

GREY HUNTER

A SPACE WOLF NOVEL BY WILLIAM KING

THE GALAXY IS riven with war on all fronts. In the eye of the storm are the Space Wolves. When one of their holiest artefacts is captured by the hordes of Chaos, Ragnar and his squad must fight tooth and claw for its return – before an ancient foe is set free.

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from GREY HUNTER

RAGNAR TWISTED IN the air, kicking both feet into the chest of the lead heretic. Not even the mutant's massive musculature could protect it from the force of the blow driven with all the force created by his running jump, augmented muscles and the carapace's hydraulic systems. Ribs snapped, and the heretic was propelled back into the ones behind it, sending them tumbling back down the stairway. At the same time, the force of the kick killed Ragnar's velocity and allowed him to land nimbly on the stairs.

One swift look told him the situation. The mutants were in disarray; one of them had been driven completely off the edge of the stairs and sent tumbling to the hard metal floor below. Another had saved himself by clutching onto the guard-rail as he went over, and now hung on like grim death with one hand, as his legs and free arm flailed for purchase.

Ragnar brought his chainsword down, severing fingers and sending the wretch crashing downwards to join his fellow in death, then sprang forward once more while the mutants were off-balance.

With one stroke, he severed the head of the leading heretic; another stroke split his body in two. Pressed back by falling bodies, the mutants were unable to bring their close combat weapons to bear effectively. Ragnar struck again and again, using his superior elevation and momentum to great effect. The chainsword reaped heretic lives like a scythe swathing corn. The bolt pistol in his left hand spat death into the faces of the mutants beyond.

He could see one or two of the bolder mutants trying to press the ones in front forward. He aimed at them through the gap, blasting one heretic skull to fragments. He chopped at the

enemy in front of him. It managed to parry, barely, with its power axe. The teeth of Ragnar's chainsword screeched against the metal pole of the axe, sparks rose where metal met metal. Ragnar twisted his blade round, moving it over the obstruction and burying it in the heretic's throat. A swift left-right movement had the head hanging by a flap of neck muscle. A kick sent the near-decapitated body tumbling headlong into the heretics behind.

It was too much for the mutants. Hampered by the press of their numbers and the falling bodies of their friends, they knew they were no match for the ferocious reaver striding among them. At that moment, Ragnar was a sight to make the bravest heart quail. Covered in blood and brains, moving almost too fast for the eye to follow, slaughtering half a dozen Chaos worshippers in as many heartbeats. The survivors turned to flee back down the stairs. It was then the killing really began. Ragnar pounced like a wolf springing on its prey, smashing his blade through the heretics' undefended backs, severing spines, rupturing spleens, painting the stairway with blood.

The screams of his victims encouraged the remaining mutants to run faster, panic more furiously. They smote each other in their desperation to get away, tripped over the bodies of those they had backstabbed and stunned themselves as they fell headlong down the stairs. Ragnar saw that he was not going to be able to overtake them quickly enough to kill them all. Instead, he holstered his chainsword and snatched up a bolt pistol from one of the fallen. Pistol in each hand, he braced himself with a leg on either side of the banister and slid down, blasting away with both weapons. Firing into the panicking mass, every shell took its toll, slamming into tightly packed bodies and exploding to cause the maximum damage.

On the way down Ragnar managed to overtake a few of the fleeing Chaos lovers and put shells into them. They fell, hampering their brethren more. Seeing the bottom of the stairs coming, he braced himself and hit the ground rolling, still firing, his superhuman reflexes and quickness of eye enabling him to hit with more than half the shots. At the end of the roll, he dropped the traitor's pistol and unsheathed his chainsword once more, leaping into the fray like an unleashed god of war.

His blade described an enormous arc, cleaving flesh and bone, sending the wounded reeling. His bolt pistol finished off the fallen. A downward stamp of his armoured boot broke a neck. A red haze dropped over his vision now. All of his foes appeared to be moving with painful slowness. He saw one heretic frantically trying to draw a bead on him with a bolter, dropped to his knees out of the line of fire and sprang forward, bearing down onto another heretic, carrying it forward as a shield of flesh, feeling its body flex and spasm as its fellow's bolter shells ripped into its body. Then when his animal keen nostrils told him he was within striking distance. He tossed the heretic's still twitching corpse at the shooter and followed it through himself.

The heavy body sent the mutant with the gun sprawling. A look of panic crossed its fur-covered bestial features. A kick to the taloned hand sent the weapon hurtling into the distance, a downward stroke sent the heretic to hell.

The berserker gang was on Ragnar now, in full flow. He smote left and right with awful power, the meat-cleaver sound of his chainsword on flesh telling him he did damage with every blow. He lost all track of time and sense of self, becoming an unleashed whirlwind of death and destruction that smashed through the panicking mutants with all the fury of a Fenrisian thunderstorm. He lived only to kill, and he took action to preserve his own life only in so far as it would allow him to slay more. A few shells ricocheted off his armour. He ignored them. A few desperate mutants managed to land glancing blows before he sent them to greet their dark gods. He did not feel them.

He stormed through the survivors hacking and chopping at exposed flesh, blasting with his pistol at point blank range. A god-like sense of exaltation filled him. He ducked and weaved beneath blows, struck with the speed of a lightning bolt. Nothing slowed him down, nothing stopped him.

Suddenly all was still around him. He glared around looking for new prey, and saw only a few wounded. Those who had fled had managed to get out of his sight. He stood panting, blood dripping from his armour and his blade, and bared his teeth. A triumphant howl erupted from his throat and echoed eerily throughout the halls.

The rest of the squad headed down the stairs. Aenar was on his feet once more, moving under his own power. He held a bolt pistol in his unwounded hand, his right arm held stiff by his side. Behind him came Sven, Torvald and Strybjorn. Sergeant Hakon brought up the rear. Aenar and Torvald looked at him with something like awe. The sergeant looked grimly satisfied. Sven grinned cheerfully.

'Bloody hell, Ragnar,' he said. 'You might have left some for us.'

Ragnar realised that the sounds of shooting in the distance had stopped. Did this mean the Wolf Lord and his bodyguard were dead or triumphant, he wondered? Hakon seemed to sense his mood. They began moving around the huge metal structure, back in the direction they had last seen their company's leader.

As the battle site came into view, Ragnar saw that the Wolf Guard had wreaked even more havoc than he had. Dead mutants lay sprawled everywhere. Berek Thunderfist sat atop a pile of corpses inspecting the severed head of the Chaos leader. The mutant's face looked more daemonic than human. Curved ram's horns emerged from the forehead. The lobeless ears were pointed. Sharp fangs filled the wide mouth.

Several more squads of Wolves had entered the power core and had obviously moved in support of their leader. High atop the various metal towers, Wolf Guard magnetically clamped their demolition charges into place.

Berek looked up. 'Just in time, Hakon,' he said. 'We're almost done here. It's time to head back to the *Fist*.'

The Wolf Lord rose to his feet and discarded the mutant's head without a second thought. He looked over his assembled troops, as if gauging their level of injury. 'You've done well, men,' he said. 'But this was the easy part. It took us twenty-seven minutes to fight our way in here. But now we know the way out, I think we can get back in around half that time.'

He gazed up and saw that all of the Wolf Guard had finished and were coming down from their perches. 'We have fifteen minutes to get back to the *Fist*. Don't get bogged down in any firefights. Don't get carried away killing any heretic scum. Don't stop for loot. The *Fist of Russ* will make its withdrawal in exactly fifteen minutes from when I activate the detonators. I am giving the signal now. *Let's go!*'

Berek pushed a command button on the back of his armoured fist. Ragnar heard a weird eerie cry echo over the comm-net. Everybody knew it was time to be on his way. As one, the Wolves turned and raced from the power core of the doomed ship.

Ragnar glanced at the chronometer superimposed on his vision by the systems within his armour. It was set on a countdown now, ticking off the minutes and the seconds till the charges detonated and the Chaos cruiser was blown to pieces. Thirteen minutes and twenty-six seconds to go.

'What happens if the mutants find the bloody charges we left behind? Think they can defuse them?' Sven panted next to him.

'No. First they will have to work out what we were doing. Then they will have to find all the charges. Since they were proximity shielded that means they'll have to carry out a visual search – they won't show up on sensors. Then they will have to defuse them all. I doubt that can be done in the remaining thirteen minutes or so.'

'Let's hope so, and let's hope that they don't set a few off trying to disarm them either. That will cook our goose as nicely as any Chaos bloody ambush!'

'You're just full of good cheer today, Sven.'

'Somebody has to bloody well keep morale up around here.'

Ragnar looked around. Aenar looked a little pale and he weaved as he ran. Perhaps his wound was worse than it appeared.

'You all right?' Ragnar asked. Aenar grinned weakly.

'He will be fine,' said Hakon. 'Just you keep your eyes peeled for any mutants. Last thing we want is to be cut off in this metal maze when the *Fist of Russ* breaks free.'

'But sergeant,' said Sven, 'we are Space Wolves. Shouldn't we be seeking a hero's death?'

'Nothing heroic about getting yourself blown up, boy. Stupid, yes. Heroic, no. Not that I would expect you to be able to tell the difference.'

Sven grinned cheerily. If it was not for his scent, Ragnar would never have guessed that he was as nervous as he himself. From up ahead came the sounds of battle.

'Ambush!' said Hakon.

'Good, a bloody battle,' said Sven.

Nine minutes and forty-five seconds. Ragnar wasted a second inspecting the corpses. They lay sprawled everywhere, mingled with the dead bodies of a few Wolves. The mutants were an odd bunch. Most looked normal save that their flesh was covered in boils or warts or their hair had fallen out in clumps. Some had scaly skin or fur. Some were more bestial with bird-like talons instead of hands and feet. Some had faces where the flesh had run together like melted wax.

Ragnar saw a couple of the Wolves collecting gene-seed from the fallen, driving the armoured punches into the chests of the dead, twisting the collar on the top of the punch to open and close the grabbing claws, ripping the tiny tentacled egg from the chest cavity. Even as he watched, the punch's claws enfolded the gene-seed completely and sucked it into a stasis tube, to be hooked onto the collector's belt. Another ten seconds gone, he thought. Best be moving.

Morgrim Silvertongue had broken comm-silence. He had hooked himself into the Chaos net and was translating orders from the enemy leaders as they passed down the command chain.

'Most of the mutants are scouring the ship for us. It looks like they are thin on the ground in this area because they think we've already passed through it. No – Some of them are reporting they have sighted us here. Sounds like their leader is ordering his troops back to meet us. I don't think they have quite worked out what we are doing yet. We've confused them.'

'From what I have seen, that's pretty easy to do,' said Sven.

'Don't underestimate them,' said Ragnar. 'They may look stupid, but they are fierce warriors. A bit like yourself actually.'

'Ha-bloody-ha!'

Eight minutes and fifteen seconds.

'We're not going to make it,' muttered Aenar. 'Leave me. You'll make better time without me.'

'We are not going to do that,' said Hakon. Ragnar could see that Aenar was right though. Their progress was slower than they had anticipated. Chaos patrols were everywhere and more seemed to be appearing by the second. Even if

they had no idea what was going on, the mutants were still capable of getting them all killed by simply being in the way. Right now, Berek's bold plan was not looking quite so good.

In his mind's eye, Ragnar saw the demolition charges exploding, vast yellow fireballs ripping through the hull, incinerating everything that got in their way. He saw his own life ending in fire and pain and terror. He pushed the thought aside and concentrated on the task at hand. He could smell mutants ahead. Within his skull, the trapped beast howled with bloodlust. If it was going to die, it wanted to take as many foes as it could with it.

Ragnar did his best to fight down the impulse. Charging headlong into battle now might be satisfying but it would not save them. It would be better to avoid a confrontation unless there were so few mutants they could rush right through them.

'Take the fork to the right,' he heard Berek say. The heretic stench came from the left. It seemed that the Wolf Lord was thinking the same way as he was. 'And pick up the pace, we don't have all day.'

The steel plates beneath their boots rang as they ran faster. Five minutes and fifteen seconds to go.

'You think Lord Berek can defuse the bombs the same bloody way as he activated them?' asked Sven nonchalantly. Ragnar thought he recognised this corridor, thought he could pick up the scent trail of their earlier passage on the way in coming from somewhere nearby.

'Why? You thinking of asking him to pause the countdown for a few seconds so you can have a rest?' Ragnar responded, sniffing the air. Yes, they definitely had passed near here before. How much farther could it be to the *Fist of Russ*? He checked the locator on his armour. The signal said it was only five hundred metres, but with all the twisting and turning of the ways, who knew how long that would take?

'I might. I may need my strength for the last sprint at this rate.' From somewhere behind them came the sound of bolter fire, heavy and hard.

'Your powers of prophesy are greater than I thought,' said Ragnar.

A signal cut in on the comm-net.

+ This is Hef here. Looks like the mutants are about to overtake us, and in force. Must be several hundred of them coming up this corridor.+

Ragnar looked at Sven. His ugly face showed dismay. Hef's squad were the rearguard. If the enemy had made contact with them then they were not too far behind. Perhaps they were going to have to turn and make a stand here. Once again the vision of those searing yellow flames licking through the corridor leapt into Ragnar's mind.

+Do you need support?+

Berek's voice was calm and full of confidence even with the flatness the comm-net imparted. He might as well have been asking whether they wanted a beer.

+No, Lord Berek. We can hold them here for a minute or so, I am certain.+

Even over the net, Ragnar could hear the bolter shells whizzing around Hef. He heard the stutter of the Marine's answering fire. It was eerie because a split second later, like an echo, he could hear the weapon's original roar. The signals on the comm-net travelled faster than sound.

Moments later came the sounds of explosions and the death howl of a Space Wolf. It sounded like Hef and his squad were achieving the heroes' deaths they sought. Another image flashed into Ragnar's mind, of an onrushing, irresistible horde of Chaos worshippers, racing to overtake them, brushing aside Hef and his pitiful few as if they were not there. He dismissed it, even as the sounds of combat receded behind them.

Three minutes and thirty seconds to go.

'This does not look good,' said Sven, looking at the twisted wreckage of the corridor around them. Someone had been using heavy weapons here. Part of the roof of the corridor had come down, leaving only a crawlspace, barely wide enough for one man. It was impossible to tell how far it might run, or whether it would become too narrow for them to pass through. Ragnar wondered whether it would be worth seeking an alternative route. Maybe they could double back and find another corridor. They had thought this would be the easy way. It was definitely the route they had come by. The scent trail was unmistakable.

Not that the decision was his to make. The rest of the squads had already disappeared into the dark maw. Only Varig's squad was behind them. The distant sound of fighting had stopped. Ragnar could sense the mutants coming inexorably closer.

'Move, Ragnar!' commanded Hakon, putting his hand on Ragnar's shoulder and forcing him down to his knees. Briefly and instinctively Ragnar resisted, and then realised that by his hesitation he was putting more than his own life in jeopardy, he was endangering his comrades too. He dropped to all fours and crawled forward into the steel lined tunnel.

Two minutes left. The thought was chilling.

**The saga of Ragnar
continues in
GREY HUNTER**



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