

# Dramatis Personae Aska Kjelu Russ WH40K OC

## The Daughter of Lemar Russ, Primarch of the Space Wolves

Von Garnet-Nihilia

### 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...."

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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!"

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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."

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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."

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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 Lemman Russ overcame her defenses and her vision turned black....

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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."

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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."

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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...