

Dramatis Personae Aska Kjelu Russ WH40K OC

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Prolog: Salvation

Salvation....

in these grim times a luxury seldom found. Not every world can hope for salvation and once Chaos has gained foothold the light in the eyes of the people diminish. Sherox Prime and its people hoped someone would come to save their pathetic lives. As fate would have it hope came out of nowhere....

One was seen.

He was firing rocket projectiles as big as a human fist into the masses of the renegades. He was seen as he made the enemies of the Imperium of man explode from within. Their bodies surrendered any hope of keeping a human form. He was unmasked as bringer of hope and herald of the imperial truth. As an executioner and he was the messenger of Death himself.

He was a warrior of the Emperor and the people in the main hive of Sherox Prime saw how he put traitors to death in mere seconds with his cruel firearm. They weren't deceived. He was completely different than anything they had expected. They all had heard the stories in their youth, stories of the warriors of the Emperor and their gleaming form.

Stories of their disciplined appearance. Of their combat prowess. Their expectations of his combat strength had this Titan of war more than surpassed. Runes decorated his armor where the eye could see and he was adorned by a huge pelt. His grey armor showed notches and smaller bullet craters and everywhere odd bone carvings and charms made of the teeth of humongous beasts were draped. His head was bare any protection and his long grey hair still showing strands of a long gone blonde had a coppery shimmer of the blood of his enemies. Fangs not unlike those of a wild beast were seen as his war cry made the marrow in ones bones shiver and his rough, grim face was ornamented with a black-red tattoo.

No holy warrior stood before them that day...

Battle beast or avatar of death would have been a more appropriate title. It was a Space Marine of a first founding chapter.

An Astartes. A son of Russ....

A Space Wolf.

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+Hostor here! My Blood Claws are in position, Jarl. If you want we can strike before the enemy can even draw his next breath+

....he didn't get an answer but the Jarl had earlier made him swear to act fast.

+Jarl?+

His Lord, the leader of his company or "Captain" in other Space Marine chapters, could not be reached. The Vox seemed to have failed over long distances and now the decision was his as a pack leader. His inner beast growled and roared with thirst for battle but a well-thought-out decision had to be made.

+Spears! Take attack formation! We storm the bui...+

His sentence was cut off involuntarily and the decision made for him. Ragnar Blackmane himself had tuned himself in every active Vox connection!

+Brothers! We have a problem here! Lay down any finesse if not necessary! Crush the enemy...NOW!!!+

When the Jarl had his will made clear the result would drench the ground in heretic

blood. A whole great company instantly would rely on the enemy not having enough firepower to penetrate their armors ceramite. The hive was secured in few hours; secured meaning it was a slaughterhouse in the open. The renegades that had the misfortune of meeting the Space Wolves had never seen a warrior of the Emperor themselves. Those that had a clear sight of Hostor were themselves excellent fighters or dead before they could realize what was happening. Hostor was a very strict, wild and grim but most of all a very proficient fighter.

A ten man squad of former soldiers were efficiently neutralized with his combat knife. It sliced right through their throats, decapitating them, their bleeding out bodies falling lifeless to the ground. The enemies only saw a grey-white silhouette before the darkness of their self-conjured Hel swallowed them. Then the roaring and murdering started anew as Hostors Blood Claws hacked themselves a path to their target. They weren't slowed by finesse but killed efficiently and viciously with steel, bolter and the concentrated fury of a true Son of Russ.

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Sven went to his Jarl. The ground crunched audibly under the weight of his armor. Still, the movement of Ragnar's Wolf Guard was fluid and light. Like the others he was merged with his armor, they were one, one unit and for him and all of his brothers it was a second skin.

"My Lord? We lost contact with the Spears and the Thunderfists. I doubt they fell. Your orders?"

His voice was rough and dark, almost like it had a low growling but still full of respect for his Lord. Jarl, Wolf lord Ragnar Blackmane looked insistently to the leader of his Wolf Guard, showing his still young fangs in a slight grin.

"We have to end this battle as fast as possible. The Great Wolf gave me some information. There are rumors of the appearance of.....well, an artifact..."

He said this hesitantly like he himself wasn't exactly sure how to call it or how to explain this information.

"....a relic of the old days. But it's pretty evidently that this is the Thousand Sons' doing. One of their ships was scanned, purely by chance in a neighboring system. We could be there in a few days and are to scout the area."

Astonishment and confusion could be sensed for a moment in Sven's scent. He raised his eyebrows skeptically as he raised his dark voice again, "Relic? It's an object worthy of sacrificing a whole planet? Jarl, I can hardly believe that".

Ragnar looked over to his Wolf Guard and familiar in all earnestness. "This object is, if it turns out to be true, more important than my whole company and this system, Sven!"

Surprised the massive Wolf Guard took a step back as he saw the strange and non-typical reaction of his Jarl and his answer fully sank in. His own bewilderment and pensiveness could not only be smelled but tasted on the tongue.

"As you command, my Jarl!"

With that the young King and Jarl of Fenris turned away and made his warriors hurry. Only minutes later a Thunderhawk blasted off to search the area for the two missing troops.

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+Hostor here!!! Can you hear me? Somebody?+It seemed they could receive some messages but not send any. Admittedly, this worried him a bit but they had already pulled through worse situations and played with much worse cards.

+Nothing, brothers. The mission is to protect the people here but there's no enemy to

be seen! We'll go back to the landing zone, even if the march will take hours, we don't have another option! Let's hope we find some heretics. Don't want it to get boring!

+The pack leader wanted to give another order when a bolter round hit him in the shoulder and sent him tumbling.

+Get down!+

Instantly his pack ducked behind cover and was on lookout for the enemy. For a mere mortal their formation would have looked chaotic but a trained eye saw a perfect defensive formation. The gunners were quickly spotted and Hostor gripped his spear tighter. A Chainglaive, which gave the squad its name. Like a roaring storm they charged directly into the enemy lines. Five of them crashed into armored warriors with head trims in the form of different scarabs. Even as the wolves returned fire the wicked warriors stood eerily still as if dead since eons past.

The heretics did not have to worry about their actual death, the armors only filled by dust and ashes instead of an actual carnal body with human blood. Hostor was the first in the enemies' lines and actually happy about their march back to the landing zone not being as boring as he had feared. As he made contact two of the traitors instantly fell and his pack offered the miserable rest. However Fjolnir, one of the newer brothers, fell in the charge. He was dropped by a combined, precise attack and did not survive. Hostor was notified the same moment his brother perished, however got another message shortly after.

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+Stormwolves, Thunderfists, here...Jarl? Guard? Anyone?+

Eryk, the pack leader of a Sky Claws storming pack had found himself in the same troublesome position as his brother Hostor, however neither knew of the other. They were the only squads who had lost contact to the company and their battle brothers. "Nothing! Damned nothing! Like we have no Vox. Not even interference. It's like it's been turned off!", he roared, smashing his fist against a crumbling wall which in turn lost even more of its massive form. The Thunderfists had delved deep into enemy territory and couldn't simply turn back, like Hostor and his pack could. Still, having no other option they had to try and they would take every single enemy on their way down, eradicating his wretched existence from this world. His warriors then took cover again and found it behind another battered wall. Hailing gunfire drummed their position, interrupted by sounds not unlike a dog's barking. Every child on Fenris recognized from a ten thousand meter distance what interrupted the firing of the enemy. Bolter fire, Phobos pattern. Weapons dating back to the days of the Heresy. The pack launched into the air and at once made out the position of the enemy. With elaborate precision they hit them and left their mark in the ground and in the leftover hulls of their enemies. The seemingly disembodied Astartes in red and gold with the emblem of Magnus fired halfhearted and then fell victim to the weapons of the Asgeir. +The Jarl has to know of this...!!!

Back to the landing zone!

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+Hostor's spears passed countless habitat blocks and Manufactori. The bodies sometimes even still lay at their work places and sometimes piled up to three meters. They could see that these poor souls had worked to their death and not died of violence. Their death came of exhaustion and not by bullets of renegades or the witchfire of heretics. Hostor spat on the ground. He loathed the system of the Imperium, since it was mendacious and it was not the way of Fenris to approve of such a death. He spat again and turned up his nose before he shook off those thoughts and

concentrated back on the task at hand. Negligence was the death of many warriors and Hostor didn't plan to die because of his lack of attention. Immediately he heard Boltgun and Bolt pistol fire. His whole pack had heard it and they carefully advanced through the area to its source. The Thunderfists had been tangled in a gunfight and it seemed they couldn't escape without help.

Hostors pack surrounded the area without him having to raise his voice. Like well-maintained clockwork they knew what to do and executed it in a way that made their movement blur. With every warrior in position, Hostor gave the sign for the hunt. The forever damned Thousand Sons were shredded and riddled with gunfire. Shortly after, every last Rubric Marine had fallen. Hostor and Eryk Thunderfist met in the middle of the battleground and joined their forearms in a greeting of warriors.

"Hostor! Brother! Your spears arrived just in time! We were stuck in combat!" The leader of the Blood Claws nodded briefly. It wasn't the nature of the wolves to talk away or waste hours with senseless babble, however it seemed necessary given the circumstances. He gripped his spear tighter, a growl escaping his throat "We have to go back to the landing zone and to the Jarl fast. I'm confused; I saw troop transports taking off, brother Eryk.

"The young leader of the Sky Claws nodded in agreement and vented his anger and impatience "Meaning the battle is over, yet I see no sign that the enemy is beaten. Magnus' Sons are here, you are right the Jarl has to know of this, although I'm sure he already knows. Still, this has me confused, too, Brother Hostor.

"His hand on his chin the pack leader thought for a moment about this. The behavior of their Lord and the withdrawal of the company were more than unusual.

"I don't get it either", he finally stated with his dark voice, a growl escaping his throat which started to feel dry from all the dust in the air.

"There has to be a valid reason why Lord Blackmane abandons all positions to go for the stars. Our young King is usually always in for a good fight and first to enter battle and last to leave. Well, we'll learn the reason soon enough, let's make sure we are fast on our way back to our brothers.

"Hostor wanted to answer Eryk, he was however interrupted by the roaring of a Thunderhawk above. Routinely both squads took position to secure a landing zone. The packs were lucky, if you will.

Shortly after entering the belly of the Thunderhawk they saw Sherrox Prime from several hundreds of meters above and for now left this world behind....

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In the middle of the central Hololith meeting room all of his pack leaders were present, along with his Wolf Guard and the old Wolf Priest Sigurd.

All eyes resting on the Jarl they waited for an explanation of their early departure. By now it was clear that the Imperial Guard would take over the job of bringing peace to the planet and that the wolves had every right to go over to the neighboring system. A world named Tavia. A name many of them had already heard, old Sagas and memories surfacing to their consciousness and kept them wondering.

Ragnar Blackmane stood before them, arms crossed behind his back. It was silent, the breathing and heartbeat of everyone present could be heard as well as the humming of the machines surrounding them. His look was that of a beast on the verge of obtaining a long-coveted prey.

He radiated absolute authority as he paced several times before his warriors, looking every one of his warriors in the eyes. Suddenly his face broadened in an unusually large grin showing his still growing fangs in full splendor.

For a moment even joy could be heard in the voice of the young Jarl, being heard in this moment...

"Tell me, my men.....what do you know about our sister....?"

Tell me....

what do you know about the Saga of the daughter of Russ?!"

Kapitel 1: Moonrise

Chapter 1: Moonrise

All records stated that Tavia was once a beautiful moon circling a gas giant. Numerous legends praised its splendor and the unique sky that could be seen from its surface. It was far away from all war and all lived in peace. Those whose fate it was to fight did so only in defense or in traditional meditation rites. Magnificent cities and a wonderful wilderness adorned the former homeworld of the woman that had born Leman Russ a child.

But in the dark millennium of mankind's history the peaceful world of Tavia was ravished by war, like many other worlds. And so this once blooming culture was wiped out and left behind. Records talked about an attack on this world but nothing more was known ten thousand years later. To no one's surprise the Inquisition had something to do with it. They were masters of cover-ups and twisting facts, after all, and probably the only ones who knew exactly what had happened so many eons ago. But apart from them, there were still a few survivors who knew what cruel fate Tavia had suffered, but no one talked about it. The whole situation was very strange but the fact that after such a long time a Tzeentch cult spread across this system didn't leave much room for speculation. Suddenly they had appeared on this destroyed and empty planet and brought with them a strange crystal which was either a relic or a trap for the Vlka Fenryka.

It stood there, in the dusty ruins, and in it she slept....

Russ' daughter was back. After ten thousand years Aska Kjelu Russ had appeared again.

It was a miracle since no one had even counted on it anymore and it brought back the hope that Russ too would soon be with his Wolves again.

Was it irony of fate or maybe providence? Either way, while on the way to the ruins of Tavia many Wolves pondered over this twist of fate. A trap maybe? Definitely foul sorcery! With those damned traitors you had to be ready for anything. Auspex-scans showed the crystal consisting of a substance similar to diamond and containing some form of air chamber inside in which Aska had survived. Her life signature was unmistakable, although she seemed to be in some form of cryostasis.

Strangely there were also only few enemies found in orbit or on the planet. Some few Chaos Space Marines of the Thousand Sons and their retinue, consisting of a few hundred cultists had made themselves comfortable on the planet.

There was no big portal or battleship in sight.

So initially there was no need for a big attack. Since Aska's safety and her rescue had top priority for the chapter, Ragnar himself was on the way to the planet. However, everyone on board the ship knew something was wrong here.

Chaos never meant something good, and rage made the hair of every Son of Russ stand on end thinking back to the butchering on Prospero.

Even after all these years the wounds were still fresh and the Wolves were hungry for a slaughter. The traitors were present in such a small number they would be easy game, or at least so it seemed. Every Wolf knew the Thousand Sons would never be so foolish and in many battles they had learned the pathetic tricks of their traitor enemies.

But a master tactician like Lord Blackmane would never go into battle unprepared.

Still, he was reluctant about the mission as he thought about it in the Thunderhawk. Having pondered their approach and their tactics, they were cautious and ready for anything. No matter if it really was Princess Russ or not, the Wolves would unleash the massed hate of a true warrior on the Sons of Magnus. As always Ragnar's men had no choice but to remain alert and ready for anything, it just seemed too much like a trap. However it would probably prove far more difficult to actually get Aska out of the crystal. They could try to blast her free piece by piece but the risk of hurting the Primarch's daughter in the process would just simply be far too high. They needed a different idea and they had just that.

The plan was to just blast a bit of the crystal away at its foot and involved a long steel chain and three Thunderhawks, which would collectively pull on the crystal via the chain and hopefully topple it.

They had an emergency plan to get the crystal off the planet first and then contemplate on their ship on how to pry Aska out of it.

Top priority however was to get Aska out of the crystal and then see, if it was truly the Primarch's daughter or if the Wolves had been deceived.

If it turned out to really be Russ' daughter she would be the most important living person of the chapter. There would be nothing more important than this young woman and Russ himself wouldn't have expected any less of his sons, only the attempt would already be more than worth it.

And should it turn out to be true there would be a good chance that Russ too would soon return to them...

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Ragnar showed his still young fangs in a grim grin. Dealing with the Thousand Sons was a personal matter and he was already looking forward to slicing their heads off their bodies. Memories of days past emerged and he thought back to when he cast Magnus, the traitor Primarch, back into the hell he came from using the spear of Russ. He listened to the silence and concentrated on that which was yet to come.

Withdrawn into himself....

The calm before the storm....

Ready for anything. He, two of his Wolf Guard and two squads of Blood Claws were already above the vast ruins. In the distance they could see the strange, diamantine crystal which they had heard about. Suddenly the Thunderhawk started groaning as their enemies opened fire, the steel hull shaking with every impact.

"Ullur! Man the turrets!" Hostor, the leader of one Blood Claw packs, shouted. The turrets of the Thunderhawk burst to life and hailed a barrage of returning bolter fire at their enemies.

"Well then let's land this bird!" They had familiarized themselves with the area and didn't even need the push of a button to have dozens of drop pods raining from the sky, if the situation escalated into a ground battle. Should this turn out to be an ambush or even a joke, they would crush the enemy without mercy. Everyone who knew the Sons of Russ also knew not to mess with them and that their massed fury is not to be underestimated. The Wolves would unleash their unrestrained, concentrated wrath upon anyone who was foolish enough to step in their path. Heretic blood would litter the ground and nothing could stop them.

Only dust would be left behind and the crows would feast on their enemies' bodies. Their fangs were sharper than any blade and their claws ready to shred anything blocking their way. Nothing could stand against their unwavering will as they unleashed their inner beasts! As the ramp lowered they readied themselves for the

counterattack. Still in the air they jumped out and while falling killed the first traitors. Booming they landed on the ground and banished the last dust out of the old hollow armors or made the flesh of their heretic retinue explode. The earth shook and the hum of the servos in their armor could be heard with every movement.

The claws of Russ ran rampant with the fierce fury of every Wolf and let their enemies feel their fangs. Cultists stormed in from every direction but they were no match for the Wolves of the Vlka Fenryka. Initially they had been looking forward to a combat but this turned out to be a cakewalk. Their chainswords sliced right through the heretics flesh and their bolters fired bullet after bullet, leaving nothing but ash in their wake.

"Watch out!" Ragnar shouted to Olvec, the leader of his Wolf Guard. He had almost been surprised by one of the Thousand Sons and burned in witchfire but thanks to Ragnar he turned in time and skillfully dodged the attack.

A salvo of dozens of bolter projectiles hailed into the armor of the heretic and caused it to explode into hundreds of small pieces. Neither blood nor flesh had filled these dusty armors for eons because the influence of the Chaos god Tzeentch had turned them into nothing more than dirt trapped in rotting ceramite. Bolter shots blew right through the head of the next chaos follower storming to them and with a tormented scream a ghastly dust cloud escaped the ancient power armor. All that was left of their enemies was empty hulls of ceramite.

"Ha, not on my watch, bub! No chance!" Lars laughed, happy about all the lowlifes staggering blindly into his firing line. Lars and Ullur were one of the most ferocious Blood Claw duos. Both complimented each other to absolute deadliness, which every enemy stupid enough to even think about attacking them got to feel. The stink of treachery was overwhelming as cultist sorcerers suddenly opened warp-portals and the troops of their enemies were reinforced. More Tzeentch sorcerers emerged from these dark rituals and the Sons of Russ had to briefly retreat behind a dusty, crumbled wall. Every second more emerged and like they had expected this turned out to be a trap. The heretics had just waited for the Sons of Russ to blindly set foot on Tavia's surface.

"Should I do it or do you want to?" Ullur asked with a broad grin, already loosening a Frag grenade from its clasp. Lars showed his fangs, returning the grin. "This time, the honor's all yours, brother!" He pulled the pin and threw it into the enemy lines when Lars suddenly shouted "Watch out! Behind you!" and thus saved Ullur from the traitor that had sneaked into their cover.

"You smell that? I love the smell of dead heretics in the morning, nothing better to start your day!"

"Every day I don't have to see your damned face is a good day, so it seems today I'm out of luck!" Even in this precarious situation, taking cover behind a not very protective crumbling wall, both of them made their usual jokes. Even the Jarl couldn't hide a grin as he heard the witty repartee of his Blood Claws. Not a second later he got a message via the com-net. A large cruiser of the Chaos Space Marines had appeared in space and from everywhere on the planet they got reports of portals to the warp opening, a cowardly strategy of their enemies. The whole time they had hid behind the next planet and only waited for the Wolves to be distracted. But the Wolves were already familiar with this trick and if the heretics thought they could fool them with this they were even more stupid than they had thought. The winds of chaos obscured their minds, made treacherous rats of former loyal warriors, but they had no chance against the massed fury of the Sons of Russ.

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"By Russ's iron balls!" Lars cursed. They all were hardly surprised. They were trained for these situations they already had endured worse.

Reports came from everywhere and it slowly started to get really nasty. Not only was a heated battle going on in orbit over the Tavian moon, but more and more portals were opening and spewing out unholy creatures. They had to stop the rituals for the portals, had to silence the dark chanting and heretic incantations. At the moment the whole planet seemed to be overrun and their mission became increasingly harder.

"This scum is becoming a major pain in the ass!" Lars growled and clenched his fist, peeking out from behind his cover. Figures, this had just been a ploy. It made them furious.

"What? You starting to slack? Wanna get nursed by mama?" Ullur teased him.

"How about you shut your damned mouth and start killing?!"

"And how about you start growing a proper beard?"

"How about you two keep your big mouths shut and start returning fire?!" Hostor barked, putting the two back in their places. Raik and Hargi, two Blood Claws of Hostors' pack, known for their wild and stubborn temper, left the cover and charged forward, howling and striking fear in their enemies. Hostor cursed, providing cover fire for the two daring Blood Claws.

Ragnar grinned, thinking back to his days as Blood Claw where he wasn't much different from the two hotheads. He watched as the two hacked apart cultists and renegades and wanted to order his troops to charge, too, when suddenly Raik was impaled on the jagged blade of a Chaos sorcerer. Hargi screamed in disbelief as he saw his friend coughing blood and the life leaving his eyes. He threw himself at the sorcerer with a wild rage but was outclassed and he, too, fell to the wretched blade.

Ragnar gritted his teeth in anger. He had seen far too many promising whelps die in this conflict already and on Sherrox Prime. He wanted this conflict to end and now! He gave the order for the drop pod attack as a support for their ground assault. It would distract their enemies, give them the opportunity to press on and ultimately crush their wretched foes.

First there was a thunder in the air without the clouds parting. Seconds later the sky was set ablaze with the first pods entering the atmosphere and their screaming descent roared over the sounds of battle. The pounding in his body grew stronger, a fiery heat spread through him and his eyes concentrated on the traitors of the Imperium of Mankind. Short, still quite young fangs were exposed as Ragnar fell into a rage and charged like a berserker with a blood-curdling battle cry into the lines of Chaos.

For now he had turned the tide to their favor again. From the beginning it had seemed to their enemies as if the Wolves had stepped right into their trap, however that was not exactly the case. They had led the Thousand Sons to believe that their trap had worked and now were striking back hard and accurately with the frosty hate of their Fenrisian warrior blood.

Ragnar had proven himself as master tactician again. But none of the Vlka Fenryka dared to think themselves safe yet, they knew their enemies too well.

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The reinforcements hit like bombs exploding the surface and the claws of Russ turned the ruins of Tavia into rubble. In the meantime Ragnar and his guard together with two packs of Blood Claws - Hostors Spears and Maegars Pack - had managed to advance to the area with the strange crystal, presumably holding the sleeping Primarch's

daughter.

"Over there! We're almost there!" Lars shouted while they pressed onwards, getting in the vicinity of the crystal.

With every step and every second their enemies' resistance grew. In the meantime they sometimes got a glance at the person trapped inside of the crystal. But they couldn't let themselves become distracted, even if they had to admit that the sleeping beauty fascinated them more than just a bit.

A young woman with long, white hair and a strange MKII armor inscribed with Fenrisian Runes once crafted by Russ himself for her. They knew her face from dozens of paintings, pictis and records and she looked exactly like Aska Kjelu Russ, daughter of the Wolf King and Princess of Fenris.

A relic.

Now, whether it was really her or not could be found out in short time with a simply genetic test. The hope and tension in their pack grew with every step. Right before the square they took cover behind a crumbling wall which probably at some time was part of a building. They could hear the traitors whispering about having problems getting the crystal open.

One of them said loud and clear in a voice like gravel, "Our master would reward us generously if we brought him the Daughter of Russ. She would endure endless torment and give the master great pleasure; how sweet her screams would be, a symphony of terror." Every Son of Russ would much rather die than let Aska fall into the hands of a God of Chaos.

The very thought of it unleashed a furious hatred in them. They snarled, clenched their fists and roared their defiance at the traitors. More drop pods rained from the sky, striking right next to the crystal and Thunderhawks skimmed over their position. Now they had to keep the area from traitors so they could finish their mission. Roaring cries of battle they charged from their cover and cleared the surroundings of those disgusting creatures. Traitor souls escaped dozens of empty armors which the servants of Tzeentch were made of.

Their chainswords cut through renegade flesh and cultists, splitting them in half and drenching the ground in blood blacker than their spirits. Ragnar's grudge against the Thousand Sons still wasn't forgotten and deep-rooted hatred rose within him. When he had managed to banish the daemon Primarch back then he had also lost an important relic. This personal defeat bothered him and the thought of retribution brought him to anger-driven, frenzied peak performance. Frostfang, the legendary blade of the young Wolflord was elevated to one of the deadliest weapons of the universe and every young Wolf in his vicinity was inspired to greater and greater efforts in order to impress their Jarl and to execute any traitor who dared to stand in their way in the name of the Allfather. A broad, mocking grin spread in his face as he thought about taking yet more traitors apart with his singing blade.

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"Aye, get the Thunderhawks here! Place the charges!" Lars bellowed as they reached their position, banging his fist against the crystal.

As always the young Blood Claw was frantic and aggressive.

They were tense since this serious situation seemed to be almost an adventure for some of the whelps.

Hostor, their pack leader, reprimanded him with a stern look. Olvec looked over to Hostor with a slight grin, then turned his attention to their young Lord, "My Jarl, I have to voice my concerns. To be honest I'm still not quite convinced we should blow

the crystal free. The risk of hurting her is way too high!"

"I don't think so," Ragnar replied. "You see that sphere around her? I bet there's some kind of air cavern, a shell supposed to protect her. At least I think so and the scan has shown the same results. If nothing else at least we can transport the crystal away but first we have to detach it and it seems it's grown together with the earth."

"And what if not? I don't think any of us wants to be responsible for hurting the daughter of Russ..." Ragnar nodded, eyeing the crystal and pondering their situation. Seeing as their situation got worse by the minute a decision had to be made fast and it was his responsibility as Wolf Lord to consider all the avenues and decide what would be the best approach. He opted to use smaller explosives, so the risk of harming Aska would be minimized.

"Understood," Olvec nodded and gave the order to start with the preparations.

"If I'm wrong I'll have to bear the consequences. And we still have Plan B, remember?" he laughed and showed his fangs; he was confident. From everywhere in the ruins they got reports of areas being secured and the casualties it had cost them. For now, the enemy was held at bay and it was important it stayed that way so they had enough time to deal with the crystal. "When we get her free start the analysis at once."

"AYE!" After a short discussion small bombs were placed at strategic places and primed. The small charges detonated and the crystal started to crumble. They had to repeat this process numerous times, reducing the risk of harming the prisoner to a minimum.

Piece by piece, the crystal started to deteriorate. It was impressive how sturdy this thing was. Chaos followers constantly pressed on their position but their line of hastily erected defense fortifications held them at bay. Ragnar with his guard and the accompanying Blood Claw troops dealt with the enemies pressing on their position while Ullur and Rolf from Hostors pack were busy attaching a long steel chain to the crystal and the Thunderhawks.

Via com-net Ragnar gave the order to start the Thunderhawks. Roaring their turbines to life, the ceramite-armored behemoths lifted from the ground. With a grinding sound the chain tensed under the tremendous power of the thundering thrusters.

The heretics panicked as they realized what the Wolves had planned and started unleashing a barrage of fire on one of the Thunderhawks. Projectiles of varying calibers drummed on the armor plates, chipping off huge pieces of ceramite. In turn now the Wolves started firing into the lines of the heretics and the turrets of the Thunderhawks turned to bombard their enemies with heavy bolter projectiles.

Suddenly a ground-to-air missile launched from within the horde, then a second and only a moment later one of the Thunderhawks was churned by two heavy explosions. The first boomed throughout the whole ship and made the heavy fuselage lurch through the air, the second ripped a huge hole in the side and one of the wings off. The right turbine detached from the hull and took off, crashing with a thunder into the heretic lines while the rest of the aircraft went into a spin towards the ground.

"Shit, they're going down!" Lars shouted.

Ragnar raced into their enemies cover, hacking Frostfang through his enemies' heads and bodies. They had no chance against him but there was a huge explosion as the Thunderhawk crashed into the land. The ground trembled beneath their feet and the pressure wave hurled huge amounts of dust and haze skywards, toppling the crystal which exploded into thousands of pieces. The dust cloud obscured their view of the field for a long time.

They could hardly see anything of the square anymore and thus had to wait until the cloud had settled again. Hoping Aska was okay, they intently peered into the cloud. Had they damaged the crystal irreparably and killed Aska? Or was it still intact and only the outer shell broken so they still had to execute their backup plan and transport it into orbit? Ragnar readied himself since it seemed to be much more difficult to get Aska out of this mess. Slowly the dust settled and they finally could see something from the battlefield. The outlines showed the crystal shattered into pieces. Behind the dust they gradually could catch sight of the outline of a young woman... Every passing second they could make out more details. In that moment the eyes of the enemy and the Wolves were just directed at the young figure and the heat of the battle seemed to stand still.

The gaze of the Wolf Lord wandered over Aska. Aska was truly a sight for sore eyes. Tall and slender, truly a splendor beyond what any Saga had described her as. There was a small, tiny moment of complete silence.

Both Wolves and traitors were mesmerized for a short time. The battle came to a halt as if only her will and her presence provoked the worst resentment in the bodies of their enemies. Tall and proud the young daughter of Russ stood, hands folded for a soft and quick prayer to the Allfather.

When she opened her eyes a few seconds later it was as if you looked into the wolf-eyes of the Primarch himself.

Infinite hate for the enemy mixed with hope and joy as she saw her brothers....

Kapitel 2: Awakening

2: Awakening

She saw her brothers....

She saw her enemy, the lowlife Sons of Magnus and their hideous armored carapaces...

The eyes of hundreds of men, brothers and traitors, lingered upon her...

Heretic traitors, conjuring dark portals to the sounds of godless trumpets, slowed to a crawl and finally froze. A war of witchfire stood still...

Time.

How much time had passed? How long did she sleep?

Trapped between complete bewilderment and uncontrollable rage she clenched her fists with all her strength. Gritting her teeth with merciless fury all that left her throat was a threatening growl while her glance wandered over the audience, analyzing the situation.

She stood still in her exposed position on top of the rubble of her former crystal prison. The air seemed to tremble as the pressure increased rapidly, generating an almost unbearable tension. All her brothers could smell the danger in her scent, could taste her fury on their tongue while she tried to come to terms with what had happened.

For a short moment, in which she saw her brothers in strange new armor, fighting and dying, she closed her eyes and when she opened them all that could be seen in them was a beast.

Behind her pupils lay the shadow of a warrior, a determination that looked into the core of everyone's soul, and a shimmer resembling that in the eye of the Wolf.

Suddenly a loud war cry erupted from her throat and roused her brothers, waking the wrath of the Wolf in them and breaking the frozen silence that had fallen. The cry of the Primarch's daughter made the bones of everyone in her vicinity tremble and a holy, shining energy struck down dozens of traitors, discharging itself in their bodies and allowing her rage to recede while she cleared her mind. The pressure wave was still perceptible, even after it subsided in strength. Even as it was still affecting the Sons of Magnus, she leapt into action, moving so fast that she was a blur of motion even to the enhanced eyes of her brothers.

No demon or Chaos-corrupted soldier stood a chance against her because the precise grace with which she attacked a sorcerer was only barely perceptible for even the enhanced senses of the warriors of Fenris. The last thing they saw was how the crescent form of her legendary weapon pierced his armor and his tormented soul escaped in a blinding light. They were not able to make out the details of the weapon, but she swung the massive scythe with one arm as if it weighed nothing. The blade was so sharp it parted flesh and ceramite alike, separating limbs and heads only seconds after being cut.

A moment later they heard another crack of thunder, striking through the enemy soldiers and leaving nothing but dust and blood. The explosion deafened their ears while the light struck down their foes.

All of this happened in mere seconds and enabled the Wolves to secure a wide area under their control.

When her body stood still again she raised her eyes towards the sky, to her beloved

stars which granted her powers and towards the moon which had always fascinated her. Between her and those celestial bodies existed a mysterious bond and some said she even sometimes talked to them.

A whisper escaped her throat, the words seemed chosen and yet mysterious. Her brothers would not understand their meaning until much later.

She didn't notice young Wolf Lord and his guard approaching her, or at least she didn't show it if she did.

"Thus I closed my eyes and dived down, headfirst... only to find out there are no stars... no moon.... And thus I see this world... and still I am falling...."

+++

Ragnar circled around Aska, trying to make eye contact. The aftermath of her awakening was as if an explosion had burst upon on this quiet battlefield. Her eyes were wide as if she had seen the devil himself, and Ragnar wondered what could have mortified such a fearless warrior like this.

His guard and the old Wolf Priest Sigurd had formed a protective circle around the young woman. On a gesture from Ragnar, Sigurd left the circle and approached her, being careful not to touch her while she was still twitching. In her shock-like state she seemed to not notice the world around her. The young Lord slowly approached her as well and for a moment he thought he had seen a shimmer in her eyes, only for her suddenly starting to cry and then close her eyes, finally passing out. She collapsed, unconscious, into his arms, and drifted away in her slumber.

Ragnar caught her before she hit the ground and handed her over to Sigurd who seemed to know what to do. With a nod he started with his rituals and inspections. For the moment they were relatively safe here, at least for a battlefield. While Sigurd attended his duties as a Wolf Priest, Ragnar voxed a Thunderhawk back to their position to pick them up.

Time and time again small groups of cultists tried to attack their position, never more than two or three men and always manageable with a few boltgun shots. Aska's attack had only left a few of the traitor forces left. Every sorcerer who had attempted a ritual had been struck down by her thunder. Her attack was a psionic chain reaction that had left her in an extremely weakened state.

"Stay alert, men. As soon as our 'relic' is aboard the ship in orbit we cleanse the surface and head straight back to Fenris," the Jarl ordered. The Wolves acknowledged this with a short, "Aye!" He looked back to Sigurd and Aska, impatiently waiting for any results from the Wolf Priest. There was an expectant tension in the air but none of them wanted to believe this to be a treacherous ploy. This was a piece of unexpected great fortune, and perhaps also a further sign that the Primarch would soon return to them as well.

If this woman turned out to be a heretic or a forgery, his blade would chop off her head in an instant. However, Sigurd's face showed not a minute later that this was nothing alike to heresy or Chaos. For a short moment the cold, grim expression of the old Wolf Priest showed something very rare... joy.

"My Jarl..." he began, almost stuttering a bit and with a promising shimmer in his eyes "...the data... this... well, of course we will still have further examine this, but this girl.... she's no heretic, no follower of Chaos, no traitor. This data proves our speculation... in a positive way." He stood up and showed the Jarl his results. "The other Priests will surely inspect her thoroughly in the Aett, every molecule of her armor and every nook of her spirit, but... I just don't think we have an imposter before us."

"Well we will know that soon enough... I'm just wondering why she would appear again so suddenly?"

"Fate? Or simple coincidence?"

"I don't believe in coincidences. Maybe it really was just providence or maybe Chaos is trying to trick us. The gaze of the Rune priests will surely tell us."

"Well, as far as I know there still is one in the Aett who can prove her identity..."

A short nod, Ragnar knew what the old Wolf Priest was talking about, an ancient legend sleeping in the depths of the Fang, as old as Aska herself. With the difference that he was entombed in the sarcophagus of a dreadnought instead of sleeping the millennia away in some kind of cryogenic sleep. The roaring Thunderhawk landed next to their position and he accompanied the Wolf Priest until they entered it.

"Cleanse the surface, men! Burn anything you can still find here. Sigurd, you will bring our sister aboard the ship. Verify it again. If necessary, verify it as often as you can. I will follow you as soon as the scum here is exterminated!"

+++

The month-long trip back to Fenris was uneventful. Aska slept as though in a coma the whole way through, almost as though she were dead. Her vital signs showed signs of a weak but slowly improving heartbeat and her breath was soft but regular. The Wolves let her sleep; she was closely monitored by the ship's staff every day in case she woke again, but nothing disturbed her rest. There was some considerable unrest upon their arrival back to Fenris, however.

"Strike Cruiser Stormwolf, on approach to Fenris."

"Welcome back, Stormwolf. Docking bay 94 is clear for you to enter."

"Thank you, Control. Inform the Stormcaller that we have recovered the relic and will need his help determining its state for sure."

"He'll be waiting for you. Over and out."

"Over and out." The pilot looked at Ragnar. "That didn't seem too hard. Did you expect something different?"

Ragnar grunted. "Land the ship. We'll see what happens then."

+++

When they landed, Ragnar and Ulrik led the procession out, with Aska covered in a blanket on a stretcher. Njal met them at the door to the docking bay and shook hands with them both. "Well done. Has she wakened at all?"

"Briefly, Rune Priest," Ragnar nodded. "When she first came out of the crystal we found her in she released a great explosion that decimated the surrounding Sons of Magnus. It did no harm to us."

"Mmm. And yet, suspicious. I will have to look into this. Nevertheless, a credit to you both, that you recovered her and survived combat with some of our worst enemies. I will test her, to be sure that she is not tainted, in the Aett. Grimnar will want to hear your stories, I'm sure," he smiled at them both. "You should go see him."

"All of our readings showed that she is indeed Aska, Njal," said Ulrik.

"And it may even be Aska, Ulrik, but it could still be a CORRUPTED Aska. I need to see for myself," replied the Stormcaller. "Don't worry, I'll let you know."

Ragnar and Ulrik reluctantly relented at this, and they were soon off to see Grimnar and tell him the story of their adventures.

Njal looked down almost sadly at Aska's resting face as he pushed her stretcher along the hallways to his chambers. "Buckle up. You're in for a lot of pain."

+++

A pungent smell bit at her senses as she awoke on a pile of corpses. She sat up and

looked around in horror at her former brothers. Strong, proud warriors and Sons of Russ were laid out on the ground everywhere, rotting like cattle. The air was thick with the stench of decay. Aska heaved herself away, retching, and when she had recovered a bit, she tried to wade through the bodies. Her heart sank as she saw the face of Halastjarni, her close friend and pack brother. His face was pale with the touch of death, his armour covered in pus-filled bio-matter. Screaming out loud in agony and grief bitter tears ran over Aska's face over the loss of her fallen brothers as rage overtook her mind.

She looked down, weeping, and through her tears she noticed a massive gash on her midriff. On closer inspection the wound was heavily infected; the flesh had turned an unhealthy white and yellow pus gushed from the opening. Carefully, she put pressure on the wound to halt the bleeding as best she could. Normally she could have used her healing powers to heal this injury, but her natural constitution was waning and the wound seemed to be getting worse by the minute. She gazed at the battlefield surrounding her in despair. The ground under her was paved with tortured souls as far as the eye can see.

As Aska dragged herself through the war-torn killing fields, her sorrow turned to righteous indignation and an incredible desire for justice. She swore to herself that she would never allow this again. She searched desperately among the bodies for anyone that might still be alive, possibly hiding under the piles of rotting corpses. There had to be a glimmer of hope somewhere. As she searched for any signs of life she began to wonder who was responsible. She wanted badly to find them and bring them to justice at the edge of her scythe.

It tortured her that she was still alive when her brothers, as honorable and brave as they were, lay slain, their iron bodies broken among a fetid, pulsating landscape fixed with the blood of the Emperor's soldiers.

The thought of a quick death, a bloody death, a warrior's death, was all that she could envision. In the distance she suddenly noticed familiar faces of the dead, and she rushed towards the fallen figures.

Her father's Ceramite runic armor was piled atop his honor guard, his face a bloody wreck. He and his favored companions had died back to back, defending each other to the last. Aska fell to her knees, weeping in grief, enveloped in both physical and psychological pain.

In a last mournful act of tenderness she stroked his lifeless rotten cheek, weeping as the memories of her father swept through her mind. Maggots writhed through his flesh, his skin discoloured and his eyes blank, and she knew it was the last time she would ever see him. Suddenly a deep, cackling chuckle emanated from the deep recesses of her mind. It spoke to her in a warm fatherly tone not unlike her own father but with a hint of malice and derangement, "Hello, welcome to my garden. You are welcome to sample anything you desire. Please stay awhile, won't you?"

Aska scanned the area warily. "Who said that? Where are you? Come out!"

"Do you not see the beauty in these lands? Your gifts are endless and sublime. You my child are my greatest work. Have you not wondered why your wounds heal so fast? Why disease seems to turn a blind eye to you? Have you any doubt that for all your dead brothers, why you have never once been bested. I do not need to offer you gifts - you have already received them."

"Stop lying, you bastard. Come out and show yourself! Fight me!" she demanded, shaking her head in disbelief.

"This, my child, is a garden that you have sown and cultivated by your hands. But I

require one final sacrifice, regrettably – your demise. My other children will be spreading this improved plague soon, and I know you will never lead them." Nurgle cackled in malicious glee as Aska's father, friends and battle brothers slowly rose, their plague-ridden bodies swaying as they kneeled in obeisance to him. Their bodies began to move in unnatural ways, shambling and contorting as they struggled with their armour. A chill of fear ran down her neck and the foul sight of such abominations rising was almost too much for her to stomach but with a swift clench of her scythe, her composure was regained. She struck down the first soldier she could reach and howled to the sky in rage.

"I would rather kill my father and my brothers than serve you! By my honour as the daughter of Russ and by the crest of the Great World Wolf that unites us I will not rest until I have brought peace to my fallen brothers and father!"

Aska started whipping her scythe around, cutting through bodies like wheat, yet the onslaught was endless. Her determination only grew, even as the zombies eventually cornered her on a hill. Through her blood shot eyes and exhausted body she continued to fight, until finally, the torn visage of Lemar Russ overcame her defenses and her vision turned black....

+++

Njal reached for a cup of icy water, sweating profusely even despite the cold air in his chambers. "Well. You ARE impressive. But what else might you have succumbed to?" he mused, stroking his psyber-raven. "We have a long way to go yet, eh Nightwing?" The bird cawed in agreement. He looked out the window at the stars in the Fenrisian sky. "And a long time to do it in."

+++

When the dark fog around her slowly began to lift, Aska recognized her surroundings – she was on Tavia, the planet of her mother's birth. Long ago it was destroyed, there were many balconies on the royal palace that stared down at the shifting hive of citizens below, magnificently decorated with ornate architecture, and she was standing in front of one now. She looked up and smiled. The sky was as she remembered it – a breathtaking deep blue in the twilight as its gas giant, Trivis Majoris set on the horizon. Aska tore her gaze away from the nighttime sky reluctantly and looked around warily as she remembered that Tavia was destroyed, a relic of a war gone long ago.

"What am I doing here?" she wondered. "Where is everyone?" The palace seemed to be deserted, she couldn't detect any ordinary human scents. She ran through the corridors and halls of the palace, searching among the decorated pillars for anyone who could tell her what was going on. She finally arrived in the Great Hall of the palace, and stopped, thoroughly confused, in front of the throne. Finally – FINALLY – she heard the sound of footsteps. "Wait!" she called. "Who's there, where are you?" It came from a door in the corner of the hall, but when she looked into the room, all she saw was the edge of a cloak disappearing into the next room. "Come back!"

Aska settled into the long, loping stride that was her usual running gait, knowing that she shouldn't expend too much energy trying to catch up, the other person would tire eventually. The chase led them deep into the bowels of the palace, into the meditation chambers where the priests had led ceremonies. Finally, the trail ended at the largest ceremonial room. Aska thrust the doors open determined to see this matter resolved. To her shock, she found her mother sitting on one of the large stones of the meditation circle with her back turned and seemingly unaware of the outside world. She sat in prayer, legs crossed and hands clasped before her. Aska

gazed upon her in disbelief and confusion. Her mother was dead, and so was Tavia. What was this?

"I have been waiting for you, my child..." Her mother said as she rose. "It has been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Mother? What is this vision? You are long dead, and Tavia is a wreck." Aska replied.

"Have you come to reveal something to me?"

"Come, sit with me. Yes, there are things you should know." She smiled warmly at Aska that had always been just for her and her father and melted his heart with its generosity and love. Aska smiled back involuntarily and sat down, facing her mother.

"Perhaps you've already noticed?"

"Noticed what, mother?"

"All of our people have a special connection to the stars. It is an ancient and sacred power, a gift to our people that is only provided to a few, and passed down through the Lunaris bloodline. Your gift, Wolfling, which was once also mine, allows us to use the power of light itself. But for you, it's not fully unlocked... Once we finish the ritual, you will be invincible at your full power. Comparable, even, to the All-Father. Doesn't that sound wonderful?"

"More powerful than the All-Father? Mother, I... this is too much, I do not want this. This ritual you speak of sounds incredibly dangerous. All I ever wanted was to serve humanity, just like any of my other brother Wolves."

"But darling... think of it! With this power you could not only avenge yourself by slaying my killer, you could save the entire galaxy. You wouldn't NEED anyone else." Her voice sounded strange now, almost desperate and pleading. "Imagine how powerful you could be if you just free your mind a little-"

"Free my mind? Mother, what are you talking about? I was NEVER intended to be like Father. I need all of what I have for my own life."

Aska stood up and drew her scythe. "I've played this game long enough. You are definitely not my mother. She never would have tried tempting me with this. Who are you and what do you want?"

Her mother's figure rose, her skin whitening into an almost crystalline tone, and her eyes darkening into flinty black pinpricks.

"Very well. No more cheap tricks." Suddenly Aska's head filled with pain as a thousand voices echoed throughout the chamber, speaking every known and unknown languages. "The Changer of the Ways offers you a great gift, Aska Kjelu Russ. You are indeed a puzzle, but a powerful puzzle. You are not at your full potential yet, that much is true. Swear allegiance to Tzeentch, and I will give you great knowledge, with that knowledge you can seek out your mother's killer, and save the galaxy. It matters not. Change is the way of things, in the end. But in exchange, you must give Tzeentch your loyalty. Nothing is given for free."

When the voices finally stopped, Aska's head throbbed in pain and her eyes were blurry with tears, but she still stood, the blade of her scythe pressing against the daemon's neck.

"I will never serve Chaos! I am a Space Wolf, and I fight for humanity, my father and the Emperor! Your tricks and temptations won't work, daemon!"

She screamed in its face and pressed the blade further, backing it against a wall. The voices returned and battered her with walls of incomprehensible, deafening sound until blood ran from her ears. It snarled at her, and she bared her fangs and growled back at it in return. She pressed her blade into the creature, the scythe's blade biting deep into the it's chest. It crumpled around the blade but kept fighting. Aska could no

longer hear anything, but the wind picked up in the chamber as the creature fought to try to get to her, reaching out with extended fingers and desperately jerking its way up the blade of the scythe. Aska slammed it back down on the ground but its arms grabbed her head, pulling it towards its chest, trying to break her neck. She reached out and slammed it on the ground again, and again, and it finally released her. She sat up exhaustedly and spat at it in disgust.

"Daemons, Skitja!"

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A breath teased the back of her neck, and Aska grumbled sleepily.

"Go'way."

"C'mon sleepyhead... it's time to wake up."

She pulled the pillows and blankets tighter around her body and snuggled back down into the warmth of her furs. "Fi' more minutes."

"You said that ten minutes ago. C'mon, beauty sleep time's over. Time to wake up and face a new dawn."

The curtains were pulled back, and Bjorn's figure stood before her in the cold morning light of Fenris's icy sun. The snow fell behind him, almost spotlighting him in the early morning glow. Aska shaded her eyes against the bluish light and glared at him. His long brown hair shook as he laughed softly at her.

"I was trying to sleep!"

"And what would your father say about that? Can't be a princess and neglect the duties of a kingdom, eh?" He leaned close and gently stroked her cheek, and she felt a slight flush at his touch. "I see you slept well again, lil' Wolfling... and you made the entire bed into your lair."

She nodded shyly and smiled coyly. Bjorn had always been a handsome man, and this unexpected closeness was awkward. They had not had many private moments together. Just as she was thinking this, he sat down next to her on the edge of the bed and reached for her hands.

"Bjorn... I..." The awkwardness was almost unbearable. She wanted to say something, but he stopped her hands when she tried to pull them away.

"Shhh. Everything will be fine. I just want to see your eyes," he whispered as he stroked the flowing white hair down her back like liquid snow. Their eyes met and for a moment it was as though their hearts would connect to each other, but when he bent to kiss her and his hand gently grabbed her chin, she pulled away, red-faced. He sighed.

"You need not be ashamed of anything in front of me, Aska. I should have done this much earlier," he said, reaching for her face to try again.

"No," she said, pushing away and standing up. She didn't know what was wrong, but the moment didn't feel right. Something about Bjorn was different; he had never been this aggressive. She looked back down at the bed.

...Why were they in HIS bed?

Aska had never stayed overnight in Bjorn's room, nor had she ever even so much as sat on his bed. She had been in his room, of course; normal daily life in the Aett had sometimes required as much, and they had even sometimes talked at length in quieter moments. But they had never sat together on his bed. Her father would have been furious at such a thing. And he had never tried to kiss her before. It was not his way, and anyway if she had taken him for a lover word would have reached her father's ears within ten minutes.

"What's going on?" he asked. She looked suspiciously at him and searched for suitable

words to express her feelings.

"Have you ever had the feeling that something was not as it seems? My instincts are flaring, everything is all wrong."

"You probably had too much to drink last night. What have Eyjólfur and Halastjarni been giving you?"

Her eyes narrowed. Now she was sure that something was wrong. Bjorn had never dismissed her concerns so easily. He was always solicitous and kind to her. He had to be, as her wild and rough nature often warred with the duties of a princess; there was too much mischief she could cause if he wasn't attentive.

"This has nothing to do with them," she said. "What is with you today?", she asked as he began to walk around her.

Suddenly he closed the door and advanced on her, a dark, evil, and before now unseen smile creasing her friend's face. Before she could react, her hands were pinned to the bed and he was leering above her.

"YOU! LET ME UP, IMMEDIATELY!" she screamed and spat in his face.

"Or else what? You'll run crying to your daddy? He's not here, Princess. Too bad you had to ruin the fun... Could have been a nice ride." The voice was definitely not Bjorn's, and she realized just how much trouble she was in as the face twisted into that of a Daemon Prince. He straightened up, holding her by the neck as he strolled over to Bjorn's weapon rack and picked out an axe.

"You know, it's really too bad," he purred. "I almost thought I'd get the chance to dishonor Russ's daughter. And now, I'll just have to kill you instead." A baleful eye swiveled towards her and he regarded her solemnly. "Last chance Princess. Slavery or death. I can make it a long-lasting life in the service of The Prince of Pleasure, or a quick end, your call."

She stabbed at his eyes, and he had to flick his head back. "You cannot corrupt me, Daemonspawn. End it and be done," she growled through his titanic grip.

"So be it. What a beauty you are. Truly, I admire you, Russ's daughter. You are much like your mother. Sweet dreams, Princess."

He threw her onto the bed, and the axe swept down. She felt a sharp pain in her back, and could no longer move her legs. The cold blade of the axe had dug deep, severing her vertebrae. He grabbed her again, smiling evilly.

Fury awakened in her, the heat of a furnace pouring forth from her core. She was thrown back onto the bed as a blast of power hit the daemon's chest, the heat of it searing its flesh even as the grip on her neck tightened even further. They were going to die together, she noted silently, but she was damned if the daemon that had taken her mother would take her too. Her hands moved upwards to its jaw, ripping its head apart even as the arm behind the daemon's fist grew fleshy tentacles and reached for her face. Her vision turned red and then black as she watched them grow closer together. The cold reached for her, beckoning her into a hole of endless night, but she had not given in.

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Aska awoke to the arid, bitter smell of fire, smoke, and sulfur to find herself on a dead, burning world. War had clearly visited here for quite some time, the buildings around her were in flames, most were desiccated husks of their former selves. Many of her brothers lay dead or dying at the feet of a host of Khorne daemons.

She glared around her, seeking something to vent her fury on. Finding nothing living, she trudged through the bodies of her brothers, clenching her fists as she searched the ruined buildings and debris of war for some sign of life, friend or foe. Some of the

soldiers had their heads decapitated for trophies, but Aska saw no sign of the creature that might have taken them. When she finally reached the end of her search in the last building, Aska let out a scream of rage and despair. There was nothing more that she could do for them, she thought. When she collected her thoughts, she noticed in the distance something that looked like a cairn, with a distant figure moving on it.

Daemons. She set off immediately, determined to get justice for her fallen pack. All she could think of now was of confronting the creature that had so brutally slaughtered her comrades.

On her way to the cairn, the daemon atop it, a Bloodthirster, noticed Aska's progress, and called out some guttural phrase to the ground below. Suddenly, the ground around her started moving, and she was beset by a group of three Bloodletters.

The Bloodletters' shadowy red eyes and blades of glowing metal surrounded her as they shrieked ominously. Vargnara, forged from the tooth of a giant wolf, a fallen legend, sharper than any razor, shredded her enemies with a deadly precision. Her scythe sang a song of death as she danced with them, decapitating their heads or slicing their bodies into bloody fountains. More of them came, and met the same fate, and the Bloodthirster laughed as he watched her struggle.

"Wonderful. You are absolutely wonderful. Please do continue, I so enjoy watching this. Let your anger run wild! My servants will lead you to me eventually, and soon you will kill in my name."

Aska shot him an evil glare in between swings of her scythe.

"Oh come now, sweetheart... You have such incredible potential in you. I could make you one of my best warriors, and you could lead a mighty host, conquering planets in my name. The eternal spilling of bloodshed would never cease, and you would have challenges aplenty to amuse yourself with."

"I will never serve you, servant of Khorne," Aska grunted out.

The daemons backed off, giving her a respite, and she glared at the Bloodthirster again.

"I don't want anything to do with your offers, filth. I just want to defeat you and send you back into the pits you came from. Look at all of them." She indicated the killing field where her fallen brothers lay.

"Enough. It's enough. I have lost too much today."

The Bloodletter roared in anger and frustration. The ground began to shake and split beneath her. She ran to avoid the chasm that was rapidly forming into a jagged formation in the ground, and she caught a glimpse of molten lava before it was hidden away by falling rocks. The daemon was undeterred, as he spread his vast wings and flew to land in front of her, glaring now in fury. Aska shut her eyes and averted her face as his acrid, sulfuric breath passed across it.

"My word, you stink," she muttered. She shook her head to clear it and raised her scythe to a defensive position again. Her foe's reddish-brown skin trembled in rage, and his horns were pointed straight at her. The skulls hanging from his belt jostled about as he stamped, preparing for a charge. There were so many that she couldn't even count them, and from multiple different kinds of species, human and otherwise. Aska did not flinch, however. There was no doubt in her mind that here was where she might die, it was almost certain she would die. But too many of her brothers had been lost. This daemon needed to die or at least be defeated as well, or her brothers' deaths would be for nothing. Running was not and never had been an option. She grinned in anticipation of the coming battle.

The charge was a quick burst of speed when it came, but Aska was expecting it. She swept aside in a complete turn and swung her blade out, catching the creature's leg as it swung past. She howled a war cry as the Bloodthirster roared in pain, but the wound didn't slow it for long. It shrieked in rage and swung with its molten whip which she had to roll to avoid, and charged her again. This time she could not dodge it, and its mighty axe cut deep into her shoulder, almost severing her arm. The pain was incredible, and Aska had to bite her lip to keep from crying out as tears of pain rolled down her face. The Bloodthirster turned back to her with an evil leer, and she breathed deeply for a moment. She could not take many hits like that again; it was clear that she was going to have to take it out quickly.

She gripped her staff with both hands, and gathered what little strength she had left. The two glared at each other one last time, sizing each other up. Then the moment came Aska screamed her war cry as she rushed straight at the daemon. For a moment time slowed, and she watched as her blade struck home and the daemon's great claws entered her chest.

Blood flowed freely from both their gaping wounds. The daemon's eyes slowly glazed and darkened, and Aska fought to stay conscious in spite of its mighty deathblow. She struggled to pull the hand away, but the claws were dug deep. She pulled her knife and sawed at the fingers desperately, until with a last, painful gasp she finally managed to pull free.

"Daemons. Jævla skitt avskum!!" she gasped out as she collapsed to the ground.

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The quiet whisper of a dark, rough voice echoed in her head. It roused memories of her father, as he too had spoken with a similar grim harsh voice that sounded, like the grumbling of a wild beast. The voice called out to her and tried to wake her, it grew louder and stronger but she didn't wake, she just wanted to sleep. She hadn't felt this weak since she was a babe, the pain in her head was permanent and unbearable and she felt like her heart would split in two. She was afloat in space in a state of weightlessness, and it felt good since in this dreamlike illusion she was surrounded by thousands of stars that enclosed her like a safe cradle.

"You cannot stay here, it is dangerous... you will lose yourself."

She knew this, but still, she was not yet ready to wake up. No matter how much she told the voice to leave her alone, it grew louder and more dominant. It had a familiar, commanding tone to it and although it irritated her, it was warm.

"You cannot sleep forever. You must wake up, Aska."

"Just a little bit more, even if this is just a dream, I am very happy here."

"What would your father say about this? Surely he would be very disappointed!"

"You know our creed... now wake up!"

"What will I see when I open my eyes? I don't remember anything..."

"You will remember once you open your eyes. You are sleeping, but it is a dangerous sleep. You could lose yourself in this place."

It wasn't in her nature to give up and if the voice spoke the truth she indeed would be happy forever, but trapped in a dream. The proud nature of her kind forbade this and so she had no other choice but to slowly escape the confines of her world. She slowly opened her eyes and was in the last dream she had last visited. It was a strange place where she herself did not fully understand. Sitting atop the big stone in the mud and meditated in this labyrinth seemed to be the only option. It was a ghostly world where you could find answers for every question, a place of peace, but you could see the grief in the heart of the young wolf.

Everywhere there were signs of doubt and fear, wilted hedges with thorns, forming a maze, and a pitch black firmament adorned the sight above her. Raising her gaze skyward she hoped to see at least one small star. Her eyes widened as a raven flew in the grey vapor of the clouds above, circling above her. Looking closer she saw he had an augmented eye.

"Is that your little spy?"

"That's my companion, Nightwing. He's been watching over you for quite some time now."

"And still you haven't introduced yourself to me," she giggled with a slightly playful voice.

For a brief moment his inflection changed to a more serious tone, "My name is Njal Stormcaller it is my duty to examine who you are."

Aska started to laugh, first quietly but growing louder and more heartily. "Examine me as much as you want, I don't care. But since you've already woken me I would think it nice if you'd answer my questions as well..."

There was a short silence before she could hear the voice again, but this time it wasn't as if it sounded in her head but it came directly from her side. "Well then go ahead, ask me."

She extensively examined the armored figure that slowly stepped out of the shadows. A long white beard surrounding an old grim face, hard as stone with scars that looked as if chiseled into the skin. The raven sailed down and landed on the pauldron of the armor, adorned with runes and wolf pelts.

"Venerable Rune Priest Njal, what exactly are you expecting to find here?" she blurted out, careful to be cheeky but remaining respectful.

"I can't tell you that because only you know the answer. Right now I only see utter darkness here... a lonely, dull world, lost in a labyrinth of thorns."

She smirked before getting to her next question.

"What will I see when I open my eyes the next time? And what year will it be?"

Njal stroked his beard for a moment, hesitating. It seemed he was searching for the right words to tell her this. "Well, you have slept for almost five months after we found you in this crystal on Tavia. In that time the company of our Jarl Blackmane brought you back here. You are in The Fang. Your home, the Aett and it is the year 999 M41."

She gave out a loud sigh, confused and overwhelmed by this news. She asked, "Is father back?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"Do you know where he might be?"

"We had hoped you would be able to tell us..."

For a moment there was silence between the two. She stared at him in disbelief, desperately holding her thoughts together. The grief and dismay over the shrouded whereabouts of her father brought her suffering. It seemed impossible that she felt that she'd only slept for a little while, when ten thousand years had passed in reality. Njal made a step toward her, laying his hand in a brotherly gesture on her shoulder. She withstood his piercing gaze, for hers was the same.

"Well, for a some time now I had no doubt about your identity, just like most of the Wolf and Iron priests. All those tests we had to do on your spirit to detect any possible corruption proved you to be pure." He extended his hand towards her and waited for her to grasp it and finally stand up from the rock, "Come, let's go for a walk."

He gestured for her to take the lead and followed her through the labyrinth. She seemed to know the way and he didn't have to lead her. For a time she lead them through the mud and the thorns, which didn't even have the strength anymore to leave a small scratch on their skin or armor.

"What was that strange crystal you were trapped in?" Njal suddenly asked, sounding skeptical.

"I'm not quite sure. I think... I made it myself... all I can tell you is father is trapped in a similar one but I don't know where."

The old Stormcaller stopped and looked at Aska with a serious and inquisitive face, "What do you mean, you made it yourself? And your father is trapped in a similar one?" He gave her a look of suspicion and the mood darkened. She inhaled and exhaled deeply, pressing air deep in her lungs only to let it escape again.

"We were in the Eye of Terror... I don't remember everything but suddenly we were in a strange realm. The kingdom of daemons, it was a trap which we sprung when we were cornered and cut off, without a way back, and we thought that the best we could do was to give a good account of ourselves and take as many of the traitors with us as we could..." with every word her voice trembled more, she spoke a truth which she herself did not want to acknowledge. If she had lied, Njal would have seen through it. He saw in her eyes that there was nothing but truth and the pain it leaves. Hate, grief and despair were visible, but fear was absent.

"We were surrounded. I do not know how long we fought, hours, years or decades, I only remember my hatred and the will to protect my family, I had already resigned myself to die with my brothers."

Njal nodded and gestured for her to keep walking. They walked next to each other then he softly pressed again. "What happened then?"

"The battle was on, and suddenly there was a big daemon, a particularly big one. I had never seen such a massive beast before... Smoke and fog shrouded his figure but something in me growled when I saw him... Surely you know this feeling, the moment when the inner beast stirs and awakens. I stood next to Father and gripped my scythe, at his side I was ready to do everything in my power..." Then she suddenly stopped her saga and looked at him, serious and confused.

"I... I heard the voice of my mother. I'm sure it was no daemoniac illusion, I know it was her. She told me this was not our time to die. It was too early and our fate would be decided elsewhere. I felt as if she took control of my body and she sealed us in those crystals. I didn't know anything about having this power. I don't really understand it."

"But.. isn't your mother dead? What makes you so sure it was her?"

Her eyes went to the stars again, "She is not dead.... not like this... I just know it was her."

When she had finished they stood in a big square, deep in a labyrinth of her thoughts and memories. They faced each other in front of a massive gate, decorated with runes and etchings commonly seen with a Jarl of Fenris. It was black and radiated with an unholy cold. Dozens of chains of frozen steel sealed it shut.

"I would like to see it, if you will allow it."

She nodded and Njal laid his hand on her head. What he saw confirmed the story the Young Wolf had told him. Hundreds of pictures and impressions rained at his spirit. He carefully examined each detail, knowing she silently endured the cruel pain of this. Like every true child of Russ she didn't fear it and showed the proud courage of a true warrior. When his hands sunk down she held her head, frowning and hoping this would ease the pain a bit, to no avail.

Her gaze fell upon the gate. Both stared at it in amazement, listening for whispers or sounds in vain, it was as if the air hummed in its presence. They could see it in the mud on the ground, an invisible force radiating from it. The scream of Nightwing rang through the air as he took to the sky and circled above them. As Aska looked up to the raven Njal directed his gaze at her, breaking the long silence that had formed while they stared at the gate.

"Only you will be capable of opening this one day."

She looked into his eyes again, not yielding under his piercing gaze, not intimidated by his authority and presence. Like every Wolf she didn't back down and answered his question with a nod.

"It has something to do with your scythe, am I right? You angered the Wolf of the Shadow. A burden and a gift from his sister, the Moon Wolf. So the Saga is true.... you killed Vargnara."

For a short moment light returned to Aska's eyes, he couldn't really classify it but the Stormcaller had already been quite sure this was indeed Aska and now there can be no doubt. Her smile had something warm to it as she turned away from him and stomped on the ground with her scythe. Pride and courage radiated in her eyes while white light spread over the ground, turning the whole area into a beautiful landscape. Only around the gate darkness remained.

"This place was so dark because I was full of grief. I am not ready to let go and I still have much more to learn, the darkness serves as a reminder of temptation and how easy it is to call out for power."

They were now in a brightly illuminated Asaheim and while Nightwing retreated back to the shoulder of the Stormcaller the world around them became blurry. The last thing he saw was a warm smile from Aska.

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The next time she opened her eyes she was in the caverns of the Rune Priests, clothed in chapter garments on a stone bench with fur and sheets. Before her were a circle of runes and soft lights that shimmered like amber. An old ritual, supposed to reveal the "true self." Other high-ranking brothers stood there, with all eyes on her. The only familiar face besides that of Njal Stormbringer was the face of the young black-maned Jarl she saw at Tavia who brought her back to the Fang.

Her vision was still blurry, and she could hardly see. Even the soft light strained her eyes. She tried to rise and registered someone trying to help her a bit. She recognized the black armor of a Wolf Priest who supported her. The dizziness was hardly bearable, she felt very strange and it didn't get any better as her vision cleared up. She didn't respond to concerned questions about her well-being and looked confused and disoriented. "Everything's so... familiar... and still... it isn't..." she whispered quietly and weakly while shaking her head in disbelief, "...it feels so wrong..."

Njal approached her and sat beside her, while she held her head. He put his hand on her shoulder, supporting her a bit. "Why does it feel wrong to be back with your brothers?"

She only shook her head, not knowing herself. Njal gestured to empty the room and give Aska some rest. Understandably a time shift like that could confuse anyone. "I will tell the Great Wolf what I saw and confirm your identity again. You already know, we all did not have any doubts, but... please forgive us," the old Rune Priest told her and stood up.

"I already told you, it's fine. You don't have to apologize. I myself did have doubts if I really was myself. I had terrible dreams..." Her voice was weak, she could hardly talk

and sounded dry so they gave her some water. It hurt to drink; she had not had real nourishment in quite some time.

"I can hardly imagine what you had to endure, even if I saw it myself. I can also understand you might see it as a disgrace to be alive. But I think this was your purpose and I also think we will soon find our Wolf King, too."

She found the strength for a short, giggling joke, "Father would never leave me alone for long, so the chances are pretty good..."

Njal smiled briefly, and the hard stone of his face was softened for a moment. "When you came here we restored your old chambers for you. We hope you will be comfortable in your old home ten thousand years later, too."

Aska thought to recognize some humor in his speaking but she didn't have to lie about her answer, "Well, I would still feel comfortable here after a billion years, even if I missed the familiar smells and faces of my brothers."

"Never forget, your brothers are always with you in your mind. The Great Wolf wants to see you as soon as possible. He still seems to have a trial for you."

A slightly irritated sigh left her throat. She had passed most of the trials. She felt like her spirit had been challenged dozens of times. Still, she would rather have had time to grasp all of this. She stood up, stretching herself which made some bones crack. "Well then I will go to my chambers and refresh myself. If he wants to see me in my armor you will have to send it back to me first."

"Just normal clothes will suffice," he responded. The Wolf Priest, who had supported her and until now had been silent and reserved now handed her a small vox device, "Let me know once you are ready and I will bring you to Logan Grimnar," his voice sounded scratching and brassy from the old Wolf helmet.

"And you are?"

"Pardon me. I am Ulrik, also called the Slayer," he said with a slight bow that she returned and then asked, "Do I have to introduce myself as well?"

"No, of course not. I think everyone here knows who you are," he answered with a soft growl in his voice.

Even the Stormcaller couldn't hide a grin, "Well then, shall we escort you to your chambers or do you know the way?"

The old, grim Wolfpriest sensed a difference in the usual way Njal had acted and raised an eyebrow under his helmet. Ulrik didn't know what Njal had been went through as he tested Aska, but for him it was strange to see Njal discarding his normal reserve. Normally he was cold as ice, he trusted nobody and usually was a lonely figure among the Wolves of Fenris. Often his only companion was Nightwing. But somehow, in front of Aska, he became almost warm, just a bit fatherlike and his stone-cold face showed something the Legend of a Rune priest never had showed before.... a kind of hope and sympathy.

"Please. I doubt you have remodeled The Fang entirely or my chambers would be in another location than before. I think I can manage the way myself," she replied, sounding amused. She made a short bow and coughed slightly. "Please excuse me."

+++

It was still all in place. Everything was where she had left it. Her chambers were still filled with magnificent objects, big trunks and the walls draped with weapons. But the ceiling was more akin to a planetarium than sleeping chambers. Her bed still was in the middle of the room, directly where the artificial sky showed her own star system and directly next to it a small table with small or private treasures, like the big gold harp which had once belonged to her mother. Because first and foremost her

chambers were filled with old memories, everything was like back in the days and still so different.

Even old scents had survived in the fabrics. She realized it when she inhaled deeply, flaring her nostrils. One of her hands swept over the smooth, adorned wood which formed her treasure dresser. Carefully she opened one of the drawers and with all of her cautiousness lifted a small casket out of it. She got an old wolf pelt out of a different one. It stank dreadfully because she had never washed it. Yet, it was a special treasure because it had once belonged to her closest friend and most loved brother. She lay on the bed with it and the small casket, turning a small wheel on it, rewinding the mechanism and the chimes of a soft Tavian melody resounded from it. Her dreamy gaze stuck to the ceiling it wandered over the artificial space. While the music box played its melody the young daughter of Russ buried deeper and deeper in the pelt. She inhaled its scent and for a moment felt back at home. She felt as if she had left her chambers only a few months before and simply had slept in the meantime. She felt very strange. Nothing had changed, still the same old runes, the impressions the same and still so much was foreign. It started with small things like the different patterns of armor and ended with the big fact that her father didn't sit on his throne to drink with her like he always had.

She realized for the first time that she was hungry, which was really not surprising given that technically she had had her last meal a couple of millennia ago. There were too many impressions and too much was new, or to be precise, different. She had only been awake for a few hours in the last ten thousand years. Not stumbling around in a dream or her world of thought, she was living, breathing, and for the first time feeling how an inner emptiness was eating her up. She thought back to her old pack. Eyjóful, Halastjarni and herself. They had been a dangerous trio back then. She remembered the battles they had experienced and all the shenanigans which they were often up to in their free time. One time they had, with her help, managed to steal Russ' personal mead. They had got so drunk that they couldn't even see straight let alone walk, and even if a just punishment was needless in the end they had still gotten it. As their punishment, all three of them had to swim around for hours in Fenris icy water with horrible headaches. She had a good laugh when she thought back to it. All three of them had already suffered terrible wounds in war or in training but nothing had hurt like the headache they suffered after drinking Russ' mead. His loud laughing about the misery of the three didn't make anything better but amused the whole Fang. Until that moment they didn't even know they could suffer a hangover.

Now she had slept for more than ten thousand years. Still, she felt tired and exhausted.

What would be her fate?

Why had she been closed in this crystal?

What was the meaning of all this?

Pondering over all this she eventually fell asleep. Well, at least if you could call that sleep, it was more like a resting state in which she put herself and now dreamed of days past...

Kapitel 3: Good Bye

3. Goodbye

Passing by armored warriors in ancient Terminator armor Aska was escorted by Ulrik the Slayer to the current Great Wolf. The gate to his realm, decorated with golden ornaments, slowly opened. For every young Wolf this always was an impressive tour and exciting to stand before the Great Wolf. For Aska this was merely ordinary and if she was honest things like this didn't impress her anymore. She walked upright, like every child of Russ never showing reserve.

The room was illuminated by torches with a warm yet dim light. On the end of the room on a throne embellished by dozens of carvings and runes he sat, the one everyone here called Logan Grimnar, the Wolf King. For Aska it simply wasn't right to have this title given to anyone but her father, but she had to cope with things like that now. Alongside the current Wolf King however there were a few things that reminded her of her father, like the two Thunder Wolves keeping watch, or the giant mead horn resting in a brass stand to his side. There also were other brothers in the room. She nodded to Njal, as she spotted him as she did to the young Ragnar standing a few meters away. Furthermore there seemed to be other Wolf Lords and Priests, some she knew from when she awoke, some were entirely new.

His dark voice rumbled like thunder. "Lady Aska, daughter of Russ and warrior of Fenris. Come closer. I have been expecting you." And even though there was much friendliness in it, it was as deep and percussive as her father's. She approached the throne until she stood only two meters away from him, never losing his gaze for a second. At first she resented a short, formal bow, but it showed her respect for Grimnar.

He nodded in approval and continued, "While you were sleeping and getting your strength back, our Priests examined every single molecule of you, your armor and your spirit. Njal has already told you of this." While saying this, his view wandered over her, examining the young woman. He had a young maiden fill his horn with mead and emptied it in one big gulp. The ceramite of his armor clinked on his throne as he tapped it with his fingers, pondering. After emptying the horn he put it back on its stand.

Everyone in the room was silent, listening to the Wolf King speak. "You probably already know we have no doubts about your identity anymore. And I do apologize for all the trials and tests while still begging your understanding. And yet..." he paused shortly again, looking Aska directly into the eyes. His gaze was like a piercing needle, looking into the soul behind, but she returned this piercing glance with one similar.

"...yet there still is one last trial I want to put you under. Maybe you will hate me afterwards, but you have my word I will not blame you for your anger."

She had many things but not with this and she had to admit his words unsettled her. But she had no choice but to nod respectfully and accept his decision. "With all due respect, my Jarl, test me as often and as long as you want. I already told Njal, you don't have to beg for my understanding." Meanwhile she examined the Great Wolf as thoroughly as he did it with her. As her view wandered over his throne she had the impression of the shadow of a giant behind him, much bigger than anyone on the room, followed by those of two Thunder Wolves and for a fraction of a second she thought to have caught the scent of her father.

Grimnar rose from his throne, seeming quite grave and tense. Aska didn't like the danger in his scent at all. Such tension was only normal before a big battle or impending doom. It was a compulsive feeling of a dark sense of foreboding that crept into her.

"Well, we'll see about that. If you pass it, which I don't doubt, we won't test you any further and welcome you into our midst a bit more open-hearted." His gaze wandered over her a last time, and then over to the other Lords and Priests in the room, stopping by a large gate which he marched towards now.

"Follow me. All of you!"

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They walked into the depths of the Fang, passing numerous quarters. They walked by the Great Hall and the chambers of the Aspirants. Nobody said a word and it probably wasn't necessary. But it might have made the situation a little more bearable for Aska. They walked ever deeper into the den below the Aett until they came to the caverns of the Dreadnoughts...

The place where legends slumbered.

The deeper they went, the more intensely she could smell a familiar scent. She couldn't put her finger on it and yet she definitely remembered it from days past. She didn't know from where but it was so strangely familiar.

They stopped in the big tombs as a few Iron Priests crossed their way. Grimnar asked them if everything was prepared and he got a positive answer. It was horribly dark down here. Well, it always was, but this time it seemed to be a particularly potent darkness that seemed to be at the source of the strange smell that stirred up Aska's memories. Aside from Grimnar, everyone kept their distance and watched her closely. A little distance away a cool light shined on the ground in a circle. Grimnar gestured for her to stand over there. She looked at him, questioning and skeptically, looked over to the circle and then back to him again. "Please..." he said, and this time not with a commanding growl but with a deep sadness. For a moment his voice even trembled slightly and she was wondering what could sadden a King like that. A moment later she followed his and moved into the circle of light with a sense of foreboding.

Njal approached her and put something small in front of her. It seemed to be a small chest or box, draped into a cloth of linen. She looked down, then knelt and unwrapped it. The cloth pulled aside and she gasped, clasping her hand over her mouth. She stared down on what she saw before her in disbelief. Her mother had two music boxes, the small one in Aska's room and a second, bigger one which Aska had gifted Björn the Fell-Handed. She gently stroked it in disbelief and a tear streamed down her face. Totally immersed, she slowly and cautiously turned the small wheel on its side and opened it to reveal a melody that hadn't been heard on Fenris for eons.

With gentle voice she softly sang the words of the song and closed her eyes. It seemed to completely isolate her from the world around her because she didn't notice the heavy mountain of steel and ceramite moving behind her. Only when the melody stopped she looked up. She noticed her heart starting to beat faster as she recognized the strange smell that had confused her all the time...

Hesitant and shivering she slowly turned around to look at the source of the smell.

Tears of joy and grief at the same time streamed down her cheeks, she felt as if her heart had been broken and her lungs felt as if filled with water.

For over ten thousand years he had not seen her, and all this time she had thought he was already dead.

Before her stood Björn the Fell-Handed.

After all these years it was not able to embrace the woman he had once loved into his arms or feel her skin, despite her standing directly in front of him, gazing at his walking grave.

For over ten thousand years they had been separated. For him it was as if an eternity had passed, and the laughter, drinks, and jokes that they had once shared were a shadow in his past. How many battles had he fought? Dozens? Hundreds? Or maybe thousands?

He had waited such a long time to see her again in his lifetime. In many Sagas at the large table in the Great Hall he had recounted a mistake, something he had always reproached himself about. A burden on his shoulders for eons now, the last few days had made him very restless since he might after all finally be able to free himself from it.

For her it seemed only a few months had passed, the shock and the pain about the events still lingering deep in her. She felt as if only a few months prior she had followed her father into the Eye of Terror and the exertion of battle still lingered in her marrow, even after she had slept and dreamt for such a long time. The wound was still fresh and gaped insufferably in her body.

She wanted to say something, anything. But all that left her throat was a faint whine followed by a hesitant attempt to say his name. Again and again she gasped for air in disbelief while staring into the darkness, unsure what to say.

Slowly and proudly his iron body, forged by the Iron Priests, emerged from the shadows. The Fenris-pattern Mark V dreadnought with the personal heraldry of Björn the Fell-Handed stood before her. The first Great Wolf after Leman Russ himself and Aska's closest confidant, mentor and best friend. If she had a quarrel with her father Björn always had had an open ear for her. Whenever she was angry Björn was there for her, trained with her until she had calmed down again or they thrashed each other in the snow for hours if they had the time for it. While at the feasts the maids danced with her brothers; he and Aska were always a pair in the dance halls, making themselves and the other couples laugh with their juvenile shenanigans and jokes.

Her former best friend and companion was gone and still he stood here. For ages he had lived as corpse to guide the holy engine and continue to serve the Chapter and the Allfather. For over ten thousand years he had waited for her and her father and the feeling of guilt washed over the young wolf, more severe than ever before because it was she who had run away.

Motionless she stared at the sarcophagus, weeping bitter tears of guilt and grief.

"Björn... I... Björn..."

The iron body slightly bent over, the deactivated Wolf Claw lifting Aska's chin slightly without leaving any scratch on her porcelain skin. An almost unbelievable gentleness was in this touch. For outsiders this must have looked awkward but it was astonishing how delicately Björn touched her.

"As..." a short crackle sounded from his Vox speaker, for a short moment it seemed as if he tried to say something, but then fell silent again. With one of her hands she cautiously embraced the claw, nuzzling her head a bit more against it as if she could feel his nonexistent body heat. For her it seemed as if he was not trapped in this shell, as if he was there with her. Her other hand grabbed a necklace that always hung around her neck. Even in her sleep she had always grasped for it which the Rune priests had noticed. Björn had gifted it to her for her sixteenth birthday.

"It's my fault..." she sobbed with a heavy heart." It's all my fault... I... should... I

should have..."

Then she howled, a cry full of anguish and despair that echoed through every corridor of The Fang. Her golden eyes stared at the magnificent, rune-adorned sarcophagus that contained the corpse of her beloved brother. Everyone present in the chamber felt as if stabbed with a dagger. Even if not visible in their cold, scarred faces, it was perceptible they were anything but unfeeling. Even the great Sky Warriors could understand how something like this felt.

The air in the chamber was filled with compassion and sorrow. She pressed herself against the cold plate, as if he could embrace her, as if this could give her a sense of consolation. "Please... forgive me." She could just about touch him.

"I shouldn't have run away, but I had to follow him, you know that... please..." she quietly sobbed and whimpered.

The sincerity and guilt in her scent plainly obvious she knocked against the sarcophagus a few times in despair until her strength left her and she shed calmer tears again....

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"It. Is. You. I. Knew. It. I. Knew. You. Would. Come. Back. You. Always. Come. Back." The dark voice coming from the vox speaker trembled softly. It sounded brassy and hollow, and there was only a trace left of his former tone of voice. He turned to Grimnar and his retinue, still standing in the chamber and watching the events.

"Great. Jarl. Please. Take. Your. Men. And. Leave. Us."

A few seconds later Grimnar answered with a pained expression on his face.

"Of course, first Jarl... We are at the annulus if you need us. But please, te-"

"IT. IS. HER. NOW. LEAVE!" the legendary warrior interrupted the Great Wolf aggressively. Never before could they sense emotions so clearly in the shell of ceramite and steel. "I. Will. Join. You. Later."

Logan Grimnar and his retinue then left the chamber quietly and left the two companions alone in their grief.

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Aska didn't care about the other Jarls and Priests that had accompanied them to the chamber until a few moments ago. For her the cold plate of the sarcophagus was warm and protective. Below it his heart pulsed, there she could sense a breath rising and sinking with his breathing and a feeling of comfort, which they hadn't felt for a long time, slowly rose in both of them.

"So. You. Truly. Are. Back. My. Little. Wolfling..." his voice echoed from within. 'Little Wolfling,' that's what he always had jokingly called her. He knew Aska didn't like to be called little and so he teased her back then with it.

Sobbing she looked up at him, repeating time and time again how sorry she was for running away. "Fa-Father said I should stay with you... he explicitly told me to but still I followed him."

"You. Never. Listened. To. A. 'No'. Did. You? It. Was. One. Of. The. Things. I. Always. Loved. About. You..." even now with his heart so heavy he tried to take the grief from her. To take away a little of her pain with some small jokes and induce a small smile from her. What else could he do? Trapped in his cage of ceramite he could only gently stroke her with his claw.

"You. Have. Always. Been. Of. The. Same. Wild. Nature. As. Your. Father. Was. Nobody. Could. Keep. Your. Temper. And. I. Don't. Have. To. Tell. You. How. Infuriating. This. Was. For. Your. Father. Sometimes," a short crackle left his speaker as if he was chuckling to himself, "And. Still. He. Always. Spoke. Proudly. Of. You."

"I didn't want you to think I didn't want to stay with you... but Father... I just had to follow him. I had no choice, even if it was against his direct order."

His deactivated claw caressed her cheek again, then stroked over her head and along her long hair, giving her the feeling of everything being alright again. "You. Do. Not. Have. To. Apologize. Little. Wolfling. I. Myself. Wanted. To. Give. My. Title. Away. To. Follow. Him... To. Follow. You... But. This. Would. Have. Been. A. Much. Greater. Disgrace. To. Defy. Him. Too. He. Wanted. Us. To. Marry. Did. You. Know?"

Aska's eyes widened in shock and disbelief. Surely she had heard wrong... "No! I... I never knew that he allowed us to marry, why did you not tell me? I wouldn't have followed Father then!" She felt as though she'd been stabbed in the heart with a dagger.

"I. Went. To. Your. Room. To. Tell. You. But. You. Were. Gone. Already. Fate. Plays. Some. Strange. Tricks."

It was awful for them both. They were so close and yet couldn't be farther from each other. They stood directly in front of each other holding one another close and all that separated them was a few centimeters of ceramite. Ceramite and inevitable, unchangeable death.

"Then... then let's be together now. I'll stay with you..." she whimpered with a heartbreaking voice, which made Björn feel as though his innards were being ripped out barehanded.

"I... I'll just stay with you... yes... please..."

Sobbing she wiped her tearful face with the grey sleeve of her tunic, looking up at him pleadingly. "I can sing to you all the time... I'll just stay with you, I don't mind."

Björn wondered how obsessively she tried to persuade herself of that. How desperately she clung to him and the past, although it was painfully obvious they would and could never be together again. She would never become a proud warrior of Russ if she lived in the shadows of the past.

The vox speaker gave a creaking feedback, a strange tone that repeated a few times. He carefully grabbed her and lifted her gently, pressing her to his cold plate as if trying to embrace her and console her a little. In his current form he was over four meters tall and Aska reached without her armor only about halfway up to him.

"Please. Stop. Crying. I. Would. Rather. Be. Torn. Apart. By. Axes. Than. See. You. Cry." Aska wiped her eyes again, trying in vain to stop and smile at Björn. Her eyes and cheeks red from crying, the smile crooked and forced in her face, the view stabbing dozens of arrows into the heart of the Jarl. The feedback came louder and more clearly, leaving his speaker with increasing regularity.

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"Aska. I. Died. A. Long. Time. Ago..." It came brassy from the loudspeaker, followed by another feedback.

"No... You are here..."

My. Former. Body. Is. Trapped. In. A. Sarcophagus. And. It. Pilots. This. Iron. Hull. That. You. See. I. Am. Nothing. More. Than. A. Shadow. Of. My. Former. Self."

Like a small stubborn child she shook her head, interrupting almost every word with a "No!" But she knew what he was about to say. He would tell her she could not stay with him, but he knew her better than anybody and was sure she wouldn't put up with this, much less accept it. She was just as stubborn and bullheaded as she was back then and this would most likely never change. Aska liked to run her head through the wall, even if it meant pain for her.

He could do nothing more than hold her with his claw and press her to his cold shell.

No emotion, no feelings in his monotonous voice and still, in some form she could sense it in his scent.

Slowly he set her back on her feet, she not letting go and making him bend over slightly. One of his claws stroked through her hair, gently and slowly, still trying to comfort her in some way.

"I. Am. Dead. And. Still. I. Roam. The. World. Of. The. Living..."

"No... Björn..."

"I. Waited. So. Long. For. You. To. Come. Back. To. Me."

"Yes... And now I will stay with you. Now that I can be with you again... I want to..."

She gasped for air, almost hyperventilating, inhaling as much as she could deep into her lungs, "I WILL STAY WITH YOU!"

"NO!"

"Wha...?"

"No. Aska..."

The harsh, monotonous answer scared her to the bone, shaking her down to her marrow. She became stiff as the ice on Fenris and the disbelief in her spoke volumes.

"Wh-what?"

"ENOUGH. Aska. Enough."

"What are you talking about?!"

"You. Are. Alive. Aska. Kjelu. Russ. And. You. Have. To. Stay. This. Way. I. Can. No. Longer. Be. Your. Companion. Or. Friend. How. Do. You. Think. That. Would. Work? Little. Wolfling. I. Am. Awakened. Once. Every. Century. And. Sometimes. For. Special. Occasions. Like. This. In. Between." His claw gripped her tighter again, embracing her completely as if he could take her in his arms like in the past when she cried. "You. Know. What. This. Means. Right?"

Even though some part of her, deep burrowed in the crumbling remains of her former world, knew he was right, her eyes filled with a dangerous emptiness. She refused to believe it, not for anything in the world, and still she knew whatever she wanted, it would not change the facts. "NO! I DON'T CARE!" She punched against the sarcophagus with all the strength she could muster. "...I couldn't care less..."

"We. Cannot. Be. Together. And. This. Would. Never. Make. You. Happy. There. Is. Only. One. Way. For. You. To. Ever. Be. Happy. Again. And. Laugh. With. The. Fenryka..."

Hoping that if she didn't hear it he would not have said it and it could be ignored, she covered her ears. She felt as if an endless hole had opened beneath her feet, swallowing her whole into its deep darkness. She had just managed to stop crying and now the tears slowly crept back to her. Looking up at him like a small, pouting whelp she kept her lips shut. But she knew no amount of pouting would change anything about their current situation, which however did not keep her from trying.

"Aska. Kjelu. Russ... Daughter. Of. Fenris. You. Will. Always. Have. My. Heart. You. Always. Were. My. Dearest. Friend. And. Confidant."

He interrupted himself for a short moment, as if it cost him substantial overcoming to say this. "I. Love. You. And. That. Is. Why. I. Release. You."

Suddenly her desperate act stopped and she looked up at him with big eyes. Still silently crying she felt as if suffocating, but tried to keep herself together. Despite tears she tried to be proud, having no other option but to accept this she could only reply to his words. "You know I love you more..." softly whispering this with a warm smile because her voice had become weak and rough. She felt dizzy but still tried to maintain her composure.

"Aska. You. Have. To. Live. For. Us. Both. So. Please. Make. The. Most. Of. It... Be. Happy. And. Make. Sure. Your. Saga. Will. Be. Carried. On. By. The. Skalds. For. Eternity. And. Please. Don't. Hate. Me. For. This. Decision." The ceramite body bent over again, enabling her to look through his viewing slit. But she could hardly make anything out, only a faint silhouette that seemed to move a bit.

"One. Last. Time. I. Could. See. You. With. My. Own. Eyes. That's. More. Than. I. Had. Ever. Hoped. For... Now. Go. Join. A. Different. Company. Make. Your. Father. Proud. And. Lay. The. Shadows. Of. Your. Past. At. Rest. Find. Your. Way. Little. Wolfling."

She nodded, closing her eyes and whispering with her last bit of strength, "How could I ever hate you, Björn? How could I...."

Again, the harsh creaking of the Vox speaker...

"The. Only. Thing. I. Ever. Regretted. Was. That. I. Had. Never. Told. You. What. I. Told. You. Today..."

Then the pain became too great to bear. With all her strength she had fought it. For days her spirit had been tested, and terrible pain plagued her head. The events of the past were like fresh, gaping wounds and even with all her inner strength, she desperately needed inner rest. It just was too much pain, too soon. She succumbed to grief and pain, collapsing in a heap. Björn immediately called for aid over vox, holding her and wrapping her in a pelt he got from his hull. Only when she was safely handed over to the Priests he went to the annulus, knowing his little girl would now have terrible nightmares.

It was remarkable how silently he could move his massive grave over the ground, considering the immense weight. And still, he lived and continued his service to the Allfather. Knowing Aska could start anew in this world as soon as she overcame the pain he vanished into the corridors, going his own way.

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Almost everybody of distinction was at the annulus. They gathered around the map of the galaxy as Grimnar talked about the next missions and who would be going where. "Sven, there are reports of Tyranid activity in the Irlia subsector. Governor Hakat asked for our help since she heard rumors about a Genestealer Cult in the main hive of Irlia. I want you to investigate these rumors and if necessary purge the subsector thoroughly," the deep voice of the Great Wolf rumbled through cavern made of stone. "Aye, my Jarl!" the tattooed warrior bowed before his lord in respect. He bore the sign of the fire-breather and when he straightened again, showing his fangs in a fiery grin of anticipation for battle, they shimmered peculiarly beneath the frosty gleam of his eyes. Grimnar wouldn't lecture him about the details of the plan like a small child. He was a Wolf Lord and now had the responsibility of it, so he knew what to do without a further word spoken about it necessary. So Grimnar turned to Kjarl, the fiercest rival of Sven Iceclaw.

"....and you will have to support the Helios subsector against an Ork invasion. The Greenskins already flooded two agriworlds and now also threaten Helios itself. The hives still hold against the green tide but you will have to dispatch immediately and beat back the scum before it can spread further through Imperial space."

Kjarl nodded, showing his fangs in a battle-hungry grin. His hot-headed temper matched his totem, the Grimblood. "As you wish my Jarl, we will burn them to ashes with the scorching breath of the Firewolf."

Grimnar nodded respectfully. The other Wolflords were still too far away, entangled in battles and their mission, and weren't expected back in the next years. Blackmane's company had been crippled in the dozens of battles they had to fight and would have

to replenish its numbers back to normal, in the meantime doing sentry duty for the Fang. After a brief respite he continued, sounding less happy than usually.

"I myself will also leave the Fang. It has been far too long since I have seen battle and it is time again... also-", he was interrupted when the giant, ceramite-armored shape of Björn the Fell-Handed entered the room.

"Ah, I was just getting around to that... Björn will accompany me. At his personal request our oldest brother will march to battle again. We will discuss the details later in private." Björn went to his place next to the Great Wolf, saying no word and showing no reaction.

The last in the cavern without a mission was Engir Krakendoom, whose cloudy temper had traversed the oceans of Fenris. As always he had his harpoon strapped on his back, always ready to slay the next beast. And for him too Grimnar had a mission.

"Engir, I think you will like this. The floating cities of the water world Lymphonia report missing transports and alleged sightings of giant creatures in the water. Investigate this and if necessary do what you do best." He knew this mission was forged specifically for the man who had throttled a giant beast with its own tentacles. Engir's scarred grin split his face, his voice like a wolf's throaty growl in the cavern, almost as mighty as Grimnar's. Rough like the sea he had made his kingdom. "Those bastards will stand no chance..."

Lastly, he came to the point, Russ' daughter.

The sharp discipline of tactic planning in seconds made room for deep gloom. Pondering, the Great Wolf ruffled the fur in the neck of his Thunderwolf lying at his side, his voice seemingly less commanding as usually "So... summarized, our sister and Russ' child is back. But understandably right now she isn't in the best mood and we should give her a bit of rest to cope with all this.

Then he looked over to Björn, "Will she accompany us?"

There was a brief feedback from the Vox speaker, "No. She. Will. Have. To. Join. A. Different. Company."

Grimnar had a short break, calling for mead and gesturing for his men to sit and drink, too. The authoritarian mood vanished and some of the present men sat down on benches made of stone.

"The Inquisition let me now they of course already know about her. Don't ask me how they did it. As always they are suspicious but made it clear they will accept our decision, while still keeping an eye on us. I don't think I will have to explain that to you..."

"Well. They. Can. Talk. To. My. Fist. If. They. Want. To. Harm. Aska," Björn replied, quite direct.

When the mead came the horns filled fast and were emptied even faster. The men listened to Grimnar who looked over to Blackmane, sitting on a bench.

"Like I said, it might be best to let her rest for a while and not immediately send her out to battle. And think of the bonds of our packs... what do you think Blackmane? You could become her mentor until she is ready to integrate in a pack," his iron gaze wandered over to Björn again. "What do you think, first Jarl? You know her best."

"Well. Back. Then. She. Was. A. Blood. Claw. Almost. Ready. To. Earn. Her. Boltgun. There. Were. No. Exceptions. For. Her. And. She. Had. Training. With. The. Rune. Priests," his brassy voice echoed throughout the chamber, followed by another feedback. "One. Day. She. Will. Be. A. Mighty. Rune. Priestess. Once. She. Learns. To. Control. Herself. And. Her. Fiery. Temper. A. Bit."

Grimnar couldn't hide a slight smile, and looked over to Ragnar. Ragnar thought for a

moment, considered the offer. He could just decline; it sounded more like a request than an order. But something in him almost forced him to accept the invitation. He didn't know exactly why but he nodded, straightening himself.

"Of course she can join my Wolves, and if she wishes she can continue where she stopped. But she will only get her Bolter once I myself am convinced she has earned it. Also I think I already have a fitting pack for her."

Njal Stormcaller, having been standing in a corner silently watching the events, raised his deep voice now. "I think that would be best. In her spirit I saw the thirst for battle; she has a lot of rage to work off because of the events of the Heresy. When we look through the records and Sagas we can learn that already back then she fought at the side of her father, so why should we deny her this now and keep her in the Fang like a treasure? I think she will be in good hands with Lord Blackmane, but still I would like to take her as my apprentice. I don't think her potential is fully exhausted yet and it would be my honor."

Grimnar nodded, first to Ragnar, then to Njal, in agreement and took a big gulp of his mead horn, then looked to Björn again, questioning.

"Her. Talent. Has. To. Be. Used. I. Am. Sure. Both. Of. Them. Will. Keep. A. Wary. Eye. On. Her."

"Then it is decided. She will become part of your company, Blackmane. Blood Claw. She might be the daughter of our high king but like Russ always said... no one gets special treatment. She will have to earn her rank." He let his gaze wander to Njal again, probably thinking she would really be a good Rune Priestess. But Björn had told them Aska liked to be in her pack. Priests often had to be solitary and the Fell-Handed had told them Aska liked company. Grimnar ended the conversation by turning his back to them, walking away leisurely. Björn turned to Ragnar and bent slightly, as if nodding to him, before the first Great Wolf left the cavern at the side of current one. Njal looked at Ragnar, a strange look on his face before turning it into a rueful grin, before turning and also vanishing in the shadows. The other Jarls and Priests left, too, either to attend to their duties or war preparations.

"Even if she is a Blood Claw and doesn't get any special treatment, you still are responsible for her. I hope you know this?!" Ulrik the Slayer spoke to him from a corner. He was known to be a grim fellow and often criticized others. Why he didn't know, but there was a provocative tone to his voice.

"Slayer... if I didn't know that I would be a lot more hotheaded than one might think of me," his grin was just as provocative, "and I have the responsibility for every warrior beneath my command, even if most of them are not princesses."

"I am not talking about that, but what do you think Russ would say if he was eventually found only to hear about the suffering or even the death of his daughter? I wouldn't want the blame for that on me."

Ragnar looked up, annoyed. What did Ulrik want from him right now? With all due respect for the old Wolf, he didn't have the time or the patience for this right now. Irritated, he replied, "I would be proud of my sons or daughters if they found an honorable death in battle. And now excuse me. I have to attend to my matters!" With this he turned around, leaving Ulrik without the chance for him to answer.

On the way to his quarters he passed by her chambers. For a moment he thought about checking on her. But as his gaze wandered over the golden ornaments covering her door he decided to leave her alone and to be on his way. He could understand her pain and even without knowing what exactly happened between her and the first Jarl, he still had a hunch. But in his opinion it also simply was none of his business and only

this one time they would give her time to cope with the situation. For now they had time, the company had to recruit anew, packs had to be formed and trained and they had to guard The Fang and the Fenris system.

All of these things needed to be set in motion and still most of the time he pondered about how to get a broken heart out of its room to integrate into one of his packs. Usually when he wanted to talk to someone in private he would send a message, requesting to come to him in his chambers. But in this case he decided to wait a few days, leave her alone and then come into her room himself.

He wondered if it would be better to keep a military tone, or speak to her in a more brotherly voice. It wasn't really Ragnar's nature to talk like a strict leader if it wasn't necessary, because he did enjoy engaging with his brothers on the same level, for example for duels. Even when the burden of leadership rested on his shoulders in such a young age, his ferocity still was that of the fires of youth.

He asked himself how to approach her, entering his ornate chambers. It was quite strange to treat her like a brother, like Björn had said. Slightly annoyed he rested on his wooden throne, etched from dozens of wolf-emblems, and sighed in irritation.

Suddenly he chuckled to himself, slapping on his thighs before getting to work with giving his company their instructions. The fact that he knew exactly what to do with a brother but had honestly no idea how to treat Aska strangely amused him. And in fact it really was. A warrior, a Lord, surviving and leading dozens of battles, who had already earned so much glory in this young age, had no clue how to lure a sad girl out of her room. He himself had already said she wouldn't get any exceptions, no different or preferred treatment. And still he somehow wanted to display some sort of sense of tact.

He decided to give the whole matter a bit of time, to check on her from time to time and if necessary to pull her out of her chambers by force. His position didn't allow for any exceptions and if the Sagas were true she didn't know it any different.

She was loyal to Russ and Björn, until the day the Primarch vanished and she defied his direct order, following him into battle. But she was his sister and one had to care for his family.

Everyone in the pack had his trust.

Kapitel 4: Resurgence 1+2

4.1 Resurgence

He sighed slightly as he stood in front of Aska's room, gazing over the highly decorated doors. The wonderfully carved wood told the tale of an old Fenrisian legend. It was the first time in recent memory something that was normally an easy task gave him a horrible migraine. He wanted to give his sister and their Wolf Princess more time to grieve, but as a Wolflord he had duties and tasks and he couldn't allow one of his soldiers to languish in a room like this. He felt strongly that a proud warrior shouldn't languish in such mental pain. It was simply not the way of the wolf. Sadness at the loss of loved ones was understandable, but Fenris was a harsh world and every warrior learned quite quickly, that they had to get up again, to fight again and to go on with one lesser simple thing... Life.

Nearly a week had passed since Aska lost Bjorn and still the scream of her pain haunted the Fang's hallways. Maybe a week to grieve wasn't enough, but as much as Ragnar wanted to give her more time, war simply didn't allow him to do so. There were no exceptions for anybody, not even for Russ' own daughter. He sighed again and knocked on her door in a silent hope that she might answer this time with something like an invitation to step in, but as in the days before there was nothing but the smell of salty tears. So he decided to step in by himself and as expected, she still lay in her bed, closed eyes, one arm crossed behind her head the other hand gripping the necklace from Bjorn hanging on her neck. He saw her ears twitch for a second, a clear sign that she wasn't deep in sleep.

Slowly he stepped a bit closer to her, taking a seat on a wooden chair next to her bed and listening for a moment to the melody coming out of her music box. This music box must have been from her mother, considering that it was designed in Tavian musters and patterns, strange letters and carvings from another, long lost world. He murmured, stern but still sensitively, "Aska, I know it is not easy. You can believe me or not, but I really can understand your pain. I am sure that all of your brothers are able to do so as well, but war doesn't give us the luxury to spend much time with our pain." He heard a soft whimpering coming out of her throat as she turned around to show her back to him. Yet again Ragnar sighed and continued his words, "You know , Aska, I really would like to give you more time, but you have to be trained soon and you have to follow the way of the wolf again. I don't want to insult you, but what would your father say? He and Bjorn wouldn't want you to be locked up in your room, staying in your bed and crying in pain for the rest of your life." He took again a deep breath and got up from the chair, walked around on her huge bed and gazed for a moment at the ceiling which looked more like a planetarium. The soft lights of the stars formed constellations and systems that spanned the heavens and he reflected on what to say next. He turned and kneeled down to look into her face as he saw another tear running down on her pale cheeks. "Bjorn released you, so that you may continue your life and become a great warrior. You MUST get back onto your way and follow our paths. He would be even sadder than you right now, if he could see how much you suffer." It took him a moment to say this, considering he tried to show some empathy. The last thing he wanted was to cause her more pain. He had hoped for a sec that he might reach her with those words, but yet again, she turned around, showed him her back, gripped her fur she owned from the Fell-Handed and covered

her face with it.

Ragnar got up and just stood there staring at her for a moment. He walked slowly over to the doors of her rooms, stood still for a moment before he opened the door and before he stepped out, he gave it one more try to lure her out somehow. "In about one hour we have training in the pits, it would be an honour for me if you would join us. I'd like to introduce you to your new pack. Fell-Handed told us some stories about your former pack and times with Russ, so I searched a similar one for you. He told me that you bantered and brawled a lot with two young Blood Claws called Bjarni and Hjllarstarni. He said that you three young bloods were fierce and furious and that you made a lot of pranks. He said it like you struggled a lot of our fathers nerves didn't you?" He smiled at her for a second, before he left he said again, "It would be a pleasure if you'd join us, Princess."

+++ Lars crashed on the floor, hearing his spine making an unusual noise, but he ignored this as it would be nothing and jumped quickly back onto his feet to punch Ullur again and again and again. He was one of the bulkiest young bloods in Hostors pack, and one of the ugliest as well. "You bloody ugly bastard will pay for this shit! By my iron balls you ain't win this time!" Lars laughed out loud while he pounded Ullurs face. Lars wasn't as bulky as him, and surely a lot more gentle man than the most usual Fenrisians, but they usually brawled each other just for fun and considering both had been in the same tribe once, they had been brothers longer than all the others in Hostor's pack. "Oh come on, you little brat! Are you on your period? Why are you so fierce today!?" he laughed back and punched Lars back in his face. Hostor stepped between those, laughing loud as well, "You two children can clarify this later in training, now we have to wait for our Lord to give us some instructions. He told me before he has a special training for all young bloods today. Calm down, you can continue to punch each other soon enough... oh and Ullur, don't call Lars brat, you know how he is in his special ladies week, this could hurt his feelings!" Hostor didn't even finished this sentences as the rest of the pack began to cry in laughter.

Elidor, one of the newest Blood Claws fell to the floor and held his stomach. Lars face just went red for a second as he spit some blood on the floor again. "What the hell is wrong with you all today?!" he yelled with a smirk and as he opened his mouth to reply to the joke, Ragnar appeared behind him. "Oh is it Lars' time of the month again?" This caused even more laughter in the pack and as though this wasn't enough, the other packs heard those words as well, so Lars stood there for a moment slightly exposed. Ragnar slapped Lars on his back and stood in front of the pits, waiting for them to calm themselves. He gazed around the room, thinking for a moment how much responsibility was embodied in leading men who loved being under his command as much as he loved having them. From a corner, a voice rumbled suddenly, "So our princess isn't with you today?" He shook his head and cracked his tensed neck while a nearly distressed grimace ran over his face. "I invited her to our training today, but she didn't respond."

He barely finished his sentence as the Stormcaller appeared out of the shadows and walked over to Blackmane, "She has more to catch up than some usual training with her new pack, she has to improve her mental and psionic skills for the next battle as well. It will be required considering I can't join you this time. I will sail on the Redmoons side." Ragnar nodded again, "Let us talk about this later in my chamber Stormcaller, this is not the right place for this." The old Rune Priest nodded slowly. Like everybody in the Fang, he was worried about Aska. Ragnar turned back to the assembled warriors and raised his rough voice. "Today you will prove yourselves by

being pitted against another pack. Your mission is simple, one member of your pack shall carry an heirloom of our Chapter!" as he held up two wolf skulls in his hands, raised them high for everyone to see them. "These two skulls have been used by our Chapter for time immemorial and are the same skulls that I carried and my ancestors carried once when they proved themselves as true warriors. Your mission is to retrieve this skull from the other team. Injuries are expected so do not hold back. This is your chance to show us that you are worthy to carry the Space Wolves sigil into battle." Ragnar waited for the pack's reactions after finishing his speech. The young Blood Claws usually reacted with joy when presented with tasks like this, but for some reason they were subdued today. He noticed a scent suddenly which didn't come from his brothers and a soft footfall coming down the stairs. The steps were too soft to come from one of his brothers, and they nearly sounded hesitant and unsure of themselves. As he tried to sort out the scent he realized what it was and smiled sudden, baring his fangs. The smell of honey and wild Fenrisian berries mixed with Aska's personal scent, a sweet, almost fruity tang. As he turned around, the Wolf Princess entered the pits. She looked ashamed to be there, holding her scythe nervously with her arms crossed behind her back, which shimmered brightly in the soft lights, brightening the dirt floor of the pits. She wore her power armor and was fully armed, but looked determined to overcome her grief. He met her eyes and she stared back at him, showing him the simple urge to survive, to fight, to come back and live. Again a soft smile ran over his face, and a weight disappeared off his shoulders that he hadn't known was there. "Ahh... Aska. I am glad you came to join us."

She nodded reserved as she spoke with a quiet but respectful voice, "You ordered me to join the training didn't you, Jarl?"

He showed her his warm smile in hope that it might ease her a bit. She seemed to be very tense and unsure herself now, away from her room. She wasn't ready yet to get back to life, but she did not really have another choice. "Indeed I did sister, please..." he said as he gestured his hand to join the ranks in front of him. He was happy she followed his order and she surprised him with this fact. To be honest he did not expect that she would come to join them. She walked over to the pack, slightly started to get annoyed a moment after because all eyes were pointed on her. She felt observed, felt like everybody was thinking about her as she couldn't hear any noise coming from her new brothers. Ragnar turned his face to a grim-looking middle aged man with a huge scar over his face and a tattoo of a raven on his left side of his shaved head. "Hostor, your pack is now back to its old strength. Our sister here can fight with you and you'll be happy to know that she is a psyker as well." Hostor just nodded with a dark grin and twitched some strained grey hairs out of his face. "We will see what our sister can do, I want to see her skills with my own eyes before I judge her," he said and looked to Russ daughter. His eyes ran up and down her body, he was very concerned and looked rather serious as suddenly a nearly happy grin which bared his long fangs broke out on his face, "... but one of the legends is true indeed. She is a very pretty woman."

Aska narrowed, crossed her arms in front of her chest, rolled her eyes slightly and sighed. A compliment about her fighting skills was fine to her any time, but she really hated when somebody told her she was beautiful. Hostor began to laugh out loud as he saw her reaction. One of her pack mates, a very bulky one, added to Hostor's statement, "Well now we have two ladies in our pack!" He shot a knowing look at Lars, who rubbed his head. Aska rolled her eyes again and put her face in her hands. "I doubt that I am as ladylike as he is, still rubbing his head from a punch which was five

minutes ago. What a weakling!" The pack tried to contain their laughter but it bubbled to the surface as it always did, and another round of guffaws broke out.

Lars just grinned and answered politely, "Well, we will see if you can take Ullur's fists, they're as bad as his jokes!" Ullur gestured a fist to his new sister and yelled a challenge, "Do you want to try it out princess?!"

She stepped without one more word into the pits and gestured Ullur to join her, as the rest of the pack clustered around to observe the event with excitement. The bulky Space Wolf stepped forward to meet her, and the ground broke and shattered under his boots as he stamped his feet to establish his position. When he stomped into the cage he punched a fist into his open hand and grinned. "This is going to hurt princess, but you have earned some respect for having the nuts to brawl me. Hrrraaahh! I am the mighty Ullur, former head of the Ice Claw tribe!" He raised his hands and showed her with this he was ready to fight. Aska just stood there and looked at him, truly unimpressed and threw her scythe into a corner. Emotionless... her face, her scent, everything was just emotionless, while Ullur's excitement was clearly evident. She pointed with one finger to him and then to the ground, but spoke no more words. They just stood in front of each other and observed their opponents, eyes alert to any sign of who would make the first move. Ullur was the first to break the still calm that had fallen, lunging forward into a punch that Aska dodged easily. "Too easy," she thought, "That was just too easy!" The rest of the fight was so quick that the Blood Claws almost didn't react fast enough to follow it properly. As Ullur drew back for the next punch her body blurred into a crouch and she swung around and twisted one of her legs between his feet to make him fall. Her momentum led her back into his body and she drove her elbow directly into his kidneys for a hard strike. He crashed on the floor and tried to jump back to his feet but a powerful kick cracked on his chin and broke his jaw. The impact rang out and his unconscious form slumped back, out cold. Her packmates regarded her in motionless awe as she breathed deeply, catching her breath. She sat down, crossed her legs and arms and looked with wintry eyes at Lars. "You wanted to give him a facelift, right? Well, I'm sorry but I'm taking over that task for you!"

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"Concentrate yourself! Focus on it, feel the power intensify as it runs through your veins, find your center and let the energies run through your body. You need to lead it into your arms, your hand and in the very end into the feather." Njal's stern and deep voice tolled out his instructions like a bell as his raven Nightwing came to rest on his shoulder. It squawked at her, scolding her failure. She ignored it and nodded, looking into his eyes with a serious face and tried again. The feather crashed into the stone in front of her, but did not leave the tiniest scratch on it. "Again!" She took the next feather with a sigh. They had done this several times now, and no progress seemed to be made yet. Once again, she began to focus herself, and felt the power run through her veins. She could feel it building in her outstretched hand, and the feather started to rise off of it. It flew into the stone, directing all of its built-up energy into the block of granite, but.... nothing.

Nothing happened again, not even a tiny scratch. "Arrrgh! It does not work! This is just stupid, how am I supposed to break this damned stone with a feather?! Let me just smash it with a light-explosion or my bare hands!!!" she screamed. Her fists pounded the ground and cracks appeared at her feet. She got up and stomped on them as well to get the cracks in the hard ground bigger. She needed to let her frustrations air out, Njal could tell. They had been working for countless hours now on the same exercise,

before this they had several long meditation sessions. He sat patiently while she stormed around the exercise area hitting the ground in her fury.

"I told you how it works. You still have no idea about your true potential, you could be already mightier than I am if you'd had yourself under control before now," he paused as she turned and glared at him.

"NO! This is just pointless," she yelled at Njal, clenching her fists together and growling in a flaming drift while she walked over to a place across from the old Rune Priest and boxed one of her fists against the wall. The evidence of her fury was clearly noticeable in the air, proving it by leaving cracks in the floor and in the wall, "I can't do it. It's impossible!" "It is only impossible as long as you scream like a newborn baby. Now pull yourself together. We will practice this as long as we have to," he spoke calmly, with his stern and ice-cold growling deep voice. Where Aska was the flaming fire of a red giant star, Njal was the ice-cold depths of the sea itself.

"We will not end the training today till you have learned to clean up your act. And now... stop wasting my time, sit down. Try it again." A deep breath filled her lungs with air, and she clenched her fists yet again, screamed out loud and sat down with a snarl, "It just doesn't work. I do not have it under control. If I use my psychic powers I can make a huge attack, crushing down hundreds of enemies in one big explosion of light, but I cannot use it as you can. I do not have a middle ground."

"And this is exactly why we are doing this here, you HAVE to learn the control. Listen to your mind, to your heart, feel it inside of you. How often do I need to tell you? The powers you possess are a fickle, dangerous thing, and if you use it recklessly, it is not only dangerous to you, but to us as well. I heard what your powers unleashed at Tavia when Jarl Ragnar found you and you have to bring this under your control! We cannot risk your strength damaging anything except our enemies." Stroking his beard, he reflected that it may have been a good thing that Aska's gifts were not recognized for what they were, all those years ago. She was young, hot-headed, ferocious, wild, and stubborn, all characteristics that hindered her from increasing her skills. All powers gifted to her required calm, icy control and often a vast amount of patience in order not to overwhelm their wielder. He suspected, however, that she could and would one day become one of their mightiest psykers if their training succeeded. "Your psionic powers are a gift from your mother, as far as I heard it in the legends they were too mighty for her to control. That's why she meditated for hours every single day, but you... you are a demi-primarch. In your veins flows the power of Russ himself mixed with the powers of the ancient living stars of Tavia. You are the light in the darkness with a divine, sacred power which is dead since Tavian world was destroyed," he growled, not letting himself back down from her temper. The only responses he got from his speech were more growls, snarls and rumbles.

"When you practice the Tavian fighting techniques you have an unbelievable amount of focus and concentration. Do not think I haven't noticed that you train by yourself when the others are resting. I saw you doing it in the moonlight. What is the difference between your martial arts and the psionic training you are doing right now with me?" he asked. The beads on his chest guard rattled as he stroked his beard thoughtfully. Aska looked up, unsure of herself. There was no answer she could give him, so she remained silent. She was grateful that she had a legendary Rune Priest training her, despite how angry he often made her. She knew he was there to help her to increase her skills. Something seemed to worry her, something she buried deep inside of her mind and the Stormcaller was sure that the distractions only made her more difficult to deal with.

"Hmmm..." a soft snarl left his throat, gazing into Aska's eyes as he tried to read her thoughts. A vision of a war long ago suddenly appeared to him, where she fought side by side with the first Great Wolf, Bjorn Russbrother, called the Fell-Handed. In this battle he saw the figure of a daemon prince who woke the anger of Aska and she lost control of herself. The Red Dream took her, and she raged at everything around there, slaughtering every daemon she could reach. In the end, she was gravely injured from all of the fighting she had done, and only Bjorn's voice brought her back to reality. He blinked, and the vision disappeared. Only a few moments had passed, but he understood now a bit more what Aska's mindset was like. This was why she was so restless, tortured by nightmares and terrors of the past. He was willing to ignore this fact for now, but surely would talk to her later about this. "Sit!" he ordered her. "Sit. NOW. Or I make you sit and believe me my child. You do not want me to help you out. You have acted like a spoiled pup long enough." Walking back to her place opposite to Njal she pressed her lips and fists together. The silence in the chamber was deafening. She was furious. As she sat down she crossed her legs, took another feather out of the wooden basket next to her and glared at it.

"Try not to use all of your power, you already look exhausted. Your fury is slowly overcoming you and I would not like to cut this short. Focus, concentrate, take another deep breath, refocus yet again if necessary for more time and try to feel instead of overthinking. Don't let your temper control your mind."

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and intensified her powers by concentration as he ordered her to do so.

"See with your inner eyes, do not unleash wrath, unleash your power, empty your mind from all distractions and feelings. Find your center," he whispered quietly as Nightwing let out a caw and settled onto his master's shoulders. Something rose inside her, free of her earlier wrathful anger. She had exhausted the fury enough to let her mind be free, cold, and determined, and indeed she felt the threads of her own powers become more flexible than before. It slowly built and collected itself between her hands, running through her veins, through her body while her mind was totally emptied. Visions of the stone in front of her appeared in her inner eye, and it was as though she could see it clearly in front of her, even with her eyes closed. Njal was sitting there too, watching carefully, but this time she did not let herself get distracted. The power began to run into her arms, flowing through it into the feather as she felt electricity flow along her shoulders and arms, lending a mighty force to the feather's flight. It glowed white hot now, and suddenly Aska's arms shot out and the feather flew like a light beam, crashing into the stone. She heard a soft cracking, twitched her ears and as she opened her eyes again in an anticipatory thrill, she saw that the stone was not broken but at last, progress had been made. Cracks spiderwebbed out from where the impact of the feather had struck. It had disappeared in the impact, burnt to a crisp and then destroyed, but the evidence of its destruction was clear.

She stood up and kicked the basket containing the rest of the feathers into the air, frustrated that it had taken so long even in her joy at her success. She turned her face away to hide a tear of anger as Njal approached, clapping his hands in appreciation. "Very good. Try to remember what that felt like. You need that kind of control every time you cast a spell from the stars, your celestial brothers and sisters." He was triumphant, exulting in her success.

"Good. Enough for today. I may see you later in the halls or in the pits. We will continue at the same point tomorrow," he said. Aska nodded to him, and she left the

chambers silently. As the door closed behind her, Njal heard her stomping up the stairs, and he looked back at the stone. He heard more cracks, and suddenly it broke in two. "She might become more powerful than any Rune Priest we have ever known, Nightwing. But first, she has to learn to bring herself under control." he whispered, staring at the broken stone. Nightwing cawed at him reproachfully.

"Yes... of course she has to learn not to behave like a young pup or an exploding star. She reminds me of a well-known young Wolf Lord, in fact..."

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They met outside, quite far from the Fang. The great fortress was barely visible on the horizon but the pale moonlight shined bright to illuminate its silhouette in the sky. The night sky was clear, full of visible stars and the Wolf's Moon was closer as usual. This was an event that happened three times in a Fenrisian year and always had been counted as a good omen. During the full moon, a clear sky indicated that the Full Moon's Huntress Vagnara would protect the world another year from the darkness caused by the Crescent Moon's Hunter Narghar. Nightwing flew over them in the sky, swinging in circles and calling out loudly several times as Aska stood on the icy frozen surface of a lake. It was a kind of meditation, moving slowly and calm, totally relaxed and as Njal observed her moving he noticed that Aska more serene than he'd ever seen her.

"Indeed she is like the sea... so abrupt and stormy, with waves that can smash anyone, but when the storm dies down, it is so calm and quiet that you can see all the way to the bottom of the water," he thought. The weeks since those first lessons with the feathers had seen Aska make leaps and bounds in her control over her powers. She now had no trouble becoming one with nature and listening to the sounds various sounds of their surroundings. She could hear the water flowing under the icebound lake, as well as every single shift of the wind whirling up the snowflakes fresh fallen and circling around. They seemed to help her to calm her hot, quickwitted mind. Her movements were slow but melodic, postures done in a relaxed, artful, and linked way, with the circular and rhythmic movements of one position flowing seamlessly into the next. The Stormcaller watched her as suddenly little balls of lights began to surround her, following each of her movements in the night and formed out of the light of the moon itself.

"This is the way!" he spoke quietly, impressed. "When you do this, your mind is totally calmed, completely stilled. I have never seen such a movement, how could I? Tavia has been dead for millennia and its knowledge vanished in the void. But you are still here, knowing and following the ways of the wolves and of the stars. Use these skills... use what you feel now..." Pausing abruptly he gestured to a nearby stone and placed a feather in her open palm.

The feather danced in her hand as she turned away, continuing the form she had started under the light of the moon, surrounded by stars who came out of nowhere. A small light beam came from the feather, and suddenly the stone that he had gestured to a moment before was split in two halves. He gestured to more stones around the shore of the lake, and no matter how big they were, Aska cut them exactly in two halves, till no single stone or rock in the nearby area was left. +++

Weeks had passed and Aska was now fully integrated with her new pack. They had been in the pits as usual, brawling each other and playing pranks with Lars and Ullur. Most of the Blood Claws had been training more earnestly, but Aska and her new best pals had been sitting on each other's shoulders, punching and slapping like young cubs. Aska began to laugh hysterically as Ullur fell face first into the hard ground of

the stone cold floor. The whole arena was brightened by their fun and slowly other Wolves began to laugh about their hilarious and amusing actions, while others just shook their heads and continued with some more serious, reasonable tasks. Suddenly she felt someone's hand gripping her shoulder from the back. Hostor stepped in front of the pack and gave Aska a gaze that would freeze a normal human's bones in terror to show her how annoyed he had been from their childish games.

"Listen up you little screwheads!" He shouted out loud to the pack as he let his hand go from her shoulder and stepped to the middle of their pit. "We have some reports of a meteorite crashing on Fenris! Usually it is not our place to investigate such trivial things but the Jarl himself insists on it. We have been steadily receiving disturbing reports from settlements scattered in the frozen tundra. We are used to Fenris beasts out there so it comes as no surprise that any report of strange creatures should be taken seriously!" With the word "seriously" he glared again at the three young Wolves... the same three who were always kicking and punching each other.

"I want all of you to prepare yourselves. We will meet in about one hour in front of the north gate to make our way to the destination. I hope none of you stupid bore-nutters will make me repeat myself!" with those words he looked again to the three troublemakers in his pack, who were not constantly following orders and as well, they usually did not seem to take him as seriously as they should. "YOU better get your arse moving before I put my boot in it!" he roared in anger again, "NOW!" +++ "Oh man, he was pretty pissed off!" Ullur whispered and sighed. "I can't blame him; we're not what others would call, 'grim warriors', maybe we should hurry up and act a bit more reasonable for today?" Lars answered narrowing his eyes. A hand gripped him from the back, as he turned around forcefully he saw Raiks face. A grin ran over his face for a brief moment, as it vanished to a grim face, "This is the most intelligent sentence I've heard from one of you guys today."

"Oh come on, what about last week? You joined us at the snowball prank, that was awesome, wasn't it?" Aska cheered joyful.

"Yeah we had fun, but after Hostor let us swim for hours in ice water and doubled our training sessions I doubt it was worth it!"

"Oh come on, it was more than worth it. I had a feeling like his head exploded any moment!" Ullur rejoiced victorious.

"Yeah it was very funny to see you pranksters acting like childish buggers, but it was much more satisfying to see you three get punished for this! Anyway I do not understand the point in making our pack leader hateful like this." From another corner of the room, Bjarni spotted them. Bjarni and Raik had been members of Hostor's Spears as well, they were, as everybody in the pack was, hot-headed Blood Claws, but they took their tasks much more reasonable than Aska, Ullur and Lars. In fact Raik and Bjarni had been the newest recruits to join the ranks of the Blood Claws together with Elidor, but they seemed to be much more respectful than other members in the pack.

"Move your hairy asses, we have a mission and maybe this time, you screwheads will follow the orders of adult warriors instead of acting like children that want to be warriors when they finally grow up!" With those words the rest of the pack turned around and made their way to their chambers, to get fully armed and to prepare themselves for the mission.

"As if you would be so much better than us, Skitjati Skum Fikta!" Ullur shouted out loud to make sure Bjarni would hear his anger about his words. But it was true, all of the pack would become Grey Hunters while the other ones were stuck in their

stubborn behavior. Aska attempted to calm Ullur down, slapping him on his butt with the flat side of her wolf-scythe, "Come on! We get our sweet cheeks to our chambers and meet later on. Just ignore him, maybe he has trouble with his maiden!" +++

Continued with 4.2 Resurgence

Story and Storyboard.: Aska Kjelur Russ Author and Co-Author.: Aska Kjelur Russ & Tomas Sandtiger Quinones Edits.: Tomas Sandtiger Quinones (Brynjolf) & Bill Adrianto (Guest Editor)

Frozen wind lashed over their faces, cold as the winter wolf's jaws, like pins and needles hitting their face and armor. Trudging through the fresh fallen snow in Asaheim's wilderness, Aska and her squad mates, covered in ceramite armors and decorated with fur, runes, and bones, were blowing their nostrils as they walked, opening them wide to inhale every single molecule in the iced air. Their senses were sharpened to notice any scent or trail, as they made their way to their final destination. Straight in formation for no potential enemy could surprise them. The vision was bare, as the storm surrounded them in the middle of nowhere. It froze their lashes together, icing their hairs, beards and eyebrows, while they twitched their ears, to hear every single noise. They heard the sounds of snowbound trees and branches rustling in the wind, wind flowing over the ground, creaking in frozen bushes and distant howls of wolf packs far away from them. They had prepared themselves for everything possible. If need be, they were even prepared to die, in the name of their father and the All-Father himself. For that their sagas would be spoken in the mead halls of the Fang, as Bjarni started to hum an old legendary warrior's song. Words spoken once by legends, by Russ himself, words that would prepare them for whatever was out there. His humming turned slowly into a quiet cheerful singing, motivating his brothers and even the grim pack leader Hostor to step into the song. But never be mistaken, even when they began to sing, even when it began to sound like they would neglect their attention, a wolf was always alert. As their voices silently echoed in the storm, the enemy, the intruders, whoever they were, would know what came to hunt them down. They would know what they had woken. They would know the hour of their end was near.

"Herja, Herja, Her~jaaa, the time has come and we will rise.

Herja, Herja, Her~jaaa, the wolfs` spirit never dies.

Herja, Herja, Her~jaaa, we are the voice of wind and pouring rain.

Her~jaaa, the voice of your extinction and pain!

Herja, Her~jaaaahh, warriors of Russ coming for you!

Her~jaahhh Hej~hej~ja, we will forever remain!"

Verse after verse they sang their song, echoing amongst the trees in a storm of punishing ice, preparing themselves to die as the Wolf Princess noticed the effects of this old melody she sang in Russ halls ten thousand years ago. The warriors she walked with were serene, joyous almost. As the verses ended, she noticed they hadn't sung all of the old melody. The song was not finished; the last words were hidden in the past, forgotten in time's misty embrace, but still her brothers hummed the melody as they marched through the high dunes of snow and ice. She took a hairpin out of her pack and fixed a stubborn strand of hair back onto its place, as she began to raise her voice as Bjarni did before, first silent, then going louder to let it resound and roar together with the melody of the storm.

"Her~jaah, Heej~jaah, Herja, Hej~jaah, 'Neath the pale light of the moon.

Herja ~ The place where the wolfs bane blooms ~ Sacrificed in sacred slaughter

Her~ja ~ Moon wolfs daughter.

Her~ja when your false body lies ~ wreathed in ruby red ~

Her~jaaa ~ A scarlet halo round an enemies head!

Her~jaaa, Heej~jaaah, Herja, Hej~jah, the force in winters time will grow.

Her~jaaa ~ A dance of blades when the strom will blow.

Her~ja ~ The voice of the past that will always be

Her~jah so am I filled with wrath and blood ~ in the coming battlefield.

Her~ja So I shall remain ~ Hej~ja future`s calling me.

Herja, Hej~jaa, Hej~hej~herja so shall my legend echo in ~ mountain and sea!"

It took her a moment as she stopped singing to notice she was the only one continuing with the song and she realized the pack's eyes were upon her. Normally it was easy to read the minds of the other pack members but in that case, there was something she couldn't describe in their expressions.

"Indeed, the legend is true. Bjorn told us thousands of times of the calmness and comfort your voice and melodies bring to the heart of the wildest warriors. Even our wildest, most grim wolf Hedloy here seems to be more serene..." Hostor spoke as he turned his gaze from Aska to Hedloy who was marching as very last in the formation as the rear guard. "I'd really like to see you more often like this instead of showing a bad influence caused by those two bores marching by your side, Princess."

"Wasn't it Bjorn as well who told the Jarl the story of my former pack? Actually it was similar to this one and Eofjul, Hjallarstjarni and me had been once the wildest and most ferocious in the pack. I am actually disappointed that you cannot see with open eyes the potential of a combination as we three are." She spoke with a certain voice, stern and nearly glorious voice which he never heard from her before.

"May we should go more often into the wilderness of our home, it seems to let you grow. You three also do not seem to be as childish as I am used from you." "

That's because we truly can distinguish between a training day in the Fang and a dangerous operation. Do not be mistaken Hostor, we also know the earnestness of the training. Even, when we might seem to be childish, inattentive and disrespectful I'd entrust my life to Lars and Ullur here because they have an understanding for something that you do not seem to understand as a pack leader... and this is quite sad plus disappointing because especially you should."

Hostor clutched his hands together, the first time in weeks she had seen him nearly grateful and filled with joy. "You are arguing as a wild grown up warrior. You are arguing finally as you should, what happened in the short time we had been marching through the snow Aska?!"

She pointed to the front, to a certain point that Hostor hadn't seemed to notice before. "We reached our destination, that is what happened." He turned around and nodded, smirked slightly, "Yes, we have, my little grown up child. Once this is finished, I'd like to speak in private with you, but now, keep up the good work. We will split soon and for now, you have the chance to prove your spoken words. I want you three to team up when we split!" He pointed to Lars and Ullur who simply rolled their eyes pretty disrespectful and formatted new with Aska. "Bjarni and Raik, you two come with me. Hedloy you team up with Ansgar and Elidor! But before we split to find out what happened here, we will investigate this meteoroid by itself."

A huge crater dented the ground ahead of them. The meteorite that had made it lay split in half from its entry to the planet, smoke still billowing from the impact. Hostor blew his nostrils in displeasure as a grim growl left his throat to voice his grievances.

Old memories ran through his mind as he remembered past battles where he had lost a lot of brothers and his anger rose at the thought of his personal nemesis intruding upon his home. He clenched his fists and inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of an enemy that he and some others of the pack had fought before as well. Hostor stomped into the ground and spat into the snow.

"Helvete Jaevla! Tyranids!" He turned around to speak to the others. "We do not know exactly which creatures of this hive have come to us, but if you see a large one, make sure you kill it quickly. Tyranids have a hive mind and one creature will often control several others. If we kill the controller first, it shall not inform the hive otherwise we will have even more to slay soon enough! No Tyranid will dare to come to our home and live while I have something to say about it. Move out!"

They moved forward with a loud, "AYE!" Aska's team ran directly into the wood while they heard Ullur cheering, "You two can deal with the synapse, I will slaughter all the rest of them!"

"Pah! Who says that the creature isn't searching for you? You're both ugly enough to hook up for sure!" Aska returned grinning while she ran in straight formation with them.

"That's a point. Aren't you sure your mother wasn't one of the 'Nids? Maybe a Genestealer, it would explain a lot," Lars replied stern.

"Shut up, maid! At the end of the day, the mighty Ullur will have slain dozens of creatures if not hundreds and you two just killed one."

"Whatever the synapse will be, don't you think it counts as a dozen as well?"

"Whatever the synapse will be, don't you think it will count as well when I put its tentacles in your mouth to make you shut up?" Ullur murmured by copying Lars voice.

"And whatever the synapse creature will be, don't you two think that I might be the first of you who kills anything if you keep being slow as this?" Aska spoke by copying Lars voice as well.

"Hey, missy! We're covering your back right now!"

"Then move faster, you tortoise."

As their banter trailed off into the forest, Hostor put his hand into his face and beckoned Bjarni and Raik to follow him, "Why do I have a feeling that one of them might die today or at least will get badly injured?"

"Well, if they go on like this the creatures will notice them before they will notice any Tyranids, but, they have a mighty Ullur. This will do!" Bjarni smirked as he followed Hostor into another corner of the frozen snowbound woods.

Hedloy, grim as the darkest night, just growled in displeasure and gestured Elidor and Ansgar to follow him without saying another word. They left the crater to another corner of the wood away from the places where the other two teams had vanished. A storm was threatening to break over them, the skies echoing Hedloy's growl. During the long hours of their search, Hedloy's luxuriant red mane slapped into his face as the storm increased its power and howled a terrible and somber song. Dim, overcast clouds covered the sky and did not allow a single ray of the moon's eye to touch the frigid ground. It felt like the world-wolf itself had foreseen a catastrophic downfall and Ansgar walking next to Hedloy noticed a terrifying shiver running down his spine.

"Something is not right here. We have to be more alert," he whispered with a rigid, harsh voice. The hairs on his back were standing up, and he knew it was not a good sign. Hedloy simply blew his nostrils and another rough growl left his throat, he was not a man of great words nor did he speak a lot, most of the time he just growled and gave brothers and enemies likewise a gaze that chilled the bones to their marrow. His

stomps through the snow increased suddenly as his senses noticed a scent which wasn't there before, Ansgar noticed this as well and turned around to brief Elidor, the youngest Blood Claw, to stay even more vigilant. "Hedloy!" he yelled rapidly, "Where is Elidor?" The grim warrior turned around, scowling, and pushed himself back to back with Ansgar.

"We did not even notice that he was gone, skitja!" Ansgar spat on the field, and they both scanned the forest, their senses ravaging everything they could reach in an effort to find their missing comrade. Yellow-golden wolf eyes pierced through the icy fog, trying to catch a glimpse of their pack mate while the rain's pins and needles crashed against their faces and armor, inhaling the raw glacial air to detect every single molecule of a scent that might have been missed before. For the first time since they had started their mission, Hedloy spoke. "All of our enemies are dangerous, but this one managed it to separate one of our brothers from us. If he is dead, I will crush its bones and its blood shall stain the snow before this is done."

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Elidor stepped carefully through the snow, trying to find the trail of his brothers. He was as tense as a tightly wound wire and anger at his own mistakes threatened to overwhelm him. He had been negligent, a mistake that might cost his life. His grip tightened around his chainsword, and he flicked the clasp of his bolt pistol's holster loose. "My first time in field and this is what happens," he grumbled. "But I will not die here, not today!" he growled as he activated a signal on his armor to tell his brothers his current position. "It must be here somewhere..."

He sniffed, testing the air again for his brothers' scent, but there was nothing, only the lonely scents of trees, snow and ice. The storm was getting worse and turning into a full blown hurricane, and vision was becoming ever more problematic from the snow whipping around area. His eyes searched the area, observing everything, trying to see any sign of Hedloy or Ansgar. He twitched his ears, murmuring to himself an old Fenrisian prayer of war to calm his thoughts. He had to watch out and still he couldn't explain himself how he got separated. He ran the events through his head once again. He had been directly behind Ansgar and Hedloy, he turned around for a mere second because he thought he noticed something behind him and as he turned around both of them were gone. No footsteps were evident in the snow, which made every single track from them vanish seconds after they stepped on it. As he called out to them, he heard only the sounds of the storm. Suddenly Elidor heard something that he had always dreaded in the deepest recesses of his mind, the sound of power armor being cracked and pierced. In shock the Blood Claw looked down and saw barbed hooks jutting straight out of his chest. With a swift, merciless tug, Elidor was pulled up the tree. For the first time in his life he came face to face with the pitch black eyes of a lictor. His arms were pinned firmly by the massive grasping talons. Completely immobile and wounded, the only thing he could do was to spit at the creature and give the monster a swift head butt. The creature's hold weakened for a moment, stunned from the blow, and with a mighty heave he tore his right arm free and drew his bolt pistol, trying to get some shots off on his attacker. His efforts were too little, too late. The beast struck first, its feeding tendrils opened and a deadly maw completely enveloped the warrior's face. His last, desperate efforts echoed among the trees surrounding them, then silence.

The snow under the tree was painted in red, soaking the ground in Elidor's blood. The lictor perched invisibly in the tree, Elidor's corpse hidden in a nook made by one of the largest branches. No footsteps were left on the ground. No noises gave away its

presence in the tree. The only hint of its predatory nature it left was the scent of blood in the storm to lure out other possible victims to feed upon. It lurked in the tree, clearly a hunter that knew how to hide itself even from the enormous senses of the mightiest warriors of mankind. It had a perfect battlefield. The blizzard had hidden it almost completely and the nature of this planet was a perfect fit for its kills, but there was one thing that this lictor did not know yet. The lictor was not the only one who knew how to hide scents, how to disappear and attack abruptly. It did not signal its master yet, for it was hungry and wanted to feed itself and its brethren. It waited patiently in the trees and it did not take long for more prey to approach.

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"JAEVLA!!!" Ansgar growled, filled with anger and rage. "We are too late! And how are we ever going to get his body down?"

"Hush! Elidor was new blood and we could have shared his fate. This is what happens when you are foolish and do not keep your senses as sharp as the blades of your chainsword Ansgar," Hedloy warned as he kneeled to take a smell of his former brother's blood. They gazed in consternation at the tree where Elidor's corpse sat, still dripping blood on the ground below. Ansgar took a bit of snow from the ground, trying to get some information out of it. "But when this creature was able to kill him that way, to impale him like this, it is a true hunter. Stay aware!"

They made a thorough search of the area to find whatever had done this. They did not want to share Elidor's fate, and with determined expressions, they set out to find Elidor's killer. Ansgar's ears twitched and when his eyes met Hedloy's he knew they had both heard the same thing - a slow, stealthy cracking from the treetops which definitely did not come from the punishing wind of this merciless, blasting blizzard. Hedloy felt a breath of air on the back of his neck, and turned around just in time to see a shape move against a tree. He lifted his bolt pistol and hissed in warning to Ansgar, firing a shot at the tree where he had seen the unknown attacker. As the Lictor leapt into the fray, the snow shot up into the air from the weight of the beast. Its barbed hooks and feeding tendrils twitched eagerly as it came forward, hungry for more succulent meat. Quick successive noises arose from the bushes on the ground, creaking, shaking in the treetops all over them. Ansgar and Hedloy suddenly found themselves surrounded by not only the lictor but smaller creatures that had been concealed out of view, hidden and waiting. Tyranids were an enemy Ansgar hadn't fought before but Hedloy knew all too well from one of the first battles he was in, and had barely survived. A horde of genestealers skulked out of the growing shadows as the wind picked up again, and snow billowed through the area, hiding the gruesome features of the genestealers and lictor. Both of them activated their homing signal and the com-net. "Hedloy here, Tyranids confirmed. Enemy contact has been made!" Ansgar growled, thinking he would make the first strike but Hedloy held an up a hand.

"Let them come to us," he said. The situation was dire. The order to kill the synapse controller as quick as possible still resounded in their heads, but there was no synapse creature to be seen here... yet. Maybe there was none, considering the creatures they had to deal with had a mind for their own.

They had to handle its minions quickly but the two of them couldn't kill this many enemies before the cults leader could escape into one of the cities, it would only be a matter of time until it would inform the hive. The shape of the lictor stamped its feet in front of Ansgar and he fired a few shots out of his bolt pistol which hit the beast several times in the chest. It raced forward, enraged, and Ansgar could not dodge in

time. Its talons went straight through his left shoulder, and a devastating pain ran through his body as he howled in rage, the lictor staring at him with its cold black eyes. It withdrew the talon and camouflaged itself with its comelionic skin, trying to stop the bleeding as it withdrew from combat. The genestealers attacked mercilessly as well, and Hedloy and Ansgar were suddenly very busy trying not to die. Their blades tore into their enemies' flesh, the blood from both sides spackling the snow around them from both small and large cuts. Hedloy felt a claw bursting into his pelvis, and as he looked down to the genestealer responsible he snarled defiance into its face. One stroke of his whirring chainsword separated the arm, and the backswing off the genestealer's head. Both men were now wounded and surrounded by feasting, hungry enemies striking cruelly and ruthlessly. And if it would be their fate to die here, they would accept it but taking as many foes with them as possible so that their sagas would be told in the halls of the Fang. The lictor rose up again in front of Ansgar and he smashed his chainsword into its body, rupturing its belly. Its guts spilled out upon the snow as he dodged a hit from its hooks with his other arm, but the lictor stabbed again, and he could not get out of the way successfully a second time. It slammed him back against a tree, and its talons pinned him there as it drew back a knife-sharp leg and slammed it forward. He knew a moment of nothingness and then immense pain in his elbow, and when the lictor drew back its leg, it held his arm aloft in triumph. The creature was distracted by its success long enough for Hedloy, screaming in rage, to charge it and finish the kill. The lictor collapsed and fell to the ground, the stench of its purple blood giving the air a pungent aroma. Ansgar breathed heavily, gasping for air as he heard Hedloy yelling, "There is another one, watch out!" They gazed, in despair, upon what they were sure was their doom.

They heard heavy footfalls in the near distance, and slowly the arched back and sharp talons of a Carnifex came into view. They looked at each other and back to the Carnifex. Ansgar's armour systems had closed off the wound in his elbow and the blood was only a trickle onto the snow, but he was clearly wounded and not going to be able to fight at his best. The Carnifex paused, readying itself for the deep lunge, and they heard a nearby howl and three boltguns opened up into its carapace. The ammunition smashed against the hardened external armor, and Aska, Ullur, and Lars made their presence known. Aska's speed was stunning as she leaped from snowbank to rock in her charge, determined to protect Ansgar from further harm. Her scythe sliced through one of the Carnifexes talons as though it was paper and she called out in challenge to it. Ullur helped Ansgar to his feet and got a shoulder under his body in support.

"Can you run?" he asked. "Aye, brother, my thanks," replied Ansgar. "I'll get to safety myself though, you take this monster down!" He turned away and disappeared into the trees, and the four warriors heard his voice over the communications relay, urging their other brothers to come quickly.

Ullur, Lars, Hedloy, and Aska faced off with the Carnifex, determined to bring it down. "Well well darlin'... Look at you," Ullur swung his arms around, limbering up for the coming battle. "That's a face only your mother could love."

Their brief celebration was brought to an end as the realization that this carnifex had regenerated its talon that was cut clean not moments ago. It turned its head slightly revealing a massive plasma burn that left the creature wounded and with only one eye. "I'm disappointed, I thought we would have some fun!" Ullur complained as he tightened his grip around the haft of his chainsword.

"Well at least it's not as ugly as you are!" Aska mocked him, swinging her scythe in wide arcs to keep it at bay.

"Indeed sister, but as well... it is not as mighty as I am!", he grunted cheerful as if it would be nothing more than a joyful challenge for him.

"Hostor! Where are you and your team? We may need some support if the genestealers are going to continue to attack like this", Lars said harsh into the communicator. Hostor's response, if there was one, was interrupted by a loud screech of the monstrous creature. Suddenly one of its talons stabbed out, and Lars and Aska both had to dodge as the enormous pincers crashed into the floor. It trudged forward with weighty stamps, and a loud screech left its throat again as the Carnifex's lumpy carapace twitched revealing scores of sinewy muscle and a second pair of heavy bulky crab claws, the wounds from the previous attacks were all but healed as the beast lunged at them for a second time. As Aska whistled to distract it and it turned its head as she swiped at it, snarling out a warning. Hedloy ran at it, and dodged another stab of its talons. It turned to follow him as he hit the carapace with the flat of his chainsword twice, and Aska had a brief moment to strike that she seized immediately. Her wolf-scythe struck deep into the carapace, and the Carnifex screamed in pain as she opened its back and threw a frag grenade into its stinking red innards. It reared back and the grenade came out as it bucked wildly and Aska slid away, falling to the ground under it. The explosion was muffled by the beast's belly, and it screamed in pain and rage again. Aska grunted in satisfaction as it collapsed, but it staggered to its feet again. The creature's ribcage had been blown clean open, the snow started to steam as streams of the creature's blood poured onto the white snow, but it had not breathed its last yet. "Ullur! Lars! Hedloy! I need you to distract it a bit longer for me. Apparently this thing will require my psionik gifts to be put down for good." She was growling in anger as she fought to control the currents of her celestial mysterious powers.

"Then what are you waiting for Princess? Want me to come over there to give you a kick in your arse!?" Ullur yelled. Aska ignored him, clasping her hands together around her scythe and using it as a staff to support her body weight. Within moments, she was gone, her mouth working out mystical words while her brow tying itself into a knot as she searched for enough focus to cast her spell. The Carnifex's damaged chest was a bloody, putrid mess, but its amazing regenerative properties kicked in, slowly but surely the muscle sinews pulled the overhanging flesh into place as new bone and carapace matter was formed to cover the wound. In that instant Genestealers leapt out from the snow brandishing their rending claws, salivating at the thought of fresh prey to devour. Even though they were once human they were already too far gone, they were predators of humanity and if they could not be stopped now the infestation will spread.

"More of them?? When does this infestation end?" Hedloy was furious. "They are without number indeed!" He, Ullur and Lars stepped forward to meet them, and shots rang out as the genestealers charged. Two of the monsters faltered a little as bullets from Hedloy and Lars found a weak spot, but Ullur's shots missed and he found himself facing a charging, lethally angry opponent. He gave an evil smile as he revved

up his chainsword, preparing for a mighty strike. The Tyranid lunged forward, its grasping claws searching for purchase in Ullur's body, but at the last moment he twisted aside, and as it went by he completed a full rotation with his chainsword swinging up and through its body. The momentum of both of their combined weight brought the sword ripping through the upper half of the genestealer, and the head went rolling away. Blood gushed from its neck as the body twitched on the ground, not understanding yet that it was dead. Its fingers flexed in one last grasp, trying to find purchase in Ullur's still form, and then it relaxed in the cold sleep of the slain. Ullur turned away, putting it out of his mind, and advanced towards Lars' opponent next. They needed to buy Aska as much time as they could.

Lars noticed Ullur's stealthy advance and pressed the attack, backing the creature up just enough for Ullur to hit it in the back. Its roar of pain was cut mercifully short by the voice of Lars' bolt pistol, and blood and brain matter spattered the snow as the genestealer's body dropped to the ground, joining its once living brother.

Hedloy had managed to dispatch the last genestealer on his own, and stood nearby, shaking the blood off of his chainsword. They closed ranks again around Aska, looking warily between her and the carnifex. Even in its wounded state, it was still dangerous. Hedloy was about to speak, when suddenly her eyes opened, glowing white in the darkness. She had found enough focus at last to cast her spell, and she could still hear Njal's words from her training lessons echoing in her head. The men stepped back as she felt the power rising in her, intensifying as her body slowly left the ground and she began to hover over it, stretching her legs and arms out as the spell took shape. Lightning crackled over the surface of her armor. This was the moment that Hostor, Bjarni and Raik arrived, breathing heavily from the dead run that they had set out upon receiving Hedloy's first distress call, to bear witness to Aska's spell. Runic lights surrounded her and seemed to decorate her face as she brought her hands together and extended them towards the carnifex. It looked up at her defiantly, glaring and growling as it stamped its feet and reared. The sky cleared for a moment, and the harsh breeze was still as the moon and stars came out, shining brightly. It felt like Aska would become the power of light itself, like she would make a bond between her and the nearby stars and the moon. Aska's hands glowed in a white-hot, blazing fury, and a pure beam of light hit the creature's body. It screamed in terrifying agony as its skin and the carapace around it blackened. It writhed in pain for a few more moments, and finally slumped to the ground. Ullur caught Aska as she fell from the air where she had floated, her body limp in exhaustion from the spell. The pack watched her carefully until she managed to stand back up on her own, and then howls of pleasure, congratulations, and triumph broke out.

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Aska, Ullur and Lars had been summoned to Ragnar's chambers upon their return to the Fang. They marched down the hallway, their boots tramping to the beat of a drum only they could hear. "Did he say anything about what this meeting was going to be about?" Lars asked.

"Not to me," Aska said. Ullur shook his head wordlessly. "Hmph," Lars said. "I wonder what this is about."

"No use in waiting to find out, is there? Let's head on in," said Aska, trying to sound more cheerful than she felt. Deep down, she thought she knew what Ragnar wanted. The ornately engraved stone door swung open before them, and they filed into Blackmane's chambers. Ragnar stood before them in his chapter-uniform, Hostor slightly behind and to the right of him. They had clearly been waiting for their arrival.

Five chairs had been set out for them to use, and a table divided the space between the three Blood Claws and the two leaders.

"Jarl," Aska greeted Ragnar and gave a slight nod to her pack leader. Both of them, the Jarl and the pack leader replied with a simple grin, baring their fangs, and Ragnar gestured invitingly for them to sit down. While Ullur and Lars preferred to stand, and declined to take a seat, Aska sat down in a comfortable position and crossed her legs. She noticed the eyes of both the Wolf Guard and Wolf Lord lay heavily on her. She raised her eyebrows at them and smiled uncomfortably. "So why are we here?"

Ragnar bared his teeth again. "You don't like to waste time, do you? Very well..." He and Hostor swept forward and seated themselves in the other chairs and Hostor turned his gaze upon each of them in turn.

"All of you have done an impressive job today. You saved two men, covered the flanks while holding the position until my team and I had arrived to your support. On top of it you slaughtered a carnifex as well." Hostor's voice was had the low, rumbling overtones of a distant rockslide as he spoke, but he was clearly annoyed. With every slight move of his hands, the runic charms and wolf teeth decorating his armour rattled against his shoulder guards.

"But none of you seems to be capable of showing any respect to me or taking responsibility for your own actions during the daily training. I can't even sense that you take your training seriously. Explain."

Aska's laugh cut the air like a whip cracking as she heard Hostor's speech, "Oh by my father's iron balls... Seriously, Hostor?!" As his ice cold gaze met her eyes she knew he was angry, which did not make any difference in her amusement. Lars and Ullur tried to contain their laughter, obviously not an easy task for them. Hostor crossed his arms in front of his chest and glared at them. "I'm waiting."

"The lictor separated Elidor from Hedloy and Ansgar, two experienced Blood Claws, wild and proud warriors with senses sharper than the tooth of Vargnara. How do you think this happened?" She waited for his reply, still holding her stomach from her hearty laughter. The sound of Hostor's teeth grinding together echoed in the chamber, and he struggled to hold his temper. "They were inattentive. A mistake that will not happen again."

"Yes, and why didn't it happen to Raik and Bjarni? They're quite a lot younger than Hedloy and Ansgar. It could have happened to anybody. Why do you think it did not happen to Ullur, Lars and me?" she asked, patiently waiting for him to see her point. Yet again Hostor growled. Saying nothing but waiting for her further explanation while giving the three Blood Claws in front of him an icy glower. Ullur and Lars had finally had enough, and sat, taking their place at their sister's side in support. Ullur narrowed his eyes at Hostor and nodded. "With all due respect, Hostor. We might seem to be the ones who neglected their duties, careless and rough, as well it might seem that our..." he paused, searching the right words, "...childish games do not make any sense, but never forget one thing: we are used to being distracted. We are used to making it look like we are playing around. The reality is simple, whilst others are used to stay alert all the time, to focus on everything and to be fierce warriors, we are doing the same just in another way. What do you think will an enemy think when he sees us 'playing' like this at a battlefield?"

"He will think you are stupid pups and an easy target!" Hostor exclaimed. "I thought the same until today."

Aska's golden wolf-eyes sparkled at Hostor's grim gaze and grinned, "Yes, that's right, and once they attack us they will see how much they have failed and what they have

to deal with afterwards. Don't get us wrong Hostor, we do have a lot of respect for you. In fact we are very happy that you are our leader. But I think you are simply used to the young Blood Claws following you without any doubt, without questioning your decisions and this is even more dangerous for you and your pack. As a leader you should know that as well. As a leader you should think about it when we question your orders."

While Aska spoke Hostor's harsh face expression turned to a wan smile. He sighed reluctantly, ceding them the point. "For the way you look at the world and for the things you have taught me today I nearly feel dishonored. Your argument is absolutely correct and this is why I don't want to stop you. But one more thing before you're dismissed for today. Learn to control yourselves. You three are my very best warriors. And without you I might not be standing here, and it's possible the rest of the pack would not have survived either." All three of them looked at each other in disbelief, even looking towards the Jarl who had been sitting there quite still and listened to the conversation. They looked to Hostor and then back to each other again, "Uhm... really?"

"Yes. I have learned a lot from you all today, and I hope you learned a lot from me and the situation we were in," he replied. In his scent and his emotion they sensed that he was serious, but still they couldn't believe what they heard. Before they stepped into the chamber for this conversation they had been sure that this would be pretty uncomfortable and they might be in more trouble afterwards. As Ragnar rose from his giant, highly decorated wooden chair he stepped next to Hostor, resting his hand for a moment on his shoulder he raised his voice, "When you fulfill your tasks in the next battlefield and you've grown even more, I am sure we can talk about your bolters."

Lars and Ullur's facial expressions went in a second from confused and unbelieving to a happy grin while Ullur's howl of joy echoed in the chamber and the nearby hallways, while Aska's eyes narrowed still not believing what happened.

"All three of you are hot-headed young pups. If you want to rise and fight for Russ and the Allfather, you need to be tempered in the fires of war. Right now, you are like a rough iron blade, needing to be sharpened and brought into its final form." Hostor got up from his place and nodded to Blackmane, and they shook hands. He signaled to Ullur and Lars that they were to follow him, as the meeting was at an end and they could leave. Aska made ready to leave with them, but then she heard Blackmane's voice calling her back. "Not you, Princess. Sit down again."

A queasy noise left her throat. A nauseated feeling sank into her stomach as she put her hand to her face and turned around.

"No need to get uncomfortable, if I wanted to rip off your head I'd already have done so." She walked back to the chairs, and crossed her legs again in her former position. For a moment her golden eyes met the blue ones of Ragnar. She suddenly uncrossed her legs, looking ashamed and turned her gaze to a corner of the room. "Yes, Jarl?" She tried to put some strength into her voice, but she was nervous. Why were Ullur and Lars allowed to leave, while she was not?

A rough laugh left Ragnar's throat, rough and harsh as the winter's storm, but he looked pleased. "I never thought I'd see you like this. You are looking like a young pup who stole their master's favorite toy. As I mentioned before... if I wanted to rip off your head I'd already have done so. Ease up."

Aska didn't find this funny. She was hungry and thirsty and all she wanted right now was to spend some time with Ullur and Lars in the great hall with food and mjod. He took down a drinking horn and offered it to her. "I cannot offer you a meal, this won't

take long, but here. Have a drink." She looked at him like nobody offered her a horn of mjod before. She took it after she paused in hesitation, nodding and replying with a serene, "Thanks."

"It's been quite a while since we had a talk. I simply want to know how you're doing and if you managed to integrate yourself into your new company." He pulled his lips back in a small smile as he poured some mjod into his personal drinking horn. Aska emptied the whole horn in one big swig. A sound of enjoyment left her mouth as she whipped away some leftovers running down her chin, "Uhm... but don't you already know, Lord?"

He quickly downed his horn of mjod with ease just like Aska had done moments before, "Of course I do, I just want to hear it from you." He held the jug up in her direction and raised an eyebrow, offering to fill up her horn again. She smiled and held hers to get filled up. "I'm fine. I feel comfortable with my pack, sometimes they remind me of the old times when my father was still here. It helps me feel at home again. Sometimes I put Hostor's back to the wall, but it's nothing new to me. I usually had been arguing and critiquing my old pack leader as well. I think it's been a while since Hostor heard something he did not like from a subordinate," she spoke with confidence as she paused suddenly to search for her next words. Her emotion swung in this moment, from confidence to sadness. "I still miss Bjorn... every day... but I can understand his decision from a few months ago and accept the fact that I can't be with him anymore. I know I have no other choice. I don't want to dishonor my father or myself. Is that what you wanted to hear?" she asked.

"It is good to hear this from you. I am glad you came back to us and you brought a new hope to the Fang. Perhaps we can use that hope to make sure that your father will return to us and lead us once again," Ragnar said. His face lit up for a moment, and Aska realized how important Russ's return was. Ragnar looked determined and hungry, almost joyful in his hope for finding his Primarch. He was quiet for a moment, then resumed. "How is your training progressing with the Stormcaller? Not much time will pass till he leaves us to sail with Redmoon," he asked, giving her another smile.

"It has been going well. I feel a lot more control over my powers than I did when I started months ago. Njal has been a harsh but fair master," she answered.

"He is that," Ragnar agreed. "I had to learn a fair amount of control over myself as well, as a Blood Claw."

Her eyes narrowed, "Are you mocking me?"

"Not in the least," he assured her. "There was a time when I wanted to kill one of the men who became a pack mate."

"What happened to him?"

"We eventually made it past that. There was a mission where he saved my life three times, and I ended up carrying his almost-dead body out of labyrinth of cave tunnels. We couldn't hold onto our hatred after that, either of us." She didn't know what to say to that, and for a time silence ruled the chamber as they both just looked at each other.

"What was your father like?" he finally asked.

"He was strong, utterly fearless, and quick to anger. I got that from him," she said, and they shared a smile. "He pretended often to be an uncouth barbarian prince to people who he didn't know well; it was his favorite role to play, but those of us he trusted knew that he was fiercely devoted to the All-Father, his men, and his wife and me. He loved my mother and me with all his heart and would have broken the world in half if either of us had ever come to any serious harm. I am not my father; I cannot play the

uncouth barbarian as he did and wouldn't want to, and I inherited his temper but not his control. It's difficult for me to control my psionic powers because of that. It's very easy to use too much energy, drain myself dry... or too little to harm anyone. I am slowly learning to find my center."

"I see. You are worried you could hurt somebody?" he queried thoughtfully.

"Yes... I am. Don't get me wrong, I am not afraid. None of us fears anything.... We shall know no fear, is that the new saying? I am simply worried I could injure one of my brothers with my power."

He pulled a stubborn strand of hair out of his eyes. "Did that happen before?"

Yet again she nodded slightly, "Yes, Lord. It gravely wounded me and one of my brothers." Her scent changed suddenly and as he felt it creep up his nostrils he nearly could taste the pain on his tongue.

"There is no need to go into detail. I can understand the burden of this. I dishonored myself once by killing a Dark Angel in an honorable duel when my anger and rage took control over me after I had lost to him by first blood. All I can remember was his dead body at my feet as my vision became clear again. We all make our mistakes. The most important thing is that we learn from it." Their eyes met again. She felt that he spoke the truth and his words cheered her up, "We all have lost something in the past, we all have our mistakes," she whispered serenely.

"I might be your Lord but I am your brother as well. I can understand that Ullur and Lars are not good companions to talk to. Neither is Stormcaller in his worse moods. But I want you to know that he has a high opinion of you as do I. If you need to talk to somebody, you are welcome to knock on my door." She gazed into his blue eyes for a moment, not sure what to say, just nodded again and gave him back the horn he had given to her before. He raised his hand and shook his head in refusal, "Take it. Consider it my thanks for a good conversation. I have many. Just don't let the lady and the tramp get ahold of it."

She giggled while holding one of her hands in front of her mouth. "You mean the man with maiden weeks and the mighty Ullur possessing the wisdom of a gretchin?"

"Indeed," he smiled briefly. "You are free to go now."

She got up from the chair and turned to leave, but before she stepped out, she turned around once again. One last smile ran over her lips.

"Anything else?" he smiled back at her. There was something in her expression he couldn't sort out.

She replied with a heartfelt "Thank you."

"You're welcome." he answered with a nod.

"No... I mean... thank you. You gave me comfort when I needed it. I was full of grief after I lost Bjorn. I am still sad on some days... but your words helped me out of the darkness to see some light again," she said honestly.

"That's why I've offered you to be your mentor if you require it."

Yet again a giggle left her throat but before she completely left his chambers she had an urge she couldn't resist. "Still.... thanks, Ragnar."

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