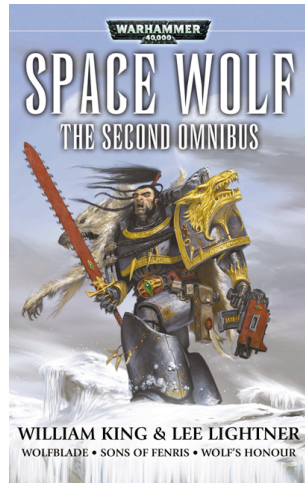


SPACE WOLF: THE SECOND OMNIBUS
A Warhammer 40,000 Omnibus
By William King and Lee Lightner

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About the Authors

William King's short stories have appeared *The Year's Best SF*, *Zenith*, *Interzone* and *White Dwarf*. He has written seven *Gotrek &*

Felix novels and the Space Wolf novels, starring Ragnar Blackmane. He lives in Scotland.

Lee Lightner is the penname for two authors who live in Baltimore, USA. Lifelong friends, they are both avid Space Wolf fans.

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The following is an excerpt from *Space Wolf: The Second Omnibus* by William King and Lee Lightner, Published by the Black Library. Games Workshop, Willow Road, Nottingham, NG7 2WS, UK.

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All around was deathly still. The old trees, with grey bark, and leaves long since killed by pollution, loomed out of the shadows like tormented ghosts. In the darkness around him, Ragnar could sense armed men on the move. He was not afraid. They were his men, sworn to follow him, and die at his command if need be. He wondered where the thought had sprung from. There would be no deaths among his men this night – at least not if he could help it.

He looked to the soft ground underfoot. Although he was moving quietly there was no way he could avoid leaving tracks. The weight of his armour ensured it. After weeks of fighting amid the wreckage of the hives of Hesperida, he was almost among nature again. Almost. The area

must once have been a park or forestry dome, before the cultists had begun their uprising. It would have been a place of pleasure where the wealthy came to experience what the surface of their world had once been like. Now it was an area of death, the great geodesic dome was shattered, and the foul air of the tortured planet could now enter. Everywhere there were splinters of armour glass from the collapse, some of them almost as large as a man.

The night air was a peculiar mixture of stench: the rot from the dead trees, the spores of the fast growing fungi that blotched their sides, industrial toxins, the faint scent of animals that had passed by not so long ago. And everywhere and always there was the faint insidious stench that Chaos left when it inhabited a world's surface for any time; it was the smell of corruption, rich, sweet and sickly.

Abruptly it came to Ragnar that he knew the source. Some of the trees were still alive – the blotched ones, the palest, the greyest, the most degenerate looking. They

were not being killed by some parasite, he realised. They were being changed by it, or into it. It was the only way any living thing could survive in an environment so rapidly altered.

For some reason, he thought of Gabriella, and the Navigators, and he smiled grimly. It was the first time such thoughts had entered his mind in decades. He shook his head; he needed to concentrate on the task at hand.

There were enemies out there in this tainted night, enemies who badly wanted him and his men dead. And right now their only defence was stealth.

Ragnar was not sure what had gone wrong up in orbit, but something had. The last he had heard was a brief scrambled burst on the comm-net that told of the arrival of a massive enemy fleet. Then everything had been lost in static. It was almost as if it were a signal informing them that the enemy offensive had begun. The cultists had attacked en masse supported by heavy weapon fire, and strange sorceries. Ragnar had made his men hold their posts as long as possible, but he had known from

the very beginning they were fighting a rearguard action, and that eventually their position would have to be abandoned.

Several times he had tried raising central command, but something had shut down the whole net. Whether it was sorcery or some freak climatic effect, it did not matter.

There was no way his superiors could know what had happened, and there was no means of attracting support. In any case, he did not need access to the comm system to know that none would be forthcoming.

The roars of Chaos Titan weaponry and the sounds of battle drifting on the wind told him all he needed to know. The enemy were mounting a massive offensive all along the front. His Blood Claw scouts had brought back word that the two adjacent sections of the line, held by Imperial Guard and Planetary units, had already crumbled. His men and the local levies supporting them were now a salient pushed into the body of the main enemy advance. And they would soon be cut off.

In the face of the sledgehammer falling on them, there had been no choice but to give the order to retreat. It had not been a popular one. For Space Wolves the most honourable death was in battle, and it was not in their nature to give way before the enemy.

Ragnar grinned. A Wolf Lord did not need to be popular, he needed to be obeyed, and Ragnar was. It was not his duty to throw lives away needlessly. It was his duty to defeat the enemy. However, if that was not possible, he would preserve as much of his force as he could so that they could return and overcome the foe another day.

They had held out as long as they could, giving their men a chance to find their way back through the ruins of the great dome while they still had the chance. In fact, they had done the work of ten times their number in throwing back the enemy assaults.

It had not been easy. They had spent most of the time in deep bunkers amid the rubble, riding out the storm of artillery fire, keeping their heads down, and knowing that the enemy would advance as soon as the barrage

finished. Perhaps sooner, for the warlords of the Dark Gods of Chaos were careless with their followers' lives. They had emerged from their dens to throw back probing attacks, and one massive wave assault that had been repulsed by the thinnest of margins. When night fell, Ragnar knew it was time to leave. He had given orders to arm the booby traps that filled their position, and he watched as the first squads began to melt away into the night. Even now, somewhere behind him in the darkness, the rearguard waited, keeping up sporadic fire on their enemies so that they would think the position was still held.

He wondered how much the noose had tightened around their necks. If the encirclement was complete the scouts would soon encounter enemy pickets and patrols. They had orders to report back without engaging, but it was always possible that the sons of Fenris would somehow manage to start a fight.

He had done his best to impress on the Blood Claws in particular that now was not the time for violence. A

mistake could lead to the death of their entire company. At the time, they had appeared to recognise the gravity of the situation, but who could know what they might do out in the field?

Ragnar pushed these thoughts to one side. He had done all he could, and matters were out of his hands. He should focus on things he could influence. He sniffed the air. He caught the scents of his comrades, along with something that made his hackles rise – the taint of madness and murder that he was so familiar with. Deep within him something stirred. He felt the urge to snarl and rend. His worries about the scouts returned. If the stink of Chaos could still affect him after all these years, what about those youths...

No point worrying, he reminded himself. They were as well trained as he had been. They knew what to do. He just had to trust in that.

The ground shook under his feet as more high impact shells slammed home. He froze, instinctively, seeking to blend in with cover. Those hits had come from close by.

Had the enemy spotted and targeted them? It was hard to see how they could have done so by conventional means, but then Chaos did not have to use conventional means. They had sorcerers and daemons and all manner of divinatory enchantments to call on. Ragnar had seen evidence enough of that in his career never to doubt it. Their own position was supposedly warded by the spells of the Rune Priests, but they had been cast days ago, and such things had a way of untangling when most needed. Ragnar breathed a prayer to Russ and forced himself to start moving again. All around him his warriors did the same. With the pack mentality of the Wolves, they had instinctively waited for his response. Now they loped into action again.

Step by tortuous step, they progressed through the shadow of the great warped trees, grey ghosts in a grey landscape, towards fleeting sanctuary. Ragnar was not even sure that there was a sanctuary any more. What the scouts had reported earlier might no longer stand. Battle was a fluid situation; lines that seemed solid had a way

of melting like tracks in sand before the tide. Perhaps the men behind them had been over-run by the advancing tide of evil. He would not know until he was much closer. Once again he cursed the battle that raged overhead. Without access to the comm-net and the divinatory orbital sensors, they were blind as well as deaf. At least, he hoped battle still raged overhead. If the Imperial Fleet had been defeated, then they were cut off, and they were all dead men who did not know it yet.

He glanced skywards at the strange stars through a break in the clouds. They glittered and twinkled oddly, their light filtered by pollution. Some of those lights might be ships, he thought, and some might even now be firing weapons of unimaginable power at foes shielded by titanic energies. There was no way to tell. All he could do was watch and hope.

How quickly the situations change, he thought. A week ago everything had seemed well in hand. His forces had cleared most of the surrounding blocks of territory and

were poised to strike at the heart of the enemy – the great citadel where the rebellion had its headquarters.

The appearance of the enemy fleet and an unexpectedly large number of enemy forces had thrown all careful calculations out of kilter. Ragnar told himself not to despair. He had been in worse situations. He had been in such tight spots that this seemed a mere feast day revel. It was strange though, how faded memories of long past dangers never compared with feelings engendered by current threats. He had seen enough men die to know how long the odds were. No matter how well trained or experienced, there was always the chance that a stray bullet would find you. Even odds of a thousand to one did not seem long when you had been in a thousand fights.

Where were these thoughts coming from, he asked himself? They should not normally occur to a commander with an Imperial field force at his beck and call. He was not normally like this. And he felt worse than a normal commander would, because his scent

transmitted his mood back to his pack, and they in turn reflected this.

Was he under some sort of attack, he wondered? Was there some chemical in the air, too subtle for his detectors and his nose to pick out? Or was some daemon-worshipping sorcerer at work? Not all spells involved bolts of fire or the summoning of hell-spawned fiends. He was shielded against obvious attacks, and knew how to resist a direct probe at his mind. But this could be something more subtle, he thought, a flank attack on the citadel of his mind. He began to recite a litany of protection, softly, under his breath.

Immediately he felt better, although he was not sure whether it was from the comfort he took in his words, or the potency of prayer itself. Sergeant Urlec moved up beside him. There was acrimony in his scent. The sergeant had taken to questioning many of Ragnar's decisions in private. There was friction between them, and Ragnar recognised its source. It was the tension that rose between the younger Wolf and the older one, as to

who would lead the pack. This friction was grafted into every Wolf's genes from the ancient days of the First Founding.

Ragnar had been like this once, and he wondered when the challenge would come. It was strange to think of himself as the elder in this situation. He had come early to his lordship and was probably younger in years than Urlec although that had no bearing on the way either of them viewed the situation.

'Scouts report enemy up ahead,' said Urlec. 'Looks like we are cut off!'

'Did they say that, sergeant?' said Ragnar. Both of them spoke so quietly that only another Space Wolf could have picked up their words, and only then if they were very close. Urlec's scent became more acrid.

'No, Lord Ragnar,' he said grudgingly. 'They only said the enemy were present.'

'Then there's no evidence of encirclement yet, sergeant,' said Ragnar, his hackles rising as he spoke the contrary words. 'Just because there are enemy there, we are not

necessarily cut off. Send the scouts forward and tell them to feel out the enemy position. In the meantime, tell the rest of the packs to slow their advance. We don't want to blunder into a firefight in the dark.'

'It's already done,' said Urlec, with some satisfaction. Ragnar fought an urge to growl. Of course Urlec had done it. He was competent. That was why Ragnar had promoted him when Vitulv had died. He only wished the man was not so smug. He did not need this contest of wills and wit with his senior sergeant right now. There were more important things to worry about.

Ragnar forced his breathing to slow. The problem here was his. The folly of Urlec was just one more obstacle to overcome in order to preserve his company. The man would be dealt with later, but right now, Ragnar had to live with with his presence and his attitude.

'Very good,' he said, knowing that Urlec could read his mood from his scent. Briefly he considered once more the possibility of psychic attack. Perhaps this was more than instinctive hostility, perhaps it was some form of

sorcerous assault. Ragnar wished Brother Hrothgar were present to perform a divination. But that was like wishing for a fleet to carry him to the moon. Hrothgar had been summoned to command days ago and had not been heard of since. It was a pity. Perhaps a sending would have been able to find out what was going on back there.

Ragnar slowed his pace, as he and the sergeant began to encounter groups of Wolves hunkered down in cover. They were taking things seriously at least. They knew that potential disaster lay ahead of them, as well as behind. He threaded his way through them, silent as a shadow. He made less noise than Urlec although he was the larger of the two. He wanted to get as close to the frontline as possible, and get the word direct from the mouths of the scouts as they returned.

He reviewed his options. One good thing about fighting on this ground was that he was familiar with it. Over the past few weeks he had scouted it himself several times, getting to know the terrain. He had wanted to be

prepared for any eventuality, no matter how remote a retreat had seemed at the time. He knew that the dome was full of rolling downs, depressions and ridgelines that could provide cover for defence and attacks. That the hills were sculpted and artificial did not matter – they looked as natural as anything on his home world of Fenris. He knew there were two winding valleys, like canyons that snaked through the park and many sculpted streams and waterfalls.

Right now they were moving along the inside of those valleys, using the cover. On the other side of the elevation, flanking troops of scouts could make sure no ambushers took them by surprise from the ridge tops. This was the easiest line of retreat but also the most obvious for an enemy familiar with the terrain. He had chosen it because they needed to be swift as well as stealthy, and he trusted the ability of his men to keep out of sight of their opponents. He hoped that his trust would prove justified.

Why the constant doubts, he asked himself? He knew the answer. They were not the objects of some psychic attack. They were the products of what was happening. It was easy to have complete confidence in yourself and your men when you were winning. It was a lot harder when things were against you. He did not think it was a coincidence that Urlec's subtle challenges had begun when things started to go against them. He supposed it was only natural, but he did not like it.

Get used to it, he told himself, you cannot always be on the winning side. Not unless you were the Imperium anyway. It was a joke among the human military that the Imperium always won, even if it took a thousand years. Individuals, regiments, armies might be lost in meat-grinder campaigns but in the end the forces of the Emperor were always triumphant – they had to be, they were just too numerous for it to be any other way. Part of him knew this was mere conceit. In the great cosmic scale of things, the Imperium was relatively young, despite its ten thousand year history. There were

racess out there that had been old when humanity had just begun to look up at the stars from the caves of a single world. Ragnar himself had seen the remains of civilisations that had once covered as many worlds as humanity did today, and perhaps had been even more powerful. ‘Look upon my works ye mighty and despair’, as he had observed once on the plinth of a toppled statue on a far off desert world. It had been erected by humans during the long gone Dark Age of Technology, but the sentiment could have been directed at any of the extinct races of the times before man.

He forced his attention back to the task at hand, pushing forward to the best cover at the front of his retreating force. He waited for the scouts to return. Urlec hunkered down beside him and waited too. There was still a look of challenge about him, but he said nothing. Ragnar wondered whether the man was right to doubt him. He doubted himself, and Urlec would sense that weakness and pounce on it. It was the Wolves’ way.

He caught the scent of the scouts returning. They caught his and moved towards him, sure-footed in the darkness. Swift, confident and full of the blood lust of the Space Wolves.

‘What have you seen?’ he asked.

‘The enemy are there, lord. They have moved to encircle us with at least two companies of heretics. Some of the accursed Thousand Sons are there too, at their head. They have set up wards, and work evil sorceries. The place stinks of them.’

That did not sound good, Ragnar thought. Ordinary infantry men would be easy to overcome with speed and surprise, but the Thousand Sons were Space Marines like his own men. No – that was not true, they were very different in important ways. They were Space Marines who had betrayed the Imperium at the dawn of its history and sworn themselves to the service of the Dark Gods of Chaos. They were ensnared by the subtle sorceries of the daemon god Tzeentch and were given over to the study of his dark spells. They were ancient, inimical and

steeped in the most profound and subtle evil. And they were deadly fighters. Ragnar had fought them on dozens of occasions, and it seemed that he was destined to cross their paths throughout his career. Some of those encounters had changed the course of his life.

‘Anything else?’ he asked.

‘There are gaps in their line. I do not know if they are aware of them, or whether it’s a trap,’ said the scout. He sketched out a map in the dirt, perceptible by the scent trace of his finger more than by the lines drawn. ‘Here and here are gaps where their patrols have no line of sight. I could crawl between them and not be noticed.’

‘Unless they have some spell waiting to be triggered by our presence.’

‘Such was my thought, Wolf Lord,’ said the scout, squatting.

Ragnar considered his words. It did not matter if it was a trap. They were caught between hammer and anvil. They could not wait where they were, for the dawn would reveal them to their foes. They could not go back, for

soon their old position would be over-run. They needed to push through the gap and try to make it back to the safety of their own lines.

‘The slaves of Horus,’ Ragnar asked. ‘Do they look towards us, or towards the Guard regiments behind?’

‘They seemed to be mostly concerned with us, milord.’ Not surprising, Ragnar thought. They would not want to leave a fortification full of Space Wolves behind them when they moved on. That would leave the chance of a break out, or having their supply lines harassed. They would want their foe dead if they could achieve it.

‘It was odd, my lord. I know nothing of such things, but I sensed that they were concentrating their spell energies in our direction. Certainly their witch lights flickered towards us.’

‘I think if they were targeting us, we would have known it by now,’ said Ragnar. He was surprised when both Urlec and the scout nodded agreement. ‘Whatever evil they work, no doubt it is aimed at our former position.’ Which we abandoned just in the nick of time, thought

Ragnar. He offered up a prayer to Russ that the rearguard had already vacated the strongpoints. Whatever the Thousand Sons were planning it would not be pleasant, he was sure.

He thought about the darkness in his thoughts. He recognised it now: it was the effect of an evil spell cast in the vicinity, the seepage of wicked energies filtered into the sane and normal world by the forces of dark magic. It affected the mood of any living thing around it, sometimes so subtly it was not noticed until it was too late. The realisation raised Ragnar's mood. If you knew what you were fighting, you could resist it much better. Another thought occurred to him. If the feeling was intense here, what would things be like in the abandoned strongpoint? Far more intense, no doubt.

'How many Thousand Sons?' he asked.

'I counted a dozen, Wolf Lord, but there may be more.'

'Not many,' said Ragnar. 'For a full company of Wolves.'

If the mages were wrapped up in their ritual and did not even know they were there, there was a chance they could strike a heavy blow before the enemy was aware of it.

How swiftly things change indeed, thought Ragnar. One moment feeling beaten, and the next considering swift attack. Such were the fortunes of war.

‘I need to know where every one of those bastard offspring of Magnus are,’ said Ragnar. He sensed he had the full and undivided attention of the scout and Urlec now. ‘I want them all dead before dawn.’

Approval radiated from them now, albeit reluctantly from the sergeant. ‘Pinpoint them all. Urlec, spread the word among the men. When I give the signal we’re going to remind the Chaos-loving scum of the Scouring of Prospero.’

Both men nodded and set about their business. Ragnar considered his options. If the Thousand Sons were lost in evil rituals, his men could have the upper hand. What they needed was to destroy the mages, and then cut

through the enemy along the line of least resistance. If things went well, they could interrupt the ritual and make it back to their own lines. If things went badly, they would at least drag some worthy foes down to hell with them.

Was he doing the right thing? Perhaps it would be best to try and find a gap in the enemy lines and go through it. He shook his head. No, this was the bold way – the Space Wolf way. The enemy obviously did not know they were here. Surprise was too great an advantage to throw away. The wait for the scouts to return seemed interminable. Every minute brought dawn closer. Every heartbeat increased the chance of discovery. Ragnar forced himself to relax, to wait, and let go of things he had no control over. He checked his weapons lovingly, a ritual that never failed to ease his mind. He fingered the pommel of his frostblade, which brought back memories of Gabriella and the Navigators and his long ago stay on the heart world of Terra.

He let his mind drift towards those ancient events for a moment, and then he snapped back. The scouts were returning. ‘A dozen, Wolf Lord, I am sure of it. They seem to be standing in some evil arcane pattern unless I am mistaken. Lines of witchfire leap between them, and they chant in some foul tongue.’

Ragnar nodded, and spoke swiftly, giving orders to the scouts to pass to the squad leaders. No sense in using the comm-net, even locally, at the moment. It might well be compromised. Word would have to ripple through the dark in the ancient ways, carried by sight, sound and smell. He sniffed the air, testing it. He could catch the change in the pack’s scent. Word was being passed, men were readying themselves for the advance. In his mind’s eye, Ragnar could picture them moving closer to all those thirteen points. Suddenly there was a flicker of light overhead, not as bright as a flare but intense nonetheless. Ragnar recognised it as a starship’s shields going into overload and its power core going nova. High above them a ship full of men had died. He would have

given a lot to know which side they belonged to.

Irrelevant, he told himself. Keep your mind in the here and now.

The warriors of his bodyguard were close around him now. They were the best of the best. He had put himself at the spearhead of the attack for he knew it would make little difference now whether he lived or died. He had done all he could with the plan. Now it was a matter of fight or die.

Swiftly and silently, they slithered through the dark, bypassing sentry devices, stepping over tripwires. Most men would not have spotted them, but for Ragnar and his warriors, the stench of Chaos gave away their position. Suddenly up ahead, through a gap in the undergrowth, he caught sight of a glowing object. He paused and raised his hand. Immediately his men halted.

He studied what he could see, taking it all in with a quick glance. There was a tall, pale staff of yellowed bones, fused together at the joints. At its tip was a skull like that of a horse, only it was horned and had a faint suggestion

of the humanoid about it. The skull glowed faintly and lines of fire sprang from it, speeding off to other places where no doubt similar staffs stood. On the bones, crimson runes glowed. The staff radiated an aura of power but what stood beside it commanded most of Ragnar's attention.

He could see a tall man, garbed in glowing armour that was like an ancient baroque copy of Ragnar's own.

Every centimetre of the armour was either etched with runes like those of the staff or sprouted tiny cast metal daemon heads which leered and moved with a will of their own. The warrior's arms were spread wide, and Ragnar's keen ears caught the words of some ancient spell being chanted in the tongue of daemons.

All around the man stood Chaos cultists. They were normal men, though some were marked with the stigmata of mutation. All wore the patched uniforms that indicated they had once, in a better day, belonged to the Planetary levies. They looked gaunt and filled with fear and exaltation, but their weapons were serviceable. Their

leader, wearing the shoulder markings of a lieutenant, looked as if he wanted to say something to the Chaos Space Marine but did not dare. The wicked warrior dwarfed normal humans just as Ragnar or any of his men would have done. The mage's voice droned on, almost imperceptibly rising, the words tumbling out faster now, as if nearing a dark climax. The air was charged with alien presence and a feeling of dread began to fill Ragnar.

He had no idea what foul ritual was being worked here, but the time had come to stop it. He sprang up and aimed a shot at the sorcerer. The bolter shell smashed into his armour sending him tumbling headlong into the dirt. Ragnar thought he caught sight of a faint flicker of chain lightning along the armour after he pulled the trigger, but did not let it bother him.

'Charge!' he bellowed, gesturing with his unsheathed frostblade. The men of his guard rushed forward. All along the line he could hear the sporadic sound of bolter fire as other squads engaged the enemy.

Ragnar let out a howling war cry that echoed in the woods around them, magnified a hundred-fold. He emerged from the bushes, cleaving at the nearest enemy and separating him from his head with one mighty blow. Moments later he was among the cultists, hacking and chopping, sending another soul to greet its dark masters in hell with every blow.

His men all did the same. They emerged from the tree-line like a thunderbolt, and cut through the enemy as if they were mere children armed with wooden swords.

The initial engagement was not a battle; it was a massacre. Ragnar could see their lieutenant frantically demanding that his troops stand their ground. He put a bolter shell through the man's brain, and his attempts to rally his men ended forever.

‘Ah, I might have known the fabled Wolves would show up and spoil everything,’ mocked a beautiful voice that carried across the field of battle. ‘It has always been your way.’

Ragnar glanced around to see that the Chaos warrior had risen from the ground and had unsheathed a darkly glowing runeblade. When he lashed out Ragnar saw Red Eric, one of his bodyguard, go down. The Chaos blade had cut right through his armour as if it were not there. It was an impressive feat, for Eric had been a seasoned warrior of no little skill. The Chaos warrior's next strike cleaved through Urlec's chainsword, and then, with a blow from his armoured fist, he managed to knock the sergeant from his feet. Now the Chaos warrior stood over him, aiming a downward thrust. 'I suppose I should thank you for interrupting the tedium of the ritual, and for letting me offer up some half-way worthy souls to my patron. You are certainly more worthy than the mewling, puking defenders of this paltry planet, although if truth be told that is hardly a recommendation.'

Ragnar turned and raced towards the Chaos warrior, intercepting his downward arcing blade with his own. 'I don't care what you think,' he said. 'I don't care what your patron thinks. I just want you dead.'

‘Spoken with all the arrogance of a Wolf! But you are no match for the High Mage Karamanthos,’ said the Chaos warrior. He spoke with a dramatic flourish, like an actor, and appeared to expect recognition. Even if Ragnar had known him, he would not have given the daemon worshipper the satisfaction.

‘It’s a pity you don’t have the strength to match your overbearing ego.’ Sparks flared as their blades clashed. The red runes brightened. They fought over the prone body of the dazed sergeant.

‘Don’t I?’ said Karamanthos mockingly. ‘Perhaps it is you who doesn’t.’

Ragnar’s weapon grated down the runesword with a terrible scream of tortured metal. As it reached the guard of the Chaos warrior’s blade it stopped, locked in place. The two mighty warriors stood breast to breast, their strength equally matched for a moment. Ragnar noticed the strange reek of ozone and hot metal coming from the visor of the Chaos Space Marine. Who knew what lay within that armour, he thought, but he was willing to bet

it wasn't anything remotely human anymore. His muscles ached from holding his opponent in place. Perhaps this creature of sorcery had no sinews left to tire. Perhaps it did not feel fatigue. Perhaps it had the unfailing strength of a daemon.

'No, dear boy, you don't,' the Chaos warrior said and made to move its weapon. Ragnar held it in place. His breath was coming in gasps now. The sorcerer seemed to change his mind and began chanting something – a spell no doubt. With an effort of will, Ragnar extruded the claws in his boots. He stepped back and lashed out with his foot, catching the Chaos warrior behind the exposed knee, where the armour's thigh and calfguards met. He felt the blades bite home and saw Karamanthos begin to tip over. Seizing his opportunity he sprang forward, avoiding the Chaos warrior's desperately flailing blade, and buried his own weapon deep in his foe's throat. The chant cut off completely.

Sparks flared at the point of impact and rose into the night sky, accompanied by a dreadful smell of molten

metal, corrosion and rot. Vapour, hot as steam, but far more corrupt, rose too. It was as if the spirit of the ancient sorcerer was fleeing its host body. Ragnar lashed at it, but his blade passed through and the thing began to dissipate for a moment. Then it started to cohere and flowed towards the skull tipped staff.

Ragnar howled in defiance and struck the staff. For a moment the vitrified bone, product of alien sorcery, resisted his blade, but then it snapped. The glow faded. The lines of fire winked out as if they had never been. From various points in the distance Ragnar heard screams like those of lost souls in torment. He guessed that disrupting the focal point of this dark ritual had had no good effect on the sorcerers weaving it. He felt no sympathy. Those who trafficked with dark powers deserved what they got.

He brought his boot down on the glowing skull, and smashed it to smithereens. Immediately the sense of dark presence vanished. He howled triumphantly and his men echoed his call. Then he dived forward into the roiling

mass of Chaos cultists, cleaving them asunder with renewed vigour. He drove them from him like a hero from some primitive saga unleashed once more into the world. His men followed him forward to victory. Howls of triumph along the line told him that the Wolves had overcome.

Ragnar sat in the main camp of the Imperial forces. The walls had taken a pounding but he could see fresh troops gathering, ready to drive back the Chaos worshippers. The comm-net had been restored. It seemed the Chaos fleet had been driven off and the reinforcements they had been sending down to the planetary surface had let up. His men were encamped below, talking softly among th

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