of the river was trembling underfoot. 'Why is the ice shaking? Tectonic pressures?' He turned, wondering if he should seek the safety of his Raider. The planet was an unstable backwater. Part of him feared that it might fly apart at any moment.

Th'tysh shook his head. 'We scanned the area. It should be relatively... stable...' He trailed off, and Kas'queil realised that he was staring across the ice, towards the far shore of the frozen river. Other warriors were too, and a murmur ran through their ranks. Something was coming, racing through the snow and mist. The thunder of its approach reverberated up through the soles of his feet and into his chest.

'What... is *that*?' Kas'queil murmured, reaching for his blast-pistol.

A moment later, the first elk burst into sight and onto the ice. The animal was massive. A spread of antlers more impressive than any worn by an archon stretched to either side of its wide skull. The brute outweighed any three kabalite warriors, at least. Kas'queil cursed and drew his weapon, taking aim.

The first elk was joined by a second. Then a third. A fourth and a fifth followed in quick succession. Then more, a whole herd – dozens of the beasts. The air was riven by bugling cries, and hairline cracks ran along the ice ahead of the racing herd as they leapt from the shore and onto the surface of the frozen river. A line of stampeding elk, as far as the eye could see. Or so it seemed from where

Kas'queil stood.

'Kill them,' he snarled. The blast-pistol bucked in his grip, and an elk toppled, its heavy body crashing through the ice. Th'tysh and the others turned their weapons on the beasts, firing with smooth precision. Some animals fell. The ice cracked and cold water sprayed upwards, dampening Kas'queil's good mood.

Their fusillade, while deadly accurate, wasn't doing enough. The beasts were too tough, and the splinter fire wasn't proving instantly fatal. That wasn't what it was for, after all. He turned, seeking the sleek shape of the Raider. The anti-gravity skiff had weapons enough to break up the herd.

But the Raider wasn't there. 'The Raider – where is it?' he asked, grabbing Th'tysh by his furs.

'I–' the dracon began, then there was a crack of thunder and he pitched backwards. Kas'queil looked at the scrap of fur he held, and then at the body on the ground.

'What?'

More thunder. Flashes from within the herd as it charged ever closer. Warriors slumped, or were sent sprawling, bloody craters decorating their armour. The herd was thinning. Something was running with them. He turned to shout a warning, but it was drowned out in the boom of mon-keigh guns.

Kas'queil heard a growl from close by, and sought its source. He squinted, trying to make it out, but he couldn't see more than a vague shape. Its form blurred and wavered like a mirage, there one moment and gone the next. He bit back a curse and fired again, this time at one of his own warriors, who had begun to edge away from the onrushing herd. 'Hold your positions. Are you slaves, to run from mere beasts?'

A moment later, the elk were charging past. The ice bucked and twisted beneath him as the great beasts surged around him. He lost sight of his warriors as well as the fleeing mon-keigh. The world condensed to heaving russet walls and bugling cries. He twitched aside to avoid being buffeted by the creatures.

He caught sight of one of his warriors through the wall of charging beasts. The warrior raised a splinter pistol as if to shoot something, but a moment later, he was gone. Vanished. Kas'queil blinked. Through the omnipresent rumble of the stampede, he heard the crackle of splinter fire and screams. He felt a chill as he realised that the screams were not those of elk, or even mon-keigh.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of slate grey. He turned, and was nearly knocked from his feet by an elk. Snarling in frustration, he fired, knocking the beast prone. As it kicked out the last dregs of life, the rest of the

herd gave it and him a wide berth. Momentarily free of the press, he searched the ice for any sign of what had started the stampede. A clammy mist rose from the crushed surface, obscuring almost everything. Then there was a crunch.

He whirled, blast-pistol raised. The air *twisted*. Something was there, but he couldn't see it clearly. It gave a snarling laugh. He fired, again and again, desperate to hit it, whatever it was. It sped towards him, only revealing itself at the last moment. A grinning, weather-beaten face, a mane the colour of blood and eyes a gleaming yellow.

Startled as he was, Kas'queil had not reached the heights of his infamy by being slow on the draw. He fired again, knowing his opponent would dart aside. He reached for the hilt of his blade, ready to bury it in his attacker's heart when he drew close. Instead, the hulking brute vanished into the herd of elk. A wave of fury washed over him, and he began to fire in a frenzy. Elk died, but their piteous cries only stoked his rage. 'Where are you? Come out and die with some courage!'

'If you insist.'

The words were spoken in the Commorrite tongue. Coarsely, to be sure, but clear enough to understand. That only made it more of an insult.

Insult turned to injury an instant later, cold and sharp at the same time. Kas'queil tried to scream, but only a burst of frigid air emerged from his lungs. He looked down and saw four talon-tips wreathed in cold light jutting from his chest. He lurched forward, tearing himself loose. He sank to his knees, trying to lift his blast-pistol. The claw that had crunched through his chest fastened on the weapon with gentle strength.

'You did insist,' his killer murmured as he twisted the weapon out of Kas'queil's slack grip.

Kas'queil heard his next words as if from a vast distance.

'You have only yourself to blame, if it didn't turn out how you expected.'

Lukas glanced down at the body of the xenos, then examined the pistol he had taken from it, considering. With a snort, he crushed the weapon in his claw and scattered the pieces.

'For a moment I thought you were going to keep it,' Kadir said as he approached.

Lukas patted his plasma pistol in its tooled leather holster. 'I prefer this one.' Besides the pistol, his battle-plate was festooned with grenades and blades.

Kadir was similarly armed. Thymr had been generous, and the Blood Claws

were carrying enough weapons and ammunition for twice their number. Kadir smiled and checked the ammunition drum of his bolter. The weapon had a noise suppressor mounted on its barrel, and had been blackened to dull any glint of metal. ‘A good jape, stampeding those elk the way you did. Better than an armoured spearhead, those brutes.’ He looked down at a dead elk, and his smile faded. ‘Not as durable, though.’

‘No, but they’ll feed the stragglers for days.’ Lukas turned. ‘You heard me,’ he bellowed. ‘Come and get it, you lack-wits. I bring you a bounty, and you huddle on the ice. Maybe I should have let the night-devils take you, eh?’ His voice carried easily despite the muffling effect of the snow.

Slowly, in ones and twos, the tribesfolk straggled towards the bounty. It was more meat than many would have seen in a month. They fell to gutting and readying the carcasses for travel with grim efficiency. Their faces were pinched with hunger and fear. They barely glanced at their protectors – awe had its place, but meat was meat.

He recognised the markings of at least three different tribes, all but hidden beneath thick furs and scale-cloaks. More women than men, more children and greybeards than adults of fighting age. He caught sight of a familiar face among them, moving from group to group. Hetha, clad in bronze armour and furs, her cheeks burned red by the cold, was barking orders to several other Jahtvian warriors.

Lukas watched the red-headed woman at her task, and felt Kadir observing him as he did so. He grunted. ‘The Raider?’ he asked.

‘Dag and Halvar brought it down. It’s already under the ice, and its crew feeding the river’s denizens.’ Kadir smiled slightly. Lukas could imagine what he was thinking. The Trickster had his reputation for good reason.

Lukas grunted. ‘Good.’ He turned his gaze south. ‘The Jahtvian stading is just past the next bend in the river. This is the third column of stragglers we’ve seen heading that way. Most of these folk were blood-enemies a few weeks ago.’

‘Now they’ve got new enemies,’ Kadir said.

Lukas frowned. ‘It won’t last. Nothing lasts. Not on this planet.’ He shook his head. ‘Still, better than the alternative.’

‘We’re ready,’ Ake called out. The pugnacious Blood Claw stomped towards them, kicking aside a dead xenos in his haste. ‘The last of them are dead, but the mortals say there are at least two more packs of them in the area.’ He spat. ‘Not that I trust them to tell one group of xenos from another.’

‘We’re going with them,’ Lukas said, not looking at him.

‘What?’ Ake looked at Kadir. ‘He’s not serious?’ he snarled.

Kadir looked at Lukas. ‘Are you serious?’

‘When am I ever not serious?’ Lukas shrugged. ‘We have a duty, pups. These folk are our life’s blood. They are Fenris. Without them, we are nothing. I will not allow them to be made chattel while I play the fierce hunter.’

‘This is not our duty,’ Ake growled stubbornly. ‘The enemy are out there. We must scour them from the face of this world. That is our duty. That is our purpose.’

‘Others are already doing that and more.’

‘And we should be with them, rather than here!’ Ake was shouting now. He stank of kill-urge and frustration. ‘We should be at the forefront, fighting alongside the rest of our brothers. Instead, you have led us into the wild to pick off isolated foes and shepherd these weaklings to safety.’

Lukas fixed his gaze on Ake. ‘And who are you to call them weak?’

‘I was chosen by the strong.’ Ake slammed a fist against his chest-plate. ‘Look at them – they are cowards. If they are strong, they would have fought. Instead, they flee. They flee these thin, hollow things.’ He stamped on a dark eldar helmet, crushing it, and the head within as well. ‘Why waste time protecting them if they cannot protect themselves?’

‘They are protecting themselves,’ Lukas said softly. ‘They have fought. Can’t you smell the blood on them? The stink of death and sorrow? Look at the wounds, fool.’ He gestured to the mortals. Many, including Hetha, were watching the confrontation now, wide-eyed and uncertain. ‘Would you have them match bronze against hell-forged steel? To what end?’

‘I would have them prove themselves worthy. As I did. As we all did.’ Ake swung out his arms, indicating the other Blood Claws as they drew near. ‘This world – this galaxy – is not for the weak.’

‘If the strong do not fight for the weak, then what is the point?’ Lukas snarled. The words shuddered out over the ice. ‘Victory? Glory? Are you so blind that you cannot tell purpose from desire?’ Two quick steps and he was in Ake’s face. ‘If you want to go, go. I am no jarl, to hold you against your will. I will not tell you where to die, or when. And I will not waste breath explaining why you are wrong, pup.’

‘Trickster. Enough.’ Kadir caught him by the shoulder. ‘Now is not the time.’

Lukas shook him off and turned away. ‘Purpose is not something you are given, Ake. It is something you choose. I choose to help these mortals. I choose to help them survive. You can do as you wish. That is the last I will say of it.’

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dag punch Ake in the shoulder. The Blood Claw whirled, but subsided as he saw the others' expressions. Lukas hid his smile. They were learning. Maybe not Ake, but the others were. He turned his attentions back to the refugees.

Since they had warned the tribes, things had proceeded quickly. Some tribes were suspicious of the Jahtvian envoys. Others thought it a test. As the eldar attacks increased, the survivors sought safety in numbers. More than one tribe had ceased to exist in the days that followed, all but exterminated by laughing shadows.

Lukas and the Blood Claws had done what they could, shepherding the survivors further south. But Ake was right in one respect at least – they couldn't remain on the defensive. The eldar wouldn't engage in open combat if they could help it. They would flee before the Great Companies, scattering on the wind. Grimblood knew that. All the jarls did, for they had fought such creatures before. They hoped to make Fenris more inhospitable than it already was, and so encourage the Raiders to find easier prey. It was a solid plan. Until the storm cleared, they were trapped here.

He looked down. Hetha and several of her warriors had joined him. 'Thank you,' she said, though not so hesitantly as she might once have done.

'What will happen to these?' he asked, indicating the refugees with a jerk of his chin.

'We will make room for them, if we can. We will have to move ourselves, soon. They have been getting closer. The steading isn't safe. Not anymore.' Her voice was flat with resignation. How many generations had the Jahtvians lived at the place where the river was lowest? Enough to call it home. Lukas felt a twinge of something that might have been sympathy.

'The sea,' he said. It wasn't a question. She nodded.

'We will follow the river.'

Lukas glanced at Ake. The Blood Claw had calmed down, but was still glaring about him with obvious impatience. He looked like he needed some cheering up. Lukas smiled. 'Or you could help us make sure that the svartalfar give your steading a wide berth.'

She looked up at him, puzzled.

'I was born under a bad sign,' Lukas said. 'Bound to fail, and die badly. But here I sit, clad in the armour of the gods and wet with the blood of great enemies. The odds were always stacked against me, but I beat them. I make my own path. And so too can you. All of you.' He looked at the mortals, a crooked

grin on his face. 'The thing about the skeins of fate is that, in the end, it's just thread. And if you're clever enough, you can weave it into whatever sort of shape you want.'

'What do you mean?' Hetha asked.

Lukas sniffed the wind. 'If you run, they will follow. They like easy meat, these creatures. If you fight, you might die. But so will they. And if enough of them die, they might realise you are not such easy meat as all that.'

'If you command us, lord, we will fight for you,' Hetha said.

'I will not command you. I am not your lord.' Lukas crossed his arms. 'But I will fight with you, if you choose to do so.'

'And if we choose to flee?' one of Hetha's warriors said.

Lukas smiled. 'Then I will help you hide, of course.' He bowed low. 'I am a champion of sneaks, a master of hiding. Not even the Allfather will find you.'

Hetha opened her mouth to answer, but hesitated. She looked around. 'I must speak with the elders. The tribe must decide.' She looked at him. 'You understand?'

'I do.'

She turned away, her face set. Lukas smiled, watching as she got the refugees moving again. The Jahtvians would feast tonight, to welcome their guests. And tomorrow... well. They would agree. They were of Fenris, and Fenris did not produce cowards. Fools, yes. Liars and lunatics aplenty. But cowards? Never.

Kadir shook his head. The Blood Claw had listened to the exchange in silence. 'This is a foolish idea. They will slow us down.'

'This is their world too,' Lukas said. 'It's only fair to give them the choice.'

'The choice to... what? Die badly, beneath xenos blades?'

'As opposed to dying beneath the blades of another tribe? Or starving to death? Or being eaten by a kraken?' Lukas smiled mirthlessly. 'We are born dead, pup. This planet eats men. Even men like us.' He shook his head. 'I intend to teach the eldar that they are not the fiercest hunters in the galaxy. They are meat. They are weak.'

He grinned. 'And Fenris eats the weak.'

PART THREE

TRICKSTER



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

STRIKE AND FADE

641.M41

Lukas scaled the tree. No easy feat, given the wind, but he managed it. By the time he had reached the top, the fastest of the approaching jetbikes was about to pass below. This one was daring, or just overeager. It had outpaced its fellows by a significant margin, and was shrieking laughter through the voxcasters strapped to the jetbike's keel.

How the rider could even see the mortals struggling through the wind and snows, Lukas couldn't say. Some form of sensory apparatus built into its helmet, perhaps, or maybe it could simply smell their anguish. Either way, it was distracted by the sight of its prey and hadn't noticed him. Perfect.

Hetha and her warriors were playing their part to perfection. They had growled a bit when he explained what he needed, but they had seen the method in his madness. The dark eldar sought prey, so prey he gave them. He had led them into avalanches, wolves' lairs and booby traps. Even now, the Raider that followed these outriders was drifting through the trees below. The skiff was using its armoured prow to smash aside trees, its crew arrogant enough to assume there was nothing in the forest that could threaten them.

He counted under his breath. The explosion was slightly early, by his count. It ripped through the forest, sending up a plume of smoke. Frag and Krak grenades synched to motion detectors. He imagined the look on the helmsman's face as the Raider slid prow-first into a firestorm, and chuckled. Below him, the Reaver glanced back as it was about to pass the tree.

Lukas leapt. His armour's servos hummed confidently as he pierced the snow-tossed winds like a bolt shell. He crashed into the jetbike, laughing wildly as he drove an elbow into the rider's skull, pulping it. The body spun away into the growing torrent. Lukas slid into the seat, growling as the jetbike strained beneath his weight. Even so, he managed to wrench it around so that it hurtled back towards the others. The controls were more complex than anything he had seen before, but he had enough wit to get it moving in the right direction. 'Let's see what this toy can do, eh?' he growled to himself.

From the way the jetbike was dipping and shuddering, he knew it wasn't long for the world – his mass had thrown its delicate stabilisers out of alignment, and the whole thing was about to fly apart. Teeth bared, he hunched forward and opened what he hoped was the throttle as far as it could go. The wind screamed past him as the distance between him and his prey closed. They had only just begun to realise that something was wrong when he was among them. At the last moment, he leapt, leaving the jetbike to pinwheel into the pack.

The soles of Lukas' boots hit the frontal canopy of another Reaver. The jetbike sank beneath his sudden weight, and the rider squalled in startled outrage, the reflected glare of the explosion washing across its ornate helmet. Lukas tore its head from its shoulders before vaulting away. Instinctive velocity calculations shot through his mind, and he angled his body towards another Reaver.

Unfortunately, his calculations proved to be off. He struck the canopy with his shoulder and scrabbled off, unable to do more than tear a chunk from its anti-grav motors with his claw as he spun away. He plummeted towards the treetops below, joined a moment later by the jetbike and its rider. It slammed into a tree and ricocheted away, its damaged engine whining like a wounded animal.

Lukas lashed out, the talons of his claw digging into rough bark. Splinters stabbed his bare face as he slid down, slowing his descent with his hands and heels. The tree swayed alarmingly beneath him as the damaged jetbike exploded, lashing his back with heat. He heard the shriek of the others plunging after him.

He had got their attention, as he had intended. The rest was up to Kadir and Dag. Ake and the others were seeing to the Raider and any stragglers.

As he touched ground, a jetbike plunged down through the branches and

whipped him off his feet, its keelblade gouging a line of sparks across his shoulder-plate. He rolled across the snow, cursing. There was just enough room here beneath the trees that they could manoeuvre. 'Should have thought this through a bit better,' he muttered. He rolled onto his back, drawing his plasma pistol.

As a second Reaver shrieked overhead, winding between the trees, he fired. It was moving so swiftly that the blast only tagged one of its bladevanes. That was enough, however, to send it careening full tilt into a tree. The explosion banished the shadows beneath the branches and illuminated him. The remaining Reavers swept towards him, darting between the trees with impossible aerobic skill.

Lukas shoved himself to his feet and began to run. He tapped the comm-bead in his ear. 'Any time now, pups,' he snarled.

'This was your idea,' Kadir replied over the vox-channel.

'Don't remind me,' Lukas snapped. 'Just shoot them before they stick one of those wing-blades up my—'

'Go flat!'

Lukas dropped to the ground, hands over his head. Ahead of him, Kadir and Dag stepped from behind a knot of trees and opened up with boltgun and pistol. The approaching Reavers were caught head on, and a moment later their flaming wreckage ploughed into the snow to either side of Lukas. Lukas pushed himself up and looked around. 'Is that all of them?'

'Looks like,' Kadir said, trudging towards him. The light of the fire was reflected in the eyepieces of his helmet. He extended his hand and hauled Lukas to his feet. 'Ake reported in a few moments ago. There wasn't much left of the Raider.'

'And the crew?'

Dag laughed gutturally. Lukas nodded in satisfaction. 'Good. We'll make camp. Give Hetha and her warriors a chance to rest. And I'll find us new targets.'

'How many have we killed so far?' Dag asked. He had some new scars to go with his old ones, and his battle-plate was marked with new kill tallies. The Blood Claws were in competition with one another. So far Ake was in the lead, but Dag wasn't far behind.

'Not enough,' Lukas said, kicking a piece of wreckage out of his path. He could hear wolves howling somewhere in the forest. The beasts were eating well off the Rout's leavings. 'Come on. Let's go find the mortals before something eats them.'

They made camp in the lee of an old stone palisade, now mostly crumbled. The bones of thousands of such ancient fortifications dotted Asaheim. Elsewhere, they would have long since been washed away by the sea or swallowed up by the convulsing earth. But here they remained, grave markers for forgotten peoples.

The mortals stretched cured hides over and out from the stones, making lean-tos to shelter within. They crouched around small cooking fires, wrapped in thick furs, their weapons close to hand. So far, Lukas had managed to keep them out of the fighting. He hoped it would remain that way, though he knew they wouldn't thank him for it. Especially Hetha.

He smiled, watching her berate one of her warriors. 'You were too slow, Alaric,' she said. 'You nearly got us all caught in that last ambush.' The youth bristled and began to rise, a mutinous expression on his face.

'I am tired of running, Hetha. I am tired of playing the fearful prey. You must tell the Varagyr to let us fight! How can they deny us the right to prove our worth?'

Hetha booted him in the chest, and he tumbled out from under the lean-to, into the snow. He came to his feet, his mouth open. Hetha had the broken tip of her sword to his throat an instant later. 'That they allow us to join this hunt at all is a great honour. If you wish for more, ask them yourself.' She gestured to where Lukas and Kadir sat, some distance away. 'Go on. We'll watch from over here.'

Alaric looked at the two Space Marines. Lukas waved genially. Alaric swallowed and turned away. Hetha snorted and sheathed her sword. 'Get back to the fire before you freeze what's left of your manhood off,' she said, not unkindly. Alaric did as she bade, his cheeks flushing as the other tribesmen shared a laugh at his expense.

Hetha joined them. 'He meant no offence, Laughing One,' she said softly. 'Do not think ill of him.'

Lukas smiled at her. 'I don't. He is right. We are keeping you from the fight. Perhaps unjustly.' He shrugged. 'But that is our task.'

Kadir snorted. Lukas shot him a hard look. He turned back to Hetha, who was looking back and forth between them in confusion. Lukas stood, shaking off the snow that had collected on his shoulder-plates. She stepped back, paling slightly. Even after several days in close proximity, the mortals were still somewhat in awe of their transhuman guardians. He reached out and brushed the snow from her head. 'You should get back to the fire. It's only going to get colder.'

He watched her go, conscious of Kadir's eyes on him. 'Something on your

mind?’

The Blood Claw looked away. ‘Nothing I care to share, brother.’

Lukas peered at him, trying to read his expression. As if aware of this, Kadir reached down and unclamped his helmet from where it hung. He slid it on. ‘I’m going to make a perimeter sweep. You should be finding our next target.’

‘Dag is seeing to the perimeter,’ Lukas said.

‘Which is why I’m going to make the sweep.’

Lukas laughed. He sat back down, his battle-plate creaking slightly as he settled onto the stone he was using as a seat. The snow fell more heavily as night drew on. The wind raced through the trees, carrying rain and sleet. He turned his face up so that he could feel the stinging precipitation. The Helwinter was almost done. The great thaw had commenced, Fenris drawing close to the sun once more.

He pressed a discreet rune on his vambrace and opened one of the many hidden ports on his armour. From within, he retrieved a portable holoslate. It was a thin, flat scrap of metal, barely larger than a data-spike. He had borrowed the device from a Mechanicus magos. At some point he might even return it to its owner, if he was ever in that sector again. The device was synced to the Aett’s datacore, and when he activated it, information began to crawl across the hololithic display. Some of it was in binary, but the rest was in the more familiar runes of inter-Chapter communications or High Gothic characters. He tapped the comm-bead in his ear and activated his cochlear vox-implant.

As if in defiance of the storm, the Chapter vox-net crackled with activity, the voices of jarls and thegns reporting in from across the planet. The Rout might be trapped on Fenris, thanks to the Helwinter, but the eldar were trapped with them.

There were other sounds as well – snatches of whispered voices and cackles of laughter. As if some unseen audience were listening in and finding it all to be quite amusing. Lukas ignored those. He had heard worse, wandering about a ship during a warp-transit.

Wherever the xenos were spotted, the Wolves soon arrived. The enemy were Raiders rather than invaders, and had not come prepared for war. In most cases, they sought to flee. The question was, where? He called up a planetary grid display on the holoslate.

Lukas studied the flickering cartographic holo-projection, tracing the reported sightings, trying to find the source. Every pack had its leader. Kill them, and the others would be easy meat. But the eldar were taking full advantage of the storm, using its interference to hide themselves from sensor sweeps. Constantly on the

move, riding the wind. It was almost funny, in its way. The strategy was similar to that employed by most of the Raider-clans who prowled the Savage Sea. Strike and fade, taking only what they could carry. Everything else was put to the torch.

They were fast – faster than the Rout even, which was a rarity – both in speed and reaction time. They had come prepared. Some were using false sensor bursts to hide their trails. Others employed mimetic baffles or phantom generators to seed the area with photonic mirages, confusing the eyes of their pursuers.

‘We’re being led by the nose,’ Lukas muttered.

‘What?’ Kadir joined him. Lukas started. He hadn’t heard the Blood Claw come back. He glanced towards the mortals’ camp and saw that the fire was burning low. They were asleep. He had been staring at the maps for longer than he had thought.

‘Did you spot something?’ Lukas asked.

Kadir removed his helmet. ‘I thought I did. I heard something, like laughter, and saw a flash of colour. But it was gone before I could catch up to it. I thought for a moment that it was you, playing a joke. But here I find you, muttering to yourself.’ He shook his head.

‘Not muttering. Plotting.’ Lukas gestured, causing the image to flash and expand. ‘Look at this. See these markers? These are encampments. Someone is using our environment against us. Whoever is in charge of these creatures is playing games with us.’

‘Encampments?’ Kadir leaned close. ‘How can you tell?’

Lukas peered at him. ‘An Inquisitor of my, ah, acquaintance taught me much about these creatures. Lovely woman. Strong principles. Good moral fibre.’

‘Since when did you know an Inquisitor?’

‘I locked her in a grox breeding pen. She had a sense of humour, that one.’ He shook his head. ‘Not important, I suppose. Still, she taught me a bit. Never know what might come in handy.’ He looked back at the image. ‘He’s smart, this one. Sneaky.’

‘Who?’

‘Whoever is in charge of this.’ Lukas tapped the display. ‘Their leader.’

‘You sound as if you admire him. It.’

Lukas was silent. Kadir stared at him. ‘You do, don’t you? You admire this filth.’

‘You have to admit, as jests go, this is a good one.’ He laughed. ‘He’s using the planet – *our* planet – against us. It’s like bashing someone over the head with

their own whetstone. That won't stop me from feeding him his own liver, when we come to it.' He hiked a thumb at the trees. 'Those jetbikes we destroyed were short-range vehicles. They had to come from somewhere.'

Kadir grunted. From his expression, Lukas could tell he hadn't thought about it. 'Yes, but to make camp here... Why do that, save as the prelude to an invasion?'

'This is a hunt, Kadir. And there is a hunt master. A guiding mind. I intend to take that mind and make it howl.' Lukas' smile was wide. 'Let Grimblood and the others race back and forth, chasing shadows. We'll go for the head and heart.'

'Just us,' Kadir said. 'You, me and the others. Oh, and a few scruffy mortals. This has all the makings of a wonderful plan, Trickster. Do go on.'

'They've set up encampments – hunting camps. Hidden from our sensors, obviously. They're good at hiding, this filth. But there is a central camp. And that is where the one in charge will be.'

'How do you know?' Kadir growled.

Lukas shrugged. 'Unlike you, I have fought them before. They travel by strange routes, and it's always the same. Whichever one is in charge stays close to whatever hole they wriggled out of. It's almost as if they don't trust each other.' He chuckled harshly. 'Given what I've learned of their society, I don't blame them.'

Kadir shook his head. 'I'm surprised you know anything about them at all.'

'And why shouldn't I?' Lukas' expression turned serious. 'You should always study your prey, pup.' He tapped a claw-tip against Kadir's chest-plate. 'And another thing I know is that they will have some method of communicating with one another.'

'And you think to use that to triangulate the location of the main camp.'

Lukas nodded, pleased that the Blood Claw had grasped the idea so quickly. 'What do you think of my plan now?'

'It's still a fool's dream.' Kadir smiled thinly. 'But we are Blood Claws. How do we find one of these camps of yours?'

Lukas grinned. 'Simple. We ask.'

Duke Sliscus studied the conflicting reports with growing irritation. The mon-keigh had somehow been alerted to their presence. Now they raced to and fro across the planet's surface, chasing his guests. Not an unexpected occurrence, but an unwelcome one. Thankfully, the storm was keeping the humans' aerial support safely grounded. They lacked the skill to navigate such strong winds.

His own corsairs had no such difficulty, though the same could not be said for some of his guests.

Already casualties were starting to come in. No one important, but they complained nonetheless. As if this were a pleasure outing rather than a raid. Annoyed, he tossed the dataslates aside. 'If I had known it was going to be this much trouble, I might not have done this.' He pushed himself to his feet and strode to the prow of the Raider.

Despite the difficulties, things were going according to plan. The mon-keigh system fleet was being run ragged by his ships, drawn from one end of the system to the other. Unable to contact the planet, they had no idea that they were being led by the nose. The moment that changed, it would be time to depart, and swiftly.

'This affair is fast coming to an end. The fires dim, the songs fade.' Sliscus watched the pict-feed as it flickered across the screens. 'Soon we must depart this shadowed vale and seek softer lands.'

'Almost poetic,' Malys said. 'There is talk.'

'About my poems?'

'No.'

'Pity.' Sliscus looked at her. 'What, then?'

Malys tapped her fan against the rail. 'A plot.'

Sliscus gave a bark of laughter. 'Against me? That's more like it. Who is it?'

'Your servants.'

Sliscus smiled. 'Myrta, you mean.'

'And your fleshweaver.'

'Jhynkar,' he said flatly.

'Is that his name? I find it impossible to remember such inconsequential details.'

Sliscus snorted. 'It doesn't surprise me. He is quite insignificant, on the whole. I was paid to take him aboard.' He paused. 'Do you think they want him back?' He gestured dismissively. 'No matter. They can have him, if they wish. He is not my prisoner.'

'Have you told him that?'

Sliscus shrugged. 'If he had half the wit he claims to possess I wouldn't need to. Just as you should know that this is a poor bargaining tactic. You have spoiled my fun, Aurelia. For shame.'

Malys laughed. 'Only you would consider such plots to be entertaining.'

'Well, me and one other. Three of us together, if you include yourself.' He

grinned sharply and turned back to the screens. 'Why bother to tell me?'

'I need you alive.'

'I thought we had already reached an agreement to disagree regarding that matter.' Sliscus snapped his fingers, and a slave hurried forward, carrying a goblet on a tray. Sliscus snatched the goblet up and took a swig. He spat the liquid over the rail with a hiss of disgust. 'Poisoned. And not one of my usual ones.' He glared at her. 'Your doing?'

She hid her smile behind her fan. 'Just a test.'

He flung the goblet into the hapless slave's face and wheeled to face her. 'You are abusing my hospitality, Aurelia.' He wagged a chiding finger at her. 'I have no interest in playing the revolutionary, as I said. I have my place, and I am content.'

'What, playing the Tyrant's privateer?' Malys glared daggers at him. 'What would all those dashing young blades think if I told them the truth of the daring Duke? That he is just another of Vect's play pretties, with no more will than the lowliest slave.'

Sliscus clapped, slowly. 'Are you done?'

'No. You are a fool. You think yourself safe? You are anything but.'

'Oh, I am well aware of that. Vect will truly seek to rid himself of me the moment my fame eclipses his own and I become a threat rather than an amusement. And then, and only then, will I strike.' He shook his head. 'I am not a schemer like you, Aurelia. I am cunning, yes. And clever. But I do not have the patience for plots and schemes.'

Malys was about to reply when a soft chime from his sensor feeds sounded. Sliscus waved her to silence and went to the displays. He grunted as the information crawled across the screen. 'Odd.' Another pack of hunters gone, swallowed up by this world. His scouts had found wreckage, but little else. There had been other, comparable incidents, scattered over the past few days. He studied the screen, wondering if there truly was a pattern. If there was, then there might yet be a bit more fun to be had on this dreary world.

Malys leaned forward. 'What is it, Traevelliath?'

He looked at her, wondering how much to tell her. After a moment, he gestured. 'I find myself in need of your wisdom, my lady. Give me the benefit of your keen eye, Aurelia.'

She stood warily and joined him. She peered at the data. After a moment, she frowned. 'Well,' he murmured. 'What do you see?'

Her smile was cold, and razor sharp. 'Only the obvious, Traevelliath. Someone

is hunting the hunters.’



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KRAKENBAIT

641.M41

Lukas climbed the outcropping, trusting the weather and his doppelgangrel pelt to hide him from view. The elk he carried over his shoulders twitched and flopped as the bloodlice nesting within it stirred. They sensed his body heat and were growing hungry. Which was all to the good.

The fire down below flickered wildly. It had been built in the lee of the crag, out of the weather. An eldar Venom sat nearby, its anti-gravity generators keeping it from being rolled by the wind. Its four crewmen crouched around the fire, laughing harshly as they played with their food. The Blackmane wolf snarled where it crouched at the edge of the fire, held in place by a barbed lash wrapped around its throat.

The harder the beast struggled, the deeper the barbs dug into its flesh. Blood coated its flanks. Despite the pain, it bit vainly at the lash, trying to pull itself free. The eldar prodded and whipped the animal, enjoying its struggles. The wolf howled mournfully.

Lukas reached the summit of the outcropping and lifted the elk. He paused, calculating the distance and angle. He felt the hairs on his neck prickle, and his

calculations ceased as he froze, suddenly alert. For an instant, he felt as if he were being watched. Not an unfamiliar sensation on Fenris, but this was different.

And as quickly as it came, it vanished.

Perturbed, he tossed the carcass down, onto the Venom. The sound of it striking the skimmer was loud, despite the howling of the wolf and the storm. The eldar spun, shouting and cursing, then fell back screaming as the bloodlice erupted and swarmed over them.

Lukas leapt. He dropped down into the camp and lunged for the trapped wolf. He severed the barbs that held the beast and stepped aside, allowing it to leap past him and onto the closest of the eldar. The xenos squalled as it was borne backwards into the fire by the furious animal. Lukas whistled sharply, and was answered by a series of howls from all around him. Kadir and the others burst from the snow, hemming the startled eldar in.

‘I want them alive,’ Lukas bellowed. He caught the eldar’s wrist and jerked the xenos off balance. Augmented muscle tensed and his punch nearly collapsed the creature’s sternum. He sank down, wheezing. Lukas quickly stripped the alien’s weapons from him – the visible ones, at least – and began to bind him with the rawhide thongs he carried for that very purpose. As he worked, he watched his pack fall on the remaining two eldar.

Eldar were good fighters, vicious and unpredictable. But it wasn’t enough. The two remaining xenos warriors were quickly knocked sprawling, their weapons and limbs broken. The xenos were swiftly bound and dragged to the fire. The Blackmane had dragged its kill some distance away and was busy gorging itself. Lukas watched the wolf devour the eldar and smiled.

‘Why spare these creatures? They deserve death.’ Ake spat the words as Lukas turned. The Blood Claw activated his chainblade for emphasis and held the grinding teeth perilously close to one of the bound aliens. ‘Let me kill them, Strifeson.’

‘I want to question them.’

‘I doubt they speak Gothic,’ Kadir said dubiously. Lukas grinned.

‘Why should that matter?’ He looked down at the xenos. ‘Tell me what I want to know, and I won’t kill you,’ he said in passable Commorrite. If the eldar were surprised that Lukas spoke their tongue, they didn’t show it.

‘Tell me where your camp is. I know it’s close.’ He leaned in, the tips of his talons tap-tapping against his knee. One of them looked as if it were about to answer. Instead it spat on the ground. Lukas sighed, drew his plasma pistol and

fired. As the now-headless body slumped, Lukas turned to the other two survivors. 'Tell me,' he repeated. 'Tell me and I won't kill you.' One of the eldar cursed at him. Lukas holstered his weapon and drove one of his talons through the eldar's chest, killing it.

He dragged the body close, and drew his combat blade. 'I guess we'll do this the old-fashioned way,' he grunted as he began to saw at the top of the xenos' skull. When he had opened it up, he carefully scooped out the brain and began to eat.

It wasn't the sort of trick he normally indulged in, but it was effective. As he swallowed the chunks of spongy meat, the artificial nerve bundles in his stomach wall absorbed the genetic information contained in the cerebral matter. His mind was lit by flashes. Images, mostly, but scents and sounds too. Most of it was unpleasant, even by his standards. These creatures indulged in monstrosity the way he might drain a tankard of mjod.

Lukas was a warrior of the Rout. He had killed thousands with his own hands, waded through seas of gore, burst eyes with his thumbs and bit out the throats of his foes. He had pulped flesh and pried loose bones. He had sent high-velocity explosive shells singing into packed ranks of enemy soldiery, and laughed as they were reduced to screaming ruin. He had killed when, where and who the Allfather dictated, and sometimes those foes had been less worthy than the sagas made out.

Nothing he had ever done could be compared to the litany of horrors that now flooded his mind. But he kept eating, until it was all gone. When he was done, he sank back on his heels, processing what he needed. He blinked, trying to arrange his thoughts. At last, he said, 'I think I have it.'

'What about the last one?' Kadir asked as Lukas stood, wiping his mouth.

Lukas glanced at the Blackmane. The wolf stared hungrily at the remaining xenos, and the eldar was beginning to look panicked.

'Fenris eats the weak,' he said.

Several hours later, as slate grey clouds crawled across the sky, Lukas lay flat on an unmoving floe of ice on the edge of a basin lake. The eldar's memories fluttered faintly against his thoughts, growing less distinct with every passing moment. Soon they would be gone entirely. But he had learned what he needed to know.

The mountains rose around him, and the forest pressed close to the edge of the lake. The lake was large, filling the entirety of what had once been an impact

crater. Ice rose in rugose patterns across the surface. The basin was squeezed by tectonic pressures, and as the waters below surged, so too did the ice, to split, rise and freeze solid once more. Beyond the pale convolutions was an eerie shimmer, like the aurora that sometimes cascaded across the skies above the Aett.

He heard the scrape of ceramite on the ice behind him. Lukas pointed towards the glow. 'There. See that flicker on the ice? It's a camp. They have erected a mimetic field to hide themselves.'

'So it is,' Kadir said as he crawled up beside Lukas. He didn't sound entirely convinced. 'The others are in place. What now?'

'There'll be a communications array of some sort in there. I intend to take it. We can use it to find the rest.'

Kadir grunted. 'Just the six of us?'

'That should be more than enough.'

'That's a bad plan. It may well mean our death,' Kadir said.

Lukas rolled over and rose into a crouch. 'Death isn't written, pup. It isn't some story in a book, inviolate and unchanging. It is sudden, and always too soon.' He nodded towards the distant shimmer. 'Grimblood might think I'm destined to die, but I'll damn well do so on my own terms. And I've decided to die cutting the head off the snake.'

Kadir peered at him. 'You're just doing this to spite Grimblood, aren't you? To steal the honour of victory from him.'

Lukas laughed. 'We'll take that camp and use what we find out to strike the others. Go for their throat, while Grimblood and the others distract them.' He clapped Kadir on the shoulder. 'Cheer up. It will be glorious.' He activated his vox-implant. 'Ake?'

'Are you finished chewing whatever bone of contention was occupying you?' Ake voxed in reply. The Blood Claw sounded impatient. Lukas smirked.

'A good meal takes time, Ake. Are you in position?'

'When do we attack?'

'I'll take that as a yes. As soon as you see the signal.'

'What signal?'

'You'll know it when you see it. Vox silence from here.' He cut the channel, more to silence Ake's frustrated growling than out of any worry of detection.

'You shouldn't bait him,' Kadir murmured.

'It would help if he didn't snap it up so readily.' Lukas checked his plasma pistol. It had a full charge. 'Ready?'

Kadir rose to one knee and checked the load of his bolter. ‘Would it matter if I said no?’ Then, a moment later, ‘I’ll take the left.’

‘I’ll take the right. Stay alert, pup.’

‘Try not to get killed, Strifeson.’

‘I wouldn’t give Grimblood the satisfaction.’ Lukas sprang off the floe and landed on the ice proper. It creaked beneath him, the surface cracking and reforming in moments. He moved swiftly, if carefully, taking advantage of the thrusting ridges of ice. He knew Kadir would be doing the same on the opposite side.

From what he had learned from their captive, he knew there weren’t many eldar in this camp. A few dozen, all belonging to one particular kabal. They were worse than Fenrisians when it came to cooperating – which made things easy.

He pulled his doppelgangrel pelt closer about him as he sneaked through the ice. The oily furs bent the light around him in strange ways, twisting even his shadow out of proportion. If he moved right, he was all but invisible. It was like a dance, of sorts, one he had learned through trial and error. The cracking of the ice, the whine of the wind, it was all the music that he danced to. He twisted and shuffled, scrambling across the ice. Never stopping, even when a Venom howled overhead, racing back to the camp.

Lukas leapt into the vehicle’s shadow and loped after it, using the hum of its engines as cover. The mimetic field couldn’t be the only protection the camp had. There might be some form of power field as well, or automated defences. Unless they were more arrogant than he assumed.

As it turned out, they were. The only defences were several bored-looking guards, crouched safely behind the field, playing some sort of game to pass the time. The eldar were more concerned with their entertainment than what might be approaching their camp. Though given their reaction times, that meant little – they were faster than any normal human.

He crouched, just a leap and a run from the flickering pylons of the mimetic field. He studied them. Each of the pylons was a thin tower of black metal, and all were connected by strands of conductive cable. Lukas knew from previous experience that the field was generated by the peculiar resonance of these cables. Take out one in just the right way, and the field would collapse.

It was hard to see anything beyond them, but what he could see told him that the camp was easy meat. Crude tents made from some fleshy material rose like hills beyond the pylons, arranged in concentric circles. The arc of each circle was broken at intervals by steel cage-domes. Lukas didn’t have a clear line of

sight, but he knew what those would contain. Prisoners, or beasts meant for the arenas in the Hel-hole this breed of xenos called home.

A muffled howl rose over the camp, and he grinned. He thought of the Blackmane they had freed earlier, and wondered how many of those brutes the eldar had captured. They would regret that. The grin was wiped off his face when he heard a sound behind him. He didn't whirl, or give any sign he had heard it.

It had been an exhalation. Soft. Like a sigh. His hackles rose, and the earlier feeling of being watched returned. He eased his hand towards his plasma pistol. Somewhere close by, something giggled. Lukas' eyes flickered to the side, seeking the origins of the sound. Nothing there. Just a spray of colour across the ice. The sensation faded, and he snorted. 'Well, whoever you are, I hope you enjoy the show.'

He crept forward, moving with the gusting snow. His pelt flapped in the wind, and he wondered, not for the first time, what an observer might see. Whatever it was, it was usually sufficient to keep him from getting shot, and that was enough for him. He unhooked a krak grenade from his combat harness and armed it.

He tossed the grenade, aiming for the point where the closest pylon sank into the ice. The grenade struck the pylon, bounced once, and exploded as it dropped to the ice. As the echoes of the explosion faded, he heard the guards shouting. They were alert now.

A moment later, the pylon groaned and the ice cracked. With a sound like a blade entering flesh, the pylon dropped out of sight, sinking beneath the ice. It dragged its cables with it, and the mimetic field sparked and warped. The nearest pylons voiced their displeasure as they turned on their anchoring bolts, further disrupting the stability of the ice. From nearby, Lukas heard the reverberations of a second explosion – Kadir making his own entrance. He rose to his feet and unhooked a pair of frag grenades.

Lukas activated the grenades as he ran towards the gap. Water spurted from the ruptures, and the ice was shuddering. Even so, the xenos were still on their feet. Lukas leapt over a heaving crack in the ice and landed among them. He tossed the grenades blind, not caring where they went. He needed noise and confusion.

More explosions ripsawed through the air as he dispatched the guards. Several got shots off, but to no avail. Lukas smashed them down with his claw and his fist. He drove a kick into the midsection of the last, snapping the eldar's spine with the force of the blow. More of them were coming, but most were heading for their vehicles. 'Kadir,' he voxed.

'I've got them.' Explosions shook the camp.

Lukas hurried towards the closest cage, rolling several grenades down the makeshift alleyways and into open tents as he passed, riding the confusion that resulted. The vox crackled, and he knew the rest of the Blood Claws were joining the fun. They would ensure that no one got out of the camp alive.

When he reached the first of the cages, the wolves were howling. Four of them, Blackmanes all. Lukas easily tore the cage apart. The wolves streaked past him without so much as a baleful look. He heard shouts and screams echoing up from among the tents, and pressed deeper into the camp. Every cage he passed, he tore open. There were elk as well, and in one, one of the great white bears that prowled the high crags.

Most of the beasts would flee, but some, maddened by captivity, would seek the closest source of blood. All to the good. The eldar might kill them all eventually, but by then Lukas' hand would be at their throat.

Smoke boiled through the camp. Several of the tents were burning – Einar's doing, probably. Lukas heard the clash of weapons, and Ake's voice, bellowing curses. He loped towards the sound. Perhaps the Blood Claw had found what they were looking for.

He found Ake struggling with a knot of eldar. The warriors surrounded him, darting in and attacking by turns, keeping him off balance. Lukas didn't hesitate. He drew his plasma pistol and fired, catching one of the eldar between the shoulder blades. Two of the xenos broke ranks and sped towards Lukas, snapping off shots from their splinter pistols as they ran. He twisted aside, the splinters tearing through a tent, and met them, laughing.

'Some fun, eh?' Lukas shouted to Ake as he sent one of his opponents sprawling. He cracked his head against that of his other foe. The xenos staggered, and Lukas kicked its legs out from under it and stamped on its throat.

His plasma pistol hummed, signalling that it was ready to fire again. He took aim and fired, but his target skidded beneath the coruscating beam. It came up, both hands wrapped around the hilt of a curved blade. The blade skidded across his chest-plate and snapped. Lukas backhanded the startled alien warrior. He glanced down and saw that its weapon had carved a gouge in the ceramite. *'Luck of the Russ, eh?'* He looked at Ake. *'Seen any wolves yet? I freed several.'*

'I was distracted by the kraken,' Ake snarled, his chainblade growling as he bisected an eldar warrior. The survivors were falling back, snapping off shots as they retreated. Lukas heard the boom of boltguns, and knew the other Blood Claws were hard at their task. Suddenly, Ake's words penetrated.

‘Kraken?’

‘There,’ Ake said, gesturing. Lukas turned and caught sight of the ring of heavy pillars of black metal rising from the ice, sunk by the eldar to create an improvised cage. Something black thrashed above the tops of the pillars. Lukas grinned.

‘The Allfather does have a sense of humour. Cover me!’

‘What–Lukas!’

Lukas ignored Ake’s shouts and ploughed towards the cage, smashing aside any eldar who sought to block his path. He could feel the ice trembling beneath him as he ran. The kraken was shifting in its pen, agitated by the smell of blood in the air. Finding one here wasn’t so strange. Occasionally the beasts would be swept inland during the Helwinter and become trapped in endorheic basins such as this one, or even in the deeper rivers. They would live and grow, so long as they fed regularly. This one looked like it had been eating well.

When he got closer, he saw just what it had been eating. The pillars had been strung with barbed chains, and from these hung the torn remains of dozens of bodies. The mortals had died in agony, stripped of meat and limbs by a ravenous kraken as they dangled over its prison. Lukas took aim at the waterline with his plasma pistol. All he had to do was weaken the pillars. The kraken would do the rest.

The searing beam of plasma caressed the ice, reducing it to a chill mist. Water splashed up as the kraken sensed the sudden change in temperature and struck the pillars, and the metal gave with a squeal. Ice split as the kraken seized on the weakness in its pen and shoved at the pillars. The creature dove down and began to squeeze itself beneath them, the ice at Lukas’ feet bucking.

A few seconds later, it exploded upwards through the ice, its beak snapping. Lukas turned and ran. The kraken surged in his wake. He led it a merry chase through the tents, staying just ahead of it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw it catch a running eldar and drag the screaming alien through a crack in the ice.

A Venom swooped overhead, its weapons hissing. Lukas threw himself forward and rolled out of the way, splinter fire chewing the ice behind him. The kraken exploded upwards, its oil-black tentacles slapping the vehicle from the air with a screech of abused metal. The Venom crashed, and a wave of fire erupted as its anti-gravity engine went up. Lukas staggered as the ice jumped beneath him. He turned and saw a tentacle slashing down towards him. ‘*Skitja*,’ he muttered.

Someone tackled him out of the way just before the tentacle slammed down. Lukas and his rescuer rolled to their feet in a spray of ice chips and water

vapour. 'Hello, Dag. Funny meeting you here,' Lukas said.

Dag laughed. 'I saw the kraken and thought it was time I returned that favour I owed you.' A splinter round struck the Blood Claw's shoulder-plate and he twisted around, firing his bolt pistol. Chuckling, Lukas fired his plasma pistol at one of the darting shapes. Without waiting to see whether he had killed it, he turned to Dag.

'Find the chattel pens. If there are any mortals in them, get as many out as you can.'

'What about you?'

'There's a communications node somewhere in this camp. I'm going to find it.' Lukas pushed past him and was off before the Blood Claw could reply.

The camp was in an uproar, as he had intended. The eldar had thought themselves safe. Now they were being dragged under the shifting ice by something far worse than any warrior of the Rout. The kraken was hungry, and angry, and any xenos that escaped the Blood Claws wasn't going to make it far. Not to mention the Blackmanes he saw prowling through the tents at a distance, or the white bear he could hear bellowing somewhere close by. 'Fenris eats the weak,' he murmured.

The memories he had ingested led him to the heart of the camp. A central tent three times as large as any of the others had been erected over a metal framework. Stooping beneath the flap, Lukas entered a circular space. Metal walkways followed a hexagonal pattern to what resembled a central vox-relay system, as designed by a lunatic. Several eldar stood around it.

They turned as he entered, and Lukas shot the one in the middle. The dying xenos fell back into the array, and sparks cascaded down, spilling across the ice. The other two drew weapons and fired, forcing him to duck back out of the tent. He could hear voices echoing through the hum of static emanating from the array.

Thinking quickly, he unhooked one of his remaining frag grenades, thumbed the activation rune and sent it tumbling into the tent. The concussive blast blew out its sides, and cracks zigzagged out from beneath it as he backed away.

A moment later, something dark and massive passed beneath him. He heard the crunch of splintering ice and the shriek of breaking metal before the burning tent and whatever was left of the array were dragged underwater by a forest of black tentacles.

'Lukas.'

Lukas turned. Kadir stood behind him. His battle-plate was streaked with gore.

‘It’s time to go.’ His gaze strayed to the smouldering mass of the tent as it slowly slipped beneath the broken surface. ‘What happened?’

‘They got an alert off.’ Lukas shrugged apologetically. ‘I wasn’t quick enough.’

‘All the more reason to put some distance between us and this camp.’

‘Not before we grab some of those corpses,’ Lukas said. ‘Contact the others. Many hands make for swift work.’

‘What? Why?’ Kadir stared at him. ‘What are you planning?’

Lukas gave a cold smile. ‘I want to send a message.’



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WOLF'S MARK

641.M41

The dark eldar base camp was, to Jhynkar's eyes, a sprawling nightmare of primitivism. The corsairs had taken over the mon-keigh steading at their captain's behest, but they had not left it in one piece. While the Sky Serpents had more experience of living off the land than the average Commorrite, neither group was particularly suited to it. So, in the best traditions of the Eternal City, they had decided to make the slaves do all the hard work.

The aboriginal palisades had been torn down and repurposed into gantries and towers of timber that acted as berths for hovering Raiders and Venoms. When the palisade posts ran short, trees were uprooted from the surrounding forest and added to the pile. Humans toiled beneath the watchful gazes of Sslyth overseers or Jhynkar's wracks.

He had donated the services of the latter, hoping to scoop up any humans who faltered before the Sslyth pounced on them. There weren't as many as he might have hoped. Most of the healthy chattel were being used to entertain the corsairs and kabalite warriors who had drawn guard duty. The others had been put to work, or else killed out of hand as a warning to the rest. That warning hadn't

permeated fully, however. For humans, these savages were hardier than expected, both in body and mind.

Jhynkar strode across the muddy ground towards the slave pens, careful to avoid getting any dirt on the hem of his robes. A trio of wracks followed him, their black iron helms turning this way and that warily as they scanned the curtain of falling snow for any threat. While the power fields now protecting the camp kept out the worst of the weather, some of it nonetheless got through.

He froze as the crackle of splinter fire split the frosty air. His wracks shifted nervously, gripping their tools more tightly. He let his hand drift down to the chunky-barrelled blast-pistol thrust through a loop on his apron. Ordinarily he was reluctant to sully his hands with a tool of such utilitarian purpose, but over the past few days the camp had quickly devolved into a lawless morass of bored Commorrites and their retinues.

The enthusiasm for the expedition was waning as reports of more lethal resistance came in, and many of the Duke's guests itched to return to their ships and Commorrhagh. Fights had broken out as old rivalries rose up. The makeshift streets ran red as grudges were settled. Sliscus seemed more amused by his guests' murderous behaviour than anything else. Jhynkar suspected the Duke had intended for it to occur – or had at least prepared for it.

He frowned as he hurried on, hoping to get out of the open before whatever was going to happen, happened. Sliscus had, for all intents and purposes, made this world into a larger version of his tesseract garden. They were all trapped here at his mercy, forced to strive against their prey, against the elements and now each other, all for his entertainment.

No one else saw it. Not yet. Sliscus was too smart for that. And the other dark eldar were too blinded by their own petty ambitions to understand that this party had never been for their benefit, but for Sliscus' own amusement. He was bored. And when he became bored, worlds burned.

That, in the end, was why Jhynkar was so eager to escape. It was becoming more difficult to keep the Serpent diverted. Soon he might narrow the bite of his boredom to include smaller, more intimate worlds. Jhynkar had heard the stories – all who served the Duke had – of corsair ships fired on at a whim and left rolling in the dark, venting flame, or loyal captains butchered because some witticism had offended the Duke's ever-changing sensibilities.

One of his wracks grunted a warning, and Jhynkar paused. He flinched back as he saw several corsairs charge towards him in pursuit of a hairy primitive. The creature gave him a wide berth, racing for an area where the power fields

weren't yet in place. The trees had not been cleared there.

'What are you doing here?'

Myrta strode towards him, appearing behind the corsairs. She didn't seem happy to see him. Then, she was rarely happy to see anyone these days. He smiled ingratiatingly. 'Shall I set my wracks upon it? They might catch the brute before it reaches the trees.'

'No need. It won't get far. Watch.'

Jhynkar turned and watched the slave run, panting, for the safety of the forest. It struck the first of the monofilament wires strung through the trees a moment later. The creature made no sound as it came apart like a badly made toy. 'Stupid apes,' the courtesan said dismissively. She turned to him. 'You wanted something?'

'A moment of your time.'

Myrta turned away. 'I'm afraid I have little to spare. The Duke, in his infinite wisdom, has left the details of organising this mess to me.'

'Is it that bad, then?'

'Worse than it looks. The guests have scattered to the winds, at least those that can be bothered to leave camp. There have already been four assassinations, and two attempts at what I suspect are sabotage.'

Jhynkar blinked. 'Sabotage?' He hadn't considered sabotage. That might prove to be a way of dealing with Sliscus to the Hex's satisfaction.

Myrta didn't elaborate. She watched as a pack of feral warp-beasts worried the remains of a slave lying in the snow nearby. 'Two kabals are demanding recompense for the deaths of their leaders by misadventure. A third is aggressively requesting that the Duke cease his own hunt and recover the body of their archon, currently being digested in the stomach of one of those large reptiles that hunt the seas here. Not to mention all the fools we have simply lost contact with due to this cursed storm.' She glared up at the roiling sky. 'Why did I ever suggest this place?'

Jhynkar quickly looked away. Before he could move back, she had drawn her sword and slid it beneath his chin. 'Oh, yes, I remember now. Not one of your better ideas, fleshweaver.' He swallowed nervously and waved his agitated wracks back.

'Why did you want to see me?' she purred.

'I need slaves.'

'You have slaves.'

'I need more.'

‘Why?’

‘Listen.’ He placed his hand to his ear and made a show of listening. She frowned, but cocked her head. A blood-curdling howl rose over the camp. ‘They’re hungry.’

‘So feed them to each other. I—what is it *now*?’ she hissed, turning to strike the slave that had just plucked at her sleeve. The blue-skinned, flat-faced creature cringed back, hands raised to ward off the blow. It babbled something in a breathy voice, and Myrta cursed. It loped away and she followed. Jhynkar released a breath he hadn’t realised he had been holding. Then he frowned. He still didn’t have his slaves.

‘Maybe she’s right. Maybe I can just feed them to each other.’ He sighed and followed the wailing howls back to his temporary workshop. While it lacked the elegance of his hideaway aboard the *Incessant Agony*, it had all the necessities. He had occupied what he thought had once been a metalsmith’s workshop, given the bellows and the half-finished tools lying everywhere. Most of that had been stripped out and tossed away by his wracks to make room for his examination paraphernalia and the suspensor cages.

The cages were translucent cubes attached to an oscillating anti-gravity field. They rose and fell at odd intervals, and the power fields that formed the sides of each cube hummed at atonal frequencies. The sound and movement worked to keep their inhabitants from becoming too comfortable. Not that that was a worry with these particular subjects.

The beasts within them were almost human. That was what made them dangerous. The various chemical alterations that had been done to them, to twist them from mon-keigh into the hulking monsters before him, were proving to be of some interest, from an aesthetic perspective. But it was their savagery that was most impressive. They never grew tired or ceased their attempts to escape.

One threw back its lupine head and howled. He stepped close to the cube, and the beast threw itself at him, bloodying itself on the power field. ‘Marvellous,’ he said. There was a certain savage elegance to the creatures – a brutal artistry that he longed to unravel.

‘Remarkable endurance,’ a thin, harsh voice murmured. Jhynkar froze, but forced himself to relax. He hadn’t realised anyone else was in the workshop.

‘Yes. The Duke has high hopes for them.’

Xhact snorted in reply. His hunched frame stood at the far end of the workshop, on the other side of the cubes. He was examining the stasis tubes stored there, and their contents. Jhynkar joined him in his examination. The Space Wolf

aspirants were brutish-looking things, unfinished sculptures begun by singularly unskilled hands. Xhact sighed audibly, and Jhynkar saw the problem immediately. There were five of them – too many to keep for himself, and not enough to divide evenly among his closest followers.

‘There is nothing for it. We will simply need more,’ Xhact said.

‘They will be watching the ice, revered artist,’ Jhynkar said. The Hex had only succeeded in raiding the training camp with the element of surprise. Now that the Space Wolves knew the dark eldar were planet-side, such prey would be all but impossible to come by.

‘And so? Let them watch. Perhaps they will learn something.’

‘That is what I am afraid of,’ Jhynkar muttered. Xhact looked at him sharply.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing.’

Xhact frowned. ‘I notice that Sliscus is still alive. You told me he would be dead. Promised it, in fact.’

‘Great work takes time, my lord.’

Xhact’s frown deepened. ‘Perhaps I made a mistake in agreeing to this expedition. Did I, Jhynkar? Have I made an error in judgement in trusting you, my apprentice?’

Jhynkar hid his own frown. He hadn’t been referred to as an apprentice for some time. ‘No, my teacher. Matters proceed apace. Brush strokes layered upon brush strokes. We are not the only ones who want him dead. We merely have to claim the credit when the applause dies down.’

Xhact nodded. ‘Good. Vect’s bounty on Sliscus is substantial. A trap, obviously, for the unwary. But we will dispatch his pet and prove ourselves a force to be reckoned with. The Tyrant will reward us for such initiative.’

Jhynkar hesitated. Then, throwing caution to the wind, he said, ‘And what of me? Have I earned the right to return?’

Xhact looked down at the stasis tubes. ‘Not yet.’

Jhynkar’s hands twitched. He desired nothing more than to throttle the spindly creature before him, but he restrained himself. Not least because his few pitiful wracks were badly outnumbered by Xhact’s own. The grey-skinned monsters squatted nearby, or rifled through his tools, touching them with their clumsy hands.

‘When?’ he asked, as respectfully as he could.

‘As soon as the Duke is dead,’ Xhact said. He tapped one of the stasis tubes. ‘And not a moment sooner.’

‘That may take some time. I am quite hardy.’

Both haemonculi spun. Wracks surged to their feet or clutched at their weapons. Sliscus stood admiring the cubes. Somehow he had got in without anyone noticing. Jhynkar was starting to regret not installing a more effective security system.

Sliscus looked at them. ‘Oh, don’t look so shocked. I’m not an idiot, Jhynkar. I have known of your discontent for some time. And you, Xhact – I am of a mind to take offence. Given that I only took this deceitful creature on at your request, it seems the height of rudeness to repay me with such disrespect.’

Xhact was so taken aback that he could only stare. Jhynkar’s hand drifted towards his blast-pistol. The wracks tensed, and one grunted a warning. Something tapped his shoulder. Jhynkar glanced back and saw Sleg looming over him, his palms resting on the hilts of his blades. Two more Sslyth covered the wracks with their shardcarbines. Jhynkar smiled weakly and drew his hand back.

Sliscus chuckled. ‘Oh, the looks on your faces. Rest easy, friends. If I took offence every time someone plotted to kill me, I would soon run out of associates. No, we’ll say no more about it, shall we? Bygones.’

‘You show great understanding,’ Xhact said after a moment. The master of the Hex glared at Jhynkar, as if the situation were somehow his fault. ‘Even so, I am embarrassed.’

‘What’s a little embarrassment between friends? Besides, you still owe me a debt, and I am not one to waste such a thing.’ Sliscus looked at Jhynkar. ‘Jhynkar knows my feelings on waste.’

Jhynkar endeavoured to smile. His eyes strayed to the controls for the suspensor cages, hanging from a support beam nearby. One tap and the cubes would cease to function. The beasts would be free. The way they were snarling at Sliscus, Jhynkar had no doubt they would go after him first. Sliscus might kill one, possibly two. But not all of them. His eyes flickered back to the Duke, who was watching him patiently.

Sliscus inclined his head slightly, as if giving him permission. Jhynkar swallowed thickly and looked resolutely away from the controls. Sliscus’ smile bent into a frown of mild disappointment. Before he could speak, Myrta burst into the workshop. ‘My lord,’ she began before coming to a halt, puzzled at the scene before her.

‘What is it?’ Sliscus asked, not taking his eyes from Jhynkar.

‘We have received an alert. One of our camps is under attack.’

Sliscus paced impatiently across the deck as his Raider cut through the chill air towards the basin lake. A pack of Venoms swooped beneath and above the skiff, keeping pace. Sleg and his other Sslyth guards watched the rails, still as statues, their flickering tongues the only sign of life. Hands behind his back, Sliscus stopped as he caught sight of a ragged plume of smoke rising through the curtain of snow. He hissed in annoyance. He spun to face Myrta, who stood watching him.

‘Are you certain it’s the same pattern?’

‘As far as I can tell.’ She frowned. ‘The attackers were only a few in number. The smallest pack we have encountered was dozens strong. This was less than half that. Or so they claimed, before communications were cut.’

Sliscus grunted. The reports were few and far between. One wolf, maybe two. No more than seven. All in the same region, attacking with an unexpected cunning – not reacting as the rest of the Space Marines were, but instigating confrontations. And always against larger and larger targets. It had taken him some time to see the pattern for what it was. Now that he had, he was determined to bring this most cunning of beasts to bay.

He still wasn’t sure what his goal was – killing it seemed a waste. Perhaps he could trap it in his tesseract, to entertain him at his leisure. Mostly he just wanted to see it with his own eyes. To see such a clever beast was a rare treat.

‘Have you given any thought as to why they let you receive the message, Traevelliath?’ Lady Malys asked. She was sitting near the prow. The table was still there, and a complement of slaves circled her, laying out a fine meal of baked wolf cub seasoned with drake venom. Sliscus was too agitated to eat, however.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It could be a trap.’

Sliscus smiled. ‘Good.’

Malys sighed and extended her goblet for a slave to refill it. ‘You really are tiresome on occasion, Traevelliath. If it is a trap, you are flying into it.’

‘Again, *good*.’ Sliscus strode to the table and snatched the refilled goblet from her. He knocked back the contents and returned it to her. ‘I came to this world looking for a bit of fun, and so far all I’ve got are complaints and a few new monsters to add to my menagerie. I want something more interesting before the end.’

‘And when will that be?’

‘Soon.’ He frowned. ‘This is the first camp to be compromised. It won’t be long

before the others are as well. I have sent word to everyone who matters to cut their hunts short and return to the base camp. The storm is ending, and so too is our time on this dreadful little ball of ice.' He tapped the pommel of one of his swords. The spirit stones pulsed warmly at his touch, the souls within them stirring.

'Well, that is a relief. I thought for a moment you were going to force us to fight the mon-keigh out of spite.' Malys gestured for a slave to refill her drink. 'And once the fires are dimmed, and the revels ended?'

'I shall find new revels and set new fires.' Sliscus looked up at one of his crew. 'We're here.' He stepped past Malys and stepped up onto the prow, grabbing a guide-wire for balance. Posed in what he hoped was a heroic fashion, he gazed out over the icy lake and the camp that had once occupied it.

'Who was this?' He tossed the question over his shoulder.

'Archon Quev'as'ayah of the Third Plenipotentiary of—'

Sliscus gestured dismissively. 'Say no more. No one important.' A minor archon from Low Commorrhagh. One with more titles than warriors, and a reputation as a trader in flesh to the cheaper arenas. No loss there.

The camp was a smoking ruin. The Raider swung out over it, turning slowly. The ice had been shattered at several points, and great, gaping holes marked its surface. Bodies lay everywhere. He found his eyes drawn past the camp. He signalled to the helmsman to take the Raider in.

'Those corpses appear to have been arranged,' Malys said at his elbow.

'Indeed. And quite a curious shape it is.'

The bodies lay in a tangled line. It was obviously a symbol of some kind – a rune, as the natives of this world called them. But which rune? He waved his hand. The helmsman obliged and the Raider sank down until it was almost skimming the ice. It circled the arranged corpses with slow grace, its engines humming, and a cold mist rose, billowing about the skiff.

Sliscus bent over the edge of the prow, studying the shape. He had amused himself with several lessons in the local dialect between hunts. His teachers rarely survived the lessons, but he had learned something despite himself. The rune-shape tugged at his memory. '*Hloja*,' he murmured.

'Which means?' Malys asked.

'Laugh,' Sliscus said, and blinked. There was something under the ice. He saw it just for a moment, and had the impression of a forest canopy caught in a strong wind. He turned. 'Up! Take us up!'

The helmsman reacted with commendable alacrity. Even so, he was an instant

too slow. Bodies tumbled as the ice ruptured upwards, driven by a heaving, monstrous shape. The kraken emerged with a thunderous shriek of hunger, its fang-studded beak snapping. Black tentacles slammed into the Raider, and the crew were knocked from their feet. A slave fell screaming to the ice and was immediately ensnared and dragged into the beast's maw.

The Raider pivoted on its axis, its engines straining, as a tendril coiled about the keelblade. Sliscus whistled. Sleg and his coil-kin slithered to the rails, shardcarbines in hand. They fired at the tendrils, severing those they could. Sliscus slid behind the disintegrator cannon mounted at the prow and swung it around, trying to get a bead on the kraken.

'Ha!' he snarled, and activated the cannon. Ravening energies erupted from the barrel and punched into the beast's body, atomising flesh and scale. The kraken shrieked and released the Raider. It plunged back through the ice and vanished. Sliscus cursed and fired again, but he knew the beast was already gone.

He stepped back. And laughed. Arms spread, he threw back his head and bellowed his joy to the sky. 'Oh, what a delightful jest! Did you see that, Aurelia?'

Malys looked none the worse for wear. She took her seat as the Raider rose into the air. 'I saw. Hard to miss such a thing.'

'Wasn't it wonderful? Quite exhilarating, don't you think?'

'I could have done without it, frankly.' Malys began to fan herself. 'You admire it.'

Sliscus' head twitched. Barely a nod. 'Perhaps. It was very cunningly done. Even I must admit that.' He stared down at the hole in the ice. 'A perfect trap. Add it to the other reports, and I see a pattern. A mind quite unlike that of any other wolf. Those others are brutes. Give them a bit of blood, and they will chase shadows for days, none the wiser.' He leaned over the rail. 'But not this one.'

'No. This one hunts you,' Malys said softly.

Sliscus laughed. 'They all hunt me, though they know it not. They seek us here and there, though they cannot find us. That is part of the fun.'

'But this one hunts *you*, specifically. This was a message, Traevelliath.' She frowned. 'They are looking to cut the head off the serpent.'

He looked at her, careful not to let anything show on his face. 'So?'

She sat back with a shrug. 'So it is a challenge. Nothing more, nothing less.'

Sliscus frowned. He glanced at Myrta, who stood close by as was his will. 'And what do you think, my lady?'

'She is right. The beast challenges us, my lord. It makes sport of us, as if we are

the prey here.’ She spoke flatly, her dark eyes gleaming. Sliscus frowned. Not at her impertinence, but at the words. They weren’t hers, he suspected. He glanced at Malys, feeling suddenly hemmed in, though they were merely saying what he already thought. Still, best not to let them see that. It might set an unfortunate precedent.

‘A challenge. I have heard that before, have I not, Aurelia?’ Sliscus shook his head. ‘This isn’t a duel. This beast is no worthy opponent, merely clever prey. I shall run it to ground, eventually. When I discover where it lairs.’

‘I can tell you, if you like.’

Sliscus looked up.

The Harlequin Shadowseer stood perched on the rail, balancing on one foot. Where she had come from, he couldn’t say. It was as if she had appeared by some sorcerous trick. She stretched her other leg out and planted a foot squarely on Sleg’s uppermost shoulder. Then, with a single, graceful motion, she was standing on top of his broad skull. The Sslyth made to draw his weapons, but a gesture from Sliscus stopped him. The Harlequin laughed and spun her staff in slow, almost hypnotic circles.

‘Tell me what, acrobat?’ Sliscus asked.

‘The location of your foe.’

‘Oh, how useful.’ Sliscus threw up his hands. ‘Were I of a more suspicious temperament, I might suspect collusion on the part of everyone here.’ He pointed an accusing finger at the Harlequin. ‘How did you come to know that? Were you watching as it savaged my warriors, perchance?’

The Harlequin giggled, stretched, and, balancing on the tips of her toes, spun slowly, causing Sleg to grunt in discomfort. ‘Convenience is the marrow of a story’s bones, oh great Serpent. I saw, I saw, I saw. I heard, I heard, I heard. And that is how the tale goes.’

Sliscus turned to Malys, his expression bleakly amused. ‘Well, there you have it. That is how the story goes.’ He twitched. The blade was in his hand so fast that Malys barely saw it before it left his fingers and shot towards the Harlequin. The clown’s giggles ceased in an instant as she interposed her staff. The knife sank deep into the staff with a hollow crack. The Harlequin leapt back, off Sleg and onto the rail, wary now rather than amused. Sliscus laughed. ‘What if I don’t like your story, vulgarian? What then? What will you do?’

The Harlequin carefully pried the knife free from her staff. ‘You are a corsair, not a critic. Your opinion means little at this point in the narrative.’ The Harlequin casually tossed the knife back to Sliscus. ‘The scene is set, the ending

written.'

'If that's the case, then why are you here?'

'To make sure everyone is at their appointed place.' The Harlequin leaned on her staff. 'I know where it hides. Would you like to know?'

Sliscus' eyes narrowed. The Harlequins gave nothing away for free. 'What will it cost me?' he demanded, letting his hand drift towards the swords sheathed on his hip.

The Shadowseer looked at Malys. A moment later, so did Sliscus. Malys made a show of sipping from her drink. 'I would advise you to listen to the clown, Traevelliath. They rarely speak without purpose.'

Sliscus frowned and looked back down at the ice. He could still see the vast shape of the kraken, crouched watchfully in the depths. Waiting for its prey to come within reach. He looked up. 'I will require the proper tools.'

'I happen to know that several of your guests brought their own pet killers.' Malys leaned forward. 'The more rash among them see this as an opportunity to... expand their spheres of influence. So they have hired blades adept at striking in the cold and the dark. You know of what I speak?'

'Mandrakes,' Sliscus said, catching her meaning. The shadow-killers were famed in Commorragh for their lethality. There were those who said the Mandrakes weren't even truly eldar anymore, but something else. 'Who?'

'I will tell you.' She held up a finger. 'If you allow me to help.'

'Why?'

'Simply the pleasure of your company, Traevelliath.'

He frowned, suspicious. But he was no stranger to such whims, and he smiled, bent, and kissed her hand. 'As I enjoy yours, my dear.'



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RED SHADOWS

641.M41

Lukas crouched beside Hetha, listening to her snore. Only the pack were awake. The mortals sheltered in the cave they had found, sleeping around the fire, trying their best to keep warm. Hetha and her warriors lay near the cave's entrance, ostensibly to hinder any attempt to creep up on them unawares.

The rest of the cave was occupied by those they had freed from the ice camp. Not many. Fewer than a dozen fit to walk, and a few others who likely wouldn't last the night. These had made their peace, and now they slept. Some – most – would not awaken.

He glanced back into the cave, listening to the soft moans of the wounded and smelling the blood. Some of them were not sleeping. Their minds were gone, and their eyes stared inwards at things he could not perceive. These too would die, and soon.

Already malnourished, they refused food and drink and were all but wasted away now. He felt some faint tremor of pity, but pushed it aside. They were already ghosts in all but body, and they were free of pain. 'Morkai keep you all,' Lukas murmured.

‘What?’ Halvar sat nearby, at the edge of the cave. He had his chainblade across his knees and was anointing its teeth with some scented unguent of his own concoction. Much of the Blood Claw’s odour came not from lack of bathing, as Lukas had first thought, but from the melange of competing blessed oils and incenses he rubbed into his gear. Bear fat mixed with the blood of orks and other foes was often used by the Wolf Priests to anoint the weaponry of the Rout. Halvar made his own, and blessed himself liberally.

‘I said I’m having second thoughts,’ Lukas said. ‘Perhaps they would be safer daring the wrath of the seas.’

‘Better here with us than anywhere else. We are the shield and sword of the Allfather. His wrath made manifest. We are the wolf that guards the gate of Hel.’ Halvar spoke quietly. Passionately. The Blood Claw’s faith was as strong as the Aett was tall. If he survived, he might find himself a place among the Choosers of the Valiant.

‘Aye. And a kind wolf we are. How often have we clashed with those who would use us to cruel ends?’ Lukas looked at him. ‘We have even warred with our own in order to spare the innocent.’

‘As it should be. As it must be.’ Halvar hesitated. ‘You sound as if you disapprove.’

Lukas laughed quietly. ‘No. I simply wonder why we do not extend the courtesy of our kindness to our own folk.’ He stared out into the dark, listening to the muted fury of the storm. ‘We will go to war in the name of innocents elsewhere, but babes starve on this world every day. Our people die, and we judge them on the quality of their suffering. How many die a straw death, that might otherwise have lived?’

Halvar was silent. Then, ‘It was the will of Russ.’

‘Yes. Remind me to ask him about it when I see him.’ Lukas smiled thinly and looked down at Hetha, feeling a twinge of something that might have been guilt. ‘We have much in common, Russ and I. Both of us liars.’ He stroked the sleeping woman’s hair. ‘She is one of mine, I think. Several generations removed, but mine all the same. There is something in them, in their scent, in the way they hunt and sing and curse, that reminds me of my own folk. Do you remember yours, pup?’

‘No. They are not my people anymore. They haven’t been for many generations.’ Halvar hesitated. ‘I barely even remember them. Their faces. Who they were.’

‘That is where we differ, then. I remember all too well.’ Lukas stood, but

continued to stare at Hetha. ‘Ake asked me why, earlier. Why I brought them food. Why I offered them the choice. That is why. These are mine. And I will let no one take them from me. Not this world, not the eldar, not even the Allfather himself.’

Lukas stepped past Halvar, out into the cold dark of the night. The horizon was slashed by pale streaks of light, despite the clouds. It would be morning soon. They would reach the Jahtvian steading then, and the mortals they had rescued might find some respite, however briefly. Not for long, though. Never for long, on Fenris.

His tribe was long gone. Their descendants had splintered, amalgamated, grown and shrunk in the centuries since he had been pulled off the ice. As they would do in the seasons to come. They adapted more easily than those they thought of as gods.

But still, they were his. His blood, however thin, flowed in their veins. And so he would feed them. He would guard them. Even unto the end of his days. He had been worthless as a mortal. A liar, a thief and a philanderer. And while he wasn’t much better now, he would do what he could. He would not forget. Others might, but not him.

Sometimes he saw ghosts, on the ice and in the morning mist. Faces and voices from a past that grew more difficult to remember with every passing decade. He hawked and spat. His acidic saliva hissed on the ice, burning through it to the rock face beneath. ‘I will not forget,’ he muttered.

He straightened as something in the distance caught his eye. Idly, he scraped his talons together, alerting the others. ‘What is it?’ Halvar rumbled, coming out of the cave.

Silently, Lukas pointed. Flashes of light pierced the shroud of rain and snow. Not firelight, but something hungrier. ‘Wake up the mortals,’ he said quietly.

A few moments later, Hetha joined him. ‘The steading,’ she said, her voice hollow. There was fear there, but mostly resignation. It had only been a matter of time before the eldar located the steading.

‘Yes. We will see what can be seen, and do what can be done. You will wake the others. Stay here, but be ready to move if necessary.’

Hetha frowned. She gripped the hilt of her blade. ‘We will come with you.’

‘No,’ Lukas growled. ‘You would only slow us down. We will return for you. Until then, stay here. Stay quiet. Stay still.’

Hetha made to protest, but Lukas was already turning away. He could only hope she would listen. He sprang from the ledge. Rock crumbled beneath his

feet as he crashed down. Before it could collapse entirely, he was already leaping for the next outcropping, trusting in his own agility and his armour's auto-stabilisers to carry him safely from one to the next. He could hear Halvar and the others following him.

There was no need for discussion. Distance was little impediment to their senses, and the storm winds only helped to carry the smell of fire and death to them. They raced across the taiga, moving as quickly as their enhanced physiologies would allow. All thought of stealth was forgotten in their haste. As they drew near the steading, smoke hung thick on the air, mingling with the snow. The crackle of flames filled Lukas' world – he heard nothing else. No screams, no howls, not even the hum of the eldar anti-gravity engines. Only the fire.

'Split up,' he snarled, his voice cracking across the vox like a whip. 'Ake, Einar, Dag – take the left. Halvar, Kadir, with me. Drive them back, whatever it takes. Give the mortals a chance to flee or fight, as they will. Go!' Lukas was moving towards the wreck of the main gateway even before he finished speaking. Halvar and Kadir bounded in his wake, thumbing the activation switches on their chainblades.

The palisade and the main hall were in ruins. The lean, sharp shapes of Raiders nosed through the clouds of smoke, like beasts on the hunt. Splinter cannons crackled. Dark, armoured xenos warriors raced through the destruction, laughing as they killed.

Lukas activated his wolf claw as he burst through the smoke. The energy-sheathed talons tore easily through an unwary eldar. The others whipped around, their weapons snapping. Lukas spun away, seeking safety in the smoke. Halvar loped past, his chainblade growling as it bit into the thin armour of his opponent. The eldar wailed as the weapon chewed through its midsection, drawing the attention of the others. Kadir shot one, knocking the alien backwards, a smoking crater in its chest.

As the others swung their weapons towards the Blood Claws, Lukas stepped into the open, his plasma pistol in hand. He took aim and fired, neatly removing his target's head. He holstered the weapon, leaving it to recharge. He could hear the howls of the others as they met the enemy. There were more eldar here than he had first thought.

A trio of Raiders hummed over the halls, firing down into the smoke. Venoms accompanied them, darting close to the rooftops. Lukas took a running leap and made it up onto the edge of a hall's roof. He reached the top just as a Venom

swooped past. His claw shot out, grazing the edge of the vehicle and sending it off course. It ploughed into the roof, setting the thatch alight as it crashed through into the hall below.

A whisper of sound that might have been singing or laughter slithered over the vox. Banded by waves of interference, it was barely there, and it was soon lost in the harsh crunch of dissolving signals. Someone – something – was watching him.

Lukas turned. From his vantage point, he could see most of the steading. What wasn't burning soon would be. But most of the dragonships were gone from their river docks, save for one or two that burned where they were tied. A thin spark of hope flared within him. Some of them were alive – they had to be.

A flash of colour riding the storm winds caught his attention. He tensed, trying to make out the shapes within the kaleidoscopic swirls, but they defied even his enhanced vision. They were gone in a moment, making him wonder if he had even seen them at all.

He heard the crunch of metal against wood, and turned back to see a Raider approaching. It drew closer, its keel scraping across the nearby rooftops, its weapons silent. A lean figure stood balanced on the rail, clinging to a guide-wire with one hand.

The eldar was taller than most and dressed flamboyantly. The coat it wore caught at the light, shimmering eerily. Two swords were sheathed on one hip, a pistol on the other. Its hair was longer than was entirely practical, whipping about its head in a frenzied halo. Its armour was not the dark mesh the others wore, but something more ornate. Even at a distance and through the haze of smoke, Lukas could tell it was intricately decorated.

A smile spread across the eldar's inhuman features as it caught sight of him. It gave a mocking salute. 'Ahoy,' the creature called in passable Fenrisian. 'I am pleased you accepted my invitation, mon-keigh. That was a good trick you pulled with the kraken.' It gestured around the steading. 'What do you think of mine?'

Lukas drew his plasma pistol and fired. The shot arced low, scorching the hull of the Raider. The xenos glanced down, and then up, a frown on its face. Lukas shrugged.

The eldar laughed. A moment later, a disintegrator beam shivered across the roof, barely missing Lukas. It tore across the nearest edge, tearing it open. A second beam followed the first, cutting him off from the far side of the roof this time. Lukas found himself perched on a lone island amid the smoke and flame.

The wood creaked beneath him, weakened by the twin waves of destruction. It began to sway.

‘*Skítja*,’ Lukas howled as the roof beam splintered and collapsed, dropping him into the burning hall below.

Kadir saw Lukas drop down through the roof and the flames roar up where he had been. He slapped aside a xenos warrior, driving it into a door post and snapping its neck. The rest of the creatures seemed little inclined to get in his way as he smashed through the burning doors and into the hall.

The wreckage of a Venom occupied the centre of the hall, and the flames spilling from its collapsed innards crawled across the floor and walls. Smoke wreathed everything, obscuring his autosenses. Optical augurs in his visor whirred, seeking Lukas’ life-signs amid the fire. The fall alone wouldn’t have killed him. Nor would the flames. But if Lukas had been caught by the disintegrator beam, he might be injured enough that one or the other could well have proved fatal.

‘Lukas,’ he bellowed, wrenching up a fallen support beam and casting it aside. It landed behind him with a hollow boom. There were bodies everywhere. This hall had been made into a slaughterhouse well before the fire had started. He heard a crunch of wood behind him, and glanced back to see Halvar shoving tables and benches out of his path. ‘He’s in here somewhere, help me find him.’

He heard the roar of weaponry outside and overhead. The hall shook, and he wondered if the eldar intended to bring it down on top of them. A moment later, he heard a shout and saw Ake and the others crashing towards him. ‘They cornered us – drove us here,’ Ake snarled. There was blood on his armour. Dag was leaning on Einar for support.

Kadir paused in his efforts. ‘What? Why would they—’

Something caught his wrist, startling him. He looked down and saw a soot-stained gauntlet clutching his forearm. He reached down. ‘Lukas!’ He hauled the Trickster up, out of the debris he had been buried under.

Lukas coughed. ‘Trap.’

‘What?’

‘Trap,’ Lukas said, shoving him aside. ‘We’re not alone in here. Heard them moving around. We need to get out. Into the open.’

Kadir tensed, his senses straining. He heard nothing save the crackle of flames. Saw nothing, save death and shadows. And then the shadows moved.

They came out of the darkness, moving like black lightning. No, not out of the

dark – they *were* the dark, stretched and skewed into humanoid shapes. They were coal black, their inky skin marked with undulating sigils. Their features were indistinct, shifting and warping as they slipped from one shadow to the next.

‘Come, then,’ Ake snarled. ‘Come and face the sons of Russ!’

A gangly shape rose up out of the Blood Claw’s shadow as the challenge left his lips, and drove a curved, scythe-like blade into his back. The weapon seemed to sink into the crevices of his battle-plate, and blood jetted from his mouth in a shocked exhalation. The thing – the eldar – coiled about him, striking again and again, hissing in pleasure. Ake staggered, groaning. Bolt pistols thundered, and the shadow-thing was gone. Ake slumped, blood leaking from the joins of his armour. He looked around dully for a moment, a snarl on his lips. Then he toppled forward onto the floor.

‘Ake,’ Kadir snarled. ‘Ake!’ He lunged for his fallen brother as something else lurched up from beneath him. He twisted aside at the last moment, falling heavily to the floor and scrambling back. Blood flowed from a long, grisly gash on his cheek. More shapes swarmed up around him, but were driven back by a desperate sweep of his blade. ‘What are these things?’

‘Daemons,’ Halvar howled, whirling. He blocked a scythe blow and forced his opponent back. ‘Unholy vibrations of the warp. Spawn of lightless stars!’

‘No, they’re shadow-hunters,’ Lukas roared, slashing at one. ‘Mandrakes, they call them.’ It slipped away from his claw as if it were no more substantial than mist. ‘They’re more shadow than flesh!’

Kadir cursed as his own chainblade failed to bite flesh. He blocked a blow that would have opened his throat, and sent the creature reeling. It sank out of sight, dropping into a shadow. He turned. He could see Lukas and the others battling their own opponents amid the fire dripping from the roof.

The hall was entirely aflame now. Chunks of burning thatch pattered across his armour as he blocked a sudden slash. The xenos retreated instantly, sinking away into the lee of a support beam. Flames washed across the floor, separating them.

Behind him, Dag howled. Kadir spun and saw one of the creatures behind the other Blood Claw, its hooked blade buried in the small of his back. It wrenched the weapon free and ceramite parted as if it were no thicker than paper. The Blood Claw fell forward, his weapons clattering from his grip.

Einar bellowed as his brother fell, and his flamer roared. The shadow-warrior screamed as fire enveloped its angular form. Einar reached down, hooked one of Dag’s arms, and began to drag him towards the doors. ‘Help,’ he

barked. Halvar leapt to aid him, firing his bolt pistol at the shadows seeking to overwhelm them.

There were Mandrakes everywhere, slipping out of every shadow, their weapons shimmering with a dark radiance. The sound of their hissing laughter was loud as they closed in on the Blood Claws, moving through the flames and smoke like wraiths. Kadir emptied his bolter, sweeping it around in a wide arc.

He staggered, dropping the empty weapon, as something slid between the plates of his armour and into the meat of his side. He snarled, spitting blood, and turned, drawing his chainblade. A burst of plasma sent his attacker toppling away before he could strike. Lukas was there, steadying him. 'Time to go, brother.' He started towards the doors.

'What about Ake?' Kadir demanded.

Lukas didn't look at him. 'Ake is dead,' he snarled. 'If you don't want to join him, you'd best tuck tail and run.'

'They're running,' Sliscus said. He pounded a fist on the rail. 'Look at them go!'

The grey-armoured warriors had burst out of the burning hall in a flurry of shots, killing those corsairs who tried to intervene. He had hoped that by driving them all into one place he had made things easier for the Mandrakes. Instead, it seemed that the shadow-killers' reputation was vastly inflated. The Space Wolves had left one of their number behind, but the rest were still breathing. Including the one with the red hair.

That one was special. He had known it as soon as he saw him. The others were brutes, but that one – that one had a look in his eyes. A certain cunning to his features. He had reacted quickly, far quicker in fact than Sliscus had anticipated. He had hoped to draw the wolves out later, after the steading had been burned. A smoking ruin made for an ideal ambush site. He could have enjoyed their despair at the sight of the dead even as they were cut down unawares. Instead, they had interrupted his warriors at their labour.

He had been forced to react swiftly, sending the Mandrakes in while their prey was on the alert. Even so, it had proved immensely entertaining. He turned to look at the others. 'Astounding. I wasn't aware they had the wit to retreat.'

'They are smart, these wolves,' Malys said. 'Or perhaps your trap was simply sloppy, Traevelliath.' She sat at her accustomed place, watching the fray with detached amusement. Annoyance flared in him.

'*Our* trap, Aurelia. Or have you forgotten that those are your Mandrakes who failed to kill them?' Sliscus flung out a hand, indicating the shadow-shape that

slowly emerged onto the deck of the Raider. He turned to face the spindly creature. He felt little of the instinctive fear that afflicted many in Commorragh when it came to the shadow-skinned natives of Aelindrach. ‘Well? What have you to say for yourself, you ambulatory oil slick?’

Whatever reply the shadow-creature had been about to offer was cut short by a blast from Sliscus’ splinter pistol. He had drawn and fired before the creature could speak. The Mandrake slumped back and toppled from the deck with barely a sound. Sliscus holstered his weapon with a disdainful sniff. The shadow-skins died as easily as anything else, whatever their reputation. ‘Call off the others. Let them go for the moment.’

Malys cleared her throat. ‘Is that wise? We could easily catch them.’

Sliscus looked at her. ‘And what would be the fun of that?’ He looked back towards the burning hall. ‘They slipped our trap – it seems only fitting I give them a head start. Then we will pursue them.’

‘Will you send the Mandrakes after them?’ Malys asked.

‘Yes. Let them finish what they started.’ Sliscus tapped his lips speculatively.

‘They will, have no fear of that.’

He turned to her, smiling. ‘Your confidence lightens my spirit, Aurelia. And since you are so sure in the success of the creepers, it seems only fitting that you should follow them and bring me my prize when they are finished with it.’ He paused. ‘Or before, if possible.’

‘Am I to go alone?’ she asked. She seemed somewhat discomfited. Good. Aurelia was infuriatingly sure of herself on occasion. At times it was necessary to remind her that cunning as she was, he was more so.

‘No. What sort of host would I be if I didn’t ensure your safety?’ Sliscus motioned to Sleg. ‘You will accompany her. Take as many of your coil-kin as you think best. I want the leader’s pelt intact.’ The Sslyth nodded slowly. Sliscus looked at Malys. ‘Take one of the Venoms.’

‘Several would be better.’

‘I don’t have several to spare, Aurelia. I expect you will figure out some way of accomplishing your task, even with such meagre resources.’ He smiled at her. ‘Be off with you, my dear. You know how impatient I get.’



CHAPTER NINETEEN

SHADOW DEATH

641.M41

‘Well, I’m not going to lie – that could have gone better,’ Lukas said as he helped Kadir lay Dag down. There was no trace of humour in his voice. He looked around.

The cave was small, as caves went. It was little more than a gouge in the mountainside. They had fled north, leading their hunters away from where they had left Hetha and the others. Lukas hoped the shield-maiden would be smart enough to take her people far from the area. Either way, there was little they could do to help the mortals now.

Dag groaned. His blood splattered the stones, refusing to clot. His Larraman’s Organ had been damaged by the eldar’s blade, and the wound wasn’t closing the way it should. Lukas could smell Morkai’s breath on the air. The great black wolf was panting at the cave’s threshold, waiting. He wouldn’t have to do so for long.

‘We shouldn’t have run,’ Kadir said, his voice hoarse. ‘Not like that. Not like whipped curs.’ He crouched on his haunches, flexing his hands until the servos in his gauntlets whined in protest. He was taking Ake’s death hard. Kadir had

fancied himself the leader of his little pack, but Ake had been the fire in its heart.

‘And how would you have done it?’ Lukas growled.

Kadir didn’t look at him. In that moment, the Blood Claws felt Ake’s loss keenly. Kadir should have snapped at Lukas. Snarled at him. But he didn’t have the same fire Ake had. None of them did. Halvar pulled his helmet off with a convulsive motion. The dirge began with him, but pulled in the others, even Dag. A groaning, growling rumble of wordless sorrow. Lukas hunched himself against the sound, as if it were a chill wind.

Part of him wanted to join them. But another part knew that he could not. For all that they had shared in these past weeks, he wasn’t truly part of the pack. Could never be a part of any pack. So he sat in silence, waiting until the echoes had faded. ‘If we had stayed, we would be dead,’ Lukas said into the silence.

‘An honourable death,’ Halvar said hoarsely. He stroked his totems, seeking reassurance. ‘A good death. Our deeds remembered in saga and song.’

‘And are our deeds etched in stone, then, or in snow?’ Dag grunted as he tried to haul himself up. ‘Will they be forgotten now? Tell me that, then.’ He laughed mirthlessly. His arms gave out and he sank back with a disgruntled groan. ‘I can’t feel my legs.’

‘That’s what happens when someone lays your spine open,’ Lukas said, almost gently. ‘Stop complaining. You don’t see Einar complaining, and he’s got three blades sticking in him.’ That Einar was still upright was more luck than anything else.

‘Hurts,’ Einar said, levering a hooked blade out of his side. The unnatural blade had sunk into the shadowed crevices of his battle-plate, seeking flesh with a preternatural precision. He cast it aside and reached for the next one.

Lukas had to help him with the last one, high up on his back and resting against the exhaust port of his power pack. Einar grunted in pain as the blade popped free. Lukas hefted it. ‘It’s only half real,’ he said wonderingly.

‘Felt real,’ Einar growled.

Lukas tossed the weapon away and glanced towards Dag. ‘You’re dying, brother,’ he said bluntly.

Dag closed his eyes. His breathing was laboured. ‘I know,’ he said, his voice thick with pain. ‘My own fault. I didn’t see it.’

‘No. Mine.’ Lukas grimaced. ‘And you have no idea how much it pains me to say that.’ He ran his hands through his hair. ‘They’ll be coming for us.’

‘Hunting us, you mean,’ Kadir said.

‘Yes,’ Lukas said. He smiled thinly. ‘Can’t say I like the feeling.’ He peered

towards the aperture to the cave, taking note of the way the shadows lengthened. His hackles rose. There was a scent on the wind – not a physical smell, not quite, but an iron tang that put him in mind of deep places and dark waters. They hadn't come as far as he might have liked. 'They'll be on our heels. We need a plan.'

'Fight,' Einar said. He clicked a fresh promethium canister into place with bloody fingers and gave his dragon a fond pat. 'Kill.' Of all the Blood Claws, he looked the least affected by what had happened, despite the injuries he had sustained. Of course, it was always hard to tell what Einar was thinking.

'I like that plan,' Kadir said. Halvar nodded fiercely, his totems clattering. The Blood Claws were eager for retribution now. Lukas could smell the kill-urge rising from them. The need to wash away their failure in blood. He felt the same himself.

'Lacks subtlety,' he said. 'They can kill us with our own shadows, those ones. Rushing them, fangs bared, is a good way to get our throats cut.' He tapped the side of his head. 'No, what's called for here is a cunning plan.'

'So it's hopeless, then?' Dag said. His laughter turned to a wracking cough.

Lukas peered at him. 'Hope is the mother of invention.' He reached down and unhooked a long cylindrical canister grenade from his combat harness. 'Photon grenades. I borrowed a few from old Thymr. Handy things to have, just in case I need to run away with my tail between my legs.' He gave a lopsided grin. 'Never thought of using them this way, though.'

'What good are flash grenades going to be against those things?' Kadir asked.

'Light,' Einar grunted.

'Ha! Yes, light,' Lukas said. 'How better to fight shadow-devils than with good, honest light?'

Dag forced himself upright. 'And how are we going to get them into the light? Ask nicely?' He coughed again. 'Those things are quick enough to cut a frag grenade in half before it's activated. We'll have to surprise them.'

'I know.' Lukas looked down at him. 'We need to draw them in. Lay some poisoned meat. Wounded prey is always the hardest to resist.'

Dag frowned and sank back down. He coughed, and blood speckled his chin. 'What do you need me to do?'

'You will be bait,' Lukas said. 'You understand? They will likely kill you. Sure as sure, however the rest of this goes, you will probably die.'

Dag nodded, his lean face sweat-slick, his eyes fever-bright. 'You never answered my question earlier,' he said hoarsely. 'Will we be remembered?'

‘By me, at least. And since I have no intention of dying any time soon, you’ll have immortality, of a sort.’ Lukas hesitated. Then, more reluctantly, he added, ‘There will be songs, Dag. I swear. For you and Ake. I’ll sing them myself, if I have to.’

‘Good. Then give me the grenade.’

They left Dag alone in the dark. Einar crouched out of sight and stared unblinking at his brother. Einar didn’t question the world. He merely endured it. But this was almost too much, even if his brother had agreed to it.

Dag lay on red snow, breathing shallowly, the flash grenade held tight to his chest. It was a simple enough trap. An open space, easy prey. Occasionally, Dag would make a half-hearted crawling movement, as if trying to haul himself deeper into the tunnels. A wounded beast, left behind by his packmates.

Einar tried to ignore the ache of his wounds as he concentrated on the dark. Everything hurt now. There was blood in his armour, and he could taste it in his mouth. But he would live. The xenos blades hadn’t struck anything vital.

He wished Ake were with them. This was the sort of thing he would have enjoyed. Not Dag dying, but the fighting afterwards. Though knowing Ake, he would probably have enjoyed Dag dying as well. He glanced at Kadir, crouched nearby. The other Blood Claw seemed subdued. He and Ake had always scraped against each other, like blade and whetstone. But now Ake was gone, and Kadir was off balance.

Soon Dag would be gone as well. Halvar would say it was the will of the Allfather. Einar found no comfort in that. The pack had been strong. Now it was weak. He looked at Lukas, wondering what the Trickster thought of it all.

A proximity chime sounded in his ear, and he turned, scanning the darkness. The xenos came in ones and twos, seeping from the darkness of the cave mouth. For a moment, Einar thought them nothing more than new shadows, added to the rest already filling the cave. But no shadow had ever moved with such purpose.

They surrounded Dag, looking down at him as if curious. Then, almost casually, one of them crouched and buried the wicked sickle-like blade it carried in the Blood Claw’s leg. Dag grunted, but made no other sound. The creature pulled its blade loose and struck again, higher this time. Einar realised that it was searching for a place to cause pain. The others joined in, prodding and stabbing as Dag cursed and flailed at them. They flickered and twisted, easily avoiding his clumsy blows.

Einar half rose, but Lukas caught him. He shook his head. ‘Wait, brother,’ he

murmured over the vox. 'We need to make sure they're all in the cave.'

Einar understood, though it sat heavily on his hearts. Dag's grunts became groans as the pain started to overwhelm him. Then, with a cry that was at once a scream of agony and a roar of fury, he set off the photon grenade. The light swelled, filling the cave, erasing every shadow save those grouped around the Blood Claw. The photo-lenses in Einar's visor compensated automatically. The Mandrakes were abnormally thin, their dark flesh marked with scarified whorls that might have been symbols. They had manes of ratty, colourless hair, and gaunt faces that reminded him of the fish the thralls caught in deep rivers below the Aett.

One of the Mandrakes spat something that might have been a curse and plunged a blade into Dag's skull, silencing him. Einar shook Lukas off and lunged out of hiding. He charged towards the creatures and drove the stock of his flamer into the skull of the closest. He felt bone give beneath the force of the blow, and it toppled backwards, limbs twitching. He lowered the nozzle of his flamer and caught another with a burst of heat, reducing it to greasy motes before it could scream.

Lukas and the others had followed him, exploding out of cover to fall on their startled prey. '*Hloja!*' Lukas cried. 'Laugh, brothers! Laugh, so that they might know how much pleasure we take in their deaths.' He caught a Mandrake by the throat and slammed the dazed creature back against the cave wall. Before it could twist out of his grip, he rammed the talons of his wolf claw into its abdomen. It shrieked as cryonic energies surged through it, flash-freezing it inside out. He ripped his claw loose, shattering the creature.

The glare of the photon grenade was already fading. 'Einar, more light,' Lukas snarled. Einar obliged, filling the air with fire. The flames jetted out, blocking the exit to the cave. In the wash of wrathful light, Einar watched his brothers go to work.

Startled Mandrakes scrambled back and found themselves face-to-face with Kadir and Halvar. The Blood Claws fought in grim silence, warding each other from the blades of their foes. Einar set alight any creature that tried to escape the killing ground by diving into the shadows of the cave or seeking relief in those cast by his flames.

Einar turned a blow with the length of his flamer and kicked the attacking Mandrake in its midsection. The creature reeled. It slashed wildly at him, trying to keep him back. Seeing an opening, it lunged past him, seeking safety in the shadow stretching behind him. Einar pivoted, and a spurt of flame caught the

creature between its shoulder blades, its head vanishing. With a wordless roar, he wrenched the struggling, screaming xenos from his shadow and cast it full into the flames.

The sounds of fighting had faded. The shadow-things were dead, or dying. Einar was relieved to see that his brothers had survived. Kadir seemed unhurt, but Halvar moved slowly, as if something inside him had been torn. Einar caught his arm. 'Injured?'

'Nothing I won't live through, brother.'

Einar nodded and looked at Lukas. 'What now?' he growled.

'The hunt is not done,' Lukas said. He stared at Dag's body, and Einar wondered what he was thinking. 'My belly is empty of meat, but my mind is full of tricks. Let us exchange one for the other.'

'What about Dag?' Kadir asked, looking at the body.

Lukas grinned fiercely. 'Oh, he's coming too.'

Lady Malys' hunting party found the wolf easily enough.

Too easily, as it turned out.

Surrounded by the torn corpses of several Mandrakes, the body lay where it had seemingly fallen, collapsed in the red snow. The beast had obviously been trying to make it up the slope, into the dubious safety of the caves above.

Malys was standing on the Venom's weapons platform, and she looked around warily as she leaned over the splinter cannon to inspect the corpse. Sleg and two of his coil-kin hunched on the skimmer's sides, and a fourth crouched in the driver's cockpit. That the ophidians could pilot such a temperamental vessel even with the cold temperatures slowing their reactions had been something of a surprise. They were adept hunters as well, tracking the wolves across ice and snow and up into the craggy hills.

Sleg grunted something, and two of his coil-kin slithered from the Venom and towards the body. Malys followed them down, frowning. Something about this seemed wrong. 'Wait,' she began.

Too late.

As one of the Sslyth rolled the body, there was a sharp, distinct ping, followed by an explosion. The Sslyth closest to the blast absorbed most of it, at the cost of their lives. Malys was thrown backwards, against the hull of the Venom. She sank down, her head spinning. Smoke billowed, mingling with the downpour and leaving greasy swathes in the air. Howls erupted from all around them, and grey shapes sprang out of the storm.

A Sslyth fell, its head tumbling soundlessly away from its collapsing body. Sleg began to fire wildly, trying to hit the fast-moving shapes. The Sslyth piloting the Venom snarled something as it tried to gain altitude. The attempt was cut short by the roar of a bolt pistol. The windscreen cracked, and the Sslyth jerked in its seat. The Venom dropped heavily to the ground, its undercarriage crunching against the rock.

Malys went to scramble up onto the firing platform. If she could get to the splinter cannon, she might be able to fend their attackers off long enough to call for aid. But the click of a weapon being readied stopped her. She turned and found herself staring down the smoking barrel of a bolt pistol.

She twitched aside at the last moment. The weapon roared, partially deafening her. She drew her blade and slashed wildly, driving her attacker back. He cursed and reached for his own blade as she darted forward, closing the distance. She had fought these brutes before. They were stronger, and more resilient than they had any right to be. And she was no wych, indulging in bloody combat for the joy of it.

Her attack startled him and he fell back, eliciting coarse laughter from unseen companions. More shapes stepped out of the swirling snow, quickly cutting off every potential escape route. She turned with her blade held out as her attacker got to his feet, and saw Sleg engaging a crimson-haired wolf. The wolf grinned at her as he shoved Sleg back. 'Leave that one, pups,' he called out. 'I need her alive.'

The others, including the one she had knocked down, kept their distance from her. Their yellow gazes were flat and calculating, as if trying to decide which bit of her they wanted to eat first. She sniffed disdainfully and turned to watch the duel.

Sleg moved with desperate speed, almost faster than Malys could follow. Four blades crashed down, scraping against a hastily interposed wolf claw. Fat sparks danced in the air. The wolf clawed his plasma pistol from its holster. A barbed blade tore the weapon from his hand as he raised it, and a second chopped into the armour protecting his thigh. For a moment, Malys thought the Sslyth might prevail. But only for a moment.

Sleg's coils looped about his opponent as the Sslyth redoubled its attacks. The wolf caught one of the ophidian's wrists and dragged it off balance. Wedge-shaped jaws snapped at him, and he stomped on its tail, eliciting a shriek. He took the opening and slugged the ophidian. It lurched away, slapping him backwards with an undulation of its tail. The wolf staggered, turned, leapt for his

pistol. The Sslyth plunged after him.

The wolf caught up the weapon and rolled to his feet, turning to face the onrushing Sslyth. He fired. The coruscating stream of plasma enveloped Sleg's skull. The ophidian flopped to the ground, coils thrashing. The wolf spat on the twitching corpse as he stepped over it. 'Tough, but stupid,' he growled in the coarse tongue of the mon-keigh. He looked at Malys. 'Can you understand me, witch?' the red-haired brute asked in the gutter-dialect of Low Commorrhagh. 'I hope so, or this is going to be a short conversation.'

'I understand, though it offends my ears,' Malys said. She cast a quick glance around. Through the falling snow and rain, she could see other great grey shapes, moving soundlessly despite their bulk. Fewer of them had been killed than she would have hoped, though she could smell the pungent aroma of their altered blood on the wind.

He laughed. 'As it offends my mouth to speak it. Are you the one in charge?'

Malys hesitated. Pride warred with pragmatism – briefly. 'No. I am but a guest to a party that is rapidly becoming intolerably dull.' She kept her blade extended. The combat drugs that had been coursing through her system were fading, leaving behind the ache of sore muscles and a pounding in her temples.

The brute chuckled. She was at a disadvantage, and he knew it. She could smell the heat of him – a wash of animal and blood. A feral odour, as intriguing as it was distasteful. 'Well, you could help me liven things up, if you like.' His eyes flashed gold, and she froze. An atavistic thrill of fear shot through her. It had been so long since she had felt anything like it that she was momentarily overcome. She licked her lips.

'And what do I get out of it?'

'A quick death.'

She smiled. 'What fun is that?'

He cocked his head, studying her. 'Life, then. A head start.'

Malys' smile widened. 'Better. And what must I do to earn this mercy?'

He drew closer, despite her blade. He flashed a sharp grin as he brushed her sword aside and leaned close.

'Take me to your host.'

Kjarl Grimblood stared into the flames, seeking any hint as to what was to come. As ever, there were more questions to be had than answers. The fire never lied, but neither did it tell the whole truth. At least, not in such a way that he could understand. It spoke in glimpses, just enough to set him on the proper trail. Or so

he hoped. There was no way to tell until the deed was done.

He had been wrong more than once. It was rare, but it happened. The thought did not sit well with him. He had spent much time and effort honing his reputation for foresight, the way another warrior might hone a blade. A gift for prophecy was only as good as its interpretation. To fail too often was to see oneself slip from honoured seer to object of mockery. And Grimblood had never had a taste for the latter.

In the end, that was why the thought of being responsible for the Trickster agitated him so. Lukas, of all the Rout, seemed immune to fate. He defied portents and struck a crooked path that was impossible to predict. Grimblood had seen the Trickster's death so often that he instinctively dismissed the possibility. Fate was a mocker when it came to the involvement of the Jackalwolf.

Around him, the Aett's central strategium chamber echoed with activity. The bark of rivenmasters as they oversaw contingents of thralls, the clatter of equipment being readied. Through it all, Grimblood leaned forward on the bench, resolutely ignoring the slow drip of data that crawled along the tacticum feeds on the screens scattered all around the hall.

The strategium chamber was full of hundreds of kaerls and machine-thralls, all of them bent diligently to their respective tasks. Some worked to coordinate the aerial search being conducted by those Stormfang pilots brave – or foolish – enough to volunteer to take their gunships out into the storm. Others added data to the growing battle-map, noting engagements, casualty figures and any other relevant tactical information.

It was all grist for the mill, as far as Grimblood was concerned. He hungered for information, the way a wolf hungered for meat. He needed to know, and knowing was a compulsion. But so far, little of it was satisfying.

He reached into the fire and stirred the embers. His ceramite gauntlet protected his flesh, and his battle-plate's sensors barely registered a spike in temperature. He held his hand there for long moments, watching the paint as it began to bubble and peel. Then, with a grunt, he extracted his limb. He gestured loosely, sending spirals of smoke through the air.

‘And what does the fire tell you, Grimblood?’

‘The fire tells me nothing. It merely reveals things I knew but was not aware of.’ Grimblood turned as the Rune Priest, Galerunner, joined him before the hearth. ‘Cast that baleful gaze of yours elsewhere, brother. What do the spirits say?’

‘Lies and truth in equal measure.’

Grimblood snorted. ‘No more helpful than the fire, then.’

‘It is the season of confusion. The earth is cast into the sky, and the stars fall into the sea. Our foes could not have picked a better time. You have command?’

Grimblood nodded. ‘Redmaw argued, as ever. But he is more eager to go a-hunting. Command is a chain whose weight would chafe him, and he knows it. In any event, I have command of the Aett this season, and that means my word is as that of the Great Wolf himself.’ He frowned. ‘Much good as it does me.’

‘How goes the hunt?’

‘Badly.’ Grimblood heaved himself to his feet. He began to pace, his broad frame filled with restless energy. ‘Redmaw and the others have made some kills, but the storm isolates us still. They must fight alone, and it is all but impossible to unite our efforts to any meaningful degree. The reports I get are incomplete. Some of that is the storm, but...’

‘The rest is not.’ Galerunner sighed. ‘Can you determine a pattern?’

‘The only pattern is that there is no pattern. They attack where they will, with no overall coordination. I suspect that we are not facing an army, but several small raiding forces, each attacking according to their own whims. And that makes them impossible to target save in piecemeal fashion. Our warriors are chasing their tails, pursuing ghosts who strike and fade away before they arrive.’

Galerunner stared into the flames. ‘Survivors?’

‘A few. They are sloppy, these xenos. They snatch who they can, kill who they can’t, and flee before we arrive. As if they know when we are coming.’

‘Could they? Given the state of our communications, if they were intercepting our vox signals, we wouldn’t know.’

Grimblood growled, and several nearby kaerls cast wary glances his way before hurriedly turning back to their tasks. ‘I know,’ he said after a few moments. ‘That’s why I gave the order for full vox-silence. Even so, we are at a disadvantage.’ He clenched his hands uselessly. ‘This is our territory, and we are being made to look like fools.’

‘The Helwinter is passing. Soon we will be able to find them.’

‘And you think they won’t flee back to whatever hell spawned them as soon as they realise that? No. They timed this too well. There is a mind out there, coordinating all of this. It is not as random as it looks. Someone planned this, and if we could catch them, we could end it.’ Grimblood growled again and turned back to the fire. ‘But we have to find them first.’ He bared his teeth at his unseen enemy. ‘Just let me get the merest whiff of them, and I will strike them

down.' He slammed a fist into his palm. 'Bones of Russ, just give me that.'

As if in answer to his plea, a squeal of feedback split the air of the chamber. Someone was trying to communicate with the Aett. Grimblood whirled, furious. Which of his fellow jarls could be so foolish?

A familiar voice cut through the static. Grimblood's recriminations died on his lips as he listened to a series of coordinates. Slowly, he smiled. When the voice became submerged in interference once more, he turned to Galerunner. 'Call the others back. Give them the coordinates. We have found our snake's hole.'

'What are you going to do?' Galerunner asked.

Grimblood growled in satisfaction. 'I am going to muster my packs. I have tarried here too long. This kill is mine.'



CHAPTER TWENTY

SERPENT'S NEST

641.M41

Malys ground her teeth in frustration. This party wasn't turning out at all as she had hoped. 'Was this truly necessary?' she asked. She shifted slightly in her seat. The explosive he had attached to a spot between her shoulder blades was a solid, threatening weight – some form of concussion grenade, tied to her armour with rawhide thongs. The Wolf hadn't warned her against trying to remove it, which she took as a sign that he was likely hoping for her to do so. Despite his talk of mercy, she had the distinct impression that he didn't care if she lived or died.

The Space Wolf lay across the back of the Venom, feigning unconsciousness. 'Would you have trusted me, were the situation reversed?' he growled, not looking up at her. He was very good at playing dead. Despite the smile. 'Now be silent.'

'No, I wouldn't trust you. But rest assured, I shall not forget this insult.'

'Good. What's the point, if you forget?'

She laughed sourly. 'That is a very Commorrite way of looking at things.'

Lukas snarled. 'Quiet.'

Malys fell silent, but continued to smile. There was a twisted knot in the soul of

this Wolf. Most of them were steel true and blade straight – little more than living weapons. This one displayed the sort of cunning that would have made him a favourite in the arenas.

The Venom swooped low over the forest's frost-covered canopy and drifted down over the hunting camp. The storm was passing. The world's orbit was stabilising once more, and the planet with it. Raiders were being prepared for departure through the webway portals, their holds heavy with slaves and plunder. Venoms and jetbikes shot past them, intending to draw off the Space Wolves before they could descend on the camp, as they inevitably would.

She urged the Venom towards the hall Sliscus had taken for his own. The corsairs and kabalite warriors on guard paid her little heed. Her warriors were near to hand, readying her own vessels for departure. Hopefully she would survive to join them.

As she drew even with the ground, a shape suddenly leapt up onto the wing of the Venom, making it shudder. Malys turned and saw Myrta grinning at her. 'I see the stories are true, my Lady Malys. You have returned victorious.'

'I have, Myrta,' Malys said stiffly. 'You seem in good humour.'

'I am. We are finally leaving this depressing mud ball.' Myrta glanced at Lukas, and Malys tensed. Did the courtesan suspect? 'This one's kin are mobilising, according to the signals we have intercepted. Sliscus believes they have somehow discovered our location.'

'Impossible,' Malys said, but without conviction. She resisted the urge to look at the Space Wolf. It seemed obvious that the mon-keigh had some way of tracking each other. Now his insistence on being brought into the camp made a crude sort of sense. Sliscus was right. This one was cunning, in a way.

Myrta frowned. 'If you wish to stay and see for yourself, feel free. But it is time to go. And take our plunder with us.' She looked at Malys. 'You have failed. Sliscus won't be helping you with whatever scheme you had in mind.'

'And how do you know that?'

'They say Vect threw you over for other pleasures,' Myrta said. 'And now Sliscus has as well. You said you would *tame* him. But he does not seem tamed to me.' Malys glanced back at the seemingly unconscious Space Wolf. His lips quirked, and she knew he was listening to every word.

She sniffed, and said, 'Regrettably, no. Traevelliath lacks any interest in helping me achieve my aims. As well you know.'

'And is that why you are bringing him such a gift?'

Malys looked at the Lhamaean warily. How much did she suspect? Myrta's

hand rested on the hilt of her blade. 'Watch your tone,' she said.

Myrta's smile was wide and without mirth. 'You should watch yours. Where is all your talk of helping one another now, eh? We prodded him to action, and for what? So he could have this beast's pelt for his bed?'

Lukas chuckled and looked up at her. 'He'll have a hard time getting it off me.'

Myrta cursed and went for her blade.

'I wouldn't,' Lukas said, gesturing tersely. In his hand was the detonator to the device connected to Malys' back. Malys caught Myrta's hand and pinned it.

'Think carefully, girl,' she hissed. 'If you strike, you will force me to dispatch you, to prevent my own death. That detonator he clutches is linked to an explosive attached to my armour.'

Myrta glared at her. 'I thought it was strange that he managed to kill Sleg, but not you.'

Malys tightened her grip. '*Think*. Now is your chance, courtesan. Would you remain his slave forever?'

'And what awaits me with his death?'

'A more forgiving mistress,' Malys said. 'I have use for a maker of poisons.'

Lukas twisted his head slightly so he could see the xenos. 'I would listen to her, witch,' he said. 'It seems to me, if I'm following your barbaric tongue properly, that we all want the same thing.' He grinned at the eldar, ready for whatever happened next. He was fully prepared to push the activation rune on the detonator he held and blow the frag grenade hooked to the back of Malys' armour. It would be inconvenient, but he would adapt. He always did.

The one called Myrta stared down at him, her alien features twisted into an expression of disgust. Lukas smiled up at her. There was nothing human in her face, none of the honest beauty of someone like Hetha. It was too cold, too perfect. Like a mask, hiding something ugly beneath. Lukas twitched his thumb, caressing the detonator. 'Best decide quick, witch. My finger is itchy.'

She turned away. For a moment he thought she was going to drop off the Venom. Instead, she leaned back. 'You should wipe that smirk from your face, mon-keigh. Corpses do not usually smile.'

Lukas chuckled and turned his attentions to his surroundings. The eldar camp had been well hidden. The steading was sprawled in the shadow of the mountains, protected from the worst of the weather. The palisades had been torn down, as had most of the buildings within, and repurposed into tall towers and crude gantries for the skiffs and jetbikes. The place now resembled an industrial

site more than a tribal dwelling.

Great cages of barbed metal sat around a central firepit, each one full of huddled, shivering shapes, the survivors of whatever tribe had made their home here. What was left of their warriors had been hung from artificial trees of black iron, their flesh exposed to the elements and their captors' blades. Lukas restrained a snarl of rage at the sight. Vengeance would come. But not yet.

Grimblood had been surprised to hear from him, of that he had no doubt. He and the other jarls would be able to track his battle-plate's beacon right to this camp. He intended to be waiting for them with the head of the enemy commander when they arrived. That would be the greatest jest of all.

Kadir and the others would be circling the camp, looking for weak points. When he made his move, they would join him. Or such was the plan. It had worked so far.

Four wolves against an army. Lukas nearly choked on a laugh. Grimblood needed to hurry, or there would be none left to kill.

The Venom slowed as it reached the heart of the stading. Malys took it down, and it landed before the remains of what had been the central hall. Lukas studied it through slitted eyes. The structure resembled the one in the Jahtvian settlement, though it was larger. It was built from stone rather than wood, and the roof was made of crudely sawed timbers rather than thatch. As the vehicle set down, the heavy doors swung open and Lukas' quarry strode out, flanked by two more of his Sslyth bodyguards. The ophidians raised shardcarbines as the Venom's engines shut off, but Sliscus waved a hand and they slithered back a few paces.

'You're alive, Aurelia. How wonderful.' Sliscus spread his arms in welcome. 'Where is Sleg, by the way?'

'Dead,' Malys said bluntly.

'Disappointing. Still, that is what he was paid for. What have you brought me?'

'See for yourself.' Myrta shoved Lukas to the ground, none too gently. He bit back a snarl. Sliscus sank to his haunches. 'This is him, then? The smart one?'

'It was,' Malys said.

'I see no wounds.'

'Poison,' Malys said flatly. 'I was forced to defend myself.'

'How dreadful. Still, you have my thanks.' Sliscus caught hold of Lukas' hair and dragged his head up. 'Ugly brute.'

'You're not so pleasant looking yourself,' Lukas said. Sliscus froze. Lukas smiled. Then, with a sweep of his arm, he knocked Sliscus' legs out from under

him. Before the eldar could react, Lukas was on him, pinning him down. He twisted to look at Malys. 'Keep the others back, witch, or you will find your wits decidedly scattered.'

Malys cursed, but the Venom's splinter cannon snarled. The Sslyth were hurled back, bodies shredded. The vehicle began to rise, its engine humming. It spun in a slow circle, firing. Warriors dived for cover. Shouts and cries of alarm rose up. Lukas grinned. He looked down at Sliscus. 'You tried to kill me.'

'I would have tried harder, had I known how clever you were.' Sliscus smiled at him. 'You even speak a civilised tongue. How delightful. Do you know who I am?'

'No. Don't care, either.'

'Shame. Familiarity adds a certain... spice.' He twisted, impossibly quick, and Lukas rocked back. Sliscus freed a hand and a blade flashed, nearly sliding between a gap in Lukas' battle-plate. He rolled away from Sliscus as the other rose to his feet. 'Someone do me the favour of killing him, please!' Sliscus snapped.

Lukas whipped his plasma pistol out and fired, knocking an eldar back. He darted for the hovering Venom, splinter fire chopping the ground around him. He caught hold of the keel just as Malys shot away from the hall. 'He's a quick one,' he shouted.

'And you're a fool,' Malys said, displaying the grenade he had attached to her armour, the sliced rawhide thongs slipping to the ground. 'Kill him, courtesan.' Myrta, still perched on the wing, thrust a blade down at Lukas. He cursed and let go of the Venom, tumbling across the ground in its wake. He pressed the detonator, but didn't wait to see if the explosion claimed them. A handful of eldar raced towards him.

Lukas rolled to his feet and darted for the cover of one of the wooden gantry towers. He pressed his back to a support pillar, waiting for the plasma pistol to reload. Splinter fire chewed the pillar to pieces around him as he counted down. 'Three, two, one – ha!' He lifted the pistol as its coils blazed with renewed energy. He swung out from behind the pillar, enhanced vision allowing him to analyse the targets scattered across the killing ground with instinctive ease. Quicker than thought, he selected a target and fired.

He turned, searching. Sliscus was gone. The creature would be looking to escape. A shot caromed off his shoulder-plate and he whirled, tackling a wide-eyed corsair through an empty slave pen. The xenos folded up, nearly every bone in its elongated frame shattered by the impact. Lukas surged to his feet,

swinging the body up to absorb the fire coming from the rest of the eldar as they triangulated on his position. The plasma pistol pinged, and he hurled the body aside, firing again. Three down. Four left, that he could see. Good odds.

Two came at him close, eager to meet him blade to blade, or just desperate. They moved fast, seeming to lash out from every angle at once. Their serrated combat blades drew sparks from his ceramite as he twisted and spun, trying to match them blow for blow. They darted away from his claw, narrowly avoiding it. He could feel an itch between his shoulders – the other two were trying to get a bead on him, letting their companions get him into position. Smart meat. But not smart enough.

His claw flashed, catching a blade. He jerked the eldar off its feet, hurling it behind him just as a splinter rifle spoke. Without waiting to see whether his aim had been true, he twisted aside, letting the other eldar's knife hiss past his face. He lunged, burying his teeth in the soft armour that covered the xenos' forearm. The plates cracked beneath his teeth and he tossed his head, dragging the eldar close. He shoved the barrel of the plasma pistol against his opponent's abdomen and pulled the trigger.

The body collapsed, wreathed in smoke, and Lukas darted deeper into the forest of wooden supports. Alarm klaxons shrieked. He could hear the boom of bolt pistols, and knew that Kadir and the others had made their move. If they could keep the xenos confused, keep them reacting, they might be able to hold them long enough for Grimblood and the other jarls to arrive. And if not... well.

'Today's as good a day as any,' Lukas murmured. He heard running feet and stuck out an arm. A corsair slammed into him and pitched backwards, whether dead or unconscious Lukas didn't bother to check. He stamped down on the eldar's head just to be sure, crumpling the ornate helm and the skull within.

Splinter fire cascaded across his chest, causing him to flinch back. He snatched a grenade from his belt and sent it bouncing in the direction the shot had come from. The explosion caused the wooden towers to groan on their supports, and he heard the panicked cries of the skiff crews above. He looked up and grinned. 'Perfect.'

Jhynkar hurried through the confusion. His wracks surrounded him in a protective circle, grunting nervously among themselves. The camp was seemingly under attack, though no one seemed to know by whom or how. The more pugnacious kabals were brawling in the streets, as the more paranoid waited impatiently for the webway gate to open. It wouldn't – not until Sliscus

was ready to depart.

‘And where is Sliscus?’ he demanded, glaring at one of the wracks. ‘Not where he ought to be, I can tell you that.’

It was all going wrong. Of course, from great suffering came great art – generally it was someone else’s suffering, but Jhynkar was adaptable. He hurried towards his workshop, hoping to catch up with Xhact before the Hex delegation collected their prizes and departed. The mon-keigh were on the way, if they weren’t already here. The whole camp was going to be smashed flat, sooner rather than later. It was time to go.

An explosion rocked the area, and Jhynkar stumbled. Smoke billowed across the path. He heard a dull boom and saw one of his wracks pitch backwards. Then another was punched from its feet, its head a red ruin. More booms, more dead wracks. The last of his servants turned, screaming briefly before it too joined its fellows in a bloody heap. Jhynkar huddled, his hands over his head, waiting for death.

When it didn’t come, he looked up. A Space Wolf was looking down at him, his helmet splashed with blood. The edge of a chainblade kissed the hollow of Jhynkar’s throat. ‘You look like you’re in charge,’ the creature rumbled in its primitive dialect. ‘Do you understand me?’

‘I–yes.’ Jhynkar looked around. Two more of the hulking warriors stepped into view, stinking of blood and promethium. ‘I know your tongue.’

‘Good. That means you can keep your head. At least for the moment. Where are the slaves kept?’

Jhynkar saw what they wanted immediately. If they freed the slaves, there would be no way to get them loaded up on the Raiders. True, some were already huddled in the holds of the Raiders circling so impatiently above, but not all by any means. ‘You mean to... to free them? All of them?’ he asked hesitantly.

‘You have a problem with that?’ The axe bit into his neck, just a bit. Jhynkar swallowed. Thoughts of reaching for his blast-pistol surfaced and sank. He wouldn’t get a shot off, and he knew it.

‘No. No problem. Delighted to be of service.’

A bone-rattling growl dripped from the front grill of his captor’s helmet. It took Jhynkar a moment to realise it was laughter. ‘I’m sure you are. Now up, little thing. Or we will leave you here with your fellows.’

Jhynkar dusted off his robes as he rose, trying to muster some dignity. ‘The slave cages are controlled by a central locking node. Trying to open them one at a time will be tedious. The central node will open them all at once. Every single

one. Come.'

He started towards his workshop. The Space Marines followed warily. One of them broke away from the group at a grunt from the one in charge. It vanished into the falling snow and smoke, moving like a ghost despite its bulk. The one with the blade and the one that smelled like a waste-processing centre stayed with him. The latter kept rubbing his primitive talismans and staring at Jhynkar in an unnecessary and unnerving fashion.

Explosions rocked the camp some moments later, the work of the Space Wolves, no doubt. Jhynkar saw the warriors of three different kabals exchanging fire in the street ahead. A few shots from his captors sent them in search of cover. He felt the thrum of electrical signals in the air about him, and knew that his captors were speaking to one another on an encrypted communications channel. This was a coordinated raid, likely the precursor to an assault.

Jhynkar didn't care. A plan was beginning to take shape. Like all good plans, it required very little effort on his part. All he had to do was help these creatures until such time as he could slip away. Sliscus was as good as dead once the rest of the mon-keigh arrived. Not even he could fight such odds. Jhynkar smiled. He had fulfilled his part of the bargain with Xhact, if in a wholly unforeseen way.

Of course, he still had to escape himself. His smile faded.

His workshop proved to be still standing, against his fears to the contrary. The Space Wolves shoved him inside. 'Where is this control node?' the leader rumbled.

'There,' Jhynkar said, pointing. He looked around. The stasis tubes were gone, as he had feared. Xhact was likely already aboard one of the Raiders circling the coordinates for the webway gate. He cursed inwardly, careful to let none of his dismay show on his face. But the suspensor cages were still there, their captives inside them.

'Bones of Russ,' the totem-bedecked warrior grunted, staring at the beasts as they raged silently. 'Are those what I think they are?'

The other tapped Jhynkar's shoulder with the flat of his chainblade. 'The control node. Turn it off.' Jhynkar hesitated. Then, with a sigh, he moved to do as he was asked. He had hoped they would do it themselves and give him the opening he needed to flee. It seemed he was going to have to improvise. He went to the node and began to deactivate the power fields surrounding the slave pens throughout the camp.

'Kadir, those creatures. Are they...?'

'They are,' the one with the axe said. 'Why do you have them here, xenos?'

Jhynkar's lip curled. 'I was studying them. Quite fascinating, really.'

'They are not test subjects.'

'Oh, but they are, aren't they?' Jhynkar paused and looked at the one called Kadir. 'You all are. You are works of crude artistry, your every cell designed just so by an artist of sublime cruelty. Finite works, to be sure. But the infinite can only be contemplated through consideration of the finite.' He looked at the wolf-things sadly. It was a shame he wasn't going to be able to improve them in any way. They would have made wonderful additions to his body of work. He smiled at his captors. 'I wonder, is that what the one who created you intended?'

'Be silent, creature,' the other Space Wolf growled. He looked around warily. 'We are running low on time. Where is the Trickster?'

'I have no doubt Lukas is where he needs to be, Halvar. It is up to us to give him the time he needs to do what must be done.' The Space Wolf looked at Jhynkar. 'Continue.'

Jhynkar nodded obligingly. 'Of course, of course.' He continued, surreptitiously manipulating the controls of the suspensor cages, making them drift closer to his captors. His free hand inched towards his blast-pistol as his head began to fill with images of the rewards to come. He was so close to freedom that he could taste it. He threw the last switch, and the node began to hum. 'There. That's done it.'

Throughout the camp, the power fields around the slave pens would be going down. All of the captives in the camp not already trapped in the hold of a Raider – human and animal alike – would suddenly find themselves free. And not just them.

The suspensor cages went dark and dropped from the air. They crashed to the ground, and their prisoners leapt free with blood-curdling howls. Jhynkar shoved himself away from the node, snatched his blast-pistol free and fired. The warrior, Kadir, jerked back. 'As promised, mon-keigh. All the captives are freed. But I doubt it is thanks that they have in mind, starved as they are!'

He was halfway to the exit when he realised the lupine mutants weren't attacking the Space Wolves. Instead, they were pursuing him. He fired at one as it leapt for him. The creature fell, its skull a smoking ruin.

But another crashed into him as he scrambled out through the door, knocking him sprawling. It snarled down at him, so close that he could see the perfect imperfection of its eyes – at once beast and human. The blast-pistol was torn from his grip by a raking claw. He thrashed beneath its weight, something in him broken. Several somethings. Pain suppressants flooded his system as the first

teeth entered his flesh.

His last thought, just before the beast bit through his skull, was that they really were quite beautiful, in their way.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

WOLF AND SERPENT

641.M41

Sliscus cursed as he stepped aboard his Raider. ‘Blow the clamps and take us up. I am tired of the smell of this place.’ The air throbbed with the sound of gunfire. Down below, the camp was in an uproar. Someone had freed the slaves, and there were Space Wolves – more than just the one – running about, causing mayhem.

Worse, the rest of the mangy beasts were on the way. The storm had abated enough that the mon-keigh had found their courage, and now grey gunships sped across the ice. They had been found, thanks to Malys. He would be sure to show his appreciation later. His anger passed as quickly as it had come, and he laughed. This was exciting.

Doubtless, Malys had been coerced. Another sign of the Wolf’s cunning. Mostly his sort was only good for killing things. This one was smart. But he had risked much, just to get close. To make the kill himself. Sliscus strode to the prow, humming softly. He had recognised something in the Wolf’s yellow gaze – a need, equal to his own. He shivered in pleasure at the thought. It was so rare to find an enemy worth one’s time.

It was too bad he had to cut this trip short just as it had become interesting. But there was no point in staying only to face a fully prepared foe. The Space Wolves would fall upon his camp like the beasts they were, and it was best to be elsewhere when that occurred. The key to success was knowing when to depart.

He leaned over the rail, watching as the lesser kabals fell to fighting each other. There were only a few Raiders left, and with space at a premium, thanks to the plunder most carried, anyone not on board one was left to the wolves. They hadn't even had time to load the bulk of the chattel.

He winced as one of the gantries exploded, taking a Raider with it. He turned to the steersman. 'Some speed would not go amiss. Take us higher, as quickly as possible.'

The deck thrummed as the vessel rose into the snowy skies. There was barely a strong breeze now. And the sun was almost visible. The crew were in a heightened state of excitement. They had fended off several attempts to commandeer the vessel before Sliscus' arrival. Sliscus looked up, towards the Raiders circling before the flicker of radiance that would soon enlarge into a dimensional rip at his command. Beyond it, the webway waited, and his flagship.

'Activate the gate,' he called out. There was a sound like an immense cloth being torn asunder, and an ugly radiance bruised the sky. The air split, and the circling Raiders plunged into the sub-dimensional aperture. He smiled indulgently. Malys would be aboard one of those, he was sure, and already scheming to spin the situation to her advantage. He wondered whether she would confront him immediately, or if she would seek a safe distance. 'What do you think, my lady? I... oh. Yes.' He turned, seeking Myrta, only she wasn't there. He wondered where she had got to. And Jhynkar, as well. Neither was at their appointed place. He sighed. It seemed this trip had been costlier than he had anticipated.

'Someone remind me to find a new courtesan,' he called out, looking at the closest members of his crew. 'Perhaps a new fleshweaver too.' He dropped a hand to the hilt of one of his blades, feeling the warmth of the spirit stones.

'And no sign of the Harlequins,' he murmured. 'How odd.' Presumably, whatever scheme they had concocted had either succeeded or failed. He doubted he would ever find out which. That was the trouble with the clowns – they never let you in on the joke until it was too late to appreciate it.

As the Raider rose, he saw flashes of light streaking across the ice fields in the distance. He smiled and waved to the approaching Space Wolves. Midwinter had

passed, and now the hunters left the wilderness to return to their entertainments. 'Ah well, it was fun while it lasted.'

His Raider shuddered slightly as it passed through the aperture and then through the striated convolutions of the webway beyond. Seconds later, his Raider was sliding into the labyrinthine assault bay of the *Incessant Agony*. Alarm klaxons were sounding, Raiders were docking at their berths all around him, and plunder was already being unloaded. It was a pleasing sort of madhouse. Cheers went up at the sight of him.

He accepted their adulation with quiet restraint. A few dignified waves would serve as acknowledgement. Most of them ignored him, too busy seeing to preparations for imminent departure. They would leave the system as soon as he reached the command deck.

The Raider slid into an open berth, and Sliscus waited impatiently at the rail as a boarding plank extended from the dock. A slave was waiting on him. 'Report,' he said as the plank locked into place.

'Ah, the... ah... the system defence fleet is en route. *Ribald Blade* is running interference with the rest of the fleet. But they seem... ah... very intent on getting back here.'

Sliscus laughed. With the fading of the storm, the planet's isolation had been broken. Reports must be filtering back to the Space Marines about what was occurring. They had seen his stratagem for what it was and ordered their fleet back to cut off his escape. But there wasn't a mon-keigh ship built that could outrun *Incessant Agony*.

'Let them come. I cannot think of a better way to end this celebration than by humiliating them in the void as I humiliated them on the ground.'

'I wouldn't call it humiliation, exactly. Does a flea humiliate a wolf?'

Sliscus spun. A familiar face surrounded by a mane of red hair grinned at him over the barrel of the Raider's disintegrator cannon, now aimed at the deck. 'My name is Lukas, by the way,' the Space Wolf said. 'If you were wondering.'

'I wasn't,' Sliscus said. Warriors swarmed towards the gunner's dais. The barrel of the cannon rose, and Sliscus flung out his hands. 'Back. Back!' If the cannon fired, it would punch a hole right through the deck and into the anti-gravity engines. 'Might I inquire how you came to be here?'

'I sneaked aboard,' Lukas said. He glanced around, taking in his surroundings. 'Nice ship. Lots of room. Too many xenos, though. Might have to air it out a bit.'

Intrigued despite himself, Sliscus said, 'Tell me, how did you know which was

mine?’

‘Oh, that was easy,’ Lukas said, leaning over the cannon. ‘I looked for the nicest one.’ His grin was wide and feral. ‘You didn’t really think I was going to let you slither away that easily, eh?’ His thumbs twitched over the activation glyphs, and Sliscus tensed, ready to duck aside. Lukas licked his teeth as if in anticipation. ‘Tell me, does your kind have the story of the boy who swallowed a kraken?’

‘No, I can’t say that we do.’

‘Pity. As you said, familiarity adds spice.’ Lukas turned the cannon on its plinth until it was aimed at a Raider docked in a nearby berth. He fired, and the skiff vanished in flames. Lukas spun the cannon, holding down the triggers. Particles of unstable matter burst over the docking ring, and delicate equipment exploded obligingly.

The Space Wolf howled with laughter as he raked the cavernous interior of the bay and much of what it contained with destructive energies. The *Incessant Agony* shook as the wolf it had inadvertently swallowed tore at its guts. Sliscus stumbled into the rail, the docking platform shuddering wildly. ‘Someone kill him!’ he shrieked.

Corsairs raced towards the dais, only to meet their deaths as the Space Wolf swung the cannon around and targeted them. Beams of energy punched through the ethersail and swept across the rail. Sliscus was flung to the deck, narrowly avoiding the beam as it passed overhead. He scrambled back to his feet, gripping the smouldering rail for support. Alarms wailed. The bay was an inferno. Skiffs burned, as did the docking ring. Fires roared out of control, despite desperate slaves and crew fighting to contain them. If they weren’t quick, the fires might well compromise the ship’s ability to escape the system.

‘Vent the bay,’ Sliscus shouted, trying to be heard over the klaxons. He gestured sharply to the nearby crew stations. ‘Do it now, before it causes a chain reaction!’ Long moments later, the bottom of the bay swung open with a torturous roar of metal and escaping atmosphere. The broken gantries and berths tore loose of the framework as the void reached out to claim what it could. Burning Raiders and those unlucky enough to still be on them tumbled downwards, caught in the sudden decompression.

Lukas swung the disintegrator cannon around and fired at the crew stations, preventing them from closing the bay. Sliscus cursed and scrambled towards him. He fired his pistol, but Lukas leapt over the prow rail and out of sight. Sliscus hit the rail and peered over. Lukas grinned up at him from where he

clung to the curve of the prow. The plasma pistol in his hand spat, forcing Sliscus to duck back.

He was over the rail a moment later, sword in hand. Lukas tackled him, and they rolled across the sweep of the prow. Sliscus struck him in the face with the pommel of a sword and sprang to a nearby gantry. He extended a blade in invitation. 'Come on then, Wolf. You have come all this way. Don't be shy now. Duke Traevelliath Sliscus awaits you.'

Lukas leapt from the wounded skiff to the gantry, landing heavily. Sliscus retreated as he rose to his feet. 'Is that what they call you, then?' Lukas twitched a finger in a come-hither gesture. 'Come then, Duke. You and I must have words.'

Sliscus smiled and stepped back. 'I can hear you from here, Wolf.'

Lukas shrugged and, quick as his namesake, bounded towards his foe. 'I think not,' he said with a laugh, bringing his claw down. Sliscus twitched aside and the claw carved long gouges in the hull plate behind him. Lukas caught a handful of the corsair's hair and yanked him back. Their foreheads connected, and Sliscus staggered with a grunt. Lukas swiped at him again, driving him back a step.

Sliscus bent away from the blow. He spun, blade slashing up and down. One of Lukas' braids fell to the deck, sliced neatly from his head. 'You are cunning, Wolf. Slippery. More so than I expected.' Sliscus took a firmer grip on the hilt of his blade. 'But cunning has its limits.'

'Even yours,' Lukas growled. He flexed his claw. Energy crawled along the talons, casting weird shadows across the cramped confines of the bay.

'I have no limits,' Sliscus said. 'At least, none that I am aware of. But by all means, come and see if you can teach me.'

Lukas leapt. Sliscus ducked aside, a graceful shadow. The Strifeson's claw slammed down, tearing through conduits and cables in an explosion of sparks. Lukas tore his talons free and spun, but too late. The dark eldar's blade danced across his ribs, slicing through ceramite as easily as if it were paper. Sliscus laughed and sprang back as Lukas lashed out at him. 'Close, Wolf. Close. But my fangs are deadlier than yours, by far.'

Lukas growled low in his throat and glanced down at the wound. He could feel something burning within him. He laughed even as he staggered. 'Poison?'

'Ah, the Wolf has a palate.' Sliscus extended his blade. 'But no, not poison. Psycho-vampiric circuitry. I look forward to seeing what it does to an augmented freak of nature like you.'

‘I’ll give you a closer look.’ Lukas lurched as if falling, and then sprang, laughing. Unprepared, Sliscus ducked back, but not quickly enough. Lukas clipped him with the edge of his claw, and the corsair yelped in pain. Sliscus rolled away and came up swiftly, his blade singing out. Lukas ducked and drew his plasma pistol. Before he could fire, Sliscus’ blade chopped through the barrel. Lukas tossed the useless weapon aside and fell back.

‘An amusing diversion, Wolf. But that is all you are. Just another animal for the arena. And there can be only one ending for your sort, long overdue though it may be.’ Sliscus slid forward as Lukas scrambled away.

‘What is everyone’s fascination with my death?’ he asked, rolling aside as Sliscus’ blade sliced through the gantry. He lashed out with his feet, hoping to smash his opponent’s legs out from under him. Sliscus leapt upwards, avoiding the blow. He landed in a crouch, his sword slicing through Lukas’ thigh.

Lukas staggered against the rail, his vision blurring. Something burned at the back of his throat, and he was having trouble drawing breath. His enhanced biology was struggling against whatever the blade had done to him. Before he could push himself away from the rail, Sliscus was behind him. The sword pierced his back-plate, tore through his flesh and skidded off his hardened ribcage. It emerged from his chest-plate and pierced the metal of the rail, pinning him there.

Sliscus cursed and set his foot against Lukas’ back, trying to lever the blade free. Lukas, choking on his own blood, raised his wolf claw and split the rail. It burst away from the gantry and he toppled forward, dragging an unprepared Sliscus with him.

They tumbled to the next gantry below, landing in a painful heap. The sword was jostled free of Lukas’ abdomen. Still on his knees, his free hand clapped to the wound, Lukas swiped out with his claw, tearing Sliscus’ cloak to ragged tatters.

The ship shuddered. Sparks cascaded down accompanied by loosened debris, momentarily separating them. Breathing heavily, Lukas hauled himself up. He could see more eldar racing along the nearby gantries. Hurt as he was, he wasn’t going to be able to fight his way out. ‘Grimblood was right. That’s disappointing.’

Sliscus emerged from the smoke, a blade in either hand. ‘Your mistake was in thinking that you could ever beat me in my own ship. This is my hunting ground, and I am master here.’

‘Wolves don’t have masters,’ Lukas said. His hand fell to his combat harness.

He only had a few grenades left. Pulling them all loose, he activated them with a sweep of his thumb. He flung them out, and they rattled along the gantries before exploding. The gantry they were standing on creaked as the explosions weakened its support struts.

Seeing Sliscus stagger as the gantry swayed, Lukas leapt. His claw closed on one of Sliscus' blades and he snapped it off at the hilt. He tried to backhand the corsair, but Sliscus ducked away. The eldar drew his pistol and fired. Lukas interposed his wolf claw at the last moment, and the blast washed across the gauntlet. He felt a prickling heat and smelled liquefying metal. Instinctively, he disengaged the clamps and seals that kept the claw in place, discarding it. What was left of it splashed to the gantry. Off balance, he turned back towards Sliscus, only to see the corsair readying another shot.

'*Skítja*,' Lukas yelled, lunging forward. Sliscus didn't hesitate. His second shot struck Lukas in the chest. The Trickster stumbled back, the gantry rail digging into his waist. Toxic fumes enveloped him as he swatted ineffectually at the bubbling mass eating its way through his chest-plate. He snarled as the first flickers of pain reached him.

'Do you like it?' Sliscus held up the pistol. 'Liquifier pistol. Discharges an incredibly potent acid derived from the caustic blood of some beast or other. It will eat right through that armour of yours, and the flesh beneath as well.'

Lukas groaned and slumped. An acrid smoke billowed up from the concave ruin of his chest-plate, and he could feel the acid eating away at his body. He sank down, his nerve endings screaming. The fingers of his gauntlets blackened as he tried to scrape the acid away. Moments later it began to dry out and flake, leaving a gaping hole in its wake.

'It evaporates quickly, however. The pain alone is enough to kill most prey. But you are not most prey, are you? No. You are clever meat. And clever meat deserves a reward.' Sliscus stepped towards Lukas and tossed the pistol aside. He drew a cruelly barbed knife from his belt. He sank down beside Lukas and wrenched the sections of his weakened armour apart, exposing his chest.

'I'll carve out that cunning heart and keep it by my bedside,' Sliscus hissed, raising the blade. Lukas struggled to rise, but the eldar's grip was strong. The knife sank into his chest, cutting through carapace and reinforced bone with ease. Lukas caught at Sliscus' forearm, fighting against the pain that threatened to overwhelm him. But it was no use.

With a dreadful, wet sound, his secondary heart came free of his chest. Lukas gasped in agony and sagged back, choking on his own blood. Sliscus held the

heart up, admiring it. 'Smaller than I imagined,' he murmured.

Darkness crept in at the edges of Lukas' consciousness. Even a Space Wolf had limits, and Lukas had reached his. Grimblood had been right, damn him. But he couldn't leave without one last laugh. The guttural sound slipped from his blistered lips, gaining strength even as his body lost it.

'What are you laughing about?' Sliscus demanded, glancing away from his gory trophy. He leaned close, grabbing a handful of Lukas' scalp. 'Answer me.'

Lukas grinned, saliva bubbling in his mouth. 'You aren't the only one who can play with acid,' he said thickly. He hawked and spat. Sliscus reeled, screaming shrilly. The corsair staggered back, his hands clasped to his smoking features. The world spinning about him, Lukas caught the edge of the gantry and dragged himself over the edge. The stars beckoned, and he joined the tide of wreckage still being vented from the ship.

He fell slowly, striking the edge of the lower bay and spinning out into the welcoming black, Sliscus' screams echoing in his ears.

The *Incessant Agony* shuddered as it left Fenris' orbit, alarm klaxons sounding. Sliscus slumped back against the broken rail, cradling his burnt face. He needed to get to the command deck, to take charge. But for the moment, he could do nothing but sit and wait for the pain to recede.

Slaves surrounded him in helpless panic, and he thrust them away, conscious of his warriors' gazes. 'Get away. Get away!' He dragged himself to his feet, blinking back stinging tears. There was no telling what the Wolf's spittle had done to his face, but he had survived worse. It could be repaired.

Or maybe he wouldn't. He might well decide to keep the scars, as a reminder to go with his trophy. Through blurring vision, he examined his prize. 'The Wolf's heart,' he murmured, remembering the Harlequin's prophecy. He smiled, but it twisted into a wince as pain flared through his ravaged features. 'Nearly undone by a metaphor. What a ridiculous way to die.'

'Silly Serpent. Death is for secondary characters.'

Sliscus looked up through blurring vision. The Shadowseer crouched on a shattered strut nearby, watching him. Given the situation, he wasn't surprised to see her. He attempted a crooked smile, and new wounds opened on his ravaged face. 'And am I a main character, then, in whatever little drama you have concocted?'

'You served your purpose well, Duke. Done as the part demanded, and with such style.' The Harlequin leaned towards him, her movements unnaturally

smooth even for an eldar. She reached out as if to touch his injured face. He flinched back.

‘I do everything with style,’ he growled. ‘And I need no instruction from you.’ He pulled himself to his feet. Below, through the open bay, he could see Fenris turning. A blue, hateful blotch on the stars. The Harlequin watched him, head tilted. He held out the heart. ‘Do you want this?’

The Harlequin rose to her full height. ‘We merely wanted the absence of it. Do with it as you see fit.’

Sliscus smiled. ‘I’ll hold on to it, then. A keepsake to remember this little affair by.’ He watched the world below dwindle as the *Incessant Agony* departed for the safety of deep space. He could already feel the faintest edge of boredom sliding against his nerves. He would have to find new entertainments with which to occupy himself, once he had healed.

Perhaps Aurelia was right. Perhaps it was time to return to Commorragh and remind himself why he had left in the first place. And wouldn’t Vect be surprised to see him? And Aurelia, too, if she had managed to get off Fenris. There was much fun to be had, if you knew where to look.

‘I don’t suppose you’ll ever tell me what this was all about, will you?’ he said finally. There was no answer. When he looked around, the Harlequin was gone.

He snorted. Typical. He looked down at the heart. ‘Lukas,’ he murmured. ‘I will remember that.’



EPILOGUE

TRICKSTER'S HEART

641.M41

‘You did *what?*’ Grimblood roared. His bellow echoed throughout the Aett’s apothecarium. Trays rattled against stone as thralls scattered.

Lukas winced and stuck a finger in his ear. ‘Not so loud, jarl. I’m still feeling delicate.’ He had been in the apothecarium for days, since the system fleet found him floating in the upper atmosphere like a piece of space junk. That he had survived at all was a miracle. His chest felt as if it had been cored out and scraped raw. An expanse of newly made scar tissue covered his bare chest. He touched it gingerly. The flesh around it was puffy and tender.

‘Quiet,’ Grimblood snarled. He pointed at Thymr, who stood at the foot of the examination slab. ‘I asked you a question, brother.’

‘He made a very convincing argument,’ Thymr said, somewhat sheepishly. The Iron Priest’s cybernetic eye whirred as he looked back and forth between them, and the trio of medical servitors standing nearby copied the gesture. The thin automatons hunched within multi-limbed medicae harnesses, their withered organic hands bound tight to their sunken chests. A variety of sensory apparatuses hid their features from view. The harnesses’ twitching limbs were

still stained with Lukas' blood from their excavation of his wounded chest to make the necessary modifications.

'I did do that, yes,' Lukas said.

Grimblood ignored him, still glowering at Thymr. 'You put a stasis bomb in his chest.'

'He did,' Lukas said, nodding. Thymr had set the bomb into the wound left by Sliscus' blade, wiring its detonator to Lukas' bio-rhythms. Not without some growling at first, of course. But he had seen the humour in it, eventually.

'I don't even know if it works,' Thymr protested.

'He doesn't,' Lukas added helpfully.

Grimblood glared at him. 'Stop talking, Trickster. Stop talking now, before I rip out your other heart.'

'I wouldn't,' Thymr said. 'The bomb might go off.'

'It might,' Lukas said.

Grimblood turned his glare on the Iron Priest. 'You said it doesn't work.'

'I said that I don't know if it works.' Thymr shook his head. 'That isn't the same thing.' He frowned and looked at Lukas.

'It's humming,' Lukas said, poking the scar tissue that was the only remaining sign of the invasive surgery that been carried out only a few hours before. He grinned. 'It is supposed to hum, isn't it?'

'No,' Thymr said, stepping back. Grimblood hesitated a moment, then followed suit. Lukas poked the scar again, and Thymr took another step back. 'Stop poking it.'

'It itches.'

Grimblood snarled in fury. 'It itches because you stuck an explosive device into an open wound, you mangy, deceitful fool!'

'Well, something had to go in there,' Lukas said. 'I was off balance.'

Grimblood snorted. 'Serves you right. You stole my kill, Trickster.' He grinned savagely. 'Or tried to, at least.' Still grinning, he pointed upwards. 'What happened up there?'

Lukas' smile faded. 'I was overconfident. I forgot that a serpent's bite can be poisonous.' He looked away. 'It won't happen again.'

'Did you kill it, at least?'

Lukas shook his head. 'No.' He smiled. 'But he'll remember me. What happened at the camp?' Stuck in the apothecarium, he hadn't heard much beyond the howls of triumph echoing through the Aett.

Grimblood grunted. 'You missed quite a slaughter. The ones who didn't

manage to get to the webway portal now sleep on red snow. Not so many as we might have hoped, though. Too many escaped. And too many of our folk died unavenged.'

Lukas hunched forward, wondering if the pain he felt was entirely physical. He clenched his fists. Hetha and her people would be gone, if they had survived. But he had found them once. He would find them again, though perhaps not for several generations. He forced himself to relax. 'What of the pups?'

'Have they not visited you? Ungrateful whelps.' Grimblood smiled. 'Such is the way of youth.' He shook his head. 'You taught them well. They are alive. Some new scars, but they bear them with honour. They will be elevated to the Grey, soon. For their bravery.' He peered at Lukas. 'And yours. What you did took courage.'

'And cunning. Don't forget cunning,' Lukas chuckled. 'Seems the fire was wrong.'

'No. It didn't say when you would die, only that you would.' There was no humour in Grimblood's smile. Even so, Lukas laughed, after a moment of bewildered astonishment.

'Oh, that is funny. You tricked me.'

Grimblood looked down at him. 'It would have been a good death,' he said finally.

'I deserve better,' Lukas said. He probed the inflamed flesh around his wound, wincing. The pain was worth it. He could feel the stasis bomb humming within him. Or perhaps it was growling, like a contented wolf. 'And with Thymr's help, I have made certain that when I die, I will be remembered as I am.'

Grimblood glanced at Thymr. 'I knew it was a mistake to let you keep that thing.'

'It's a coward's weapon, anyway,' Thymr said. 'Who better than him to have it?'

Grimblood sighed. 'Perhaps.' He looked at Lukas. 'Perhaps that is the most fitting end for the Jackalwolf's saga, whatever my hopes. A monument to hubris and courage in one.'

Lukas grinned. 'See, Thymr? I told you he would get the joke, in his own time.' He slapped Grimblood on the arm. 'Cheer up, jarl. *Hloja*. Laugh!'

And Lukas laughed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josh Reynolds is the author of the Horus Heresy Primarchs novel *Fulgrim: The Palatine Phoenix*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Lukas the Trickster*, *Fabius Bile: Primogenitor*, *Fabius Bile: Clonelord* and *Deathstorm*, and the novellas *Hunter's Snare* and *Dante's Canyon*, along with the audio dramas *Blackshields: The False War* and *Master of the Hunt*. For Warhammer Age of Sigmar he has written the novels *Eight Lamentations: Spear of Shadows*, *Hallowed Knights: Plague Garden*, *Nagash: The Undying King*, *Fury of Gork*, *Black Rift* and *Skaven Pestilens*. He has also written many stories set in the Warhammer Old World, including the End Times novels *The Return of Nagash* and *The Lord of the End Times*, the Gotrek & Felix tales *Charnel Congress*, *Road of Skulls* and *The Serpent Queen*. He lives and works in Sheffield.

An extract from *Lucius the Faultless Blade*.



The *Pit Cur* cut a rattling dive through the maelstrom. She was an ugly craft, the core of a boxy mass conveyor swollen into a hulking monstrosity of oversized weapons batteries and crudely stacked armour plates wrapped around a bulbous cluster of warp engines. She bore none of the avian or oceanic grace that had inspired so many shipwrights as they had created the spacefaring vessels of mankind.

Her utilitarian form suited the ones who now called her solemn decks of adamantium and cold iron home. In the time since the ship's capture by her current masters, the *Pit Cur* had been rendered into an effigy, her armour plating edged in brass and lacquered in crimson as if she had breached from an ocean of spilled blood, all in veneration to the God of War. The ship's blackened engines burned hot, oblivious to the handful of smaller escort craft straining to keep pace with her as they clung to her flanks.

Riotous colour twisted and bloomed around the *Pit Cur*. Churning nebulae of half-formed hands and faces waxed and undulated, birthing clusters of light and tumbling raw matter into being and then destroying them just as quickly. Storms of incomparable scale appeared instantaneously, the feeding grounds for ancient intelligences of congealed passion who were ravenous for the chance to strip the souls from mortal flesh. Trillions of predators swam through the psychic syrup of accumulated sentient emotion, whispering promises and lies to any that would hear them.

The mortal crew of the *Pit Cur* shuffled in fearful silence through the dark arteries of their vessel, wary to keep themselves far from the masters who roamed the upper decks. They were slaves to towering demigods, enraged beasts clad in armour of brass and blood-red, a shard of transhuman shrapnel sent spinning upon the path of its own destiny in the wake of the XII Legion's death at Skalathrax. Their path was erratic, guided by the aggression engines ticking into their minds with a ceaseless desire for butchery. Internal strife against their

own brethren was as commonplace within their savage throng as the raiding and pillaging they committed across the storms.

Life was cheap aboard the *Pit Cur*; especially that of the mortals who had never seen beyond its slowly corroding halls. Theirs was a brutal existence, as unstable as the abused brains of their lords, though the ones who led their warband were not so blind as to yield all caution. For they plied the space between the real and the unreal, the realm that had been both their refuge and their prison since the failed siege of Terra. They were in the Eye of Terror, and danger lurked all around them, staring with a billion eyes both mundane and aetheric.

In this instance, danger took a familiar form.

The huntress slipped forth from the shimmering storms that wreathed Eyespace, sentient lightning clinging and licking at the pale lozenge of blue-and-gold light encasing her that was her Geller field. Where the *Pit Cur* was bulky and unsightly, a monument to uncouth wrath and aggression, the huntress was breathtaking. She was an elegant spear of platinum and bleached mauve, a cityscape of fluted towers and cathedrals sculpted into a knife's edge. Her hull was pockmarked and blackened by ceaseless war stretching back to the killing grounds of Isstvan, yet these scars did nothing to diminish the beauty of her sublimely regal form.

The huntress angled her bladed prow, adorned with the anguished effigy of a crucified eagle rendered in blemished gold, towards the *Pit Cur*; and leapt forwards on swift engines into attack range.

Alarms and warning klaxons rang out within the *Pit Cur*; scratchy and blaring in disunity from a combination of poor maintenance and overuse. Crew rushed through corridors stained in scarlet emergency lighting. Threadbare boots and rag-bound feet splashed through pools of blood running without source or end from the ceiling and walls to collect in the deck grating. Serfdom under the War God's champions had dulled the horror of those still living to serve, and they jostled and shoved past one another to reach their appointed battle stations. The pale, spindly figures of lobotomised servitors dragged themselves to the engine room and maintenance decks, while brutish vat-grown abhumans stomped towards the weapons batteries, slathering their chemically swollen arms with chalk as they made ready to haul enormous shells into the breeches of the ship's guns. The walls around them shivered as the *Pit Cur*'s engines were pushed beyond their tolerances, the hull issuing a chorus of tortured metallic groans as she twisted her superstructure to face the approaching foe.

The escorts sailing with the *Pit Cur*; a pair of Idolator-class lance raiders and a

single Infidel-class torpedo frigate that any reasonable commander would have decommissioned a century ago, peeled away from the larger vessel's flanks and surged towards the huntress. Their commanders spread their meagre numbers in a wide formation, seeking to divide the invader's fire and buy time for the *Pit Cur* to come about and bring her superior weapons batteries to bear.

Void conflict was a feat of mathematics and complex calculation, a precise dance conducted from a staggering distance. Battles where the opposing commanders were ever close enough to have made visual contact with one another were occasions of extreme rarity. The huntress had arrived practically on top of the *Pit Cur* and her escorts, immediately triggering the wail of extreme proximity alarms and impact klaxons across the bridges and command decks of every vessel. This choice of tactics was far from unexpected, however, for those who waged the Legion wars preferred engagements of a more intimate nature than those fought by conventional navies.

Migraine-bright spears of crackling light slashed out from the forked prows of the Idolator raiders. Smoke and bits of wreckage shook from the Infidel's hull as it loosed a spread of torpedoes at point-blank range. Lances erupted across the huntress' void shields in a corona of slick multicolour, while point-defence batteries along the hull of the purple-and-silver ship lit the void with streams of tracer fire. Golden ribbons of shells struck the incoming ordnance, reducing the torpedoes to small spheres of expanding fire that quickly shrank and guttered out to nothing.

Pinpricks of light gathered along the flanks of the huntress as her own lance batteries primed. Brilliant bolts of energy linked her to the three escort vessels for an eye-blink. The void shields of the smaller warships popped like soap bubbles as the concentrated beams continued on, slicing through armour as knives carve through flesh. Internal detonations boiled over the hulls of the escorts as their warp drives overloaded, blowing them apart in eye-aching bursts of spectral-blue plasma.

Men and women streamed into the storm from the warships' ruptured hulls like blood spurting from lacerated flesh. Those not already dead would writhe in agony before joining those who were, either from the uncaring cold of the void, or at the hands of the Neverborn that roosted in the maelstrom's tides. A lesson quickly learned by all of those who were banished to the Eye of Terror, both mortal and demigod alike, was that there were many fates worse than death. Those sucked out into the void did not wait long to learn the full extent of that truth.

Their killer had not even broken her stride. The huntress sailed with the easy, natural grace of a dancer through the clouds of spinning debris, which was all that remained of the escort craft and their thousands of crew, as she bore down upon her true prey.

Across the outer decks of the *Pit Cur*, mortal crew scurried out of the path of power-armoured giants clutching brutish chainaxes and glaives. Eye-lenses of crimson and dirty jade pierced the gloom from beneath the crests of their war-helms, and the waspish buzz of their active war-plate sent ripples through the blood pooled on the deck. Twitches and low growls issued from the warriors as the pain engines implanted in their brains punished calm and fed them frenzy. A low, coarse voice barked across the ship-wide vox, scratching from battered horns in guttural Nagrakali: ‘*Gird your plate and ready your blades. Praise be to Kharnath! Praise to the War God! He has given us skulls to split and blood to spill.*’

They had been made to be angels. Even more so than the Legions who bore that epithet within their own titles, more than the entirety of the Legiones Astartes who strode across the galaxy as the conquering Imperium of Man’s Angels of Death, only one Legion understood the true totality of such an ideal. To be angelic, to truly realise the intended vision of their creation, could only be fulfilled by achieving perfection.

Only one Legion had borne the name of the Emperor. Only one Legion had been chosen to wear the symbol of the Master of Mankind, the Palatine aquila upon their armour as their blood and iron forged His interstellar dominion. Only one Legion had ever been perfect enough to be called His Children.

The *Diadem* slid through the milky squalls of prismatic warp light, her void shields flickering as the last of her prey’s escort picket rained over her as shards of twisted wreckage. She rolled aside from the fire of the *Pit Cur*’s macro-cannon batteries, salvoes of shells the size of hive city tenements screaming harmlessly past as the ancient strike cruiser manoeuvred with stately grace. The heavily modified mass transport ahead of her listed from the recoil of her guns, unable to match the preternatural agility of the *Diadem* as she knifed into close range.

Lances and smaller weapons batteries linked the space between the two vessels in storms of fire as the *Diadem* dipped low and under the *Pit Cur*. While the heliotrope strike cruiser still lit the twisted void around them with the kaleidoscopic light of her intact void shields, the *Pit Cur*’s layered energy fields

had overloaded, and clouds of broken weapons emplacements and shattered armour hung in loose orbit around her hull. Hundreds of crew bled out into the void from deck breaches, torn into the waiting arms of the Neverborn that chose the Eye as their feeding ground.

Slipping beneath the *Pit Cur*'s guns, the *Diadem* executed an immaculate roll, turning the anger of her lance batteries upon the mass conveyor's sub-warp engine arrays. As her prey listed to a halt, trailing a sputtering tail of neon gases from ruptured propulsion drives melting to charred slag, the *Diadem* continued to roll. Splinters of dark lilac shot from her flanks before she burned her engines bright and blasted past the wounded *Pit Cur*. Like seeds scattered across a field, the tiny darts of boarding pods sank into the undefended belly of the conveyor and locked fast to her hull.

The majority of the World Eaters aboard the *Pit Cur*, as per standard tactics when repelling voidborne boarding actions, mustered to take up positions at sites of the greatest strategic importance. The greatest numbers deployed across her corridors were tasked with guarding the engine room, upper decks and bridge against any invader seeking to wrest control of the ship from the warriors of the XII Legion.

The fallen angels locked within the boarding pods sought a different prize, however. The *Pit Cur*, a broken-down junker scarcely stitched together and barely suited for travel through Eyespace, meant nothing to them. Their eyes were locked on the true treasure aboard the heavy mass conveyor, the teeming masses packed into the blackness of its holding decks – mortals destined for lives of brutal toil or violent deaths in the gladiatorial fighting pits of the Eaters of Worlds.

The fallen angels had come to free those wretches from the captivity of XII Legion shackles. Their liberators had an entirely different fate in store for them. A fate that was sublimely, excruciatingly worse.

Direnc clutched the length of rusted iron pipe to his barrel chest, the thunderous tremors around him crashing in concert with the pounding hammer of his heart. He had torn the pipe out from the wall of a long-abandoned maintenance duct four months ago, and since that time it had helped him in killing eight men and three women in the lightless expanse of the *Pit Cur*'s lower decks. Direnc had sought none of them out, but he had not had to. From murdering over debts incurred gambling in the fighting pits to struggling for the meagre supplies necessary to eke out a threadbare existence aboard the ship, killing was a way of

life for those in thrall to the War God, from the lowliest slave to the Red Centurion who ruled the warband and the *Pit Cur* as its chieftain.

Rounded up with a dozen other slaves, Direnc had been herded into the depths of the ship, to guard against potential invasion. Most of the other slaves were armed in a similarly pitiful manner to Direnc, white-knuckled claws gripping sharpened bits of plasteel tubing or battered industrial tools. Looking around the near total blackness of the corridor in which he found himself, he wondered what the ragged collection of serfs could possibly do to stop any hostile demigods intent on cutting their way into the ship. Even against a single one of them, the slaves would do little more than serve as a meat shield to cake their boots.

Only one man present in the corridor was armed with anything that was ever originally intended to be used as a weapon. The overseer flicked nervous eyes from slave to slave, cradling the dented stock of a beaten combat shotgun against his hip. He had positioned himself behind the pack of terrified thralls, to serve more as a means of keeping them from fleeing than to repel any boarders himself.

Wiping grimy sweat from his brow, Direnc pushed a deep breath from between his teeth. The entire situation was insane. The idea of anyone coming close enough to be boarded by the *Pit Cur* and its cohort of geneforged killers was as good as suicidal. The very notion that anyone would board such a ship themselves was beyond ludicrous. Direnc was strong enough to survive aboard the *Pit Cur*. His large, muscular frame ensured that he could keep himself alive as well as haul the fuel lines and ammunition hoppers used to rearm and refuel the masters' war machines housed in the primary landing bay. He stood a head taller than most of the other men and women around him, but he was still a child in comparison to one of the legionaries.

The walls around Direnc heaved as a shell struck the hull nearby, filling the air with the sonorous screech of protesting metal. Another, greater impact followed, right at the end of their corridor. Direnc managed to seize hold of an exposed pipe threading the wall to remain upright, just keeping him from joining several of the slaves around him who were dashed against the walls and deposited on the deck. Dazed men and women pushed themselves shakily back to their feet, while others, their bodies bent and folded at unnatural angles, remained unmoving on the grate.

Deep, resonant clunks issued from the end of the corridor, underpinning the shriek of shearing hull plating. Faint pinpricks of light appeared against the far wall, multiplying and merging together as the metal began to glow. Acrid smoke

billowed down the corridor as the wall melted into slag, slopping down onto the deck in hissing, golden lumps.

Direnc's blood froze. He had spent enough time maintaining the warband's attack craft to recognise the tell-tale effects of a melta cutter. The enemy had attached a boarding ram to the *Pit Cur*. Right here.

The slaves began to look behind them, instinct and the animal urge to flee for their lives taking hold over their minds. The air grew thick with the sour reek of adrenaline. Panicked chatter broke out, as more and more of the thralls backed away from the rapidly growing breach in the wall at the end of the corridor.

The overseer standing behind them with the shotgun barked a threat, firing his weapon into the crowd. A man thudded to the deck, his chest ripped open by the blast. The mob reeled, looking back to see the last of the wall boil away.

Silence filled the corridor for a handful of moments. The slaves jumped as a low hiss issued out from the site of the breach. A thick, rolling mist billowed down, a deep rose in colour. Slowly it filled the corridor, curling towards them in soft pink tendrils.

The slaves began to see shapes form in the depths of the mist. Large things clad in spiked armour. *Legionaries*. And these were not their masters.

Pandemonium gripped the serfs. Frantic, they turned upon the overseer en masse. He issued a command to halt, his voice cracking from panic, and fired the shotgun into the crowd again. Aiming was unnecessary against the frenzied press advancing on him. Men and women were flung back, shredded by the booming blasts, and all the while the mist crept closer.

Direnc leapt at the overseer, twisting himself aside just as the shotgun fired again. The bulk of the shot missed him, but a handful of razored pellets stitched across his side in puffs of dark blood. Pain exploded, ripping out from Direnc's ribcage and spreading like fire over his body. Rage willed him to his knees, and he grabbed the panicked overseer around the waist and hauled him to the ground. The man thrashed and kicked, struggling to level the shotgun at Direnc's head as the mist drifted nearer.

Direnc smashed into the overseer with a brutal headbutt. He felt his nose break, mashing flat to his face in a starburst of black, hot pain, but also felt something shift in the overseer's skull. Dazed, the man loosened his grip on the shotgun, and Direnc wrenched it from his grip. Reversing his hold on the weapon, he smashed its buttstock down into the overseer's face. He brought it down again, and again, and again, until what he was hitting lost any semblance of having ever been human. Blood, spongy globs of flesh and splinters of bone covered the

buttstock, slippery in Direnc's grip as he stood, whirling around and bringing the weapon up to his shoulder.

The mist had reached him. It rolled forwards like a living thing of rosy smoke, surging up and into his mouth and nostrils. It filled his lungs, passing through the membranes to spin through his bloodstream.

For a moment, Direnc was perfectly still. The shotgun clattered to the deck, utterly forgotten as he fell to his knees. His pupils dilated, growing so wide that his eyes appeared to have no irises at all. His hands shook. Tears streamed down his face, carving lines through the gore as he both laughed and sobbed at the same time.

Bliss enveloped Direnc, utter, unrestrained and complete. He felt it pass into his heart and radiate out in ripples of ecstasy with every pulsing beat. It felt like being wrapped in warm silk, like the kiss of a roaring fire in the ship's freezing lower decks. It felt like love, honest and asking nothing of him. It only gave, true and unending.

The dark, rust-pitted corridors of the *Pit Cur*, slathered with blood and sweat and curses, melted away. The stale, earthy scent of poorly recycled air was replaced by rapturous perfume. Direnc's pain, his fear, his loneliness, all evaporated. A song filled the air, the purest, most beautiful music he had ever heard. Direnc wanted to drown in it, forgetting everything but the unimaginable pleasure he was sinking into.

Nothing else mattered. Nothing could ever matter as much as the waves of elation washing over his senses. Curled into a ball beneath the mist, Direnc giggled softly as pinkish foam boiled from between his lips. To him, the clanging tread of armoured boots felt kilometres away as they passed him by, barely registering in his mind as they crushed corpses into paste on their way to the heart of the *Pit Cur*.

Click here to buy [Lucius the Faultless Blade](#).

To Hannah, for her patience.

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