



Bodyguard of Lightning

Chapter I

Stryke couldn't see the ground for corpses.

He was deafened by screams and clashing steel. Despite the cold, sweat stung his eyes. His muscles burned and his body ached. Blood, mud and splashed brains flecked his jerkin. And now two more of the loathsome, soft pink creatures were moving in on him with murder in their eyes.

He savoured the joy.

His footing unsure, he stumbled and almost fell, pure instinct bringing up his sword to meet the first swinging blade. The impact jarred but checked the blow. He nimbly retreated a pace, dropped into a half crouch and lunged forward again, below his opponent's guard. The sword rammed into the enemy's stomach. Stryke quickly raked it upward, deep and hard, until it struck a rib, tumbling guts. The creature went down, a stupefied expression on its face.

There was no time to relish the kill. The second attacker was on him, clutching a two-handed broadsword, its glinting tip just beyond the limit of Stryke's reach. Mindful of its fellow's fate, this one was more cautious. Stryke went on the offensive, engaging his assailant's blade with a rain of aggressive swipes. They parried and thrust, moving in a slow, cumbersome dance, their boots seeking purchase on bodies of friend and foe alike.

Stryke's weapon was better suited to fencing. The size and weight of the creature's broadsword made it awkward to use in close combat. Designed for hacking, it needed to be swung in a wider arc. After several passes the creature strained with effort, huffing clouds of icy breath. Stryke kept harrying from a distance, awaiting his chance.

In desperation, the creature lurched toward him, its sword slashing at his face. It missed, but came close enough for him to feel the displaced air. Momentum carried the stroke on, lifting the creature's arms high and leaving its chest unprotected. Stryke's blade found its heart, triggering a scarlet eruption. The creature spiraled into the trampling melee.

Glancing down the hill, Stryke could make out the Wolverines, embroiled in the greater battle on the plain below.

He returned to the slaughter.

Coilla looked up and saw Stryke on the hill above, not far from the walls of the settlement, savagely laying into a group of defenders.

She cursed his damned impatience.

But for the moment their leader would have to look after himself. The warband had some serious resistance to overcome before they could get to him.

Here in the boiling cauldron of the main battlefield, bloody conflict stretched out on every side. A crushing mob of fighting troops and shying mounts churned to pulp what had been fields of crops just hours before. The cacophonous, roaring din was endless, the tart aroma of death soured the back of her throat.

A thirty-strong flying wedge bristling with steel, the Wolverines kept in tight formation, powering through the struggling mass like some giant multi-stinged insect. Near the wedge's spearhead, Coilla helped clear their path, lashing out with her sword at enemy flesh obstructing the way.

Too fast to properly digest, a succession of hellish *tableau vivant* flashed past her. A defender with a hatchet buried in its shoulder; one of her own side, gore encrusted hands covering his eyes; another silently shrieking, a red stump in lieu of an arm; one of theirs staring down at a hole the size of a fist in its chest; a headless body, gushing crimson as it staggered. A face cut to ribbons by the slashing of her blade.

An infinity later the Wolverines arrived at the foot of the hill and began to climb as they fought.

A brief hiatus in the butchery allowed Stryke to check again the progress of his band. They were cleaving through knots of defenders about halfway up the hill.

He turned back and surveyed the massive wooden-walled stronghold topping the rise. There was a way to go before they reached its gates, and several score more of the enemy to overcome. But it seemed to Stryke that their ranks were thinning.

Filling his lungs with frigid air, he felt again the intensity of life that came when death was this close.

Coilla arrived, panting, the rest of the troop close behind.

'Took your time,' he commented dryly. 'Thought I'd have to storm the place alone.'

She jabbed a thumb at the milling chaos below. 'Weren't keen on letting us through.'

They exchanged smiles that were almost crazed.

Bloodlust's on her too, he thought. *Good.*

Alfray, custodian of the Wolverines' banner, joined them and drove the flag's spar into the semi-frozen earth. The warband's two dozen common soldiers formed a defensive ring around the officers. Noticing one of the grunts had taken a pernicious looking head wound, Alfray pulled a field dressing from his hip bag and went to staunch the blood.

Sergeants Haskeer and Jup pushed through the troopers. As usual, the former was sullen, the latter unreadable.

'Enjoy your stroll?' Stryke jibed, his tone sarcastic.

Jup ignored it. 'What now, Captain?' he asked gruffly.

'What *think* you, shortarse? A break to pick flowers?' He glared at his diminutive joint second-in-command. 'We get up there and do our job.'

'How?'

Coilla was staring at the leaden sky, a hand cupped over her eyes.

'Frontal assault,' Stryke replied. 'You have a better plan?' It was a challenge.

'No. But it's open ground, uphill. We'll have casualties.'

'Don't we always?' He spat copiously, narrowly missing his sergeant's feet. 'But if it makes you feel better we'll ask our strategist. Coilla, what's your opinion?'

'Hmmm?' Her attention remained fixed on the heavy clouds.

'*Wake up*, Corporal! I said - '

'See that?' She pointed skyward.

A black dot was descending through the gloom. No details were obvious from this distance, but they all guessed what it was.

'Could be useful,' Stryke said.

Coilla was doubtful. 'Maybe. You know how wilful they can be. Best to take cover?'

'Where?' Haskeer wanted to know, scanning the naked terrain.

The dot grew in size.

'It's moving faster than a cinder from Hades,' Jup observed.

'And diving too tight,' added Haskeer.

By this time the bulky body and massive serrated wings were clearly visible.

There was no doubt now. Huge and ungainly, the beast swooped over the battle still raging on the plain. Combatants froze and stared upwards. Some scattered from its shadow. It carried on heedless in an ever sharper descent, aimed squarely at the rise where Stryke's Wolverines were gathered.

He squinted at it. 'Can anybody make out the handler?'

They shook their heads.

The living projectile came at them unerringly. Its vast, slavering jaws gaped, revealing rows of yellow teeth the size of war helms. Slitty green eyes flashed. A rider sat stiffly on its back, tiny compared to his charge.

Stryke estimated it to be no more than three flaps of its powerful wings away.

'Too low,' Coilla whispered.

Haskeer bellowed, '*Kiss the ground!*'

The warband flattened.

Rolling onto his back, Stryke had a fleeting view of grey leathery skin and enormous clawed feet passing overhead. He almost believed he could stretch and touch the thing.

Then the dragon belched a mighty gout of dazzling orange flame.

For a fraction of a second Stryke was blinded by the intensity of light. Blinking through the haze, he expected to see the dragon smash into the ground. Instead he caught sight of it soaring aloft at what seemed an impossibly acute angle.

Further up the hillside, the scene was transformed. The defenders and some attackers, ignited by the blazing suspiration, had been turned into shrieking fireballs or were already dead in smouldering heaps. Here and there, the earth itself burned and bubbled.

A smell of roasting flesh filled the air. It made the juices in Stryke's mouth flow.

'Somebody should remind the dragonmasters whose side they're on,' Haskeer grumbled.

'But this one eased our burden.' Stryke nodded at the gates. They were well alight. Scrambling to his feet, he yelled, '*To me!*'

The Wolverines sent up a booming war cry and thundered after him. They met little resistance, easily cutting down the few enemy still left standing.

When Stryke reached the smoking gates he found them damaged enough to offer no real obstacle, and one was hanging crookedly, fit to fall.

Nearby, a pole held a charred sign bearing the crudely painted word *Homefield*.

Haskeer ran to Stryke's side. He noticed the sign and swiped contemptuously at it with his sword, severing it from the upright. It fell and broke in two.

'Even our language has been colonised,' he growled.

Jup, Coilla and the remainder of the band caught up with them. Stryke and several troopers booted the weakened gate, downing it.

They poured through the opening and found themselves in a spacious compound. To their right, a corral held livestock. On the left stood a row of mature fruit trees. Ahead and set well back was a sizeable wooden farmhouse.

Lined up in front of it were at least twice as many defenders as Wolverines.

The warband charged and set about the creatures. In the intense hand to hand combat that followed the Wolverines' discipline proved superior. With nowhere to run, desperation fuelled the enemy and they fought savagely, but in moments their numbers were drastically depleted. Wolverine casualties were much lighter, a handful sustaining minor wounds. Not enough to slow their advance or impede the zeal with which they plundered their foes' milky flesh.

At length, the few remaining defenders were driven back to bunch in front of the entrance. Stryke led the onslaught against them, shoulder to shoulder with Coilla, Haskeer and Jup.

Yanking his blade free of the final protector's innards, Stryke spun and gazed around the compound. He saw what he needed at the corral's fence. 'Haskeer! Get one of those beams for a ram!'

The sergeant hurried away, barking orders. Seven or eight troopers peeled off to run after him, tugging hatchets from their belts.

Stryke beckoned a foot soldier. The private took two steps and collapsed, a slender shaft projecting from his throat.

'Archers!' Jup yelled, waving his blade at the building's upper story.

The band dispersed as a hail of arrows peppered them from an open window above. One Wolverine went down, felled by a shot to the head. Another was hit in the shoulder and pulled to cover by his comrades.

Coilla and Stryke, nearest the house, ran forward to take shelter under the building's overhang, pressing themselves to the wall on either side of the door.

'How many bowmen have *we*?' she asked.

'We just lost one, so three.'

He looked across the farmyard. Haskeer's crew seemed to be taking the brunt of the archers' fire. As arrows whistled around them, troopers gamely hacked at the uprights supporting one of the livestock pen's immense timbers.

Jup and most of the others sprawled on the ground nearby. Braving the volleys, Corporal Alfray knelt as he improvised a binding for the trooper's pierced shoulder. Stryke was about to call over when he saw the three archers were stringing their short bows.

Lying full-length was a less than ideal firing position. They had to turn the bows sideways and aim upwards while lifting their chests. Yet they quickly began unleashing shafts in a steady stream.

From their uncertain sanctuary Stryke and Coilla were powerless to do anything except watch as arrows winged up to the floor above and others came down in exchange. After a minute or two a ragged cheer broke out from the warband,

obviously in response to a hit. But the two-way flow of bolts continued, confirming that at least one more archer was in the building.

‘Why not tip the shafts with fire?’ Coilla suggested.

‘Don’t want the place to burn ‘til we get what we’re after.’

A weighty crash came from the corral. Haskeer’s unit had freed the beam. Troopers set to lifting it, still wary of enemy fire, though it was now less frequent.

Another triumphant roar from the pinned-down grunts was followed by a commotion upstairs. An archer fell, smacking to the ground in front of Stryke and Coilla. The arrow jutting from its chest was snapped in half by the impact.

At the livestock, Jup was on his feet, signalling that the upper story was clear.

Haskeer’s crew ran over with the beam, muscles taut and faces strained with the effort of shifting its mass. All hands to the improvised ram, the warband began pounding the reinforced door, splintering shards of wood. After a dozen blows it gave with a loud report and exploded inwards.

A trio of defenders were waiting for them. One leapt forward, killing the lead rammer with a single stroke. Stryke felled the creature, clambered over the discarded timber and laid into the next. A brief, frenzied trading of blows pitched it lifeless to the floor. But the distraction left Stryke open to the third defender. It closed in, its blade pulling up and back, ready to deliver a decapitating swipe.

A throwing knife thudded hard into its chest. It gave a throaty rasp, dropped the sword and fell headlong.

Stryke’s grunt was all Coilla could expect in the way of thanks.

She retrieved the knife from her victim and drew another to fill her empty hand, preferring a blade in both fists when close quarter fighting seemed likely. The Wolverines flowed into the house behind her.

Before them was an open central staircase.

‘Haskeer! Take half the company and clear this floor,’ Stryke ordered. ‘The rest with me!’

Haskeer’s troopers spread right and left. Stryke lead his party up the stairs.

They were near the top when a pair of creatures appeared. Stryke and the band cut them to pieces in combined fury. Coilla got to the upper level first and ran into another defender. It opened her arm with a saw-toothed blade. Hardly slowing, she dashed the weapon from its hand and sliced its chest. Howling, it blundered through the rail and plunged to oblivion.

Stryke glanced at Coilla’s streaming wound. She made no complaint so he turned his attention to this floor’s layout. They were on a long landing with a number of doors. Most were open, revealing apparently empty rooms. He sent troopers to search them. They soon reappeared, shaking their heads.

At the farthest end of the landing was the only closed door. They approached stealthily and positioned themselves outside.

Sounds of combat from the ground floor were already dying down. Shortly, the only noise was the distant, muffled hubbub of the battle on the plain, and the stifled panting of the Wolverines catching their breath as they clustered on the landing.

Stryke glanced from Coilla to Jup, then nodded for the three burliest foot soldiers to act. They shouldered the door once, twice and again. It sprang open and they threw themselves in, weapons raised, Stryke and the other officers close behind.

A creature hefting a double-headed axe confronted them. It went down under manifold blows before doing any harm.

The room was large. At its far end stood two more figures, shielding something. One was of the defending creatures' race. The other was of Jup's kind, his short, squat build further emphasised by his companion's lanky stature.

He came forward, armed with sword and dagger. The Wolverines moved to engage him.

'No!' Jup yelled. '*Mine!*'

Stryke understood. 'Leave them!' he barked.

His troopers lowered their weapons.

The stocky adversaries squared up. For the span of half a dozen heartbeats they stood silently, regarding each other with expressions of vehement loathing.

Then the air rang to the peal of their colliding blades.

Jup set to with a will, batting aside every stroke his opponent delivered, avoiding both weapons with a fluidity born of long experience. In seconds the dagger was sent flying and embedded itself in a floor plank. Soon after, the sword was dashed away.

The Wolverine sergeant finished his opponent with a thrust to the lungs. His foe sank to his knees, toppled forward, twitched convulsively and died.

No longer spellbound by the fight, the last defender brought up its sword and readied itself for a final stand. As it did so, they saw it had been shielding a female of its race. Crouching, strands of mousy hair plastered to its forehead, the female cradled one of their young. The infant, its chubby flesh a dawn-tinted colour, was little more than a hatchling.

A shaft jutted from the female's upper chest. Arrows and a longbow were scattered on the floor. She had been one of the defending archers.

Stryke waved a hand at the Wolverines, motioning them to stay, and walked the length of the room. He saw nothing to fear and didn't hurry. Skirting the spreading pool of blood seeping from Jup's dead opponent, he reached the last defender and locked eyes with it.

For a moment it looked as though the creature might speak.

Instead it suddenly lunged, flailing its sword like a mad thing, and with as little accuracy.

Untroubled, Stryke deflected the blade and finished the matter by slashing the creature's throat, near severing its head.

The blood-soaked female let out a high-pitched wail, part squeak, part keening moan. Stryke had heard something like it once or twice before. He stared at her and saw a trace of defiance in her eyes. But hatred, fear and agony were strongest in her features. All the colour had drained from her face and her breath was laboured. She hugged the young one close in a last feeble attempt to protect it. Then the life force seeped away. She slowly pitched to one side and sprawled lifeless across the floor. The hatchling spilled from her arms and began to bleat.

Having no further interest in the matter, Stryke stepped over the corpse.

He was facing a Uni altar. In common with others he'd seen it was quite plain; a high table covered by a white cloth, gold embroidered at the edges, with a lead candleholder at each end. Standing in the centre and to the rear was a piece of ironwork he knew to be the symbol of their cult. It consisted of two rods of black metal mounted on a base, fused together at an angle to form a simple X.

But it was the object at the front of the table that interested caught his eye. A cylinder, perhaps as long as his forearm and the size of his fist in circumference, it was copper coloured and inscribed with fading runic symbols. One end had a lid, neatly sealed with red wax.

Coilla and Jup came to him. She was dabbing at the wound on her arm with a handful of wading. Jup wiped red stains from his blade with a soiled rag. They stared at the cylinder.

Coilla said, 'Is that it, Stryke?'

'Yes. It fits her description.'

'Hardly looks worth the cost of so many lives,' Jup remarked.

Stryke reached for the cylinder and examined it briefly before slipping it into his belt. 'I'm just a humble captain. Naturally our mistress didn't explain the details to one so lowly.' His tone was cynical.

Coilla frowned. 'I don't understand why that last creature should throw its life away protecting a female and her offspring.'

'What sense is there in anything humans do?' Stryke replied. 'They lack the balanced approach we orcs enjoy.'

The cries of the baby rose to a more incessant pitch.

Stryke turned to look at it. His green, viperish tongue flicked over mottled lips. 'Are the rest of you as hungry as I am?' he wondered.

His jest broke the tension. They laughed.

'It'd be exactly what they'd expect of us,' Coilla said, reaching down and hoisting the infant by the scruff of its neck. Holding it aloft in one hand, level with her face, she stared at its streaming blue eyes and dimpled, plump cheeks. 'My gods, but these things are *ugly*.'

'You can say that again,' Stryke agreed.