

The Call of the Pack

By Elliot Hamer

The wolf stalked through the damp grass, his pace quick as his eyes scanned the ridgeline before him. Warily, for something felt wrong this night, he crested the rise and took in the sight before him. An ominous storm hung overhead, intermittent flashes illuminating its unnatural purple-black hues. The valley beneath was hounded by a tempest of rain and lightning, and the humid air vibrated under the fluctuating pressure. The wolf's hairs were on end from a strange static on the wind. He bared his teeth and stared down the storm's approach, defiant amidst the tumult.

The wolf's attention was drawn to the valley below as his kin bounded forward. He howled to catch their attention, but the solemn note was drowned out by the storm. Unsure of how he had broken from his pack, the wolf looked on despondently as they went on without him. As they raced into the storm's heart, the wolf observed a mighty beast emerging from the forest on the other side of the valley. Thick muscles bulged from its dense black form, various scars and wounds adorned its flanks and cloven hooves scuffed the ground. Curved horns protruded from its broad skull, and its baying showed a beast in the clutches of rage, unafraid of the tempest that raged above.

The pack sensed the threat and a call to action went up. The foremost wolf raced forward, a turn of acceleration that caught the beast off guard. The wolf ducked a clumsy swing of horns and locked its jaw tightly on the beast's flank, but its teeth could not pierce the hide. The beast bucked hard and the wolf fell to the floor, then was hammered into the mud as a swift kick of hooves connected with its ribs. Whelps of pain were lost to the howl of the storm as two other wolves attempted a head-on charge, but a scything sweep of the beast's horns gored the injured wolf and the others called off their attack. From the ridgeline, the wolf looked down upon his fallen packmate; the blow had ended his life instantly.

The beast puffed out a breath of contempt as the remaining wolves circled, hesitantly. A vicious growl brought all eyes to a single wolf. It called back the pack and stood alone in challenge, its thick black mane rustling in the wind. With fangs bared and eyes dilated, the pack alpha prepared to fight the beast alone. The beast scraped the ground and charged, a release of aggression and adrenaline bound for the alpha. The wolf advanced in kind, its pace measured at first, but as the two combatants drew near it leapt into the air. The beast reared to meet the challenge...

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Tor Whitetail awoke from the dream with a start. He blinked sweat from his eyes and his vision cleared, revealing the metal ceiling of his quarters. He sat up and registered the icy temperature. Heavy panting vented steam from his mouth and his skin tingled as the salty moisture beading across the surface of his body ran cold. Tor was a Space Wolf of Fenris, so whilst temperatures akin to his native climate would ordinarily be a rare comfort whilst seconded to the Deathwatch, the icy bitterness he had awoken to this hour was unnatural. What's more, he knew not how he had lost consciousness.

Tor swung his feet to the chill floor, its brisk touch rousing him to full alert. He rose and went to a data panel by the door. Wiping away the frost that had built up, he observed a temperature reading of minus nineteen degrees Celsius. Tor checked the alerts, but all ship systems were reporting as normal. *Morkai's teeth*, he thought to himself, *what just happened?*

He was no storm-caller, yet his quarters had turned colder than an ice wyrm's lair. This had the mark of spirits and wyrd. The dream was so clear! Tor had felt the howl of the wind and the damp earth beneath the wolf's feet. Then the battle between wolf and beast... it had seemed as if he was witnessing events that had already come to pass. He was far from his kin, but he had felt a *Sammekull* – a call of the pack.

Tor punched the door release and bounded out.
He marched down the corridor bare-chested,
his exposed feet padding against the metal floor.
Arriving at his destination, he entered unannounced
to the robed figure of Sergeant Caddon, kneeling in
meditation in the centre of the room.

'The Wolves are in peril, brother-sergeant,' Tor said, disturbing Caddon's meditations. 'We must lend aid.'

'We have received no such call for aid, Tor,' sighed Caddon. It wasn't the first time he had been required to manage the lack of discipline of the sons of Russ.

'I saw it in a vision,' Tor pressed. 'A great storm was gathering, not one of my home world, but an unnatural tumult born from the warp. Beneath it a pack of wolves battled with a mighty horned beast.'

Caddon raised his head to look at his intruder. A half-naked feral stood before him, chest panting, eyes

wild and sweating. ‘Just so I understand, Tor, you suggest that I go before our Watch Captain, propose that we neglect our orders in favour of rerouting to an as yet unknown location to fight a horned beast, based on a sudden dream from a single member of our company. Have you lost your mind, brother? Or have you overdone it on the *mjod*?’

‘My quarters are colder than the void. Ice and frost are coated across every surface,’ Tor continued, not accepting his sergeant’s perspective. ‘If this was just a dream, explain why the spirits have left their mark. It was a Sammekull, Caddon, a summons in the common tongue. I know it in my heart that my pack calls.’

‘But it is not our duty to answer, Tor. Our duty is to the Emperor. That is why Veterans join these ranks, for they should have the wisdom to see the bigger picture. Your sworn duty is fulfilled by fighting here, under the orders of our Watch Captain, to enact the Emperor’s will.’

Tor moved forward, looming over the kneeling form before him. ‘For what, cousin? To cull yet more xenos filth that have barely managed to crawl off their native planet? We are Space Marines, Caddon. Let us fight a greater enemy and earn our place at the Allfather’s side! If the company will not go, then let me!’

Caddon finally rose. Taller and wider than Tor, the Imperial Fist drew back his hood to reveal close-cropped hair, chiseled features and a creased brow. ‘No,’ he said, in a tone of finality. ‘Now return to your quarters, before I need question your loyalties further.’

Tor’s fists clenched and his brow creased as he wrestled with his frustrations. He looked up at his superior in defiance, an unspoken challenge that hung in the air. The tension between the two men hung like a thread, and Caddon was the first to cut it.

‘Last time I checked,’ Caddon began, his composure all but lost, ‘a dog obeys the commands of its master, not the other way around.’

Tor snarled in anger, teeth bared and eyes wild. His capacity for reason had been reduced; the wolf within was straining for release. Caddon looked on scornfully, his patience eroded.

‘On the Chogorian steppes,’ began a quiet voice behind them, ‘the greatest of hunters work with magnificent birds of prey.’

Tor turned to observe the relaxed form of Watch Captain Ghasubai in the doorway. He knew not how long the White Scar had been observing the confrontation, but one hand resting idly on the hilt of his Chogorian tulwar was enough to douse Tor’s fury.

‘Many would wonder why such mighty beasts as the hawk and eagle do not fly alone, free from the bonds of servitude,’ Ghasubai continued. ‘True, the hawk would soar free, but the harshness of the Chogorian steppes would soon reveal itself as rival predators challenged it at every turn. Thus, the harmony of Human, horse and hawk is a coalescence that has mastered its environment to become the apex predator of Chogoris.’ Ghasubai looked to the Space Wolf. ‘Harmony is how Humanity will survive, Tor. We all know the price that was paid when brother fought brother; our enemies grew in strength when our paths diverged. Without harmony, we will stumble across the plains of this galaxy until exhaustion claims us, and nought is left but emaciated scraps for the jackals.’

‘I cannot abandon my true brothers.’ Tor answered. ‘They are in peril, every instinct I have tells me so.’

Ghasubai fixed his eyes upon Tor, and for many moments he weighed up the wolf before him. Tor felt his appraisal as he waited for judgement. Ghasubai had a relaxed and unassuming demeanour, but the whole company knew him as utterly formidable. Tor knew the next words his Watch Captain uttered would be the final say on the matter, and he would have to accept it.

‘If there is but one crack in the unanimity of this brotherhood,’ Ghasubai began, ‘we will break in the face of the horrors of this galaxy. I will not have you compromise the harmony of our company, and as such... I grant you your request. You may return to your Chapter and pursue the Emperor’s enemies by the side of your true brothers.’

Tor breathed a sigh of relief, but this concession left him with little elation. Chagrin hung in the air, and the dire threat he knew his Chapter to be in meant dilemma awaited him at every turn. But the pack had called, and he would answer.