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SANCTUS REACH

BEN COUNTER, JOSH REYNOLDS,
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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst His soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants - and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.

GRUKK FACE-RIPPA

LOGAN GRIMNAR

PENUMBRAL SPIKE

BEN COUNTER

Time stretched into the distant future above, banded in the streaked black stone of Obstiria, reaching through another ten thousand years of war to the end of everything. There the Emperor waited, flanked by the billions of warriors who had fallen in His name, to vanquish the Great Enemy in the culmination of all battles.

Below, the past rolled out into the darkness, falling down to Obstiria's core through millennia of past glories and tragedies. Through the Altigenos Purges and the Black Crusades of the Arch-Traitor, the Age of Apostasy and the hellish vistas of the Scouring. There lay the Great Crusade and the Great Heresy, the crumbling obscurity of times that lay before the coming of the Emperor. The Age of Strife boiled like a river of black blood at the nadir of time, rushing over the forgotten horrors of the Dark Age of Technology.

Mighty heroes stood astride the burning worlds of myth. First amongst them was the Emperor Himself, the beginning and the end of all history, His face hidden by the glare of His divinity. His son, the Primarch Guilliman, bearing the weight of the Imperium on his shoulders. Fulminos, the greatest Obsidian Glaive who had ever walked the galaxy, echoed the image of Guilliman as he struck down alien, daemon and heretic with his blade of black glass.

Brother Molkis saw from the beginning to the end. The Obsidian Glaives were not just an army, not even just a Space Marine Chapter. They were a pillar of the history of mankind, forged by the will of the Emperor to bear up the shield that staved off the extinction of the human race. All their glories, past and present, spun around Molkis at a thousand years a moment.

He could see it all, from the Great Crusade and the Heresy to the Age of Imperium and the founding of the Obsidian Glaives Chapter, through the endless wars to defend humanity and on to the future. Those myths that had their origins in the prehistory of the Imperium ran on through the present, that arbitrary point where Molkis himself stood, and on until the end. It was a comfort to Molkis, who had fought in those wars, to know the victories that he had bled for would roll on until the end of time.

Then he saw his hands. The hand that had held his chainsword and his bolter were gone. They were ugly masses of metal, painted black and pitted with old battle scars. One was a cylindrical power fist, four fingers radiating out, powered by pistons to seize and crush. The other ended in a pair of lascannon barrels. Not hands at all, but the weapons of a war machine.

His body was not his body, but the massive body of that machine. A power plant thudded its slow rhythm behind him. His eyes were not eyes but the lenses of picters mounted on the front of his hull, transmitting flickering images through his optic nerves.

And around him was not the endless vista of his Chapter's history but dark and dismal cloisters, with a vaulted ceiling overhead and implements of incarceration and punishment on the walls. Manacles hung alongside thumbscrews and paring blades. On the ceiling was mounted a full-length body harness of spiked iron bands, a testament to endless suffering.

Someone was speaking. Molkis looked down and felt his whole body tilt, a tank-sized sarcophagus clad in ceramite. He saw his massive steel feet against the cracked flagstones of the cloisters, and the enormous shadow he cast in the light of the torches burning on the pillars.

A Space Marine Scout stood beside Molkis – an Obsidian Glaive, his demi-armour in the black and bone of the Chapter. He was young, midway through his transformation into a full Space Marine, the surgical scars still pink against the skin of his face and scalp.

'Molkis!' repeated the Scout. 'Brother Molkis, come back to us! The time has come to fight!'

Molkis felt connections sparking in the back of his mind, accessing the data-medium stored in his sarcophagus. The name 'Desaan' was projected onto his consciousness. This Scout was named Desaan. Brother Desaan of the Tenth Company.

‘Are you with us, Brother Molkis?’ continued Desaan. ‘We need you now. Of all times, of all battles, we need you now.’

Molkis’s picters scanned around. The data-medium told him he was in the Penumbral Spike, in the Cloisters of the Bold, where the cold of the earth met the heat of Obstiria’s core. Below were the generatoria and forges, and above were the sparring halls and cell blocks. He had once walked these halls, marching alongside his brothers. Now this machine walked in his place – this Dreadnought, this war machine in which he was the pilot.

‘I am with you,’ said Brother Molkis.

‘Do you remember?’ asked Desaan.

‘Remember?’

‘You are Brother Molkis of the Fourth Company,’ said Desaan. ‘You fell to the Kraken at Devilin Reach. You were wounded but the Apothecaries stayed your death, and you were mounted in this Dreadnought. Do you remember?’

Flickers of pain burst at the back of Molkis’s memory. He remembered a tide of monstrous flesh, and the chill of a bony blade spearing through him. He remembered the cold of the blood draining from his body.

‘Yes,’ said Molkis. ‘I remember.’

‘Good,’ said Desaan, with obvious relief. Molkis realised that Desaan had gone through this same conversation many times. ‘War has come, my brother. We need you at the front line, on the battlements.’

‘But we are at Penumbral Spike,’ said Molkis, ‘on Obstiria. We are not at war. This is our fortress-monastery, where we are inviolable. Or do I remember wrongly, Brother Desaan?’

‘You remember right,’ said Desaan. ‘Obstiria is invaded. The Penumbral Spike is besieged. The greenskins are here.’

The Penumbral Spike shuddered, slabs of black stone tumbling down its vertical sides. The irradiated rocky valleys around it shuddered too, momentarily as fluid as water. The lesser peaks around the Spike shed their caps of caked grey ash and new raw gashes opened up in the ground.

One of the peaks was punctured by a dozen explosions, throwing black plumes of pulverised rock into the sky. The mountain collapsed, millions of tonnes of rock plummeting into the mountain’s roots. Rockslides flooded the valleys with rushing waves of stone. Another peak went down

a moment later, closer this time, the deep thud of the explosions shaking the Penumbral Spike as if by a giant hand. In a few moments the craze of valleys and crevasses had changed, the map around the Obsidian Glaives fortress-monastery rewritten.

Augmented eyes were just able to make out the ramshackle halftracks and warbikes tossed end over end by the landslide, the tanks swallowed by the dark earth, the greenskins fleeing before the collapse.

On the battlements halfway up the Spike, beside one of the fortress's turbolaser emplacements, a cadre of Space Marines looked down at the changing landscape. Chapter Master Midnias was one, his black armour edged in gold, with a purple cloak over one shoulder and the spiked silver crown of Obstiria on his brow. He was the lord of this planet, though only the Obsidian Glaives lived there. It was his planet being mutilated below. The captains of the Fourth, Sixth, Ninth and Tenth companies stood alongside him. The Captain of the Tenth, Terundel, the Master of Novices, wore an ornate version of the Scout armour worn by the recruits who fought beneath him. Also with the group was Techmarine Javan, his armour in red, his face half steel and one eye replaced with a set of overlapping crimson lenses.

'Mount Scalen did not fall,' said Midnias.

'The charges were laid more than a thousand years ago,' replied Javan. 'Truth be told, I am surprised any of them fired.'

'Then you have done well, Brother Javan,' said Midnias. 'That will slow them down.'

'Not by much,' said Captain Elhalil of the Sixth. 'Days, my lord. Not months.'

'Then we will take the days we are given,' said Midnias. 'Do not be so quick to see defeat, captain. Not every turn of the tide is to be greeted with such ill humour. Greenskins lie dead. Rejoice in that.'

Terundel stood up on the battlement and lifted a magnocular to his eye. The dust below still billowed but the deepest of it was clearing from the valleys outlying the destruction.

'Their vanguard has tested us enough,' said the Scout-captain. 'Their patience has been used up. They attack in force. See?'

Midnias took the magnocular and followed Terundel's outstretched finger. Through one valley streamed an armoured wedge of tanks, a collection of

treaded and wheeled vehicles with no uniformity of order. Some were bolted together apparently from junk, with crude and violent symbology daubed on their armour plates. Others had been Imperial tanks, refitted, upgunned and driven recklessly into battle. Midnias counted two hundred of them with the first glance, half as many again with a second at another valley winding between the low peaks that formed the Nineteen Sisters. Hordes of orks on foot ran alongside them, trying to keep up with the bikes and halftracks that raced ahead.

'The opening moves are concluded,' said Midnias. 'Now the battle can begin. Give thanks for this test, my brothers. Give thanks for the punishment.'

'More new punishments with every moment,' said Keshuma, Captain of the Ninth. A veteran of the Devastator heavy weapons formations, Keshuma carried a heavy bolter on his shoulders like it was a holy burden to bear. He nodded up at the Obstiria's pale, blue-streaked sky. There a flock of black flecks rounded one of the peaks, leaving trails of filthy black smoke as they flew. 'They come at us from the air. Everything this greenskin lord has, it throws at the Spike.'

'Thus do the greenskins fight,' said Midnias, handing the magnocular back to Terundel. 'These have shown more patience than most in sending their outriders to test us. No doubt their leader counts as a master strategist among their kind. Now it reverts to the alien's type and runs at us as animals. And we will be here to meet them. To your duties, my brothers. Prepare the defence. This punishment too we shall endure.'

'This too we shall endure,' echoed the assembled Space Marines as one.

In the valleys below, the orkish artillery began to bellow.

Fulminos would have cried out a chant of war, and the brothers around him would have taken up the cry. He would have surged forward like a living tide of steel and beaten back all who stood before him. So Brother Molkis did the same.

'Who will follow me?' he blared from the vox-casters mounted on his hull. 'Shall I wade alone through this sea of xenos blood?'

The Cathedral of Victory spun in front of him as his pict-lenses cycled, bringing him a full picture of the battlefield. The rear wall, with its statue of Guilliman, had fallen to the ork artillery that had crashed against the

side of the Spike. Now it was a drift of torn stone with greenskins swarming over it. They were elites by ork standards, with yellow and blue painted on their armour, their fangs tipped with gold, and each with a banner or totem strapped to his back. They carried guns as long as they were tall and fired them off as if competing to have the most barrels or the loudest report. Some had massive cleaver-blades, notched with kill-marks, hung with bones.

Gunfire rattled against Molkis's hull. The ceramite was thickest on the front of the sarcophagus and the armour held. The offending ork stood on top of Guilliman's fallen statue, which had previously depicted the primarch poring over the Codex Astartes. Molkis willed his lascannon to fire, as if a mental finger was squeezing around the trigger. Twin bolts of crimson flashed, lighting the dark reaches of the cathedral, and sheared the ork clean in two.

Space Marines of the Fourth Company ran into the fray alongside Molkis, bolter fire streaking across the cathedral. Ork bodies shredded and burst. Captain Seharra led them, holding his power sword high as a beacon for them to follow.

The two sides clashed in the centre of the cathedral, the orks surging through the breach and the Obsidian Glaives rushing to meet them. The fire cut down orks in their dozens but they continued seething from the fallen wall like blood pouring from a wound. Steel smacked into flesh as they crashed into the Space Marines, cleavers rising and falling, guns blazing at point-black range.

Each Obsidian Glaive was worth ten orks, but it seemed there were a hundred orks in that melee for every Space Marine. In the close confines they could swarm the Space Marines and drag them down, and Obsidian Glaives were being swamped under waves of green flesh. Seharra cut a great bloody swathe around himself with wide swings of his two-handed power blade, like an eye in the centre of the orkish storm.

The greenskins swarmed around Molkis's legs. One of them carried a crude flamethrower and grunted with laughter as it adjusted a valve so the nozzle spat a cutting lance of blue-white fire. The ork's skin was scorched black and its yellow fangs were bared with delight beneath a pair of scarred welding goggles. It must have rejoiced in the idea of cutting open Molkis's sarcophagus and ripping out the crippled flesh inside.

Molkis grabbed the ork in his power fist. Neural feedback from the arm's actuators gave him the sensation that his own arm, long since atrophied, was moving. He lifted the ork in the air so that its fellow greenskins could see it, and crushed it in his power fist. Molkis felt the reports of the ork's bones cracking like a volley of gunshots and threw the mangled body to the cathedral floor.

Molkis's twin lascannon were fine weapons for punching through tanks and armour, but against a swarm of enemies it could shoot down only one or two at a time. In this scrum Molkis relied instead on his power fist, and on his massive feet and the armoured weight they bore. His torso pivoted on its waist bearing with a speed the orks had not expected and he bowled over a clutch of them trying to clamber onto his back. He stepped over them and stamped down, flesh and bone turning to jelly beneath the weight of a Dreadnought.

Molkis felt the orks' warm blood spraying over him. He drew his blade and sliced off a head, an arm, a hand, as he had done as the greenskins breached the pass at Malikan Gate. One tried to get behind him but he threw it over his shoulder and pressed it to the ground, forcing his bolter barrel up under its jaw and blowing away the upper half of its skull.

'Good kill, my brother!' cried Chapter Master Tekelon, who saluted from across the battlefield with his power spear. 'Thus does Molkis shame us all with the tally of the dead he reaps! I shall not wager the day's kill against you again!'

'I will offer you fine odds, Chapter Master,' replied Molkis as he blasted a wide wet hole in another ork scrambling through the corpses at him. 'If you will take them!'

Molkis felt a tugging at his arm, small like a persistent insect. He glanced down and saw Scout Desaan, face wide with concern.

'Brother Molkis, focus! See what is around you. The greenskins are massing again!'

No, thought Molkis. He was not fighting the orks with combat knife and bolter, as he had done centuries ago. He was entombed in this Dreadnought. And Chapter Master Tekelon was not there. He had died soon after Molkis's entombing, and Midnias was master of the Obsidian Glaives now.

How easy it was to forget.

The first wave of orks had been beaten back from the cathedral. The floor was slick and gleaming with their blood. The Obsidian Glaives were hauling their fallen back from the front line as a few scattered shots from the orks pinged against the pillars. Some of the fallen were wounded, being helped to their feet by their brothers – others were unconscious and limp. Some were clearly dead, torn open or beheaded.

The ork dead numbered in the hundreds. They were draped over the stone benches and heaped against the walls. But there were more of them still to join the fight, chanting their war cries beyond the breach, ready to storm it again and buy a few more Space Marine dead with dozens of their own.

'Hold the doors!' ordered Captain Seharra. 'Give them ground so they pay for it in blood!'

The Obsidian Glaives were forming up around the archways leading into the cathedral, hauling broken benches into barricades and kneeling in gun lines like an execution detail.

'Come, brother, take your place,' said Desaan. The Scout was still holding on to Molkis's lascannon arm. Molkis allowed himself be led to a gap in the line where an archway pillar had fallen to ork gunfire.

'How fares Brother Molkis?' asked Seharra to Desaan.

'Ready for the fight,' replied Desaan.

Seharra looked at Molkis, something uncertain in his face. 'We need you with us, Brother Molkis. Here and now. See the enemy before you and the battle-brothers beside you.'

'I can,' said Molkis. His synthesised voice was low and grating, like stone grinding against stone, and it shocked him to hear it instead of the voice with which he had spoken to Captain Tekelon.

That had been more than three hundred years ago, Molkis reminded himself. Tekelon was dead, and Molkis was no longer that man.

'We shall be with you, captain,' said Desaan.

'The brothers of my company look to you both,' said Seharra. 'There is no need to fight enemies who are not there. We have plenty already who are.'

A great war cry rose from beyond the breach, a mingling of hundreds of ork voices. One among them led the chanting, guttural and loud as a vox-hailer. The other greenskins echoed the leader's cries and the chant sped up. The shape of a single ork appeared in the breach – it was enormous,

taller by half from its fellow greenskins, wearing a ragged mismatch of wargear. On its head was jammed an Imperial admiral's hat with a feather still stuck in the band. Its shoulder pads were battered steel and hundreds of Imperial Guardsmen's dogtags hung from them like brocade from an officer's epaulettes. The greenskin's mouth was crammed with gold-capped tusks and it wore a patch over a mass of scar tissue covering one eye socket. In one hand was a naval cutlass, presumably stolen from an officer of the sector battlefleet. In the other was a huge, crude flamethrower bulky enough to have been cobbled together from spaceship parts.

The greenskin's abdomen had been torn out, perhaps by injury, perhaps by choice. In place of the missing organs was a round furnace, spurting flame, connected to the flamethrower by a thick ribbed tube. A heap of fuel burned behind a barred door on the ork's belly. The ork's lips peeled back in a grin and flame flickered behind its gilded fangs.

Molkis's hearts leapt as the targeter built into his sarcophagus ringed the greenskin in red, and he raised his lascannon to fire. But the orkish pirate bellowed and dozens more swarmed in around it, obscuring the shot. The Obsidian Glaives opened fire at the same time Molkis did, without Seharra having to give the order. These orks were elites, heavily armed and armoured, and they weathered the first volley of bolter fire with only a dozen or so fallen. They bellowed as they vaulted the stone benches and closed with the Obsidian Glaives.

'They shall not force this breach!' yelled Seharra into the vox-net. 'They shall find no foothold on sacred ground!'

An ork in a full suit of mechanical armour stomped towards Molkis's position. Its armour was a mockery of a Space Marine's: crude and massive, spurting hydraulic fluid as it absorbed chains of bolter fire against the bullet-scarred plates. Only the upper part of the ork's face was exposed, the lower half covered with a massive steel jaw plate cut into jagged teeth.

Molkis strode forward from the cover of his archway. An enemy like this was not to be received on his own terms, by waiting back and allowing him to strike with all momentum. Thus the Codex Astartes read. Molkis followed it to the letter as he crashed into the armoured ork, knocking it to the ground with the weight of his sarcophagus and ramming his power fist

down into its body.

The ork caught the Dreadnought's fist as it descended. The xenos was strong enough to halt the fist as Molkis powered it downwards. The ork's eyes narrowed into red slits as Molkis pushed harder, besting the ork by a fraction to grind the weapon down.

The greenskin leader was laughing. Molkis flicked a lens up to the breach where it still stood, surrounding by the seething mass of orks pouring through the breach. Among them were several orks less armoured then the others, carrying not guns or blades but bundles of crude stick explosives with lit fuses hissing. These orks were covered in weeping scars, as if they came from a whipped and tormented caste marked out for a suicide mission.

'Perfidy!' cried out a voice over the vox-net. 'They will bring this place down!'

More of the explosive-carrying orks were making it onto the cathedral floor. Molkis paused his crushing of the armoured ork long enough to draw a bead on one of them, whose face was half stripped down to the bone and who carried a hopper of burning explosives on its back. Molkis fired twin lances of crimson light from his lascannon and the ork vanished in an eruption of flame and debris. The shock wave of the blast hammered against Molkis and shards of stone rattled against him.

'Shoot them down!' ordered Seharra. 'Do not let them…'

His voice was lost in a trio of explosions that ripped through the cathedral. Pillars collapsed. Black torrents of stone poured from the shattered ceiling. Molkis tipped to one side as the floor shifted underneath him.

In the tumult Molkis saw Scout Desaan yelling, but the noise was so vast he could not make out his words. Desaan was falling away – no, it was Molkis who was falling, pitching onto his side. The floor was sinking into the crypts below. Obsidian Glaives and orks tumbled past him. The armoured ork was gone, crushed beneath Molkis or pitched into the catacombs.

Darkness closed in. Falling stone hammered against Molkis. He could hear now – the roar of the collapsing cathedral mingled with the laughing of the orkish warlord at the destruction he had created.

Another explosion shuddered the cathedral. A pillar fell, trailing

pulverised rock. One of the hands of Guilliman's statue tumbled past Molkis into the crypts.

'…back! Fall back!' Seharra was ordering. The vox-net was full of static and Molkis could barely make out the words. Gunfire streaked back and forth above as Molkis tried to shift his weight and get upright again.

The ceiling above bowed down and split. Rock rained down. Men and orks were yelling as they were crushed. The torrent slammed down onto Molkis so hard another, more profound darkness fell behind his eyes.

The Penumbral Spike was riddled with chambers, some of them enormous assembly grounds and sparring arenas, others tiny cells or shrines to heroes whose inscriptions were all that remained of them in the Chapter's memory. Natural volcanic tunnels had been enlarged to form the interior of the fortress, each constructed with a mind towards defending against an invader – dead ends, switchbacks, false gateways leading to killing zones. But no fortress was completely impregnable. Room by room, doorway by doorway, Penumbral Spike was falling.

'Bring us the devastation, Lord Guilliman,' said Chapter Master Midnias as he knelt before the Vaevictis Monument. The monument chamber had been enlarged many times to contain the stasis chambers in which were displayed arms and armour captured from fallen enemies. One contained a slender crystalline rifle of elder design, another the crested skull of an enormous war-beast fielded by the tau. Some held fragments of armour carefully suspended in psychic wards, taken from warp-corrupted foes.

'Give us the wisdom to bring it down on our enemies. Bring us the hatred, Lord Guilliman. Give us the discipline to wield it as a weapon. Bring us the deliverance, Lord Guilliman, from the end of days.'

Scout Desaan waited until the prayer was finished. Only when he finally entered the chamber did he see the other Obsidian Glaives standing in the gloom, among them Scout-Captain Terundel of Desaan's own Tenth Company.

'Scout,' said Midnias. 'You have come to tell me that Brother Molkis has fallen.'

'He has,' replied Desaan. 'The greenskins collapsed the cathedral. Molkis was buried. Captain Seharra was taken to the apothecarion, they say…'

'I know of Seharra,' said Midnias. 'I needed to hear of our Dreadnought's

loss from one who had seen it with his own eyes. I am aware of Molkis's recent waywardness. Had he been separated he might not have returned to us without one to guide him, as you have. Now I am certain.'

'A choice must be made,' said Captain Elhalil of the Sixth Company.

'And it is only I who can make it,' said Midnias.

'You know my mind, Chapter Master,' said Elhalil. 'To me, this point was reached the moment the first greenskin set foot on Obstiria. We should have…'

'There is no should or should not,' snapped Midnias. 'There is the word of the Codex Astartes and the certainty a lifetime of battle has given me.' Midnias looked towards the shadows and Desaan saw another Space Marine there, in glossy red armour instead of the black of an Obsidian Glaive. 'Can it be done?'

'It can,' replied Techmarine Javan. 'Though with all my heart I beg you not to ask it of me.'

'What does your heart say about defending this ground from the alien?' demanded Elhalil. 'What can be more important than that?'

'The survival of our Chapter's soul!' replied Javan. 'The thousands of years that will be lost! Some of the neural couplings are almost completely degraded. With the radiation readings from the last year, there is no saying how long…'

'I will tell you how long!' shouted Elhalil. 'As long as it takes the greenskins to force their way through the lower levels and into the vaults! Can you not hear them? They tunnel through the Spike as we speak. This Warlord Flamegut has ten thousand lives to spare and it will pour them all through the catacombs to fill this Spike to the brim with greenskin flesh. If, of course, the orks who took the fighter hangars do not get there first. That is how long the soul of this Chapter has before it is extinguished!'

'Enough, my brothers,' said Midnias. He did not need to raise his voice to quell the argument. 'Obstiria is a cruel world, and the words of the Codex have bound us to a path that has done much harm to those who are most precious to our Chapter. But Elhalil is right. Though it cost us everything, we must make this stand. Not because our pride demands we repel the invaders, but because the orks who are halted here will not join the warfleets pouring into the sector. More lives than our own, even of our greatest heroes, depend on us. There is only one choice I can make.'

Desaan looked across the faces of the Obsidian Glaives. Though Javan tried to hide it, he was heartbroken. Desaan had never seen such sorrow in a Space Marine, let alone in a Techmarine who was supposed to become in outlook like the machines he tended. Elhalil, for all his bluster, seemed to bow under the weight of Midnias's decision.

'Go to the vault, Brother Javan,' said Midnias. 'Take with you everyone you need. Wake them. Wake them all. May Guilliman guide our hand.'

Desaan had never seen the inside of the vault. Very few ever did except the highest-ranked of the Chapter and the Techmarines who maintained it. Scout-Captain Terundel had beckoned Desaan follow as Javan took a detail of Obsidian Glaives to the vault, and Desaan had known immediately what his purpose was to be.

The vault was clad in cold steel, the only chamber in the Spike not to be walled with the living rock of the mountain. Rivulets of condensation had frozen into beads of ice around the cryo-towers standing like the pillars of the cathedral. They exuded an aura of such deep cold that the air Desaan breathed felt brittle, as if it might shatter in his throat.

Twelve enormous pedestals stood, each one topped by a cradle of archaic machinery and wreathed in cold vapour. In eleven such cradles stood a Dreadnought, the black armour of each covered in heraldry and battle-honours spanning thousands of years of the Obsidian Glaives' history. The twelfth pedestal was empty, for it was assigned to Brother Molkis.

Several servitors marched from the corners of the room as Javan walked between the pedestals. He gave them orders in rapid machine-cant and they scurried off to attend to the Dreadnoughts. Each servitor was based on the body of a human, its mind wiped and reprogrammed and its limbs replaced with heavy manipulators or data-probes.

'Brother Desaan,' said Javan. 'Your task of ascendance was assisting Ancient Molkis in his guardianship, is that correct?'

'It was,' said Desaan. 'I saw him fall.'

'Our elder brothers will need assistance too,' said Javan. 'I do not know if you have been informed of Obstiria's curse.'

'Its curse?'

Javan activated a control stud on the side of the nearest pedestal. Hydraulics hissed as the Dreadnought atop it shifted its weight onto its

huge metal feet. Cables disengaged and spilled coolant fluid. ‘The radiation,’ he said.

‘Of course,’ said Desaan. ‘Obstiria cannot be settled by ordinary citizens. But our augmentations protect us from the radiation.’

‘As does the physiology of the ork,’ said Javan. ‘But I gather there is something about our world you have not yet been told. No wonder. It is not easy to hear.’

The servitors were completing the same procedures at the other pedestals. The room shuddered as eleven Dreadnought power plants rumbled into action. Hull lights flickered on. The Dreadnought on Javan’s pedestal lurched forward a step, pulling out the remaining cables and wires. Its pict-lenses whirred as they focused.

‘Reclusiarch Vengis,’ came a grating, steely voice from the Dreadnought’s sarcophagus. ‘I was broken in body, but I stand alongside my brothers once more.’

‘Brother Karulak,’ said Javan, ‘I fear you are mistaken. I am not Reclusiarch Vengis. He has been dead these last four hundred years. I am Techmarine Javan. Chapter Master Midnias commands us now. Do you remember, brother?’

‘What is this?’ came the metallic reply, tinged with anger. ‘Vengis dragged me from the fires of Kephalon Vale. I owe him my life. Who has killed him? How can I seek my revenge?’

Javan activated another panel on the pedestal console. Karulak sagged down on his hydraulics and Desaan recognised the effects of psychological stabilisers released into the pilot’s bloodstream. ‘Focus on what lies around you, brother,’ said Javan. ‘Time has clouded your mind. Do not let it wander. Your Chapter has need of you.’

‘What is the curse?’ asked Desaan.

‘Space Marine flesh is proof against Obstiria’s radiation,’ replied Javan as he continued working the controls. ‘But the same cannot be said about all our technology. The connection between the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought and its pilot uses technology that cannot be replicated. But those connections degrade with exposure to this planet’s radiation, and with them the faculties of the pilot’s mind. The Codex Astartes demands that one of our Chapter’s Dreadnoughts stand guard over our fortress but each hour of such exposure shortens a Dreadnought’s life. In here, asleep,

they are protected. When active on Obstiria, the degradation continues, and as it worsens the speed of decay accelerates.'

'They are dying?' asked Desaan.

'Slowly,' said Javan. 'But yes, they are dying.'

'How long do they have?'

Javan glanced at a series of marks on Karulak's sarcophagus. They were unobtrusive against the heraldry and kill-marks painted on the armour plating. Desaan recalled similar markings on Brother Molkis, but had never thought to wonder what they meant. High Gothic numerals counted out a date.

'Karulak has four years,' said Javan. 'That ticks down as we speak. Some have more, most have less.'

'And Molkis?'

'Longer. The Dreadnoughts are rotated out of honour guard duty as they degrade and his duty was to last a year or more. After that he would be sent back to this vault to wait his rotation again. Each time would be shorter as his connections were corroded away, but the Codex demands it of us and the word of Guilliman must be honoured.'

Karulak lunged forwards, stomping down and off the pedestal. The servitors scattered as the Dreadnought's assault cannon swung around.

'Brother!' cried Desaan. 'Ancient brother! Listen to my voice and do not let the shadows of the past overcome you! You lie now in the sarcophagus of a Dreadnought, for you were wounded unto death and brought back from the brink. Years have passed and new battle-brothers wear the colours of the Obsidian Knights, but our purpose and our foes remain the same.'

Karulak paused and turned towards Desaan. 'Scout-brother,' came Karulak's voice. 'Can this be true?'

'Look down, ancient one,' said Desaan. 'You bear not the bolter and chainsword, but the fist and cannon of the war machine. Yet you are still one of us, an Obsidian Glaive, a son of Guilliman and sworn warrior of the Emperor. Nothing that truly matters has changed.'

'Yes,' said Karulak. 'I see now. I remember. I fell, and slumbered, but now I wake. Has a crusade been called? Am I to go to war?'

'Alas, there is war, but no crusade. The enemy has come to us. Penumbral Spike is besieged by the ork!'

A great crash rolled through the vault. A servitor tumbled from the furthest pedestal and sprawled broken on the floor. Machinery rained down. A coolant unit was torn from the ceiling as one of the Dreadnoughts, its tarnished armour inlaid with gilded eagle's wings and hung with spiked chains, crashed from its sleeping place into the centre of the vault. Its power fist had been modified to carry a hugely oversized power sword and its gun arm carried a heavy plasma weapon. From one shoulder hung a banner with the heraldry of twin blades crossed with a lightning bolt.

'What heresy is this?' bellowed the Dreadnought. 'The ork defiles Penumbral Spike? Obstiria weeps under the tread of the alien? And yet here we stand like idiot prey! I shall leave nothing but gore and misery of the xenos horde, and when I am finished, every ork will shriek in dismay at the very mention of the Obsidian Glaives!'

The Dreadnought bore the same markings as Karulak and Molkis. Its time was short. Hours. Maybe less.

'Thus is the fate of the xenos!' the Dreadnought yelled. 'Thus shall fall the rage of Fulminos!'

When he fell, it was a world of pain, a great ocean of agony into which he was immersed.

He had been here before. He had suffered. He had been broken down in body more than once. The memories of that pain lanced up at him, needling through his mind like the fire searing through his limbs.

But he had risen again. He had not died. The pain had been overcome. Brother Molkis seized on to that fact and held it tight, using it as an anchor point to drag himself up. The pain resolved into concrete memories now, the shapes and sounds that had been there when he was last struck down this low.

He remembered the Kraken. The tyranids darkened the sky with their numbers above the peninsula of Devilin Reach. Hundreds of thousands of warrior-organisms had descended from the whale-like carrier beasts in low orbit. Among them, along with the bat-winged swarm organisms, were enormous cysts of chitin and bone. Where these impacted against the rock of the peninsula, massive war-organisms tore their way out, living siege engines bristling with symbiotic weapons. Molkis's squad found

themselves in the shadow of one such beast, a quadruped with massive shovel-like tusks that could have flipped over a tank and a pair of enormous scythes attached to its forelimbs. A swarm of acidic spores belched from the quivering sacs around its throat and bony tubes along its ridged back fired clusters of spines like mortars.

Molkis had ordered the charge. He was a sergeant, a veteran, and the Obsidian Glaives around him would follow him through the warp itself if he led the way. The beast roared as bolter fire ripped into it, ichor spurting from a hundred wounds. Molkis closed to drive the point of his chainblade into its eye as it lurched under the volley fire.

But it had been faster than him. Too fast for anything of that size. Its claw had scythed at him and even as he threw himself to the ground it punched through the ceramite of his abdomen and the intense chill of its edge slithered through his torso…

No. Molkis forced the memory down. That had not been what brought him here. That had been before, the last time he fell. The Kraken had laid him low, but he had survived and fought on.

The greenskin had tried to do the same as the Kraken. And like the tyranid war-organism, the orks had failed. They had buried him in a black pit of pain and left him there to die, but they did not know what he was. He was Molkis, a blade in the Emperor's hand, a son of Guilliman and guardian of Obstiria. He had suffered more by the hand of his own battle-brothers during his initiations than the malice of the orks could ever match. He could not die. He could not be broken. He was Molkis.

The darkness shifted. Molkis took the pain and balled it up into the hollow inside his chest, between his two hearts. He pushed against it as his feet pushed against the stones beneath him. Fragments of rubble trickled down past his face. The enormous weight above him shifted again and he took it on his shoulders, wrestling it further off him.

A crack of light opened up above him. He remembered where he was. Obstiria, his Chapter's home world. Penumbral Spike. The orks had breached the fortress and the Cathedral of Victory had fallen.

But Molkis had not fallen. The Obsidian Glaives had not. While one of them lived, the orks would have a war to fight for every rock and flagstone.

Molkis roared. He heaved in a mighty breath, pushing aside the

constricting rock. The slab on top of him slid away and he was free to reach up out of the pit. He found a handhold and dragged himself up through the shattered layers of the catacombs. Old bones and grave wrappings tumbled past. He hauled himself up out of the catacombs and into what remained of the cathedral.

Molkis almost wept. The cathedral had collapsed. Where the ceiling had been was now the raw rock of the Penumbral Spike. Only a few pieces of decorative carving and the crowns of a few false columns remained. The statue of Guilliman was gone, buried by the fallen stone that filled the chamber. At the end of the cathedral, where the statue had stood, a massive breach led to the exterior of the fortress and the cold wind whistled through.

The place stank of greenskins. The outstretched hand of an ork still poked between two fallen slabs of the ceiling. Molkis's sorrow was overtaken by disgust. Greenskin filth had broken into the Penumbral Spike through the cathedral. Even now they were rampaging through the Spike, seeking to kill his brothers and defile the heritage of his Chapter.

But at least one Obsidian Glaive lived. No matter what they had wrought already, the orks had not succeeded yet.

The pain still ran through Brother Molkis. He felt ungainly and ill-coordinated, as if many times his weight and controlling his body from afar. But that would not stop him from fighting. In one hand he held his bolter, for though he had been buried and left for dead an Obsidian Glaive was never unarmed. His other hand he would use empty if need be, to strike down and crush any greenskin who stood in his way.

He heard gunfire from above. His hearts leapt and he forgot the pain, for he was not alone. Other battle-brothers yet lived. And then a light descended from above, like a scene from a stained glass window depicting the prophecies of the end of time. Molkis heard the singing of a thousand choirs and caught the scent of heavy incense among the dust and smoke.

'The Time of Ending has come!' Molkis cried. 'The greenskins were the herald of the enemy. Obstiria shall be the battleground of eternity. And I am here to fight alongside you, my Emperor! Brother Molkis is here!'

As if in reply a voice bellowed from the heart of the Penumbral Spike, a voice that Molkis had never heard but seemed like that of his oldest friend.

'Thus shall fall the rage of Fulminos!'

In the night, the lower generatorium fell. Flamegut's ork pirates stormed the plasma generator chambers in their thousands. Keshuma's Ninth Company halted their advance with massive volleys of heavy weapons fire, but at the cost of the plasma generators themselves. Coolant ducts and containment vessels were ruptured by stray gunfire and the lower levels of the Spike, the dungeons and catacombs in the mountain's root, were flooded with liquid plasma. Thousands of orks were incinerated, but the automated defences that covered the upper slopes fell silent.

Flamegut's aerial corps emerged in locust-like waves from behind the mountains around the Spike. Ramshackle fighter-bombers dropped clusters of bombs on the battlements, blasting open cannon emplacements and gatehouses. Thousands more orks were dropped from carrier craft – for every one that found a foothold on the upper slopes another tumbled down to the valleys at the base of the Spike, but still an army of greenskins found purchase among the shattered defences. The airborne orks that had already taken the Obsidian Glaives' aircraft hangars joined with this new force to lay siege to the uppermost entrances. Among the eyries of the Penumbral Spike the Obsidian Glaives rallied around Chapter Master Midnias to lead the defence.

And Midnias brought with him the final weapon to be deployed from the Chapter's arsenal – the ancients of the vault, the Dreadnoughts, eleven of them storming onto the battlements in a tide of ruthless steel.

Brother Molkis passed through the path of chaos the orks had left. They had torn down the tapestries from the Quartermaster's Cloisters, which had depicted the fall of the Beast of Vengor to the Obsidian Glaives. They had ripped down the sculpted panels from the duelling hall that had shown scenes from the life of Roboute Guilliman. Chapter Master Erberan's greatsword had been cast down from its place on the altar of the Shrine of Ancestors. The ork had an instinctive sense of what was beautiful and sacred, even to another species, and an equally strong urge to destroy it.

Molkis felt the hatred stoked in his hearts. The sight of a fallen Obsidian Glaive made the fires leap. The battle-brother had been dragged down and butchered with cleaver blades. It must have taken the strength of dozens of greenskins to break open his ceramite armour. Another body lay at the foot of the staircase leading to the Dawn Bastion, this one riddled with gunfire.

Dead orks lay littered around, too, but not nearly enough to avenge the death of the warrior.

The sounds of war came from above. The Dawn Bastion housed one of the anti-aircraft batteries and led to the battlements around the upper slopes. If the orks gained a foothold there, the Obsidian Glaives would be fighting them from above and below. Molkis hurried up the stairs – he was still feeling the effect of his earlier ordeals, for he felt unbalanced as if he was in danger of toppling over with each step. Even his shadow, cast by a burning tapestry on the wall, seemed huge and misshapen.

Molkis reached the bastion. The cold irradiated winds of Obstiria whipped along the sheer black wall of the Penumbral Spike. The narrow battlement was spattered with greenskin blood. The wreck of an ork fighter craft was embedded a short distance down the battlement, belching smoke, surrounded with charred corpses. Hundreds of metres below the orks swarmed in their thousands, battering away at the impenetrable gateways into the lower levels or seething towards the breach points that had opened up in the siege.

Molkis picked out the sound of a chainblade through flesh. He rounded a corner and found a sight to counter the anger burning in his chest.

'Brother!' cried Lord Fulminos as he decapitated another ork pirate with a swing of his black glass sword. 'I fear we have slain the cream of the orkish filth already! But perhaps they can still spare you some sport!'

Molkis could not help but smile. 'Thank Guilliman I gave you a head start,' he said, 'for I fear you cannot keep up with this Glaive's tally!'

The heroes of the Chapter had returned.

Lord Fulminos led them, as was right, for he was the greatest warrior who had ever worn the glossy black colours of Obstiria. Fulminos was a master duellist who had sought out and faced in single combat every enemy champion who had ever stood opposite him on a battlefield. He was magnificent, his armour encrusted with ornamentation earned with hundreds of notable kills, his glassy sword a relic of the ages before the Heresy. Fulminos was handsome where a Space Marine was usually battle-scarred and ugly, with an aquiline nose, bright blue eyes and flowing hair. If a sculptor had created an icon for a fellow Space Marine to follow in battle, it would have looked like Lord Fulminos.

Brother Karulak, hero of Axian Ridge, hammered volleys from his thrice-

blessed storm bolter into the orks trying to scramble over the battlements beside him. Captain Hurlikan, who had suffered the torments of eldar pirates and escaped with the rest of the Chapter to burn their flagship, swept his broadsword through a gaggle of attacking orks and sliced three of them in two with a single blow.

A grimacing ork's face appeared over the battlement beside Molkis. He grabbed it with his free hand, and such was the fury in him that the skull cracked under his fingers. Molkis threw the body aside and blasted a volley of gunfire into another ork trying to get around Hurlikan with a demolition charge in hand. The ork was punched right through by the shot, body incinerated, the charred fragments carried away by the knifing wind.

Hurlikan saluted Molkis. Though the two had never met and their service as Obsidian Glaives were separated by two thousand years, they were battle-brothers by instinct.

Lord Vorkias, the Chapter Master crippled on board the space hulk *Icon of Debauchery*, speared a giant armoured ork through its chestplate with a thrust of his sword. Lukanas the Penitent, who had turned himself into a mass of scar tissue and scabs with self-inflicted punishments for every imagined sin, lay all about him with a barbed power-scourge. Molkis found himself back to back with Drekal the Martyr – Molkis himself, as a Scout newly elevated from the torments of selection, had witnessed Drekal fall single-handedly holding a mountain pass against a tribe of savage kroot. Now they fought together again.

Drekal's chainblade sawed through an ork at waist height. Molkis followed up with a crushing backhand blow that knocked a second ork over the parapet. His bolter blasted another apart as Drekal kicked away a ladder the greenskins were using to scale the battlements.

'Have you learned to fight yet, Molkis?' said Drekal in false mockery. 'Or are you still just a boy?'

Molkis saw the wounds of Drekal's fall were still on him, arrows and spears still stuck through the tears in his armour.

'Have you returned to your prime,' retorted Molkis with a laugh, 'or are you still just an old man?'

Across the battlement, Fulminos was already standing on a mound of the dead. Mangled orks were crushed beneath his feet as he thrust his sword to the sky. 'Blessed are we,' he cried, 'that we witness the Time of Ending!

Rejoice, for the prophecies have been fulfilled! Pity those who doubted, scorn those who fled! Now is the time to seize the joy of battle!'

The legends of the Obsidian Knights cheered. Drekal flicked the blood off his chainblade and across the fortress wall. 'May this battle never end,' he said with a blood-flecked grin.

Overhead, the roar of engines drowned out the sounds of combat. An enormous orkish vehicle, a carrier craft held aloft by an asymmetrical patchwork of blazing engines, flew above the battlements and crash-landed on the upper slopes. The ship's bow crumpled, spilling wreckage and flame. Hooked chains were thrown out to arrest its slide down the mountain and from a dozen ports along its sides leapt ork pirates. Molkis recognised their kind from the battle in the cathedral – they were the piratical warlord's own troops, deployed to turn a battle the greenskins knew they were losing.

The heroes of the Obsidian Glaives had retaken enough of the battlements for their battle-brothers to follow them out onto the slopes. Dozens of Obsidian Glaives in the livery of the Fourth, Sixth and Seventh Companies flooded out to meet the new ork attack. They looked on their Chapter's returned heroes as if in awe.

A great war cry went up among the greenskins swarming from their landing craft. Among them was Flamegut, the warlord Molkis had seen in the cathedral below. The orks rallied around him, for to them he was as potent a talisman to the orks as Fulminos and the other ancestors were to the Obsidian Glaives. Hundreds of orks had already amassed around the unstable upper slopes and were charging down at the Obsidian Glaives forming up on the battlements.

'Break them on the rock that is our Chapter!' yelled Fulminos.

'Every moment of mankind's suffering,' yelled Lukanas the Penitent, 'we now repay!'

Brother Gidnaron, his gilded armour surrounded in a blazing halo, unfurled the Standard of Obstiria for all to see. It was embroidered with threads taken from tapestries in the Imperial Palace burned during the Siege of Terra, and depicted Roboute Guilliman granting the lordship of Obstiria to the first Obsidian Glaives. Among the throng Molkis also picked out Reclusiarch Morvern the Grim, Assault-Captain Bayelor and the towering form of Dagguron the Brute, the tallest and broadest of all the

Obsidian Glaives, whose oversized armour was displayed in the Chapter armoury long after his fall at Urakan. Even Silias the Cunning was there, who though laid low by a lung-destroying disease had continued to create battle plans of unprecedented complexity for decades. Silias was returned to the glory of his youth, handsome and proud, in the polished silver and black of a Chapter champion.

Eleven great heroes, all returned. Did Molkis dare count himself the twelfth?

The orkish line hurtled towards the Obsidian Glaives. The Space Marines levelled bolters and opened fire. The front rank of orks were shredded, but the density of flesh and bone protected those behind them. The battle lines clashed, and the sound was as if thunder crashed around Penumbral Spike. Molkis followed Fulminos into the fray, and with every blow he crushed a skull, broke a spine or threw another foul greenskin off the battlements. But the weight of the ork assault forced the Obsidian Glaives back and the line bowed, threatening to break.

Gidnaron held the Standard of Obstiria high and a section of the Obsidian Glaives followed in its wake. Assault-Captain Bayelor led them. They hacked with chainsword and combat blade deep into the ork mass. Molkis saw where they were headed – for Flamegut himself.

If he fell, the orks would know the dismay that Molkis had felt to see Penumbral Spike invaded. They would feel more, for a Space Marine could cage such dire emotion and turn it into anger with which to crush his enemies. The orks would break.

Flamegut's elites formed up around him and battered back the Obsidian Glaives' attack. Bayelor vanished somewhere beneath the swarm of greenskin bodies. The Standard of Obstiria almost fell, but was snatched up by the other Obsidian Glaives. One, young and bold, broke free of the ork line and ran right at Warlord Flamegut.

Fulminos roared and redoubled his efforts in the heart of the battle. The battleline heaved back and forth as the orks surged and were pushed away. Molkis reaped a tally with his fist where he could not bring his gun to bear and, where there was room to fire, every shot blasted an ork apart as if his humble bolter were infused with his rage. Where an Obsidian Glaive fell, his battle-brothers avenged him tenfold.

The Glaive battling with Flamegut ducked a slice from the ork and kicked

out at the warlord's leg. Flamegut slumped to one knee and the furnace in his belly flared. A second later the ork vomited a belch of flame at the Glaive, who rolled to the side and sliced out with his power sword.

When Flamegut drew his arm back to land a kill-stroke, he stared dumbly at the stump of his wrist. His severed hand twitched on the rocks beneath it, still holding its cutlass.

The Obsidian Glaive followed up with a thrust to the throat. His power sword punched through muscle and spine, burning away the tough scarred flesh of the ork. The Glaive twisted the blade and the head flopped to one side, held onto the charred ruin of its neck by a strand of skin. The Glaive kicked the ork onto its back and finished the kill with a downward stab through the chest that shredded the ork's organs with the flash of the discharging power field.

A terrible cry of anguish rose up from the orks. Molkis saw the anger drain from them replaced with horror.

'Press on!' yelled Molkis. 'Drive them off this mountain!'

The Obsidian Glaives surged on, led by their returned heroes. The orks broke and fled but there was nowhere to go. They sought shelter in the smoking wreck of their landing ship as Fulminos led the charge right through their crumbling formation, butchering the greenskins in their hundreds. Molkis followed and crunched them underfoot as they scrambled to escape from him, as if they were smashed beneath the treads of a tank. Molkis's hearts swelled at the rising stink of orkish blood and the sight of corpses tumbling down the mountain past him.

The Obsidian Glaives advanced up the slope, firing as they went, dispatching the wounded orks with combat blade and chainsword. Fulminos paused by the Glaive who had killed Flamegut, and who was still kneeling exhausted beside the warlord's corpse.

'Good kill, young brother,' said Fulminos. 'What is your name?'

'Midnias,' came the reply.

Over the peak of the Penumbral Spike a new sun rose, a glare of white light that edged the mountain's hard rocks in silver. Through its light Molkis could make out a distant field, an endless plain with an infinite army arrayed for battle. They were armoured in gold and carried the standards of a thousand Space Marine Chapters. At their head stood the titanic gilded form of the Emperor, his face obscured by the intensity of

the light, ready to lead the charge that would win the final battle.

'Who will follow me?' called out Fulminos. The other returned heroes had joined him on the upper slope, on the threshold of the light. 'Brother Molkis! You have earned your place. Come, brother. He promises us a war that will never end. Will you answer his call?'

'Can I refuse,' replied Molkis with a smile, 'when there is a tally to be taken and brothers to humble?'

Molkis walked towards the eternal battlefield. Behind him, barely audible over the trumpets and war cries of the Emperor's host a single voice struggled to be heard.

'Remember!' it shouted. 'Remember!'

But it was just the last moment of doubt, the final test. Molkis walked off the Penumbral Spike and onto the battlefield at the end of time, to fight the battle that would end all battles.

Scout Desaan picked his way across the carnage of the battlefield. Orks lay dead in heaps, piled up against the battlements and gun housings where they had tumbled in the slaughter. With Flamegut's death they had broken and run, and the Obsidian Glaives had killed them with the efficiency and swiftness of Space Marines.

Desaan passed Brother Karulak's sarcophagus. It lay surrounded by crushed ork bodies, its armour plating covered in blood. The lifesign readings read critical – Desaan did not know enough about reading them to tell at a glance if the ancient Space Marine inside was alive or dead.

Twelve Dreadnoughts lay among the ork dead. Fulminos had made it almost to the peak ascent, before toppling at the furthest extent of the Obsidian Glaives' charge. The other Dreadnoughts had stood as living bastions in the battle until they too had fallen, each having reaped a massive tally of ork dead.

Desaan reached a knot of ork bodies where Chapter Master Midnias stood beside the fallen sarcophagus of Brother Molkis.

'I am sorry, my lord,' said Desaan. 'I tried to bring him back, but he did not listen. He did not remember.'

'None of them did,' said Midnias. 'Fulminos spoke to me as if I were a new recruit. Out here, without even the walls of the Spike to protect them, the degradation was faster than we expected.'

‘Does Molkis live?’ asked Desaan.

‘Barely,’ said Midnias. ‘Techmarine Javan can tell us whether he will ever fight again. We must take him back inside. Gather a detail of brothers to move him to the vault. Accompany him.’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said Desaan.

As the Obsidian Glaives began the process of salvaging the fallen Dreadnoughts, Captains Keshuma and Elhalil approached. Their companies had borne the brunt of the fighting on the battlements.

‘Lord Midnias,’ said Elhalil. ‘Your orders?’

Midnias looked across the black mountains towards the horizon.

‘This was a testing of our defences,’ said Midnias. ‘Flamegut was a lesser lord of these greenskins. Their true commander sacrificed him to learn how we fight. They will attack in their full force next. Your orders are to prepare for more.’

The captains followed Midnias’s gaze. There they saw a greater darkness gathering among the shadowed valleys. It fell from the sky and spread across the surface of Obstiria like a disease.

There would always be more orks. There would always be another battle.

BLACK GULCH

BEN COUNTER

The scars made it difficult every time. Chapter Master Midnias had donned his armour on the eves of hundreds of battles, but each time the pain reminded him of everything that had gone before. His back was a lattice of ribboned skin separated by ridges of gnarled scar tissue, and they cried out as if they were newly-made as he buckled the breastplate of his power armour. His shoulder pads chafed the raw flesh on his shoulders, and he felt a shiver of new, cold pain as the armour's interfaces slithered into the ports in the carapace under his skin.

He opened and closed his hands. It felt like his gauntlets were lined with spikes, for of all the punishments Midnias had endured, the worst had been to his hands.

This punishment, he told himself, we shall also endure.

'My lord,' said Scout-Captain Terundel. 'My outriders bring word of the greenskins on the move. They are heading right for our position.'

Midnias fastened the demi-cloak around his shoulder. 'Good,' he said. 'Their warlord could not hold them back forever. The most potent weapon against the ork is the nature of the ork himself.'

'The first count is seventy thousand,' continued Terundel. 'More are landing on the Belishar Flats. Two hundred thousand in number, marching as reinforcements.'

'Then we will have to see our warlord dead before they arrive,' said Midnias. 'Draw in the outriders and have them take their places in the line. We will need every gun here.'

'It will be done,' said Terundel. 'This we shall endure.'

'This we shall endure.' Midnias placed the Crown of Obstiria on his brow before he put on his helmet. The crown was a simple spiked band that

symbolised how Midnias was both the Chapter Master of the Obsidian Glaives and the Planetary Governor of Obstiria. Not that he ruled anything beyond his Chapter – the planet had seen off every attempt to settle it except for the Glaives themselves.

Midnias had chosen the shadow beneath an overhang of rock to spend the time before dawn, praying to the spirits of Guilliman, the Emperor and the ancestors of the Obsidian Glaives. It was not quite grand enough to be considered a cave and had afforded just enough shelter to hide him from the eyes of any orkish fighter craft that might pass overhead. He emerged from the overhang into the bleached irradiated light of Obstiria's sun.

The knot of rocky ridges and crevasses at the head of Black Gulch was treacherous terrain for anyone but a Space Marine. It was broken and trackless, enough to whittle away an army of normal men who marched across it. But four hundred Obsidian Glaives had set up their battle lines there, with bolters and heavy weapons covering the long dark throat of the gulch.

Black Gulch was a deep furrow in the surface of Obstiria, a long canyon carved by a glacier in ages past before the planet had drifted closer to its sun. An army marching across Obstiria, from the landing grounds on the high plains to the fortress of Penumbral Spike, would inevitably follow the path of the gulch. Its soldiers would drain into the gulch like water trickling down off the mountainsides around it, and when they came to the broken ground at the western end they would find themselves bottled in, the front ranks struggling across the terrain as the rear ranks bunched forwards into a formless scrum.

That was the plan.

Midnias answered the salutes of the Obsidian Glaives on the way to the front line. With the losses at Penumbral Spike, including Captain Seharra, the structure of the Chapter had been compromised and battle-brothers from various companies were set up in fire teams together. Devastator--Captain Keshuma was positioned ahead, lying on his front as he scanned the landscape of the gulch.

'I can smell them from here,' said Keshuma.

'Can you see it?' asked Midnias.

'It's in the heart of them,' replied Keshuma. 'It's got plenty of xenos flesh in front of it. But to these eyes it's hard to miss.'

Midnias clambered onto the rock beside Keshuma. The captain hadn't been exaggerating. The radioactive breeze carried on it the stench of alien sweat and blood. It carried the sound of the xenos too, rhythmic chanting and the churning of throaty engines.

Black Gulch was full of orks. The mass of green-skinned bodies stretched from one side of the valley to the other, a kilometre and a half of seething, furious xenos killers. For as far as the gulch ran, winding across the jagged mountain ranges back to the flats, it flowed like a green river. Obstiria's radiation didn't seem to affect the orks at all. They were difficult to kill.

Difficult, but definitely not impossible.

Midnias could pick out the foremost bull-orks. The largest and most brutal of their kind, they had shouldered their way to the front to reach the battle first. They wore the colours and symbols of many tribes – a gouged eye, a clenched fist, a rack of horns, several variations on a skull. Once they had probably been at war with one another on whatever world spawned them. Now they were united and fought as one, most on foot, some from the crudely looted and adapted Imperial tanks that ground along in the middle of the horde.

They were firing off their guns in celebration of the battle to come. Most orks sought to kill up close but they loved the noise and devastation of gunfire too, and the more powerful of them sported enormous multi-barrelled cannons that competed in the shows of fire and noise they made.

It was a horde with no discipline or plan, funnelled inevitably down Black Gulch towards the Obsidian Glaives position. It could no more turn back the way it had come than take flight to soar over the mountains.

'It's working, so far,' said Keshuma. 'We'll only fight a thousand of them at once instead of a hundred thousand.'

'Even so,' said Midnias, 'this is not a storm we can weather. *It* must die. That is the only way.'

'There,' said Keshuma, pointing.

Midnias saw it. It towered over the horde, wearing armour that looked like it had been nailed onto its frame: an ork of immense size, its face a mass of scars and its bare bloody fists wrapped with spiked chains. Its brutal skull was crowned with horns, but Midnias could not tell if they were a natural growth or if they, too, had been bolted onto the ork's skeleton. Its armour was festooned with captured prizes. Whole corpses of

Imperial Navy crewmen hung from wooden gibbets fixed to its shoulders. Dozens of skulls rattled on its chest. It was a walking monument to the hatefulness and fury of the ork.

Grukk. The greenskins called it Grukk. It was the lord of an army that had come to the Sanctus Reach to despoil everything in its way, an army that had to go through the Obsidian Glaives first.

But it was also the horde's greatest weakness. Grukk's underling, Flamegut, had fallen to Midnias at Penumbral Spike, and the orks besieging the fortress had broken. With Grukk's death this horde, too, would fall apart. If Obstiria was to stand, Grukk had to die, and again it would be Midnias who killed it.

'Lord Midnias! *Darkest Hour* here.' Midnias recognised the voice of Captain Draegan of the Second Company, and the vox-echoes that told him the message was coming from the void far above. 'We are in position in low orbit. Ready to deploy at your mark.'

Midnias glanced upwards. Against the blue-white sky he could make out a dark splinter. 'Then stand by,' said Midnias. He switched vox-nets. 'Chosen brethren! To me! The battle is too long awaited.'

The Obsidian Glaives that Midnias had chosen joined him at the front. One of them buckled a jump pack onto Midnias's back. They included members of Squads Benilar, Voken and Gaerdigan, assault units whose sergeants had been lost in the fighting at Penumbral Spike. It was a tradition among many Chapters for battle-brothers who had lost their leaders to form the forlorn hope, the first assault through the breach. Midnias was their squad leader now.

'Ready?' asked Midnias.

The assembled Obsidian Glaives saluted. There were eighteen of them in the markings of three different companies. None of them said anything. There was no need to.

'Your objective is the alien known as Grukk,' said Midnias. 'With its death, the greenskins fall. Have faith that your brethren will be at your side, but fight as if you fight alone. Keshuma, cover us! Elhalil, ready the charge! Chosen brethren, with me!'

Midnias stepped forwards. Below, the greenskins let up a cry to see the first Obsidian Glaive standing in their way. They were close enough for Midnias to see the blood-flecked anger in their eyes.

Midnias leapt off the edge. He activated the jets of his jump pack and his fall was arrested, the momentum switched forward. He hurtled down Black Gulch over the heads of the foremost greenskins. Eighteen Obsidian Glaives were right behind him, the sound of their jump packs like the air itself being torn apart.

The jump pack would take him far, but not all the way to Grukk. Midnias and his brethren would come down in the middle of the horde. Before Grukk was to fall, there were a great many greenskins to kill.

It could be strange, the thoughts that came to a mind in the most extreme of circumstances. Even with the sleep-taught discipline of a Space Marine, even with the experience of a Chapter Master, Midnias still had a part of him that was very much human.

The heat of the jump pack jets behind him was like a slab of hot metal against his back, very much like that of a cramped, stifling cell in the belly of a spacecraft. The brig was next to one of the reactor housings to keep it swelteringly hot. The prisoners kept there would sweat out all their defiance, so when it came to interrogation and sentencing they would admit to any evil in exchange for a glass of water.

It was Midnias's first memory. Some Space Marines retained nothing at all of their lives before their recruitment, as sleep-doctrination tended to force out previous memories to be replaced with battle-lore and tracts of the Codex Astartes. Midnias remembered the cell where he had been imprisoned, the prayers of admonition and penance inscribed on the steel walls and the hourly sermons from the brig chaplain. He remembered the manacles on his wrists, ankles and throat.

His name had not been Midnias then. It did not matter what it was.

A dark shape had stood in front of the cell door. Midnias was amazed at its size. It seemed too big to fit into the cell block corridor. It wore massive glossy black armour trimmed with white, the image of crossed swords on one shoulder pad. Its helmet had a faceplate in the shape of a skull. The sockets were set with green lenses and the teeth were picked out in silver. It wore a black half-cloak and around its waist were buckled the implements of a priest – books, an hourglass, prayer beads and ritual silver knives.

'You are punished,' said the armoured giant. It had a low, metallic grind

of a voice.

Midnias looked up at the apparition, but there was no expression to read from the skull. Perhaps this was some strange shipboard tradition. Perhaps this was his executioner, dressed up like a horror from a child's cautionary tale. Whatever it was, answering it could hardly put him in any worse a spot.

'Executed,' Midnias said. His throat was raw and hoarse.

'Are you punished enough?'

Midnias smiled. Cracked lips pulled back over broken teeth. 'For what I have done?' he said. 'No.'

'What if you could be punished?' said the giant. 'Not killed here, but to live an entire life of punishment. Not pain, for pain can be adapted to and ignored, but a punishment of service that will never end. Even at your death it will not be finished. A true punishment as befits your crime against the Imperium of Man. What would your answer be?'

'My answer would be, if you have the guts to imagine a worthy punishment then I have the guts to take it on.'

'You see a challenge, then? That is interesting. Perhaps if we grind you down and break you, we can rebuild you into something worthy. Something to stand among the heroes of the Imperium. Perhaps you can be a Space Marine.'

Midnias looked up at the dark shape, squinting in the half-light to make out the details of the ornate armour. 'A what?'

In the press of greenskin flesh it seemed Obstiria was gone, replaced by an endless, hellish plane of ork bodies stretching out forever.

Midnias hacked left and right with his power sword. Flesh parted and more orks poured through. The air was thick with the stink of their blood. Around him the battle-brothers he had chosen to join him fought to keep up. Some of them had already been left behind in the charge, bogged down fighting the orks who sought to swamp and butcher them with cleavers and jagged blades.

'To me!' he yelled into the vox as he mounted a low rise and cleared the orks from around him with a wide two-handed sweep of his sword. 'Form up! We strike as one or we strike not at all!'

The Obsidian Blades struggled towards him. Behind them, up on the

ridge, Captains Keshuma and Elhalil led the battle-line in firing volley after volley into the orks, forcing them back down the gulch and turning the ork advance into a brutal scrum. Grukk could not manoeuvre out of Black Gulch now, not with the entire army backed up around it. It was as vulnerable as a creature like it could be.

Midnias grabbed an Obsidian Glaive's hand and hauled him out of the melee. The battle-brother was slick with ork blood. His armour was nicked and scored all over by cleaver blows he had turned aside and his chainblade was almost clogged with stringy ork flesh.

The Obsidian Glaive's faceplate turned to the sky. Midnias allowed himself a glance upwards.

'It's the *Darkest Hour*,' he voxed. 'Our brethren have arrived. Onward, sons of Obstiria! While the horde fights a dozen battles at once, we shall win victory in ours!'

The other Obsidian Glaives were reaching Midnias's position. Most of them had made it this far. All of them were covered head to toe in gore. All of them had enough fight left in them for the final stretch.

The orks would be busy facing the new threats raining down on them from above. Midnias had to strike now. There would never be another chance to save his Chapter.

He opened up the exhausts on his jump pack. Blue-white flame roared behind him.

'Charge!' he ordered. As one, his chosen Obsidian Glaives rocketed into the air, making another leap across the horde towards Grukk.

As the rise receded below him, a strange thought caught light in a corner of Midnias's mind. He had been here before.

Black Gulch was one of the few routes by foot into the foothills around Penumbral Spike – a bleak and brutal path, but one that a Space Marine could weather. For someone without the augmentations of an Obsidian Glaive, or whose augmentations had not yet begun to fully function, it was little better than a death sentence.

Midnias had walked it in the night when the radiation was less severe. Even so it had covered his back, shoulders and newly-shaven scalp with burns that wept and cracked as dawn rose over the mountains.

There was barely any shelter down there. If a recruit did not find shade

from the radioactive sun, he would die. It was that simple. The Obsidian Glaives did not welcome new recruits who were willing to lie down on the scalding rocks and accept their death.

Midnias shielded his eyes from the early morning rays. He had stumbled almost unthinkingly through the night and only now stopped to take proper stock of his surroundings. The knife-sharp ridges up either side of the gulch were out of the question – even if there was a cave or an overhang up there he would be dead before he reached it. A short stumble away was a rise in the ground, and perhaps on the other side there would be enough of a hollow for him to crawl into and wait out the day.

His feet left bloody footprints as he walked to the rise. He rounded it to see that the stone overhung enough for a man to roll under it and, perhaps, escape the sun. He could tell this because there was already a man there.

Another recruit. Midnias had known he was not alone on this pilgrimage from the flats to the Penumbral Spike, but this was the first fellow he had seen since he had crawled blindly into the glare of the sun upon being dropped from a gunship. Both men had been dropped onto the flats with orders to reach Penumbral Spike, a test that had to be passed before he could call the Obsidian Glaives his brothers and walk amongst them as a Space Marine.

There was not enough room in the hollow for both of them.

Midnias caught his heart before it sank.

He crouched beside the hollow. The recruit noticed him and the two looked at one another. The other recruit – Midnias had never seen him before – was as fit and muscular as Midnias himself, his body just starting to adapt to the new organs promoting bone and muscle growth. His shoulder and face were burned maroon with the sun's glare. He wore nothing but a loincloth. In all respects he looked just like Midnias himself must have done.

Midnias grabbed the other recruit's arm and dragged him out of the hollow. The recruit wrapped an arm around Midnias's neck and forced his chin down to his chest, trying to cut off his air and throttle him. Midnias kneed the recruit in the groin and pushed him back against the lip of rock. The recruit hit hard and his grip relaxed. Midnias wrenched his head out and drove an elbow into the recruit's shoulder.

Bone broke. The recruit sagged. Midnias only had a second. He grabbed

the wrist of the wounded arm and twisted it around. The recruit cried out as the broken shoulder bones were torn out of place. Midnias spun on a heel and threw the recruit over his shoulder.

The recruit fought back. He was staring up at death twofold – Midnias, and the burning sky above. He kicked out at Midnias's leg and it buckled. Midnias fell on top of the other recruit and they wrestled on the rocks.

Midnias forced an arm free and drove the heel of his hand into the recruit's jaw. He felt his bones break. Ripples of pain and numbness ran up his arm. He found his footing and lifted the recruit off the ground, slamming him again into the rock. The recruit growled as he held on and Midnias hit him again, again, until both hands were unfeeling clubs of bloodied bone.

It was only when Midnias smelled his own skin burning in the rising sun that he paused. The recruit did not move. His face was split open and gushing blood. If he was not dead, he would be soon.

'We are here for punishment,' said Midnias through cracked lips. 'Yours is over. The next I shall endure.'

He crawled on his belly into the fold of rock. The shade was barely any relief at all, but the sizzling from his burned back stopped.

Midnias's life from now on was punishment. The other recruit had deserved only death. Midnias deserved more.

The battle-brothers from the *Darkest Hour* hammered into the orkish lines. Where their drop pods landed, great plumes of pulverised rock and ork bodies were flung into the air. Some pods split open to reveal deathwind missile launchers and hurricane bolters blasting fire at everything that moved around them. Most, however, carried Obsidian Glaives.

These battle-brothers had been too late to fight in the siege of their fortress. They owed the greenskins death.

Midnias was just able to see the ripple of the drop pods' impact running right across Black Gulch before he landed again. He had aimed his last jump at a patch of blood-streaked rock momentarily free of orks. He landed running, impaling the nearest ork with his blade. His fellow Obsidian Glaives landed a moment later.

'There!' cried Midnias. 'The warlord! We are nearly there, my brethren!'

Warlord Grukk had leapt into the fray as the battle-brothers from the

Darkest Hour made landfall. A drop pod had slammed into the gulch a short run from the xenos leader. Grukk threw other greenskins aside to get at it. The pod was the size of a tank with grav-dampened restraints inside to hold a full squad of ten Space Marines. Grukk leered bloodily as it reached the drop pod before its explosive bolts fired to split it open. The warlord clambered on top and wrenched one of the steel plates aside.

Midnias sprinted into the wall of orks between him and the warlord. The mass of flesh gave but did not break. He threw one ork aside even as he cut another clean in two. Cleavers hacked at him – he caught one on a shoulder guard, spun in place and drove a reverse thrust into the belly of the alien trying to kill him.

Grukk laughed. He reached into the drop pod and ripped out a handful of mangled ceramite and flesh. Bolter fire stuttered up at him from inside but the impacts didn't seem to register on the enormous ork. It roared in anger and delight and crammed a handful of Obsidian Glaive into its mouth. It tore another side off the drop pod and dived into the battle-brothers inside. It ripped at them in a fury, its claws throwing chunks of armour and meat into the air as the other greenskins cheered.

There was no room in Midnias's mind for anything but hatred. For an alien to kill an Obsidian Glaive was an obscenity. For it to do so as sport, with thousands of other xenos cheering it on, was blasphemy.

And it was a failure. Every Obsidian Glaive who fell was a crime laid at Midnias's door. As Chapter Master it was his responsibility and he would be punished. But the ork would be punished first.

Midnias left the other Obsidian Glaives behind as he roared through the orks. He swung his blade two-handed, ignoring the blows that came his way. Grukk tore out another handful of broken limbs as Midnias rose on a rampart of butchered orks to reach level with the top of the drop pod.

Grukk clambered out, spattered with the gore of ten dead Obsidian Glaives. It turned greedy eyes on Midnias and pointed a talon at him.

'Are we but sport to you?' demanded Midnias, not caring if Grukk understood his words. 'Then take this prize, alien! Wear this corpse on your armour! But cut me down first!'

Grukk bellowed a war cry in the orkish tongue. The other orks nearby cowered back, for Grukk had marked out Midnias as his to kill alone.

A punishment would be meted out here. The Emperor alone knew which

one would suffer it.

Midnias ran right at the towering ork. The ork charged, horns down like a bull. In the heart of the swirling bloodshed of Black Gulch, they collided.

Every drop of shed blood was a failure. That counted no matter which Obsidian Glaive shed it, from a newly-inducted scout to one an ancient with a thousand years of battle experience. But some, when they fell, put a greater stain on those responsible than others.

It had been thirty years before, when Midnias fought in the Chapter's First Company, that he last walked the labyrinth of passes and gulches that led to the foothills of Penumbral Spike. Three other brothers of the First Company walked alongside him, their armour stripped off, as they carried their burden on their shoulders.

'I should have taken the bullet myself,' said one, Brother Varas.

'I should have warned him,' said Brother Madrilar. He walked with a limp, as a stray round in the battle for the Hargraven Basilica had hit him in the meat of the thigh.

'His wounds were too grave,' said Brother Kess, the First Company's Apothecary. 'There was more shrapnel than I thought. I should have saved him.

'I killed the traitor who took the shot,' said Midnias. 'But I was a second too late.'

Ahead of them, the peak of Penumbral Spike broke through among the mountain peaks. A flock of predatory birds circled the peak as if waiting for the four penitents. The sun was directly overhead, baking the rocks with radiation.

'It is noon,' said Varas. 'Set down your burden and pray.'

The four Obsidian Glaives set down the litter they were carrying. It was covered in a black silken shroud. Midnias flexed his hands – even now, after so many years, he felt the pain of the fingers he had broken when he had killed the other recruit. Every time the ghost of that pain rose in his hands he remembered what he had done to survive, and every one of his failings since then.

The burden he helped carry was one such failure. Perhaps the greatest.

Midnias pulled back the corner of the shroud. It revealed the scarred face of Chapter Master Lukal who, until the Battle for Hargraven Basilica, had

led the Obsidian Glaives. He had died there, and the four battle-brothers who carried his corpse to Penumbral Spike had condemned themselves as most responsible.

'We will see you to the vaults, my lord,' said Midnias. 'We will hold vigil at your tomb. This too we shall endure.'

'This too we shall endure,' said the other Obsidian Glaives.

Midnias drew the shroud back over Lukal's face.

'They say,' said Varas, 'that you will one day wear the Crown of Obstiria, Brother Midnias.'

'Me?' asked Midnias.

'I was one of Lukal's honour guard,' said Varas, 'and most Chapter Masters once served there. But I am too impulsive to lead my brothers, and no other among us is suitable. A new Chapter Master will probably be appointed from among the company captains, but is any of them a strategist or inspiration as Lukal was? No, they will merely serve until one more able is found. It is said that with time, that may be you, Midnias. You will one day be Chapter Master, if your potential is realised and fate spares you death until then.'

Midnias looked from the shrouded corpse to Penumbral Spike. The fortress was still distant. It was a long and gruelling walk.

'Then my punishment has only just begun,' he said.

Midnias's sword arced down in a blur, its edge aimed for Grukk's neck.

The ork turned at the last split-second and the blade hacked deep into the meat of its shoulder. The power field ripped through muscle and bone but the ork was so massive the wound was not mortal.

Grukk grinned, its tiny red eyes glimmering. The foulness of rotting meat and old blood washed over Midnias. Midnias wrenched the blade free and drew it back for another strike. If he caught Grukk's neck he could take the warlord's head off. If he struck the same place he might cut through an organ the greenskin could not live without.

Grukk dropped to one knee and raised a massive fist. It caught the blade in its hand. The edge sliced deep through its palm and into its forearm but the ork registered no pain – it just laughed as Midnias fought to wrench the blade out of the bone.

Grukk's other fist pistoned up in a massive uppercut that slammed into

Midnias's chest and face.

Blackness spun around Midnias's head. All the old pains ghosted up through his body – the burns across his back, the bullet and blade wounds across his chest, the surgical scars all over his body. His hands hurt worst of all, as if they were full of needles or immersed in scalding water.

He took the pain and held on to it. The pain meant he was not dead. No, he was still to be punished for his crimes and his failings. He forced a hand beneath him and pushed himself up.

Midnias's helmet had been torn from his head. The Crown of Obstiria lay on the stone beside him.

Grukk wrapped a massive hand around Midnias's body, pinning his arms to his sides. The ork's mouth yawned open, revealing rows of gory fangs leading to a hungry black throat.

It could be absurd, the thoughts that came to even a Space Marine, even a Chapter Master, in times of crisis. Midnias was back in the cell again, before he had ever met the Chaplain who recruited him into the Obsidian Glaives. This time he was looking at himself as if he was hovering in the corner of the cell, and saw not a Space Marine but a scrawny, filthy criminal, the lowest of the dregs who plagued that spaceship's crew. Nothing but a condemned man, waiting for a well-deserved bullet in the back of the head in punishment for…

For what?

Midnias no longer remembered what he had done to be put in that cell. It was the crime that had led to him becoming an Obsidian Glaive, and suffering the endless punishment that was the Emperor's gift to that Chapter. Yet he did not remember what he had done.

As Midnias's head was forced down into Grukk's maw, he tried to draw out some flicker of memory about his crime.

The mouth closed. Fangs bored through the back of his neck and up through his jaw into his skull.

To deserve a death like this, thought Midnias, to have served so unflinchingly and yet to be a trophy kill for an alien, he must have done something terrible indeed.

Grukk's jaws closed, and Midnias's execution was carried out at last.

THE FALL OF HIVE JENSEN

JOSH REYNOLDS

Defensive Emplacement Dornmeyer, *Hive Morn*

The orks spilled through the ruptures in the outer shell of the hive like blood from a gaping wound. A raucous cacophony split the smoky air, duelling with the shriek of engines and the stolid thump of the internal defensive batteries as they were winched down by the emplacement servitors to fire at the horde that rapidly filled the outer hab-ring of Hive Morn.

The shell of the hive shuddered again as the ork machines outside on the dead dusty plain emptied their weaponry into it. The vibration of the constant barrage sounded like distant thunder, but grew louder when one of the great plates of metal, forged and fitted in centuries past and hundreds of metres across in width, was torn from the shell of the hive and punched inwards to fall down into the hive like a man-made comet. Buildings were obliterated in its descent, and orks and humans both vanished in its shadow. When it hit, the ground shook, and cracks crawled upwards along the foundations of the defensive batteries. A cloud of smoke and dust spread outwards from the point of impact like a choking, opaque wave.

Ghul Jensen, twenty-fourth to bear the name, twenty-fifth to rule the world for which he was named, drew his chainsword and thumbed the activator switch as the dust cloud rolled over the emplacement wall and enveloped him. Everything went dark for a moment before the internal systems of his artificer armour, forged for the first to bear his name, acted to compensate. The armour was a thing of unique artistry, crafted by the servants of the Machine-God. It was not quite up to the standards of the

power armour worn by the Emperor's truest servants, but it was better than nothing. Targeting readouts scrolled across the eyepieces of the grotesque war-mask he wore, and he could feel the ancient pneumatic systems wheeze to life, tightening and hissing as he readied himself. He glanced about, checking that the defences were shipshape, one last time.

Hive Morn, like all of the hives of Ghul Jensen, was arranged in a series of ascending, ever-contracting hab-rings, protected by internal emplacements which marked the demarcation line between the outer and inner ring. Great, reinforced bridges marked the circumference of each emplacement, connecting the upper to the lower. At a single word of command, he could order the bridges destroyed, isolating each hab-ring as necessary. The thought evoked a momentary sense of nausea in him. The bridges were ancient, as were the hab-rings themselves, the work of generations now lost to history. He wasn't entirely sure that they could be replaced once lost. He hoped it wouldn't come to that, but he knew, with a growing sense of dreadful certainty, that such a hope was in vain.

Outside, the last of the outer defensive batteries had fallen silent. There were orks on the outer shell now, as well as beneath it. Bodies fell like rain from far, far above as the orks assaulted the shell batteries and sent their brave, doomed crews hurtling down into the depths of the hive they had fought to defend. The orks below were ravaging the destitute slums that marked the narrow circle between the lowest hab-ring and the hive shell. Jensen could hear the raw thunder of thousands of screams echoing up from the shanty-city that grew in the hive's roots, and he closed his eyes, whispering a prayer for forgiveness. When he opened them, he looked around.

The defence forces of Hive Morn were clad in the char-grey livery of the noble house that bore the hive's name. Despite the chaos of the ork attack and the destruction being wrought on their home, they remained steady, checking their weapons and readying themselves for the assault to come. Hive Morn was the closest to the ork dropsites, and the first in their path. If they couldn't hold the orks here, the other hives would be in danger.

But he wouldn't let that happen.

He turned to make sure that his wives were nearby. Fifteen women clad in form-fitting, black, gilt-edged carapace armour beneath flowing robes of silk, stood ready to fight beside him. The daughters of the fifteen noble

families of the world of Ghul Jensen, pledged to him in political courtship, as was tradition. The House of Jensen ruled Ghul Jensen, though the other fifteen families had their say, through the mouths of their daughters. One of them would become his Consort, and provide an heir to the gubernatorial throne, but until that moment, they served as bodyguards and advisors.

Each woman wore the colours of her hive of origin, and they carried a variety of weapons – Sasha swung her crackling power maul in a lazy arc, Beatrix cocked one of the dozen stub pistols holstered about her person, the others hefted their axes, swords, glaives, lasguns and other, more esoteric weapons.

The emplacement trembled beneath his feet. The cloud was thinning, and he could hear the rumble of hundreds of feet on the rockcrete below. The emplacement had sheer walls, but that wouldn't prove much of an obstacle for the orks. He drew his ornate laspistol from the holster on his hip and readied it. Beatrix caught his eye, and was about to speak, when the sound of ork engines filled the immediate area, echoing around them. A spatter of gunfire erupted from the defenders, forcing them to seek cover.

The orks wore crude rockets strapped to their backs, and they corkscrewed through the smoke on tails of flame. Some didn't reach their target, either flying too low and slamming into the emplacement or else going too high and hurtling off towards some unknown point, their frustrated cries trailing after them. But most made it. They landed awkwardly, but they landed and set to with an enthusiasm that was terrible to behold up close. Men died without firing a shot, so quick was the attack.

Great crude blades rose and fell as the butchery commenced, and primitive firearms belched and thundered. To their credit, the soldiers of Hive Morn recovered quickly, but Jensen could see that they had already lost the advantage. They outnumbered the orks ten to one, but it would take them precious minutes to put that advantage to use. By then, they would be the ones outnumbered, as the rest of the greenskin assault reached the emplacement, and clambered up the dusty slope to reach the bottom of the wall.

Jensen traded blows with a muscular ork clad in fatigues reeking of oil and blood. It gabbled at him in its savage tongue, taunting him. He lurched forward and the serrated brow of his helmet struck the ork's head, tearing

it open. The ork reeled, and Jensen opened its belly with a flick of his blade. Nearby, an emplacement exploded, and he cursed himself as he realised the true purpose of the assault. The rocket-orks had come to silence the guns that were preventing their comrades from pressing the assault.

Beatrix screamed, and he whipped around to see her stagger back, clutching her abdomen as she emptied her pistol into an ork's leering face. Blood spattered the ground at her feet, and he felt his heart lurch. The ork she'd shot fell, but there were dozens more cresting the wall. One of the other women caught Beatrix and pulled her back out of the line of fire as she emptied a second pistol. Sasha caught an ork beneath its jutting chin with her maul and sent it flying head over feet backwards and off the emplacement. Blades stabbed and guns roared, but the green tide crested the wall again and again.

'Fall back,' Jensen roared, hacking down the next ork over the wall. The defence forces began to retreat with disciplined alacrity, firing as they went. Jensen fired his laspistol, killing an ork who'd been about to brain a soldier. His chainsword growled as it bit through alien muscle and bone, and he booted one of the aliens in the face, sending it toppling backwards even as it crested the emplacement. He caught Sasha's eye and jerked his head. 'You as well,' he said. 'Fall back to the next emplacement.'

'And what are you planning to do?' she demanded.

'I am planning to show our guests the full width and breadth of Hive Jensen hospitality,' he said, trying to sound confident. The emplacement shuddered as the gun turrets mounted on the next emplacement began to fire down from the slope of the hive's core. Soon enough, this entire hab-ring would be nothing but pulverised ruins and mounds of corpses – mostly green ones, he hoped. 'Go, Sasha. I'll cover your retreat.'

'But–'

'Begin the evacuation procedures – civilians first. We'll need to hold the orks here as long as possible, so that the other hives can prepare their defences,' he said, steamrollering over her objections. He was hereditary-governor. It was his job – his duty – to see to the defence of his people, and he would not be the first Ghul Jensen to fail in that task. He hesitated, and then said, 'Make sure Beatrix is on the first transport.'

He saw Sasha's eyes widen, and he thought that she was about to argue

with him, when something struck him, ripping the air from his lungs and sending him flying backwards. As he fell, he saw that the section of the emplacement he'd been on had disintegrated, struck by ork artillery fire. He hit the ground hard, and only the durability of his armour saved him from being pulverised on impact. Through the rain of debris, he thought he saw Sasha and the others falling back, and he allowed himself a moment of relief, before he tried to push himself to his feet.

The servos in his armour whined and protested, clogged with dust or damaged in the explosion. He fell onto his side, and tried to roll over. He saw shadows approaching through the smoke. He'd lost his weapons save for the poniard sheathed on his hip, but it was less a weapon than a family heirloom. Nonetheless, he clawed awkwardly for it as three orks charged towards him. *Stupid way to die,* he thought.

A blur of white and green interjected itself between the closest ork and its prey. Jensen rolled onto his back, his armour whining in protest. A man, Jensen saw, clad in green and white silks and carapace armour made from overlapping scales of bronze-hued ceramite, his head covered by a heavy conical helmet surmounted by a spike, with a visor covered in a curling script that had been etched into the metal.

The warrior chopped through the ork's wrist with the curved blade he carried in one hand. The ork, undeterred, roared and drove a fist into its foe's helmet. The warrior staggered, but slashed out, opening the ork's throat to the bone. The xenos slumped. The warrior lifted the autogun that dangled below his arm on a sling and fired two precise shots, dispatching the other orks. He turned and looked down at Jensen. 'Hereditary-Governor Ghul Jensen the Twenty-Fourth,' he said. His voice was tinged with an accent that Jensen didn't recognise. His armour was scorched and stained in places, and liberally festooned with spare ammunition pouches and grenades.

'I–I am he,' Jensen said.

'It wasn't a question,' the other man said. 'Up, hereditary-governor,' he continued, reaching down to clasp Jensen's forearm in a surprisingly gentle grip. 'This is no time for lying about.' The warrior cocked his head, as if waiting. Jensen stared up at him, uncertain of how he was supposed to respond.

'You should laugh. He was joking,' a new voice cut in. Jensen turned and

saw a bald, scarred man in a heavy fur coat stalk towards them. He felt a thrill of revulsion cut through him as he recognised the markings on the man's hairless scalp as the brands of the Inquisition and the Adeptus Astra Telepathica. 'Big one for jokes, is our Ismail. The veritable physical embodiment of farce on this misbegotten plane of existence. Pardon me, some of us have work to do,' the psyker continued, striding past the governor and the warrior, his fur coat flapping about his lean frame. Blue lightning crackled about his head like an elemental crown, and he shoved his hands out, letting the sleeves of his coat slip down to his elbows.

More orks thrust themselves through the gap in the emplacement. They came in a rush, bellowing brute war songs. The psyker interlaced his fingers and cracked them. 'Boil, burn and burst, little rage beasts,' he said, clenching his fists.

The howls of the charging orks were cut short as their skulls exploded one by one. The bodies tumbled into heaps about the bald man and he grimaced in distaste as he scraped steaming lumps of green matter from his coat. 'I hate when they do that,' he said, looking at Jensen. 'My name is Harks, by the by. Not that you asked. Not that anyone ever asks.'

'We have acquired the hereditary-governor,' Ismail murmured, and Jensen heard the vox-link in his own helmet crackle as someone replied. 'Understood. Falling back,' the warrior said. He lifted his autogun and checked the ammunition clip. 'Harks, escort the hereditary-governor to the next emplacement. I will dissuade any pursuit.'

'Just don't get killed, Ismail,' Harks snapped. 'You know how Mazarin feels about replacing his tools.' The warrior's only reply was the roar of his autogun, as he fired off a burst into the smoke billowing through the shattered emplacement.

Harks caught his arm. 'Come on, your governorship. Leave the Tallarn to his fun. The inquisitor would like to see you.' The psyker grinned unpleasantly as Jensen tore his arm loose from his grip. His teeth were black and shiny, like polished chips of obsidian. 'It's not polite, rescheduling without prior notice. No one likes that.'

'I could care less what you like,' Jensen spat. But he followed the psyker nevertheless, the dull, echoing boom of Ismail's weapon following him the entire way.

Defensive Emplacement Horabin, Hive Morn

Jensen flexed his hand as his servants cleaned the clogged servos of his armour with holy unguents and sacred oils. They scurried about him as he stood in the command bunker of the second of Hive Morn's defensive emplacements. Outside, the orks were already assaulting the walls, and the air was heavy with the stink of weapons fire. Jensen longed to be out on the walls, fighting beside his people, but there were long-delayed courtesies to at last be observed.

Inquisitor Emilio Mazarin of the Ordo Xenos had arrived not long before the orks, bearing word of the destruction of Obstiria and the Space Marines of the Obsidian Glaives and wanting to meet with the hereditary-governor. Jensen had avoided the inquisitor with all due tact, hurrying to the front, leaving Mazarin to enjoy the hospitality of Hive Jensen. Mazarin, it seemed, was not content to do so. The inquisitor had followed him into the warzone, and not unaccompanied.

There were two others in Mazarin's retinue besides the Tallarn and the psyker. One was a thickly-built soldier, clad in faded, colourless fatigues, carapace armour and a full-face helmet in the shape of an eagle's head. He cradled a combat shotgun in the crook of one bare, scarred arm, and idly tapped blunt fingers against the intricately carved stock. The other was a woman, wearing a vibrant red coat embroidered with the sigils of the Adeptus Mechanicus. She was slim and pretty, in an artificial way, with skin that was too perfect to be natural, and eyes that were too clear to be the ones she had been born with. Her pale fingers tapped against the hilts of the two swords sheathed on her hips. Jensen shivered slightly when he saw her coat bunch and rustle, as if there were something moving restlessly beneath it.

They stood to either side of Inquisitor Mazarin, who sat on a stool that someone had hurriedly fetched for him. The inquisitor was a wasted figure, swaddled in heavy, dark robes. He smelled of age and machine oil, and the two hands that balanced lightly on the head of his cane were withered claws wrapped in blotchy bandages. There was no human face beneath his voluminous hood, merely a metal mask, wrought into the cruel, beaked visage of a bird of prey. Two servo-skulls hovered over him, one with protuberant optical sensors in place of its empty sockets, and the

second bearing an old fashioned vox-broadcaster where its rictus grin ought to have been. Both appeared to be recording everything going on around them.

The optical servo-skull floated closer to Jensen, its crimson lenses whirring and clicking as it examined him from every angle. The vox on the second skull crackled, spat and then said, *'My compliments, Hereditary-Governor Jensen. Harks tells me that you are a man of rare capability. Pragmatic, with a keen mind. There are not many like you in these dark times.'*

Jensen twitched on his stool and glanced at the psyker, who grinned his black grin and tapped the side of his head. Jensen swallowed and turned back to Mazarin. The inquisitor hadn't moved, but the optic-skull hummed around Jensen, interposing itself. Jensen licked his lips and said, 'Forgive me for not meeting with you when you arrived, but, as you can see, we have an – ah – situation.' He gestured about him, indicating the controlled chaos of the command bunker. Communications screens flashed, showing the devastation of the ork advance. Dust drifted down as the emplacement to which the bunker was connected came under fire.

A burst of garbled noise emerged from the vox-skull. It took Jensen a moment to realise that it was laughter. *'And a sense of humour as well. Oh mercy, you are a treasure,'* Mazarin said, via his floating proxy. A frail hand flapped at the woman. *'I am being rude. You have already met Harks, and Master Ismail of Tallarn and the Doraha. Allow me to introduce you to my other companions – this is Olympia, and the lump of gristle is Mamluc-9. Don't ask me what his real name is – they forget it when they put on the mask, and I never bothered to learn it, myself. Could be anyone under there… then, you know a little something about that yourself, don't you, Hereditary-Governor Jensen?'*

Jensen hesitated. He nodded brusquely, and reached up, without thinking, to stroke the contours of his own mask. He had five others just like it, and the body doubles to wear them. Besides his wives and the upper echelons of the planet's military, no one was supposed to know of the existence of those men. Each of the five had been coached and trained in his mannerisms, and taught some of what he knew – enough to convince the troops under their command that they were the hereditary-governor in the flesh. Useful in situations such as this one, where he needed to be

everywhere at once. ‘It is a regrettable fact that sometimes a ruler must appear to be in one place, when he is actually in another.’

‘How many times has that xenos-worshipping cult – which was based out of Hive Noctis, by the way, you’re quite welcome, no need for thanks – tried to kill you now? Seven, eight…?’

Jensen grunted. ‘Fifteen,’ he said, knowing full well that the inquisitor likely knew the specifics of each and every one of those incidents.

‘Sixteen, technically,’ Harks said. ‘Your – they are your women, aren’t they? – your women did horrible things to a very unlucky assassin several months ago, but didn’t tell you.’ He grinned widely. ‘They didn’t want to worry you.’

Mazarin shook his head. *‘I apologise, hereditary-governor. To Harks, even the strongest mind is but an open book, which he can’t help but read over the shoulder of its owner.’*

‘Except yours,’ Harks said, with evident bitterness and not a little fear, Jensen suspected. ‘And his,’ he added, motioning towards Mamluc-9. The latter twitched, as if in amusement. Jensen looked at the mask, and felt a tingle of disgust as he took in the hooks and wires which anchored it to its wearer’s flesh. He wondered if the man had been a volunteer. He suspected that where the Inquisition was concerned, ‘volunteer’ was a very broad term.

‘The world is made of limits, Harks. It is best for a man to know his, and act accordingly. Which brings us to you, Hereditary-Governor Jensen,’ Mazarin said. He tapped the floor with his cane. *‘Master Ismail, if you would…?’*

‘By current estimates, Ghul Jensen has, at best, a month left,’ Ismail said.

‘A month? Of what?’ Jensen asked. Part of him already knew the answer, however, and a sick feeling rose up in him. If an entire fortress-monastery full of Space Marines had fallen, what hope had his world?

‘Operational effectiveness,’ Ismail said. ‘In a month, the orks will have overrun this world.’ The Tallarn hesitated. Then, in a softer tone, he added, ‘I am sorry, hereditary-governor.’

‘He is, too,’ Harks said. ‘Hidden depths of pity, our angel of the desert.’ He spat.

‘Quiet, Harks,’ Mazarin said. *‘Go on, Master Ismail.’*

‘With rapid redeployment, and adaptive strategies, operational

effectiveness might be extended,' Ismail said. 'Given the calculations of the size of the enemy force, as passed on by the Obsidian Glaives, and my own estimation as to the defensive capabilities of the inner worlds in the Sanctus System, such a strategy will increase the statistical likelihood of a successful defence of Alaric Prime.'

'Now ask him by how much,' Harks muttered.

Mazarin didn't bother to reprimand the psyker this time. *'You are an intelligent man,'* he said, as the optic-skull circled Jensen slowly. *'Your current strategy is untenable. A man who seeks to defend everything loses all, as the war-poets of Chogoris say. You must pull your forces back, abandon the other hives and concentrate on defending Hive Jensen.'*

'What – no,' Jensen said. He shook his head. 'No! That would mean condemning millions to death – we don't have the means to evacuate one hive safely, let alone all of them.'

'Who said anything about evacuating the hives?' the woman in Mechanicus red trilled softly. She sang, rather than spoke, as if she were a life-size figurine from a music box. It was beautiful, but there was an artificial edge to it, as if a machine were trying to replicate a bird's call. 'Death comes swift or slow, but it comes all the same.' She placed her hand on Mazarin's shoulder and he patted it.

'Thank you, Olympia. As ever, your wisdom cuts to the heart of things.' Mazarin tapped his cane on the floor. *'Master Ismail?'*

Ismail looked at Jensen. 'Ghul Jensen is doomed,' he said bluntly, no trace of his earlier sympathy in his words. 'As is Malaghai Morca and Squire's Rest,' he continued, naming two of the other planets in the Sanctus System. 'But Alaric Prime can be saved. If it's given enough time to ready its defences, it can weather the orks.'

Jensen didn't bother to ask why. It was obvious – the Knight Worlds were valuable, but hive worlds were cheap, as were the lives of their populations. He swallowed and looked around the command bunker. Outside, he could hear the sound of the assault redoubling in intensity. Soon enough, the defence forces of Hive Morn would have to fall back, and then again and again. The same bloody story would be repeated over and over again at each hive, whether the orks chose to take them one at a time or all at once.

He'd known his world – the world he had ruled since his father had

passed over the black river and into the Emperor's hall – was dead the moment the first ork ship crashed on the plains, the heat of its descent turning the sands of the wastes to glass. But to abandon his people in such a fashion galled him. He could still save some of them – couldn't he?

He looked around the bunker, trying to find a friendly face. The closest he came was Ismail. The warrior exuded calm, but not compassion. No, there was no hope there. He considered demanding an evacuation attempt of some sort, in return for his efforts, but the more pragmatic part of him knew that any guarantee the inquisitor gave him would be a lie. The orks were above as well as below, attacking the orbital defences. The conflict raging there was as effective a cage as any blockade. There would be no escape. Not for anyone. 'What about you?' he said.

'What about us?' Mazarin replied.

'You say my world is doomed. That there is no escape. And yet here you are. Did you come to die with us?' Even as he spat the question, he wondered if he could somehow save someone – his wives perhaps, his cousins, anyone. If there was a ship, he could save a few people at least. Even if he had to take it from its owner at the barrel of a gun.

He'd had vessels of his own, a small but expensive fleet of yachts, but both his and the ships owned by the ruling houses of the other hives had been pressed into service to bolster the orbital defences and were now so much as debris floating in the upper reaches of the stratosphere. Lightly armed as they had been, they hadn't lasted long, though the crews had fought bravely.

'Regrettably, my personal vessel was damaged during our arrival. The skies are even more dangerous than the ground.' Mazarin cocked his head. *'From orbit, your world rather resembles a piece of fruit surrounded by swarm upon swarm of flies. There is no way off of Ghul Jensen, I'm afraid. Not for any of us.'* He straightened. *'That is why we must make it count, hereditary-governor. Do not let the death of your world be for nothing.'*

Jensen's hands curled into fists. 'What do you suggest?' he said, forcing the words out.

'Redeploy all planetary forces not currently engaged with the orks to Hive Jensen,' the Tallarn said, without hesitation. The bunker shuddered again. The sounds of ork artillery could be heard outside, hammering away at the emplacement. Men were dying, even now, to hold back the green

tide.

'What about the forces already engaged?' he said, slowly, not wanting to hear the answer he knew was coming.

'We should leave as soon as you are ready,' Mazarin said. *'Gather your command staff and all essential personnel. We have little time, and much yet to accomplish.'*

House of Jensen, Gubernatorial Palace, Hive Jensen

Jensen stared out through the vast crystalline window that marked the outer edge of the palace gardens, his hands clasped behind his back. Around him, his command staff were hard at their tasks, barking orders into vox-transmitters, studying holographic maps, or talking quietly amongst themselves. His wives moved amongst them, overseeing the confusion so that Jensen didn't have to.

The palace occupied the uppermost tier of the hive, just above the great hab-ring occupied by the minor aristocratic clans whose sons and daughters made up his command staff. He studied the massive enclosed gardens that spread out below him, each one dominated by a different colour of foliage and flower, and teeming with plants from the far-flung corners of the planet. Each of them had taken generations to coax into vibrancy and when they were gone, the galaxy would not see their like again.

His gaze was drawn upwards, towards the reflective surface of the solar collectors that lined the uppermost edge of the hive's outer shell. The collectors gathered and filtered the light of the sun down through the hive like so many solar aqueducts, so that even the deepest levels of the underhive had some access to natural light. It had been his grandmother's innovation, he recalled, crafted from older technologies which they could no longer make work. Hive Jensen relied on many such engines, and as the weeks and the siege went on, more and more of them ceased to function. Already, whole hab-rings were without light, heat and water, and he had been forced to divert precious resources to rigging up temporary water sumps so that his people would not die of thirst before they froze to death, or were killed by the orks. He closed his eyes and his shoulders slumped.

The redeployment had gone as planned. His authority was absolute, and

his body doubles had proved their value yet again, allowing his people the illusion that he had not abandoned them but, rather, was sacrificing himself for a greater purpose. The military resources of each of the great hives had retreated through the subterranean darkways that stretched between hives and across the wide ashy wastes. Hive Jensen, the largest of the great hives, was now full to capacity. Its resources were stretched to the breaking point. Not that that would be the case for long.

The orks had finished with the rest of the planet in record time. The death-pyres of the other hives were visible from the weapons clusters of the outer shell, and the smoke of their passing still choked the atmosphere. Millions of lives, snuffed out and forgotten. The bulk of the ork forces had already turned their attentions towards Hive Jensen, looking for new opportunities for battle.

He opened his eyes. The noise behind him had dimmed. He turned. Inquisitor Mazarin and Olympia moved through the crowd of officers and staff, who drew back to give them plenty of room. The old man was orbited as always by his servo-skulls, which rotated slowly as they hovered, seeing and recording the faces of everyone around them. Olympia stared straight ahead, her hands resting on the pommels of her swords. In the retreat from Hive Morn, Jensen had witnessed just how deadly the former skitarii tribune was with the blades.

'Inquisitor Mazarin,' Jensen said. The dull rush of conversation resumed as he spoke, but he knew they were being watched. The inquisitor had come to be regarded as something of a bird of ill-omen by Jensen's officers.

'I have come to compliment you, hereditary-governor. You are as efficient and as competent as promised,' Mazarin said, through the vox-skull. *'Master Ismail's projections have been exceeded beyond my wildest fancies.'*

'Are you here just to compliment us for not dying as quickly as you estimated?' Jensen said. His fingers twitched, and he was conscious of the weight of the blade on his hip and the pistol holstered opposite it. Olympia watched him, her perfect features twisting into a perfect smile.

'Not solely, no,' Mazarin said. *'Master Ismail has done all he can to improve your defences, and the peculiar talents of Olympia, Harks and Mamluc-9 are – heh – wasted here in your palace, lovely as it is. The orks*

are even now scaling the outer shell of the hive, like rats seeking entrance to a store room. The lower hab-rings are already under attack. I humbly request that you allow me and my retinue the honour of assigning ourselves to the front. Master Ismail has estimated where the next attack will come, and I feel that our talents would be better put to use there.'

'You will go with them?' Jensen asked, startled. For the brief time he'd known the inquisitor, the man had not risked himself in open combat, leaving the bloody work to his subordinates. It wasn't surprising; Mazarin was old, ancient even, and looked no more durable than a rotting branch hanging from a dying tree.

'Of course,' Mazarin rasped. *'It has been a long time since I met the enemy openly, but I wager that I still recall how to do it. Once learned, never forgotten and all that.'*

Jensen stared at him for a moment, trying to parse for any hidden meaning in those words. He had the natural suspicion of the Inquisition that every planetary governor cultivated; it was a survival instinct. And he was suspicious of this sudden change of heart. Why now? Was it simply the impatience of a man used to manipulating events from afar caught up in an unwinnable situation? But there seemed to be no hidden agenda where Mazarin was concerned. As the redeployment had proceeded the old man had overseen much of it, displaying a strategic acumen that was rivalled only by the most senior members of Jensen's staff. And now that there were no more decisions to be made, and nothing to do but hold, fight and die, he seemed impatient for the latter. 'What if I say no?' he said, finally.

'Why would you?' Mazarin said. *'You are angry with me, I can see it in your eyes.'* The optic-skull swooped closer, its red gaze boring into Jensen's own. *'And you have every right to be. I brought tidings of doom, and there are very few people who appreciate that. But if my discomfort would be a salve to your anger, then why deny me the joy of being messily dispatched by an ork?'*

'You have a point,' Jensen said. He turned back to the window. 'Do as you wish. If that wish is to die on the front lines rather than here, who am I to deny you?'

'You are a most congenial host, Hereditary-Governor Jensen. My thanks,' Mazarin said, bowing courteously. He turned and made his way back out,

trailed by Olympia. Jensen watched their reflections recede, like ghosts vanishing into the light of the fires rising from below.

'So, that's it then?' Harks said, pushing away from the wall as Mazarin and Olympia exited the gardens. 'He's going to let us fight, just like that?'

'A wise man uses all of the resources available to him,' Mazarin croaked. *'And he is very wise, the hereditary-governor.'* He didn't bother asking how Harks knew. He had grown used to the psyker's eavesdropping, and had even profited from it on occasion. Indeed, they would not be on Ghul Jensen now, were it not for Harks's inability to keep from spying on the thoughts of those around him.

'But not too much so, otherwise he would have put a guard on our ship, rather than taking your word that it was out of commission. It's ready to go when you are, by the way,' Harks muttered. He frowned and rubbed his skull. 'Which I assume will be soon, yes?'

'As soon as we get what we came here for,' Mazarin said. Then, *'Has the girl been located?'*

'We have narrowed down her bio-signature to somewhere within the lower hab-ring,' Olympia hummed softly. 'Shall we find her?'

'Not yet,' Mazarin said. *'Jensen is suspicious. We have our reason for being there. When the time comes, we will find her.'* He raised a hand, silencing Harks before he could speak. *'And then, we will depart this sad, dying world.'*

'And until then?' Harks asked.

'We do exactly what I said we'd do, Harks. We fight.'

They left the palace, Harks keeping up a steady flow of complaints and muttered recriminations, and Olympia humming something which sounded like machine code. Mazarin stopped as they came to the great gates, carved from the last trees to have grown unaided in the bitter soil of Ghul Jensen. Scenes from the world's founding and the erecting of the first hives had been carved into the surface of the towering gates. Mazarin stared up at them for a long time, his mechanical eyes recording every shape and whorl on the wood.

It was very lovely, he thought. It only seemed right that someone remember it.

As the servitor-guards that controlled the gates hauled them open with a

squeal of abused wood and metal, a wave of heat entered, washing over Mazarin and the others. His servo-skulls wobbled in the air, buffeted by the almost solid gust of temperature. Harks was already sweating as they left the palace behind. The broad procession way beyond, its bulwarks topped by marble statues of ancient heroes of the Jensen line, afforded a picturesque view of the sloping descent of the hive. From Mazarin's perspective, it was rather like a stack of ever-shrinking data-discs, and just as ill-balanced. The inner curve of the hive's shell was highly reflective, so as to more easily bring warmth and light to the lowest hab-rings, and it seemed as if the hive city stretched forever in all directions. The fury of the fires reaching up from below were redoubled by those vast reflective surfaces as well, and they were the source of the heat, Mazarin knew.

The orks had broken through into the lower rings almost immediately, having grown experienced in shattering hives over the past weeks. But they had been held, and even thrown back in places, though not for long.

As they walked down the wide staircase that led to the main thoroughfare below the gubernatorial palace, Mazarin could see through the cracked and shattered sky-paths that stretched like a vast web of rockcrete and metal between the outer shell and the spire, and down into the inferno below, where the shapes of alien war machines struggled through a landscape rendered inhospitable even to the galaxy's toughest breed of vermin.

The great pneumatic lifts which provided quick access between hab-rings for those allowed access to them were still working, and were being used to ferry troops and command staff between the upper levels of the spire and wherever the front line happened to be at that moment. The lifts were reinforced and would likely be standing long after the rest of the hive collapsed in on itself.

As they rode down, Mazarin watched the hive rise around him, taking note of which of the gun emplacements on the outer shell were still active. These were the only things keeping the bulk of the ork forces pinned on the wasteland outside. But they were isolated, and vulnerable to attack by those orks clever and suicidal enough to attempt to scale the shell, or surf the sea of anti-air flak to their target. Even as the lift reached its destination, one of the gun emplacements far above exploded, casting a weird light over the trio as they stepped out. They traversed the sky-path that led to the emplacement, striding beneath the gazes of the ornate

statues that lined the high rails that marked the edges of the path.

Mazarin had contacted the others as they descended, and saw Mamluc-9 sitting on an upturned fuel drum, briskly loading his shotgun. He hopped off his perch and fell in beside them.

'Where's Ismail?' Mazarin asked as they moved through the crowd of soldiers moving back and forth between the primary and secondary rows of defences.

Mamluc-9 gestured with two fingers towards the highest point of the emplacement, where soldiers were firing at the orks. *'Of course,'* Mazarin murmured. He waved a hand. *'The rest of you, try and look busy. Mamluc-9, come with me.'*

The masked man followed him up onto the emplacement, where Ismail was observing the enemy with cool detachment. They stood in silence for some time. Then, at last, as the orks mounted another assault, Ismail glanced at him.

'This attack is a prelude,' Ismail said. His autogun thundered, and down below, orks died. 'The ones too eager or too stupid to obey orders. The others are waiting for something.'

'And what would that be, Master Ismail?'

'If I knew, I would have said,' Ismail said.

Mazarin eyed the Tallarn for a moment, considering. Then he sighed slightly, the vox-skull amplifying the sound into a staticky hiss. Such disrespect from his subordinates was his lot, and it would be borne gracefully. *'My apologies. Can you hold the line here?'*

Ismail's head turned slightly, the lenses of his helmet's eyepieces reflecting the crimson eyes of the servo-skulls. He said nothing, but the meaning of the look was plain enough. Mazarin shook his head. *'Again, my apologies – better to ask, can you hold for the time required?'*

'No,' Ismail said, turning back. 'But I can try.'

'That is all I ask, my friend.'

Ismail made a noise; it was something like a cross between a leopard's growl and a bolter going off. Mazarin realised that the warrior had laughed. Before he could comment, a great cry went up and orks surged across the broken ground below, charging towards the emplacement. 'Best you get down below, inquisitor,' Ismail said.

'Yes, quite,' Mazarin said. An ork crested the emplacement, and Ismail

twisted around, punching its head off of its shoulders. *'Come, Mamluc-9. Let us see to the next line of defence, shall we?'*

Mazarin made his way back down, followed by Mamluc-9. As he walked, he said, *'Olympia informs me that we have pinpointed her location. You know what to do?'*

Mamluc-9 nodded, and patted his shotgun affectionately. Mazarin stopped and turned. He reached out and clasped the other man on the shoulder. *'As soon as the battle commences, go. We will meet you at the lift platform, when you have signalled that you have her. Do not fail me, my friend. Much counts on your success.'*

Mamluc-9 said nothing, and Mazarin hadn't expected him to do so. He never did. Mazarin turned as he heard Ismail's autogun roar. The orks were on top of the emplacement, propelled by eagerness more than strategy. One appeared at the top of the steps. Mamluc-9 spun and the shotgun belched. The ork pitched backwards. Mazarin continued down. *'Olympia, Harks, we will soon be having guests,'* he said, extending his arms. *'Ready yourselves for war, my soldiers.'*

'We're always ready,' Harks spat. 'My mind is a machine, and it's always in overdrive,' he continued, tapping the spot between his eyes. 'A finely tuned meat-engine of mass destruction, devised by chance and guided by the grace of the Emperor. I can burn armies and ignite a planet's atmosphere. I am built for war. We all are,' he continued, more softly. 'You – your kind – saw to that. We are your weapons, just like these poor fools.' He gestured about him, to the soldiers of Hive Jensen, who were falling back around them to the second line of defences as the orks washed over the emplacement. Mazarin joined his retinue as the emplacement became a scene of carnage. There were orks everywhere now. Ismail hadn't been able to hold back the tide so much as he had forced it to go around him.

'Your point?' Mazarin said. He watched as Ismail led the surviving defenders in a fighting withdrawal. The Tallarn was an old hand at fighting orks, and he did so with economy, never allowing himself to be drawn into close-quarters combat. He kept the orks at bay with precise bursts of autogun fire as he backed down the steps.

'No point,' Harks said, baring his black teeth. He pointed at the servo-skulls. 'Your eyes and voice are outside of your body, maybe your

conscience is too, eh?'

'If I had one, it wouldn't be you,' Mazarin rasped. The eagle mask tilted, and the optic-skull moved closer to Harks, who flinched back from it. *'Now hush. Olympia is about to sing.'* He motioned with his cane in a grandiose fashion, and Olympia gave a courtly bow before she turned and strode through the crowd of retreating soldiers. She began to pick up speed as the first orks spilled past Ismail's bulk and reached the courtyard.

As she ran, Olympia swept back her coat, revealing the second set of arms folded tight against her belly. The secondary arms unfolded, and the gleaming metal hands sought the hilts of the swords sheathed on her hips, even as the pale fingers of her real hands drew the pair of laspistols holstered under her coat. Then, with a strange, piercing shriek, Olympia bounded forward, moving with inhuman speed.

She had been born for this, in a way. Or rather, reborn. She had risen through the ranks of the skitarii, shedding flesh and weakness to become something other, something deadly. The blades in her lesser hands hummed with force as they cleaved through green flesh and bone, and her laspistols hissed as she danced through the orks, singing her killing song. Her weird caterwaul caused orks to stumble and fall, retching. The effects of the sonic pulse transmitter built into her larynx were different for different species, and Mazarin noted the reactions of the orks with interest.

'Beautiful,' he rasped, to no one in particular. An ork charged towards him, perhaps thinking him easy prey. He sighed and stepped aside, drawing the hidden blade from his cane as he did so. The brute stumbled and whirled, impaling itself on Mazarin's sword cane. *'You, on the other hand…'* he said. The ork's eyes bugged out, and it yowled. Mazarin thumbed the switch on the blade's hilt, activating the weapon's power cell. Energy ripped through the creature, burning it from inside out. What was left of it sloughed off of the blade and Mazarin sniffed in distaste.

'It isn't often you bestir yourself, old man,' Harks said. Energy crackled about him, crawling from his pores and curling around his limbs. He flicked a finger, and an ork became a howling torch. 'The hour must truly be desperate.'

'Hush, Harks. We all play our part. Speaking of which… where is he?'

'Already gone, the sneak,' Harks said. 'Following orders like a good tool.'

‘Soldier, Harks. He is a soldier. We are all soldiers.’

‘Whether we want to be or not. I wonder which it was, in his case.’ Harks grinned mirthlessly, and lightning crawled across the black surface of his teeth. ‘I–’

Whatever he’d been about to say was lost in the rumbling destruction that consumed a section of the bastion. Chunks of rockcrete and twisted lengths of smoking metal hurtled across the battlefield. Harks gestured hurriedly, and the storm of debris struck the coruscating shield of protective warp energy which had enveloped him and Mazarin. ‘What in the name of the Emperor was that?’ Harks snarled, as he strained to protect them.

‘Offhand, I’d say it’s what the rest of the orks were waiting for,’ Mazarin said.

The emplacement had been ruptured, not by artillery fire or explosives, but by something far more deadly. Harks’s eyes widened as the brute shape capered through the smoky gap, muscles swelling with deadly power and a sickly green energy bleeding from its pores. It was bigger than any of the orks that flooded through the breach around it, as if it were drawing strength and mass from its surroundings. The ork’s eyes were fiery orbs, and a murky froth spilled from the sides of its mouth as it stamped and gibbered. It lurched forward and vomited a searing burst of green fire, which incinerated a number of unlucky soldiers, reducing them to greasy char in moments.

Mazarin looked at Harks. *‘Well? Are you waiting for an engraved invitation, perhaps?’*

‘You can’t be serious,’ Harks protested.

‘I didn’t bring you for your scintillating wit, Harks. Now, go thought-murder that alien freak for me like a good little sanctioned abomination.’ Mazarin lifted his blade, and let the tip drift casually towards the psyker’s throat.

Harks spat at his feet, but turned to face the approaching ork psyker. ‘I hate you, old man,’ he said, as he started forward.

‘The feeling is mutual, I assure you,’ Mazarin called after him.

The air between the two psykers began to vibrate as they approached one another. Lightning reached out and crackled between them. The ork bellowed and nearby fires seemed to swell and grow in strength. Harks

cursed and the fires crackled. An ork raised a weapon, and the ork psyker reached out with a flabby paw and crushed the over-eager warrior's head.

Then, with a sound like thunder, the ork psyker turned and unleashed a howling wave of green energy, which burned the air and turned the rockcrete to slag where it passed. Harks thrust out his hands and caught hold of the energy as if it were a serpent. It crawled up his arms and lashed out at his skinny form, opening a wound in his side which vented superheated blood as a red mist. Harks screamed and the energy he held exploded back towards the ork, tearing great gouges in its rubbery flesh. It staggered and threw itself forward, trailed by lighting. Harks did not go to meet it, instead raising his hands, palms up. As if at some unspoken command, the shattered chunks of rubble strewn all around rose into the air.

The ork stomped a warty foot, and the ground cracked and split. Harks stumbled, and then threw out his arms, unleashing a barrage of debris. The ork roared as chunks of rock and metal pierced its already wounded flesh, ripping and burrowing into it. Blood splattered the ground as it forced itself forward, lightning gathering in its hands. Harks gritted his teeth, and redoubled his efforts. The ork's body swelled, and across the battlefield, the heads of its fellow xenos began to pop as whatever power it was channelling overcame them. Mazarin had seen similar occurrences before, and he knew that Harks wouldn't survive what was coming.

'Master Ismail, if you would,' he murmured, trusting the vox-signal to carry his words to the warrior's ear. Ismail's autogun cracked once, and a crater opened in the side of the ork's skull. Green smoke boiled out of the rupture, and the ork was spun about by the force of the shot. A second round took it between the eyes, and, with a sigh like a deflating bladder of air, it toppled backwards, the power it had been drawing into itself spilling out and away harmlessly. The Tallarn stepped up beside Mazarin. *'Thank you,'* Mazarin said.

Harks looked down at the dead alien, and placed a hand to the wound in his side. He looked at Mazarin. 'Can we go now?' he asked wearily.

Hab-Ring Deucalion, Hive Jensen

Mamluc-9 moved swiftly across the swaying gantry towards the hab-unit,

shotgun at shoulder height. As the first ork burst out of the gloom of the corridor beyond, he fired. The ork was knocked back, but not down. Mamluc-9 fired again, and the ork fell, missing most of its skull. He paused at the edge of the entry-hatch, considering. Then he unclipped a grenade, activated it, and sent it bouncing into the compartment beyond. He huddled away from the blast, and the gantry shivered as the grenade went off.

He pushed himself away from the wall and swung into the compartment, the sensors built into his helmet compensating for the smoke that now filled the area. An ork, its flesh torn by shrapnel and its crude combat vest aflame, rushed towards him blindly, ruined jaws working soundlessly. He avoided the rush and pivoted, driving the reinforced stock of his shotgun into the back of the brute's head. Alien bone, softened by the heat, crumpled, and the ork pitched forward. Mamluc-9 whirled around, narrowly escaping a blow that would have done the same to him, and fired, taking the second ork in the gut.

It stumbled back, eyes wild with shock, and then lurched forward, roaring. It swung its crude blade down and Mamluc-9 caught its blow on the length of his shotgun. The tableau held for a moment, man and ork straining against one another, until the former snatched his knife from its sheath and drove it point-first up through the ork's jaw and into its brain. Even then, it took several moments for the brute to realise that it was dead.

Mamluc-9 did not remember who he was or what he had been, before he had put on the mask. But he knew how to kill. He had killed xenos of every type and species. He had killed them with explosives, guns, knives, sharp sticks and, in one case, a decorative paperweight shaped like the Imperial seal.

The owner of the hab-unit had not been so skilled, however. The man was dead, torn apart by the bite of savage blades, his blood decorating the floor and walls. An autopistol lay near a lopped-off hand, unfired.

There were orks everywhere in the hab-ring now, looting and killing. The area would be abandoned entirely soon. His helmet's HUD showed the positions of his companions as the emplacement was slowly overwhelmed. His skin prickled as he felt the aetheric chill of Harks's powers being unleashed. There was a rumble that came from no explosion, and he shook his head. He didn't have much time. He checked the tracking device

hooked to his belt, and looked around. He heard a soft sound, like an animal's whimper.

Ah, there she was.

The one they had braved the horrors of a planetary funeral pyre to find. The whys and wherefores of the mission escaped him, as so much did the longer he wore the mask. He didn't care; the mask saw to that as well. All that mattered was the mission.

He moved quickly towards the sound. When he tore open the closet, the woman screamed, and moved to shield her child. It wouldn't have taken long for the orks to find them as they ransacked the house. The girl was young, barely more than a toddler. She stared at him over her mother's shoulder, displaying no fear, only curiosity.

Mamluc-9 considered her for a long moment. Then he held out his hand.

Shyly, the girl took it.

Hab-Ring Deucalion, Exitus Node, Hive Jensen

Ismail saw them first.

'He has succeeded,' the Tallarn said.

'Ah, and not a moment too soon,' Mazarin said as he clapped his hands together. Through the eyes of his servo-skull, he saw the broad shape of Mamluc-9 hurrying across the bridge, a woman beside him, a child clutched in her arms.

'It's them,' Harks wheezed, clutching the wound that was his souvenir from his battle with the ork psyker. 'The woman, I mean. I can hear it in her head.' Mazarin glanced at him. He had dealt with the creature efficiently enough, but he looked as if he was on his last legs. Mazarin hoped he would survive. It was difficult to find a battlefield-capable primaris psyker not already attached to a military command.

Harks stiffened. 'Wait,' he said. 'There's something…'

'The rail,' Ismail said, lifting his gun. Mazarin saw the first ork a moment later. Where they'd come from he couldn't say, but he recognised what they were easily enough. There were thousands of them loose in the lower levels of the hive. Wrapped in ash-stained rags and wearing crude fatigues, the ork commandos hauled themselves onto the sky-path with howls of excitement.

Mamluc-9 noticed them a half-second after Harks, but by then, it was too late. The orks were on them in an instant, hurling themselves over the sides of the bridge, ragged cloaks flapping. Mamluc-9 spun, shoving the woman aside. A blade sank into his chest, ripping through his armour as if it were paper. His shotgun roared and an ork was flung back.

Mamluc-9 stumbled, and Mazarin almost cried out, before he remembered himself. *'Go,'* he croaked. Even as the word echoed out of the vox-caster, Ismail and Olympia were in motion. The Tallarn drew his blade as he ran and removed the head from one of the orks as he slid past. Olympia bisected another, carving the alien into bloody chunks with her blades. The last two beasts flung themselves at their enemies with gleeful howls, and were summarily dispatched for their efforts.

The woman was screaming, clutching the child, her cries spiralling into the smoky air to join the cacophony rising from below. *'Silence her,'* Mazarin hissed. Olympia jabbed the woman and the girl with syringes held in her artificial hands. The solution inside would put them to sleep, and had been prepared for just such an occasion.

Mazarin knelt and, with steady hands, unhooked his servant's mask. The man was already dead, and had been from the moment the ork blade severed his spine. Mazarin stared down at the pale, wrinkled ruin of the face, trying to recall who the man had been before he'd become Mamluc-9. At last, Mazarin gave up and allowed Harks to help him to his feet. He cradled the mask to his chest as gently as Ismail held the child. 'Satisfied, old man?' Harks said, softly.

'Not yet. Not until we've left this place far behind. Come, the shuttle awaits,' Mazarin said, stalking towards the lift, the mask held tight. Ismail bent so that Olympia could lay the woman over his shoulder, and then they followed him towards the pneumatic lift which would carry them back to the uppermost levels of the hive. There was only one still working on this level – the others had been shattered by the heat, or had been caught in explosions, or had simply stopped working. Those, he saw, were caught between the hab-rings, and most were full of soldiers trying to head down to the fighting or civilians seeking escape. They would remain where they were, until the fire reached them or the orks did.

The pneumatic lift climbed the spine of the hive, towards the skyport. Below, the lower rings of the hive were being consumed in fire and war.

Smoke and ash drifted upwards, caught by the still-functioning oxygen recyclers mounted in the upper reaches of the outer shell. There was a crashing roar as a section of one of the lower rings gave way and collapsed in a cloud of dust and a plume of fire. He could make out the crumbling shapes of buildings giving way to gravity and becoming a flood of bent metal and rockcrete that swept over everything in its path.

The air was thick with noise – screams, roars, gunfire, explosions, splintering metal, tearing stone, all of it rising up, combining into a singular noise that defied description. If he had been a man for poetry, Mazarin thought he might have compared it to the death-scream of some great leviathan, or the funeral dirge of an entire race, but because he was who he was, it was merely noise.

The child whined, and Mazarin glanced at it. Ismail shifted slightly, as if to protect the child from Mazarin's sightless gaze. *'It should be sleeping,'* Mazarin said. The mother was, where she hung unceremoniously over the Tallarn's shoulder. But the child squirmed and wailed.

'She's frightened,' Harks said, clutching his wound. He looked paler than normal, and Mazarin wondered if his confrontation with the xenos psyker had broken something inside him. 'She's a child, Mazarin. Her parents are dead. Her world is dying.'

'Worlds die, but the dance goes on, eternal and pristine,' Olympia trilled.

'Emperor's bones, shut *up*,' Harks hissed. He hunched forward, one hand pressed to his skull. 'I can hear the death of every living thing in this misbegotten place. I don't need some berserk wind-up doll yammering in my ear as well.'

Olympia whistled and the glass face of the elevator trembled. Harks clutched his ears and made a strangled sound. Mazarin thumped the floor with his cane. *'Stop it. I'll have none of your childishness, Olympia, and none of your whining, Harks. Rejoice, my soldiers. Our war is almost won.'* He glanced down at the blood-spattered mask he held, and felt a flicker of annoyance. *'Yes, almost.'*

'If this is victory, I'd hate to see defeat,' Harks murmured.

Defensive Emplacement Jensen-Primus, Hive Jensen

Jensen cradled Sasha's torn, explosion-ravaged form to him, her blood

staining his fire-blackened armour. The hab-ring burned, and orks loped through the smoke. Beatrix's body was nearby, lost amidst the piles of dead, as were those of the rest of his wives. A stray blast from an ork gargant had ripped through the emplacement, gutting the command bunker and the hab-ring beyond. Buildings lay shattered like forgotten children's toys, cracked open by the roiling beam of destruction which had passed over them. Jensen had only survived thanks to his armour… and Sasha. She had thrown herself between him and death, as was her duty, and his heart felt like lead in his chest as he looked down at her.

'I'm sorry,' he said, stroking the ruin of her, and looking out at the ruin of his world. The hive shook like a dying animal. The orks were ripping it apart from the inside out. Their barbaric war machines trudged through the lower levels, pounding the rubble flat and shaking the ground beneath his feet. They had occupied the outer shell and were smashing through in places, using the hive's own weapons emplacements to fire down at the centre of the hive. Comets of fire rained down, killing man and ork alike. 'I'm sorry,' he said, more loudly. He looked down into her unseeing eyes, and bent low, until his head touched hers. Then he set her body aside and shoved himself to his feet, her power maul in his hands.

As he stood, his vox-link chirped, spitting out a coded frequency. Mazarin was making his move, and Jensen was in no position to do anything about it. Anger filled him, and brought with it strength. Orks charged towards him through the smoke and the fire, and he killed them, battering their snarling faces to pulp as he fought his way back to where the remaining defenders were regrouping. Armaments bawled, and orks died on their knees, scythed away by the last dregs of the artillery's ammunition.

He shook off the helping hands as he reached his soldiers, and barked orders. Smoke rose from the spire of the hive, and he knew the gubernatorial palace was already under attack. One of his remaining body doubles would be there, seeing to the defence. The man would have to do for as long as the hive had left. He had other business than overseeing the immolation of all that his people had built.

Jensen borrowed a laspistol from one of his men and pushed away from them, ignoring their questions. They would hold their position until they were forced to fall back, or they would die where they stood. There was nothing else left for them, but to die and die well. But not for him. He had

one last duty to fulfil. Quickly, he made his way to the closest of the level's pneumatic lifts and hammered a button with a fist.

There was still power, thankfully, and as he rose towards the skyport, he tried to clear his mind of distractions. He turned away from the transparent wall and ignored the sounds that caused the lift to vibrate around him, as if it might judder loose from its moorings and plummet into the fires below. He shed his responsibilities and fears, letting the mantle of authority slip from his shoulders.

It was almost a relief.

He fingered the clasps of his mask, considering. Then, with a grunt, he let his hand fall. While the hive still stood, he was still the governor.

The skyport shook around him as the lift slowed and the doors slid wide. He stepped out, and breathed in smoke. The wide, open area was full of cargo that had been abandoned at the start of the fighting, and technical servitors stood awaiting orders that would never come, heedless of the destruction occurring around them. Coughing, he stumbled forward. Through blurring vision, he saw a shuttle – Mazarin's, he knew – touch down on the landing pad, its thrusters dimming from white hot to blue.

He'd had his people keep a watch on the inquisitor's shuttle. The damage to it was evident, but his spies had informed him that this was purely cosmetic. It clearly still functioned. It had remained docked in an upper grav-berth, and had not moved since its arrival, but he'd known that it was only a matter of time. He'd set the control-servitors of the communications tower to alert him, and him alone, if the shuttle moved.

Sooner or later, Mazarin would have made a run for it. Jensen had expected it. He'd hoped to have others with him now – Sasha, perhaps Beatrix, others. He could have saved some of them, sent them off into an uncertain future, but better that than staying here. He'd had it all planned. He intended to die with his people, and he intended for Mazarin to do the same. But some of them could have been saved. Someone would have been left alive to remember Ghul Jensen and its people. The thought was like a hammerblow in his head, pounding against the wall of his mind. He couldn't save them, not now.

He would settle for avenging them.

Dust rolled across the landing pad, mingling with the smoke and haze of the growing inferno below. For a moment, he could see nothing. Then it

cleared, and he saw his quarry, starkly outlined in the light of his home's pyre. 'Mazarin,' he roared, and fired, striking the armoured hull of the craft and causing Mazarin to whirl. The old man moved fast, but not fast enough. Jensen had him dead to rights, and they both knew it.

'Hereditary-Governor Jensen, what a delightful surprise,' Mazarin rasped. *'My people informed me that you were still in the palace. I take it that was one of your doubles, then?'*

'Where do you think you're going?' Jensen snarled, ignoring the question.

'We have accomplished what we came here to do, so we are leaving,' Mazarin said.

'And what was that?' Jensen demanded.

Mazarin was silent for a moment. Then, *'We came here to find someone. We needed as much time as possible, which meant that your world needed to survive longer than it was expected to. Now we have found them, and we are leaving.'*

'Who are they? Who did you sacrifice my world for?'

'Your world was always going to die. I simply extended its agony.'

'Who?' Jensen roared. His finger twitched and Mazarin raised his hands in a placatory fashion. Jensen saw the mask he held, and knew that Mazarin wasn't escaping unscathed.

'No one important,' Mazarin said. *'Someone whose safety was desired by one who will now owe the Inquisition a debt, to be called upon at a later date, after this war is long finished and the next one begun.'*

'You weren't interested in helping us. You were only interested in putting some poor fool far from here in your debt, just in case you needed him at a later date,' Jensen said bitterly. 'For that, you sacrificed my world – made *me* sacrifice my world – and got your companion killed.'

'All men die, Hereditary-Governor Jensen. The reason is, frankly, immaterial. The end result is a given.' Mazarin cocked his head. *'Would it help if I said that it was necessary? That the death of millions here will prevent the deaths of billions elsewhere?'*

'I'm not the hereditary-governor elsewhere,' Jensen snarled. 'My people, my wives, all of them will die, and for what?'

'A little girl,' Harks piped up. The psyker leaned against the ship's hatchway, one hand pressed to his wounded side. 'Last scion of a noble

Rogue Trader dynasty, more valuable than a hive world to the right people.' He smiled. 'The mother ran away, you see… Fell in love with a crewmember aboard her mother's vessel and came here to start a new life. They've been looking for her for some time. That's she's had a brat only spices the meat, as it were. Her family will be overjoyed to get her back, snatched from the very jaws of the ork, and they'll swear an oath of fealty to the Ordo Xenos. They'll be just another set of tools, to be employed where required.'

'What?' Jensen said, momentarily off balance. He saw the child then, noticing her for the first time, huddled in Ismail's arms.

'Quiet, Harks,' Mazarin said.

'He deserves to know,' Harks said simply. The psyker looked at Jensen. 'We all have our uses. The question is, what happens when you're no longer useful?' He smiled bitterly. 'What's a governor without the governed, eh?'

Jensen shook his head. 'Nothing,' he said flatly.

'Not nothing,' Mazarin said. The vox-skull drew closer to Jensen, buzzing around him like a fly. *'Harks is a fool. When a tool is no longer fit for purpose, other uses can be found by a clever man. A hammer can destroy as well as build, to stretch a metaphor. You're a capable man, Ghul Jensen. You'll forgive me if I don't use your title. We are but men here, now, in this moment. Emilio and Ghul. We worked well together, Jensen. You show great promise.'*

'What are you talking about?' Jensen longed to rub the sweat out of his eyes, but he didn't dare lower his weapon. Ismail and Olympia were too close; a single moment of hesitation would cost him his one chance at revenge. Revenge for his wives, his people, his world.

Mazarin held up Mamluc-9's mask. *'I do so hate to have to replace my tools,'* he said. *'I get attached, you see. I'm an old man, and sentimentality is a weakness of the old. I have grown fond of you, Jensen. And I am loath to waste a man of your capabilities.'*

'You want me to – no,' Jensen said. He licked his lips. Far below, something large and important exploded, and the outer shell of Hive Jensen shuddered like the flesh of a man afflicted with ague. A solar collector tore loose with a shriek that caused his teeth to shiver in his gums, and plunged down, smashing against the edge of the platform.

Jensen staggered, but didn't fall or lower his weapon.

Thunderous explosions shook the spine of the hive, and Jensen heard the wail of alarms and the booming roar of hab-rings being isolated. Those guns still active on the inner curve of the hive shell began falling silent, one by one, and fire sprang from them, as if the hive had been engulfed in a typhoon of flame. He knew that one of those explosions likely signalled the destruction of his palace, and he felt a twinge of pain in his chest. The gardens were gone. Sasha was gone, and Beatrix and all of them. Everything was gone, wiped away, as if it had never been.

'Then why did you come?' Mazarin said. *'Revenge? Or pragmatism? Your palace is gone, your people meat for the Beast, and you came here, rather than falling with them. You say you knew that my shuttle still functioned? Then why didn't you confront us sooner? Why wait?'* The servo-skulls circled Jensen like carrion-birds, and beneath his mask, his eyes stung with sweat. *'Because you are not a fool. You were buying time, even as we were. You are a creature of practicality.'* Mazarin lifted the mask. *'We all have our limits. It is best we recognise them, when we reach them.'*

'I was waiting so that I could save someone,' Jensen growled. 'But since that is impossible, I am here now to avenge them.'

'And thus, damning the last of these people whom you claim that you wish to save to a bad death,' Mazarin said. *'The servitor piloting this ship is attuned to my bio-rhythms. If I die, it will self-destruct, and take this vessel with it. But if I live, well… we all live.'*

'I don't care,' Jensen said, but his eyes strayed to the child again. She was a waif, there was nothing special about her that he could see. But she was one of his people.

'Of course you do,' Harks said. Blood from the wound in his side pooled at the psyker's feet. He coughed. 'If you didn't, you'd have had this ship sabotaged, or simply blown it out of the sky when we tried to leave. But you cared enough to come up here. If we die, she dies. The last of your people die, as if they'd never been.' Harks grinned. 'She might still die. Her family is on Alaric Prime, after all, and that's where we and the orks are going.'

Jensen felt something twist inside him. He stared at the girl, uncertain of what to do.

Mazarin stepped forward, and extended the mask. *'Do your duty,*

hereditary-governor. Protect your people,' he said. Jensen's eyes flickered from the mask to the girl, to the gun in his hand.

Around them, Hive Jensen burned.

Alaric Prime

The reunion was a strained but joyful affair, Mazarin judged. The girl and her mother were welcomed with open arms by the latter's parents as old sins and past indiscretions were forgiven in the face of looming obliteration. They clasped one another lovingly in the shadow of great war machines, making ready for the war to come. There was a certain poetic melancholy to the moment, and Mazarin recorded it for his records. He also recorded it as proof of services rendered – rogue traders were, by and large, useful people, and he would have much work for such in the coming days, he suspected.

'It's like something out of a holodrama,' Harks said, and spat. He sat in the open hatch of the shuttle, nursing his side. It had begun to heal. By the time the orks arrived, Harks would be in fighting trim, Mazarin judged.

'Perhaps,' Mazarin said. *'Then, I have never known a sentimental psyker.'* He turned, and looked at the man standing beside Harks, arms crossed over his chest. He wore an ornate eagle mask over his face. *'What do you think, Mamluc-10?'* Mazarin asked.

The man didn't reply.

Then, Mazarin hadn't expected him to.

DEATH MASK

CAVAN SCOTT

Storm clouds were forming around Hive Vinter, blocking the light from Sanctus. Guard Captain Holt shivered despite the oppressive heat. His scowl intensified as the first drops of acidic rain started to fall, sizzling against his mottled green carapace armour.

The larger of the two cyber-mastiffs he held by heavy chains growled as the downpour started in earnest. Wisps of steam rose from the implants visible through old fighting scars in what was left of its flesh. It had fared better than its brother, a smaller but still impressive hound almost completely covered in metal plates. The pair slunk ahead of Holt as he patrolled the defensive wall, glaring out with glowing, amber eyes. No one dared argue with Holt while his two pets were on their leash.

And when he let them go… well, you'd better start running.

All around, his men were hunkering down behind their weapons, lasguns and autocannons aimed at every possible exit of the hive. None of them complained about the stinging rain even as it raised angry welts on any patch of skin that was exposed to the elements. They wouldn't dare. They had a job to do and their orders were clear.

They had been here two weeks now, holed up behind the defensive perimeter that had been erected around the hive. Ten-foot walls, topped with gun stations and sentry points. How many times had he walked the gantry around the cordon, gazing at the hive itself? How many days watching that strange green mould creeping from every joint, as if the building itself was decaying? Like meat gone bad.

He could almost taste the rot. Throne knew what it was doing to their lungs, breathing in that stench day after day. But here they would remain,

until the job was done. Until they'd fulfilled the orders Holt had been given.

No one was getting out of that hive alive.

As if to question his resolve, a sharp crack drowned out the steady hiss of the falling rain. The cyber-mastiffs reacted with a frenzy of barks as Holt twisted around, careful not to slip on the nowslick walkway. Acrid smoke plumed from the mine that had detonated in the middle of the no-man's-land that surrounded the base of the hive, indistinguishable shadows moving through the dense fog. Another blast followed, just metres from the first, sending more debris high into the air.

'Runners, sir,' the sergeant nearest Holt reported, never looking up from his rifle sights.

'Wait for a target, Sergeant Lang,' Holt ordered.

That was easier said than done as more and more mines blew, one after another, shrouding the hive in thick mires of choking black smoke.

'There,' Lang barked, his lasgun shifting as the smoke started to lift. A bloodied man floundered in the roiled earth. He was missing an arm, his clothes reduced to rags. Holt raised his laspistol and fired, putting the poor soul out of his misery. His body slapped into the mud.

'Good shot, sir,' the sergeant said, as the mastiffs threatened to pull Holt over in their haste to get to the others that were now staggering forward. These few had survived the first wave of mines, a mixture of fear and relief on their faces as they hurried towards the cordon occupied by Holt and his men. Some were crying, others were shouting, yelling for the Guardsmen to hold their fire. When he was younger, less experienced, Holt may have listened to their pleas.

But time and experience had taken their toll. Now he barely heard the cries for mercy.

'Shoot to kill,' Holt bellowed and his Guardsmen obeyed the order without question, lasguns shrieking louder than the citizens they were slaughtering.

There was every chance they were innocent; sheep driven across the minefield. But their loss was acceptable if it meant keeping the heretics festering inside their traitorous hive. One by one they fell before any more mines could be trampled, clearing the way for the real threat.

'And here they are, the unholy scum,' sneered Holt as the first shots rang

out from the hive doors. Without the need for another order, his men shifted their aim away from the last hopeless stragglers to the cultists that were now streaming from the hive.

The mastiffs were desperate to be freed, to sink their metallic teeth into the wretches, but Holt kept them firmly on the leash, watching as the first fatalities tumbled to the ground. Victory for the Ninth Jensen Regiment was assured; there was no way the cultists could withstand the full force of his men's guns. He could almost hear the praise that would be lavished upon him from his superiors. His worth would be proved once and for all, his ticket away from this insignificant siege, payback for the two weeks stuck in the mud around this accursed hive. War was coming to Ghul Jensen. Everyone knew it, even if they didn't know exactly what threat was racing towards the hive world. Holt had his suspicions and would be there, in the thick of it, for the glory of the Emperor – and himself.

A shell slammed into the defensive wall, forcing Holt to duck. What in the name of the Eye was that? Last time the cultists had tried to run the stockade, they had been armed with simple handguns, crude rifles at best. But this?

Another missile whistled through the air, taking out an entire section of the barbed wall. The screams of his own men joined the battle cries of the enemy, who were flowing onto the field now, more than Holt had expected.

The captain slapped his laspistol against his thigh, the magna-lock holding it in place as he retrieved a pair of field glasses. The grainy image zoomed in on the cultists and Holt cursed beneath his breath. On previous escape attempts, the cultists wore nothing than leathers and their savagely-tattooed hides. Not now. Now they were sporting hefty armour, twin-barrelled ripper guns spewing hot metal from their drums, and that wasn't the worst of it. Behind this advanced guard, a trio of massive exoskeletons waded into the mud – crude yes, but intimidating all the same. They'd obviously started life as heavy-lifters for the hive's manufactorums, designed to carry unwieldy parts on the production line, but the cultists had been busy. Armour plates were riveted across the chest cavities to protect the operators, flamers and missile launchers mounted on each pneumatic arm.

'Man the autocannons,' Holt screamed, shouting to be heard over the increasing barrage. 'Fire!'

Within seconds the gun-turrets sounded, a thunder to rival the storm overhead and the last noise the cultists would ever hear. The exterminators carved through the advancing force, silencing at least some of the heretic's weapons.

Some – but not enough.

For every armoured cultist the Guardsmen mowed down, two more were ready to take their place, each bearing arms more powerful than the last.

Holt's mind raced. He had two options. Deactivate the rest of the minefield remotely and give the order for his men to surge forward, taking the battle to the enemy, or bring fire down on their very heads from above.

Holt's scarred lips twisted into a smile as he barked into his vox. There was no contest.

'*Skyraptor*, take them down.'

Guardsmen cheered as the sound of *Skyraptor'*s engines filled the air. The Vendetta gunship swung around Hive Vinter, spotlights illuminating targets on the ground for the twin-linked lascannons to send to the mud.

One of the exoskeleton-clad heretics swivelled towards the looming aircraft, its shoulder mounted missile-launcher zeroing in on the gunship's cockpit.

Skyraptor's pilot fired first, reducing the exoskeleton to scrap.

'You've got your toys,' Holt grinned, his laspistol kicking in his hand, 'And I've got mine.'

The cultists didn't know which way to attack. The Vendetta swooped low, blazing death, while Holt's guards continued the barrage from behind the containment wall. The cultists were outgunned, plus they had made a fatal mistake showing their hand.

If they were manufacturing weapons such as these inside the hive, Holt thought, he may be able to persuade command to bring the entire building down. When the news of the uprising within Vinter first broke, defence forces were sent in. The battles were fierce, the cultists sacrificing themselves – and their prisoners – to defend their newly won territory. The decision had been made. Shut them in. Don't let them pass. Let the cultists starve in the mouldering tower.

All it would take is a few well-placed missiles. Holt had made the recommendation before, only to be told it was a waste of resources.

'Just keep the miscreants within Vinter's walls, Holt. And remember your

place for Throne's sake.'

Better to defend the other hives. Better to keep watching the skies.

They'd been wrong and he would prove it.

The Vendetta's engines whined as it came about for another sweep. The cultists were already breaking rank, running back for the exit. The sound of battle was incredible, almost drowning out the sergeant's shout.

'Sir, head's up!'

Holt glanced up just in time to see something hurtling down from on high. Something large.

'Incoming,' the captain yelled, willing the Vendetta to bank out of the way. The pilot slew the gunship to the side, but not fast enough. The falling object smashed through the Vendetta's port wing, sending the craft spiralling out of control., *Skyraptor* ploughed into the defensive wall, its lascannons still firing, a ball of flame blossoming into the rain.

Holt was thrown from his feet, his vox filled with the dying screams of his men.

'What is it, sir?' Lang asked, boggling at the steaming metal cocoon now half buried in the ground, metres away from *Skyraptor'*s burning wreck. As the cultist's assault began anew, a hatch blew from the side of the pod, neatly taking out an armour-clad attacker. The sergeant's face blanched behind his visor. 'Could it be the Angels of Death, sir? Have they sent reinforcements?'

'I don't think so, sergeant,' Holt replied, watching as another cultist rushed towards the pod, firing into its cramped quarters. The advance didn't last long. A single shot from within downed the heretic, a haze of bone and brain matter exploding from the back of his head.

The captain was right. The figure that burst from the pod couldn't have been more different to a Space Marine. Yes, it wore black armour, but it was as sleek as members of the Adeptus Astartes were imposing. It raced out of the pod, a heavily modified bolt pistol thundering in one hand, a power sword growling in the other – but it was the thing's head that caused Holt to gape. It was completely encased in a bone-white death mask fashioned after a human skull, red eyes glowing above a grinning skeletal mouth.

'Sir, what is it?' the sergeant spluttered as the thing's power sword neatly separated a cultist's head from his shoulders.

‘A distraction,’ Holt replied, struggling to hold the mastiffs back, the hounds driven wild by the newcomer’s scent. They pulled on their chains, eager to get away, even as more cultists fell at the mysterious aggressor’s feet. ‘Whatever it is, it shouldn’t be here. Bring it down.’

‘But sir, the cultists–’ began Lang.

‘Bring them all down!’

Lang didn’t argue. Without another word he brought his lasrifle about and discharged a volley straight into the back of the macabre figure that was mowing down more cultists than Holt’s own men.

Not that it even seemed to notice. One of the armoured cultists lumbered forwards, swathing the skull-faced brute in promethium. The stranger disappeared beneath the flames, but still didn’t stop. It barrelled forward and slashed across the exo-skeleton’s rough chest-plates, opening the armour up in one solid strike. Whether the blade cut through the cultist’s flesh Holt couldn’t see, but even if the heretic survived the initial assault, the bolt lodged in his brain finished him once and for all.

The cultist toppled back, the weight of his exo-suit pulling him down. Even then, the death-bringer didn’t stop. It vaulted forward, planting a booted foot on the cultist’s chest, propelling itself through the air, still peppering the cultists with bolts as it leapt.

Autocannon shells were already churning the mud around its feet when it landed on the other side of the fallen exo-skeleton, a round finding its target and knocking the killer from its feet. The power sword flew from its grip, but the creature didn’t stay down. It rolled with the impact, springing back up to its feet as if it had just been stung by a wasp rather than hit with a shell that should by rights have ripped him in two. It continued running towards the open doors, not even pausing to slash at the tattooed cultist that stood in its path, opening the heretic’s inked cheek with the needle--like talons that extended from its empty hand.

So that was the real reason it was here. Not to aid the fight, but to get inside the hive. Not while Holt still had breath in his lungs.

‘Rend!’ the captain screamed at the mastiffs, finally loosening his grip on their restraints. The two hounds charged forwards, the chains flailing behind them, catching wounded cultists as they tore past. They covered the no-man’s-land in seconds, and yet incredibly – impossibly – the death-bringer seemed ready for them. Without even flinching, it turned,

dispatching the first mastiff with a single clinical shot. Practiced. Fluid. Like an assassin from hell. Holt screamed in frustration as the beast's corpse slid to a halt in the mud, the smaller of the two dogs threw itself at the assassin, ready to close servo-powered jaws around that fearsome grinning mask.

'Rip his head off,' Holt yelled, reaching for his magnoculars to witness the mauling – but as they focused, a strained gurgle emanated from the back of the captain's throat.

'No,' he spat. 'That's not possible.'

The assassin was wrestling with the mastiff, holding the hound's jaws open with its gloved hands. The claws he had seen carve open the cultist's face were now embedded in the side of the dog's face, the augmented animal's body going into some kind of seizure.

With a sudden jolt, the assassin ripped the jaws apart, splitting the dog's head open like a ripe fruit. With barely a shrug, he pushed himself free of the still twitching body and reached for his bolt pistol that had been thrown aside during the attack.

Screaming with rage, Holt charged for the nearest gun-turret, roughly shoving a guardsman out of the way to get to the controls. He swung the autocannon around, finding the assassin in the sights and fired. The rest of his men joined the assault, the Assassin struggling to get to his feet as round after round thundered home.

'Die, won't you?' Holt howled as the gun-tower bucked. 'Just di–'

As one, every remaining mine in no-man's-land erupted, sending mud and body parts high into the air. In his fury, Holt hadn't seen the embattled assassin press a stud set into its belt, didn't hear the sudden shrill tone that was perfectly masked by the percussive rumble of the autocannon. He wasn't even prepared as shrapnel peppered the containment wall, a sliver of metal slicing straight through his protective visor, carving its way into the soft jelly of his right eye.

The pain would come later. For now, he was pulling himself back up from where he had fallen, knocked back by the combined force of the blasts, blood pouring from burst ear-drums.

With his one good eye, Holt scanned the battlefield, searching for any sign of the stranger.

There was none. As the sergeant ran up to him, Holt slumped to the

ground, shock finally taking hold. Whatever that thing was, it had entered the hive – and Emperor help anyone who got in its way.

High in the Spires of the hive, Governor Vinter coughed violently, blood splattering across the rich dark brown rug. He'd purchased it just months before. Genuine Carnadon pelt. The best gelts could buy. How he'd loved slipping off his boots and feeling its deep soft pile beneath his toes. So luxurious. So extravagant.

'The lower levels would kill for a carpet like this,' he'd joked to his aide, pouring himself another glass of amasec.

It didn't seem so funny anymore.

The governor had forgotten what it was like to be comfortable. He had no idea how long he'd been hanging from the wall of his chambers, nailed to the frame of his own official portrait, the cult leader's idea of a sick joke. It could have been days, maybe weeks. Time had lost all sense of meaning. The memory of the heretic's brutish face as the nails had been rammed home was all that was clear.

'I don't know much about art, governor but I know what I like.'

Why wouldn't they just let him die?

Vinter tried to glower at the cult leader, rocking back and forth in front of the makeshift shrine he'd erected on the other side of the office. It was useless. The governor couldn't even summon the energy to glare anymore. Instead he let out a long feeble moan – the greatest act of defiance he could manage.

The traitor stopped mid-chant, looking over his abnormally large shoulder.

'Quiet!' the brute rumbled. 'I'm praying!'

'So sorry to disturb you,' the governor murmured, amazed at how weak his voice sounded.

The cult leader turned back to the flayed skull that sat in the middle of his makeshift shrine. He reached up, caressing the heavy brow that formed a thick ridge over tiny, impossibly small eye sockets. His fingers lingered on the huge jutting jawbone, the large pointed canines. The heretic's head dropped into a deep bow before he rose to his full height. Even after all this time, Vinter was always surprised how big the traitor was. He must have been easily seven foot tall and seemed just as wide, muscles

bunching beneath his heavily-tattooed skin. The governor felt sick to his stomach just looking at the freak, his broad back a pincushion of metal studs.

Or perhaps he was still nauseous from when Big Bruvva had broken both his legs. Surely he hadn't snapped them with his bare hands, as Vinter remembered. That was impossible wasn't it? It had to be another of the fevered dreams that had plagued him on the rare occasions that he'd managed to sleep hanging here.

The governor couldn't tell what was real or not anymore. Everything was a blur. The news that mutants were swarming through the underhive. The power going down. The sound of stuttering gunfire outside his office. Big Bruvva grabbing his aide by that lovely, slender neck Vinter had admired on so many occasions. The neck that cracked with the sound of splintering wood.

He hadn't seen her body hitting the carpet that she had so admired. He was too busy reaching for his gun.

The same gun Big Bruvva had twisted from his grip and used as a bludgeon.

His mind had blanked out most of the details – except for the pain. He remembered the pain. He'd lived with it ever since.

Big Bruvva turned and sniffed loudly, the bone thrust through his flat nose twitching obscenely.

'Should kill you for that,' his tormentor snarled, offering Vinter a glimpse of a terrifying row of filed teeth.

Please, the governor thought, proving that just when he couldn't disgust himself any more, there was further still to fall.

'Know why I don't?' Big Bruvva asked, thudding forward to bring himself face-to-face with the broken man. When Vinter didn't respond, the cultist roared in his face, spittle flying from his pierced lips. 'Do you?'

'No,' the governor whimpered, trying to turn his head away from the brute's fetid breath. His head lolled forwards weakly instead.

Big Bruvva gazed up to the ceiling as if his piggy eyes could see the heavens.

'Because Gork wills it.'

The governor's stomach clenched at the name – one he hadn't even heard just over a month ago. He'd heard it enough since, chanted over and over

again as the cult leader had daubed icons of his false god across Vinter's walls in lurid green paint. At least, he hoped it was paint.

Gork, Gork, Gork, Gork.

Big Bruvva would whirl towards him, his eyes wide with fervour, foam flecking the sides of his mouth.

'He's coming for us, governor. Coming to make us whole. Coming to make us ork!'

And that was the scariest thing of all. These simpletons believed, really believed, that this ork god, if that truly was what it was, was coming for them, to transform them into their twisted idea of perfection.

Not human, but greenskins. Xenos scum.

'Coming for us, coming for me.'

Oh, they were coming for him all right.

And then were Big Bruvva's followers, trooping in front of him, falling over each other to prove their devotion. Each one seemed larger than the last, muscles straining beneath taut skin that bled freely where the imbeciles had carved intelligible runes into their own flesh. It couldn't be natural. He'd seen big men before, men who'd worked hard to sculpt their bodies, but not like this. Throne knew what poisons they were pumping into their systems to swell their muscles to such unnatural proportions.

Yet the bigger the idiots were, the more damage they had lavished on their bodies, the warmer the welcome they received from their leader.

As long as they didn't dare to be bigger than Big Bruvva himself. Then they'd suffer. Then they'd be cut back down to size.

All over the governor's rug.

How desperate had things got in the underhive that deviants such as these could take control so easily? That their influence would stretch so far.

Why hadn't he been warned? Why weren't the authorities prepared?

Of course, the truth of the matter was that he had been told, his advisors shuffling into his chambers, reporting the existence of a lowly mutant with an ork obsession.

'He believes that he is a herald,' Prefect Bodil had sneered as a hololith of the cult-leader appeared over the governor's table, turning slowly in the air. 'Sent to convert us to the xenos' blasphemous faith.' Bodil had chuckled as he'd made his report.

The ashen-faced man in the emerald robes sitting beside the prefect

didn't share the humour. This was Murkel, an astropath who had served Vinter well for many years, looking beyond the hive, feeding the governor secrets. Murkel's sunken eyes seemed more troubled than ever. 'There is a disturbance within the hive,' the astropath muttered, his voice rarely louder than a whisper. 'A presence I cannot identify.'

'This herald?' Vinter asked.

The astropath's gaze dropped. 'A devil from below.'

Bodil couldn't hide his distain. 'At the worst, he displays some low-level pysker abilities.' His thin lips twisted into a superior smile. 'Perhaps the bore is picking up on the coming troubles.'

The coming troubles. That's how Bodil had described them. Such small words for the fleet of ork warships that were rampaging towards Ghul Jensen.

'You think that's what is galvanising this Big Bruvva character?' the governor asked Murkel, and ignoring Bodil. 'Fuelling the riots in the lower levels?'

'We believe so, sir.'

Vinter thumped his fist sharply on the table. 'Then it will only get worse the nearer the ork threat gets.'

The governor realised now that he should have listened, should have acted as soon as this muscled oaf had emerged from the Pit. If he'd cleaned that cesspool up years ago, when the sinkhole had first opened deep below the hive, none of this would have happened. His advisors had told him that the Pit had been a blessing in disguise, taking slums and crime-dens with it. Hundreds had died on that day, but thousands more had shed blood since. The wound in the bowels of Hive Vinter had since become an amphitheatre of sorts. The dregs of what could laughably be called society gathered on the edges, peering down into the Pit as combatants fought. Some used their fists, others caved in their rivals' skulls with the debris that still littered the floor, the remnant of life before the sinkhole. The results were the same. The blood. The cheers. The gangs taking bets on the sidelines.

According to the reports, a rare few went voluntarily into the pit. Most were thrown in kicking and screaming. If they survived the fall they'd fight for their lives. Winner takes all.

Until the next bout.

Big Bruvva had survived more fights than any other champion, but had used his newfound infamy to spread his unholy gospel. The word of Gork.

And now his followers had clambered out of the Pit to ‘save’ anyone who would listen, and slaughter those who would not. All while a plague of real ork ships was carving its way across the system, destroying everything that stood in its way.

Bodil reached forward and extinguished the hololith, snapping Vinter’s thoughts to the here and now. ‘I’m sure it is nothing to concern ourselves over, governor,’ Bodil he said, but Vinter wasn’t having any of that.

‘Nothing to worry about?’ the governor repeated, not quite believing what he was hearing. ‘Bodil, Obstiria has already fallen. You do realise that, don’t you?’

‘Of course, sir.’

‘The hive should be preparing for incursion.’

‘As indeed we are–’

The governor had always hated being interrupted. ‘Not facing dangers from within,’ he continued. ‘For the last time, how much of a threat is this cult?’

‘The so-called ‘Bruvvahood’?’ Bodil offered another of his shrill laughs. ‘Mindless rabble, governor, nothing more. Violent, yes, but easily controlled.’

Vinter wondered if Bodil still believed they could be easily controlled when his head had been twisted from his scrawny shoulders.

He had always thought Bodil was spineless.

The governor giggled at the words crossed his mind. The sound of a crazy man.

Big Bruvva buried his fist in Vinter’s empty stomach to shut him up.

‘You’ll see,’ the cult-leader said, grabbing Vinter’s once immaculate hair and yanking his head back to face him. ‘You’ll all see when Gork comes.’

An alert blared from the cogitator embedded into the governor’s desk. No, it was Big Bruvva’s desk now, perfect for resting his filthy boots on. The cult leader plodded over and jabbed a glyph with a calloused finger.

‘At last,’ he growled. ‘What happened? Did we break out?’

‘No, Boss,’ replied in an equally guttural voice. ‘There was a problem.’

‘What kind of problem?’ Big Bruvva asked, the chords on his neck standing out like ropes.

‘You need to see for yourself.’

A grainy image flashed up on the monitor behind Big Bruvva. The Gork worshipper turned to see three of his men rushing down a dark corridor, armed to their sharpened teeth.

Vinter recalled the similar images he’d watched. His private defence force, the army he had spent years training, slaughtered at the hands of the insurgents. The dead mounting up one by one. All that effort keeping the extent of his empire building secret, skirting around rules and regulations, keeping his activities away from prying Administratum eyes whatever the cost, wasted.

Sounds hissed over the vox. Angry yells. The bark of weapons.

Screams.

The cultists dropped out of frame as a figure swept forward. A figure clad in black. A figure wearing the face of death itself.

Big Bruvva slammed his hand down on the controls, freezing the image. He took a step closer, almost pressing his flat nose against the screen, examining the stranger who had just cut down three of his best men.

And then he started to laugh; a deep, horrible sound.

‘This is it,’ he boomed, throwing his hands out wide in rapture, before whirling on Vinter. ‘The Day of Reckoning is coming. This is the final test, as it was foretold!’

When Vinter didn’t respond, Big Bruvva brought the back of his hand across the governor’s cheek. ‘Are you listening?’

The cultist snorted to himself as Vinter let out a pathetic whimper. ‘Puny human,’ he grinned, jabbing at the vox-control one more time.

‘Take him down, boys,’ Big Bruvva ordered, eyes blazing with sinful fervour. ‘Take him down hard!’

Greenie had never felt so alive. Life had always been hard in the underhive. Ever since he was a kid he’d spent his days scavenging for tech, breaking into his neighbour’s habs to pilfer whatever they’d stolen the day before, running home before his ill-gotten gains could be taken from him in turn and selling it to the highest bidder.

You never knew which gang would be in charge of the block when you woke up in the morning, not until you ventured outside to see which bodies were lying in the gutters. Not that the victors remained in power for

long. Events moved quickly in the undercity.

Not anymore. The gangs were all gone, and for once Greenie was on the winning side.

On Gork's side.

He belonged here now, with his 'bruvvas' by his side and a gun in his hands. Greenie ran his pierced tongue over his newly pointed teeth. Shaving them into fangs had hurt like hell, but that's what Gork had commanded.

'It's a message to your enemies,' Big Bruvva had explained as Greenie had gone to work with the file. 'If you're willing to do this to yourself…'

'Imagine what we'll do to them!' Greenie had replied happily.

The pain had been worth it. Big Bruvva had even given him his new name. His parents had christened him Halcum, a weak human name. He wasn't weak any more. Now he was Greenie, on account of the fact that he'd dyed his hair the colour of jade before the teeth-filing ceremony. Yeah, it was falling out now, the chemicals having scorched his scalp, but he'd proved his devotion.

The Day of Reckoning was coming. Gork would make them whole. Would make them ork.

Greenie couldn't wait.

'He's in the power plant,' Rippa shouted from up front. Rippa was Greenie's hero. Other than Big Bruvva, Rippa was the largest cultist he'd seen so far, and therefore the best. He had more tattoos than anyone else too, thick green runes snaking across his broad back. Most of them were weeping, of course, the edges encrusted with dried blood. Rippa had made the ink himself, using the fungus that had started spreading across the walls of the hive the day that Big Bruvva had taken control.

Old Raine had said Rippa was an abomination – the mould had got into his blood.

Rippa had torn the old man's tongue out and left him to die in the street. Served him right. Greenie had always hated the arrogant old git. Always thought he knew best. He'd meant to go back and take Raine's head, boil off the flesh and present it to Big Bruvva himself as an offering, but the rats had got there first. There wasn't much left.

This was his chance to prove himself to them all. To Rippa, to Big Bruvva – to Gork.

‘You’ll go far, Greenie,’ that’s what Rippa had said. ‘Just do what you’re told.’ And today he was being told to kill. Best kind of telling there was.

Of course, he didn’t really know who it was they had to kill.

Rippa had shrugged when Greenie asked. ‘Some git from outside the hive.’

‘An invader?’

‘Big Bruvva reckons it’s a test, sent by Gork.’

Greenie didn’t care about that. He just wanted to try out this new gun. He ran his head over the smooth barrel. What had Rippa called it? Yeah, that’s right – a ‘shoota’!

‘Main generator room,’ Rippa yelled. ‘Come on!’

They obeyed without question. Of course they did. Rippa would crack their skulls otherwise. Greenie wanted his skull to stay the way it was – although he did fancy getting some of those fancy horn implants he’d seen on the others. Maybe he’d get one after he’d killed the git. A trophy.

The cultists ran into the vast chamber, giant turbines stretching up on either side like vast metallic cliffs. There was a narrow path down the middle, similar channels on either side. The noise was incredible, generators roaring like mud-lizards.

Greenie’s skin tingled. You could almost feel the power in the air, the energy that the spire-scum had denied the underhivers for so long. Not now. Big Bruvva had shut off their power on the first day. Made them beg, just so that they could use their stupid little machines again – and then Big Bruvva had killed them anyway.

‘Where is he, then?’ one of the other cultists called out, struggling to be heard. They swept down all three paths, checking between the turbine towers, firing around corners, just in case the git was hiding in the shadows like the cowardly human it was. Not like them. They were going to be orks. They were going to win.

Greenie stuck close to Rippa, itching to find a target. He didn’t have to wait long.

Shots rang out across the generator room, mixed with cries of triumph and then fear, as Greenie’s brothers finally found their prey. He soon wished they hadn’t.

‘Get him!’ Rippa yelled, running between two of the turbines and firing wildly ahead. ‘Knock him down! Stomp him good. Dakka, dakka, dak–’

Rippa's head exploded. Just like that. One minute it was there, the next it was gone. His body continued to run before his legs realised that his brain had been pulped and simply stopped. Rippa's headless corpse toppled forward to land wetly on the floor.

Hot metal buzzed through the air like a swarm of angry hornets. Greenie ducked, slipping on Rippa's blood, and fell, a tumble that saved his life – for a few moments at least.

He never saw who fired the mortar that screamed above his head and barely even registered its trajectory in the chaos, but by Gork did he feel the fireball that burst out of the turbine behind him, the clothes on his back melting in an instant. The pain of filing his teeth was nothing compared to this, but even with the world going mad, he knew what he had to do. For Rippa. For himself. Gritting his teeth so tight he thought they would crack, he scrabbled across the slick floor towards where his gun had fallen. Someone else snatched it up – another new recruit, hardly a tattoo on his skin. The runt hadn't even been granted an ork name yet. He was still called Vorn, the same snivelling wretch Greenie had known in the schola.

'Hey, that's mine,' Greenie cried, staggering back up to his feet, ready to pull the weapon out of Vorn's hand, to kill him if necessary – but he didn't need to. A look of complete surprise flashed over the runt's face, four sharp points bursting out of his chest. They vanished as quickly as they'd appeared and Vorn dropped to the floor, his body convulsing.

Greenie didn't hang around to see Vorn's veins blackening, blood streaming from his dimming eyes. He was running from the thing that had already stepped over Vorn's corpse. Turned out Greenie didn't care about proving himself so much after all. All he cared about was survival.

As he fled, Greenie threw a look over his shoulder, more a reflex than any desire to know how much distance he'd put between him and certain death.

Not enough.

The claws raked against Greenie's skull as they slashed clean through his screaming face.

Big Bruvva roared in fury, sweeping a heavyset arm across the governor's table, sending its contents flying across the chamber.

Behind the cult leader, Vinter allowed himself the ghost of a smile.

Are you scared, yet Bruvva? Are you feeling as helpless as I was when I

watched my own guard trampled beneath your followers' boots?

The governor knew what that thing was down there, knew what it could do. He'd seen reports, highly classified reports that no one outside Hive Jensen had been supposed to see. Secrets that had been commodities to trade, back when the world made sense, when he'd had been lord and master. Before this brute had ruined everything.

Big Bruvva wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand, shoulders heaving. 'It doesn't matter,' he growled. 'That freak will bleed soon enough, whatever it is.'

'He's coming for you, you know?' Vinter was surprised to hear a voice challenging the oaf, even more so when he realised it was his own. 'He won't stop until he's killed you too.'

Big Bruvva peered at the governor over his shoulder, a cruel grin spreading over his blunt features.

'I'm counting on it…'

Anya could barely breathe, the stench of her fellow prisoners becoming more overpowering by the day. She had no idea how long they'd been crammed in these cages, suffocating in their own filth. The survivors of Big Bruvva's purges. The lucky ones.

A bony elbow jabbed her in the ribs, but she'd taught herself not to react. Cause a scene and you'd be pulled out of the cage. Cause a scene and you'd die.

And so she kept quiet, watching their two guards inhaling spores from the mould they heated in a small metal bowl, their bodies shuddering with every ragged breath.

'Blades,' the thinner one of the two called out, his rough voice catching on the smoke. 'You've got to try this stuff. Think I just saw Gork.'

Beside him, his obese companion half-choked on the fumes. 'Where is Blades anyway?' he hacked, his abnormally stretched earlobes joggling.

Anya knew exactly who they were talking about – the largest of their three guards. Tall, muscular and cruel with the habit of clanging his knife blades along the bars of the cages, not caring if he cut the terrified prisoners within.

'Who cares?' grinned the first guard. 'All the more for us. Gork be praised.'

He raised his gaunt face, a dozy smile stretching across his tattooed features before his eyes went wide. He didn't even have time to shout a warning before something heavy crashed wetly down between them, guttering the small fire and sending the bowl clattering across the floor.

In her cage, Anya gagged as she realised what had fallen from the access panel high above their heads. A slab of meat that had once been a man, his green-inked skin covered in blood, the arms that had once carried long wicked knifes missing, ripped off at the shoulders.

The fat guard gaped before a jagged hole opened in his forehead, as another figure leapt down from on high, landing heavily on Blades' corpse, gun still smoking. The thin cultist jumped back, grabbing his own weapon, but couldn't even drag it from its holster before his face was shredded by the newcomer's claws.

The guard hit the floor, limbs jerking as what was left of his features started turning black.

Anya looked up, locking eyes with the living nightmare that had so proficiently dispatched her tormentors; furious red orbs glaring back from a bone white face.

There were shouts from behind, the sound of running feet. She glanced over her shoulder, trying to see through the gaps lefts by her panicked fellow prisoners. A mob was running towards them, more cultists than she'd ever seen, guns already up and firing.

A shot thudded into their skull-faced saviour's chest, followed by another, but it didn't fall. It didn't even make a sound, simply swinging up its own weapon and firing a single bolt – not at its aggressors, but at the lock on Anya's cage. The door was open in an instant, the prisoners pouring out of the corridor and straight into the path of the approaching gunfire.

Anya didn't run. She shrank back into the cage and watched as the former captives were struck down, those who escaped the hail of bullets running in every direction, blocking the cultists' view of their skull-faced target, a perfect shield.

And then it was in the midst of them, moving so fast Anya could barely see. She slid down the bars, pressing her palms over her ears, trying to block out the rattle of bolts and the shrieks of those breathing their last. She screwed her eyes tight, expecting any minute for one of those shots to

find her, cringing in the corner of her cage like an animal.

But the shot never came. After a while, Anya realised the sounds had stopped. Her hands dropped from her ears as, still shaking, she turned to see a carpet of bodies on the floor – prisoners and cultists alike. Limbs were at awkward angles, blood running in rivulets down rapidly cooling flesh. Somewhere someone was weeping, faint sobs that ended abruptly with a wet cough and a dry rattle.

She's seen enough massacres in the last few weeks, but nothing like this, cultists and prisoners alike united in death.

One body was missing as Anya nervously stepped out of the cage – a body with a bone-white face.

Big Bruvva's fist piled into the screen.

For the first time since the revolt, Vinter wanted to live, if only to witness their beloved leader's despair as his forces were diminished level by level. It couldn't be stopped now.

Any perverse enjoyment the cult leader had been deriving from the bloodshed was gone. As Big Bruvva turned to the vox his face was a mask of pure hatred. The heretic hunched over the desk, thumbing open a vox-channel that could deliver a message to every speaker in the structure simultaneously. The new lord and master of Hive Vinter was about to address the masses.

'You think you're so hard,' he growled, leaning close to the vox-bead, his voice echoing around the corridors deep below them. 'Well, Big Bruvva is about to teach you a lesson, do you hear?'

The doors of the cathedral blew open, blessed splinters hammering against the pews – and that wasn't all. A figure was thrown into freshly defiled nave, knocked back by the force of a frag grenade, crashing into the ancient wooden benches.

It didn't get a chance to stand. Even before the smoke had cleared, cultists thronged through the wrecked doors, emptying their guns into its black armour. From his perch, high in the gallery, Hurta saw a flash of white amidst the chaos. The freak's skull mask.

He hated waiting. Always had. Even now, his trigger finger twitched, desperate to fire, but Big Bruvva had told them to wait for the signal. The

moment had to be right.

The assassin struggled to rear up, chips of its armour flying in all directions. One of the cultists got near – too near – and was rewarded by talons digging deep into his leg. The Gork worshipper screamed as he was dragged in front of the assassin, his own brothers' ammo slicing through him.

It was the opportunity skull-face had been waiting for. It was on its feet again, returning fire, kicking and swiping with those damned claws. Surely it couldn't remain standing for long. It was surrounded. It was dead.

A brother Hurta had never seen before grabbed the assassin's gun arm, yanking it back, attempting to rip every ligament in the freak's shoulder. Old skull-face just swung around, driving its talons deep into the tall man's neck, perforating muscle and bone. Another brother lost. Another dead.

But that was the freak's first mistake. As the brother dropped, the assassin pulled its claws free, turning its back towards Hurta. The moment Hurta had been waiting for.

Big Bruvva's voice hissed in Hurta's ear-piece: 'Now!'

Hurta squeezed his trigger, the harpoon bucking in his arms. The barbed spear shot forward, burying itself in the freak's back with a satisfying crunch. So much for that armour.

The assassin arched its back, pulling against the thick cord that stretched back up to Hurta's harpoon. Hurta grabbed at the gargoyle that was crouched beside him, anchoring himself as the refined acoustics of the cathedral sang to the sounds of harpoons being fired from all around the gallery.

Spears plunged into the assassin's flesh, barbed spears impossible to pull out without doing more damage than they had caused going in. Spears dipped in poison. Big Bruvva had promised the freak a lesson. This was it.

Within seconds, the assassin was caught in a web of cords, each reeling back into the harpoons, holding the freak tight. At first it thrashed, a couple of Hurta's brothers losing their footing and crashing down from their hiding place.

Not Hurta. Hurta hung onto the gargoyle, even as the freak stopped struggling, its head finally lolling drunkenly forward. A stream of red drool flowed from its slash of a mouth, the slabs hissing and steaming

where it pooled.

A cheer went out from the faithful, a roar of victory, but silence descended as a green-skinned giant swaggered into the cathedral.

Big Bruvva reached out and, almost gently, tipped the back of the freak's head. The cult leader smiled and then planted a pile-driving punch on the assassin's cheek. Its head snapped around so fast that Hurta was sure its neck must have broken instantly.

When the head fell limply back, the side of the death mask was smashed, opened by the spikes implanted in Big Bruvva's knuckles, dark blood oozing from the cracks.

'Bring it to the Pit,' Big Bruvva sneered.

It was like coming home. The roar of the crowd. The rubble beneath his feet. The stench of stale blood and fear.

The Pit.

It had been here that Big Bruvva had pulled a bone from beneath a collapsed wall and used it to stave in the head of his first opponent. Here where his first vision had seared its path across his mind. Here where he had first heard Gork's name, screamed across eternity.

They were coming now. Big Bruvva could feel them. Ready to descend. Ready to crush and stomp and kill. It wouldn't be long.

Bombs falling. Guns firing. Bones ground into the dirt.

The Day of Reckoning.

Big Bruvva swayed on his feet, but no one would see. He was standing in the shadows, all eyes on the freak, hanging from chains in the centre of the Pit. Limp. Broken.

Big Bruvva would break him some more.

He could feel the drugs burning through his veins, his muscles hardening second by second, pressing against the restraints of the exo-suit. It hurt. Gork knew it hurt, but pain was good. Pain kept you alive and when you were alive you could make others dead.

Stomp 'em. Crush 'em. Kill 'em.

Big Bruvva lurched forward, ignoring the pain squirming at the back of his mind.

They are coming. They are coming. They are coming.

The suit's pistons hissed with every step – out into the arena, out into the

light.

Stomp 'em. Crush 'em. Kill 'em!

The crowd went wild as soon as they saw their champion striding purposely towards the freak, his name chanted over and over again. It mixed with the cry inside his head, the otherworldly bellow that threatened to split his skull in two.

'Bruv-va! Bruv-va! Bruv-va! Bruv-va!'

He was running now, arms raised, teeth bared, ready to rip this deformity limb from limb.

Big Bruvva roared, a single wordless howl that echoed around the arena, his followers instinctively joining the chorus, drowning out the harsh grind of the chainblades mounted on each of Big Bruvva's arms.

And still the freak didn't move.

Maybe it was unconscious. Maybe it was dead. It didn't matter. Big Bruvva would cut it in–

The chains attached to the post broke free, the freak ducking as the chainblade buried itself into the stone. The teeth caught, just for a second, but long enough for the assassin to brake his curved claws against Big Bruvva's exposed chest.

The pain didn't even register as he brought his free arm around, cracking hard into the side of the freak's nightmarish face. The assassin stumbled back as Big Bruvva pulled the embedded chainblade out, the momentum causing him to take a step back – far enough to avoid the boot that swung out to take his legs away from beneath him. Blood sprayed from the freak's cracked mask, hissing as it splashed against the rubbish beneath their feet.

Big Bruvva brought his right chainblade down, but the freak rolled out of the way, sweeping up with those claws, cutting through cables and wires to find the welcoming flesh of Big Bruvva's left forearm. The blades did their work, cutting deep to the bone.

Big Bruvva's vision flared white, the pain silencing everything else, the roar of the crowd, the buzz of his blades. Even the thunder in his head.

He had suffered worse injuries in the past, but he bawled with the agony, and Bruvva barely noticed the freak springing up to plant a boot in the middle of his blistered chest.

The force of the blow threw him back, the hand of his ravaged arm

cramping into an involuntary claw of its own.

This couldn't be happening. The skull-faced freak had inflicted a few scratches, nothing more, but as Big Bruvva lost his footing, it was as if his body was going into shock.

Realisation dawned as he hit the floor. Those claws. They were poisoned, just as the spears in the cathedral ambush had been. His body felt like it was burning up from the inside – matching the flames that raged through his mind.

Stomp 'em. Crush 'em. Kill 'em

He couldn't even tell if his followers were still cheering or had been shocked into silence. All he could hear was the sound of a battlefield. A single, monotonous war cry drowning out every else. He forced his head around in time to see the freak swinging a weapon down towards him. No, not a weapon. Those damned claws.

Big Bruvva twisted, the exo-suit's joints whining in protest, and batted the claws away with his near useless-arm. He brought it down hard, crushing the hand beneath the exo-suit's armour plating and rolled on top of his opponent. He knew what he was going to do, even as he planted an armoured knee into the assassin's chest, a pleasing spurt of blood spraying through those skull-like lips.

With more effort than it should have taken, he drew his near-dead arm back sharply, twisting it so the chainblade met the freak's own mangled arm. The teeth sliced through armour and flesh, before it reached bone. The assassin bayed, the first nose Bruvva had heard it make, scarlet eyes widening behind the mask.

When the freak pulled its arm back to its chest, the severed hand stayed where it was, claws still twitching. It grabbed its bloody stump in shock, long enough for Big Bruvva to grab the assassin's throat with his good hand. He pressed hard, feeling the freak's windpipe buckle beneath his grip, heard a choked gasp behind the mask. Not such a monster now. Strip away the skull and the weapons and the armour and the freak was just another stinking human ripe for sacrifice, one more tribute to Gork.

Stomp it. Crush it. Kill it.

The freak clawed helplessly at Big Bruvva's arm, the cult leader lifting his prize into the air. No poison could stop him. No wound would bring him to his knees. He was the Chosen One. He was Gork's herald. He was

triumphant.

Big Bruvva held the freak aloft, ignoring the pain. This was his moment. He threw back his head and joined in his followers' cry.

'Waaaaaag–'

He didn't even see the freak move. There was no warning. One minute it was hanging from his fist, like a slab of meat, and the next it was thrusting the stump of its arm through the protective cage that surrounded Big Bruvva's head. He had no time to react. The bloody end mashed into his face, stripping the skin away in an instant. The flicker of a memory replayed through his mind. The pool of gore steaming on the cathedral floor, eating through the stone slabs like acid.

Big Bruvva had no idea if he screamed. He saw Gork's bloodshot eyes, painted large across a blazing cosmos, even as his own were reduced to a viscous jelly that dribbled out of melting sockets. Gork was laughing, throwing back his mighty head and roaring with mirth.

Big Bruvva never felt his hand loosen around the freak's throat. Never felt it press its stump deeper, burning through his skull and into his brain. Never even felt his knees buckle, his engorged body crashing forward, the exo-skeleton smashing into the jagged debris on the floor.

As he died, the only thing Big Bruvva could hear was Gork's mocking laughter, taunting the man who would have been an ork.

His Chosen One.

His fool.

The stars were falling across Ghul Jensen. That's what it looked like for Governor Vinter at least. New suns blossomed in the sky before fading, fire streaking through the heavens.

This was what Big Bruvva had wanted the governor to see, why he'd kept him alive. The Day of Reckoning. The Coming of Gork.

The idiot would have claimed that the explosions in the upper atmosphere were a sign, a portent even, if his vocabulary hadn't been that of a child.

He was right about one thing. It was a sign – that bombs would soon start falling. That ships would be descending through those leaden clouds, crushing all opposition.

Not that Big Bruvva would see it himself. The cult leader had left the smashed screen operating in the office, so that Vinter could witness him

slaughter the Assassin first hand. The governor wished he'd still had the strength to cheer as the brute had fallen in front of his followers, his face an unrecognisable mess – but he could hardly breathe. It wouldn't be long now. A blessed relief.

He didn't know what had happened to the Assassin. As soon as the cult leader crashed to the floor, his disciples swarmed into the arena, desperate to take down the creature that had killed their so-called herald. The screen became a confused mess of bodies, gunfire crackling over the speakers, as the Gork worshippers turned on each other. Big Bruvva's lieutenants were desperate to take control, filling the gap left by their leader's demise, even before his body grew cold.

The governor wondered how long the Assassin had lasted in the melee; which of the mindless drones had delivered the killing blow. It didn't matter anymore. Soon they'd all be dead. The weakest of laughs gurgled in Vinter's throat as he imaged the cultists welcoming real orks with open arms. He could just imagine the response, the leer on the orks' faces as they cut the pretenders down where they stood.

'Stupid humies!'

There was movement in the corridor outside. He'd heard muffled explosions and gunfire earlier, the feuding cultists making for the spires to claim their throne. Let them have it, for all the good it would do.

The door opened. Vinter couldn't look up. His head was like a lead weight.

He followed the noise across the room, booted footsteps on the carpet. It wasn't like the heretics to be so quiet. Where were the jeers and yells, the cries of victory? Maybe they were there and just couldn't hear them. For all he knew, his senses had finally deserted him. A blessed release.

A shadow passed in front of him, blocking out the light of the panoramic window. Something pressed up against his chin, pushing his head back. Something that burned. The governor looked up, expecting to find himself staring at the idiotic features of a cultist, all tattoos, studs and pointed teeth. Instead, the face in front of him was bone white, albeit streaked with dried blood. Red eyes regarded him coldly, the death mask frozen in an eternal smile.

Vinter wheezed a weak approximation of a laugh. 'So, you weren't sent for Big Bruvva at all. Of course not. What would the Imperium care about

a heretic and his motley band of followers, eh? Not when you could have me.'

The Assassin didn't answer. That wasn't a surprise. Nor was the fact that the Imperium had known all along. About the illegal arms. About the army.

About the plans to attack the other hives.

He could have ruled Ghul Jensen – no longer the poor relation among the founding families. Vinter, a name they had always ridiculed. A name they would have learnt to fear.

Until that dolt had dragged himself from the Pit – and the moment Obstiria fell. It had only been a matter of time.

Not that such a triviality would stop the Assassinorum. Why leave things to chance when you could send an Eversor to tie up any loose ends? To finish the job.

Typical Imperium efficiency, praise be to the Throne.

Behind the bleeding Assassin, far in the distance, a fireball erupted from the walls of Hive Jensen. The first casualty of the incursion.

Hive Vinter would be next. The governor wondered how long it would be until all the towers were burning.

The knife slipped easily into his parched throat. He locked eyes with the Assassin as he was released from his torment, his chambers bathed in the red glare of the battles already raging outside.

Was the Assassin's death mask grinning a little wider as he slipped away? And what was that sound Vinter heard as he slipped away? The sound of the Eversor's body crumpling into a heap at his feet, its wounds finally taking their toll?

The governor would never know.

Perhaps the Day of Reckoning had come for them both.

EVIL SUN RISING

GUY HALEY

CHAPTER 1

THE RED WAAAGH!

From a dozen brawling orkish domains, the Red Waaagh! gathered: a billion orks pulled in the wake of the rust-ships of Warlord Grukk.

Grukk the Unstoppable, he liked to call himself. Grukk Face-Rippa, he was more often called. Grukk the Zogging Maniac, the boyz said.

They did this behind his back. He really was a maniac.

Grukk's fleet of blunt-nosed kill kroozers smashed across the cosmos, pillaging half a dozen star systems. His followers multiplied with every victory, attracted not by the fact of these conquests, for many a lesser Waaagh! has accounted for more devastation, but by the sheer violent finesse with which Grukk achieved them. By the time the Red Waaagh! dived into the Karasoon Warp Rift en route to Sanctus Reach, its ships filled space as far as the eye could see; the largest Waaagh! for centuries. Members of every clan and faction imaginable had thrown in their lot with the Face-Rippa. As a representative sample of ork-kind, it was unsurpassed in recent millennia, the kind of gathering a xenobiologist would have given his eye or tooth to survey. In truth, had any xenobiologist got close enough to accomplish such a study, he would have given a lot more than his tooth in payment for the privilege.

With this cloud of marauding violence travelled the Red Sunz Mob – Uggrim, Snikgob, Bozgat and their Stompa, *Fat Mork.* From system to system they wandered, following a path of bloodshed and teeth away from

the domains of the tau in the galactic east, heading ever corewards.

'Dunno why,' said Uggrim, when surly Snikgob asked him why. They were in the hangar of the *Evil Sun Rising*. (This vessel they had acquired with a small amount of cunning and a large number of teeth from the crazed Pirate Boss Gunmouth Nazog, but that's a tale for another day.) 'I just feel it in me bones, ya know? I reckon Mork wants me to go.' Uggrim jerked his thumb over his shoulder at their war god sleeping soundly.

Uggrim and Snikgob said little more on this matter than that. The meks were clever, but they were orks, and proper boyz are uninterested in philosophy.

From the battlegrounds of Hurdlian to the meteor-wracked plains of Bork's Mistake, onwards from there through an unfortunate and near-fatal brush with the arsonists of Charadon and the tyranids locked in never-ending war against them. There was a fruitful contract with a flotilla of freebooterz lost and down on their luck, and a sadly short-lived association with the deadly Dread Dok and his Kan Katastrophe Karnival… *Fat Mork* fought on a hundred battlefields. Sometimes the Red Sunz lingered so long in one place Snikgob thought they'd stay forever, only for Uggrim to stick his nose in the air and sniff the wind like a squighound on the chase. Days after, they'd be gone. However long they stayed, always they headed off eventually, and when they did, always they went to the galactic west.

So it was that Uggrim and the Red Sunz Mob found themselves pulled into the orbit of Grukk's mighty Red Waaagh!, shortly before it hit Sanctus Reach. Not that Grukk or his followers knew that was what it was called, or would have cared had they known.

It is on one of the Red Waaagh!'s larger ships, the *Toof o' Mork,* that we find Boss Mek Uggrim toiling, reduced in station from *the* Big Mek to a big mek, one among the many hundreds working their strange genius on the behalf of Grukk. Or rather, on behalf of the Bad Moon Big Mek Mogrok, Grukk's chief adviser and aide. This is how Mogrok styles himself, and for the time being at least, so Grukk believes him to be…

'Nah, nah, nah!' Uggrim swung his arm in a broad arc, catching the pointy heads of a brace of gretchin with the back of his hand. He chucked his great spanner down, bringing forth a howl from one of the oilers as it smashed its foot. Uggrim shoved the gretchin out of the way and grabbed

at the wires they had been fiddling with. ‘See?’ he said, pointing emphatically. ‘That one goes here, that one goes there! You thick or what?’

The gretchin grinned with great servility at him, and shrank back.

Uggrim growled and gathered himself up to his full, imposing height. He was among the biggest big meks in the Waaagh!, and had once led a small tribe himself, although he’d got rid of them as soon as he could. ‘I’m going for “or what”,’ he said. He dusted his apron off and snorted back a noseful of snot. ‘Just get it right, or it’ll be bad for you, you get it?’

‘Oooh, yes, boss, yes, boss. We geddit.’ The gretchins’ little heads bobbed enthusiastically, and all the while they shoved and pinched at the least of their number like Uggrim couldn’t see them doing it.

Uggrim groaned and ran his hand over his long face. ‘You grots are the worse grots I have ever seen. You don’t buck your ideas up, I’m going to have meself a little barbecue. Now get on with it!’ he roared.

He let them run off, tutting and cursing after them. When he was alone he leaned on railings that looked across a massive metal cavern, deep in the guts of Mogrok’s gargant, carried itself deep within the guts of the *Toof o’ Mork*. Hundreds of mekboyz of every conceivable subtype laboured away in its steel belly, and a hundred times as many grots. The racket in there was enough to make a boy go deaf. Runtherds bellowed at whimpering runt teams, mekboyz hallooed and shouted at each other. Power tools whined, burnas whooshed, thousands of hammers banged away. They were fitting a belly gun, the biggest belly gun Uggrim had ever seen. This sight ought to have excited him, but somehow it didn’t. Instead Uggrim felt deeply dissatisfied. What was wrong with him he didn’t like to admit, but he knew all right.

Ambition, that was what. It wasn’t *his* gargant. And that made him mad.

A horny nail tapped on his shoulder. Uggrim looked behind him, ready to roar at the interruption. He turned it into a snarl, curling his lips back over his long fangs at Mek Snikgob, the closest thing Uggrim had to a friend.

‘You all right, Uggs?’ said Snikgob mildly, for he was well used to Uggrim’s rages. His welding mask was flipped up on his head, a greasy smoke stick jammed into the gap between his fang and one of his smaller – although no less sharp – teeth.

‘Yeah,’ said Uggrim grumpily.

‘Don’t look all right.’ Snikgob fished about in a leather shoulder bag

hanging at his hip. ‘Here we are.’ He handed over a half-burned morsel with a surprised look on its face. ‘Squig on a stick – that’ll cheer you up, no worries. Lunchtime, ain’t it? I knows you, a right git when you’re hungry.’

Uggrim took the snack and looked at it dubiously.

‘Go on then,’ said Snikgob, ‘chow down.’

Uggrim growled and took a bite. It was surprisingly good, burned on the outside, half raw in the middle – just the way he liked it. He waved the creature around at the cavern, its rubbery limbs flapping with the motion. ‘All this – thought it’d be fun, ya know?’ He chomped and swallowed noisily. ‘Working together and all that, making something real big.’

‘It is fun, ain’t it?’ said Snikgob. ‘Come on, Uggs, this is a Mega-gargant. A Mega-gargant! There’s two in this Waaagh! Two! Now ain’t that something?’

Neither of them are mine, thought Uggrim. ‘Well, yeah, yeah,’ he conceded. ‘But it’s not right. Not right! Too hard, taking too long.’ He sniffed. ‘I blame the staff. These grots are worthless. Always cheekin’.’

‘Get Frikk on it then,’ said Snikgob. ‘Beat him if he don’t sort ’em out.’

‘Don’t you tell me how to beat my grot. I’d give him a right shoeing! Frikk’s guarding *Fat Mork.* Only one of them little zoggers I trust. Got so many meks wanting to come and look at the little sun, can’t be leaving *Fat Mork* alone any more.’ Uggrim stared daggers at a bunch of gretchin swinging from a plank some metres below, slopping yellow paint all over everything. They laughed at him and pulled faces. ‘Zogging Bad Moons. Not one of ’em’s got any respect,’ he grumbled, deep in his chest. ‘Ya know, I miss being me own boss sometimes,’ he said more loudly.

Snikgob groaned. ‘Don’t tell me you want those Deathskulls back, mate. I mean, yeah, our own crew, but to tell the truth, since the blue boyz went over to Bluefinga, I’m enjoying knowing me socks will be where I left ’em every morning. Gets mighty tiresome shaking down twenty thieving gits for your grog mug every five minutes.’

‘Huh. Gork’s arse, no. Want them back on *Evil Sun Rising?* Good riddance to ’em. When I’m a real boss, it’ll be proper orks, not blue faces.’ He gave an involuntary shudder. Perhaps he was remembering the great underpant snatch. It had been a particularly testing time for all the meks. ‘I just want to get out there, feel the stars on me face, sail the void with no

big zogger tellin' us what to do!' Uggrim finished his squig and tossed the stick over the edge. A grot squeaked somewhere down below.

'Steady, ye're sounding like a freebooter.'

Uggrim glared at his friend. 'Done that. Never again.'

'Gunmouth,' said Snikgob knowledgeably.

'Gunmouth,' agreed Uggrim. 'Though the Dok and Happy Basher weren't no better.' He drummed his fingers on the railing and sighed. 'I thought it was bad back on Garbax World, but this is worse! Thought *Fat Mork* was us hitting the big time, but it weren't so. And then I thought joining up with this Waaagh! would be it. And you know what? It ain't either.'

Snikgob grunted. His habitually sour expression became ever so slightly less sour. 'Ain't that true?'

'Politics! Always the politics. Time was, you could just shoot someone in the face and get it all your own way. Not now, oh no.'

'We're getting old, is all.' Snikgob gave him a sympathetic look. 'You think one day, you play your cards right, you'll be the biggest zogger. But there's always, always a bigger zogger, Uggrim. Just the way it goes. You be careful. That Mogrok's top mek round here. You rile him up, it'll be trouble for all of us. You want to play at being king, you go ahead, but we need to find us a different Waaagh! if so. It ain't so bad here. Look at it all. It's exciting to be a part of.'

'You changed your tune.'

'Yeah,' said Snikgob. 'Well, pays to keep a positive attitude, don't it?'

Uggrim frowned, his heavy brows crowding his sunken eyes. Snikgob had just said something positive, and he was *never* positive. Far from it.

'Did you go funny when we was in the warp, Sniks?' said Uggrim. He squinted at his friend suspiciously. 'Mogrok puts a lot of faith in them shields of his, but I ain't convinced. Bit rocky that ride. Something might have happened, something… unnatural. You ain't got nothing unnatural in there with you, have you?'

Snikgob was taken aback. 'What? Me? Nah! Anyways, it's been days since we come out! What do you reckon I been doing? Drinking snotling blood down in the drop sump and waiting for me moment to pounce?'

Uggrim shrugged. 'Weird universe, pal.'

'Well I ain't!' Snikgob scowled. 'All I is saying is that you can't be too careful round here. You got a lot of orky know-wots, Uggs, and a lot of

smarts. But you also got too much ambition.' Uggrim's size told the truth of that. He was bigger than most nobs these days. Good in the fighting pits, good with a spanner, that's what they said about him. Uggrim was getting a lot of admirers, and that was a bad thing as far as Snikgob was concerned. 'We got to make the best of what we got. We need to keep a low profile.' Snikgob stared at his friend for a moment, as if he reckoned Uggrim should shrink a bit in order to keep said low profile. 'I dunno. Gotta get back to work.' He put up his hand to flip his welding mask down, but didn't. 'Oh!' he said. 'Nearly forgot. Speaking of big zoggers – Mogrok. He wants all the chief meks with him on the *Wrath of Gork*. Big meet on with the biggest boss. That means you an' all.'

'Zogging brilliant,' said Uggrim. 'Sneak and snipper in one place together. All I need.'

'Hey!' said Snikgob. 'Remember what I said. Be careful. We ain't our own operation no more. Too many ears listening. Grots everywhere, most of 'em working for Mogrok. Don't want your arms snipped off now, do ya?'

Not really, thought Uggrim. He snarled in return.

Snikgob gave a scowl that contained just the hint of a smile. 'That's more like it. Proper ork face. Now, off you go.' Snikgob made shooing motions with his hand.

Uggrim stared at him.

Snikgob curled his lip. 'Boss,' he said.

That was more like it.

'There ya go, there ya go, little fella.'

In the stomach of *Fat Mork,* Frikk crooned over his latest racing squig – a snuffling, bald sack of flesh with big, big eyes at one end and a flatulent arse at the other. Frikk turned it over gently, inspecting its over-sized rear legs with a practiced eye. 'Yeah, yeah. You's gonna earn me all me money back. You're a right little champ, you are. Yeah, that's what you are.'

He spoke quietly. Bozgat, the third member of the Red Sunz Mob, snored gently in a hammock. The war machine's captive evil sun burned brightly in its invisible magnetic bottle, encased by a squat cone of iron. The sun's ruddy light spilled out into the engine room through the thick glass of the observation window, keeping it nice and cosy, which was why Bozgat liked

to sleep there.

Fat Mork was sleeping too. All his systems were off-line. The killy beam-eye of his head was dark and his arms hung limply by his sides. The tiny evil sun fizzed every so often, as the Stompa dreamed cunning Mork-dreams of war and slaughter. Otherwise he was silent and lightless, as still as a spent shell casing, and possessed of as much life.

Frikk tickled his squig. Its tiny forelimbs waved and it chirred with pleasure. Frikk laughed softly.

Absorbed by his pet, he never heard Urdgrub, not until the gretchin was right on top of him.

'Hello, Frikk.'

Frikk whirled round to see Urdgrub's horrid blue face half a handspan from his own. He got the lot – beady, wicked eyes, flaking lucky blue paint and killer breath in one unpleasant instant, and it frightened the life half out of him.

Frikk squealed. Urdgrub slapped his hand over Frikk's mouth, cutting off the scream. Frikk clutched hard at the squig, which responded by sinking its teeth into his thumb. Frikk howled into Urdgrub's smelly hand. The squig leapt for its freedom. Claws pattered on metal, and it was gone into the dark.

Both gretchin froze, staring instinctively up at Bozgat. He was short for an ork, but still much bigger than either of the grots and would beat them both to bits if they woke him up. He snorted at the disturbance and rolled over. His hand flopped out of his filthy hammock.

'Mmmph. Gotta fix them power couplings. Yeah,' he said sleepily.

The gretchin did not stir until Bozgat was snoring loudly again.

Urdgrub recovered first. He was a head taller than Frikk and far more confident. Somehow he'd escaped the slaughter at Garbax World and had been bothering Frikk ever since. Rather than leaving with the surviving Deathskulls to join their clanboss, Bluefinga, he'd stuck around the *Evil Sun Rising* when the Red Sunz had come to the Waaagh!, hiding out in its darkest recesses. Worse luck for Frikk. Frikk thought often. Ever since he'd got Urdgrub to perform one little job – one tiny bit of thievery – for his boss, he'd not been able to shake the bigger grot. Urdgrub held up a finger to his lips, shook his head and removed his hand from Frikk's mouth.

‘You,’ hissed Frikk, his ears going flat under his grubby forage cap.

‘Me,’ said Urdgrub, planting his thumb in the centre of Frikk’s skinny chest. ‘And you,’ he jabbed a finger at Frikk, ‘owe me a fat stack of teeth, runt.’

There were runts in this life, and there were *runts*. Urdgrub might have been a bigger runt than him, but Frikk couldn’t handle being called so by this riff-raff, whether it was true or not. ‘Oi, oi, oi!’ he said, standing slowly, eyes darting from Urdgrub’s hands to his face. ‘Don’t you come in here calling me runt. You got no boss. One word, just one word from one of the big ’uns and you’re dead.’ Frikk gave a nasty grin, his tongue poking through needle teeth. ‘What ya think about that?’

The gretchin conducted their conversation in furious whispers. This was life and death business they were about, but it wouldn’t have done to wake the ork, or they’d both get it.

‘They’ll have to catch me first,’ said Urdgrub.

Urdgrub was shifty. When he was standing still he wasn’t ever really standing still, stepping from foot to foot like the floor was hot, opening and closing his hands like they were paining him. It made Frikk nervous. But then, everything made Frikk nervous. ‘No one’s caught me yet. And I got friends.’ He jabbed his thumb at his chest again. ‘Me? I’m too useful. I got connections. What you got? That old fart, Uggrim? Nobody listens to him.’

This insult against his boss outraged Frikk, and he said loudly, ‘He built *Fat Mork!*’

Urdgrub gave him a look of alarm, and Frikk clapped his own hands over his mouth this time. Both of them glanced up at Bozgat.

‘Get us some pie... Mmm, pie,’ said the ork, and belched in his sleep.

‘Five teeth you owe me, Frikk,’ whispered Urdgrub harshly. ‘You got two nasty habits. One is gambling with a lot of teeth that ain’t yours. I mean, that racing squig you were getting all soppy over. Per-fettic. Make a better snack than a racer.’ He smacked his lips.

Frikk cast about for the squig. If Urdgrub caught it he would eat it, and Frikk couldn’t afford another.

‘That’s one bad habit, ya zoggin’ zogwit,’ said Frikk.

Urdgrub smiled: a slow, evil leer that showed off all his teeth and had Frikk shrinking back. ‘I was gettin’ to two,’ he said. ‘And two’s this. You

is always losing. Worst habit of all that, bad luck. You can lose at worse things than squig-racing, Frikk.' Urdgrub patted the sharpened sliver of metal thrust into his waistband meaningfully.

Frikk swallowed, torn between anger and fear. 'All right, all right! I gets the message. What do ya want?' he hissed.

'Well, five teeth's five teeth. I'd like it back. It's mine after all, innit?'

Frikk's shoulders slumped. 'Don't have it.'

'There is something else you could give us. Gone and got meself a new boss, I have. There's something he's interested in. You help me help him, and I'll forget your little debt.'

'Rubbish! How you get off the ship?'

Urdgrub smirked. 'Ways and means, runt, ways and means.'

'What is it you want?' said Frikk, afraid to ask. He hunched in on himself protectively, peeking up over his knees. Urdgrub bent over and stared him full in the face.

'That,' he said, pointing a filthy finger at the little sun. 'My boss wants to know how that works.'

'Tell him to come see himself.'

'Who says he ain't? Your boss ain't sharing his secrets, apparently. So you're going to tell.'

'I don't know how it works!' squeaked Frikk.

'You got a better idea than most, I reckon. Find out. Say, I is feeling generous. Even if it's just a pointer in the right direction, I might knock a couple of teeth off. Either that or,' he smiled nastily, 'I could just knock a couple of teeth *out*.' He pushed his face so close to Frikk's that their noses pressed together. Frikk pushed back, his ears standing erect. A while back he was bossing this grubby thief about. Now here Urdgrub was pushing him around in his boss's own place.

'I'm not having this, Urdgrub.'

'Oh yeah you are.' Urdgrub stood up, and paced stealthily backwards. He spared a glance for the snoring ork. His face went from violence to fear to violence again as he looked from grot to ork then back to grot. 'You got till before the drop to squeal or pay up, or you'll be squealin' for real.' He retreated into the shadows until only his pointing finger and the top of his dirty blue head were visible. 'You pay me off soon, Frikk, or I don't care who ya boss is, me and my grots'll come in 'ere and skin you alive.'

Urdgrub's eyes flashed in the dark. Frikk held his breath until he was sure the shadows were empty. He ran round the Stompa's engine deck, checking every nook. He opened the side door. There was nobody outside in the hangar, not even any of the ship runts. He blew out his cheeks hard, and brought his head back inside. He pushed the door to with exaggerated care, and leaned against it.

'This is not good, not good at all,' he said to himself.

'What ain't?' said Bozgat sleepily.

Frikk looked up with an obsequious expression plastered across his sneaky little face. 'Nothin', boss. Thinking about the squig race, boss, that's all, boss.' His false smile spread until he thought his cheeks would split. 'Nice cuppa, boss? Reactor's good and hot. Brew ya one up right quick, yes siree. Squig stock special? Mushroom surprise? What's yer fancy?'

'Course the reactor's hot, it's a self-contained, self-sustaining fusion reaction,' said Bozgat, in that strange, oddboy way meks had when they spoke a load of old jabber they didn't understand. He farted loudly. When he spoke again, the dreaminess had left his voice. 'Yeah, cuppa'd be nice. Mushroom. Got the squig farts something chronic.'

'Right you are, boss.'

'And Frikk?'

'Yes, boss?'

'Ye're an idiot,' said Bozgat.

'Yes, boss.'

Up above on the main deck, Talker started up, howling and shouting. If oddboyz talked odd, madboyz talked, well, mad.

'Oh don't you start!' said Bozgat. He swung his legs out of his hammock. His booted feet landed with a clang on the floor. 'Mork and Gork's drops. Oi! Shut it – shut it now!'

Talker didn't shut up. If anything, his mad talk rang madder and louder through the Stompa.

Frikk sighed resignedly. It was shaping up to be one of those days… just like every other.

CHAPTER 2

GRUKK FACE-RIPPA

Uggrim took an uncomfortable ride over from the *Toof o' Mork* in a shuttle boat crammed with all manner of meks. The compartment reeked of ork sweat and dirty clothes mixed with oil, flatulence and ill-humour. The meks were jammed in tight as snotlings in a pen, and angry about it, for these were orks more used to good treatment.

The shuttle boat shuddered as it flew, strange spanging and roaring noises coming from under Uggrim's feet. The pilot managed to restrain himself for most of the trip, performing only half a dozen unnecessary and somewhat hazardous manoeuvres as he made his way across the fleet. Uggrim could see the endless ships through the gaps in the hull. There was the gaudy yellow of the *Toof o' Mork.* Behind it, he caught sight of his own small ship, the *Evil Sun Rising,* and looked at it longingly. That's where his boys were and *Fat Mork* waited. His vessel slid out of sight, and his longing passed.

Windows, he supposed a more generously inclined mek might call the viewing gaps. They had no glass, and not all of them were a regular shape, but they had that essential window-y quality of letting an ork look through that which would otherwise be entirely opaque. Honestly, he'd have been happier without them. He was thankful of the bubble field encasing the ship, keeping the air in and whatever was in space out, but they failed as often as they worked no matter what Big Mek Mogrok had to say about it.

Bubble expert my green arse, thought Uggrim.

Uggrim gritted his teeth. Normally he would have talked long and loudly about how poorly put together the shuttle was, and how much better he could have done – and he could have, all right? – but he was surrounded on all sides by mean-eyed boss meks, some of whom were getting on for being as big as him. One of them might well have nailed the sorry mess together. His money was on the Snakebite in the stinky furs. Rubbish at proper machines, Snakebites were. He let it lie and tried not to think too hard about dying as the pilot looped the loop into the main hangar of Warlord Grukk's flagship, the *Wrath of Gork*.

The shuttle bounced twice before its mismatched wheels touched down, scattering grot deck crew. There was a bump as it mowed one down.

'Please stay seated until da shuttle has come to a complete stop!' cackled the pilot. A wheel came off and the shuttle clanged hard to one side, sending cursing meks stumbling everywhere. Sparks flew behind it as it slewed across the deck at an alarming speed. The pilot laughed louder.

The shuttle banged into a wall and came to a halt. The pilot whooped and banged his fists on the ramshackle dashboard. Deck crew came running up and the cockpit door was wrenched open with quite a lot of help from a crowbar.

'It's always like this,' Uggrim muttered to the mek next to him, a solid fellow with a huge jaw.

'Yeah,' the fellow said, in a voice as deep as space itself. Dozens of tiny spanners dangling from piercings in his lips jangled as he spoke. 'Comes of giving zoggin' speed freeks jobs flying transport runs.' They watched through a window as a dozen gretchin prised the pilot, who was by now insensible with laughter, out of his cockpit and carried him away. 'Trouble is, it'd turn anyone into a freek doing this day in, day out. Not right, I says.' The mek spat on the floor mightily. 'Should let the grots do it, if you ask me.'

'Anyone asking?' joked Uggrim, immediately feeling foolish for having done so.

The ork gave him a long, hard stare.

The big meks were grumbling and swearing and shuffling about. The landing ramp creaked open and hit the deck with a bang.

Revealed outside was the flashiest flash git Uggrim had ever seen. Of

course he was a Bad Moon, all yellow silk and gold and extra knives, and a massive hat stitched into the shape of a leering moon. Half a dozen grots stood to attention behind him, each wearing an exact copy of their boss's foolish outfit and aping his smug expression.

'Git,' muttered Uggrim.

The Bad Moon beamed a smile at them so laden with gold caps and plates it vied with the stars for brightness.

'Welcome!' he said with outrageous cheer. 'Welcome, big meks of the Red Waaagh!, to the *Wrath of Gork,* home of our master, the mighty Warlord Grukk!' He held up a finger. 'I warn you, gentle-orks, before you step out, that his name is as his temper – short, and to the point. Say nothing, do nothing, and we'll all get out of this alive. Most of us might even be able to go back to work with all our limbs attached! Get yerselves ready to meet the boss! You can have a few minutes. Make yerselves look presentable, because we're off to see the boss!'

'Ya said dat already, boss,' squeaked one of his aides.

'Shut it, you,' said the Bad Moon and knocked the yellow-clad grot flying. No one paid any notice. Such was life for gretchin.

The ork, who smelt suspiciously clean to Uggrim, stood waiting as the meks filed out onto the deck. Being so crammed together, they'd been forced to leave all their gear in the hold. Uggrim reckoned some ork was making a point about pecking order – as in, these big meks weren't as important as they thought they were. Seeing as Mogrok and his cronies hadn't come over in the same shuttle, even though they were coming from his own vessel, that ork was certainly Mogrok.

Swarms of grots appeared shivering and miserable from the runt-hold aft of the passenger ramp. A couple were noisily sick as they tumbled out. A few cuffs round the head from the meks cheered them up, and they went to work, fastening on back banners, shining tools dangling from utility belts, and passing large and improbable weapons into the hands of their masters. 'Spit and polish, sir! Yes, nice and shiny, nice and bright!' said Uggrim's runt.

Uggrim had a lot of runts and had no idea what the two attending him were called. Counting runts was what Frikk was for. He wished now he'd brought his head runt, but what he'd told Snikgob was no exaggeration; Frikk was literally the only creature he trusted and Uggrim needed him to

keep watch on *Fat Mork.*

‘Zoggin’ Bad Moons, zoggin’ gits. What’s Grukk want with all these silky ponces? They jibber on as much as madboyz,’ growled the ork with the spanner piercings. ‘There’s a load of ’em about. Followers of Mogrok. Something’s not right here. Not right at all.’

‘Boss Mek Uggrim,’ Uggrim introduced himself. ‘Red Sunz Mob.’

The other ork stared at him again – not hostile, at least not openly. Uggrim stared back. They might fight, or they might not. You can never tell with orks.

Without warning, the other ork butted his beetling brow hard against Uggrim’s. Their skulls made a noise like logs clacking together.

‘Chief Boy Skarbutkin, Koghead’s Krew,’ he said. ‘Evil Sun, yeah?’ He took in the scarlet trimmings of Uggrim’s clothes, the ork-face belly-plate glowering red from his gut. ‘Used to be one of them, long time ago. Gave all that speeding stuff up. Too old for it, ’sides,’ he sniffed. ‘Evil Sunz? All they want is faster. Got no ’ppreciation for a good steam engine, and always, always meddling! Can’t leave ya alone to work. Steam’s where it’s at – brilliant stuff, if you ask me.’

Uggrim refrained from repeating his earlier comment.

‘Fire and water, that’s all it is. Dead simple, but still dead killy, you see? Remarkable.’ Skarbutkin belched. ‘But apparently, not fast enough for the boys. Too slow, they said, too boring. So zog ’em, said I. I stopped wearing the red and went solo. Still, I’m an Evil Sun at heart and always will be. Can’t take the clan out yerself, can ya? Might as well pretend I’m no mek. You halfway to a speed freek yourself, I s’pose?’ he said disparagingly.

Uggrim grinned back. ‘Oh no. Me, I build Stompas. Dead killy Stompas.’

Skarbutkin nodded appreciatively. ‘Ooh, nice.’ He shoved one of his gretchin oilers aside as soon as it finished buckling on a complicated looking gauntlet festooned with pointless cogs. He flexed his hand and poked at a few brass toggle switches.

‘Hey!’ an individual with a tall black squig crest on his scalp called out. ‘Is you Uggrim?’

‘Yeah,’ said Uggrim, his chest puffed up at the recognition.

‘I heard about you. Me mate Daffbag came over to see your Stompa. Little sun engine, ain’t it? Brilliant. How’d ya do it?’

‘Can’t say,’ said Uggrim, tapping his finger against his nose. He was

correct – he couldn't say, because he didn't know.

'Ah, I see,' said the other mek, nodding and winking. 'Trade secrets, eh? Ah well, I'd love to see it meself.'

'Stompas, ya say?' shouted a tall Bad Moon with a mouth full of fine teeth. 'I heard about you too. What was it? Rebel Sun, Uffgrit?' he said, getting Uggrim's name wrong on purpose. 'I heard that you got that little sun in the guts of your machine. Can't say I'm impressed as this lot. Don't see what's wrong with squig oil meself, Uffgrit.'

'Red Sun. Uggrim,' growled Uggrim.

'Whatever. Now when you want to see a proper Stompa, come and see *Big Mouth* sometime. I built him for Gashrakk the Flash – heard of him? Well important, just like me.' He put a ringed hand on the belts crossing his chest, wherefrom hung numerous spanner icons and golden half-moons.

'Can't say I've heard of you,' said Uggrim, which was true, although he did know who Gashrakk was. 'I'm the top boss of fifteen work mobs on Mogrok's gargant, *Gungutz*. If you're so important, how comes you is not working there too?'

'He's dead good that Uggrim!' called someone else. 'I seen 'is Stompa meself!'

The Bad Moon opened his mouth as wide as it would go, showing off a dental fortune. He slapped his fat gut and stared round at the others. 'Oh, I'm well impressed now. Fifteen work mobs, you say? *Gungutz,* you say? At least I would be, if I weren't top boss on *sixteen* work mobs on *Gork's Fist.*' He inspected his talons insouciantly. 'That'd be Grukk's *personal* gargant. Grimgutz is my name and beating pipsqueak Evil Sunz meks like you is my game. Leave the big killers to the experts. Go off and tinker up a few pretty little bikes for the speed heads to wreck. That's what you lot's good at, ain't it? Rubbish little speedies? Vroom vroom?' he said in a piping grot-voice, delicately miming opening a throttle with his hands. 'Tell you what, why don't you tell me how your little sun works, and I'll put it to work in a proper Stompa. Deal?'

A couple of the others laughed, although none who did were Evil Sunz.

Uggrim bristled. He shoved his way through the crowd to where Grimgutz stood. Grumbles at being so manhandled turned to eager chuckles when the meks scented a fight in the offing.

‘You take that back, moon ponce. I ain’t sharing nothing with the likes of you,’ said Uggrim. ‘*Fat Mork’*s the finest Stompa you’ll ever see, and the last, if you don’t watch that stupid gob of yours. What happen? You fall face first into a freebooter’s treasure chest or something?’

‘Ooh, spicy one, ain’t we?’ said Grimgutz. He had to draw himself full up to look Uggrim in the eye, but although he was shorter than the Evil Sun, he was heavier. They’d be a good match in a pit fight. ‘You want to take this to the pits, you be my guest.’

‘Nah. Stompa to Stompa. Then we’ll see who’s best.’

‘Oh, can’t handle a little ork to ork, can we?’

‘I’ll kill you either way, git.’

‘You’re on,’ said Grimgutz. ‘Stompas. *Big Mouth* can shout louder than you. He’s gonna shout yer head right off yer stupid red shoulders.’

‘Hey,’ said Skarbutkin, putting himself in between the two meks and forcing them apart, hands on their chests. ‘We’d love to see you two biff each other, wouldn’t we, lads?’

A subdued cheer went up.

‘But word is the boss wants Stompas for the big drop.’ He said this more to Uggrim than Grimgutz. ‘You want yer faces bit off? No shortage of spanners round ’ere would take yer beasts off you lickety split, and if you was lacking a face, I reckon it’d be a bit hard for you to object.’

Grimgutz’s smile stayed just as toothy, but he backed off. He slumped back down into his usual slouch and jabbed a ringed finger at Uggrim. ‘We’ll see. We’ll see about that. Next time, speedy.’ He winked and sauntered off.

Uggrim grumbled low in his throat. All he wanted to do right then was smash Grimgutz’s face in.

‘Not clever that, mate,’ said Skarbutkin. ‘But as I likes you, thought I’d step in.’

Uggrim relaxed a little. ‘I’ll ’ave ’im.’

‘Sure you will,’ drawled Skarbutkin, ‘just not right now. You start scrapping here, Grukk’ll kill you both. Them Goffs are right killjoys.’

Uggrim snorted. Reluctantly he nodded his head. Skarbutkin felt the fight go out of Uggrim, and removed his hand from his chest.

‘Say, I can do you a really fine steam engine, if yer interested? Mates’ rates. I likes the look of you, Uggrim.’

The grots returned to their duties, and the meks primped themselves up without further incident. All decked with their unwieldy totems and favourite inventions humming on back and hip, they followed the Bad Moon and his herd of bright yellow gretchin across the busy hangar deck. Through the throng of swaggering mekaniaks Grimgutz remained visible to Uggrim, his cocky back banner waving high over all the big meks' heads. Then they were led into a corridor off the hangar. The boasts and grumbling conversation of the big meks became quieter, losing some of its joviality. There were thousands of Goffs and Bad Moons about. A group of nobs glared at them, red bull emblems prominent on their chests and 'ard boy checks all over their armour. One spat on the floor as the meks went by.

'What's he want to see us for anyways?' said Skarbutkin. 'That's what I wants to know.'

'No idea,' said Uggrim. 'Probably wants to boss us, just for bossing's sake.' He shrugged. 'Not normal this, is it? Goffs and Moon boyz closer than close.'

Skarbutkin nodded. The Evil Sunz, Deathskulls and Blood Axes produced more meks than the other clans, and were disproportionately represented in the delegation. In such circumstances, clan rivalry could easily flare up. So could the resentment some orks felt towards oddboyz. All it'd take would be one hard-headed Goff wanting to prove hitting people with a pointy object was more effective than thinking up clever killy things and it'd all kick off.

It did not. They went on without trouble, although the sense of danger only grew. The smug Bad Moon nob at their head dealt with set after set of surly Goff guards, opening the way for them with a word or flourish of his hand. Squads of stormboyz thundered past. Banging came from workshops. Slaves whimpered, whips cracked. The corridor widened. There were uncountable numbers of black-clad Goff grots running about everywhere on errands for their masters. A deep throaty hum, the ship's engines, or its bubble shield generators maybe, grew louder the further into the *Wrath of Gork* they went, the metal plates of the deck vibrating with it.

They came to a giant set of double doors. Untidy heaps of trophy weapons spilled from each side into the thoroughfare. Hundreds of alien

heads – from old skulls through rotting to reasonably fresh – were pressed onto spikes over the archway. A bull's head of black iron decorated the doors, glaring with eyes carved from huge rubies. Two gigantic Goff nobs in their full regalia of war glared equally hard at the meks from either side. The mekaniak delegation came to a stop.

'Big meks of the Red Waaagh!, we are here.' The Bad Moon pointed at the doors. These opened onto a giant hall, full of very large orks and the banners of defeated weaklings. Conversation ceased. At the very middle of the hall there was an archway of skulls – thousands of them – wired together. Spotlit under its apex was a tall iron throne, which reeked of drying blood. Spikes adorned its high back and heads adorned the spikes, recent gore glinting blackly below their ruined necks. Many of them – ork and alien alike – were missing their faces.

Their destroyer was Warlord Grukk, the most ferocious ork for light years in any direction. He sat brooding and mighty on his sticky throne. His eyes were red coals above the great metal scuttle of his prosthetic jaw, and they were fixed unblinkingly on the doorway. The meks went in, careful not to meet Grukk's stare. There were brave orks there, and reckless ones. They were all big meks after all: clever orks with a mek's mind and a nob's ambition. But if there were times to be clever and times to be tough, there were also times to shut up. Not one of them said a word.

Grukk Face-Rippa tended to have that kind of effect on an ork.

Grukk was among the largest of all orks, twice the height of a regular boy and more than twice as broad. His muscles strained all over his body, fibres standing to attention as if they would break free from the confinement of his skin. His whole demeanour was of tension. He sat forwards on his throne, his jaw jutting – the razor sharp, over-powered mechanical jaw whose face-shearing abilities had won him his name. Pistons at its left and right shifted, giving little hissing noises as he ground his gob from side to side. His massive torso was naked to the waist, criss-crossed with scars as complex as the wiring diagram for a shokk attack gun. He wore simple black trousers, a line of checks down the outside of each leg, terminating in enormous boots. A grot was polishing blood off their spiked, metal toecaps.

Grukk's hulking suit of mega armour was displayed on a no-nonsense stand behind him. His infamous power shears were held in similar stands

within grabbing distance. You could tell his fingers wanted to be in the shears, to be working their worky bits, closing their gleaming snippers around the limbs of… Well, anybody that annoyed him. Choosing who would be a tricky matter, for everyone annoyed Grukk. Denied the snippers, Grukk's hands gripped the armrests of his throne like he wanted to tear them off. These were worn smooth and shiny. When he relaxed, which he did just barely, his fingers made constant, tiny ticking motions towards the claws, fidgeting of their own murderous accord.

Only madboyz and grots fidgeted like that, and they only did so because they couldn't keep a thought in their heads for more than a second. Grukk looked anything but distracted. In the main, he just looked really furious.

What would it be like to fight that zogger, thought Uggrim? Fatal, most likely, but part of him – that part of him that seethed with schemes, dreams and plans yet unrealised – wanted to find out.

Grukk snorted like a bull, drew a hand across his flat nose and sat back. He glared at the grot boot boy, and kicked it halfway across the room. It skidded to a halt in front of the meks, pulled itself up, bowed, and limped out.

'You's the big meks then,' grunted Grukk. His expression was as uncompromising as an avalanche.

'That they are, oh favoured of Gork,' said another. Only then did Uggrim notice that the line of orks to the left of Grukk were all also big meks. This was not unobservant on Uggrim's part. Grukk was a massive threat, and a threat held an ork's attention like nothing else.

These were the biggest big meks of the Waaagh!, the bosses of bosses, some of them mek-warbosses in their own right. A few Uggrim had met while working on *Gungutz,* others he knew only by reputation.

There was Rokstik Ironstitch, a mek so obsessed with upgrading himself he was more machine than ork – and the bits that were ork weren't necessarily originally bits of Rokstik. Next to him was the fabulously unlucky Gutmash Festork, whose reputation for ill-fortune, judging by his station in life, was probably overstated. Midgit Mogrok, Mogrok's freakish sidekick, capered in front of them, tittering like a shroom-happy snot. He was rumoured to have been created by Mogrok, and that could have been true – there certainly was nothing natural about him. Gitfink Hollowskull stood at the end, a sneering Deathskull whose prodigious

skills in direct energy weapon mechanics were only outweighed by his talent for larceny.

And there was Mogrok himself, the one who had spoken. He stood near to Grukk, slightly ahead of his crew. Mogrok was flanked by the shokk attack nutcase Daggog, and Dok Fourklaw, Mogrok's best mate. Mogrok was very big, as you'd expect, overtopping the other big meks by a head. He was also tastelessly attired in many shades of yellow, and over-endowed with weaponry – again, as you'd expect, him being a Bad Moon and all. But what was unusual about Mogrok was his physical state. There was something *wrong* with him. His red eyes were shot through with black veins. And his skin… This was particularly nasty. It was covered in scabs, which lay atop each other like plates of bark on a sick old tree. The cracks between crawled with squig-parasites of every kind. Whatever ailed Mogrok attracted all manner of things to feast upon his flaking flesh. Something wormy poked out of a pockmark in his cheek and waved around. Mogrok dug around in his face, pulled it out and slurped it up like a noodle. It made Uggrim feel a little bit queasy.

Perhaps this unusual affliction and the unwanted attention it doubtless brought – orks were not prone to disease, malformation, or disability – had moulded Mogrok's devious nature, for he was exceptionally devious. Being an outcast and a target sharpened a boy's wits.

Fourklaw's friendship with Mogrok also stemmed from this sickness. Whenever Uggrim saw Mogrok, Fourklaw wasn't far behind, waving some pot or other of gloopy ointment at him. Some whispered that Mogrok was the power behind Grukk, but Uggrim reckoned Fourklaw might be the power behind Mogrok. Where did it stop? Probably with some maniac grot telling everyone what to do. Uggrim decided there and then to give Frikk a good kicking when he got back, in case he was getting ideas above his station.

There was no denying Mogrok was powerful. If he had been spawned a boy, he'd have been cast out, probably killed. But he was made a mek, and one of the very best at that. A boy could overlook a heavy infestation of squiglice in a vendor if he could buy a reliable gun that would blow a beakee in half with one shot. And if Mogrok had suffered at times because of his condition, at least he never lacked for a snack.

'These are the lads working on the gargants, your mightiness,' said

Mogrok, his voice as deep as an oil well. He scratched at his cheek, sending a shower of scurf onto his rich clothes. ‘Clever lads, hard workers – some real talent there.’ He nodded at the visiting big meks.

‘None as talented as you, eh Mogrok?’ said Grukk. He turned his head very slowly to look at his adviser, as if to do so more quickly would cause his head to twist off at the neck and uncork his rage. Uggrim imagined it whizzing round the room like a deflating squig, metal jaw snapping.

‘Naturally not, oh git of Gork.’

Grukk yawned, the pistons of his jaw hissing loudly, exposing a terribly scarred tongue. ‘Shame. Gonna have to keep you alive then. A big pity, because you is too big for your boots.’

Mogrok bowed very low. ‘Oh no, your grand high scarred one. I’m only after building bigger and better for you, Grukk – see you smash up some humies with it. My boots is big enough.’ He waggled one. ‘Fit right well, they do. Don’t want any bigger.’

‘Right,’ said Grukk, unconvinced. He shifted in his throne. ‘Are me rust-ships ready for the drop? Is *Gork’s Fist* ready for a scrap?’

‘Sure is, your mighty Gorkishness,’ said Mogrok. ‘We’s all ready for the first drop.’

‘Good.’ Grukk stood up. He was even bigger than he looked sitting down. ‘Because I am bored. Boring meeting. Boring meks. Bored!’ He strode over to the meks. He dwarfed them; Uggrim had seen smaller carnosaurs. ‘You is here for two reasons!’ He held up three fingers. ‘One, you better be ready!’ he shouted, showering them all with spittle. ‘And three…’ He pivoted round on one foot, taking them all by surprise. He grabbed the Snakebite big mek by the shoulders and hauled him off his feet. The mek had enough time to look shocked before Grukk’s metal jaw opened wide and clamped down onto his face. The Snakebite struggled under Grukk’s iron grip, punching the ork warlord’s body. He might as well have been hitting a cliff. Dark blood ran down from the mek’s skull, spilling over Grukk’s iron gob. Grukk worked his head from side to side. There was a mighty crack, and the mek went limp. Grukk let the corpse fall. The Snakebite slumped to his knees, blood gouting from his head, and fell to the floor. The front of his skull had been sheared off. Thick bone, nasal passages and the pulsing remains of the big mek’s brain were visible in cross section. Even an ork wasn’t going to be getting better from that.

Grukk spat out the mek's face. It landed next to its ex-owner with a wet slap. 'Don't you forget who's in charge.' He swung his head back and forth along the line of meks, and gave Mogrok a fierce stare. 'I'm watching all of you. Oddboy gits. Too clever by half!' He wiped his bloody metal jaw with his forearm.

The meks said nothing. Normally what Grukk had done would have been very funny, but there had been no provocation, no posturing, nothing. Grukk was as unpredictable as rumoured. A good guffaw at the dead mek's fate might set him off again.

Grukk stalked back to his throne, flinging his arm out in the direction of the dead mek. 'Take that away! Snakebite mek. Gah! What use are they anyway? Want guns! Want tanks! Want Stompas – not a better squiggoth saddle.' He sat down heavily. 'Now get out!' he roared.

They got out, trying hard not to look like they were hurrying.

'Zogging maniac,' said Uggrim to Skarbutkin. Very quietly.

CHAPTER 3

MOGROK'S OFFER

The days rolled past, the star of the Sanctus Reach became bigger and bigger until, almost suddenly it felt, the orks were through its wall of comets and had arrived within the confines of the system proper.

The orks breached the system with minimal resistance, swatting aside the few ships sent to oppose them in a storm of red metal. Victory, they all knew, was inevitable. Not that that took the fun out of it. Not at all.

They approached the world of Obstiria first, where the horde fell upon the Space Marines of the Obsidian Glaives and annihilated them in a series of entertaining battles. Beakees being beakees, they tried to counter-attack, and it didn't go well for them. There was a particularly ace bit when Grukk scissored his way into a drop pod and chopped up all the beakees inside, snippety-snip.

Whatever else you could say about Grukk, he was a proper ork.

Mogrok's bubble fields allowed the biggest kroozers to make planetfall, including the *Wrath of Gork.* Now that was impressive. What was even more impressive was that Mogrok could not only get them *down,* but had some cunning means of getting them back *up* into orbit too – a number of massive traktor kannons.

'We're goin' to have to get in on that,' said Snikgob, his eyes lighting up at the thought of such a big lifta-droppa.

Uggrim grunted non-committally. Mogrok was a sneaky one, and he was

trying his best not to get too close to the Bad Moon. His huge cadre of hangers-on contained many meks jealous of Uggrim. Grimgutz, especially, made public insults about the Red Sunz. Others attempted to bring him on side.

'I can get you in, mek like you,' said Daggog, the mek renowned for his shokk attack expertise. 'Say the word, I can have a natter with Mogrok. He and I are good buddies. We go way back.'

Uggrim remained unmoved. Despite this and similar promptings that he should go and make himself useful to Mogrok, Uggrim had decided he didn't want anything to do with him.

Envy, it probably was.

Grukk called the invasion of Obstiria 'target practice', and many of the Waaagh!'s more powerful creations were kept in orbit. To his annoyance, Uggrim and his crew were left behind to work on the gargants. After Obstiria a neat pyramid of glossy black Space Marine helmets was piled behind Grukk's throne. Someone, or rather someone's grots, went to a lot of time and effort to describe pretty patterns with the few differently coloured ones. Most humies were all the same size. Even the big ones were the same size as all the other big ones. Stupid colours and badges were all they had to tell themselves apart and help them figure out who was in charge. It hadn't done them any good. After the orks had finished with them, helmets were all that was left of the Obsidian Glaives.

The world the humies called Ghul Jensen saw more of the orks descend to plant green feet upon solid ground. This time the Red Sunz mob got some fun too, although again *Fat Mork* was kept from the action and they were left to content themselves with patching up battlewagons. Still, it was nice to get out of the cramped confines of the fleet, and Uggrim, Snikgob and Bozgat had a wonderful couple of weeks burning and looting until there was nothing left to burn or loot. The whole planet was a playground for the orks, a wasteland you could drive fast over with no stupid trees to get in the way, studded with giant cities full of people eager to fight. The fight didn't last long. Uggrim was there when Grukk dragged the humie king out of his big house and bit his head off. Very amusing. Once the final humie city fell, the orks spent another couple of weeks chopping up the humie towns and carting metal back up into the sky.

The next world was small and deserted, swift ships fleeing before the

approaching green storm. The humans took all they valued, but still the planet burgeoned with all manner of bits and bobs handy to a mek. The orks consoled themselves with stripping it of everything useful and blowing up the rest. The junk-ships trailing the Waaagh! got so crammed with gubbins and scrap they had to stop awhile and make dozens more.

The next world after that was full of fields of beans, which went deliciously with the inhabitants in the post-battle feeding frenzy. No one properly opposed them, and if it hadn't been for the quality of the fight the Space Marines gave, the Waaagh! might have fragmented under the weight of disappointment.

But all this, Grukk said – although Mogrok actually said it for him – was merely an appetiser, something to test the choppa's edge on before the real blade work began. One further world awaited. Ork freebooterz, back from raiding the boring beanworld, had told Grukk about it: a place where humies stomped about in big walkers, bashing at each other over petty insults. Almost, they said, like the boyz did. If there was going to be a good fight, it was going to be there. This world, known to the humans as Alaric, was the real target of the Waaagh!

In all the time they pillaged and plundered, Frikk did not see Urdgrub, and he began to calm down. The greenskins were distracted, their blood up for the big battles yet to come. There were plenty of scraps to be had on the fleet, the flames of rivalry fanned by the hurricane blast of the Waaagh! Fights, official and impromptu, became a common occurrence. The Red Sunz Mob built, drank, fought, and built some more. They were having a good time, even Frikk, and he as a rule was not overly fond of warfare.

Still, as any wise old skarboy will tell you, just because the biggest biter squig in the drop hasn't been seen for a while, it doesn't mean it won't bite you on the behind.

Construction reached a fever pitch as the orks approached the final humie world. Work on *Gork's Fist* was nearly done, so mek teams were taken from the *Wrath of Gork* and brought over to Mogrok's *Toof o' Mork* to be put to work on *Gungutz.* So big was the gargant, and so many meks were there working on it, that the orks there swarmed as thick as snots at the drops. Fights broke out as contradictory plans and meks' egos collided.

The big meks had their hands full keeping the lesser meks in line. Brawls between rival grot work gangs were frequent. All the while gimlet-eyed Goff bruisers kept watch in case of any real trouble. Last time the meks had fallen out, the resultant warp breach had swallowed up three rust-ships. Grukk had made it quite clear that was not to happen again, naturally by biting someone's face off.

Uggrim, Snikgob and Bozgat kept well out of it. They worked hard and quickly, supervising the building of power field projectors on the gargant's fifteenth and sixteenth decks. They were good at it, well respected already, better respected when they finished ahead of schedule.

It wasn't long after this that Mogrok himself sought Uggrim out. He found him with his backside in the air, humming loudly into a duct.

'You got a minute, mek boss?' said the Bad Moon. He waited a moment while Uggrim retracted his head and arm from the service hatch he was jammed into and wiped oil from his face. Mogrok seemed genial enough, but Uggrim eyed him warily.

'Yeah, I suppose so.'

'Good. Mek like you, clever ork. We should have a little chat. Come with me.' Mogrok scratched his nose and beckoned. 'This way.'

They made their way through the gargant. The shell was all in place, most of the workings too. The finishing touches were under way. They passed grot painting crews stencilling checks and dags on stuff, others fixing glyph plates to this gubbins or that, describing hazards, operating instructions or the boasts of their makers.

You could never trust these glyphs. You'd as likely get clear instructions to blow yourself up as operate the machinery properly, but the orks put them on anyway. Like everything else they did that wasn't fighting, eating, or sleeping, they were driven to it by an instinct they neither understood nor questioned. They simply got on with it, accepting that there was only one right way, and that was the ork way. Uggrim was pleased to see it being done properly.

Mogrok opened a door leading into *Gungutz*'s main bridge. He motioned for Uggrim to pass through first. It was darker in there than out in the corridor. Uggrim had no choice but to go in. He gripped a spanner at his belt lightly. A number forty-six: long, with a head the size of his fist. It'd do for a weapon. He couldn't risk openly loosening his blasta pistol in its

holster – too aggressive a move. Instead he readied himself to spin about and smash Mogrok in the face in case he tried anything funny. He almost wanted it to happen.

Mogrok came in after the other big mek. There was no fight.

Dim orange bulbs burned in the bridge, lighting five chairs, the periscope and the lift that would carry grot signallers up to the very top during battle. Mogrok kicked out a couple of gretchin malingerers he found asleep in a corner. They tried hard to look like they'd been busy but they weren't fooling anybody. Mogrok didn't care, and they left relieved they'd only received a couple of hard kicks. Once they had gone, Mogrok gave the room a quick once over, checking behind banks of levers and opening a couple of lockers. Satisfied they were alone, he went back to the door, closed it, and spun the lock wheel tight.

'Put the control bridge way down here in the guts,' he said, when he was sure they were alone. 'No point putting it in the head. Humies always go for that, see? Dunno why other meks always do that. Always thinking, me.' He tapped his forehead with a warty finger. 'And I reckon you is too. I've had a look at that Stompa of yours.'

'When?' said Uggrim.

'Never you mind. *Fat Mork,* innit?'

Uggrim nodded slowly. He held the spanner lightly in his hand, still in its loop on his belt.

'Impressive that. Not many meks can make a little evil sun like that, keep it all bottled up without blasting themselves to bits or cooking each other slowly. Very clever. Morky, that. Clever stuff. You got the know-wots. I could work with an ork like you, but…' Mogrok pursed his lips and sucked in air through his gold-capped teeth. 'Thing is, Uggrim, I hear a little whisper that you're steering clear of me.'

Uggrim's face was a perfect study of mild surprise and denial. 'Been busy, boss,' he said. How calling this scabby Bad Moon boss choked him!

'Do you think you're smart, Uggrim?' Mogrok usually stood with his hands hooked into his wide belt, but had a habit of gesticulating broadly when agitated or inspired. He did so now. 'Humies think they is the smartest, making twisty plans and laying cunnin' traps like they come up with war. We come up with war! Orks are the best at scrapping. Get us close and we'll tear anything to bloody bits. All the boyz need is a shove

in the right direction, and Mork'll do the rest!'

Speech delivered, he rocked back on his heels. Now he put his thumbs back into his belt. Mogrok really was scabby for an ork, and that was saying something. Uggrim watched fascinated at the squig parasites writhing across the big mek's skin. He stank real funny too, a cheesy, mouldy smell that filled the bridge. Mogrok didn't take offence at Uggrim's stares. He pulled a maggoty thing out from under a scab on his chin and popped it into his mouth. It crunched when he bit down.

'Trouble is, a lot of orks isn't as smart as they think they is. Now, Grukk there – he's a follower of Gork, pure and simple. But the likes of you and me, you need a bit of cunning, some sneaky thinking. He hates the likes of us, does Grukk. But where would he be without Mork? Bashing the brains out of big lizards with a rock on some nowhere world as Gork intended, that's where.'

Uggrim found his voice. 'What do you want exactly, Mogrok?'

'Well. Well there we are. What do I want?' He gave a toothy, Bad Moon smile. 'I want you to tell me how you got your little sun up and running. Power source like that, well…' He sucked his teeth. 'I know some of the others have been making big talk about this thing or that thing what they would build with your evil sun, but I'm not like the others. I'm not all talk. If you gave me something like that, why I'd build a gargant that'd make *Gungutz* here look like a snotling. What do you say? You interested? You can be in on the whole thing.'

Of course Uggrim was interested. What mek wouldn't be? And Mogrok was making a real overture here – no mek liked to admit he was lacking certain knowledge. It was bad for business.

The only problem was that Uggrim had absolutely no idea how the evil sun at the heart of *Fat Mork* burned. Bozgat had wanted to make it. They'd almost failed. He still wasn't sure what they'd done to get it going. There was an atmosphere on Garbax World. It was a dump, but it was inspiring – made him work harder and better than before or since, Bozgat and Snikgob too. Probably because it was a dump, he figured, and they wanted out.

Not that he was going to admit that. Pride would not allow. Mogrok was confident enough to put his own inability out there, but he was far too dangerous to have Uggrim's secrets. Mogrok was right – Uggrim had tried to keep clear of the old devil. It hadn't worked. What would he do if

Uggrim fessed up? Uggrim decided he'd rather not find out. He needed to play for time.

'Tricky,' said Uggrim.

'Tricky?'

'Tricky,' said Uggrim. 'Difficult. Bit temperamental, they are, little suns. Scaling that up to this size… Well, let me tell you.'

'Tell me what?' said Mogrok.

'Problems. Big problems. The alignment of the compression beams, containment…'

'Bubble field,' said Mogrok. 'I'm an expert, remember? Dead easy. I've been thinking on it. You tell me how you initiate the primary reaction, I'll contain it. Bang!' He smiled lazily. 'Or rather, not bang. It'll work great.'

'There are… other problems,' said Uggrim flannelling desperately. 'Let me go away, have a think, then you and I can sort it out together, yeah? Gonna have to draw up some plans. *Complicated* plans.'

Mogrok seemed satisfied by this. Mostly. He came right up to Uggrim. Not quite close enough for it to be an outright challenge, not quite far enough away for it not to be one either. Uggrim's mind did a bunch of swift calculations on whether he could take the fatter, bigger ork. They all said no.

'Good,' said Mogrok nicely, in a way that was not at all nice. 'You have a think. I'd like you to figure it all out, because I always get what I want, and I don't like to be disappointed.' He leaned in a bit nearer. Uggrim's nostrils flared at the reek of him. 'Ever.'

He stepped back, went to the door and spun the wheel. 'You better get back to work. *Gungutz* is coming down in the second wave, so I want him ready. You get it?'

'Oh yeah. I'm done on my bits.'

'I knows that. Why do you think I'm here? I'm making a point. You're a good mekaniak, Uggrim.' He held his finger up, in the manner of an ork who has just had a splendid idea. 'Tell you what, I hear you got a bit of a thing going on with Grimgutz. Well, I reckon you and him should go down on *Wrath of Gork* with *Gork's Fist, Big Mouth* and *Fat Mork* right into the rumpus. Would you like that?'

'Oh yeah,' said Uggrim, whose head filled with thoughts of crumping. He was starved of action.

‘Great. We’ll move *Fat Mork* tomorrow then. Needs to go on *Wrath of Gork,* don’t he? I’ll be seeing you around, Uggrim.’

Mogrok came back from the door, stared at him a moment, patted him on the shoulder and walked off whistling.

Uggrim brushed off the flakes of pale green skin Mogrok left behind on his shirt. Going down with the spearhead was fantastic news, and he couldn’t wait to tell the lads.

All the same, there would be another reason for it. Uggrim was arrogant enough to think Mogrok might see him as a potential rival, and there were few better ways of getting rid of a potential rival than having him stand right in front of the enemies’ guns and happily shout ‘Waaagh!’

Uggrim gripped his spanner tightly. Things might be getting problematical.

CHAPTER 4

DA DROP

‘Look at that – will you look at that!’ said Frikk, peering through Snikgob’s gunsights. ‘There must be…’ Frikk did a quick mental calculation. ‘Lots of ’em!’

Snikgob smacked Frikk on the back of the head, bashing his face into the eyepiece. ‘Lemme look, runt,’ he said genially. Frikk jumped down from the seat, rubbing his eye and setting his cap straight.

‘Yeah, boss. Sorry, boss.’

Snikgob put his eye to the scope. ‘Huh,’ he grunted.

‘Wow. He’s right. That’s a lot of boyz. Hey! Hey! Isn’t it great? We’re going in first!’ said Bozgat from the reactor deck. He was babbling almost as much as Talker. Whatever Mogrok’s motives, all the Red Sunz were happy to be part of the first assault. Except the grots; they were terrified, but they were always terrified and so they didn’t count.

There were tens of thousands of orks in the cavernous hold of the *Wrath of Gork,* ranked by clan or mob, their nobs up at the front in their best fighting get-up. Back banners waved. Iron icons bobbed. Orks barked and shouted at each other, the voices of individuals competing with the deep hum coming off the crowd. The boyz hung onto chains dangling from frames on multiple open, stacked decks. At the very top, high above the crowds, fighters sat in rocket sleds at the end of rickety launch tracks, facing slots in the metal that opened directly into space overhead. The

bubble fields glimmered out there, distorting the light of the stars.

*Fat Mork'*s squawker was alive with cackles and bragging, threats of extreme violence and the squeals of abused grots. In front of the boyz, hundreds of different war machines waited, their wheels clamped to the floor: little, faster ones up front, the big ones at the back.

Biggest of all were the Stompas. *Fat Mork* had a bay all to himself. He was so tall he filled the hold halfway up its height, only the fighters in their racks above him. As Mogrok promised, Uggrim and his lads were riding down from orbit with Grukk himself. Deeper in the ship, at its broad, high waist where the hold went up many more decks, Uggrim could just about make out the massive shape of *Gork's Fist.* Uggrim was proud they were going in with the boss. What he wasn't so pleased about was the presence of *Big Mouth,* Grimgutz's eye-wateringly bright yellow Stompa, in the next bay. A crowd of boyz separated them. They looked like two fat old orks, dressed up in their finest, a million little squiglings swarming around their feet.

Big Mouth lived up to his name. His metal teeth were spread jaw-crackingly wide, an array of giant speakers jammed into his gaping maw. Black moons were daubed all over him, and black flames licked up along the edge of his yellow armour. One arm mounted a huge chainsaw, the other bristled with rockets and guns. Another rack of rockets was held high on stanchions over his smokestacks.

'Flash git,' grumbled Uggrim.

There was no warning when they started to fall – no countdown or klaxons, no call to action stations – but somehow the orks all knew it was going to happen just before it did. Uggrim, who'd worked out the rough time they would be landing, got in first.

'Hold on, lads. This is going to be a bumpy ride.'

The pulsing murmur of the orks became definite words and a raucous song emerged.

''Ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go-oh!' Over and over, louder and louder, with increasing tempo. They stamped their boots and roared. Some of the more foolish ones let off their guns.

The Red Sun meks felt it in their guts – that shift when gravity stops tickling and grabs hard. The ship groaned, a long metallic grumble that

ended in a ping. Uggrim glanced upwards. He wrapped one hand into a squigskin strap dangling from the roof of his cockpit. The pair of grot fixers by his feet clung on to each other and whimpered.

'Shut it, you bleeding runts!' he said indulgently. He gave one a comforting kick.

Uggrim took one last look out of the periscope and shoved it up out of the way. With his free hand, he keyed on *Fat Mork'*s telly-scope. Multiple pictures sprang up on half a dozen primitive glass screens. He twiddled a knob, tuning in to the ship's scopes until he found the image he wanted. Upon the biggest screen embedded in the Stompa's dashboard, an image of Alaric emerged from a storm of glowing phosphor dabs.

An orange world, with dark seas and brown clouds. The curve of it crossed the top part of the screen, limned in pale blue, black space beyond. This curve receded rapidly, disappearing from view until brown wastes filled the screen up. Uggrim saw wreckage spin past, the remains of the humie space-guns, smashed to bits by the fleet's approaching salvo. There were so many ships firing so many cannons, nothing could stand up to them. Nothing at all.

At that moment, Uggrim and his fellow orks felt invincible. The world was literally at their feet, and they were raining down upon it like a vengeful green comet.

The ship began to shake. A pale corona of fire flickered at the edge of his screen, growing brighter with each moment: the atmosphere of Alaric rubbing hard against the bubble fields of the kill kroozer.

Fire of a different kind came in hard a few seconds after that, great pillars of laser light first, which burst harmlessly against the rust-ships' bubble fields. The *Wrath of Gork* fell faster and faster, the rumbling of the ship drowned out the frenzied singing of the orks. The telly-scope image wobbled hard. Uggrim grappled with its controls to compensate. More fire was coming in, and aerial shell bursts joined the defence lasers. He saw first one, then two, then two more of the rust-ships disintegrate into hails of fiery debris. Whether that was because of their shoddy construction or the efforts of the humans didn't really matter – it was hilarious either way.

'Fightas away, fightas away!' shouted out the kaptin of the ship over the squawker. There were multiple booms as the pilots ignited their rocket slings, slamming them at high speed vertically out into the rush of burning

air. More booms followed as a handful of fightas smashed into launch slots that were slightly too narrow, showering burning fuel over the orks below. There were further explosions, briefly viewed before being whipped away, as more fightas were torn apart by the violence of their exit and the speed of their descent, but dozens of the flyboys somehow wrestled their craft under control, gunned their engines and shot off past the hurtling kroozer, already firing at the Imperial craft coming to greet them.

The *Wrath of Gork* shook. The odd buggy and tank came loose, chains bursting under the strain. One particularly large gun wagon skidded across the drop deck, into the hull, crushing boys on the way. Uggrim laughed.

On *Fat Mork'*s telly-scope, he watched the ground rush at them at ridiculous speed. Sulphurous clouds parted. He saw a brown river running into a brown ocean, the straight cuts of two roads on bridges breaking its wiggly course into three. The spider-lines of humie fortifications grew thicker and thicker, resolving themselves into fat pen strokes, then into crenellated ramparts. There were a lot of them, a number of lines on the west side of the river, the majority surrounding a regularly shaped mountain on the eastern side. The *Wrath of Gork* was coming down not too far from the forts on the west bank of that river, a few kilometres out, so Uggrim reckoned.

Ochre ground sped at them, and then it was over, just like that. The ship didn't so much land as smash into the planet with bone-crushing impact. The singing stopped. There was the horrendous metallic crash of more tanks flying from their moorings. Uggrim jerked forwards, smashing his jaw on a drive lever and biting his tongue. He sat up and shook his head, wiping blood from his mouth.

A fresh cacophony of mechanical noises started up: engines, creaking, rattling chains. Landing ramps slammed down into the orange dust of Alaric. Hatches popped open. Doors swung wide.

Thick orange sunlight flooded into the hold, lighting up motes of dust like waterfalls of gold. There was a pause, wherein all the universe turned, and a silence fell. Other races might have found a beauty in this moment, a swift vision of peace before extinction. And in truth, there was a swell of emotion that passed over the boyz and the runts. All the greenskins felt it, but it was of an altogether more savage kind.

'Waaagh!' bellowed thousands upon thousands of orks. 'Waaagh!'

bellowed a thousand speaker-grilles. ‘Waaagh!’ roared thousands of engines. Gripped by the need for violence, the greenskins poured out of the ship with a noise like the end of the world.

The buggies and bikes were out first, a buzzing cavalcade overflown by Deffkoptas that shot down the ramp faster than fast. Hard behind, battlewagons clanked. Dreads and Kans clumped down the ramps and out of hatches after the wagons, then the boyz, so many of them the orange dust turned green. On and on the horde went, Goffs, Evil Sunz, White Spiders, Deathskulls, Snakebites, Bad Moons, flash gitz, freebooterz of every kind, Blood Axes, Kill Blades and more. Every clan, every faction, and every kind of ork you could imagine. And this was just one rust-ship; dozens had made planetfall together and dozens more were descending from orbit. Hundreds, *thousands* more waited to join them.

Uggrim breathed heavily; his nostrils were full of the scent of his own blood. His throat was thick. His head hurt – not with the blow he had sustained, but with the need to kill.

‘Steady, lads,’ he said, more to himself than to his boyz. ‘We’re up next.’

The *Wrath of Gork* emptied rapidly, leaving the Stompas alone. The pop and crackle of explosions sounded from outside as the humie big guns opened up on the boyz. The bubble fields held around the rust-ship, but the metal shook under *Fat Mork’*s feet as the ground beyond was pounded by high explosives. The Red Sunz waited long minutes. Nobody spoke. All the orks were tense. It was all they could do not to snatch up their weapons, throw themselves out of *Fat Mork’*s doors and rush headlong to join the charging mobs. The pulse rushed in Uggrim’s ears. He drooled freely, his hands gripped so tightly on *Fat Mork’*s steering sticks he almost bent them. Even Talker was quiet.

*Fat Mork’*s squawker hissed: a message from *Gork’s Fist*. ‘Humie walkers coming in. We got the go. Stompas out!’

Across the hold, *Big Mouth’*s head squealed around on its neck.

‘’Ere we go, ’ere we go, ’ere we go!’ it bellowed. Grimgutz laughed through the machine’s massive gob. ‘I’ll be first out, Evil Sun, then we’ll see who’s the best Stompa mek!’ *Big Mouth’*s engine roared. Black smoke poured out of his exhaust pipes.

Uggrim narrowed his eyes at the rival Stompa. He bellowed down the ladder well. ‘Lads! Fire up the reactor. I don’t want that yellow git

Grimgutz killing anything big before we do!'

Outside the Stompas the hold erupted into activity. Runt teams emerged from holes all over the place. There were none, and then there were lots, just like that. Directed by their runtherds, gretchin clambered all over the two idols, smacking retaining pins out of their drop-harness chains. Grots whistled and shouted, flags flapped, squighounds barked. Grotbosses gave the thumbs up. Runtherds bawled commands and curses through megaphones. 'Heave! Heave, you laggardly grots!' Teams of sweating grots and slaves turned capstans set behind the war machines. The chains holding the Stompas slid over their armoured plates and crashed to the floor, where they slithered and rattled their way back onto drums. It was a smooth operation. Only a handful of runts were crushed to bits as the chains whipped free.

A klaxon honked. The runts ran back to their holes.

A series of explosions went off around the slab in front of *Fat Mork,* a second series starting a split second later in front of *Big Mouth.* The crackling detonations blew out the minimal seams holding the panels in front of the Stompas in place. The plate fell slowly outwards. Then with a gathering speed that mirrored the rushing need for violence pounding in every ork's chest, it crashed forwards, forming a drawbridge for *Fat Mork* down to the parched ground. Ochre dust rushed outwards in a low billow, obscuring the view of the battle.

*Fat Mork'*s bridge was down first, but *Big Mouth* didn't wait for his plate to topple all the way out. He bashed it down with his rounded belly plates and waddled out of the ship. Rockets flashed from the rack at his summit before he had got outside, and then he was out of sight and into the battle.

Uggrim howled his annoyance and slammed his drive levers forwards. 'Let's go! That git's stealin' a march on us. Get a move on!' he shouted.

The captive sun in the Stompa's gut flared at Bozgat's coaxing. Gears ground. *Fat Mork'*s stumpy feet were set into motion. Uggrim whooped as the Stompa emerged into the orange sunlight of Alaric, blasting and roaring, and not too far behind *Big Mouth.* Seeing the two embodiments of Mork and Gork march down the ramps onto the field, the orks sent up a huge cheer. 'Waaagh!' shouted *Fat Mork* in reply. 'Waaagh!' shouted *Big Mouth,* far more loudly.

The sweep of the battle was revealed to Uggrim in full, and it was

exhilarating. Ork boyz poured across the plain, thousands of them heading in a great stream towards the human fortifications. Hundreds of kans and trukks and trakks, and all the orky might of war went ahead of them. Other rust-ships dotted the plains in the distance, bubble fields flaring under fire, each disgorging its own green flood, although none were so big as the *Wrath of Gork*. Explosions were going up everywhere. A big kerfuffle to the south-east marked the point where some of the boyz had already broken through the defence line. The humans kept up a spirited rate of fire, cutting down hundreds of orks, and falling back where they were threatened with hand to hand combat.

These humies didn't worry Uggrim. They were as weak as their weapons, unable to penetrate *Fat Mork'*s bubble field. Most of their guns were out of range in any case, which was, now Uggrim thought about it, as much a curse as a blessing.

Luckily for them all, the fight was coming to them. As promised, humie Stompas, Knights, were loping towards the horde – twenty of them at least, decked with flapping banners, all in different colours but variations on a single theme. They were hunched over like orks, their high carapaces rising over cockpits shaped like giant helmets. Each one had a massive gun for one arm and a big chainsword for the other. Polyphonic warhorns boomed as they ran; they were quick and closing fast. Uggrim caught some squeaky humie talk over his squawker. It sounded angry.

The Knights tore into the ork army, cannons spitting shells at an impressive rate of fire. They stamped a bloody channel through the horde, heading directly for Grukk's drop-ship. A big group of Deff Dreads formed up in their way, and were promptly smashed down. Orks were hurrying to get clear, in a manner that, to Uggrim, looked suspiciously like running away.

Uggrim pressed his eye to his periscope. Looking through its magnifying lenses past the enclosing bubble field of the ship, things weren't going too well. Orks were being blasted to pieces by the hundreds, caught by long-range artillery and the up-close repeater cannons of the humie Stompas. Burst cones of ork body parts and parched soil shot upwards. Battlewagons came apart in showers of scrap, buggies were lofted high into the air, but the orks ran onwards heedlessly. It was glorious. The Red Sunz laughed and cheered with excitement. Even the grots stopped snivelling. *Fat Mork*

jolted as Talker opened fire with the gigashoota, sending a highly inaccurate fusillade at the Knights.

'Oi, madboy – stop that!' Uggrim shouted down the talky-tube. 'We're out of range.'

'Well do something about it!' Snikgob replied grumpily. 'What we doing standing around here for?'

Snikgob had a point. Uggrim slammed the left lever forwards. *Fat Mork* waddled around, heading towards the encroaching phalanx of Knights. Most were approaching the ship's mid-section, but a couple of them had scoped the two Stompas and altered their own course to intercept.

'Hur hur,' said Uggrim. 'This'll be a good fight!'

At that moment, Grukk chose to make his entrance. Four massive explosions tore through the side of the rust-ship a way down from the Red Sunz. A good chunk of the ship's flank, where it was at its very fattest, fell outwards. Uggrim and his lads laughed to see the humie Stompas come to a halt and then go frantically running backwards as the metal bore down on them. A stripy orange one didn't make it, and was flattened by the falling debris, its reactor making a pathetic *phutting* noise as it blew.

Dust washed outwards, covering a large part of the fight. A loud metallic 'Waaagh!' rolled out from the rust-ship, and *Fist of Gork* strode onto the battlefield. Nearly twice the size of *Fat Mork,* huge as an entire orktown, it bristled with cannons. Its iron hide was mostly the dark red of old blood, for that was the substance Grukk favoured as paint. Where it was not crusty red it was goff-black, covered in bulls' heads and the neat, checked patterning of the discerning skarboy.

The orks answered the gargant's cry with their own mighty 'Waaagh!'. They lunged forwards again, swamping the first line of the humie defences across a broad front.

Uggrim salivated at the prospect of the fight. Knights encircled *Fist of Gork,* firing madly at it. Thinking it would be highly politic to get involved in this biggest of scraps, as well as loads of fun, Uggrim lined *Fat Mork* up with the foe and depressed his acceleration pedals.

The Stompa took one step, lifted his foot to take another, and came to a juddering halt. There was a noise like a farting squiggoth and a faint smell of burning, before *Fat Mork* tipped uncomfortably forwards to balance precariously on the toe of his upraised foot. The lights went out.

Uggrim looked around with disbelief. He toggled a couple of switches. He snarled, slammed his fists into his skull. He cast about, settling on a grot as a target for his anger.

'No, boss, no… Oooof!'

The grot flew down the ladder well, dead.

'What the zog's going on? What the *zog* is *going on!*' bellowed Uggrim.

'We've stopped!' shouted Snikgob. 'Lost all power!'

'I knows that! I know! I can see that, can't I?' Uggrim watched in dismay as *Big Mouth* ploughed on towards the human lines, racking up a very impressive kill count while *Fat Mork* stood there like a madboy picking flowers. 'What the zog is going on?'

To make matters worse, a Knight was zeroing in on them.

'Boss, boss! Humie Stompa coming in fast!' shouted the lookout grot from the tower above.

'I know, I know! I can see that as well!' bawled Uggrim back up the talky-tube, too angry to be impressed the grot hadn't run off. He rammed the drive levers back and forth. They had no effect, so he started slamming his gnarled fists into the dashboard over and over again. The Knight fired. Uggrim winced.

CHAPTER 5

THE BIG SCRAP

‘What’s going on? Why aren’t we moving?’ shouted Talker, only now grasping the situation. Then, ‘I think I needs the drops. My tummy isn’t well.’

Fat Mork shuddered as a shell burst on his crackling shields.

‘I don’t know! I don’t know!’ wailed Bozgat, down on the engine deck. He ran to and fro, clutching his head in his hands.

‘Well I’d zogging well find out, you useless squig turd!’ shouted Uggrim, his voice all hollow and tinny down the talky-tube. ‘Because that humie Stompa don’t look like he’s coming round for a cup of fungus beer and a nice chat.’

‘Ooooh! The emblems, the heraldry! The badges are nice!’ hooted Talker. ‘Pretty! Male line left, distaff right. Clever pinkies!’

Another of the enemy Stompa’s shells exploded harmlessly, absorbed by *Fat Mork’*s energy shield.

‘Oh, that’s pretty, that’s nice. At least that still works then,’ jabbered Talker. ‘A predictable outcome of a polarised muon deflection matrix.’ He belched loudly. ‘Well orky.’

‘Boss, boss!’ shouted Bozgat. ‘Reactor’s still on. I don’t understand!’

Uggrim’s mind was highly compartmentalised. On the one hand he was an ork, possessed of and possessed by all the unthinking rage that suggests. But the other part of his brain brimmed over with inherited

knowledge, some of which was so complex it would have kept the assembled priesthood of a forge world occupied for a generation or two. As his subkind had been made to react in such situations so many aeons before, this part kicked in and took over, pushing his roaring orky aggression aside. He wanted to kill, but before he could kill, he had to fix. The red mist receded from his vision. Diagrams and charts and rotating schematics spilled dizzyingly into his mind's eye, and his innate technical know-how spilled in its turn out from his fanged mouth.

'Check the fuses, check the shunts! Initiate testing on the couplings. That's got to be it!'

Bozgat pulled himself together, for a while. He swung under the criss-crossing pipes and bracing spars that webbed the periphery of the engine room like a great green ape, frantically grabbing at everything that conveyed power anywhere. His concentration didn't last. Unable to find what was wrong in a time commensurate with his limited span of patience, he lost his temper, grabbed his biggest axe-spanner and started randomly hitting things very, very hard. Sparks and arcs of electricity shot out of the abused machinery, flashing on Bozgat's teeth as they earthed through the Stompa's metal deck. The little mek's ears smoked, but he went on battering everything in sight. 'I can't do it! I can't do it!' he wailed.

Up top, Uggrim leaned back from *Fat Mork'*s periscope eye. The Imperial walker looked altogether too close through it. *Fat Mork'*s shield generators screamed as round after round pounded into them from the big cannon on its arm.

'Bozgat! Bozgat! Bozgat! Fix it or we're all dead!'

'Waaagh!' howled Bozgat, and not in a good way. He battered the casing of the reactor, putting shiny gouges into its paintwork. 'I'm tryin'! I'm tryin'!'

'Try harder, you bleedin' runt! Pull yourself together. You an ork or a grot?' bawled Snikgob. He gave up, ramming the levers on his lifta-droppa backwards and forwards in frustration, and dropped from his chair, ran across the gun deck and slid down the ladder to the engine room with his feet on the rails. 'Gork's arse, you want something doing, do it yourself!'

Frikk, meanwhile, was scurrying about on his hands and knees, looking for things Bozgat might have missed. He had already soiled himself twice, and the mess of metal shavings, old screws and bones littering the place

were cutting his palms and knees up something chronic. Bozgat was panicking, Snikgob was shouting, and there were a great many things outside that were trying their best to kill him. He tried to ignore the reality that he was, to all intents and purposes, inside a poorly constructed tin can with a fusion bomb in the middle. He failed.

There are few things that can be as physically terrified as a gretchin. Fear, however, is a friend to a rare number of them. There are grots that will die on the spot under the duress of such terror, but Frikk was of the other sort. Fear motivates this unusual breed like nothing else. Frikk's small brain was in overdrive, his mean red eyes scanning every scrap of the engine room. Instinct drew his gaze downwards, round about Bozgat's boot level where the ork would not think to look. In a small gap, close to the floor, he spotted something awry. A thick tube of fungus rubber had been hacked through, the bundle of wires inside cut. The metal that made them up had melted together.

He scrambled over to it, grabbing onto a scalding pipe as *Fat Mork* rocked back on his heels. 'Argh!' he wailed, sucking his fingers. 'Bozgat! Bozgat!'

Frikk noticed a pair of glyphs scratched into the wall. His eyes widened with shock. He hastily scrubbed them out with dirt before the mek scrambled over and shoved him out of the way.

'Sabotage!' Bozgat snarled. He yelled over his shoulder at Snikgob. 'We've been done!' Bozgat pulled the ruined cables close to his face, flipping a magnifying lens down over his eye. 'Been cut just enough to melt when stressed. Someone with the know-wots gone done this! I bet you it's that bleedin' glory hog Bad Moon. Frikk, Frikk! Get back here!' Bozgat grabbed the gretchin by an ear and pulled him squealing into the hole. 'You gotta help. We gotta join all these back up!'

'But there's loads of 'em!' protested Frikk.

'Best work fast then, lazy grot,' said Bozgat, his own thick fingers already working with surprising dexterity, separating the melted strands and twisting the wires back together.

'Lemme at it,' shouted Snikgob, and he pulled roughly at Bozgat's shoulder.

'No room,' said Bozgat, elbowing Snikgob hard.

'Stop fighting and fix it!' yelled Uggrim down the talky-tube. 'Snikgob,

get back on the gun deck. Don't want Talker doing anything weird.'

Uggrim redirected his attention back outside. Seeing its shells had no effect, the Knight had pulled back and was circling the Stompa warily. *Fat Mork* was taking plenty of fire from all around, but luckily *Gork's Fist* was attracting most of the humie Stompas' attention.

Great, thought Uggrim. Means we only got the one to deal with.

The Knights ran round and round *Gork's Fist,* blasting away at its iron hide. His bubble fields were out and his armour glowed hot with the impact of fusion weapons. Runnels of molten steel dribbled down the gargant's broad skirt, flash-cooking boyz who got too close. But the Knights could not penetrate the thick plating. One of the humie walkers was doing some right fancy prancing, ducking this way and that. It got carried away, ran forwards and carved a gash into *Gork's Fist'*s belly plates.

'Ooh, that was pretty stupid,' said Uggrim to himself.

The gargant reacted swiftly, taking the Knight off guard. Its shoulder weapons ratcheted down, sending a massive rocket straight into the humie Stompa's chest. The explosion was huge, but the walker was only staggered. Uggrim narrowed his eyes at that.

Bubble field? He thought. Humie bubble field?

If so, it did little good. *Gork's Fist* smashed the humie Stompa down to the ground with its battleship-sized chainblade, then finished it off with a gut barge, bashing the smaller war machine into scrap. Uggrim would have laughed, but suddenly he found himself rather preoccupied. While he was watching the fight, the nearest humie Stompa started to charge right at them, massive chainsword arm raised. He only looked back at it when its warhorns wailed a terrible cry that, quite frankly, gave Uggrim the fear. He banged away at his useless fire controls. He howled with annoyance, bashing and beating everything he could get his hands on. The lookout grot screamed as it fell past his viewing slot, deciding to jump from the spotting tower rather than risk the Knight's wrath. Uggrim covered his face with his arms.

The humie Stompa swung hard at his cockpit. The chainsword teeth spun wildly. Lightning crackled all across *Fat Mork'*s front, but the shield held.

'Get on with it! Fix it! Fix it! *Fix it!*' roared Uggrim. He was enraged. The enemy were all around them and he could not fight them. 'What a

shambles. This is pathetic. Pathetic!'

'Almost there, boss!' came Bozgat's shout.

Almost there was no good. 'No good at all!' he said aloud. His hand groped for his custom super blasta. 'Right,' he bawled. 'That's it!' he grasped the lever of the hatch above him, swung it open with a bang, and heaved himself out the top.

Up on top of *Fat Mork'*s head he had a wider view. The battle was swinging back in the orks' favour. The boyz had learned their lesson, parting around the humie Stompas' advance, then flooding in behind them again. Those ranged about *Gork's Fist* were in danger of being cut off, but they ignored their worsening situation, doggedly harassing Grukk's gargant. *Big Mouth* had marched ahead right into the defence line and was happily pulverising humie bunkers with its cannon, the enormously loud 'Waaaghs!' coming out of its mouth speakers audible even so far away.

The Knight attacking *Fat Mork* retreated for another run and angled its chainsword for another strike. Streams of tracer bullets from a big shoota in its shoulder smacked into the pulsing energy field of *Fat Mork* only a couple of metres from Uggrim's face. Their momentum arrested, the slugs fell from the air.

'Right, you!' he shouted at the Knight, levelling his pistol directly at its helm plate. 'Leave my zoggin' ride alone!'

His gun was small for an ork weapon – small as in the size of a human torso – but packed quite the punch. He squeezed the trigger. Gubbins whirred all over it. The charging chamber flickered a satisfying shade of electric green. A searing line of energy belted from the muzzle. *Fat Mork'*s shields were configured to keep things out, not in, and the beam passed through without hindrance. It splashed on the Knight's own energy shield and dissipated harmlessly.

'Oh ho ho!' shouted Uggrim. 'What's this? What's this? So you do got your own bubble, do you? That's why you're such tough nuts, eh? Well, well, we'll see about that.'

Uggrim twisted a couple of knobs on the side of his gun, amping up the power to the max. 'Eat this, pink git!' he hollered. He fired again. This time when the beam intersected with the Knight's field it flared brightly and some of its force got through. The humie Stompa rolled adroitly as the beam connected with its helm, blackening one of the eye lenses and

blistering the thing's paint.

'Ha ha! Ha ha!' bellowed Uggrim. 'Ha ha ha!'

Fat Mork lurched, banging Uggrim into his hatch rim so hard he dropped his gun. It clattered down the front of *Fat Mork.*

'Now I'm angry,' he growled. 'That was me favourite blasta!'

'We got power, we got power!' shouted Snikgob from below. *Fat Mork's* arms came up. Talker opened fire without waiting.

'Right then,' said Uggrim, looking the Stompa dead in its clear eye lens. He pointed to where he assumed the pilot was. 'You're dead, mate.'

He dropped back down into the hatch, and slammed the drive levers forwards. *Fat Mork's* upraised foot shifted, fighting the earth and the weight forced on it by his awkward poise. *Fat Mork* shuddered, metal squealing. Centimetre by centimetre, he pushed himself back into an upright position. With a lurch he was in motion. The few orks in front of him wisely got out of his way.

'Let's see how you like this!' roared Uggrim. He depressed the big red button that activated *Fat Mork's* gaze. A beam of energy much like that emitted by his pistol, only many hundreds of times bigger, spat from the Stompa's killy eye. It splashed onto the humie Stompa's shield like a torrent of water hitting a bucket. Uggrim blinked afterimages from his vision and sniffed the ozone in the air appreciatively.

The zogging thing was still standing!

'It's that zoggin' energy bubble,' he shouted. 'Trip the zogger up, Snikgob. Let's step on its face!'

'Can't snatch it, boss. It's like trying to grab an oiled squig,' shouted Snikgob up the tubes. He snatched up a speeding buggy and tossed it at the walker. It exploded on the shields, buffeting the Knight but not bringing it down. The two war engines circled each other. Away off to his left, Uggrim caught the flash of a massive explosion. He turned to see a huge cloud of flame billowing up out of *Gork's Fist's* engine. The gargant stopped dead. A heavily decorated Knight was loping around from the back.

'Sneaky gits,' he growled. No time for that now; he had his own problems to worry about.

The Stompa thundered with the noise of the gigashoota. Talker's shells bounced off the energy shield of their enemy. The air wobbled like jelly where the powerful grav-beams of the lifta-droppa slipped off. The two

walkers traded fire, neither machine piercing the other's energy fields.

'Sort it out!' bellowed Uggrim. Talker wailed and sang as he fired the gigashoota at the humie Stompa, the ammo runts stationed around him sweating to keep up with the weapon's high rate of fire. They slammed magazine after magazine into the rotating ammo feed. Snikgob cursed, and so did Uggrim as their respective big guns did nothing to their foe.

Uggrim was very angry. And then something funny happened. A killa kan, separated from its mob, took a pot shot with a rocket at the rear of the humie walker. It corkscrewed in on a cloud of black smoke and exploded on the thing's engine stack.

The Knight moved fluidly, torso pivoting. It destroyed the kan as a second rocket came off the small walker's arm. This exploded well short of the body of the thing, fire smeared across the tell-tale flare of an energy field.

Uggrim saw that Talker's rounds got through, shattering armour on the side, until the humie Stompa's attention was back on them.

His face creased, long lips pointed in a v-shaped flute. Inspiration struck as hard as Mork's own fist. 'It doesn't go all the way around. It doesn't go all the way around!' he shouted.

'What do you mean?' said Snikgob.

'Never mind. Snikgob, left leg, on my mark.'

'Which one's that?' said Snikgob, who was ordinarily very intelligent for an ork, but currently was burning with full battle rage and so was as thick as the next boy.

'The one that's not on the right! Talker, fire everything you got at the right-hand side!'

Whether Snikgob got that or not, it was too late. At least he was powering up the capacitors in preparation. Uggrim couldn't expect much more than that.

Uggrim pushed *Fat Mork* into a tottering run. Talker's gun swung out to track the humie. Uggrim followed with the head. *Fat Mork's* beam eye joined the stream of bullets spewing out of the gigashoota.

'Keep it up, keep it up,' said Uggrim. He squinted through his most powerful telly-scope. If he was right, the humie could only cover part of his facing at one time. Sure enough, as Talker's gun played over the machine's front, Uggrim saw the last rounds batter into the chest directly.

He fired again with *Fat Mork's* gaze, targeting the right.

'Now, Snikgob – left leg, left leg!'

Snikgob worked his levers, setting the lifta-droppa's grav-beams to 'lift'. He got it wrong, targeting the right leg. Air wobbled. Weird whoops and feedback burbles sounded from the lifta's gubbins.

'The other left! The other left! Quick, before he notices,' shouted Uggrim.

The Knight's shield shone with violent patterns of disharmonious energy as the lifta-droppa beam played over it, going for the left. Uggrim saw the pilot's reaction; the shield was sliding along with the lifta-droppa beam. Talker's bullets suddenly found their mark on the right arm in a hail of sparks and spall.

The humie pilot was too slow. There was a sudden howl in the Stompa's power lines as the lifta snagged solid matter. With a nonchalant 'Down he goes!' Snikgob tugged back on the levers just as the capacitors gave up their last, yanking the Knight's left foot forwards. The humie Stompa flipped backwards, landing on its back with an almighty crash.

'Now,' said Uggrim, 'I'm willing to reckon that fancy shield don't cover the nasty bits. Let's kill it, boys.'

He depressed a big red button embossed with the ork glyph for 'Boom!'. One of the rockets mounted alongside the gigashoota slid free and sped off into the prone walker. *Boom!* it went, exploding pleasingly right on the thing's chin, rolling the head back and knocking it cold. It had been trying to get up before that, but not any more. Talker blazed away at it anyway as they marched forwards, blowing great chunks out of its colourful plating.

Fat Mork came to a shivering standstill over its prey. Uggrim jiggled the levers, shuffling his creation about, until it was in a position to drive one huge iron foot down hard on the humie Stompa's battered gun arm.

'Yeah!' said Uggrim. 'Not so clever now, is we?'

A bunch of burna boys came from nowhere to swarm all over the machine, intent on hacking it apart.

'Oi!' bellowed Uggrim through *Fat Mork's* speakers. 'That's my salvage. Zog off!'

Talker pivoted the gun down to point right at them. They sheepishly slunk away. By Mork, that Talker was mad as they came, but he knew where to point that cannon. Not for the first time, Uggrim was grateful the crew put

up with Bozgat's pet.

CHAPTER 6

AFTER THE BIG SCRAP

The battle was coming to a close. Artillery shells fell on the ork horde with lessening frequency. The orks had overrun the defence lines on a front many kilometres across and the humies were pulling back towards the river. Worse still for the humans, most of the Knights that had been attacking *Gork's Fist* were smoking wrecks and the rest had turned to flee. Uggrim wasn't sure how most had bought it, but he thought he saw a massive armoured shape that could only be Grukk clinging to the front of one, biting at the face-plate as it went down. The remaining bright walkers were entirely surrounded. Orks clambered up them as they retreated. Little flashes lit up joints as stikkbombs blew. Soon there were only a handful left.

Larger explosions erupted all around the walkers then, bringing the battle briefly closer again. Uggrim zoomed *Fat Mork'*s eye in on their source, finding a line of humie battlewagons cresting a low rise to the north-east, those in the lead firing as they advanced. More joined in as they all lined up, tearing ragged holes in the ork horde. The freed walkers accelerated at a run. Light ork vehicles and mobs moved to intercept the tanks. Many were killed, and by the time the orks managed to get close, the three surviving humie walkers were safe behind them. The tanks commenced driving backwards no faster than walking pace, still firing. Flame tanks emerged from between them to burn up any boyz who got too close, and in

the end the orks gave up the fight as a bad job.

It didn't matter. Everywhere, the humans were in retreat. Fightas and Deffkoptas harried them as they fled. Buggies roared in hot pursuit. The orks had won. They'd come down on the planet, smashed up the defences, and had themselves somewhere to build a base. A good start. Already meks were on the rust-ships, temporarily reconfiguring them into forts.

Big Mouth, Uggrim was very pleased to see, had an enormous hole in one side, its jagged edges blackened with soot, although it was still operational. Uggrim cursed Grimgutz's name colourfully, then turned on the squawker, hailed the other Stompa and did it all over again.

'Don't brag, Evil Sun,' said Grimgutz. 'I think we all know who did the most crumping today.' Grimgutz cut off the squawker feed.

'Yeah, right,' said Uggrim to himself. 'Try bashing my Stompa, will you? Sneaky git. We'll see who's best.'

Grimgutz couldn't bring his mood down. Uggrim sighed a happy sigh. He had that warm glow he always got after a strenuous fight. That they had nearly been killed only added to the delicious feeling of it. 'It's over, lads. We won, like always.' He slid out of his chair, and climbed halfway down the ladder. He looped his arm over a rung and hung there above the gun deck. 'Right, Sniks, let's get to work – we got to cut up that humie walker for parts before those burnas come back and snaffle the lot.'

'What about the sabotage?'

'Obvious, innit?' said Uggrim, climbing down the ladder. 'Mogrok did it, didn't he?'

'Eh?' said Snikgob.

'I reckon it was him. He grilled me well hard about the worky bits of our sun here. Didn't tell him nothin'.'

'Right.'

'He's a powerful enemy, Uggs,' said Snikgob.

Uggrim waved his concerns away. 'Nah, don't worry. We'll show 'em.'

Snikgob wasn't convinced.

Bozgat popped his head through the hole leading down to the lower deck. 'Wow, now that was fun! That chainsword, gotta get one of those. Dead killy, dead killy! Come on, if we got one weakness it's up-close crumping, boss. Let's put it on – go on, boss. It's brilliant!'

Frikk popped his head up close behind Bozgat and nodded enthusiastic

agreement.

'Yeah. Yeah, it is.' Uggrim clambered down the remainder of the ladder's rungs. 'Let's stay here and get started. Battle's nearly over. Should be safe to get working. Tool up, boyz, we got a job on.'

The meks clambered down to the lower deck, and out of the door in the side of the Stompa. The hard ground was torn up by artillery fire, and dead and nearly dead orks were strewn about in great multitudes. Piles of scrap lay everywhere, but the Red Sunz were fixated by the fallen human Knight. Bright heraldry torn and scratched, its long legs folded up uncomfortably under it. Weapons and eyes pointed to the sky. The meks took it all in with greedy eyes.

'Would you look at that,' said Bozgat. 'Look at it!'

'A veritable treasure trove of alien technological salvage,' said Talker in a foolish voice. 'Ain't it pretty?'

Uggrim rubbed his hands together. 'Right then…'

'*Trousers!*' yelled Talker at the top of his voice. Bozgat, Uggrim and Snikgob all jumped.

Talker immediately slapped both hands over his long snout and stared in shock at the three meks.

'Will you keep him quiet?' growled Snikgob. 'I nearly messed meself.'

'Sorry, Snik,' said Bozgat.

Uggrim was about to give Talker what for when, from behind them, came an embarrassed cough. Uggrim turned to see a mob of six Blood Axes sheltering under the lip of *Fat Mork'*s iron skirt.

'Great battle that, the way you did for that Stompa…' started up the bravest of them. The others grinned with embarrassment; one stared fixedly at the ground, twisting the pole of his rocket launcher like he was trying to strangle it.

'What you doing under there?' said Uggrim incredulously.

'Um, strategic placement? Er, tactical evaluation!' ventured the brave one. The others nodded enthusiastically. 'We was told to wait 'ere by the boss while he called in reinforcements but, ah…' He nodded at a muscled arm lying in the dirt a couple of metres in front of the meks. It still held an axe in its hand, gold braid in evidence at the red squishy end.

Uggrim looked at it.

'Ya know,' said the Blood Axe, and shrugged apologetically.

‘Strategic placement… Tactical…’ spluttered Snikgob, who was more embarrassed about them seeing him jumping at Talker’s outburst than anything else. ‘Gork’s arse! Ye’re hiding! Skulkin’ about under our bubble field like you was grots! Get out! Go on!’ Snikgob kicked a lump of metal at them. They ducked and it rang off the side of *Fat Mork.* ‘Get on with you! Zoggin’ pansies.’

‘Er, see you then.’

‘Not if we see you first! Get!’ shouted Snikgob, tossing another piece of metal at them.

The Blood Axes sloped off.

‘Sneaky lot, them,’ said Bozgat. He belched. ‘’Scuse me.’

‘Cowards,’ growled Snikgob. ‘Cowards!’ he hollered after them for good measure. ‘Cowards,’ he reiterated for the other meks’ benefit.

‘Not like you then, jumping at a madboy’s boo?’ said Uggrim.

‘Now that’s entirely different!’

‘Hey, hey, calm down,’ said Bozgat. ‘Let’s live the moment a bit, yeah, Snik, boss?’

Snikgob spat hard, dislodging a surprised looking cheek squig. ‘Yeah. All right.’

‘Great, isn’t it?’ said Bozgat.

And it was.

The battle rumbled still, noisy enough in parts that they had to shout to be heard over it, but already moving further away. Fires guttered in the heaps of flesh and metal around them. They watched and listened and sniffed the scorched air while the sun sank towards the horizon. By unspoken agreement they broke apart, stretching out their long arms and hunched backs, kicking bits of debris out of their way as they ambled round *Fat Mork.*

Uggrim pulled a pencil out from behind his ear, got a notebook out of his belt pouch and started to make drawings. Much of the time his eyes were on the fallen Knight. Snikgob checked all around the Stompa for any other skulkers before lighting a smoke. He had a sit on a burned-out buggy and surveyed the carnage with little sighs of pleasure. After a while he got to checking over nearby scrap. ‘That’s junk,’ he said. ‘Junk. Junk. More junk…’ His muttering and the clatter of discarded parts moved nearer, then further and then nearer again as he scavenged. Bozgat scouted about

for a bit, gathering up a bunch of unnameable debris. When he had a little pile of scrap, he settled into the dust and started to take a battered something to bits, tongue poking out in concentration. Talker started to sing. They were all in such a good mood – nobody told him to shut up for once.

They went on like this for a good time. The orange light took on the colour of burned sugar as evening set in. The battle's noise dwindled to a comforting background din, quiet enough now that they could hear the smallest sound, near and far: the hisses of squabbling gretchin looters, orderlies planting flags by not-quite-dead boys and calling their dok masters over, the moans of the wounded, the screams of captured humans, orks laughing and shooting off their guns in celebration.

It was soon quiet enough that they caught the muffled banging coming from the fallen humie Stompa.

Bozgat looked up from his little heap of gubbins. 'Can you hear something, boss?'

'Hmmm?' said Uggrim distractedly. He was drawing power couplings that might join the Knight's chainsword to *Fat Mork*.

Snikgob took his smoke out of his mouth and cocked his head.

'I think…' said Bozgat.

Snikgob frowned, finger to his lips. Bozgat shut up.

The banging came again.

Snikgob laughed: a low, throaty and wholly unpleasant chuckle. 'Oh I can hear it, I can! Back in a jiffy.' He ran into the Stompa, puffing smoke as he went.

'There! There it was again.' Bozgat clambered up the fallen vehicle and stood on its face-plate. He stamped hard, and listened for a reply.

Some kilometres away the fighting continued. Uggrim idly thought that far too many of the humies had made it over the bridges, but he didn't care. It just meant the fun would last longer. There was nothing nicer than a good long war.

Bozgat bent over, his hands on his knees. 'Hmm. Stopped now.' He stamped again on the buckled face-plate.

The banging started up. Muffled words came in between.

'There! There is something in there!' said Bozgat, pointing.

'Oh yeah,' said Uggrim, not much interested. 'That'll be a humie.' He

kicked a buckled armour plate on the humie Stompa's leg and nodded at the sound it made.

Snikgob came jogging back, his burna tanks sloshing on his back, his welding mask open on his head. He bounded up the fallen metal giant and shoved Bozgat out of the way, pushing a crowbar into his hands as he did. 'This is going to be fun!' he cackled. He lit his burna flame from his smoke, flipped his mask down and set the flame to blue and hot. He carefully cut into the shell of the walker. When he'd made a full, square cut, he beckoned and Bozgat came in to pry the front open. Snikgob got his fingers under it and with a loud grunt hurled the plate back.

An angry, soot-stained human stared back at them, his gubbins and worky bits smashed all to zog around him. He shouted something at them in his squeaky humie voice.

Snikgob flipped up his mask. He and Bozgat shared a merry look. 'Hello, humie!' Snikgob said, very loudly and very slowly. 'We is going to get you out – you savvy?'

The human pulled a stupid expression on its flat, pink face and started squeaking again. Snikgob got on his hands and knees. With one hand he reached in, smacking the human across the head when it tried to shoot him with a tiny pistol. Grabbing the man's clothes, Snikgob hauled him halfway out, yanking repeatedly when the human got tangled in his straps and the wires coming out of his skull. This made the human scream. Bozgat laughed and pulled harder.

The human was soon screaming a whole lot more. Snikgob took his time with him, not stopping until he got hungry and decided it was dinner time.

'Frikk. Frikk! You want some? There's still a bit left!' shouted Snikgob, waving one of the human's thigh bones at the gretchin.

'That was a cracking cook up,' said Bozgat happily. The pair of them were sitting in chairs they'd knocked together from junk, enjoying the embers of their cooking fire glowing in half an oil barrel, the shiny sunset, the stink of war and – best of all – the sweet, sweet taste of pinky flesh.

Frikk wasn't hungry. He sat with his back against *Fat Mork's* foot. He shivered even though it was warm. He was frightened out of his wits, but not so frightened that he did not recognise the glyphs he'd seen scratched into the wall by the broken wires.

Urdgrub.

CHAPTER 7

FRIKK IN TROUBLE

Night fell.

Battle retreated further from the *Wrath of Gork.* Artillery fire rumbled no louder than distant summer thunder. The howling of the boyz was the pounding of a faraway sea upon the shore. Sinister warbles and crackles split the gathering dark, the discharge of ork energy weapons made close by tricks of the atmosphere. The gretchin and Deathskulls combing the battlefield looked up at the flashes in the sky when this happened, before going back to their looting. Injured orks who still had not been seen by the doks shouted angrily. The doks took their time. Floodlights marked where they worked. When done, they dished out their version of post-operative care, haggling over the price. Their lisping negotiations were usually brief, giving way to the crunch of pliers ripping out teeth. Screams of discovered humans still came and went, although only rarely. Most had already been tormented and eaten.

The oddboyz were out in force. Runtherds marshalled huge mobs of industrious grots. Surgery tents sprang up around the *Wrath of Gork,* and to the southern end of the ship the mekboyz had begun work on their own settlement, a massive pile of salvage rising rapidly next to it. Loud arguments, some punctuated by gunfire, drifted on the wind from the direction of *Gork's Fist.* Already the superstructure was covered in blazing arc lamps. The blue tongues of welding torches stabbed at the gargant in

multiple places. Whether the meks were repairing it or cutting it up was hard to tell from that distance, but knowing orks, the likelihood was that different mekmobs were doing both simultaneously.

Snikgob was still out and about, scavenging from human and ork alike. Uggrim and Bozgat were arguing over the best way to dismember the humie walker and get all the good gubbins out. Now it was dark, the Red Sunz' grot fixers patrolled a wide cordon around this valuable piece of plunder, beating the slaves of rival mekmobs when they got too close.

'I tells you, going in from underneath, underneath!' said Bozgat, gesticulating wildly. 'Got to get that shield generator out in one piece. Armour's too thick at the front, boss – we'll get bored, go at it too hard and mash up all the good stuff by accident. Armour's weak at the back, boss, and all crumped up anyhows. We can get at it if we dig a trench right there.' Bozgat stomped across the fallen Knight, steel-shod boots booming on the metal. He pointed at the ground between the walker's legs.

Uggrim was equally annoyed that Bozgat was right and that he had the nerve to disagree with him. He harrumphed and crossed his apish arms. He realised he was just being stubborn for the sake of it, but giving in irked him. 'All right! All right! You win. When Snikgob comes back we'll get him to cut from the back.'

'Boss, listen. It's the only way to do it,' began Bozgat. He stopped, puzzled. 'Did you just agree with me?'

'Yes. Yes, I did. Don't let it go to your head.' Uggrim approached Bozgat. 'Now let's start getting that choppy arm off. We can do that without Sniks, no worries. I got plans for that.' Uggrim looked up at *Fat Mork*'s gigashoota thoughtfully. With a sneaky shove to the chest, he sent Bozgat off the walker and sprawling on the ground below. He laughed. 'Watch yourself there, Bozgat! Frikk. Frikk!' he bawled.

Frikk had been hiding under *Fat Mork* all this time, obsessing over his Urdgrub dilemma. His hands were raw with his wringing them. 'Yes, boss. Sorry, boss. Coming, boss!' He trotted over to the humie walker, and stared up at his master.

'Go get me some fungus beer, you waste of space,' shouted Uggrim. 'Why I don't just eat you is beyond me. I'm getting soft – sentimental!'

'Yes, boss, sor– Ow!' A large, rusty nut caught Frikk squarely on the shoulder. Uggrim put his hands on his hips and stared down. He was a dark

silhouette against the dirty brown of Alaric's late evening sky.

'And be quick about it!'

Frikk looked up at Uggrim fearfully. The mek's tusks glinted in the light of undoused fires. He was a good boss to Frikk, better than most. But Frikk was still just a grot, and Uggrim as unpredictable as any ork.

'Right away, boss,' he said, trying to sound chirpy. 'Right away!'

He ran the twenty metres back to *Fat Mork,* just to show willing, around the back, up through the side access door, onto the bottom deck and straight into Gulgul, Urdgrub's most vicious henchman.

'Hello,' said Gulgul. He grabbed Frikk by the scruff of the neck and tossed him into the engine room. A villainous looking bunch of gretchin stood around him, all bigger than Frikk. 'Jakar, get that door locked. I want to talk to this runt in private.' He leaned in over Frikk. 'I've come to collect.'

'For who?' said Frikk, innocently.

A tittering, flatheaded gretchin, whose eyes pointed in different directions, slammed Frikk hard against the reactor house. Gulgul's lackeys giggled maliciously as Frikk's flesh hissed on the hot metal.

'How does it work? How does this little sun work? Urdgrub's got people who need to know!' said Gulgul. He jerked his head. Flathead failed to take the hint, so Gulgul punched him in the face. Frikk fell to the floor.

'Whaddya do that for?' said Flathead.

'I wanted you to let him go!'

'Well why didn't you say?' said Flathead, rubbing at his cheek.

Gulgul curled his lip at the gretchin. Flathead shrank back, ears flat against his head in submission.

The three gretchin with Gulgul looked mean but not too bright; either way they were brawny for grots. Frikk didn't fancy his chances, but at least Urdgrub wasn't there. He rubbed his face. The smell of his own singed flesh overwhelmed his sensitive nose.

'I don't suppose I could just give you the teeth back?' he said hopefully.

'You could,' said Gulgul, spitting on the floor. 'Six, ain't it?'

'Five!' protested Frikk.

'Six. What about me?' said Gulgul nastily. 'I need one. Pay for me time retrievin' them. You got 'em?'

'Um, no,' said Frikk.

‘Well,’ said Gulgul, and began kicking Frikk in between each word, a form of brutal greenskin punctuation. ‘You. Can’t. Give. Them. To. Me. Can. You?’ He gave Frikk a final kick in the ribs for good measure, and stood panting.

Frikk writhed on the floor. That had hurt.

‘Now, how’s it work? You tell me, we’ll zog off. You don’t, well, you saw. We can fix this Stompa right easy so it don’t ever get fixed again, you understand?’

The gretchin with Gulgul giggled. He cuffed them and swore at them until they shut up.

Frikk’s red eyes flicked about. He licked his swollen lips. ‘Er,’ he said, ‘Er…’

Gulgul raised his boot.

Frikk’s hands shot up. ‘Wait!’ he called. ‘Wait!’

Gulgul lowered his foot.

‘Look,’ said Frikk. ‘I don’t know how it works.’

Gulgul’s foot swung backwards again.

‘But I have got an idea!’ squealed Frikk.

‘What?’

‘Well, I was thinking. Why make your own little sun, when you could…’ he shielded his mouth with his hand, and said, sneaky quiet, ‘just nick this one.’

There had been many times in Frikk’s life when he’d prayed to Gork and Mork that his enemies were as thick as he thought they were. This was one of those times.

‘Ye’re joking,’ said Gulgul uncertainly.

‘No, no, I’m not,’ said Frikk. ‘Catch it, in a net,’ he said. ‘I’ve seen it done. Honest.’

‘Urdgrub never said nothin’ about that. You is having me on, runt,’ said Gulgul. ‘It’s way too hot!’

Gulgul’s three lackeys were looking at one another uncertainly. ‘He might be right,’ said Jakar.

‘Shut it, you!’ said Gulgul.

Frikk sat up and laughed, shaking his head. ‘You don’t use a normal net, silly. Look, Bozgat fishes it out every week, regular as clockwork. Got to clean in the reactor, see, or the… Or the light, that’s it, the light clogs up

all the pipes. Yeah.' Frikk winced at this poor improvisation.

'Then why don't it burn the net?' said Gulgul.

'He uses a metal net?' Frikk said doubtfully.

Gulgul looked around. 'Right. Where is it then?'

'I dunno, but we could use that. Should do the job nicely. Scoop it out, nice as pie.' He pointed at Snikgob's welding mask. 'Tell you what, I'll go get it. There's a couple of taps need turning off down there before we can open it. Don't touch though, hot hot hot!'

'What do you mean?' said Gulgul.

'Well,' said Frikk, all wide-eyed innocence. 'I've got to turn the heat down, or it will be too hot even for that, won't it?'

'Which taps?' said Gulgul. Suspicion was writ so large on his face that the dumbest, blindest ork could read it.

'Oh, it'll be easier if I just do it meself…'

'Which ones, runt?' Gulgul smacked Frikk hard.

'Can I show you?'

'Not likely. Gizkor, you go with him.'

'Boss, shouldn't we wait? Urdgrub'll be here in a mo – he's only up top having a skwizz around, and this runt is right tricky…' said Jakar.

'Shut it, Jakar! Urdgrub's not here. I's biggest! I's in charge! Gizkor, you go with him.'

'Right,' said Frikk, getting into the swing of it. 'I'll show him which to do. You open the door, and we'll bring the mask back over, okay?'

Gulgul looked at Gizkor, considering. 'This better not be a trick, runt.'

'What?' Frikk made an outrageous face of wounded innocence, fingers resting gently on his heart. 'I always pay me debts! Just think how happy…' he narrowed his eyes, time for a gamble, '*Mogrok* will be when you come back with a little sun he can call his own.'

'How do you know who my boss is?'

A lucky guess, thought Frikk. 'Everyone knows,' said Frikk. 'Talk of the town, how Urdgrub is in his good books and all. And you!' he added hastily.

'Yeah, yeah!' said Gulgul. 'Yeah, yeah!' He nodded at his lackeys, who giggled obediently. 'You think you're so smart! It ain't Mogrok, nothing to do with Mogrok!'

'Who is it then?' said Frikk.

‘Not telling you that, am I? But take a look. I’ll give you a clue. Gave me this, he did.’ He held up a tooth on a chain, its gold cap stamped with a grinning moon. ‘Pays me, lets me go where I like. I got one just like Urdgrub.’

‘Urdgrub got two,’ said Jakar.

‘Shut it, you!’ snapped Gulgul. ‘You should get a new boss, Frikk – you’re wasted down here.’

‘Yeah,’ said Frikk sadly, and he half meant it. ‘Oh, but I’m not so clever as you, Gulgul,’ he said, with a massive, insincere smile.

‘That’s the truth, ain’t it?’ sniffed Gulgul, pocketing his tooth. ‘Urdgrub don’t think so neither. He thinks everyone but him is thick. Even me!’

He might be right there, thought Frikk.

‘But he don’t know me, he don’t know me at all.’ Gulgul went on. ‘Wait here, he says, do that, he says. Wait for me and don’t go in while I has a scout about. Well, I thought, I’ll show him! I’ll show him and get him his little sun, no bother, and we can be out of ’ere in no time. Ain’t that right, runt?’

Gulgul looked very pleased with himself. Frikk was high on relief; Gulgul was a certifiable idiot. He had a chance. ‘Now, shall we?’ Frikk got up, dusted his cap off on his knees and set it carefully on his head.

Gulgul jerked his head back towards the reactor. This time, his lackeys obeyed.

‘You need to spin those wing nuts, then open the door. Yeah, that one – the one with the observation window in it.’

There was a sizzling sound as Flathead grabbed the wing nuts. ‘Ow! It’s hot, boss.’

‘Tsk,’ said Frikk. ‘Course it’s hot. I haven’t turned it down yet! You got to wait.’

‘You thick?’ growled Gulgul. ‘Get a cloth! Then grab a spanner or somefink to open the door. Idiot.’

‘Right then,’ said Frikk. He was aiming for confident, although terror was closer to what he felt. ‘We need to go over here, by the mask. That’s where the taps are.’ Frikk led Gizkor over. Gizkor looked unhappy. ‘I’ll do it,’ he said, ‘save you the bother.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ said Gizkor genially. ‘Got a bad back,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t like to bend over.’

Frikk bent down, putting as much of his body behind Snikgob's welding mask as he could. One of Snikgob's tool bags was next to it. He selected a spanner with exaggerated care and fiddled with some taps that didn't do anything at all to the output of the sun, but did turn off part of its magnetic containment field.

'All right!' called Frikk over his shoulder. 'You open it now. If it's too hot then I'll turn it down a bit, then we'll bring the mask back!'

'It's still very bright,' said Jakar. Curse him, thought Frikk. Urdgrub's crew had half a brain between them, and it all seemed to be in Jakar's skull.

Jakar peered through the glass of the observation window. 'And it's acting funny.'

'Turned down the heat, not the light!' said Frikk cheerfully. 'Taps for that are up in the head. Bad design, if you ask me – should have them both together. Orks is dumb, yeah?'

The gretchin shared a little laugh at this, united briefly by the misery of their oppression.

Frikk smiled. 'It'll settle down in a second. Right, you ready?'

Nods all round.

'Go!'

'Not doing it,' said Jakar.

'Jakar!' said Gulgul.

'No, I ain't.'

'All right then. Flathead, *you* do it,' said Gulgul.

Flathead, an oily rag wrapped around his fingers to protect them, unscrewed the wing nuts.

Frikk ducked down behind the welding mask. 'Okay! You should be fine to do it now!' he said. He watched through its smoked glass visor as the reactor's service door was flicked open. He flinched.

A blast of terrible heat seared the room. Flathead burst into flames. Gulgul and Jakar reeled back screaming, hands flung up to protect their faces.

An alarm bell on the wall clamoured out a warning. There was a rumble from the reactor, and a burning arc of white heat, with the form and effect of a miniature solar flare, licked out and cut Jakar in half. Gulgul threw up a hand and lost it. He keened horribly, eyes wide and staring at the

cauterised stump. The flare continued on, growing longer and wider as it travelled. It connected with the inner hull in a spitting shower of molten metal, slashing a burning hole right through *Fat Mork.*

'What the zog is going on here?'

Frikk's eyes were a mess of after images, and watered something awful, but he recognised that voice: Urdgrub.

'Shut the door! Shut the door! What the zog are you doing? Idiots! Zogging idiots!'

The flare ran its course.

Squealing in pain, Gulgul slammed the door shut with his stump. The light and heat ceased immediately. Urdgrub dropped down the ladder and ran up to his lieutenant. Gulgul was a terrible sight. All the right side of his body had been burned charcoal-black. One eye was blind, the ear on that side burned away entirely. Gulgul staggered towards Urdgrub, who stepped back in horror.

'Sorry, boss,' said Gulgul, and died.

Urdgrub stared madly around the room. 'You!' he roared over the bell's din. 'Frikk! You little git! Gizkor, Gizkor is that you? What you standing there for, Gizkor? Kill him!'

Gizkor stumbled round to face Frikk. From the back, he looked fine, but the front was another matter. His skin was peeling away from his face in red strips like squig rashers. His eyes were cooked white, moist and blind as soft poached eggs. Frikk blinked the afterimages of the sun away, grabbed at the smoking tool bag and pulled out a screwdriver. He whimpered as the hot metal singed his hand. Gizkor swiped for Frikk, only to find the screwdriver buried up to the handle in his heart.

The ringing went on deafeningly. A commotion came from outside. Ork voices. Ork fists hammering on the door. Urdgrub turned this way and that.

'I'm going to kill you slowly, grot,' he snarled. He flung himself out of the gash in the wall and was gone.

Frikk limped over to where Gulgul's smoking hand lay. Next to it, the links of its chain fused together, was the blackened tooth. Frikk held it up in front of his eyes, fascinated. A dull whoosh came from outside. Seconds later, the blue knife of a burna turned to cutting flame slid through the door and the bar locking it. Molten steel dribbled onto the floor, spitting as it fell.

Frikk pocketed the tooth as the door clanged open.

'What the zog is going on here?' bellowed another voice, this one much deeper, orkier, far angrier. It belonged to Snikgob, who was leaping through the door with a murderous look on his face. Frikk whimpered. The ork came over the deck in two great strides, dropped his burna, grabbed the gretchin by the throat and hauled him into the air.

The other two meks were close behind. Bozgat clapped his hands to his head. 'What've you done? What have you done to me Stompa?' he said.

Uggrim's eyes followed the still glowing crack from the floor all the way up the wall and into the ceiling. The darkening sky was visible through it. He examined the damage silently, tutting and humming and hawing. Frikk dreaded the moment he'd face him, which he duly did. 'What's all this about, Frikk? Don't make me bake you. Ye're me favourite grot, you are. But I am perishin' hungry. That humie was very thin.' Uggrim seemed calm. Frikk quailed – that was when his boss was at his most dangerous.

'Thanks, boss,' choked out Frikk, dangling from Snikgob's claw. 'It wasn't me, I swear.'

Snikgob shook him.

'All right! I mean, it was me, but… Look, boss, it was Urdgrub. I had to get rid of him.'

'Urdwho?'

'That sneaky blue-face git we got to nick the gubbins out of Grabskab's battlewagon back on Garbax World. Do you remember, boss, do you?'

Uggrim smiled fondly at the memory. 'Hur. Yeah. What's 'e still doing about?'

'Never went away, boss. Most of his lot went off to Bluefinga, but not him. He's been skulking about in the ship's drops, making all sorts of new troubles for us grots with his gang! He's a menace, he is. I, er, I owed him some teeth…'

Uggrim looked at him admonishingly. 'Don't tell me you been gambling again, Frikk.'

Frikk nodded miserably.

'Oh, Frikk, I am so disappointed.'

'Oh, yeah, sorry, boss. I was. Hard habit to break. But look! He said he'd let me off if I told him how *Fat Mork's* little sun works…'

This admission prompted another bout of furious shaking from Snikgob.

Frikk's collection of pencils spilled out of his shirt pocket, and his cap came off again.

'Another one? Another one after our stuff? What'd ya tell him, you little runt?'

Frikk made a series of horrible noises in his throat and clawed feebly at Snikgob's hand.

'Er, you know, I don't mean to butt in and all, but I don't think he can answer, Snikgob,' said Bozgat. 'He's gone blue.'

'Well he won't mind that will he?' snarled Snikgob, shaking Frikk harder. ''Cause it's a lucky colour!'

'Stop a mo, Snik,' said Uggrim. He laid a hand on Snikgob's arm. Snikgob bared his teeth and growled at his boss, but stopped and loosened his hand.

Frikk could barely speak. His nails still scraped at Snikgob's fingers, desperate to relieve the pressure, but Snikgob's hand was as immovable as a vice – he never used one, he had no need. 'Thanks, boss,' gasped Frikk. 'I told him nothing. I don't know, do I? I'm just a grot.'

'True that,' said Uggrim.

'And he says he has a new boss. And I think I knows who it is!'

'Mogrok,' said Uggrim with dead certainty.

Frikk tried to shake his head, but he couldn't. Spots wheeled in front of his eyes. His view of the room was growing an unattractive and terrifying black border. Then he remembered the tooth.

Still scrabbling at Snikgob's fingers with one hand, he flailed at his pocket with the other.

'Here, what's he doing now?' said Bozgat.

'Why don't you put him down and we can find out?' said Uggrim.

Snikgob pursed his lips. 'Nah.'

Frikk pulled the token from his overall's pocket. 'Here, boss. Here!' His voice was a croak. His world had become a dim circle containing three very angry orks and a large measure of pain. With the last of his strength he held up a gleaming white object, long as a finger, capped with gold bearing a cleverly worked leering moon.

Uggrim snatched it and examined it.

'It's a tooth,' said Bozgat, who although he had the most orky know-wots of any of them was somewhat prone to stating the obvious.

‘Course it’s a tooth!’ said Uggrim.

‘Whose though?’ said Snikgob.

‘Grimgutz. It’s Grimgutz!’ croaked Frikk. Then he went back to grabbing at the hand around his throat and kicking feebly.

‘Zoggin’ heck,’ said Bozgat.

‘Grimgutz?’ said Uggrim. ‘Oh yeah. Look here. That moon, same as his clan badge. Cheeky zogger! See?’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Bozgat. ‘Nice design. Bit fancy.’

‘Bad Moon, ain’t he?’ said Uggrim.

‘Could we get back to the important stuff, like who’s trying to kill us?’ snapped Snikgob. ‘Sounds like you know what’s going on, Uggs.’

‘What *is* going on?’ said Bozgat.

‘Don’t know if I do. Thought I did, but…’ Uggrim stroked his wide jaw. ‘Trouble,’ said Uggrim. ‘You can put him down now, Sniks.’

‘Oh yeah. Sorry,’ said Snikgob, in a manner that could only be described as highly sarcastic. He dropped the gretchin. Frikk landed in a little heap. He stayed there coughing and retching and making funny little hitching sounds in his throat, like he was finding it hard to breathe or something. Pathetic.

‘I thought Grimgutz thought his Stompa was best?’ said Bozgat. ‘Squig oil, all that?’

Uggrim gave a massive grin. ‘Yeah, he did say that, didn’t he? Obviously he’s a liar. He reckons *Fat Mork* is better than *Big Mouth!* That’s why we got sabotaged! Ain’t that nice, lads? He wants our secrets.’ Uggrim made a proud face. ‘He wants our secrets! Ha!’ He slapped Snikgob on the back. Snikgob glowered.

‘So what about Mogrok?’ said Snikgob. ‘Tell Bozgat what he did, Uggs.’

Uggrim’s face fell. ‘Oh. Yeah. Grimgutz ain’t the only one. He, er… Well, Mogrok wants to know how the little sun works an’ all,’ said Uggrim.

‘Why? Don’t he know?’ said Bozgat.

‘Maybe he does. Maybe he’s just Morking on us, see what we got. A sneaky one that Mogrok,’ said Uggrim. ‘And stinky.’

Snikgob shook his head and spat on the floor. ‘This ain’t good. Rumour has it lots of them what displeases him go missing,’ said Snikgob.

‘I heard that too,’ said Bozgat.

‘Last thing we need is that git getting uppity with us. Gah. Why can’t a Waaagh! be simple, like it was in the good old days?’ said Snikgob.

‘Like I said, politics,’ said Uggrim.

‘You going to tell him how it works then, or what?’ said Snikgob.

‘Why, do you know how it works, Snikgob?’ said Uggrim.

‘Well, er, not exactly… But I could sketch out the general… Er, no. No I don’t,’ he said limply. Admitting so soured his temper further.

‘Do you, Bozgat? You wanted it. You did most of the work.’

‘Um, I… I reckon I could do it again, but…’ He threw up his hands. ‘You finished it! Not me. You knew which gubbins to lift from the blue boyz.’

Uggrim nodded. ‘That’s right. Truth is, it was all three of us. Mork working through our orky know-wots.’ He tapped his sloping forehead. ‘Bozgat, you did the most…’

‘You didn’t tell Mogrok that, did you?’ Bozgat said, a little alarmed.

‘Gork’s right arse cheek, Bozgat! Ye’re as snivelly as a grot! No, I did not tell him. And don’t interrupt.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Apology accepted. Nah, to make this again, we’d all have to do it. It’s a rare piece of technorkology, this.’ He flung his arms around his compatriots. ‘Red Sunz Mob. We can’t give him the secret alone, only together. And even if we could, I don’t reckon we should, just in case any of youse lot is thinking on that.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Snikgob with a scowl. He shucked off Uggrim’s arm. ‘But now he’ll probably want to kill us.’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Uggrim. ‘But he won’t. Come on boyz, he’s only a Bad Moon! More teeth than sense, that lot. We’re Evil Sunz! We’re the Red Sunz! We have a little sun!’

‘What’s that mean?’ said Bozgat.

‘Beats me,’ said Uggrim. ‘But it’s got to mean *something.* We aren’t going to let him kill us! And if he does try to go all sneaky-sneak on us, we’ll be ready.’

‘Fine, fine,’ said Bozgat, shrugging off Uggrim too. ‘But what about Grimgutz?’

‘Oh, him we’ll have to kill,’ said Uggrim. ‘Right, Snikgob?’

‘Right, Uggs.’

‘So!’ exclaimed Uggrim, clapping his hands together. ‘First order of the

day. Check out the damage.'

The orks thumped around the room, checking out the damage.

'Oi! You got blood on my best screwdriver, you runt,' shouted Snikgob.

'Sorry, boss,' Frikk said. It wouldn't have mattered which screwdriver he'd chosen. As far as Snikgob was concerned, they were all his best. The gretchin was so beaten up now his bruises had bruises. The feeling had left his ribs some time ago. He idly wondered if they were still there or had all been kicked to flinders. He curled into a tight little ball and waited.

'Well?' said Snikgob. 'What you lying round for? I'm too busy to beat you. Punch yerself in the face!'

Frikk sighed and sat up. He began smacking himself as instructed.

'Oi, you little runt,' growled Bozgat. 'Harder!'

Uggrim stayed staring at the hole. Snikgob came up to Bozgat with a finger to his lips. 'You know what that means, don't you?' he whispered, nodding towards Uggrim.

'He's not? Not *again.*'

'He is,' said Snikgob. 'He's thinkin'.'

Uggrim had that glazed look on his face an oddboy gets sometimes. He was talking to himself, low in his throat, a rumbling stream of words the others couldn't quite make out.

'We is going to Mork up the Gork on *Fat Mork* so we's ready for them zoggers, either one of 'em, when they come a callin'.'

'Er, righty-ho, boss,' said Bozgat, his brow furrowed with confusion. He looked at Snikgob, who gave the exaggerated shrug of cluelessness.

Uggrim looked at them both. 'You is both idiots! I mean we'll make *Fat Mork* the stompiest, shootiest Stompa there is in the whole Waaagh!' he explained. 'That Mogrok tries to do us in on the quiet, he'll look well stupid, sneaky as a runt.' Uggrim was energised. 'And if he comes at us proper Gork right, we'll blow his stuff to bits. Same for Grimgutz – we'll do him first. Get the grots organised. I want lights up outside, big lights! We've wasted enough time. We have to get those arms off of that humie Stompa, dig out its bubble generator and all. Snikgob! We're going to have to work fast, and we're going to need some big burna action. You still mates with the Flaming Fire crew?'

'Yeah, Uggs. Seen them, not so long back today, cutting up junk near the gargant.'

‘Go and get ’em, and no one else, got it? Someone – Bozgat – go find Talker. There’s complicated sums needs doing.’

Bozgat nodded. ‘All right, boss. I’ll cook up a squig, always brings him running.’

Uggrim clapped his hands together and jutted his tusks out. Things were getting fun. ‘Excellent! Excellent! Get to it, we’ve not got time to waste! I’ll wipe those smug looks off those fat Bad Moon faces and no mistake…’

CHAPTER 8

THE BIG BURNY RIVER BATTLE

Fat Mork's reactor grumbled loudly. The little evil sun inside his belly spat with anger at the increased demands placed upon it. The Stompa had changed inside and out. His belly had been sliced open, the repeating humie cannon mounted on the reactor deck to jut out of his gut like a little version of *Gungutz*. Up top, the gigashoota loading mechanism and the rest had been removed. In its place was the humie Stompa's choppy arm, the smooth lines of its manufacture a glaring contrast with *Fat Mork'*s solid but ugly construction. Patches of its original colourful heraldry showed up underneath its new red paint; the orks had been left with little time to do a good job.

Bozgat hummed happily to himself as he played with the humie shield. It wasn't a proper orky bubble, but a moveable wall that could be swung to protect the most vulnerable parts of the Stompa. Bozgat spun it round on its new gimble mounts, panning it up and down and round about. He fiddled with it, now slow, now fast, narrowing and widening its field of effect. He kept his eye on an array of dials set into the wall near his station. He sucked his lip in through his fangs and nodded.

'Reactor's up to ninety per cent of tolerance, boss,' said Bozgat.

'Caution must be taken when interfacing ionic technologies, especially those that originate with alien species whose consciousness wavelengths are incompatible with the psychically motivated etheric generators of the

krork,' said Talker.

'Shut your jabber,' said Bozgat aggressively, before tweaking a few knobs and closing a few valves on it anyway. The reactor calmed down.

'Wibble,' said Talker.

'Ahem, just to be on the safe side,' said Bozgat to a gaggle of grots. 'What you looking at anyway?' he growled when their blank faces did not change. 'Move!' He clapped his hands. They moved. Frikk found them all jobs to do.

'Hur hur hur. I'd like to see 'em stop *Fat Mork* now!' said Uggrim through the talky-tubes.

'Burble,' said Talker.

Bozgat gave Talker a filthy look and grabbed the nearest talky-tube. 'What's he doing down here, boss? It ain't fair.'

'Who said fair's got anything to do with it? He's your pet, so you can have him. We're sick of his yapping up there anyway. Ain't that right, Snikgob?'

Snikgob nodded. 'S'right, Uggs. I'm sick of his yammer. You're the one that's always saying how useful he is.' Talker was useful too; some of his babble hid real insight that had got them out of many a technical knot. Not that they would ever own up to it.

'I just wanted a little break,' complained Bozgat, 'just a little one! It's a lot of responsibility having a mad 'un to look after.'

'Your problem, matey. You found him, you took him in, you look after him!' said Uggrim. 'Besides, he's the best shot. He's staying in the belly gun and that's final – got it?'

After the drop, the war was proceeding in a most satisfactory manner. The humans skulked on the other side of the river. The water was hot and burned the skin, as early kommando forays had discovered. A few had got across, fewer had come back, their skin bleached horribly white. Their stomachs were a mess too, and these brave scouts had been banished far from the main drops until they sorted themselves out.

Still, their intelligence was as useful as their drops-smell were unbearable. The humies were hoping, said Mogrok, to funnel the orks over the narrow bridges and blast them as they did so.

Grukk didn't listen and went charging in anyway. The humies blocked the bridges with ogryns, and hammered the ork horde at range. Pandemonium

was too gentle a word. Orks battling ogryns, orks swimming, orks drowning. In the end they got over the river, but the humies were acting all smart, isolating the orks and cutting them down. Their guns were puny only if you were facing one. But a thousand? Ten thousand? Orks were las-burned by the hundred. Grukk had gone in himself, trying to take the south bridge. He snipped up a lot of the ogryn boys, a great fight, and it looked like it was all going his way until this big floating island ship thingy plugged the end of the river and sent out a whole bunch of quick humie Stompas to get on with shooting everyone up. One had smashed up the bridge; a big white boss Stompa had lifted the end! Lifted it! Humies were weak, but that was impressive. Grukk had been giving it some in the middle when it happened, and had gone missing when the whole lot crashed into the river. Fallen in, by all accounts, but no one reckoned he was dead. He'd only fallen into some burny water; what harm was that going to do to such an ork?

So the orks kept on coming, because that's what greenboyz do – keep on coming until the last one, leastaways provided not too many of them get fried. In any case, the humies had reckoned without Big Red and the other weirdboyz telly-porting a whole crowd of mobs behind their lines. The artillery buzzing in from the other side of the burning river rapidly petered out, before being redirected with redoubled fury. That was a surprise for them. The humans were in disarray again, just like the last time. Orks bashed their way through the lines, and it all started to fall apart for them. True, some humie flyboys came swooping in and knocked out the artillery, but by then the humies were running away. Again. Uggrim thought it was all pretty predictable. It was disappointing, really.

And that's where the lads of the Red Sunz were called in. The humie Stompas were still a problem. *Fat Mork* advanced across the desert under the cover of a dust storm kicked up by a million pounding orky boots. He marched alongside *Big Mouth,* a shiny patch in his side. Uggrim felt pretty pleased with himself, because *Fat Mork* had been refitted in the time it had taken that show-off Grimgutz to stick a fresh plate on his machine. That's what being a mekaniak was all about: out-Morking the other meks.

Mogrok's Gorkanauts waddled in front, a new kind of walker halfway between a Dread and a proper Stompa. Uggrim looked down on their heads sniffily. The pilots weren't proper meks, but nobs who had bought their

walkers from Mogrok like they were common bikes. Uggrim did not approve.

'*Waaagh!*' bellowed one.

'Shush!' shouted Grimgutz over the squawker. 'We're supposed to be sneaking up on 'em!'

'Proper orks don't sneak,' came a belligerent reply. 'Come on, lads – let's show these snivelling oddboyz a proper orking!'

The Gorkanauts opened fire, sending a highly inaccurate storm of metal towards the humie walkers crowding the end of the fallen bridge. Not much of it got anywhere near them, but enough did to grab their attention.

'Zog it,' said Grimgutz, and activated *Big Mouth'*s big mouth. Raucous ork music blared from the Stompa.

'Great,' said Uggrim. 'Talker! Get that belly gun ready!'

'Yeah, ur, hic, boss.' Talker blew a big raspberry into his talky-tube.

'Out the way! Out the way, you nobs – let some proper shootas do their work!'

The half a dozen or so Gorkanauts in front of *Fat Mork* waddled reluctantly aside. A good few of them got in *Big Mouth'*s way as they did, causing a clumsy waltz as they tried to avoid crashing into each other. It looked ridiculous, and Uggrim laughed as Grimgutz swore mightily. Grimgutz's tirade got even more imaginative when *Fat Mork'*s stolen battle cannon opened up, landing four shells in the middle of the Knights. The Stompa shook on its short legs as it absorbed the recoil. The noise of its report dinned the machine like a bell. When it fired the orks could hear nothing else, not even the music coming out of *Big Mouth'*s big mouth. The meks found this exhilarating, whooping until their throats hurt. Three of the shells exploded on the shielding of the humie war machines, but the last powered through, ripping the leg off a bright blue one. It toppled over, raising a cloud of dust.

'Ha ha!' shouted Uggrim, slamming his hands into his periscope handles. 'Ha ha! That's how you do it. That is how you do it!'

An uproarious buzzing surrounded *Fat Mork,* as hundreds of buggies, bikes and trakks held back to shelter behind the Stompas were released. They shot past, speed-crazed orks hanging from their backs with their tongues lolling out.

With a storm of fire coming from both sides of the river, the humie

Stompas that came from the sea wised up enough to retreat.

'Oh no you don't!' roared Uggrim. 'Bozgat! All power to the feets. All ahead full!' He had a little mechanical dial that he rammed backwards and forwards to ding a bell in the engine room.

Snikgob was getting frustrated. Buggies were running alongside the human walkers, volleying rocket and blasta fire at them. A lot died, but they were as numerous as biting flies, and their weight of fire was stupendous. 'All the freeks are killing the humies! There'll be none left for us! Get me lifta in range!'

'We'll get closer than that,' said Uggrim. 'Want to try out our new choppa, don't we, lads?'

'Yes, boss!' shouted the orks.

Uggrim pushed his drive levers to full. *Fat Mork* picked up speed and barged the Gorkanauts out of the way. Uggrim ignored most of the complaints from the nob pilots, and yelled threats at the most persistent. *Fat Mork's* new gut cannon thundered after the retreating Knights. They were dropping into the river, away from the boyz on foot and the buggy swarm; pretty sneaky, as Uggrim reckoned it, but not sneaky enough. The ork Stompas were getting closer. The Gorkanaut's shells sparked off the humie Stompa's shielding, and the cavalcade of light vehicles kept pace with the Knights along the bank, sending dozens of rockets screaming at them. Plumes of acid water erupted from the river, scalding anything they hit.

The Knights formed up into a box formation, their clever shields making a mobile castle wall of flickering light around them, and marched onwards at a steady pace. They traded weapons fire where they could, but their attention was on escape. The Knights were slowed by the acid stream dragging at their legs, allowing the lumbering ork walkers to gain. The buggy swarm had no trouble keeping pace, but the humies were outpacing the footsloggers on the eastern bank.

'Get on! Get on!' yelled Uggrim. *Fat Mork* groaned in progress. His short legs were moving so fast that the machine had taken on a pronounced wobble, and most of Talker's shots missed. 'We got only one kill! We can't finish this battle with only one kill – what will the others say?' asked Bozgat.

'No worries, Boz,' said Snikgob. 'The humies are getting away, but at

least we're running ahead of that Grimgutz.'

Uggrim swung his periscope around. Sure enough, Grimgutz's way forward was blocked by the smaller Gorkanauts. His engine lacked the power to allow him to bash his way past them, and he was steadily shrinking into the distance. The din of his wide metal gob got quieter and quieter the further they drew away from him.

'Squig oil engines my green behind!' crowed Uggrim. 'Get yourself a proper reactor, Bad Moon!' he yelled into the squawker. 'Ha ha!'

Fat Mork waddled through the burning wreckage of ork light vehicles, caught up with the stragglers from the buggy swarm, and then they were into the main body of the buggies. The swarm had slowed to match pace with the humies in the river, the vehicles looping great big donuts in the desert to keep their speed up. Ork gunners hanging from pintle weapons made obscene gestures at *Fat Mork* as he got in the way. Snikgob chucked a couple in the river to teach them some manners, and they zoomed off ahead, black exhaust washing into Uggrim's cockpit and making his eyes water.

'Faster! They're getting away! We need to go faster!' shouted Bozgat. 'I'm upping the juice.'

The Stompa lurched, his wobbling jog becoming violent. Gretchin squealed as they were flung from their posts. Uggrim grabbed his squigskin straps. The human island-ship loomed ahead of them. It was loads bigger than even the *Wrath of Gork,* and that had him thinking.

An uncomfortable thought crossed Uggrim's mind. 'Snik, how many guns do you reckon a big humie boat like that has?'

'Not enough!' shouted Snikgob.

'Er, lots?' said Frikk, who'd somehow got to a talky-tube.

Uggrim ignored this flagrant violation of Stompa rules and slammed his left stick backwards. 'I'm turnin' us round.'

Gretchin, junk and ammo slid everywhere as *Fat Mork* executed a high-speed pirouette.

'What? No! Uggs! No! Wanna do some crumpin'!' roared Snikgob. He sent a lifta beam after the Knights, ripping up a linear burst of spray from the water. He stopped mid tirade. 'Hang on a minute… Hang on a minute! Oh yeah, oh yeah!' He became agitated as the threat sank in. 'Er, don't you reckon we should be goin' faster?'

‘We were going faster,’ said Bozgat sulkily.

‘Stop your whinin’, Bozgat, and get us goin’ as fast as you can the other way. And get that humie shield pointin’ at our behind!’

‘Sure thing, boss,’ grumbled Bozgat. Uggrim checked his readouts and the telly-scope to make sure Bozgat was doing it right. They were cutting this very fine.

A few bikers and buggy boys caught on and screeched around to follow. *Fat Mork* was going a ferocious pace when it met the Gorkanauts. ‘Ye’re goin’ the wrong way!’ crowed Kaptin Blackfoot, one of the pilots. ‘Ye’re goin’ the wrong way!’

General hilarity from the nobs in the smaller walkers blasted out of the squawker, mixed with insults concerning oddboyz’ cowardice and Uggrim’s unnatural predilection for being pleasant. A massive explosion cut it short. One of the Gorkanauts detonated in a shower of red-hot iron fragments. A lot more followed.

‘Who’s goin’ the wrong way now, you dumb zoggers?’ shouted Uggrim, totally intoxicated by the fight. ‘Who’s laughin’ now?’

Mork alone – and perhaps Gork – knew how many guns there actually were on the humie island thing, but the rippling flashes that signalled each broadside suggested a great many indeed. The orks were engulfed in a firestorm. Buggies flipped end over end, bikers dug heels in to spin their mounts on the spot and flee. Trakks went into reverse, only to throw their tracks or be smashed apart by the dozen. The humie Stompas stopped firing altogether. They were wading as fast as they could through the stinky water. A giant ramp dropped down from the floating stronghold, and the humie Stompas made right for it.

Fat Mork juddered as it took a direct hit. Flames billowed around the Stompa, filling the telly-scope, the glass viewing eye and the periscope. The squawker was a din of screaming, howling orks being blown up or baked alive, Uggrim caught the high-pitched wittering of humies too. Over all that Uggrim could hear Grimgutz laughing it up in his Stompa.

Fat Mork strode from the fire storm. *Big Mouth* was waiting for them a few hundred metres away.

‘Wow! If it weren’t for that humie shield we’d be dead!’ said Bozgat.

CHAPTER 9

BIG MOUTH VERSUS *FAT MORK*

‘What you laughin’ at, Grimgutz?’ bellowed Uggrim into the squawker.

‘’Cause you nearly got your squig cooked. Evil Sunz is as Evil Sunz does – always goin’ faster, always falling right into a trap. Idiots,’ said Grimgutz, all cocky from the safety of *Big Mouth.*

‘Wasn’t just us, was it?’ yelled Uggrim. He squinted at his grot signallers, at the squawker and the talky-tubes. All he had to do was say the word and the big yellow fool would be as dead as dead.

‘Not talking about that trap, moron.’

‘Er, Uggs…’ said Snikgob.

Big Mouth levelled his gigshoota at *Fat Mork.* ‘You’re trouble, you are. Too ambitious, too clever by half, and you won’t share.’

‘You never asked,’ growled Uggrim. ‘You came pokin’ about into my Stompa like a grot sneak!’

‘Don’t know where you got that idea, pal. It was Mogrok behind it all.’

‘Really? Let me see,’ Uggrim tapped his chin with a nail. ‘Oh yeah, that grot was carryin’ your tooth…’

‘Don’t mean anything,’ Grimgutz said.

‘I think it means you reckon *Fat Mork’*s better than *Big Mouth!*’

Grimgutz snapped. ‘So what if I was interested? No, I didn’t ask. Mogrok did, and look where that got him! This is your last chance. Tell me how to make more of them little suns. I’ll be king of my own tribe in a week. I’ll

be generous. Don't tell me, and I'll smash yer stupid red walker to bits right here and now.'

Uggrim was cunning. Uggrim was smart. Uggrim might, on a different day, have told Grimgutz that he would do exactly as he wanted, and later try to wriggle out of it. That was the way Mogrok would have played it.

But Uggrim was also an ork of action. The raw, red violence that dominated all his kind was a raging blaze in his forehead, stoked by Grimgutz's impertinence.

'Fire!' he yelled.

There was a loud *thwack-boom!* from the Stompa's gut. The shell piled right into *Big Mouth'*s chest, wreathing the yellow machine in fire. Green lightning crackled around it as his power fields absorbed the energy. *Big Mouth* took a sharp swerve to the left, and a second shell sailed past him.

'You'll have to do better than that!' crowed Grimgutz over the squawker.

The volume of *Big Mouth'*s music increased, so loud it was almost a weapon in itself. Bellowing metallic Waaaghs!, the machine stumped around *Fat Mork* in a wide circle, its turn of speed taking the Red Sunz meks by surprise.

'Track it with the humie shield,' ordered Uggrim.

'I'm trying, I'm trying, b–'

Another deafening report from their new belly gun. Uggrim's ears rang. 'Need to overload the shields, bring 'em down!' he shouted. 'Snikgob, get ready with the lifta.'

'On it, Uggs,' said Snikgob. Indeed he was. One of the buggies fleeing from the battle was snatched from the ground by a delicate movement of the lifta arm. Uggrim pressed his eye close to his periscope so he could catch the surprised looks on the crew's faces as their ride was smashed into *Big Mouth'*s shield. 'Hur hur hur. Funny that!' Uggrim said. 'But wait till I give the say so next time – got to hit it all at once!'

*Big Mouth'*s head swivelled to track his opponent. A checked rocket shot off his shoulder, corkscrewing madly before the grot in the nose cone got it under control; unfortunately for Grimgutz, 'under control' meant a straight line three hundred metres wide of *Fat Mork.*

Talker was firing again, not a bad shot this time, his shell raising a burst of earth near *Big Mouth'*s foot.

'Wait for my orders, you maniac!' shouted Uggrim.

*Big Mouth'*s gigashoota arm could not rotate far enough out from his body to target *Fat Mork.* It didn't stop the gunner trying, and a spray of incandescent streaks spat from the weapon. The bullets were so off target that Uggrim ignored them. He pressed his eye to the periscope. He twiddled knobs, calibrating *Fat Mork'*s death-eye to the energy frequency he reckoned Grimgutz had set his shields to. 'High' was his guess. More was always more with Bad Moons. Biggest, best, loudest, brightest, fanciest… They lived in a world of superlatives, the yellow clan. It was their weakness. Gits.

*Fat Mork'*s eye thrummed next to Uggrim. The Stompa wobbled slightly as Snikgob panned his lifta arm out to the far left, looking for a good piece of scrap to lob.

This was the situation: the battle was virtually over. The humans were flooding away from their defences. Orks from both sides of the river were running after them, reinforced by the boyz of Blacktoof's and Dok Killa's crews spilling out of the newly arrived rust-ship, *Steeljaw,* to the south. Squawker chatter had it that more and more of the ork ships were coming in from orbit. Reports were also getting to Uggrim that Grukk had indeed survived and was in a terrible temper, his skin bleached by the acidic river. He would carry the sulphurous stink of it with him until his none-too-distant demise.

Only to the south, where the river joined the sea, were the humies holding the upper hand. There, orks were streaming away from the humie island. Those that didn't were being methodically obliterated.

'Pulling back! Just getting our breath – we'll be back for more! We'll show 'em!' shouted nobs over the squawkers, but it was plain to see that they were all pegging it as hard as they could. When ork morale fails, it fails spectacularly.

As one battle came to a close, another was beginning. A touch outside the extreme range of the humie island guns, *Fat Mork* and *Big Mouth* danced slowly around one another. *Big Mouth* went in a circle at the centre of which was *Fat Mork.* On the straight, *Fat Mork* was more than a match for *Big Mouth,* but *Big Mouth* was going slightly too quickly for *Fat Mork,* stomping round on the spot with a somewhat comical shuffling motion, to catch. The belly gun had a clear shot, and then it didn't. When it did, the killy eye next to Uggrim's command seat hadn't. If both could get him,

Sniks couldn't get a good throw for the burning Gorkanaut body he'd spotted on the ground. And so on.

Uggrim held off, waiting for the killy eye to charge to maximum. Talker banged off the odd shot, but it had percolated even his mad mind that each one only exploded – admittedly excitingly – on the rival Stompa's bubble field, and so he orkfully managed to restrain himself and not fire off all his ammo. This wound him up terribly, and his stream of nonsense reverberated around the Stompa when the din of his cannon didn't. *Big Mouth,* on the other hand, continued wobbling past, unable to shoot any of his weapons at all. Trouble was for Grimgutz, *Fat Mork* outgunned his own *Big Mouth* significantly. Uggrim knew Grimgutz knew it.

Straggling buggies roared past these duelling metal godlings, eager to get out of the way. Orks on foot steered well clear – a couple of mobs that didn't got stomped.

'This is stupid!' said Snikgob.

'And boring!' said Bozgat.

Uggrim put his hand over his squawker microphone, then leaned into the talky-tube and spoke conspiratorially. Well, as conspiratorially as one can bellow down a metal pipe embedded in the guts of a noisy war engine.

'We just got to wait him out! Either he'll break down, or he'll lose his cool. Then we can nail 'im.'

Snikgob sniffed disgustedly. 'That ain't very orky.'

'Mebbe,' said Uggrim. 'But winning is.'

'What happens if we break down?' asked Bozgat.

Shocked silence greeted his words. *Fat Mork's* engine seemed to grumble less loudly. It was quiet enough to hear the grots whimpering for a second.

'You what? You *what*?' shouted Snikgob.

Uggrim roared furiously. 'None of us stuff never, ever, breaks down. You got that! We is the Red Sunz meks!'

'Except for last time,' said Bozgat.

'Sabotage!' protested Uggrim.

'What about all the other last times?'

'Shut it, you!'

'Just sayin',' said Bozgat.

'Bleep,' said Talker.

Evidently Grimgutz did get bored. As *Big Mouth* was almost in the rear

arc of *Fat Mork,* where his armour was thinnest, *Big Mouth* pivoted and came right at them.

'Fi–!' began Uggrim, but he stopped and pressed his eye harder against his periscope. He upped the magnification. 'Oh, that's new,' he said.

Big Mouth had been modified more extensively than Uggrim had suspected. His motion brought into view a weapon the meks had not seen before. A panel in *Big Mouth'*s right side below the gigashoota swung open. Held up by chains, in the manner of a drawbridge, this dropped hatch allowed a rack of rockets to extend outwards. Not your usual fat, short-bodied rockets, but sleek, deadly, and more importantly *accurate* looking rockets. They were the business.

I am not the only sneaky one, Uggrim thought. I am not the only sneaky one.

Big Mouth let out a deafening roar, and all the rockets whooshed off their rack to streak at *Fat Mork.* The Red Sunz' Stompa was turning as the shoal of missiles hit it. Bozgat had got the narrow-arc humie shield to cover some of the threatened area, but not all. Six of the rockets exploded harmlessly on the looted energy field, another three on *Fat Mork'*s bubble field. Two got through, armour-piercing heads smacking into the side of the Stompa. The steel core of each warhead was instantly melted and squirted forwards by the explosions, drilling through the layered plates of *Fat Mork'*s side. Grots screamed as they were splashed with molten metal. There was a massive bang and screeching. The acrid smell of burning filled Uggrim's cockpit and made his eyes water. A bell clanged – not the same bell that had rung when Urdgrub's grots had opened the reactor, because *Fat Mork* had a lot of bells, but equally loud and equally alarming.

'Fire! Fire!' wailed a grot.

'You don't give the orders, runt!' shouted Uggrim, wrestling with the drive sticks to bring *Fat Mork* back under control.

'No, boss, no! We is burning! Burning!'

On the gun deck, a second bell, this one a hand bell, was rung: the bell to summon all the grots to fire-fighting duty. Uggrim's eyes widened at the smoke coming up from below. He looked over his shoulder down the ladder well to the middle deck. Gretchin were passing buckets of sand to each other. They were dappled by the light of flames.

*Big Mouth'*s rubbish gunner had finally drawn a bead on the rival Stompa, and massive bullets were smacking into the Red Sunz' own protective bubble field. Bozgat swung the stolen ion shield to cover the weakened area, just in case.

'Bozgat!' Uggrim called.

'Still going, boss – reactor's fine.'

'Snikgob!'

'Just waiting for the word,' replied the other.

'Talker!'

Talker made a noise like a squig being trodden on. Uggrim took that for a yes.

'Fire!' shouted Uggrim.

'I know!' yelled Frikk. 'I'm on it, boss!'

'No! Fire the guns – all of 'em!'

'Right you are,' said Snikgob. 'Now?'

'Now!'

The belly gun boomed. Snikgob tossed his lump of wreckage at the rival Stompa. Uggrim roared and banged the big red button that activated *Fat Mork'*s killy eye.

With a noise like a backwards cough building to a whoop, a wobbly, braided stream of green energy slammed out of *Fat Mork* and into *Big Mouth'*s shields. Uggrim kept it on as long as possible. The bubble field burned bright, green lightning playing over it in crackling starbursts, so much of it the shield resembled some great membrane patterned with veins. Talker gibbered and let off three rapid shots. Snikgob was tossing pieces of junk at the Stompa like a snot at the drops hurling dung. Snikgob was an artist with the lifta. He waved the thing around like a painter with a brush – a dab here, a flick there. Uggrim sometimes wondered what it would be like if they had *two* liftas. Snikgob could rip a limb off a Dread with one; with two they could grab hold like he possessed the hands of Mork himself, and rend such machines in two.

He stored that idea for later, mainly because he was getting hot. He glanced from the viewing slit to the wall by his chair. It was glowing a dull red.

'Whoops!' he said. 'Got to keep going, a couple of moments more…'

Big Mouth carried on coming at them, its power field making warbling

and boinging noises as it deflected *Fat Mork'*s attacks. Grimgutz was cackling over the squawker.

'Can't get me! Can't get me!' he laughed. 'Oh, you is dead, so dead! Soon, I'm going to have me two Stompas!'

'Not after you, am I? Dumb zogger,' muttered Uggrim. He pressed his eye to the periscope. *Big Mouth* turned from side to side, a monstrous runtherd admonishing a soon to be dead runt. Its chainsword revved in anticipation of the coming crumping.

'That's right, that's right. Come on, come on!'

The wall between Uggrim and the killy eye glowed hotter and hotter. Worrying fizz-pops sounded from the mechanisms on the other side.

It was Talker that did it. One last battle cannon round, and the power field round *Big Mouth* burst like a soap bubble. *Fat Mork'*s gaze suddenly burned unhindered, slicing into the Bad Moon walker, shearing *Big Mouth'*s top shoota bunker off its struts and sending it crashing down. Uggrim hastily turned the eye off before it cooked him. Snikgob's next piece of wreckage, a large, solidly built buggy that must have been the pride of its owner, slammed squarely into *Big Mouth'*s mouth. His music stopped as his speakers were smashed to bits, and the Stompa rocked back on its heels, sending the stream of its gigashoota streaking off sideways.

'Charge!' shouted Uggrim. He slammed the drive sticks for both feet forwards as far as they would go, and bashed his speed dial from 'dead stop' to 'fastest'.

A dinging below indicated Bozgat had the order. *Fat Mork'*s reactor roared and the Stompa ran full tilt at its damaged opponent.

In too close to use the lifta-droppa, Snikgob slipped out of his chair straps and ran over to the far side of the room, jumping up into the new chain-choppa's operator's cage. Uggrim heard him hooting with glee as he powered the stolen weapon up. The edge of it blurred as Snikgob raised it up past the head, ready to strike.

Grimgutz's mek raised his own chainblade to block the blow. Snikgob, jiggling about madly in the operator's cage, slashed down. The two weapons met with a terrific racket. Metal clashed together, teeth squeaked off each other and gears ground as their chains locked.

*Big Mouth'*s gave out. The toothed chain whipped off its mount, striking sparks from the armoured aprons of both Stompas. Snikgob swung back

for another hit. *Big Mouth'*s gigashoota came up. Snikgob smashed it aside. Two more chops at its vulnerable joints and it hung uselessly from *Big Mouth'*s shoulder. Too late, Grimgutz began to reverse away. *Fat Mork* was on him. Snikgob brought the Mork machine's blade down hard onto that of its rival. The toothless weapon was forced back, juddering. The Stompas remained locked a moment, then *Fat Mork* jolted as the Knight's stolen sword cut *Big Mouth'*s weapon clean in half. *Fat Mork* lurched forwards with the release of energy, his entire weight bearing down hard upon the chest of *Big Mouth.*

The sword squealed on *Big Mouth'*s armour. Teeth screeched on metal, putting shiny scars in the Stompa's bright yellow paint. Another swing knocked *Big Mouth'*s head askew. Uggrim backed up a couple of paces.

'Talker! Fire!'

The battle cannon boomed once more, blasting *Big Mouth* at point-blank range. The explosion swept around both Stompas, but *Fat Mork* was protected by his bubble field. *Big Mouth,* who bore the brunt of it, was not.

A gaping hole opened in the lower level of the Bad Moon Stompa. Fire licked out of it. Grots ran screaming from the burning *Big Mouth,* followed by Grimgutz's ork crew. As the machine tried to move, one of its feet came off its mountings, and *Big Mouth* fell sideways to rest at a steep angle. It moved no more.

Smoke gushed from *Big Mouth'*s mouth. Grimgutz popped out of the head hatch. He threw his helmet down hard at the shoulders of his wrecked creation. He was screaming and gesticulating at *Fat Mork.* What he said, they could not hear, because the meks were helpless with laughter. They laughed louder still when Grimgutz took out his shoota and started blasting hopelessly at *Fat Mork.*

'Not so loud now, are you?' crowed Uggrim out of *Fat Mork'*s speakers.

'Shall we finish him, boss?' shouted Bozgat. 'Say the word, and Talker'll do the honours.'

'Nah,' said Uggrim. 'Let him stew. We's the best, that's all that matters, and now everybody knows it! He's learned his lesson.'

With that, *Fat Mork* pivoted, took two steps backwards, swung about, and swaggered off towards the rust-camp, Grimgutz's curses chasing him home.

CHAPTER 10

MOGROK COMES CLEAN

No one was going to say anything about the fight. It was nobody else's business. Orks fought and that was that, and it had been a good fight. The story of the Stompa battle got round the camp, growing with each telling. Uggrim received much praise; Grimgutz was laughed at when he finally came limping home, smeared in soot and so ashamed he seemed a good half-metre shorter. The Red Sunz Mob were all there, drinking beer outside his work shack, beating up his grots and waiting to mock him.

'Loser! Loser!' they shouted as the Bad Moon approached.

'I'm not done with you yet,' said Grimgutz.

'Right here, right now then!' said Uggrim.

Grimgutz growled but shrunk a little more into himself. 'That'd prove nothing.'

'I'll tell you what it does prove,' said Snikgob.

'What?'

'Who's got the best Stompa,' said Bozgat.

'Steady, lads. I think that's changed to who's got the *only* Stompa,' said Uggrim. The Red Sunz meks laughed in Grimgutz's face.

Grimgutz growled, went into his work shack and slammed the door hard.

'Now that's what I call a sore loser,' said Uggrim.

He whistled happily and walked away, swinging his biggest spanner by his side. He stopped abruptly when they got back to their own workspace.

The Red Sunz had their own visitors. Mogrok was waiting for them, sitting in a chair under an awning anchored to *Fat Mork,* a handful of very big bodyguards lounging around him.

He got up when they came in through their new scrap wall, and gave them a hard stare. 'Bit of a mess you made today, lads,' he said.

Uggrim shrugged. 'Grimgutz had it comin'.' Snikgob was tensing up at Uggrim's shoulder; Bozgat was dismayed.

'Maybe he did, maybe he didn't, but that was Gashrakk da Flash's Stompa you totalled. Grimgutz built it, sure, but Gashrakk paid for it. What am I supposed to tell him? He's a good mate of mine. What are you going to do about it?'

Uggrim shrugged again.

'I tell you what you're going to do – you're going to build me a little evil sun. Bigger. Like what we agreed.'

Uggrim didn't remember agreeing anything of the sort. 'All right,' he said.

'You do agree, then?'

'Orks what don't agree with you die,' said Uggrim.

'Terrible, terrible these accidents we're having,' said Mogrok. 'There should be a committee.'

'Ha,' said Uggrim. 'It's not that, though. It'll be fun. Thing is, you asked me. I don't know, gave me a turn, that. But together, I reckon we Red Sunz meks can do it again, no worries. Because if you ain't got yer mates, what have you got? You got any mates, Mogrok?'

Mogrok glared at him.

'Not a good idea to try and nick it off us, though, is it lads? I'm not so sure Grimgutz was working off his own back there. Two Bad Moons? Thick as thieves you are, and bossing Deathskulls for a while. I've known some pretty thick thieves.'

Mogrok's fury was frightening. He stood up tall, hand on his gun. His bodyguards were up behind him in an instant.

'What did you say? Listen, you jumped up grot coddler, I asked you all nice to cooperate. And you didn't. By rights, you should be dead, and if you cheek me like that again, you will be.'

'Uggrim…' warned Snikgob.

Uggrim was undeterred. 'You kill us, you'll have to find another bunch of

experts, won't you?'

Mogrok's hand relaxed a little. A twitch in his eye betrayed his anger, no more. He smiled.

'Don't see how's you can go believing a word what the likes of Grimgutz says to you.'

'Look,' said Uggrim. 'Let's be honest. We's orks, not grots.'

'Very well,' said Mogrok.

'Everyone knows you is the real power round here,' continued Uggrim. 'I do, you do. Everyone does. I don't want to fight you, Mogrok. But me secrets is me secrets. You're a mek, you know that. Tell me how you make such good bubble fields,' said Uggrim.

'No,' said Mogrok. 'Don't you be Morking at me, Uggrim. You are smart, it's true. But is you smart enough?'

'I dunno,' said Uggrim. 'Smart enough not to get got by you, that's for sure.'

Mogrok's hand was still on his slugga, a plain-looking weapon for such a powerful mekaniak. No gubbins or whirly bits, no extra juicing chambers or blasta mods. Simple steel, well oiled, well made. All the bits looked like they fit together without being persuaded by a bit of hammering; a proper gun. Uggrim folded his hands behind his back, lightly grasping the handle of his second favourite blasta pistol, ready to draw.

For a moment, it looked like Mogrok was going to go for it. Then he laughed, a snorting wheeze, once, twice. He slumped down and hooked his thumbs into his broad yellow belt. His bodyguards relaxed.

'All right,' he said. 'All right. We'll leave it be. But you is going to have to demonstrate your loyalty to me, Uggrim. You've been standoffish, little bit… proud. The other meks respect you. They like your work.' He thrust his diseased face close to Uggrim. 'And I don't like that. Makes me nervous – don't want you getting ideas. You led a tribe to war once.'

'Not a big one,' said Uggrim. 'And they was thieving Deathskulls, like I said. Couldn't wait to be rid of 'em,' said Uggrim. 'Blue zoggers.'

'That's as may be, but you done it once – mebbe you could do it again.' He poked a finger at Uggrim, careful not to prod him just the same. The tension had not left their encounter by a long shot. 'You prove to me that you're just interested in mekking, we can rub along fine.' He plucked a grub from under his shirt, popped it in his mouth and bit down.

‘I got an idea, but I need your know-wots, that’s all I want. It’s for me grabber, see.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Need more power, don’t I? The kind of power your little sun can provide. Only I want a big one.’

Uggrim scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot. ‘You need to get something big back up into space? Snikgob is well impressed with your tricks.’

‘Yeah,’ said Snikgob flatly. ‘I am.’

Mogrok smiled wider. ‘Nah,’ he said. ‘Don’t want to put stuff up. I want to bring it *down.* You help me, we’ll get this war done and dusted and have the biggest Waaagh! on our hands since… Well, since forever!’ Mogrok was excited, his sour breath panting out in strong gusts as he related his plan. ‘We’ll smash the humies to bits, and take on the galaxy! Mark my words, what I’m going to do will be remembered for all time.’

‘What are you goin’ to do?’ said Uggrim, who was intrigued despite himself.

‘Simple,’ said Mogrok. ‘I’m going to drop a comet on the humies.’

‘What?’ said Snikgob. ‘You *what?*’

‘You heard. Now shut it, I’m talking to your boss. Are you in, or do I have to kill you all?’

Uggrim looked to his companions. Snikgob’s smoke hung from his bottom lip, his mouth agape. Bozgat’s eyes glowed with the possibilities presented. Through them Uggrim could almost see the mekky dreams parading through Bozgat’s skull. They didn’t need to say anything. Uggrim reached out his hand. He tried not to flinch when Mogrok gripped it with his scabby fingers.

‘We’re in all right, oh, we are in!’

KLAW OF MORK

GUY HALEY

In a tall, tall dome made of rough iron plates, a compact fusion reactor burned. Shielded and kept in place by arcane force fields as it was, it probably wasn't a good idea to stand right next to it like Uggrim and Snikgob of the Red Sunz Meks were. They had built it, so they should have known better. Ork technology is temperamental at the best of times.

They had a visitor, another Big Mek having what he called an 'inspekshun', but which was just snooping, as far as Uggrim saw it – Big Mek Dagogg, shokk-attack expert, instigator of the infamous 'snotling rain' and good buddy of Mogrok. Mogrok the great! Mogrok Da Kunnin'! Mogrok, new chief of the Red Waaagh! A very nasty ork, and no mistake. Mogrok wasn't there, which was good. But Dagogg was, and Dagogg had recently become a thorn in Uggrim's side. A big, ugly ork, the ruddy light of the little sun cast his face so deep into shadow that he seemed more carved than alive. His dark red squig hair crest was blacker than night in the orange light.

'Impressive, very impressive, shows a lot of know-wots this, a little sun, as big as a Squiggoth, hot as you like! Very smart, and no mistake,' said Dagogg.

'Thanks,' said Uggrim guardedly.

'No need to be like that about it! No need at all!' said Dagogg. If there was a prize for wounded innocence, Dagogg would get it. Uggrim gritted his teeth so hard one of them cracked.

Dagogg poked the field holding the fusion reaction in. Luminous waves rippled out from his fingertip.

'Don't poke that,' Uggrim's best mate Snikgob said stonily.

'Nah, be alright, it'll hold,' said Dagogg. 'Nice bubble. You'd never know

there's a little sun on the other side of that, would you? Should bake us all alive, eh? Eh? Mogrok do it for you then?'

'No. Bozgat did.'

'Who?'

'The other one. The other one of us.'

'Ah,' Dagogg said. 'Yeah, that scrawny little one, eh? Looks like a very big grot.' He was enjoying Uggrim's discomfort immensely. He wiped sweat from his long green face. 'Should have guessed he did it, and not Mogrok. It is hot in here. Wouldn't be so hot if Mogrok'd done the bubble for you, would it now? Mogrok's the expert, after all. Eh? Eh?'

He smiled widely, exposing his fangs, inviting Uggrim and Snikgob to laugh. Dagogg frowned when they didn't.

'No sense of humour your lot, that's your problem. Still, it's a good job. I'll be the first to admit, when Mogrok said he was asking you to set up the primary power plant for the Klaw of Mork, I wasn't convinced. "That Uggrim does stompas well nice," says I. "And I hears all about that little sun they've got in there making it all go. But," says I, "can he do it again, and bigger? Traktor kannon like the Klaw of Mork needs a lot of juice",' he said, punctuating each word with a jab of his finger in Uggrim's chest. 'A lot of power to pull down a comet. But, here it is!'

His voice echoed around the reactor housing.

'I got to hand it to you. Mogrok was right. Course, he's always right, but that is not the point! He's the boss of the Waaagh! now, after what happened to Grukk. I suppose that's the real point, ain't it?' He hawked up a glob of phlegm and spat it onto the plating of the floor where it fizzled to nothing. 'Poor Grukk. A real ork's ork. Shame that.'

'Yeah,' said Uggrim.

Grukk Face-Rippa had been killed not long after Mogrok had 'recruited' them to build the sun. What he didn't say was that lot of orks had a lot of accidents around Mogrok. It didn't pay to think about it too much, or to mention it, come to that.

'You know that Mogrok's me mate, right? We go way back.'

'I'll remember that,' said Uggrim.

'You better. I'm watching you, Uggrim. Right, gotta go. This camp don't run itself, and I got some grots to go kick.'

He sauntered over to the door, his stumpy legs giving him an exaggerated

swagger, even for an ork. He stopped by the reactor's door, a heavy thing shut with a lock wheel.

'Why you all the ways out here anyhow?'

'Health and safety,' said Uggrim, folding his arms.

'That what you tell Mogrok, is it?' Dagogg pressed his finger to his nose and winked. 'Don't want a bunch of sneaky gits stealing your secrets, more like.'

He chuckled and shook his head, as if having a big joke that Uggrim wasn't in on, and let himself out.

The door clanged. A moment later, the muffled sound of a bike engine announced his departure.

'Zogger!' snarled Uggrim. 'What's he know about little suns? All he's interested in is stuffing snotlings into holes. He's not right in the head.'

'Ain't that the truth,' said Snikgob.

'I'd like to fire him out of his own shokk attack gun,' grumbled Uggrim. 'There's no end of 'em, Mogrok, him, Grimgutz…' Uggrim smacked the side of the reactor casing with his spanner. It clonged like a bell. 'Deal with Grimgutz, there's Mogrok, make a deal with Mogrok, there's Dagogg hanging around like a bad smell. Where's it stop? With Rokstitch? Gutsmash Festork? With that… that… weird midget of Mogrok's?'

'Midget Mogrok?'

'That's the one.'

'A lot of big meks in this Waaagh! That's the truth,' said Snikgob.

'And every one a git,' said Uggrim. He hurled his spanner at the bubble field. It bounced off with a 'wom'.

'What did you do that for?' asked Snikrot. 'You've lost your favourite spanner now.'

'I'm not happy, Sniks.'

'All right,' said Snikgob soothingly. 'All right. Don't let it get to you, Uggs. We can kill them all later. Come on, let's go out for a smoke.'

'Yeah, alright. Where's Bozgat?'

'I dunno, does it matter?'

As if he'd heard, the crazy yatter of Bozgat's madboy Talker echoed down from somewhere high above. The bubble field wobbled, sending fiery ripples over the sun's surface. Somewhere, something went 'ping!'

'Bah, leave him,' said Snikgob. 'Let's go.'

The meks emerged at the top of an earth embankment mounded up around the reactor shell. From there, they could see all the way over the grassy plain to the main camp, a messy sprawl of tents, shacks, wrecks, scrap piles, drops, runtpens and, further out, mekboy compounds like their own, all lit up with orange campfires and buzzing floodlamps. At the centre hulked a beached rustship, the *Bad Gob*. The faint glimmer of a force field, one of Mogrok's specials, covered it all over like a giant umbrella, tinging the stars green.

The *Bad Gob* was in a sorry state, its cannibalised hull full of holes and the entire stern missing. Mogrok had cut it up for his secret weapon, the mighty traktor kannon he called the Klaw of Mork. There it was at the prow, pointing skywards, as tall as only the most pompous Bad Moon's creation could be. Its thick stream of green energy pierced the force dome at the top, stretching out into beyond the atmosphere where it was about its job, namely dragging down a comet from space to drop on a bunch of humies.

Despite the energy barrier protecting the camp, the air brought the smell of distant battle to the ork meks, mixed with the sulphurous stink of Alaric's seas. They breathed it in deeply, noses twitching in appreciation.

'Get a good view from here, good look at the energy beam coming off the Klaw,' said Uggrim appreciatively. 'Say what you like about Mogrok–'

'He's a git,' interrupted Snikgob. 'A verminous, lice-ridden git.'

'That he is,' said Uggrim. 'But he knows his stuff. Look up there! There's that comet thing.' He squinted hard. 'Be here soon, then *blam*!' he slapped his fist into his palm. 'Loadsa dead humies.'

He and Snikgob chuckled evilly.

'Yeah, and it's us what's giving it the juice,' Snikgob said proudly. He nodded at the thick black cabling snaking through the grass from their reactor toward the *Bad Gob*. He produced a smoke from his grubby trousers and jammed it between his fangs. 'I don't like that Mogrok, but it's been good, this job. Been feeling a bit slow lately on the mekking front, a bit… stale.' He stretched out, lifting his long, wiry arms high over his head. 'Ooh!' he said, as his backbone cracked, then added brightly. 'And Mogrok won't kill us.'

Uggrim gave his friend a sidelong glance. 'You know, I've said this before, but I'm gonna say it again. Are you sure you are okay, Snikgob?

You have been suspiciously cheery of late. The old Snikgob, the *proper* Snikgob, was miserable all the time. Now, you're only miserable *most* of the time.'

Snikgob shrugged. 'Well, I dunno, Uggs, I'm just feeling upbeat, ya know? This is a good fight, you gotta admit. Big humie walkers, loads of pinkies to squish. Good eating on them too, well fed this lot. And then there's that!' he pointed a long-taloned finger at the Klaw. 'Come on, there's some real know-wots there. It's impressive.'

'Suppose,' said Uggrim grudgingly.

Snikgob scuffed the ground with the toe of his boot. 'Maybe I'm just getting old. Maybe it's giving me a new perspective on things. Like, them stars is nice to look at.' He pointed out a bunch of bright lights low in the sky to the north.

'You what?' yelled Uggrim, jumping back. 'Stars? You is going soft! You… You…' Uggrim was quite at a loss for words.

'What, don't you tell me you got no time for a quiet moment?' said Snikgob. 'It's when I do me best thinking that, looking up at the sky, losing meself in the lights, dreaming about going someplace else and bashing it up real good. Hur hur hur.'

'Not right, I says,' said Uggrim, shaking his head.

'Suit yourself,' said Snikgob. To Uggrim's relief, Snikgob's face settled into its normal sour expression, jaw jutting forward, lip curled. He plucked out a match from behind his ear and lit his smoke. Foul-smelling blue fumes wreathed his piggy face, completing the familiar image. Uggrim relaxed a bit.

Meanwhile, Uggrim's boss grot Frikk had taken some time out from being kicked to poke about in the soil for worms. No luck. He sighed. Now the orks were outside, he'd soon be called back for another beating. 'And I still haven't had me tea,' he said softly. As Snikgob mentioned the stars, Frikk looked up at the sky.

'But Boss Snikgob, he's right. Them stars is so nice and all,' he said, feeling immensely sorry for himself. 'They is like jewels, jewels in the sky, all afire. I wish I could goes there, where there is no orks! That would be so…' He narrowed his eyes. 'Hang on a minute…' his ears went flat against his head.

‘Them’s not stars! Boss, boss!’ called Frikk. He walked backwards up the hill, not taking his eyes of the stars, until he bumped into Uggrim’s leg. The ork ignored him.

‘Boss! Boss! Look!’

Uggrim cuffed him in the face.

‘Ow!’ said Frikk.

‘Stop plucking at me trousers you stupid grot, it’s annoying. Sniks and me,’ Uggrim paused dubiously, ‘well, we is having a quiet moment.’

‘Sorry boss, but, but…’ said Frikk.

‘What is it?’ said Snikgob.

‘Them stars! Them ones Boss Snikgob said!’ Frikk held a shaking hand up. ‘They is moving!’

‘Oh yeah!’ said Uggrim. He frowned. ‘Oh, yeah.’

‘Nah, it’s just a trick of the light,’ said Snikgob. ‘Just stars.’

‘Nah…’ said Uggrim pointing. ‘Look, one just flew over, right past the secondary effulgence corona of the gravitic attraction wave,’ he said, using the special mek talk which even the meks didn’t really understand. ‘Stars don’t do that, do they?’

Snikgob took his smoke out of his mouth. ‘Not as a rule, no,’ he said.

‘Humies?’ said Uggrim.

‘Probably. They’ll never get through that forcefield though. Idiots.’

‘Why can I hear guns then?’

‘Right,’ said Snikgob. ‘Guns.’

‘Coming from the *Bad Gob,* sounds like.’

A loud explosion preceded the thunderous collapse of the force bubble. Cold night air rushed in.

‘Nope, not stars. You is right, Frikk. Sorry for punching you in the face.’

‘It’s alright, boss,’ said Frikk.

‘That’s okay. Here’s another so you don’t get cheeky.’

Uggrim’s blow knocked Frikk onto his backside.

‘Ow! I mean, thanks boss,’ said Frikk.

The pops of small arms fire crackled over the plain and bullets streaked the sky.

‘Looks like a good fight,’ said Snikgob.

‘Looks like fun,’ said Uggrim. ‘Frikk! Fire up me speedsta. We is going for a little drive.’

Frikk groaned inwardly, his hand clamped over his swollen nose. He hated riding the buggy. Uggrim always insisted on taking him along.

'I'm going to get my burna,' said Snikgob, and hurried off.

Snikgob came jogging back a minute later, a large burna tank sloshing on his back.

Uggrim's buggy was a new project, hammered together in the idle hours after they'd fixed up the little sun for Mogrok. Snikgob thought it a beauty, a two-ork job with a cracking red paint scheme. Its oversized engine sat exposed on the chassis bed in front of the driver's seat, six exhaust pipes running along the sides. The tyres were especially fat, bigger at the back than the front. Carefully made mudguards curled over them, wicked flame detailing lovingly painted on them and shone up real nice by the Red Sunz' grots.

Frikk hung limply in a leather harness from the bosspole at the back, a little goggled flying hat on his head, ears drooping with misery. He hated driving, especially with his boss at the wheel. Uggrim, on the other hand, was seething with impatience. He was already in the driver's seat gunning the engine, his own lucky goggles pulled down over his eyes.

'Come on! Come on!' Uggrim shouted, 'Get in! Get in! In the back! Get in me gunner's perch!'

Snikgob jumped into the gunner's station behind Uggrim. 'I'm in!'

Uggrim smiled evilly. 'Good, because I got an idea.'

'Now,' said Snikgob, lighting the pilot light on his burna with his cigar. It whooshed as he adjusted it. 'That wouldn't have anything to do with this being a battle and all, and there being a good chance of a certain ork having a bit of an accident, would it?'

'Might be, Sniks,' said Uggrim, flicking switches and twisting knobs. 'Might be.'

With a lurch and the stink of burning squig oil, the buggy shot off, flying over the plain toward the *Bad Gob* at intemperate speed. 'Not bad for an afternoon's work!' he cackled.

'Don't go all freek on me!' howled Snikgob. But he laughed madly too, leaning out of the gunner's cage to let his tongue flap in the breeze. For all the Red Sunz' disavowal of bikes and buggies in favour of stompas, they were still Evil Sunz, and all Evil Sunz, deep down, liked driving fast.

‘They has taken out the generator, have to have done. There must be a fight at the tower!’ said Snikgob.

‘That’s where Dagogg’s got all his guns!’ shouted Uggrim, accelerating carelessly past the broken rear end of the *Bad Gob* right into the heart of the camp.

The place was in uproar. Orks were running everywhere, shooting at everything that moved, and that meant mainly each other. Uggrim swerved to avoid a wild-eyed boy brandishing a shoota, mowing down a couple of gretchin. They bounced off the front plate, one landing on Snikgob’s face.

‘Get off me face!’ he roared as he flung the grot aside. ‘Watch it, Uggs.’

‘Sorry!’ said Uggrim.

A pair of human aircraft strafed the mek camp, bringing bright destruction out of the night. They shot overhead, split, banked, and came back for another go. Tracer bullets and curses chased them there and back again, but the boys were awful shots and the fightas buzzed overhead with impunity.

‘Why ain’t the big guns gunning for them?’ shouted Snikgob.

They soon saw why, when Uggrim swerved around a pile of burning debris and headed for the tower, the camp’s main air defence and housing for the force field generator. It was more of a fort really, wide-sided, tall and strong, if rickety in appearance, with many floors and a couple of big firing platforms at different levels up top.

‘They is shooting at the ground! Not the sky!’ yelled Uggrim.

‘What?’ shouted Snikgob, who couldn’t hear him.

‘I said, they is shooting at the ground! There must be humies in da camp!’ hollered Uggrim.

‘What? Shout louder! The engine’s too loud!’ yelled Snikgob, who still couldn’t hear Uggrim.

Smoke billowed from the forcefield generator room on the lowest floor. From the top, bright green zzap lances and eerie force bubbles crisscrossed the night. Plumes of earth leapt up from the ground as kannon shells impacted.

‘Woah,’ said Snikgob. ‘Either everyone’s gone crazy, or there’s humies in da camp!’

A gunship came right at the tower, guns spitting. There was the discharge of a gravity weapon, and the flyer was snatched out the skies and dashed to

flaming pieces on the ground.

'Dagogg's up there! That was his gun!' shouted Snikgob.

'Good, let's go kill him,' growled Uggrim.

Bright flashes were coming from the top of the tottering tower, a fierce gunfight in progress. The spindly forms of humans ran about the parapet of the lower platform, slaughtering grots. Guns exploded, but the humies couldn't get them all. The weird whoops and buzzes of mek weapons were deafening up close. Snikgob chuckled appreciatively as one smashed a humie from the top. He fell to the ground, arms flailing, dying with a wet crunch.

Uggrim slewed around the base of the tower, nearly running into a fight between some armoured humies and a bunch of squealing grots. The humans were shouting in their funny talk.

Snikgob let rip with his skorcha. A gout of fire whooshed past the melee, incinerating an unfortunate gretchin. 'Mork's teeth!' he yelled. 'Slow down, I can't hit a thing!'

'Alright! Alright!' yelled Uggrim, slewing around the tower. 'I'm going round for another go! Get them on the way back!' He cornered with what could be generously described as carefree élan, tipping the buggy up onto two fat wheels.

'Boss, boss! Oh boss, please slow down, please!' screamed Frikk as the buggy slammed down.

'Shut it, you,' growled Snikgob. He glared at the quivering gretchin, who was several shades paler than usual. 'If you widdle down my back, I'll give you something real to whine about.'

They whizzed alongside the tower on the far side to the fight. Boys were forming up into mobs. Nobs bellowed orders. The whole camp was roused.

'I'm going in,' said Snikgob. He clambered outside the gunner's cage, leaning out, ready to leap.

'Go for it!' Uggrim slowed just the tiniest amount to let Snikgob jump, which he did, landing at an angle in an impressive skid, heavy boots ploughing up the ground.

'Right!' Snikgob said, switching his burna to 'cutting flame'. 'Time to teach that Dagogg a bit of a lesson. I'll chop him up good.'

He set off for the tower entrance just as the top exploded with unfeasible volume, knocking him onto his backside. Dead gretchin, bits of ork,

smashed machines and plates of metal rained down all around him. A second later, a bunch of humies came plummeting out of the air, slowing at the very last minute to touchdown softly.

Now he got a good look at them, Snikgob saw that they weren't like the usual humie fighter – not beakees, but almost as heavily armoured, with thick plates stained dark with soot covering their torsos and limbs. They also didn't look as scared as the usual humans. Two of them caught sight of Snikgob. Much to his amazement, instead of running off to find their mates, they levelled their rifles at him. Snikgob rolled to one side, no mean feat with a burna tank on your back. A blast of laser energy cut into his shoulder guard, burning right through it.

'You got some juice on them blastas!' said Snikgob, leaping to his feet.

They took aim again, but Snikgob was too quick. He barged between them, elbow swinging sharply backwards to knock one down. He squeezed his burna trigger, sending a bright blue tongue of intense flame from the nozzle, and slashed it down at the second humie, cutting right the way through its gun. The weapon fell away in two pieces, the rear part dangling from power cables attaching it to the humie's backpack.

Snikgob's eyebrows went up. That wasn't a normal humie gun at all.

The humie yelled at him in its ridiculous voice, pulling a tiny knife Snikgob wouldn't have used to peel a squig. It came at him, its flat face all scrunched up. They ducked and dodged, but the human was quick and buried the knife to the hilt in Snikgob's meaty forearm.

Snikgob and the humie looked at the knife, then at each other.

'You is pretty good, humie,' said Snikgob. He paused as the pain hit him. 'Ow!'

The humie lunged for the knife, tried to pull it free, but the knife was stuck fast. All the human did was get too close.

'Persistent little fella, ain't ya?' Snikgob rumbled, and headbutted the humie square on the nose. The humie went down hard, face pushed in like a squashed crate.

'Ork jaw, humie face, no contest,' said Snikgob. He spun round to see the other humie legging it, trying to catch up with his mates who were disappearing into the dark.

'Oh no you don't!' said Snikgob. He twisted the knob back to 'whoosh!' and sent a blast of yellow flame searing into the night.

Snikgob never got to see if he got the humie or not. Uggrim's speedsta burst through the cloud of fire and slewed to a halt, his buggy covered in guttering patches of burna fuel.

'I'm back, let's go!' roared Uggrim. Frikk was clinging to the bosspole so hard it was like he was part of it.

'Couldn't find Dagogg,' said Snikgob as he leapt aboard. 'Chances are he's dead already.'

'That's what I figured,' said Uggrim. 'Let's go kill some humies instead.'

'Ha! I got two al… argh! Watch it – I'm not strapped in!' Snikgob fell backwards as Uggrim set off in hot pursuit.

'Out the zogging way!' yelled Uggrim, waving his hand. Orks and gretchin were running pell-mell in every direction. The buggy hurtled parallel to the humie's escape route, trying to cut them off, only for the meks to find the humies sprinting directly at them out of the chaos, heading towards the edge of the camp. The buggy overshot, and the humies were gone into the confusion of smoke, fire and darkness again. Snikgob sent out a long plume of fire after the invaders, igniting three shacks. One exploded.

'That was Ifgut's Booze Hut, weren't it?' said Snikgob. Frikk nodded frantically in response.

'No pinky gives Uggrim the slip!' Uggrim roared, braked hard, and skidded in a wide arc, sending clods of earth scything skywards.

'Argh!' shouted Frikk.

'Watch it, Uggs!' bellowed Snikgob.

The buggy went through the middle of a tent. Canvas enveloped the boys, muffling Frikk's terrified wails. The buggy bucked like a wild animal. They ran over something big that complained loudly. By the time they had chucked the tent off it was ablaze and trailing a couple of braver grots who thought grabbing the ropes might be a quick way out of the fight.

Something clicked in Frikk's sharp grotty mind. He raked at Snikgob's back. The ork grabbed him by the throat.

'Oi!' he barked. 'Don't you scratch me, you miserable–'

'Don't chase them! We got to get out of here!' said Frikk.

'What? You what?' Snikgob squeezed slowly. Frikk went purple

'Listen! Listen! It's like with that big floating humie town!' choked Frikk. 'The battle with *Big Mouth*, the burny river battle, remember?'

‘What, you mean ‘boom?’’ said Snikgob, catching on. He looked to the sky.

‘Big boom, boss! They’re going to blow up the camp! And me!’ the gretchin wailed.

Snikgob dropped Frikk. ‘Gah! You’re right! Uggs, we gotta leave!’ he bellowed.

‘What? Run away?’ shouted Uggrim.

‘No, let’s stay here and get fried instead.’ Snikgob pointed at the sky, where a light was rapidly approaching. ‘Humie bomber coming in! Drive!’

Uggrim yanked up the handbrake, sending the buggy into a dangerous spin. He arrested it. For a moment, the buggy was still.

‘Waaagh!’ screamed Uggrim, flooring the accelerator.

Mobs of orks were howling after the humies. Uggrim drove right at them. A bunch of surprised nobs loomed out of the dark. Uggrim spun the wheel, the buggy slid sideways with the force of the turn. He wrestled with it, bringing the vehicle back under control and past the swearing boss orks. They were through, going fast toward their own compound while a horde of enraged ork boyz went the other way.

The whine of jet engines working hard came from the edge of the camp. Humie heavy shooters clattered as a fighta came to a hovering stop. Behind the meks orks died. The human commandos scrambled aboard their aircraft and escaped.

‘It’s coming!’ shouted Snikgob. ‘Another humie fighta, coming in fast. Get on! Get on!’ hollered Snikgob. ‘It’s getting closer! Get us out of here or we’re all for it!’ He was jabbing his finger at the sky over and over again.

The bomber became a bright shape that cut down from the night. Four dark cylinders detached from under its wings. They fell like dropped candles, before something ignited in their rears and they accelerated away. The craft pulled up, poorly aimed ork fire slashing the dark as it shot skyward. It wheeled around to join the other fighta blasting off from the edge of the camp.

‘Missiles! Missiles! They is going for the Klaw! Drive, drive drive!’ bellowed Snikgob.

‘But this is as fast as it goes!’ shouted Frikk.

Uggrim’s foot was already to the floor, but he had another trick up his

sleeve.

‘Heh heh heh. Oh no it ain’t.’ he shouted over his shoulder. ‘Hang on! Squig oil injector!’

‘Noooooo!’ squealed Frikk.

Uggrim reached between his legs, twisted the wheel at the top of a canister. The potent stuff inside flooded the engine, causing fire to shoot from the exhausts. The buggy leapt forward so hard bits fell off. Snikgob was thrown painfully into the rails surrounding the gunner’s cage. He recovered to see the missiles lance into the opening containing the Klaw of Mork.

A heartbeat passed, and the night vanished in a massive explosion bellying from the front of the ship. Secondary detonations ripped all along the hull, blasting out plating and sending bursts of flame shooting at the stars.

If the explosion at the tower had been entertaining, this was a real jaw dropper. Giant sheets of hullplate hailed down all over the grassland, setting the plain ablaze. Some bits went far enough to crash down among the ork meks’ satellite camps.

The Klaw of Mork twisted ponderously to one side. Its bright green beam sliced down through the night, cutting out in a spectacular shower of sparks. Giant arcs of electricity earthed themselves in the metallic rubbish littering the plain as the klaw toppled like a felled tree, crashing to ruin amid the fire.

More explosions, many tinged odd colours, leapt up as one highly dangerous invention or another detonated. If a piece hit the Red Sunz’ reactor it would have been goodnight for every ork within three kilometres. In saner moments, Uggrim and Snikgob might have been a mite worried about that, but right then they were past caring.

The grassland was stained as orange as the Evil Sun itself, revealing the speed-crazed faces of Snikgob and Uggrim. They drooled freely, their pupils, barely visible at the best of times in the red of their eyes, were vanishingly small pinpricks. Uggrim gripped his steering wheel so hard he bent it. Snikgob grabbed hold of the bosspole above Frikk’s head, and beat his chest with his free hand.

‘Waaagh!!!!! I love this planet!’ screamed Snikgob.

‘I want to go home,’ sobbed Frikk.

The super-refined squig oil in the injector ran dry. The engine coughed, belching smoke from its exhausts, and settled back to its normal uneven rhythm. Things, most of them on fire, still hurtled out of the sky.

‘Ahaha, hur hur, ahahaha,’ said Uggrim, not lessening his grip on the steering wheel, but the buggy was spent, and was slowing.

‘Now that is what I am talking about, eh?’ said Snikgob. He punched Uggrim playfully. ‘What a fight! Do you see why I might not be me usual self?’ he laughed uproariously.

‘Boss! Boss! Look! Look! Slow down!’ shouted Frikk. He got no response, so bent low and pinched Snikgob’s arm. He dodged Snikgob’s answering punch and pointed out an entire ork lying surrounded by bits of dead ones. He was supporting himself on his elbows and looking back at the conflagration. ‘Dagogg! That’s Dagogg, ain’t it? I’d recognise that squig crest anywhere.’

‘Yeah, yeah I think you’re right!’ said Snikgob.

He told Uggrim, but Uggrim was too far gone, so Snikgob punched him in the back of the head.

‘You what? What you do that for?’ growled Uggrim.

‘Dagogg! It’s Dagogg!’

The thought of seeing so prominent a rival shamed snapped Uggrim out of his speed fugue. He zeroed in on the ork and brought the buggy to a puttering halt.

‘That’ll do, squig,’ he said, patting the injection tank. ‘Well, hello, Dagogg! How you doing?’

‘Fancy meeting up like this,’ said Snikgob. ‘We was just on our way to see you.’

Dagogg stared at the burning ship. His tough green hide was peppered with shrapnel, badly burned in the places it wasn’t charred. All his clothes had gone, blown off by the blast. Smoke rose from the top of his scorched squig. Much of the parasitic creature’s hair had been burned away, leaving the small head exposed. Tiny eyes blinked in surprise by Dagogg’s scalp.

‘Oh dear me,’ said Snikgob with malicious glee. ‘What a sorry sight.’

‘Do you know something, mate?’ said Uggrim.

Dagogg looked up at them, eyes wide and jaw slack. His eyes flicked between the inferno that was lately the *Bad Gob*, and the smirking Red

Sunz.

‘I don’t reckon Mogrok’s going to be very happy with you. Do you, Snikgob?’

‘No, boss,’ said Snikgob.

‘And that’s not a nice place to be is it, Sniks?’

‘Definitely not, no, Uggs,’ said Snikgob.

‘So, I would kill you for being such a git, but you know what? You got far bigger problems than being dead!’ Uggrim put the buggy back into gear with a clunk. ‘See you around, Dagogg! Say hello to Mogrok for me.’

Laughing madly, the two meks drove off into the night, their voices fading as they pulled away.

‘Am I glad that is over,’ said Frikk.

‘Shut up, Frikk,’ said Snikgob.

‘Ow!’ said Frikk.

‘Oi, don’t you hit my grot, that’s my job, hitting that grot. Pass him here.’

‘Here you are, Uggs.’

‘Ow!’ said Frikk.

‘See?’ said Uggrim. ‘You know, Sniks, that you got a knife in your arm?’

‘Have I? Oh yeah. So I have. I’d forgotten about that…’

BLOOD ON THE MOUNTAIN

BEN COUNTER

PROLOGUE

The first Ulli had seen of Alaric Prime was a topographic map projected from the holomat servitor mounted on the floor of the gunship. Now, as the rear ramp of the *Skjaldi's Lament* slid open and the icy wind roared in, Ulli could see the holo-briefing had not done this world justice.

A gleaming panorama of frost and white sunlight flooded the gunship's interior with light, as bright as a magnesium flare. Here, above the layers of cloud, this world's sun reflected up into an ocean of pale fire. The star Alaric, this world's sun, burned icily in a mantle of the most extraordinarily vivid blue.

The peak of Sacred Mountain burst up through the light ocean, a mighty spear of snow-capped stone that pinned Alaric Prime to the sky. No wonder the people of this world, settled in the distant reaches of the Dark Age of Technology, had bowed to this peak as the physical manifestation of the Emperor's will. When the Great Crusade brought Alaric Prime into the Imperial fold, it had been to the vastness and perfection of Sacred Mountain that the Imperium had been compared. The mountain shone as if plated with silver, a counterpoint to the sun above.

Ulli Iceclaw felt his eyes sting as his pupils contracted, his augmented senses correcting to prevent the snowblindness that any normal man would have suffered. The freezing air lashed against his face, whipping the wolf's tooth necklace around behind him. The many trappings of a Rune Priest – talismans from Fenrisian graves, teeth and bones for scrying, books of battle-prayers and meditations – jangled on his belt.

'They say Terra's sky was that colour,' said Brother Tanngjost, who held

onto the handrail overhead beside Ulli. ‘A long time ago. It is like that in paintings and poems.’

‘Tanngjost Seven Fingers was probably there to see it, the old dog,’ said Saehrimnar Brokenaxe. Saehrimnar was grinning beneath his expanse of red-brown beard. He was still strapped into the gunship’s grav-harness and had his weapon, the pack’s massive heavy bolter, across his knees.

‘Not so old I cannot learn some new tricks,’ retorted Tanngjost, pointing at his packmate with one of the remaining fingers on his mutilated hand. ‘Like boxing a fat upstart’s ears!’

Ulli ignored the bickering. It was tension being let off, and in spite of the barbs the pack needed it. They had been together a long time, some of them since they had first come to the Fang as hopeful young Fenrisian warriors, and without some levity they would become jaded and stagnant. Instead the Rune Priest looked back into the passenger compartment, towards Aesor Dragon’s Head.

‘Pack leader!’ called Ulli over the roaring wind. ‘What do you see?’

Aesor unfastened his grav-harness and joined Ulli at the ramp. His long, sharp face was as complete a contrast to Tanngjost’s as the blinding sky of Alaric Prime had been to the gloomy interior of the gunship. Aesor’s was young and unscarred, while age had lined Tanngjost’s face as deeply as the battlefield scars that covered his cheek and one side of his jaw. When the people of the Imperium imagined the Space Wolves, the mighty warriors of Fenris, it was Aesor they imagined.

‘A battlefield,’ said Aesor. ‘A butcher’s block unbloodied. A blank parchment for us to write our glories upon. I see what every son of Fenris desires, a place for us to descend and bring the Emperor’s justice.’

‘There goes the Company,’ said Tanngjost, leaning forward for a view of the cloudscape beyond the gunship’s engine. Streaks of burning light were punching down through the clouds, trailing ripples of flame. They were drop pods, each one in the pale grey livery of Fenris with the black wolf’s head stencilled on the side – the symbol of Ragnar Blackmane’s Great Company. The same symbol Pack Aesor wore on the shoulder guards of their armour.

‘Wish them Russ’s speed,’ said Aesor, ‘and they will wish us his fury. Their battle is on the slopes below and the ballads of this war will speak of what they do. But we shall have our own saga, and though fewer will hear

it, it will be ours alone. Pack Aesor! Give thanks, for again the galaxy gives us what we crave! It gives us war!'

'War!' cried Aesor's packmates in response, like a toast drunkenly roared in the Great Hall of the Fang.

Ulli could feel the fury in them, tempered in the bonds of brotherhood. A Rune Priest could not help pick up the vibrations from the men around him – no psyker could, for psychic power was rooted in human emotions as much as human will. The relish Pack Aesor felt at the coming battle thrummed at the base of Ulli's skull, infectious, eager to be released.

'You know what I see, Rune Priest?' said Fejor Redblade, seated at the back of the compartment. He lifted the sight of his customised bolter to his eye, as if picking out a distant target on the upper slopes of Sacred Mountain.

'What, Fejor?' asked Ulli.

Fejor smiled, revealing the overgrown canines of a Space Wolf. 'Piles and piles of dead orks,' he said.

ONE

Strikeforce Stormfall hit Alaric Prime hard. Beneath the clouds, the massive battle in the shadow of Sacred Mountain had entered its first stages. According to the briefings just before the gunship had launched, the orkish invasion force had made landfall in their hundreds of thousands, crashing to the surface in hollowed-out asteroids and barely space-worthy hulks that had landed more by luck than judgement. Orks cared nothing how many they lost to get to a planet's surface – each death just meant more mayhem for the rest of them. The numbers had been sufficient to force a beachhead there, and now the Imperial forces were desperately trying to contain a growing mass of orks rampaging out from their landing sites. Imperial Knights, war machines crewed by Alaric Prime's warrior aristocracy, had blunted the ork breakouts, but they could not fight on forever.

It was the orks' own war machines that made the difference. Orks could hammer together an engine of war from wreckage faster than the Imperial Guard could get their own tanks loaded and fuelled. Anything the Imperial defenders destroyed just became more spare parts for the greenskins. The Imperial Guard had plenty of veterans who had faced greenskins before and they reported this orkish invasion had with them more armour and greenskin engineers than they had ever seen. That was the extent of the intelligence on the ork invaders on Alaric Prime.

The greenskins had come to this world with numbers and purpose. It was no accident that they had landed at Sacred Mountain, the most storied place on this planet. They had to be defeated here, or Alaric Prime would

be lost.

That task of relieving the defenders had fallen to Ragnar Blackmane and the Great Wolf Logan Grimnar. Blackmane was the young king, a future Great Wolf omened as grandly as any who had ever walked under the moons of Fenris. Grimnar was the Chapter Master and the Lord of the Fang, and while he had more battles behind him than in front he was still a terror of the Emperor's enemies. Together they were the greatest warriors from a Chapter whose lowliest members were ferocious masters of war. They brought with them most of their respective Great Companies, supported by aircraft, armoured formations, and specialists like the Rune Priest Ulli Iceclaw.

The great battle would be for the lower slopes amongst the greenskin landing sites, where there was a great tally of orkish heads to be reaped by chainsword and frost blade. There Blackmane and Grimnar would cover themselves in greenskin blood and hundreds of Space Wolves would glory in the ferocious joy of it. But on the upper slopes, where that battle would be a distant din, Ulli Iceclaw and Pack Aesor would wage a war of their own.

It was Starkad and Fejor who took the lead; Fejor, with his hunter's eyes, and Starkad with the experience of surviving in places just like this. The snow flurries kicked up by the *Skjaldi's Lament* swallowed the guide and the sniper as they jumped down from the gunship. Ulli and the rest of Pack Aesor followed, Ulli reading the winking green runes projected onto his retina by the auto-senses on his armour. In the whiteout he wore his helmet and the icons told him his packmates were nearby, advancing alongside him, close enough to come to one another's aid but far enough to avoid a single missile or landmine taking out more than one.

A Rune Priest stood apart from the rest of the Chapter – he was a psyker, training alone with the secrets of warpcraft. But here he could hunt with a pack of brothers alongside him, and the joy of that cut through the distance he had to maintain. Ulli's mind was shared between the Rune Priest and the son of the Fenris, and the Fenrisian's heart grew to be a pack hunter again.

'I'll keep the peak between us,' came a vox from Sigrund, the Space Wolf who piloted the *Skjaldi's Lament*. 'No greenskin filth will take potshots at

my gunship! I shall make for return when the charges are blown and I shall not tarry, so be quick!'

'Don't doze off,' replied Saehrimnar. 'We won't be long.'

'I can see the structure ahead,' voxed Fejor. 'I'm taking cover. The greenskins hold it.'

'Advance, and be swift,' said Aesor. 'The snow will settle.'

Ulli emerged from the whiteout to see Fejor crouching by a rock, Starkad beside him peering through a pair of magnoculars. The pair had reached the edge of a long, sheer drop, a shoulder of the mountain, marking a stage of the ascent towards the uppermost peak behind them.

The departing engines of the gunship were replaced by the roar of rushing water. Below the ledge, a great lake reflected the pure blue of the sky. A dam blocked off what had once been a plunge down a sheer cliff face that vanished into the tops of the clouds hundreds of metres below. Several sprays of water gouted from the dam, the force turning hydroelectric turbines inside the dam that shuddered the rock beneath Ulli's feet.

The dam itself was a massive slab of rockcrete, its curved parapet mounted with battlements wrought into scowling masks like the faceplates of archaic armour. Chunks had been torn and blasted away, bundles of cables crudely slung from the breaches onto the shore at the far side of the lake. There squatted an orkish encampment, ringed with barricades of scrap steel cannibalised from the landing craft that had brought the orks here. The dam powered smoky workshops and motor pools of ramshackle vehicles – tanks, transporters, even aircraft that looked barely sky-worthy parked alongside a rocky airstrip marked out with burning fuel drums. A central building, apparently the bulk of a crashed spacecraft, glowed with bursts of blue-white power and the odd crackling and thrumming from it reached even across the lake to Ulli's ears.

'By the Moon-Wolf's frozen rump,' growled Saehrimnar. 'Our greenskin friends have been busy.'

'They are vermin,' said Tanngjost. 'Once they get a foothold they spread quickly, and they are Hel itself to winkle out. Even so, these orks are not such fools as we imagine. They took the dam early and are powering their workshops. See? War machines for the fight below – a second wave to strike from these upper slopes, where our brethren will not expect it. Blackmane was wise indeed to send us here.'

‘I see a dozen greenskins on the dam,’ voxed Starkad.

‘Barely even sport,’ said Fejor.

‘Be thankful the enemy gives us such a quick victory,’ said Aesor, ‘no matter how much you love to shed his blood, Fejor Redblade.’ Aesor turned to Ulli. ‘Rune Priest. What do you make of our options?’

Ulli unlatched the helmet of his armour. The cold air in his throat felt good, much like the Fenrisian chill on the battlements of the Fang. He breathed in, reading the air. The Codex Astartes, that manual of Space Marine tactics, stated that the helmet of power armour should be worn at all times, but a Space Wolf knew that his nose was as powerful as his eyes and a battlefield could reveal as much by smell as by sight. He caught machine oil, sweat, the chemical traces of metal melted in a crucible. The mountain itself smelled pure, snow and ice and cold rock.

‘Move in swiftly,’ he said. ‘No need to soften them up. Take them on at close range. That is how the ork loves to fight, too, but it will give the greenskins in the camp no time to respond. We must be in and out before they can scramble those warbikes and flyers. My apologies, Brother Fejor, but there will be no long-range kills made unseen, not for the moment.’

‘I agree,’ said Aesor. ‘Starkad, scout us a way in. The rest, be ready to move. Kill close and swift. Ulli, bless our blades for this one.’

No one even mentioned that Aesor would take the pack’s first kill on Alaric Prime. It was not the sort of thing that needed saying.

The honourable first blood was taken from the greenskin lurking in the dam’s cavernous interior, serving as what passed for a sentry among the orks. Aesor’s footsteps were lost amid the roar of the turbines and rushing water, and the ork did not hear them until the Space Wolf was three paces away. The ork didn’t have time to bring its gun barrel up as Aesor brought his frost blade down past its face, the serrated edge slicing down into its shoulder. The frost blade was cut from a kraken’s fang, and held an edge that could slice through the armoured predators of Fenris’s oceans. It passed right through the upper chest and spine of the ork, and out beneath its arm. The two chunks of the ork’s body thudded to the floor, the red-black mass of its organs slithering out across the rockcrete.

The rest of the pack bounded after Aesor as he ran past the fallen ork into the dam’s interior. Crude orkish technology was everywhere, bolted to

turbines or drawing off the power generated by the dam into masses of cables and pipes. Starkad carried one of the squad's demolition charges and Tanngjost the other, strapped to the backpacks of their armour. A stray shot could detonate one – it was not a task taken on with relish.

'Here,' said Ulli as the pack rounded a turbine housing. 'We're halfway across the dam. A breach here will do the most damage.'

'Set the charges,' ordered Aesor. 'Fejor, watch our backs.'

Starkad and Tanngjost began fixing the charges, one to the outer wall and one to the inner. A breach in both would flood the dam and send the torrent draining down through the cliff, hopefully taking the rest of the structure with it. Ulli was no engineer himself, but the Iron Priests of Strikeforce Stormfall had devised this mission and assured him that a strong enough explosion in the right place would bring the whole thing down, starving the ork encampment of the power needed to get their war machines running.

Ulli's thoughts were broken by the howling above him. He glanced up to see an ork looking down from a length of pipework a couple of storeys above, bellowing in alarm. Ulli instinctively drew his bolt pistol from its holster but before he could fire Fejor had taken the shot, punching a stalker bolt round through the ork's forehead and blowing out the back of its skull. The body tumbled to the floor.

Another howl took up the alarm, then another, a chain of them echoing down the length of the dam. Enough war-cries were raised to be heard over the turbine din.

'The enemy wants us,' said Aesor. 'He can have us!'

'Rune Priest,' said Saehrimnar, hefting his heavy bolter level with Ulli's chest. 'Bless the Widow, Brother Ulli!'

Ulli laid both hands on the housing of the heavy bolter Saehrimnar called the Widow. The weapon was too big for anyone unaugmented to carry, and it took a particularly well-built Space Marine to lift it with the ease that Saehrimnar did. Ulli felt his palms tingle with the familiar heat, as if he were laying them against the door of a blazing forge.

Ulli drew the psychic energy needed for the rune striking, calling it down from his mind's rare connection to the warp. He felt the darkness of that realm slithering at the back of his head, its tendrils probing at the mental defences a Rune Priest built up during decades of testing. That darkness

was as familiar as the fire spiralling around his arms and out through his palms, the coils of heat and cold running around the inside of his armour as its warding circuits drew off the excess psychic power.

In his mind he formed two runes, taken from the language with which the tombs of Fenris's ancient kings were inscribed. One rune was strength and fury, both honour and the honour-breaking rage, the strength and curse of Fenris's people. The other was focus of mind, decisiveness, the will and the knowledge to strike with certainty. It was the necessary quality of a king, and when applied to steel it meant accuracy and sharpness.

The metal beneath Ulli's hands buckled and he drew them away. Where his palms had been, the two runes were now raised up from the metal. They glowed blue-white with the energy of their making, energy Ulli had drawn from the warp and forged with his mind.

'My thanks,' said Saehrimnar with a grin. 'Fitting garb for the queen of battle!'

The war-cry of the orks rose to a single wailing bellow, dozens of their voices raised as one. Ulli could hear the rumble of their feet on the rockcrete.

'Brothers, are we set?' demanded Aesor.

'I am,' said Starkad.

'A few moments,' said Tanngjost. He was still fiddling with the detonator on the demolition charge.

'Starkad, help him,' ordered Aesor. 'I would be gone from this place.'

Through the darkness the greenskins approached. Dozens of them loped through the broken machinery and rubble that choked the dam's interior. Orks were humanoid, but there the resemblance to man ended – their skin was dark green leather covered in scars and scabs, heads hung low on massively muscled torsos. Mouths crammed with too many teeth to fit snarled under red piggish eyes. Every movement was power and anger, for every ork was born with a lust to despoil and destroy that never waned until they died.

'What sons of a hundred oathbreakers stand before Brokenaxe?' yelled Saehrimnar. 'What waits for you beyond death that you are so eager to see it?' He cocked the movement of his heavy bolter, levelling it at the approaching horde. 'Do you hunt for oblivion? Fenris obliges!'

The heavy bolter bucked in Saehrimnar's hands as it rattled off a chain of

fire, the barrel flare strobing in the darkness. The din of the gunfire echoed off the rockcrete into a wall of noise. Ulli's runes glowed hot on the weapon's housing as shots burst among the orks, ripping open bodies, throwing chunks of torn flesh and limbs into the air.

The other Space Wolves returned fire. Aesor blazed with his bolt pistol. Tanngjost, relieved of his task preparing the charge, stood and unholstered his custom bolter. He added a volley of his fire as Ulli did with his own pistol. Fejor switched to full-auto and sent half a magazine of stalker shells into the orks.

'Done!' yelled Starkad into the vox.

Behind the bulk of the horde, smouldering in the shadows, was a great dark shape looming and huge. Ulli felt the crackling psychic mass of the orks, a pulsing insanity like a fire or a stormy ocean, and among it a massive upwelling of rage.

Aesor grabbed Saehrimnar's shoulder guard and turned him around. The unspoken order was given and the pack withdrew, firing as they went towards the exit behind them. Saehrimnar sent out short volleys now, aiming as he moved, the bolter shells drawn to their targets by the power of the runes Ulli had inscribed on the gun.

'What a treat to be shot right through!' yelled Saehrimnar Brokenaxe between volleys. 'Feel the breeze on your lungs, my friend! Feel the mountain air on your guts!'

The return fire was ill-aimed and without discipline. The ork preferred to fight up close, and most used guns to soften up enemies and make noise as they charged. A shot rang off Ulli's shoulder guard as he took aim at a charging greenskin and put a pistol round through its skull.

The rage was growing. Ulli had faced orks before, but he had never felt this. In the swirl of combat he could not focus on it to divine what it was, but even the glimpses he had of it spoke of a scale and intensity beyond the psychic field that always surrounded a mob of orks in battle.

Pack Aesor emerged into the snowy glare outside the dam.

'Do it, Starkad!' ordered Aesor. Starkad hit the detonator switch in his hand and twin plumes of rubble and dust erupted from the centre of the dam. The sound hit a moment later, the ground shuddering, hot air roaring from the dam entrance.

Orks charged out of the dam onto the snowy mountainside. In ones and

twos, the Space Wolves fell on them and cut them to pieces. Starkad drew his twin drake's-fang daggers, spinning and lunging as he punctured abdomens and severed spines. Saehrimnar clubbed one greenskin to the ground with his heavy bolter, and the creature was finished off by Aesor's frost blade thrust through the small of its back.

One ork barrelled towards the Rune Priest. Ulli's axe was in his hand. The weapon had runes of his own making inscribed on its blade and they glowed with anticipation of bloodshed. The power field around the weapon sparked into life, energy rippling across the blade. The ork was a larger one than most, a leader in whatever tribal system passed for their society. Its face was painted with a crude representation of a white skull, its gnarled fangs were tipped with iron and it wore a filthy mass of skins and matted furs. It was armed with a cleaver-like weapon, its rectangular blade well pitted with old blood.

Ulli ducked its first blow, letting the weight of his body and armour drop him out of the cleaver's arc. He struck upwards with his axe, burying it in the ork's chest. He balled up a flare of psychic power, born of anger that this alien would dare single him out, and let it burst up through the psychic circuit in the axe. The power burst out through the blade, adding itself to the force of the discharging power field.

The ork was blown clean in two. Scorched meat and organs rained across the snow. The upper half landed some distance away, the legs and abdomen flopping wetly to the ground in front of Ulli.

He could not deny how good it felt. Ulli set himself apart from the ferocious Blood Claws, or men like Saehrimnar who revelled in the kill – but Ulli was still a son of Fenris, and the lust and glory of battle was in his blood.

The ground rumbled as the dam gave way. A new waterfall burst through the break, taking half the crumbling structure with it as it poured down the cliff face to plunge through the clouds. Ulli glanced around to see the orks who had made it out of the dam were dead or dying, the last of them shot down by a short burst of fire from Tanngjost.

Ulli could hear the bellowing of orks trapped inside the dam, and the rushing of water inundating the whole structure.

He could hear something else, too. The roar of unfamiliar engines from the direction of the lake. From the camp across the lake a black speck was

rising on a column of grey-black smoke, the drone of its engines growing louder as it approached.

'They have aircraft,' voxed Ulli.

'Russ's teeth,' snarled Fejor. 'I'll never understand how they learned to fly.'

'Break and take cover!' called out Aesor. The pack was already moving, scattering for the scant shelter of boulders and rises of rock. Behind them the peak of Sacred Mountain rose craggy and covered in snowy outcrops, but the slope by the lake was open. There was nowhere a man the size of an armoured Space Marine could hide, not from a strafing run from above.

Ulli ran for a rock that barely reached his waist. He was suddenly so open to attack he might as well have been wearing nothing but the ox-hide loincloth a supplicant wore on his Blooding. He glanced back and saw the ork aircraft knifing across the lake, swooping low. Massive cannon were mounted below its wings and a cluster of fat bombs hung under its belly. The craft had a blunt, lopsided look, the panels of its hull apparently salvaged wreckage, its pilot showing a grin of yellow fangs behind the cracked glass of the cockpit. How such a thing could even fly was beyond Ulli's understanding. It was as if the orks willed their war machines into motion, and fuelled them with their need to destroy.

The cannon opened fire. Bursts of flame and smoke jetted from the aircraft's wings. Explosive shells burst deafeningly along the near shore of the lake, and in a second or two they would fall amongst the exposed Space Wolves.

Ulli felt the hot blast of exhaust washing down over him as he was bathed in the roar of an engine. The cockpit of the ork aircraft shattered, throwing shards of glass and broken machinery behind it in a glittering tail. The ork craft angled upwards, wrenched out of its trajectory, and the shots from its cannon sprayed uselessly towards the mountain's peak. The aircraft spiralled away, its pilot dead, vanishing among the upper slopes and leaving nothing but a contrail of filthy smoke.

'I leave you for five minutes!' came Brother Sigrund's voice over the vox. 'Five minutes and already you need me to save your mangy pelts!'

Skjaldi's Lament banked around over the lake, the lascannon mounted under its nose still glowing from the volley that had shot down the ork. Sigrund brought the gunship down towards the slope, the rear ramp

already opening.

'No whelp ever welcomed its mother's milk as we welcome you, Brother Sigrund!' laughed Tanngjost.

Beyond the landing gunship, the centre section of the dam was completely gone. The lake was rushing through the breach, the edge already receding from the shore as the meltwater drained away.

'You made a bloody great mess,' voxed Sigrund. 'As always.'

'Board, brothers,' ordered Aesor. 'I would not tarry here.'

'A shame,' said Tanngjost as he lugged his heavy bolter towards the gunship. 'I'll miss the mountain air.'

And again, welling up below his feet like the molten heart of the mountain itself, Ulli could feel that hate. A rage unbounded, waxing upon itself. It had the stink of the ork, but blacker and stronger, the monstrous will of the greenskin race distilled and made pure.

Smoke billowed at the entrance to the dam, from which howled the rush of water through the breach. The rockcrete entrance was suddenly shunted out of alignment, the lintel forced upwards as a great dark shape emerged through the smoke.

Ulli saw then what that hatred looked like, given a physical form. It was an ork, but that word did not seem to do the thing justice. It was enormous in size, twice the height of a Space Marine even hunched over, as broad through the shoulders as a tank. Its shape was composed of muscle and fang, its skin tattered with scars and almost black with age and smoke stains. Its jaw was so heavy as to look deformed, even among the orks, crammed with too many fangs to fit. Its eyes were burning coals set into pits of scar tissue.

Ulli had faced giant orks before. The larger the ork, the more powerful it was among its tribes and warbands, and so the hugest specimens formed the greenskins' leadership caste. This one, however, brought with it the psychic wailing of hatred and madness that spoke of the roiling, diseased ocean of rage it had in place of a mind. And there was a terrible intelligence to it, the last attribute one might give to the greenskin. On its back – no, *in* its back, fused to the spine and ribs, protruding from the skin and muscle – were metal protrusions like antennae, around which crackled blue-white arcs of power. It crackled across the ork's steel gauntlets and the metal plates riveted to its skin as makeshift armour. Cogs and

flywheels spun amongst the machinery, generating the bursts of power. Sparks ground into the rocks, and snow vanished to steam as it stepped onto the lake shore.

In its arms it carried a weapon that would not shame a main battle tank, a cannon with five rotating barrels connected to an ammunition hopper full of loose shells. Like the aircraft, like everything the greenskins built, it looked like something that should never work, or at the very best that should have blown up in its user's hands as soon as the trigger was pulled. But the will of this thing was enough to make the weapon work as it levelled the barrels at the *Skjaldi's Lament*.

'Hear the thunder straight from Fenris!' bellowed Saehrimnar as he brought his heavy bolter up. He blasted a chain of fire at the ork, and the shots hammered against its massive frame.

The fire sparked off the armour and thudded into its flesh, but the ork was not even pushed onto the back foot. Explosive bolts were swallowed up by the mass of scar tissue and muscle, and the barrel of its cannon came down to aim at Saehrimnar.

The return fire was scattered wild. One shot caught Saehrimnar in the thigh and blew the ceramite open, revealing the wet redness of muscle underneath. Saehrimnar sprawled, his blood spraying onto the white snow.

Ulli was closest to Saehrimnar. He broke cover and sprinted to his fallen packmate, before the ork could bring its cannon to bear again. It could throw out a massive wall of fire but its recoil was such that the ork had to brace itself before it could finish off Saehrimnar. It would be enough time, Ulli was sure of that. He had the instinct of a seasoned warrior; he knew the cruel science of bullets and bodies. It would be enough.

Ulli grabbed Saehrimnar around the waist and hauled him off his feet. He backed towards the rock he had tagged as cover – it wasn't much against the air attack but it would provide shelter from fire at ground level.

Ulli saw the ork out of the corner of his eye, leaning into its gun to keep it level. It was even stronger than Ulli had imagined.

There would not be enough time.

The gun roared. Ulli felt the massive calibre shells ripping past him. The ork's face was illuminated in the muzzle flare.

Saehrimnar's head and upper chest burst. Ulli was thrown back, a torrent of blood and gore hitting his face. The weight he carried was suddenly

less, for a good portion of Saehrimnar's body was gone.

The ork turned back to the gunship, which was rotating in place to aim its nose cannon. The ork brought its weapon to bear first. The barrels blazed and a dozen shots punched through the cockpit, stray rounds bursting among the fan blades of one engine. The engine tone rose to a scream and the craft wheeled out over the lake, belching smoke.

'Sigrund!' voxed Aesor. 'Brother Sigrund!'

The *Skjaldi's Lament* pitched into the lake and vanished, drawn under and out of sight by the currents rushing towards the breached dam.

Across the lake, a flotilla of craft had set sail. They were ramshackle motor launches and hovercraft, wreathed in oily smoke, teeming with greenskins from the camp. They held tribal banners high and waved their cleavers and guns, eager to clean up whatever the air assault had left alive.

'Fall back!' ordered Aesor. 'Take to the peak! The upper slopes!'

The ork turned back to the Space Wolves. It shouldered its gun and drew from among the machinery on its back a blade as long as an oak trunk and as wide as a Space Marine. The jagged length of the weapon was corroded and spattered with old black bloodstains. The time for killing from a distance was gone – it wanted its next kill up close.

Ulli hefted Saehrimnar's body onto his shoulders and vaulted over the boulder behind him. The lakeside slope became jagged and broken a good long sprint away, the gradient increasing sharply as the knife-like ridges and outcrops rose towards the mountain's peak. The giant ork could take any of them it wanted if it could outpace them, but that would limit it to one or two. If the pack of Wolves stayed where they were and fought it, they would still be on the shore when the rest of the greenskins arrived.

The scream of tortured engines reached Ulli's ears. The *Skjaldi's Lament* rose from the waters, lurching like a wounded sea creature. Behind the shattered windshield, Brother Sigrund wrestled with the controls as he forced the gunship's nose to point at the ork. A handful of shots blasted at the beast, most missing, one burning through an armour plate and into the greenskin's flank.

The ork bellowed and took up its cannon again, and with a final volley shattered the front end of the gunship. It vanished into the waters, Brother Sigrund having got in a final insult to the creature that killed him.

Ulli used the seconds Brother Sigrund had bought him. He ran for the

cover of the rocky slopes, willing his body to ignore the weight of Saehrimnar's corpse on his shoulders and the heat of the blood that ran down his face.

The ork's frustrated roar echoed around the mountainside, mingling with the tumult of the new waterfall and the grinding of the ork flotilla's engines.

It hurt Ulli to flee. But the pack would not survive a battle here, exposed, one of their number down and the orks assaulting in full force. Their shame would burn hot, but it would not go unanswered. In that moment, Ulli knew the giant ork had to die, or the stain on Pack Aesor's honour would never be washed away.

TWO

Pack Aesor gathered an hour later. The way had been hard going, the steep slope forcing them to climb as much as run. But Space Wolves trained in the treacherous foothills of the Fang – they lived in a mountain and it was natural for them to negotiate such terrain. Even before they had been chosen by the Wolf Priests to undergo the tests that made them Space Wolves, some of the pack had lived among tribes who hunted and made war among Fenris's mountain ranges. It was difficult, but it was more difficult for the greenskins, who pursued them slowly up the slopes in an ill-disciplined throng with their enormous leader at their head.

Starkad was waiting for the rest of them on a shoulder of rock where they could gather, snatch a few moments of rest, and plan their next move. He was a natural pathfinder and had made the best progress. Ulli, weighed down by Saehrimnar, was last.

Saehrimnar's head and neck were gone, and most of his chest. The gene-seed organs, which could be preserved and implanted into new aspirants, were gone as well. They had been seated in his throat and chest, from where they regulated the many augmentations of the Space Wolf's body. Saehrimnar would not give those sacred organs, crafted from the flesh of the primarch Leman Russ himself, to the next generation. His legacy had come to an end. It was the worst coda to a bad death.

There was little time for words, and none of the packmates had much inclination to say them. Saehrimnar had been the quickest among them to speak. Without him, the silence he left said more than any of them could. The pack buried Saehrimnar under a cairn of loose stones, and Aesor took

up his heavy bolter.

Starkad pointed up the slope, to where a squat rockcrete bunker occupied a ledge. It was the best shelter they would find up here, probably built by the Knight Houses of Alaric Prime to aid their exploration of the vast mountain.

As the pack made their way in silence towards the bunker, Ulli hoped the orks would not think to search the pile of stones and defile what they found there.

In the light of the guttering fire, the man's eye seemed to be sunk so far into his head that his face was little more than a skull with the skin stretched over it. He wore a rebreather mask, adding oxygen to every breath to compensate for the thin air at this altitude. Looking at him, Ulli thought how easy it was to forget that an environment like this, so natural to a Space Wolf, could be lethal to an unaugmented man.

Pack Aesor had found the man in the bunker, huddling by his fire. It looked like he had been there for days, living off a few packs of emergency rations, waiting to die up there on Sacred Mountain. His name, he had told them, was Frith.

'Time was,' he was saying, his voice almost lost in the shrill wind outside the bunker, 'they were kings of this world. My masters were this world's master. You see this?' he held out an emblem pinned to the lapel of his tattered uniform, a pair of compasses on a field of red enamel. 'House Varlen. Their sons had the most resplendent Knights on Alaric Prime. I, we, we would have followed them through the warp and into the heart of Chaos itself. But now?' The man coughed out a laugh, and Ulli wondered how old he was. He could have been anything from twenty to sixty. 'Now these… these animals have come down from the sky and made us all into normal men.'

Tanngjost looked down from the bunker's firing slit, where he had mounted Saehrimnar's heavy bolter. 'The greenskins don't have your world to themselves any more,' he said. 'The Space Wolves have come to Alaric Prime. Two companies of us. There's not an ork in this galaxy that can stand up to Blackmane and the Great Wolf.'

'And how many of you are there?' said Frith. 'A hundred? A thousand? The orks are vermin. They breed! There will always be another one around

the next rock. You could kill a million of them and there would always be more.'

Behind Frith, Starkad drew the long, thin spike he used to clean the barrel of his bolter.

'You were a mechanic?' said Ulli hurriedly. 'For the Knights?'

'A retainer,' said Frith. 'Like all the line of my father. I served Baron Vigilus Varlen, Second Son of his House. I kept his steed, the *Dominus Vult*. Never did a finer Knight walk this world! I hung her with banners of Varlen's victories and polished her crimson flanks! But she has fallen, Angels of Death. She fell and is gone! How can this world prevail if even the *Dominus Vult* can be prey to the vermin?'

'How did you lose her?' asked Aesor.

'The ork,' said Frith. 'The one ork.'

'You saw it?' asked Ulli. 'Their chief, from the camp by the dam?'

'They must have their gods,' said Frith, ignoring Ulli. 'They must look like that ork did. The baron faced him on the mountainside. I watched from our command truck. Already I was thinking how I would bleach the vermin's skull and hang it among the battle honours. But it was not just a brute! A brute, the baron could have killed. It was cunning. It did not fight an honourable duel.'

'It's one of their engineering caste,' said Aesor. 'But I've never heard of one the size of their warlords. Not an auspicious combination.'

'There were more of them,' continued Frith. 'We saw them sneaking up but we were too slow. They infected my master's steed.'

'Infected?' asked Ulli.

'With a disease,' said Frith, leaning over the fire, the flame glinting off his sunken eyes. 'A disease of the metal. The *Dominus Vult* went mad! I heard the master screaming. She stalked off into the mountain, and blackness bled from her. Then she was gone, and the vermin was laughing. We fled and scattered. I ended up here. I know not where the other retainers are – most likely they are dead. Perhaps I will walk out and take the mountain's embrace. This is holy ground, Angels of Death. That was why my master took to these slopes, in case the greenskins defiled it. And they have. The mountain weeps.'

'A machine-virus,' said Aesor. 'I have never known an ork to employ such a thing.'

‘Orks are animals,’ said Fejor. Ulli noted with some gratitude that Starkad had put his blade away. ‘That is beyond them.’

‘They are animals who can cross interstellar distances,’ said Ulli, ‘who can capture a hydroelectric dam and use it to churn out war machines within hours. There is a cunning to the creature we faced. It is not like the other greenskins. Its hatred masks it, but there is a… a depth there. An intelligence.’

‘I have known you a long time, Ulli Iceclaw,’ said Tanngjost, ‘ever since Phalakan. But even now, knowing that you see what you see, it raises my hackles.’

‘Well, you aren’t the one who has to see it,’ replied Ulli.

Tanngjost grunted in agreement, and turned back to the firing slit to keep the watch.

Frith’s chin sank down to his chest and he closed his eyes. Only the misting of his breath on the inside of the transparent rebreather mask suggested he was alive.

‘I take it we cannot raise the Great Company,’ said Ulli.

‘Not with the gunship gone,’ said Aesor. ‘Its communicator could reach Blackmane’s command. Our vox-net is not strong enough. On level ground with no interference, yes, but up here we are on our own. They will realise when we do not return, but I doubt our brothers will have the warriors to spare to come and rescue us.’

‘Then we are on our own,’ said Ulli.

‘When are we not?’ replied Fejor.

For a long moment the only sound was the crackling of the fire and the whistling of the wind.

‘Tell me of Phalakan,’ said Aesor, looking at Ulli across the fire.

‘Your packmates must have spoken of it,’ said Ulli.

‘I would hear of it from you,’ said Aesor. His voice was level and Ulli could read nothing from it.

‘A battle against the eldar,’ said Ulli. ‘Tough going. We lost many brothers. I was apprenticed to the Rune Priest Torgrim Splitbeard. We were cut off and I found myself fighting back to back with this ingrate here.’ Ulli jabbed a thumb at Tanngjost. ‘And Saehrimnar. The eldar made Tanngjost rather more handsome.’

‘I shall ever be grateful to whatever alien it was,’ said Tanngjost, idly

scratching the spiral scars on his face as if they itched with the memory. ‘I paid him back in kind but I was a bit too generous. There wasn’t much left of his head at all.’

‘Saehrimnar broke his axe in the fight. The xenos were damned fast, backflipping and dancing all around. So he picked up a heavy bolter from the ground and shot them all down. We called him the Broken Axe after that.’

‘And you?’ asked Aesor.

Ulli knew Tanngjost from Phalakan, but that had been a long time ago and Aesor had become their pack leader after that. Aesor didn’t know Ulli, and it seemed that the word of his older packmates wasn’t enough for him. Ulli bristled at that, a little of Russ’s blood reminding him that he was still a Space Wolf, even if he studied in the Rune Halls instead of feasting in the Great Hall. But he could not blame Aesor for his caution. They would have to rely on one another up here, each one placing his life in the hands of all his packmates. Trust had to be earned hard in such circumstances.

‘I put the runes on their guns,’ said Ulli. ‘When their bolters ran dry, I put them on their knives and chainswords. When their blades were dull, I put them on the rocks, and we dashed out the aliens’ brains. Few of us lived, but live we did, and Ulli Iceclaw became worthy of the Blood of Russ. I might not boast like the Wolves of your pack, Aesor Dragon’s Head, but I have earned the armour that is my pelt and I am proud of it.’

Aesor nodded, the ghost of a smile on his face. It struck Ulli then how, unlike the older Space Wolves who were covered in scars, Aesor was unblemished by war. Almost unblemished, that is.

‘Tell me of your ear,’ Ulli said.

Behind him, Tanngjost chuckled quietly. Starkad, who was resting in a dark corner, broke a smile, which did not happen very often.

Aesor looked for a moment as if he would curse out Ulli for his presumption, and perhaps if Ulli had been a member of Pack Aesor he would have. But the moment passed and Aesor shrugged.

‘You have good eyes,’ he said.

‘You would not hide your scars by choice,’ said Ulli. ‘You are not some perfumed Blood Angel ashamed of the marks of battle. It is something that weighs on you. And if you would know about me, then I would know about you.’

Aesor swept the hair back to reveal the dark red snarl of scar tissue where his left ear had been. ‘Before my Blooding,’ he said, ‘many of us were taken to the foothills of the Fang to look on the place where we would be tested. One of the other aspirants joked he would bet his kraken-tooth knife that I would be the first corpse brought back. I lost my temper, Ulli Iceclaw, and in the scuffle I bit off his ear. My people took tributes from the barbarian tribes of the Shark’s Reach fjords, and we did not take kindly to insults. And I was young.’

‘I see,’ said Ulli. ‘And he took your ear in recompense?’

‘Ulli, Ulli,’ said Tanngjost. ‘I thought you were supposed to be the smart one?’

Aesor shook his head. ‘No. I tore it off myself. I was taught to pay my debts, and not to visit on any man an insult we would not accept ourselves. My Blooding was delayed a week and I stood guard on the walls of the Fang in only a loincloth as punishment. I hide this scar because I would not have it bandied about that Aesor Dragon’s Head is not to be insulted, for if that happened I would not know what my brothers truly thought of me. But I could not have it repaired either because then I would not bear the wound I had earned as one I dealt to my brother. So I hide it as best I can, until some sharp-eyed and inquisitive soul decides to point it out.’

‘Then I would say we have both satisfied our curiosity,’ said Ulli.

Starkad snapped to alertness, his bolt pistol suddenly in his hand.

‘What is it?’ asked Aesor.

‘I can hear them,’ said Starkad.

Starkad was from the nomad tribes who walked a belt of glaciers on Fenris, carving survival from the endless ice. They were trackers and pathfinders without compare, many of them serving as Wolf Scouts unless they were too pack-minded, like Starkad. Their senses were considered exceptionally sharp, even amongst a Chapter who could hunt by scent alone. When something caught Starkad’s senses, the pack paid attention.

‘Footsteps?’ asked Fejor, unshouldering his rifle ready to set up at the firing slit. ‘War-cries?’

‘Engines,’ said Starkad.

Ulli pushed open the bunker door as Starkad stamped out the fire. The wind was a thin, shrill whistle but underneath was the grinding of many engines, low and throaty. On a lower slope he could make out a lumbering

shape, and as it came closer it resolved into a squat, ugly machine crawling up the rocky slope towards the shoulder of rock on which the bunker sat. The machine was something like a huge, flattened tank, but in place of tracks it had sets of rotating bladed wheels that dug into the rock and hauled it upwards. A crew of orks scrabbled across the machine's hull, throwing out chains with grappling hooks to draw tight and keep the tank stable as it climbed.

Hitched to the back of the rock-crawler machine, dragged by ropes and chains, followed dozens of orkish warbikes being towed in the machine's wake. The warbikes were painted in red with the sigils of a crude skull painted in blue. Their riders' leathers and goggles were well stained with oil and smoke. Some of the bikes were fitted with sets of cannon, the kind of crude, loud weapons that orks loved. Ulli guessed about thirty of them were being towed up the mountain.

He could feel the low *thrumm* of orkish minds, bestial but united in purpose. And beneath that, the dark foundation of their rage, the echo of their leader's mind.

'By Magnus's broken teeth,' swore Tanngjost, watching from the doorway beside Ulli. 'They didn't waste any time. Where do they get all this junk from?'

'Some build, some lead, most fight,' said Ulli. 'It is as if someone created the greenskins for war. Their mechanics can make a gun or a war machine from a handful of nuts and bolts. Their leader is more adept than most, it seems. Blackmane was wise to send us here. If it continues, it could turn the battle below.'

'Pack leader,' said Fejor. 'I would cover their assault from above us. I can take out a driver or gunner.'

'Agreed, brother,' said Aesor. 'But do not give yourself away for the sake of one more shot.'

Fejor left through the door, staying low as he ran for the snarl of broken rock and fissures that led to the uppermost slopes.

The grinding of the rock-crawler's engine changed pitch and the machine slowed to a halt, the orks on board hurling grappling hooks to keep it chained to the slope. The host of warbikes behind it gunned their own engines, whooping with the anticipation of speed and destruction.

'They're insane,' said Tanngjost.

‘Their rank and file are,’ said Ulli. ‘Their leader knows exactly what it is doing.’

The first warbikes screamed up the few metres of slope that remained, reaching the sliver of level ground on which the bunker stood. Snow sprayed out behind them as the orks crouched over their handlebars, lips peeled back over yellow fangs.

Tanngjost ducked back into the bunker and manned the heavy bolter. Aesor and Starkad aimed their guns through the firing slit beside him. Ulli stayed by the door, using the rockcrete construction for cover and drawing his bolt pistol.

The heavy bolter opened fire. The lead bike was struck in the front wheel and fairing, pitching nose-first into the snow and catapulting the rider from his saddle. His body impacted against the rocks near Fejor with a crunch of bones.

The survivors drew cleavers and clubs, whooping as they banked to sweep around the bunker. Another fell, caught through the forehead by a shot from Starkad’s pistol. Heavy bolter fire took down another before the bikers roared around to the other side of the bunker.

Ulli held his rune axe tight, feeling the psychic circuitry of its blade echoed in the shape of the sigils he drew in his mind. He judged the tone of the shrieking engines and leaned out from the doorway, bringing his axe up just as the first ork rounded the bunker.

The rune axe hacked into the ork’s chest and shoulder. Ulli didn’t need to force his willpower into the axe to shatter bone and shred neurons – the ork’s own speed buried the axe deep enough to cut through heart, lung and spine, and the body that thumped into the wall of the bunker beside Ulli was dead before it hit. Ulli wrenched the axe out and brought it up in time to parry the swing of a cleaver from the next biker.

This one wore a mass of teeth hanging from leather strips around its neck, its muscular body cut deep with ritual scars. Its face was painted with blue skull markings. It slewed around to charge at Ulli again, as Ulli knew it could not resist doing.

The ork expected Ulli to duck, so it brought its cleaver down low as it swung. Ulli jumped instead, with an agility granted by the muscle-fibre bundles that let his power armour echo his every movement. He crashed into the ork knee-first, throwing it off the back of its bike and landing on

top of it in the snow. He drew back his axe and brought it down into the ork's skull, splitting its surprised face in two.

More bikes were cresting the slope, mounted with cannon slung on either side of the rider. They were slower and their aim was wild as they sprayed shots almost at random. Splinters of rockcrete rained down as they peppered the bunker's side with fire. Tanngjost ignored the incoming fire, loosing off bursts from the heavy bolter to claim two, three more as they roared towards him.

One bike careered out of control and pitched over the side of the mountain. Two more crashed into one another and as the surviving rider got to his feet, Fejor sniped it through the throat from his hiding place above.

The orks were seeking to encircle the bunker, but they had to slow down to negotiate the wreckage of the bikes whose riders Ulli had killed, and soon Starkad was beside him, wielding chainsword and bolt pistol to bring down the bikers. When cornered like this, the level-headed nomad of the Gautreksland glacier vanished and pure Space Wolf came to the surface. Starkad fought with his teeth bared and hands bloody. He rammed his chainsword through one ork's chest, ripped the blade out and threw the wounded greenskin to one side. Another ork leapt down from its bike to leap on Starkad from behind, but Ulli willed a wave of psychic power into the rune on his axe that represented the Fenrisian word for flight and swiftness. A crescent of glowing energy swept out from the blade as he swung it, its leading edge as keen as the axe itself, slicing off the ork's arm at a distance of several paces.

Orks were scrambling from the wreckage of their bikes, taking cover from the heavy bolter fire in the rocky slope. Some refused to leave their machines, slewing around to hammer fire at the bunker even as they were shot down and wrecked.

Ulli was finishing off an ork on the ground with the spike on the butt-end of his axe when he caught a scent on the cold wind. It was one he had smelled before, a mix of old blood and chemicals, decaying flesh and dense, choking musk. He yanked his axe out of the ork's chest and raised his nose to the sky, trying to catch the scent again.

'What is it, Rune Priest?' asked Starkad.

'I smell warpcraft,' growled Ulli.

‘We have them scattered,’ voxed Aesor. ‘Hold your ground and break them against us.’

‘They are not finished,’ replied Ulli.

The clanking of great metal feet rang off the rocks, and Ulli saw a huge armoured hand finding purchase at the top of the slope. The orks clinging to the back of the rock-crawler machine whooped and cheered as the face-mask of a massive steel head rose up behind it. The face was wrought into the shape of an eagle with deep green lenses for eyes. Its shoulder guards were in the shape of golden-feathered wings and the torso was inlaid with the intricate heraldry of an ancient and powerful house of Alaric Prime.

It was an Imperial Knight.

THREE

Ulli had never seen a Knight in the steel before. Once whole legions of them strode at the head of Imperial armies in the ages of the Great Crusade, the Heresy and the early centuries of the Imperium. Now the secrets of their construction were known only to the Adeptus Mechanicus and only a few aristocratic houses maintained and piloted them. They were bipedal war engines that echoed the enormous machines of the Legio Titanicus, but smaller and more agile, the linchpin of a way of war that was almost extinct.

This one was sick. Ulli could tell that at the first glance. Glistening black oil ran from its joints, like corrupted blood, running from its eyepieces and the joints of its armoured body. The green and gold paint was blistered as if by disease, with pits and craters like old wounds turned bad.

Behind it clambered the giant ork mechanic, and in one hand it held a chain hooked to a collar around the Knight's neck. It was a master leading a slave, and it brought with it the stink of witchcraft and that upwelling of rage that seemed to shake the mountain under Ulli's feet.

'Is that the *Dominus Vult*?' demanded Aesor inside the bunker.

A shuddering Frith appeared at the firing slit. 'No,' he said, his eyes wide with horror. 'It's the *Aquila Ferox*. Emperor on high, they got the *Aquila*…'

'Whatever it is,' said Tanngjost, 'this heavy bolter won't dent it and that thing on its arm is a battle cannon. It will crack this bunker open.'

Ulli ducked back into the doorway to shelter from the fire still coming down from the scattered orks. The bikers had been sent to keep the Space

Wolves pinned down in the bunker while the Knight reached them. The greenskin was not stupid, and it could call upon the corruption of the warp.

'Rune Priest,' said Starkad, sheltering beside Ulli, 'we have need of you.' He was holding out the final demolition charge, a spare in case the detonator failed on one of the charges they planted at the dam.

'Brother,' said Ulli, 'I cannot…'

'We will all die,' said Starkad, 'if you do not.'

Ulli looked into Starkad's face. He was one of the newer members of the pack, and had not been a Space Wolf when Ulli had fought alongside Tanngjost and Saehrimnar at Phalakan. Ulli did not know the young Grey Hunter well, but he had seen in him a calm and analytical war mind that could turn to a Fenrisian fury when cornered, a pathfinder who could pick out a trail through the roughest terrain and scout the most cunning enemy. The Chapter would do ill to lose him. But there was no regret in his face, and no pride at being the one to stand alone. There was just the certainty at what had to be done, and that he was the one who had to do it.

Ulli placed a hand on the casing of the demolition charge. He formed the sigils of strength and reckless fury on it, indiscriminate destruction and anger without form. It was not a complicated symbol but it was one that needed raw power, dredged up from the well at the back of Ulli's mind that was usually kept sealed by the mental discipline of a Rune Priest.

The glowing rune in the shape of a fist was etched onto the explosive's casing, and Ulli's hand smouldered with the effort.

'Cover him,' ordered Aesor.

The Knight reached the top of the slope, its gait lopsided and uncertain. One arm ended in a battle cannon, a weapon normally carried by the main battle tanks of the Astra Militarum. The mountainside shuddered under its feet.

'Metal beast!' bellowed Tanngjost from the bunker. 'Steel will melt and bend in the forge of war, but flesh and bone will not! And greenskin filth! Your kind are a disease, and in my hands I hold the cure!'

The ork mechanic turned at the sound of Tanngjost's voice, its face creasing with hatred. It pointed and bellowed towards the bunker and the enslaved Knight followed it, the battle cannon turning to aim. Tanngjost opened fire and heavy bolter fire *spanged* off the Knight's armoured chest, throwing out sparks but doing no damage.

Starkad sprinted from the doorway, pistol in one hand and the demolition charge in the other. Ulli's rune left a glowing trail in the air as Starkad ran.

If Ulli could bury his axe in the ork's skull, would he kill it? Even if he channelled every drop of psychic power through the blade, was that well of warp-born darkness too great for a Rune Priest to overcome? Ulli had never encountered an ork corrupted in this way before. He had never even heard of such a thing. How could he fight it?

Starkad reached to within a few metres of the Knight before the ork saw him. It roared and stomped up proud of the rocks, drawing the rotator cannon it had strapped to its back to make the climb. Ulli broke cover and ran at an angle to Starkad's path, letting a white-hot flow of power course from his mind into the axe. The weapon was hot in his hand and it was suddenly heavy, the strength of his arm temporarily drained as it was forced out of his body and into his mind.

Ulli leapt and brought his axe down, as if delivering a killing blow to the back of a prey-animal's neck. The blade of psychic energy was projected from the axe, a crescent of white light. It hammered into the ork's gun and shattered its casing, sending components spinning everywhere.

Ulli gulped down air. He abhorred the moment of weakness that followed such use of his power. He saw the ork throwing the broken weapon aside and growling in frustration – but it was not stalking towards Ulli for revenge. Instead it stayed fixated on Starkad, who was now in the shadow of the Knight.

'Here!' yelled Ulli, knowing it was useless. The distraction had bought a few seconds, but not enough for Starkad to do his work. Instead Ulli ran for the ork, his axe for the moment just a mundane weapon until he could catch his breath and feel the psychic power flowing through him again.

The Knight's cannon hammered a volley of shots into the bunker. Unaugmented hearing would have been deafened by the din – as it was Ulli's senses were overloaded for a moment by the noise. Chunks of the bunker vanished in bursts of flame and debris, laying open the interior.

Silhouetted by the muzzle flare of the battle cannon, Starkad clamped the charge to the leg of the *Aquila Ferox*. The ork loomed down on him, bringing his cleaver up to hack Starkad in two.

Ulli dived into the ork's side, tackling the alien shoulder-first. It was an unyielding wall of muscle and scar and Ulli barely knocked the ork back

half a pace. He hacked at it with his axe and buried the weapon deep in the ork's shoulder, but the ork flexed the muscle of its arm and forced the blade out. For a moment Ulli was looking into the ork's eyes, and behind them he saw the infinite darkness of the warp, tinted red and boiling over with hate.

The ork aimed a backhand swipe at Ulli and caught him square in the chest. Ulli was thrown off his feet, head reeling with the impact, and it was instinct that made him throw his hands out to find some purchase in the snow and rock. He arrested his momentum just as his feet swung out over the precipice, a moment before he would have slid over the edge and into a fall hundreds of metres down through the clouds.

The charge detonated. The concussion wave hit Ulli before the sound and nearly threw him the rest of the way off the edge. The impact slammed against his ringing head and everything went red for a moment as the mountain shuddered.

Fragments of rock rained down over Ulli. Through the dust and snow thrown up by the blast he saw the *Aquila Ferox* listing to one side, one leg completely gone below the knee where Starkad had planted the charge. It put out a hand to steady itself but the ork's corrupting machine-sickness had made it slow and ill-coordinated. It toppled to the ground beside Ulli, the greater part of its weight hanging over the edge. It slid across the icy rocks and fell. Ulli heard the sound of stone on steel as it was battered against the side of the mountain and plunged through the cloud layer.

Ulli shook the sense back into his head. Somehow he still held onto his axe – another warrior's instinct. He used it to push himself to his feet.

The shape of the ork emerged from the smoke. In one massive paw it held Starkad up in the air, brandishing him towards the ruined bunker. Starkad's face was streaked with blood and his armour was torn and cracked, but he was conscious. He saw the ork's maw opening wide.

The ork bit down on Starkad's upper body. Its fangs sheared through ceramite and bone. Starkad's head and shoulders disappeared down its gullet. Blood and organs spilled down its chest as the ork threw the body aside.

Ulli could feel its glee. It relished this, not just killing, but killing a foe in front of that foe's allies. The very hatred Ulli felt for the ork brought it joy.

'To the slopes,' said a voice behind Ulli. In the chaos it took him a

moment to recognise it as Aesor. ‘Upwards. More are following.’

Ulli could hear the engines now, more bikers and war machines crawling up the slope towards the ruined bunker. Through the smoke of the Knight’s assault he could see Tanngjost, the insensible Frith thrown over his shoulder, breaking from cover to join Fejor in the rocks above.

‘We’re running out of mountain,’ said Ulli as Aesor helped him to his feet.

‘Then we will make our stand at the top,’ said Aesor, ‘and bleed the greenskins white as they follow us. Move, Rune Priest. Move!’

For the first time, what remained of Pack Aesor could appreciate just how many greenskins followed the mechanic who led them. They had swarmed out of the camp by the mountain lake, thousands of them, released from the workshops to take up whatever weapon they could find and hunt down the Space Wolves.

Two more crawlers ground their way up to the ruined bunker, one bringing more bikers, the other scores of orks clinging to its upper hull. Other orks made the journey on foot, clambering through the ice and snow. From the glimpses of the greenskins massing below, Ulli estimated three to four thousand of them, many hauling their bikes after them, others loaded down with heavy weapons. Ulli saw no more corrupted Knights, for which he dared to be grateful.

Above the Space Wolves now was nothing save for a long snowy climb up to the very peak of Sacred Mountain, a gnarled spear of rock pierced with black caves. When the pack reached that peak, there would be nowhere left to climb.

Frith trudged alongside the pack as they moved. He was slow, but his weight was a fraction of a Space Marine’s and he did not have to watch his footing so carefully in the snow.

‘I should not look upon it,’ said Frith, pointing up at the peak. ‘It is a sacred place. Only those who pilot their own Knight may make this journey. We are unworthy.’

‘Speak for yourself,’ growled Tanngjost.

‘What is in there?’ asked Aesor.

‘In there?’ said Frith.

‘This is more than just a mountain. It might be the tallest on this world

but the Knight Houses are not cowering savages to bow before a mere mountain. I have heard tell the lower reaches were opened up, and there was found the means to summon us to Alaric Prime, but the peak is a mystery.'

'We keep it to ourselves.'

Aesor paused in his climb and turned to Frith, fixing the retainer with a look that Frith couldn't return. 'We could leave you,' said Aesor, 'if you would rather keep it to yourself.'

Frith squirmed for a moment, but Aesor did not have the air of someone who let such things slide. 'It is said that the Omnissiah put his greatest secrets in the peak,' said Frith. 'He walked here before men did. And when the Knightly Houses came, He left them ninety tablets of pure carbon carved with the admonishment never to tread upon the peak. When we are worthy, when we can hear the Omnissiah's truths and not corrupt or abuse them, then the peak of the mountain will open up to us. That is why our noblest sons make this journey and halt at the threshold, to show the Omnissiah they still hold true to his commandment.'

'And now there will be greenskin filth running all over this place,' said Fejor, who was listening in from his place in the lead a few paces ahead.

'I cannot think of it,' said Frith, 'I must not.' Ulli noticed the labour of his breath and remembered that while a Space Wolf did not care about altitude, an unaugmented human would suffer as the air got thinner. Without rest Frith would probably die before the sun rose the next morning, and he would not get any rest.

'I smell smoke,' said Fejor. Aesor held out a hand and the pack halted. They were in the lower reaches of the long snowy ascent, a trudge of perhaps two hours up to the rocky spike of the summit. Ulli followed Fejor's gaze and saw a smudge of grey against the ice-blue sky.

'It's the ork aircraft,' said Tanngjost. 'The one Sigrund shot down. Our greenskin pilot made friends with the side of this mountain.'

'Take a moment to think,' said Aesor. He kneeled in the snow and ran his hand through it, picking up a handful. 'This is fresh snowfall, on top of old. See up ahead. Near the peak? The snow is cracked where the slope has shifted. It won't come down with our movement but it wouldn't take a lot more.'

'An avalanche,' said Tanngjost. 'Wouldn't mind dropping half the

mountain on a few orks.'

'There,' said Aesor, pointing to the side of the pack's path, where a dip in the slope formed a snow-choked valley. 'The orks are many but they are slow and move at different speeds. They will gather there before striking out for the peak. And above them is an avalanche begging to be set off.'

'Set off by us,' said Fejor. 'That ork death trap never dropped its bombs. If they didn't go off on impact then they'll still be there.'

'A fitting tribute to Brother Starkad it would be,' said Tanngjost, 'if we could set off a few more explosions in his name.'

Starkad's death flashed in Ulli's mind. He did not dwell on the deaths of brothers, setting those thoughts aside to be unravelled at the mourning rituals back at the Fang where the fallen were remembered. But the sight of Starkad's body disappearing down the greenskin's gullet, the alien's growl of satisfaction at the taste of a Space Wolf's flesh, those came to Ulli's mind unbidden.

'We have to take out their leader,' said Ulli. 'If that thing lives, it'll bring its warpcraft to the battle and the Imperial Knights will become weapons in its hands.'

'Leave that to me,' said Aesor. 'Fejor speaks true. Between Sacred Mountain and the greenskins we have everything we need. We will not make our last stand on this peak, brother. The greenskins will be making theirs.'

FOUR

The pilot's body was a tangle of skin and flesh, torn open first by gunfire and then by the impact that pancaked the fighter craft's nose back into the fuselage. Smoke was coming from one of the engines that had been torn clear of the main body and burst into flames. The snow was stained a dirty grey by the spill of fuel and oil.

'How can they get anything like this to fly?' asked Tanngjost, peering into the wreck's innards. 'It's just flotsam and junk.'

'The greenskins believe it will fly,' replied Ulli. 'Maybe that's enough.'

Fejor wrenched a sheet of steel away from the hull, revealing the bomb load crushed into the fuselage. 'A couple look intact,' he said. 'Tanngjost, your help, brother.'

Aesor and Ulli kept watch as the packmates unloaded the intact bombs. The bombs were as crudely made as the rest of the craft, just metal barrels with fins welded on and filled with explosives. It was a miracle they had not all detonated on impact.

'Do you see them?' asked Aesor.

All Ulli could see was the long white expanse of the slope, then the snarl of frozen rock that led down to the ruined bunker and eventually the distant blue glimmer of the lake. 'No,' he said, 'but they are there.'

'Greenskin scouts,' said Aesor, pointing towards a dark cleft in the rock where Ulli could just make out movement. 'Received wisdom states the ork is too stupid to scout ahead. That it simply charges headlong into anything put in its way. But you noted the cunning in the creature that leads them, Rune Priest. What you sensed, I now see with my own eyes.

When the assault on the bunker failed, it changed plans. Now it seeks to trap us and hunt us down, and leave us no hiding place. It has its scouts pick out the best routes up the mountain, so its forces will not become bottled up and congested.'

'But you do not have any admiration for it,' said Ulli.

'No, brother,' said Aesor, 'for it tries to match wits with a hunter of Fenris. Better for it that its greenskins charged blind and raging up at us, for then at least they would have the advantage of shock and fury. No, it has never hounded a quarry like us. It has no trick or tactic that I did not learn as a child of my tribe, let alone a warrior of the Space Wolves.'

'It left no gene-seed for us to take from our dead,' said Ulli. 'Not from Starkad or Saehrimnar.'

'You think that was deliberate?'

'I can conceive of few better ways to dispirit Space Marines than to kill our brothers in such a way that the flesh of Russ cannot be passed on.'

'A coincidence,' said Aesor. 'And crimes for which it will be punished. It should be grateful that we are visiting no more than death on it.'

'There is more going on in that creature's skull than you realise,' replied Ulli. 'The machine-virus was born of warpcraft, and wielded with deliberation and focus. Our enemy is no greenskin brute that rules by size and strength alone. That is why it must die, Aesor Dragon's Head.'

'And so all discussion of our foe will be rendered irrelevant,' said Aesor, 'for die it shall, and then there shall be nothing going on in its skull at all.'

Tanngjost trudged towards them from the wreck. 'There are two bombs that are still intact,' he said. 'Fejor's rigging a detonator. They were using a chemical mix as explosives, and bloody volatile too. If it wasn't so cold here it would go up if you breathed on it.'

'Thank Sacred Mountain, then,' said Aesor, 'for another weapon.'

Ulli thought of the cold, and looked around for Frith. He saw the man crouching out of the wind by the side of the wreck, holding the lapels of his uniform around his face. He was going to die, and Ulli thought about mentioning that fact to Aesor – but there was nothing the Space Wolves could do to prevent it, no shelter to provide for him or fuel to build a fire.

Ulli wondered if Sacred Mountain was an auspicious place to die, if it would be a failure in the eyes of the Omnissiah or a blessed end under His gaze. The Space Wolves did not cleave to the Imperial church or the many

variations of the Imperial creed, or to the worship of the Omnissiah, that facet of the Emperor as a god of knowledge and revelation. Ulli did not understand religion of that kind – he had read the runes from tombs of Fenrisian kings venerated as ancestors by the people of his home world, but he did not himself believe their ghosts came to lead the souls of fallen warriors to the afterlife as many tribes did. And the Emperor, while the greatest man who had ever lived and the father of the Space Marines in a literal and figurative sense, was not a god in his mind as the Imperial church would have it. Did it bring comfort or dread to imagine the Omnissiah glowering down to judge at the moment of death? Was there even room in Frith's frozen mind for matters so weighty?

It was not long before Fejor and Tanngjost had buried the bombs at the top of the fractured snow field, where the upper layer sat precariously on an older fall of icy snow. The detonation would bring it all down, sweeping into the narrow defiles that would serve as paths upwards for the greenskins. More of the orks were gathering now, the hardiest and fastest climbers, lurking behind ridges of stone ready to make the final push upwards. Behind them smoke rose from the engines of bikes the other orks were manhandling over the rough climb, ready to scream up the flat slope.

'The bombs need no help this time,' said Tanngjost, 'and our pack leader's frost blade is as keen as it ever will be. But alas, the heavy bolter was destroyed at the bunker and all I have is my darling Frejya. Rune Priest, would you?'

Tanngjost held out his bolter to Ulli. It was a heavily customised model, an older marque from some ancient armoury of the Fang. Its casing was inlaid with red and gold, marked with silver eagle's heads to mark notable kills the weapon had taken. Tanngjost had even had the weapon's name inscribed on it.

'It has been too long, Lady Frejya,' said Ulli. 'Last time I saw you, you were out of shells and Tanngjost was beating an eldar about the head with you.'

'She might not be refined,' said Tanngjost, 'but she's still my girl.'

'What does she wish of me?'

'She is jealous of Brother Fejor's range,' said Tanngjost. 'Not his bite, for sure, for she can blow a hole in any greenskin big enough to spit through. But she'd rather not have to wait until I can see the reds of their eyes.'

Ulli laid his hand on Frejya's casing. He could feel the years on the weapon, the countless alien and heretic lives taken by her, the joy that a Space Wolf took in the decimation of his enemies. Such a weapon took the runes well because half the work was already done – it was already infused with meaning and history, with a patina of age and bloodshed. Ulli created the rune in his mind, taken from the tomb of a long-dead Fenrisian prince who could shoot a snow hart through the throat from leagues away. Distance, accuracy and cold-heartedness were enwrapped in the symbol now being raised up in light and steel.

'Fine raiment,' said Ulli, 'for a fine lady.'

Gunfire was stuttering up from below. The orks weren't trying to hit anything, or even fire ranging shots. The noise and the fury was its own reward, raising the blood of the greenskins until they were in a raucous battle-frenzy, with war-cries echoing up from the throng. They were starting the climb up the slope, falling over one another in their eagerness to get to grips with the Space Wolves.

'Can you see their leader?' voxed Aesor.

'Not yet,' replied Fejor, who was crouched in the wreckage of the crashed aircraft, surveying the enemy through the scope of his sniper rifle.

'Not right,' said Aesor. 'Greenskins lead from the front.'

'This whole army could be swept away,' said Ulli, 'but if that creature survives, all our work here will be undone.'

'Is it among them?' asked Aesor.

Ulli knelt in the snow and put a hand to the ground. Though his psychic discipline was not the reading of minds or the perception of the warp, his psychic sense could still react when the touch of the warp was strong enough.

It was there. The dark and monstrous stink of warpcraft, filtered through the mass of hatred that each ork possessed in place of a mind. It pulsed through the rocks and the air. It stained the clear sky. Ulli felt filthy just to perceive it.

'It's here,' said Ulli.

'Much as I would love to try,' said Fejor, 'I doubt we can wade through this many greenskins to get to it.'

'Then as Russ hauled the Iron-Scale Kraken from the ocean to best it on land,' said Aesor, 'just as Hef Shattertusk lured forth the Beast of the

Black Fjord, so shall we bring the enemy to us.'

Above the Space Wolves' position was a promontory of rock, sprouting from the base of the rocky spindle that formed the mountain's peak. Aesor ran to it and stood on the edge, drawing his frost blade. Ulli could imagine that image in stained glass adorning a chapel, built by Emperor-fearing citizens to honour some act of deliverance from the Space Wolves. Very few of the Chapter were handsome, but Aesor was definitely among that few.

'Beast of Sacred Mountain!' Aesor bellowed. 'I know you can hear me! You have slain my brothers and I have slain yours, and who is either of us to leave such work undone?'

Aesor's words echoed up and down the mountain, as if Sacred Mountain itself were calling out the greenskin. A few whooping war-cries reached Ulli's ears from below.

'My frost blade has not drunk its fill!' continued Aesor. 'And there is space for another skull above the fire of the Great Hall! I think yours will fit perfectly, greenskin. And so I call you out! You will find no fiercer quarry on this planet, you will find no sword keener than mine to test your own! I call you out, and I know you hear me true!'

The orks howled and bellowed, and fired randomly up in the air. And then the din subsided.

Ulli had never seen greenskins cowed into obedience, not when they were chanting their war-cries and ready to spill blood. But these threw themselves face-down into the snow or scurried to the side as the horde parted.

The greenskin leader walked out from the throng. The mountain seemed to shake under its feet. It pointed up at Aesor and bellowed, the sound carrying on the wind like a roar from the warp itself.

'Do it!' yelled Aesor.

Fejor shouldered his rifle and jumped down from the wreckage, where the detonator had been rigged to the bomb load.

The ork grinned and the contraptions on its back glowed blue-white, spraying sparks and arcing into the ground. With a sound like a clap of sudden thunder, it vanished.

The orks around it were thrown aside by the shockwave. A blast of air tinged with the steely taste of ozone and blood hit Ulli, heavy with the

greasy feel of warpcraft.

'It exploded,' said Tanngjost.

'It teleported,' replied Ulli.

The air was torn apart. The ork appeared on the promontory a few paces from Aesor, bellowing as it brandished the massive cleaver in its fist.

Aesor saluted with his blade – a foolish gesture, but a feint. The ork lunged at him, bringing the cleaver down to cut the pack leader in two. Aesor dodged to the side and turned the cleaver with his frost blade – a mundane weapon would have been shattered but the kraken-tooth blade turned the cleaver aside and the weapon was driven into the rock beside Aesor's foot.

Aesor leapt into the ork, planting a foot on its knee to propel himself upwards. He grabbed one of the beast's fangs with his free hand and headbutted it in the bridge of the nose. Cartilage cracked and the ork reeled.

'Say the word,' voxed Fejor from the wreck.

'Stand by,' replied Ulli.

Aesor vaulted off the ork before it could tear him off and dash him against the rocks. The separation was enough for Tanngjost to draw a bead with Frejya and blast a volley of shots into the greenskin. Shots punched into the mass of gnarled green scar tissue, but only angered the creature more. It hauled the cannon off its back, the barrels cycling as it levelled the weapon at Tanngjost. The ork had patched the weapon back together using ill-matched spare parts and chunks of welded steel plating. There was no way it should have worked, but there had been no reason for the ork aircraft to fly either.

The cannon blazed. Tanngjost sprinted for the rocky base of the mountain spire as shots erupted around him, throwing columns of snow into the air.

Aesor lunged at the ork. His frost blade was aimed at the place where its heart should have been. But the ork was fast, far too fast for a creature of its size. It brought its cleaver down into the path of the blade and caught Aesor's arm in the crook of its elbow, levering Aesor to the ground. It let its cannon fall to the rock as it drew its fist back.

Ulli's axe was in his hand. He had not willed it – it was a reflex action, wired into his hindbrain. Psychic power was pooling into the weapon, illuminating the runes on its blade. They were runes from the ancient

peoples of Fenris, sigils of keenness, valour and ferocity, glowing bright against the dark steel.

The ork drove its fist into Aesor's chest. Ulli heard the ceramite buckling and the stink of warpcraft was suddenly sharp and real, the savage joy of the ork making its corruption flare up.

Ulli charged at the ork. This time he dropped at the last instant, knowing the ork had the cunning to anticipate the attack. The ork's cleaver swept over Ulli and he hacked the axe deep into the ork's thigh.

A force weapon, such as the rune axe, was not just a badge of a Rune Priest's rank. The psychic circuitry built into it was attuned to the wielder's mind, a conduit for the raw psychic power created by accident of birth and merciless training under the Rune Priests of the Fang. When that power flowed through the blade, it killed. It did not wound or sever – it sheared the enemy's soul away, annihilated his mind in the torrent of willpower.

Ulli let his mind flow through the axe now, the killing wave, the flood of mental fire, to shred the greenskin's mind from the inside.

A great black wall of hatred met his mind. The psychic force crashed against it like an ocean against a cliff. Ulli was thrown back, mentally and physically, hurled onto his back with his vision greying out and fireworks of shock bursting in his mind.

The mass of warp-born corruption had welled up and thrown him aside. The darkness inside the ork was more powerful than Ulli had realised. It was not an ork at all – it was a vessel for that darkness, brimming over with raw hatred that found form in the greenskin's savagery and lust for war. Ulli had faced daemons and witches, and sorcerers of the dark gods on the battlefield, but he had never felt such a magnitude of raw corruption.

'Fejor!' gasped Ulli into the vox, and his own voice sounded far away. 'Do it!'

'Thirty seconds!' came the reply.

Aesor was on his feet. The breastplate of his armour was crushed and split, and blood ran from his mouth. The ork lashed at him with its cleaver and Aesor parried, duelling with the creature blow for blow. They were both fast, both strong. The ork had the greater reach and power, but Aesor's frost blade was the finer weapon and he had the skill of a Space Marine and master swordsman. Ulli rolled onto his front and pulled

himself to his feet, picking up his axe from the ground – the weapon's blade was smouldering and the snow around it had melted away.

Aesor was forced back a step. The ork slashed at Aesor at waist height with enough power to cut the Space Wolf clean in two. Aesor jumped back and sliced in response, the frost blade cutting off a good chunk of armour on the ork's shoulder and revealing oozing red muscle beneath the gnarled skin.

Fejor was running to join Tanngjost by the spire. Ulli glanced behind him and gauged the distance to the wreck. He was a little too close, and scrambled across the slope out of the blast radius.

Frith crouched beside the wreck, head in his hands and shivering.

'Frith!' yelled Ulli. 'Move! Move!'

Frith didn't respond. Perhaps fear made him insensible to what was going on around him. Perhaps he knew full well what was happening, and chose not to flee.

The bomb exploded. The wreck, Frith, and a good portion of the mountainside vanished into a column of grey snow and flame. The ground seemed to liquefy under Ulli's feet and he pitched onto his face.

The greenskin stumbled back. Aesor leapt onto its chest, frost blade drawn back to spear it through the heart. The ork grabbed Aesor with one hand, its massive fist enclosing his waist, and slammed him into the rock head-first.

The side of the mountain shifted and slid downwards. Ulli couldn't even imagine how many tonnes of snow had been dislodged, now gathering speed as it rumbled towards the ork horde below. The greenskin mech turned at the sound to see the avalanche seething downwards.

Ulli took the chance. He sprinted for Aesor, who lay on the rock at the greenskin's feet. Ulli grabbed the collar of Aesor's armour and hauled him away towards cover.

The ork looked back around to see Aesor out of reach. Its face split into a grin, of all things, and it laughed – it laughed to see its quarry escape and its army seconds from destruction. Liquid corruption, oily and black, was slathered around its fangs and glinting in its eyes. It reached behind it and worked the controls of the contraption in its back.

The ork vanished again, leaving the taste of burning metal in its wake. Ulli thought it must appear ahead of him, at the base of the pinnacle,

cutting him and Aesor off from the cover of the mountain's caves. But instead, the flash and sound of the teleport came from below. The greenskin appeared in the midst of its army again, in the path of the avalanche that by now had taken the entire slope's worth of snow with it in one boiling mass.

Ulli was sure he could still hear the greenskin laughing as it activated another of the devices it had built into itself. A dome of crackling golden energy leapt up around it, flaring and spitting with arcs of electricity, encompassing a good third of the ork army.

It was a forcefield. The damn thing had a forcefield. Ulli cursed inwardly as he dragged the reeling Aesor towards Tanngjost and Fejor at the nearest cave entrance.

The ork horde vanished in the whiteout. Ulli waited at the entrance to watch, and sure enough, after a few moments of stillness the snow hissed and boiled away, revealing the perfect circle where the forcefield had protected the ork army from its fury. In the middle of hundreds of greenskins their leader stood bellowing orders and pointing up at the pinnacle.

Hundreds had died. Maybe thousands. But more than enough remained. Ulli spat in the snow and headed into Sacred Mountain, knowing the orks were following.

FIVE

Not even the Knightly Houses of Alaric Prime knew what lay inside the peak of Sacred Mountain, nor who had built it or why. The intelligence the Space Wolves had on the world suggested only that it was an archeotech site, full of technology from the Dark Age before the coming of the Emperor, when human innovation ran untempered and great wonders and terrors were made. A few legends suggested those who entered the peak never returned, which made it a less than ideal shelter for Pack Aesor, but one slightly more appealing than facing the orks in the open.

Inside the cave the pack found walls of smooth metallic stone cut into enormous blocks, dark and shot through with silver lines that suggested circuitry. Along the ceiling ran broad metal pipes that looped in and out of the stone. Panels of black crystal made up the floor and sections of the walls, still polished and reflective even after Throne knew how many centuries exposed to the elements. Flurries of snow blew in from outside and melted against the stone, for it was slightly warm to the touch, and Ulli could just feel a faint vibration as if from a power source running deep down in the mountain.

There was no sign of anyone having set foot in here. The cave led down into the body of the mountain, in a wide winding spiral lined with silver glyphs of some ancient tech-language. It was better shelter than nothing, but for real cover the pack would have to move further in and find a defensible location. They had time until then, but not much.

Fejor was kneeling over the stunned Aesor, trying to get his buckled breastplate off so the pack leader could be checked for injuries. Ulli leaned

against the wall, watching the snow swirling outside and listening to the orkish war-cries and bike engines.

'How many did we get?' asked Tanngjost.

'Half,' said Ulli. 'Maybe more. A good tally for us this day.'

'But you do not rejoice in it, Rune Priest.'

'No. The true enemy lives. With luck it will follow us up here and spare our brothers below a few more hours of whatever evil it can wreak among the Knights. That is scant recompense.'

'We gave it a bloody good fight,' said Tanngjost.

'That would be enough for an Imperial Guardsman with a lasgun and bayonet,' replied Ulli, 'to tell himself while he waits to die. It is not enough for a Space Marine. We cannot claim valour as victory, or endeavour, or a fight well fought. Only victory is victory to us, and we are not victorious.'

'Does a man have to be miserable to join the Rune Priests,' said Tanngjost, 'or is it just you?'

Ulli tried to raise a smile, but could not. He could only think of the *Aquila Ferox*, corrupted and lumbering at the greenskin's command, and how a whole legion of them might look advancing on the great companies of Ragnar Blackmane and Logan Grimnar.

'How dare you?' came a voice from behind Ulli.

Ulli turned to see Aesor standing behind him, his damaged breastplate hanging loose, one shoulder guard buckled and split. Aesor's face was pallid and his eyes sunken, as if he had not slept for days, and Ulli could feel the anger in his eyes – a hot, red tint, flickering behind the pack leader's mind.

'I do not understand, brother,' said Ulli.

'How dare you deny my combat against the enemy!' snapped Aesor. 'The greenskin was mine to fight! The kill was mine, and you denied it to me!'

'You were wounded,' said Ulli, keeping his voice level. He had not seen Aesor like this before, but somehow it was not a surprise – that proud predator had always been there, lurking behind Aesor's eyes, waiting to uncoil.

'I could have taken it!' retorted Aesor. 'I was hurt, but it was distracted. A few more seconds and I would have been on my feet, as I am now, and I would have taken its head!'

‘You would have died!’ replied Ulli, louder than he had intended.

‘Then I should have died!’ shouted Aesor. ‘I should have fallen in single combat with the beast, a glorious death that would crown the legacy of Aesor Dragon’s Head! Do you think I want to become old and lame like this crippled ancient here?’ Aesor jabbed a finger at Tanngjost. ‘That may be enough for you, but not for me. I was chosen for greatness. I was destined for glory. Now I have been denied it. How many times do we court a death like that, in single combat with a lord of xenoskind? A death deciding the fate of a whole world? Of such things are the sagas of my people written. I might never see it again. My saga might never be written. And that sin I leave at the feet of Ulli Iceclaw!’

‘That is why you fight?’ asked Ulli. ‘For glory, for a song to be sung of you when you die? What of your duty to the Emperor, to the citizens of His Imperium?’

‘A billion die every moment,’ snarled Aesor. ‘What good does it do me to die for billions of ignorant scum who will never know my name, and who will be dead the next day? Only glory remains. Only glory is worth dying for. That is what you robbed from me. I do not expect a Vulture Clan deviant to understand.’

Ulli did not reply. He could not. Aesor spat at Ulli’s feet and walked deeper into the cave, around the curve which led into Sacred Mountain.

‘Pack leader!’ shouted Tanngjost after him. ‘Brother Aesor!’

There was no reply except for Aesor’s footsteps, echoing as they faded away.

Tanngjost leaned against the cave entrance. ‘He had no right,’ he said.

‘He is the pack leader,’ said Ulli. ‘He has every right.’

‘But that does not mean you have to agree with him.’

‘It does not.’

‘Is what he said true?’ asked Fejor, still sitting where he had been working on Aesor’s armour.

‘That I am a lame old cur?’ said Tanngjost. ‘Alas, it is. If no enemy can finish the job, this old body will fall apart of its own accord soon enough.’

‘I meant about the Vultures.’

Tanngjost gave Fejor the kind of look a Wolf Priest might give a boisterous young Blood Claw, when that Blood Claw was bandying insults that others present might take too seriously. But Fejor showed no

contrition on his face. If he realised the seriousness of the question, he did not care.

'It is,' said Ulli.

'I did not know any Vulture Clan yet lived.'

'Hold your tongue, Fejor Redblade,' said Tanngjost. 'I might be old but I can knock the fleas out of your hide.'

'Peace, Tanngjost,' said Ulli. 'The truth holds no fear for me. The Wolf Priests descended on the Valley of the Burning Stones and exterminated my people. And rightly so, for they were deviant witches to the last person. Five were young and strong enough to be salvageable. Three were found corrupted and were abandoned in the snow to die. One did not survive his proving. The last one was me. I have come to terms with it, yet none will speak of it to me. Such an origin is ill-starred indeed and those brothers who know it doubtless assume I would be moved to violence to hear it mentioned. Aesor probably hoped I would strike out at him, so he would have reason to fight me.'

'You are my brother, Ulli Iceclaw,' said Tanngjost. 'No matter what clan whelped you. You are Vulture no longer, not since you returned from your Blooding a Space Wolf. Aesor might not say the same, but I do.'

'Fejor, set up here,' said Ulli. 'Find something to build a barricade we can defend. We can fight at this cave entrance, where the orks can only assault with a few at a time. There may be somewhere more defensible further in that we can fall back to.'

'I should find Aesor,' said Tanngjost. 'I fear for him. He was always proud, but not like this.'

'Then we are both headed inside,' said Ulli. 'Time to see what the Knights of Alaric Prime were forbidden to look upon.'

'If I smell greenskin,' said Fejor, 'I'll vox.'

Within the peak of Sacred Mountain was a single great machine, a vast and terrible construction around which ran a spiralling pathway. Shafts of massive pistons soared away in every direction, massive cogs meshed in the shadows and the ever-present thrum of power got louder the further in the Space Wolves went.

Everything about it was ancient. The very air smelled of centuries. Drips of condensation had made stubby stalagmites on the floor and here and

there the smooth grey stone was cracked where the mountain had shifted.

'Throne knows who built this,' said Tanngjost as he and Ulli emerged onto a long walkway crossing a depthless black gulf, crossed with cables and pipes. On the other side, hexagonal columns framed the entrance to a cave of crystalline datamedium, glittering with flickers of power and information.

'We built it,' said Ulli. 'Another mankind, who existed before the Emperor brought reason to our species. A mankind who had never looked into the gulf that delving too far could open up.'

Ulli paused halfway across the bridge. Something smelled off. It was something like the stink of warpcraft the ork mech had upon it, but far more subtle, cold where that had been hot, metallic where that had been bloody.

Ulli drew his bolt pistol and moved warily. Tanngjost followed, training Frejya across the crystalline cavern ahead.

At the threshold of the cavern, Ulli saw the huge metallic foot outstretched. He backed against one of the crystal pillars and glanced around, to see the whole massive steel form sprawled on the floor of the cavern. The winking datamedium lights picked out the gilding on its armour plates, and the glistening black oil that oozed from its joints. It was humanoid, three times the height of a Space Marine when it had stood, with massive-calibre guns mounted on the backs of its arms. On its back was an open hatch that led into a cramped one-man cockpit, from which spilled bundles of cables. Its armour plates were lacquered a deep red, emblazoned with the coat of arms of a Knightly House of Alaric Prime.

'It must be the *Dominus Vult*,' said Ulli.

'It looks like it crawled in here to die,' said Tanngjost, approaching the fallen Imperial Knight. He aimed Frejya into the cockpit as he checked inside. 'And I think we have made the acquaintance of Baron Vigilus Varlen.'

Inside the cockpit was a corpse, the face blackened by electrical burn. The eyes had burst and the sockets were charred pits, and the lips were drawn back over shattered teeth. The scorched remains of a red uniform clung to the chest, covered in tatters of gold brocade and a rack of medals that had melted into blobs of gold and silver. The body looked fused to the fittings of the cockpit, the hands indistinguishable from the twin control

yokes and the legs and lower body lost in the tangle of pedals and pipework.

The black fluid had pooled in the cockpit and fingers of it had reached up into the body, running like dark veins up the arms and neck. Up close Ulli could see the same fluid trickling from every seam and join in the Knight's body, oozing in questing fingers across the floor. Threads of it ran through the datamedium where it met the wall, and there the glittering lights had dimmed like stars blotted out by a dark moon moving across the sky.

'Corruption,' said Ulli grimly. 'Do not touch it, brother. It is not just a machine-curse the greenskin inflicted on this machine. It is a physical corruption too, born of the warp. I have not seen such a thing before, but I know the source by its smell. It would take an Iron Priest as well as me to exorcise it.'

Tanngjost knelt down and held a hand over the floor, tracing the shape of a swirl of spilled corruption. 'Here,' he said. 'A footprint. Power armour. I might not track as Starkad could but these eyes are not grown dim just yet. The trail goes this way.' Tanngjost followed the marks to a black smear on the wall. He stumbled here, and put a hand out to steady himself.

The temperature dropped several degrees at once. Ulli's grip tightened on his bolt pistol, and he spun at the sound of metal grinding on stone behind him. The faceplate of the *Dominus Vult* was shaped like the helm of archaic plate armour, with triangular eyeslits over a featureless shield-shaped plate. The eyes were glowing a dim blue, guttering as if a hot flame burned inside the Knight's head. That flame seemed to focus on Ulli, and he was certain the head moved imperceptibly, corrosion and warped metal grinding as the servos forced themselves back to life.

'Brother, beware!' said Ulli and turned back to Tanngjost. But Tanngjost was not there.

Where the datamedium cavern had been, now there was a rocky valley open to a sky that was overcast with grey-white cloud. Packs of carrion birds wheeled over the jet-black mountain peaks that bounded the far end of the valley. It was a dark and chill place where the sun only reached for an hour a day, choked with huts made from whale bones and the flayed skins of enemies unwise enough to raid the narrow mountain passes.

Beyond those peaks were cairns and watchtowers built to warn the

unwary of these mountains' tribes, scattered with the skulls of men who had traded with them, shown their captives mercy or tarried with one of their women. Of all the evils, conspiring with the mountain tribes to produce more offspring was the worst, for they carried with them a taint worse than madness, disease or dishonour.

Memory caught hooks into the back of Ulli's mind as he spotted the heap of corpses at the end of the valley. A battle had been fought here, swift and total, with some huts fired, others trampled down, and blood slick on the heaps of bones and trash on the valley floor, but the bodies had all been gathered up into that one heap. Hundreds of bodies were piled up there. The figures that stood around the heap were at once strange and familiar to Ulli, for the youth who had first seen them had not known what they were. They were taller than any man, wearing armour the same colour as the clouded sky, hung with pelts and bone charms. Some wore helmets, as if to ward off the stench of the valley's evil, others went bareheaded to reveal faces burned by decades of wind and lined with battle-scars.

Ulli the Space Wolf, however, knew who they were. They were Wolf Priests of the Fang, among them men he would encounter and recognise years later among his battle-brothers. Neither would acknowledge the connection, but those Wolf Priests knew full well that Ulli was the skinny, filth-streaked creature they had spared. It was a lifetime ago. It was not to be spoken of.

One priest threw a burning brand onto the pile. The bodies must have been doused with accelerant for they caught fire immediately. The bodies vanished in the flames, casting more light than the Valley of the Burning Stones had ever seen.

Everyone the young Ulli had ever known was in that ball of flame. The other youths spared by the Wolf Priests were ones he did not know, for the strongest of the valley's young were kept separate lest they join their powers and try to break from the clan's authority. Even here Ulli had been feared, because he had the strength to one day overthrow the Vulture elders and take the Valley of the Burning Stones for himself.

Ulli realised his arms were bound behind his back. He had been thrown into the remains of a burned hut, among the blackened bones of the valley's defenders, who had fallen to the Wolf Priests in a few exchanges of gunfire and force blades. Strung along the valley walls above him were

more scorched bones – not the recent battle-dead but the sacrifices the Vulture Clan had made to their gods, chained to the rocks and burned in a ritual that gave this valley its name.

The memories hurt. Ulli the Space Wolf's memory was crammed into the young Ulli Vulturekin's skull, sharing a space too small for it with the youth's terrified, angry, confused mind.

Two of the Wolf Priests approached Ulli, their armoured feet crunching through the bones. Though the youth did not understand their Fenrisian dialect, the Space Wolf did.

'We should take this one back to the Rune Priests,' said one. He had a long and battered face, like a length of driftwood.

'No,' said the other. He had a black beard streaked with grey. Ulli recognised the face of Vortigan Breakbone, a senior Wolf Priest who had often presided over the feasting in the Great Hall. 'This one will never be clean.'

Breakbone levelled a bolt pistol at Ulli's chest.

Cold hands grabbed the back of his neck.

'Rune Priest!' shouted Tanngjost. 'Brother Ulli!'

Ulli was shoved against a chill stone wall. His head bounced against the hard surface. The crystal chamber swam back into view and Vortigan Breakbone's gun barrel was replaced with Tanngjost's face, eyes intense, jaw set.

'I slipped,' gasped Ulli. 'I was weak, just for a moment. Forgive me, brother.'

'Your eyes rolled back and you staggered about. You were speaking a language I did not know.'

'The corruption here is strong. It can entangle more than machines.' Ulli put a hand to his chest unconsciously.

'What did you see?' asked Tanngjost.

'The past. Do you still have Aesor's trail?'

'Yes. He headed further in. There are many paths ahead but I think I can follow him. I would not do it alone.'

'Then we must move on. The greenskins outside will not wait for me to pull myself together. On, brother, on.'

SIX

The datamedium was the information core for an enormous factory, cramped and folded as if ready to unfurl into a vast foundry. Machinery of brass and stone rose in bewildering configurations, with the only light from trickles of glowing data that wound around their crystal pillars. Ulli could make out a huge brass oculus that might grind open for an army of war machines to march out of, huge turbine blades arranged in a spiral that speared down into the darkness, generators and forges that smelled as if they had lain cold for thousands of years.

Aesor's trail was barely perceptible, but drops of corruption led further into the tangle.

'What will this be when it awakens?' said Tanngjost as he trained Frejya's barrel across the shadows.

'The only ones who know that are those who built it,' replied Ulli. 'If it is a weapon and the greenskin corruption takes this place, we could lose this whole world.'

Ulli's vox chirped. 'They are at the threshold,' came Fejor's voice through a crackling vox-channel. 'I can stand my ground a moment but I must fall back.'

'Damnation,' said Tanngjost. 'They don't waste time.'

'We will be with you soon,' voxed Ulli. 'Faith, brother.'

'Take your time, Rune Priest,' came the reply. 'I can kill awhile at my leisure.'

Tanngjost turned to head back the way they had come, through the data cave and across the bridge.

A shifting darkness darted from nearby and hit Ulli hard in the side, knocking him off his feet. He threw out a hand to brace his fall but he found nothing and slithered off the edge of an engine block, clattering down through layers of machinery.

Ulli knew Aesor Dragon's Head by the smell of him, tainted now with a metallic impurity something like old blood.

Aesor landed on top of Ulli, hands around Ulli's throat. Ulli caught a glimpse of Aesor's teeth bared, discoloured black, the whites of the pack leader's eyes stained with dark threads like spilt ink. Ulli lifted a knee and levered Aesor off him, throwing him aside.

Ulli took stock of his environment. There was enough room to fight, but obstacles and impediments jutted out from every angle. The two Space Wolves had landed on an assembly line, with jointed brass arms and blocks of stone poised to stamp and press. Underfoot was a conveyor belt of steel segments.

'Brother Aesor, you have taken leave of your reason!' called Ulli. He tried to spot Aesor among the machinery but everything was tangled and confused, his mind ringing, the opaque blanket of corruption lying over his senses. 'I am a Space Wolf, a brother of the Fang, as you are! We have found corruption here and it is your enemy. We can fight it together.'

'Ulli Vulturekin dares speak of corruption?' came the reply. Ulli was only vaguely aware of its direction. 'You were steeped in it! You were born to it!'

Aesor stalked out of the shadows. He had his frost blade drawn, a trickle of blackness running down the kraken-tooth blade. Ulli got his first good look at what had happened to Aesor. The warp-born virus had found purchase in him, latching on to some impurity just as it had tried to latch on to Ulli's memories. Aesor's cheeks and eyes were sunken as if in death. The oily darkness oozed from the corner of his mouth and the joints of his armour. The stink on him was overpowering.

'This is not you,' said Ulli. 'Aesor is in there, fighting to be free. I can exorcise this from you, my brother. I can…'

'They killed you!' roared Aesor.

And though he tried to will it down, the old pain flared in Ulli's chest. The pain of those scars that had never completely healed, where the Wolf Priest's bolt pistol had blasted a burning hole in rib and lung.

They had executed him. They had shot Ulli Vulturekin dead and thrown his body on the back of a pack animal, to be dissected at the Fang so they could understand the debasement of the Vulture Clan.

But he had not been dead. Not quite. And the strength that kept him alive had marked him as strong enough to become a Space Wolf.

'Speak not of me,' said Ulli. 'The warp-virus clouds your mind. Think on yourself. Think on becoming pure. You are imprisoned, but you can be free. Aesor Dragon's Head is no enemy of the Fang! He is a hero who will tear apart the filth that infects him!'

'And I suppose,' replied Aesor, 'that if I do not, you will put down this diseased runt for the good of all?'

Ulli took out his rune axe. While a bolt pistol could kill with a good shot to the head, the rune axe gave him a better chance of an incapacitating or killing blow – but against a master swordsman like Aesor, it still wasn't a very good chance. 'I have my duty,' he said.

'You still do not understand, Vulture's cur,' said Aesor with a smile. 'I cannot die.'

Ulli had studied the ways of combat enough to know the lunge was coming. It was a thrust to the upper chest, a killer if it hit true. Aesor's frost blade lanced up at Ulli through the darkness. Ulli knocked it to the side and Aesor stepped inside his guard, driving a knee up into Ulli's side to knock him off guard, then hooking Ulli's left arm and throwing him over his shoulder. Ulli rolled as he hit the steel of the conveyor and Aesor followed with a downward thrust intended to skewer Ulli through the back. Ulli spun on his stomach, kicked Aesor's front leg out from under him and felt the frost blade shearing off a chunk of his shoulder guard as it missed by a hand's breadth.

The two were a pace apart again as they sprang to their feet, each shuddering with the tension as they guessed and second-guessed the move the other would make.

'I will not grow old and crippled like Tanngjost,' said Aesor, more corruption slithering from his mouth. A tear of it ran down the side of his neck and Ulli realised it must be running from the scar where Aesor's ear had been. 'I will not become bitter and unheard. This flesh cannot rot. There is nothing in my future save glory and a glorious death. This is what a Space Wolf is supposed to be.'

‘You have fallen,’ said Ulli. ‘The true Aesor can rise again.’

‘I am perfect,’ came the reply. ‘None can rise any higher.’

Ulli let his psychic sense probe the edges of Aesor’s mind. It was like touching a live electrical wire. Dangerous spurts of pain sought to drive him away as the jealous corruption built its mantle around Aesor’s soul. It was pride that had let it in – a Space Marine’s sin, pride and the anger at that pride being wounded. Aesor had been at his most vulnerable when he had come across the greenskin’s machine-virus, and it had used that moment of weakness to infect him as it had infected the *Aquila Ferox* and the *Dominus Vult*. As it had so nearly infected Ulli himself.

Aesor made the first strike again, a slashing arc at waist height. Ulli drove the frost blade off with the head of his axe but that was not the real kill-stroke. Aesor spun and brought the blade around in a figure of eight, the edge slicing down at Ulli’s shoulder. Ulli ducked to one side and Aesor closed, headbutting him in the bridge of the nose.

Ulli fell back a step. His psychic sense shattered and a thousand flecks of perception flickered in his mind’s eye. For a split second, he was insensible.

Ulli brought his free hand up to grab the frost blade he knew, by some hindbrain instinct, was aimed at his chest. He caught the blade as it slid in and felt the cold line of pain across his palm as the edge sliced through the ceramite of his gauntlet.

The blade was turned aside just enough to miss his primary heart and the real target, his spine, which if severed would leave him paralysed. The point nicked his heart and punctured one lung, passing out through the backpack of his armour.

Ulli gasped. The breath opened the wound up more and heat flooded into the void the cold had left, as blood filled the ruptured lung.

‘That is for the insult, Ulli Vulturekin,’ said Aesor. ‘For the glorious death you stole from me. But the Wolf Priests did not take the time to make sure you were dead. And they failed again when you awoke and they let you live. They should have cut your throat and burned your corpse. The task they failed on that day, I will finish on this.’

‘Only if you die afterwards,’ gasped Ulli. He was still on his feet but the cold numbness was spreading through him where his armour dispensed painkillers into his bloodstream. ‘Aesor Dragon’s Head will only do to a

brother what he will inflict on himself.'

Aesor paused. His hand went to the place where his ear had been.

'No,' he said. 'You are no brother. You are…'

The moment of indecision had been just long enough for Ulli to draw his bolt pistol. Before Aesor could react the barrel was up and Ulli blasted three rounds into Aesor's chest.

Aesor fell back. The breastplate of ceramite, buckled as it was, was more than enough to keep the shot from penetrating flesh and bone. But the impact threw Aesor off balance and the shock would addle even a Space Wolf's senses for several seconds.

Ulli threw himself shoulder-first into the tangle of machinery beside him. His weight snapped robotic arms and sent components pinging in all directions. He forged through, seeking a way off the conveyor and out of Aesor's reach. His upper body was numb and his arm would be slowed – he would be second best against Aesor in hand-to-hand combat at the best of times, but wounded he might as well lie down and die if he stayed to face him. He had to get away, to regroup, and seek out his brothers.

He forced his way through the knife-sharp edges of broken machinery, and felt his footing fall away. He pitched forward into darkness, his armoured body clattering off cogs and pistons as he fell. His head spun and he could not tell up from down until he landed, hard, on the pitted steel surface of a giant cold furnace.

Ulli Vulturekin wanted to lie there and wait for the pain to wash away. But Ulli Iceclaw was more than that witch-boy had been. He was a Space Wolf. Pain meant nothing save for the chance to overcome it. And both Aesor and the greenskins still threatened his brothers. He got to his feet, feeling the wound in his chest flare up with the movement.

Ulli had come to rest a long way down, with the thin light of the datamedium barely reaching his surroundings. His superior vision could just pick out the outlines of the huge cylindrical forge beneath him, its door yawning wide enough to admit a tank, with gigantic steel pipes and cables leading up into blackness.

Ulli willed a fragment of his psychic power into the rune axe he still clutched. The runes on its blade glowed blue-white and cast deep, long shadows around him. He could make out more of his surroundings, including one fuel pipe that led upwards in the direction of the

datamedium cave and the chasm. From that direction he could hear muted gunfire and yelling greenskins, as Fejor and Tanngjost fought their battle against the attacking orks. There was no sight or sound of Aesor.

Ulli ran through the patterns of pain across his body. He was battered and bruised from the day's fighting even without the wound Aesor had dealt him. His nose felt broken and he had to breathe through his mouth. The sword wound was deep enough not to hurt in the right way – not sharply, like torn skin and muscle should, but with the dull, cold throb of shock and severed nerves. His stomachs turned with it. Every augmentation and sleep-taught survival instinct fought to keep him functioning as a warrior.

He walked along the pipe, then climbed as it got steeper. He could feel the humming of Sacred Mountain running through the steel, rising and falling in a long, slow pattern like an immense heartbeat. And in the dark cold smell of stone and steel, he could detect the note of corruption that had come to this place with the *Dominus Vult*, seeping and growing.

Perhaps Sacred Mountain was strong enough, and would expel it like a body expelled sickness. Ulli hoped so. There was majesty to this place, even dormant. He understood, cradled in the mechanical darkness, why the Knightly Houses of Alaric Prime had looked on it with such awe. The first of them to explore Sacred Mountain, hundreds of generations ago, had looked on it and realised they were not yet ready to understand what it held, and ever since had stopped just short of the summit in recognition of something greater than themselves.

Huge stalactites of datamedium hung down, columns of jagged crystal fluttering with millions of lights. Even dormant, Sacred Mountain's machine-spirit was alive, running through billions of calculations every second. Perhaps it knew it was invaded, by greenskins without and the machine-virus within. Ulli clambered onto an adjacent bundle of wires to get a closer look, for the scent of the corruption was stronger here, but with a hint of ash and burned skin.

Fingers of blackness ran down the column, but instead of reaching further down, with every moment they split up and turned into dark blotches, indistinct and fading. Lights gathered there, flaring like distant fireworks, and the tendrils of the virus were turned back or dissolved into nothing.

'You fight back,' said Ulli as he watched. 'The Knights are not strong enough, but you are.'

He could feel the anguish of the virus as it was held back from the deepest cores of Sacred Mountain's data systems. It was a fury and a frustration, skittering at the back of his mind, the sound of a prisoner screaming dulled by the walls of his cell. It was not just a collection of machine-code and warp incantations – it was a living thing, drawn from the warp and mutilated by the greenskin mech until it served as a slave weapon. Ulli could taste the concoction of anger and pain, frustration and hatred, all boiling through every dark tendril.

It had almost got him. It had found a way in, and had it not been for Tanngjost, perhaps it would have taken Ulli's reason as it had Aesor's. The wound in his chest throbbed in response to the thought. He clambered upwards, towards where a glimmer of light punctured the shadows and the sounds of battle grew louder.

Ulli had reached the entrance to the datamedium cavern, leaving a trail of coagulated blood behind him as if he had dropped handfuls of rubies to mark his path. He hauled himself up onto level ground and leaned against the cave wall. The face of the *Dominus Vult* stared up at him. The fire behind its eyepieces was extinguished. Black rivulets bubbled over the edge of the open cockpit, and liquid corruption had almost immersed the scorched body welded inside.

'Fejor, Tanngjost,' said Ulli into the vox, aware that his voice was croaking and weak. 'Report, my brothers.'

'They attack!' came Tanngjost's voice in reply. 'Wave after wave! We have fallen back to the chasm. I thought you lost, Rune Priest, but we could use your axe with us!'

Ulli hurried through the cavern and across the bridge. At the far side, gunfire hammered and echoed across the mountain's interior. He could make out the distinct cough of Fejor's suppressed bolter rounds, and the chatter of Frejya fired at full-auto. And he knew well the sound of bolter shells hitting greenskin bodies.

Across the bridge, Fejor and Tanngjost had drawn wreckage of ruined ork bikes and fallen debris into a barricade. Both Space Wolves crouched there now, reloading their weapons between waves of orks. The corridor ahead of them, leading back up to the mountainside entrance, was so choked with ork bodies the floor was completely hidden and they lay three deep against the walls.

‘Brother Ulli!’ cried Tanngjost as Ulli approached. ‘Alas, you have missed the first of the killing. But there will be more than enough to make up for it. The greenskin must honour us greatly to give us so many targets for our firing range!’ His face fell. ‘You are wounded.’

‘You are not parade-ground-ready yourself,’ replied Ulli. Both Tanngjost and Fejor were covered in ork blood, and their armour was dented and scored from a dozen close calls. Their faces were bloody, some of it their own. ‘I have two working hands, both with trigger fingers. I can fight.’

‘It is your mind we need as much as your hands,’ replied Tanngjost.

‘What of the Pack Leader?’ asked Ulli. ‘He has lost his mind. He dealt me this blow and I could not pursue him.’

‘He vaulted our barricade and ran on,’ said Tanngjost. ‘There was darkness on him, and not just the corruption. What has happened to him?’

‘The same that happened to the *Dominus Vult* and the *Aquila Ferox*. It almost happened to me, brother.’

‘I always thought,’ said Fejor, ‘that if one of us was to fall, it would be me. No right mind takes such pleasure in killing as mine. Of all of our pack, it was Aesor I would have trusted to stay righteous, and to be the one to put me down when I fell.’ He broke a smile, the first time Ulli had seen him do it, and a very different man showed through for a moment. ‘But I do not think I have long to wait before the greenskin does that job for him.’

‘If Aesor brings this disease back to the Chapter,’ said Ulli, ‘we could lose much more than Alaric Prime.’

Greenskin war-cries echoed down from the mountainside, rising and falling rhythmically. Steel clashed on steel. Engines revved.

‘They’re coming again,’ said Tanngjost. He checked the load in his weapon. ‘Frejya is thirsty,’ he said. ‘We are running low on ammunition. This one will be settled with teeth and knives.’ He drew his pair of combat knives and held them out to Ulli. ‘My two little girls,’ he said. ‘When their mother tires of the fight, they will finish it.’

Ulli let the old runes form in his mind. A Fenrisian prince, a famed hunter and horseman, had been buried in a tomb inscribed with sigils of swiftness, prescience of combat, and the knowledge to strike once and for the kill. These runes appeared on the blade of one knife and glowed deep red. The other received the symbols of spite and revenge, for they came

from the monument to a queen of Fenris who, in ages past, had been quick to anger and to seek vengeance, and whose rule lasted a hundred years as a result.

Tanngjost's old face, with old spiral scars and fresh battle-wounds, was lit up by the light of the runes. They glittered in his eyes. 'Just what they needed,' he said.

Fejor rarely fought with his chainsword, always killing at long range when he had the option. But he had only a few stalker shells left, and so he handed his chainsword to Ulli for rune-striking. It was a compact marque, used on boarding missions and other occasions where close confines made a longer weapon a liability. It resembled a workman's tool more than a Space Marine's weapon of choice. Ulli gave it runes of raw power and strength, steadfastness and the ignorance of weakness, taken from the great necropolis of Fenrisian fortress-builders.

The roaring of engines signalled the approach of the greenskins. The din grew louder and mingled with the screaming of the orks, whipped up into a killing frenzy.

A single ork was a stupid and ill-disciplined creature. But orks, a tribe or army of them, when directed by one with willpower and cunning became a green tide that no defence could stand against. That was how they fought, wave after relentless wave of them, brutality incarnate. That was how their leader intended to grind down the last Space Wolves who stood against him on Sacred Mountain.

They did not care how many of their own they lost. There were always more orks.

The orks must have fought among themselves for the right to be the first in this wave. The winner was a scarred veteran, its lower jaw replaced with a slab of jagged metal, clinging to the handlebars of the smoke-belching bike beneath it. It had a massive industrial claw clamped over its left arm and waved it like a banner as it hurtled towards the barricade.

Two of Fejor's last few stalker shells knocked the greenskin off its bike, sending it somersaulting backwards off the saddle. The bike careened off the wall and skidded on its side into the barricade, throwing wreckage everywhere. The bike screeched past Ulli in a spray of sparks. A dozen orks charged in the biker's wake, wielding cleavers and hammers. Ulli blasted at them, unable to miss the wall of green flesh with a volley of

bolter shots. They fell and tumbled, but more followed, yelping with joy that they were the new front line.

Tanngjost jumped up onto the remains of the barricade. ‘My blades are far too sharp!’ he yelled. ‘Which of you will help dull their edge?’

And then the orks were on them. A howling press of bodies, of cleavers rising and falling, of teeth and claws raking at power armour. Ulli lashed out with his axe, feeling the shudder up his arm as a head came free of its shoulders. His backstroke cut through an arm.

Ulli had always been apart from his fellow Space Wolves. He was a Rune Priest, and they all held their own counsel, but even among them Ulli was the one who had been marked for extermination and had survived. It was the word of Ulrik the Slayer, the most respected Wolf Priest in the Chapter, that had saved him from being clubbed to death and thrown into the Fang’s incinerator. Though none of them spoke it out loud, many in the Chapter thought Ulrik had taken too great a risk and should have completed Ulli’s execution himself. And so Ulli had never been close to the heart of his Chapter, never the foremost reveller at the feasting, never held up as the image of a Space Wolf.

But he was still a Space Wolf, and deep within there was the spark of Leman Russ’s own fury that Ulli could not deny. It rarely came to the surface but it was there, scratching at the back of Ulli’s mind. It was the savage-born warrior, the berserker, the sheer joy of battle that had driven the Primarch to so many victories. It was at odds with the studious mind of the Rune Priest, and so Ulli had caged it, but it had never left him. And in the scrum of greenskin fury, he set it free.

He let the joy of battle kindle inside him as he brought his axe down on the head of the ork that lunged at him, splitting its skull down to the jawbone. It caught fire as he rammed his bolter into the mouth of another ork and blew out its throat. By the time two greenskins leapt onto him and tried to pin him to the ground, he was aflame with it.

Ulli howled with joy. It overcame the pain of the wound running through him. He reared up to his full height, throwing off the orks, letting his bolter fall on its strap and catching one by the neck. He dashed the ork’s brains out against the engine block of the fallen bike beside him. Hot blood spattered over his face and he revelled in the feeling like the most vicious Blood Claw, letting himself forget the iron discipline of his calling

and allowing the rage of a Fenrisian son to boil over.

Another ork fell to an elbow shattering the side of its face and the rune axe's blade carving up through its sternum. Ulli kicked down on another and stamped on its chest, grabbing the grip of his bolter and hammering three shots into it point blank.

Blood was thick and sticky underfoot. It misted in the air and ran down Ulli's face. It pooled in his eyes and he saw through it as if through a pane of red glass. In the back of his mind a wolf howled, exulting in the freedom it finally had to drive Ulli's fist and blade into the body of any ork that got within arm's length.

Through the melee, he glimpsed Tanngjost's twin blades puncturing torsos and eye sockets. He could hear, amid the orkish bellowing and snapping bones, the screeching of Fejor's chainblade against bone. But they felt far away, the combatants in three battles separated by an ocean of greenskin flesh. Ulli's battle was a cauldron of fury and blood, seething with broken bodies falling away from his axe.

The symbols on the blade glowed deep red now, drinking the fury in the air without Ulli having to will it. The weapon hungered in the hand of the wolf, coming alive with every spray of blood across its runes. Ulli rode the wave of it, and let the axe swing as if it were leading his hand and not the other way around.

He shouldered an ork against the fallen bike, and gloried in the breaking of its ribs. He kneed another in the jaw and whooped with joy as its fangs were driven up into the base of its brain.

The tide hammered home, body after body, corpse after corpse. Ulli lost sight of his packmates in the throng. There was nothing but the stink of torn bodies and the din of dying greenskins.

Ulli felt space open around him. He drew in a panting breath. His body finally told him how far he had pushed it. His throat was bubbling with blood from his torn lung, and the fires of pain ran up and down the channel punched through his chest. Every joint was wrenched and every muscle was pulled. The pain combined into a red veil that hung over his body, dulled by his augmentations and painkillers, heavy as stone.

The greenskins had stopped pressing forward. Their dead were waist-high around Ulli, and bodies tumbled off one another as he kicked himself free of them. He was slick with blood from head to toe.

The barricade and the wreck of the first ork's bike were buried in bodies. Blood was sprayed up the walls and dripped from the ceiling. Ulli looked around to see the passageway choked with greenskin corpses in both directions. A few groans and dying whimpers came from the bodies.

He could not see his battle-brothers. He called out their names, and his own voice was dull in his ears. There was no reply.

Ulli hauled greenskin bodies away, digging in the places he had seen his fellow Space Wolves last. He spotted a chainblade sticking up from the mass and hauled corpses aside to reveal Fejor Redblade, lying face down. Ulli turned him over and saw his breastplate had been carved open by an orkish cleaver or power claw, and the red ruin within had been torn by teeth and claws. Fejor's jaw was still clenched and set, for he had died denying the pain, fighting on without showing the enemy they had hurt him. His eyes were open. Ulli lifted Fejor off the ground and propped the body against the wall.

A sudden desperation seized Ulli. He dived into the bodies where Tanngjost had fought, where they were piled high and sliced apart by his twin blades. The wounds on the orkish bodies were still smouldering with the power of the runes Ulli had etched on Tanngjost's knives. Ulli's body complained as he dug in a frenzy, like a starving animal clawing through frozen earth.

Ulli's hand closed on ceramite – a gauntlet. He grabbed and pulled, and Tanngjost's body came free, heaved up through the broken limbs and sundered bodies. It was slick and dripping with ork blood.

Unlike Fejor, Tanngjost had died with his fury written across his face. His lips were drawn back, showing the elongated canines grown by every ageing Space Wolf. It could have been any one of a score of wounds that had finally killed him – cleaver wounds into his chest, one leg shattered and bent unnaturally, a deep cut to his scalp, punctures through his back and abdomen. Dried blood beaded, jewel-like, where he had bled and fought on.

Ulli held Tanngjost's body and shuddered. All the pain caught up to him at once. The red veil dissolved into a million points of pain spreading through his body, pooling in his joints and the wound in his chest, sparking through the back of his mind. For a moment it was overwhelming and Ulli felt he would pitch over into the mass of bodies, his augmented organs

finally failing and his mind shutting down, and that he would die alongside his brothers there in Sacred Mountain.

But the Fenrisian cold would not melt away. It demanded Ulli rise and stay alive, just as it had done during his Blooding, just as when his heart had refused to stop beating when he was executed with the rest of the Vulture Tribe. Ulli did not die but threw back his head and howled, and the sound echoed down to the heart of Sacred Mountain and back again.

The sound of mourning scoured away the red veil. When Ulli opened his eyes the pain was gone, replaced with a deep chill that filled him. His skin prickled with sensitivity and his throat was raw with the cold air.

He laid Tanngjost Seven Fingers alongside Fejor Redblade. The gene-seed organs of both Space Wolves were still intact. Ulli let himself take solace in that. Whatever happened, the flesh of Russ would be taken from their throats and implanted into a new Space Wolf. Their spirits would never truly die.

The orks had stopped. Though the three Space Wolves had killed many indeed, it was just a fraction of the army that had remained after the avalanche. But they had stopped, and it was not at all like the greenskin to hold off in their assault when an enemy still lived. They should still be pouring in to defile the bodies of the Space Wolves, and charge on into Sacred Mountain to loot and destroy.

The dullness of Ulli's senses was gone, and his ears pricked when he heard a familiar sound. It was the roar of engines, the engines of a Stormwolf gunship that could carry a squad of Space Wolves into the heart of battle.

He heard bolter fire and the howling of Fenrisian wolves loosed at the prey. He heard a hunting horn sounded.

Ulli clambered free of the bodies and ran for the entrance to Sacred Mountain. The air was heavy with the stench of newly shed blood, and the rankness of greenskin flesh. The floor was slick with blood and frost. The bodies ran right up to the entrance where Fejor and Tanngjost had begun the fight before falling back. Framed against the stark blue sky, Ulli saw another drop pod falling towards the mountain slope, in the grey livery of the Space Wolves, with its landing jets firing.

The pod bore the markings of Ragnar Blackmane, the Wolf Lord of his Great Company. Reinforcements from below had arrived, in force, eager

for revenge.

Ulli reached the entrance, and below him unfolded the whole scene.

The Space Wolves had landed scattered around the lower slopes, their drop pods deployed from a modified Thunderhawk gunship that circled above. They were fighting as they unbuckled their grav-harnesses and leapt from the pods. Grey Hunters formed firing lines mowing down the orks that had broken off their attack on the mountain to storm down the slopes towards the new threat. Blood Claws, with bright red and yellow markings on their armour, shrieked battle-cries and ran with chainswords drawn at the closest orks. A Dreadnought stomped free of its clamps and levelled its assault cannon at the greenskins.

Ulli spotted Lord Ragnar Blackmane himself leaping free of his grav-restraints and drawing his frost blade, which flashed like a bolt of lightning. Blackmane was accompanied by Ulrik, the eldest of the Wolf Priests, his face hidden by his wolf's skull helm, and a squad of Wolf Guard in Terminator armour hung with trophies and honours. Ulli's heart should have leapt to see his Wolf Lord come to bring destruction to the greenskins, but the deaths of his battle-brothers were too raw in his mind to let in any joy.

He heard a familiar howl, one that echoed around the peak even above the gunfire and war-cries from below. On the promontory stood Aesor Dragon's Head, his own frost blade raised, not in salute to Blackmane but in challenge. In the greenskin throng Ulli saw the ork leader stop in its charge forward and return the challenge, raising its cleaver high and bellowing a wordless response.

Aesor wanted his duel with the greenskin. He would die here fighting it, or defeat it and live on forever sustained by the corruption inside him. He could not lose.

Ulli knew the path the future would take if Aesor won. The Space Wolves would run to him and embrace him as a victorious brother, and they would all be exposed to that corruption – all those sons of Fenris who did not have the protection of a Rune Priest's psychic discipline. How many would fall to the corruption entering their minds through their greatest flaw? It would return to the Chapter, that corruption, perhaps to the Fang itself. And if the greenskin won the duel it would continue its campaign on Alaric Prime, escape the mountainside in the confusion of battle and take

its machine-curse to the Imperial Knights fighting below.

Whoever won that duel, the Space Wolves and this world would suffer for it. Both Aesor and the greenskin had to lose.

They both had to die.

Ulli could not fight them himself. He was a poor opponent for Aesor or the ork at the best of times and now he was exhausted and wounded. His fellow Space Wolves were too far away to intervene, and even if they could, would they kill Aesor before they were exposed? Ulli had seen what Aesor had become. Blackmane and the rest of the Great Company had not. No Space Wolf would stay his hand when the kill was necessary – except if the kill were of one of his own. Even Ragnar Blackmane might hesitate.

Ulli had to do it himself, and this time his rune axe would not help him. He leaned against the rock, almost robbed of all his strength by the weight of what he had to do.

The ork bounded up to the promontory and bellowed a war-cry. Aesor howled in reply. The ork vaulted onto the rocky spur and slashed at Aesor, who parried and stepped aside. The duel had begun. There was no more time.

Ulli drew in a breath of the cold mountain air, felt it run like freezing water through his ruined lungs, and ran back into Sacred Mountain.

SEVEN

The datamedium cavern had escaped the bloodshed. The orks had not got that far before Blackmane's assault drew them away. The *Dominus Vult* still lay in its pooling blackness. The charred eye sockets of the dead baron watched Ulli as he limped into the chamber. The sounds of battle were little more here than a dull crackle of distant gunfire.

Ulli knelt on the floor and laid his axe beside him. He tried to divine some reaction to his presence, some flicker of recognition against his psychic sense.

'You tried to take my soul,' he said quietly. 'You were nearly successful. That was when you found your way into my mind with perfidy and deceit. Now, I bid you enter.'

He felt nothing. A drop of blackness, like glistening tar, dripped from the Imperial Knight's faceplate onto the crystal floor.

'My brother saved me,' continued Ulli. 'But he lies dead and I am alone. We both know you can break me. And we both know you cannot turn down a mind like this to ravage. An Imperial psyker, a Rune Priest of Fenris. How many of your kind ever claim a trophy like me?'

There was a response to that. A low whisper, a laugh or a curse, not a sound but a rumbling at the base of Ulli's skull.

If the machine-curse reached the Chapter, it would enter their minds through their pride – through the sin of every Space Marine. And it was also the sin of the daemon.

The chamber began to melt away. Darkness ran down the walls. The floor shifted under Ulli, deepening into the trash-choked base of a deep ravine.

Skulls and long-withered bodies lay in the detritus and Ulli caught the familiar scent of carrion and smoke.

Sacred Mountain was gone, and Ulli was somewhere else.

There was a memory that Ulli kept locked away, using the mental techniques the Rune Priests had taught him. He had not forgotten it entirely, for it was much too important a part of him to abandon. But it was dangerous, and so he had placed it behind a barrier of mental steel, shut away as the keeper of a library might shut away a blasphemous work too valuable to burn.

It was a memory that at all times would create the heresy of doubt in Ulli's mind, except in those rarest cases when it would give him strength. Knowing the difference was a discipline he had learned in long sessions of meditation and sleep-doctrination, before the vigil of the Rune Priests who trained him.

The memory was one of the cold slab against his back, and the heat of the incinerator nearby. The sound of cracking bones and spitting fat in the flames. The sight, blurry and painful, of a stone ceiling above him, flickering orange.

He heard breathing beside him as the thrall, muscular and tanned deep bronze on his shirtless back, hauled another of the Vulture Clan dead into the incinerator.

Ulli had forced his eyes open all the way, and drawn in a weak, ragged breath in spite of the pain in his side. Bolter shell fragments, he would later learn, had lodged in his chest cavity and would need weeks of surgery to remove.

'Stop,' said a voice, deep and commanding. The thrall, one of the thousands who worked maintaining the Fang under the command of the Wolf Lords, halted and looked around uncertainly. 'My lord?' he asked.

'This one lives,' said the other voice. Ulli forced his head around and saw two Wolf Priests overseeing the disposal of the Vulture Clan bodies. One was the same who had shot him at the Valley of the Burning Stones, whose name he would later learn to be Vortigan Breakbone. The second wore a suit of polished black power armour with a wolf's-skull helm, the pale bone grinning down at Ulli as the second Wolf Priest regarded him.

Then, this Wolf Priest had been a vision from a nightmare, an

otherworldly power sent to judge the dead. Now Ulli knew him to be Ulrik the Slayer, the most senior Wolf Priest of his generation.

'Damnation,' spat Vortigan. 'This one's stubborn. Be warned, Brother Ulrik, he's a witch-child.' Vortigan drew his combat knife, as long as a sword, but a dagger in his hand.

Ulli Vulturekin had not fully understood their words, but he knew well enough their meaning. He also knew that it was no use reasoning with the man who had killed him once already.

He turned to the wolf-skull helm and forced himself to meet its eyes. Lenses of red were set into its sockets, reflecting the furnace fire. 'Stop,' Ulli gasped, hoping this Wolf Priest would understand enough of his tribe's dialect. 'You do not know what I can do.'

'Then tell me,' replied the wolf's skull in a version of Fenrisian that Ulli Vulturekin could just understand. 'But be quick. My brother here has made up his mind about killing you, and I cannot stay him for long.'

Ulli swallowed, a painful movement that reminded him how severe the wounds inside must be. And then he told Ulrik the Slayer just what Ulli Vulturekin was.

Ulli held on to the memory as the new world formed around him. This time it was not taken to a place from his own mind. He was here on the machine-curse's terms, and it had laid out for him a vision of Hel such as the fieriest Imperial preachers would fear to conjure up.

Crevasses brimming with corpses criss-crossed the blasted landscape, reaching to the foot of the wall that bounded a massive dark city. The bodies writhed and pulsed with decay, bursting like pustules in eruptions of bile and filth, and they screamed in the drizzle of corrosive sludge that fell from a purple-black sky. Faces melted away. Hands reached out, were stripped to bone, and dissolved to nothing.

The city's towers and cathedrals were vast organs, heaving out over the edge of their confinement like rolls of corpulent belly. Lengths of entrails slithered into the seething death, fanged mouths sucking up the decaying gore. Banners showing the symbols of the carrion insect and the gouged eye hung from the highest spurs of bone, where flocks of enormously bloated flies hung like dark clouds.

Daemons leapt and cackled on the edges of the crevasses, dragging

corpses out with hooked spears and throwing them onto the stones like landed fish to be gutted, cut up, and thrown back in. Some choice heads and organs were carried to lords of their kind who sat on palanquins, snatching up the finest and gulping them down. A few were taken by messenger-daemons to the gates of the city, to be passed on for the delectation of its rulers. Each daemon was a vision of decay, a corpse bloated and rotting but animated with a gleeful purpose, and each had a single yellow eye that bled malicious light.

'This is where you bring me?' called out Ulli, knowing the corruption could hear him. 'A world of daemons and decay? I am a Space Marine and a son of Fenris! I know no fear! And I saw worse than this before I left my crib. Do you seek to challenge me or to make me laugh?'

A tide rose through the rotting bodies and they swelled up into the air in a foetid column of flesh. A face formed in the mass, noseless, with three pits for eyes over a wide frog-like mouth. The whole thing was enormous, the size of a tall building.

'You lie, Ulli Vulturekin,' it said, though the voice was not truly sound but something conjured in Ulli's mind. 'You despair to know your mind will be lost in a place like this.'

'Not as much,' retorted Ulli, 'as I would despair to be a greenskin slave!'

The face creased with rage. The world the corruption had created flickered and shifted, as if in its anger it lost its concentration for a moment.

'What did it have to offer to bind you into service, daemon?' yelled Ulli. 'A million dead? A billion? A world for you to defile? And was it enough to make you kneel before the beast?'

The daemon's rage rained down as scalding blood. Its eye pits caught fire, flames consuming liquefying flesh. A Space Marine had pride, but the daemon – and the machine-curse was most definitely a daemon in information form – had rage. That was another of its sins, and it was inflamed by Ulli speaking of how the greenskin must have summoned it forth and bound it into service.

The world melted around Ulli. The sky ran down the horizon like wet paint. The walls sagged under their own weight, spilling the rancid offal of the city out onto the plain. Ulli planted his feet and willed stability around him, so he stood as an island in a churning sea.

The mass of corpses fell apart. Limbs rained down and vanished, drops of corruption in the swirl of bile that now made up the world. The noxious mass churned around Ulli and he dropped to one knee, driving the butt of his axe into the ground to steady himself.

'Now,' said Ulli through a grimace of concentration, 'I will show you a place of my own.'

In his mind's eye he created it, and around him it took shape. It was a place from his youth, the substance of another toxic memory he kept locked away even more closely than the first time he spoke with Ulrik the Slayer. A cave in the Valley of the Burning Stones, cut of sharp obsidian deep into the valley wall, stifling and hot. The heat came from the fire in the centre of the room, guttering with blackened bones.

Ulli had been here as a youth. He remembered most the smell of it – even before the enhancement of his senses the stench of the burning offerings had been dizzyingly intense. Ulli was kneeling in the cave just as he had been when the elders of the Vulture Clan had hauled him in there and gripped his shoulders to hold him still.

The elders were there now, shadowy figures half remembered. In the flames leaped a darkness – the darkness they had called forth with the ancient sorceries of his tribe. Even then, ignorant and afraid, Ulli had known the blasphemy of that sight, the long, spindly limbs forming from the air, the many eyes winking white in its substance, the spread of ragged wings behind it filling the cavern.

'They brought me here,' said Ulli, still tense with concentration. The memory was delicate and the machine-curse daemon was strong, and he could not let it unravel around him. 'They conjured it forth. The Spirit of the Burning Stones. One of your own kind. The daemon that enslaved the Vulture Tribe.'

Ulli stared into the eyes of the daemon forming in the fire. Drops of blackness spat and hissed in the fire. Trapped there in his memory was the machine-curse daemon, pinned in place by the force of Ulli's mind. Ulli had trained for this, for endless hours in the scriptoria and breaking halls of the Fang.

'No trick can stay me,' spat the daemon. 'This is my world, this place inside your head. I cannot be deceived, I who am deceit! I cannot be destroyed, I who am destruction!'

‘Every one of my people was given to the Spirit of the Burning Stones,’ continued Ulli. ‘Brought here and possessed by it, then spat back out again with their minds in ruins. But not me. I resisted it. I looked it in the eye and I cast it out of me. I was the strongest witch-child they had ever borne, and the Spirit could not take me.’ Ulli stood, his head reaching the ceiling of the cavern that had seemed so huge in his youth. ‘And they feared me! I was marked for death when the Wolf Priests came for them! Do you understand now what I can do, daemon? I can crush your kind with the power of my soul, and you are trapped in here with me! Do you despair? Do you know fear?’

‘Blasphemer!’ spat the daemon back at him. It writhed in the flame, trying to break free. Ulli felt it struggling in the back of his head, pounding the inside of his skull. ‘Wretch! Filth! The gods of the warp will tear–’

‘I am the god of this place!’ yelled Ulli, ‘You are the broken slave of a greenskin beast! And I command you to burn!’

The flames leapt up. The chamber was full of fire. The obsidian walls and the Vulture Clan elders bled away and all that remained was the flame, raging white and blue-hot.

The daemon screamed. The sound filled Ulli’s skull. It lost any shape, and with it any resemblance to the daemon Ulli Vulturekin had defied beneath the Valley of the Burning Stones. The machine-curse daemon broke apart into the information of which it was composed. Scraps of cogitator code fluttered in the fire like burning insects.

Ulli took the whole world inside him, encompassed in the obsidian cavern, and crunched it into a single diamond-hard point of knowledge. In there was contained the daemon, compressed into white-hot agony. Aside from that there was a void inside him, a pure and endless space where the daemon would find no purchase.

Ulli let his senses reel out. He had the scent of his prey already and it did not take him long to follow the trail up out of Sacred Mountain and onto the slope. He followed the stink of the corruption, the sweat and chainblade oil of a Space Wolf – Aesor Dragon’s Head, still fighting his duel with the greenskin lord.

And Ulli could sense the greenskin itself, the reeking hulk of alien muscle, its machinery belching thick smoke. Ulli perceived the burning

red anger of the ork's mind and held on to it, drawing his consciousness closer, willing the connection to become stronger.

Ulli took the prison in which he had trapped the daemon, clutching it in a psychic fist. He drew it back and willed all the strength of his arm into that mental grip.

The strength Ulli called upon was what had caused Ulrik to spare his life. It was the same quality that had denied his possession by the Spirit of the Burning Stones – the raw strength that pooled in Ulli's mind, a reservoir of power that he so rarely had the chance to tap. Most uses would destroy him, burning out his brain or tearing a hole through to the warp. But now, with the daemon in his grasp, he could use every drop of it.

Ulli rammed the daemon into the ork's mind. The daemon poured screaming into the ork, clashing with the furnace of hatred within the alien. The daemon took on its shape as the machine-curse and, without room in the ork's skull, it was forced into the only place it could go: the machinery built into the ork's body, the generators and weaponry grafted onto its spine and the back of its ribcage.

Ulli did not see what happened, but he felt it. He felt the daemon, uncaged and furious, course through the ork's half-mechanical body. He felt the ork's body prised apart by the force of it, the bones splintering, the organs pulping, skin and muscle tearing. Ulli could feel its pain and he felt in himself that savage joy of battle again, that spark of hot Fenrisian fury.

EPILOGUE

Ulli heard later what happened outside on the mountain slope. The other Space Wolves battling there witnessed Aesor Dragon's Head duck a swipe of the greenskin's cleaver and charge shoulder-first into the alien's midriff. The ork wrapped its massive arms around Aesor and the two wrestled, Aesor forcing its jaw open with one hand while the ork tried to crush the ceramite of Aesor's damaged armour. None of those watching could guess who would win, and struggling with the mass of greenskins further down the slope there was nothing even Wolf Lord Blackmane could do to intervene.

The machinery built in to the greenskin's body glowed deep red, and the sizzling of its flesh added to the smoke. The ork howled, a terrible sound that shook the mountain's peak, and flames licked from its body. Black corruption spurted from the joints of the machinery, spattering foulness across the icy rocks.

Aesor fought back, but the death grip was around him. The ork didn't have Aesor's skill as a master swordsman, but it was stronger than any Space Marine. Aesor couldn't break out of the hold and as the flames grew they caught on his hair and the wolf's-tail talismans hanging from his armour.

Then, with a sound like thunder breaking around the peak, the ork's body exploded. The greenskin and Aesor Dragon's Head vanished in a burst of flame and debris, and burning darkness that cast across the snow like a rain of black blood.

The greenskin horde bellowed in rage and grief to see their lord, who to

them must have seemed invincible, destroyed in an instant. The Space Wolves echoed the sound as they howled in anger to see the death of the young and noble Aesor Dragon's Head.

It was the Space Wolves who used that anger the best. Ragnar Blackmane, who was fighting alongside the Dreadnought Karulf the Wizened, vaulted up onto the shoulder of the war machine and howled out his fury. The Space Wolves took up the call and leapt into the orks with renewed anger, vengeance adding strength to their arms. The orks were shocked and shattered, and fell back in ill-ordered mobs as Blackmane dived from Karulf's shoulder into the thick of them.

It was a few moments later that Ulli, exhausted, stumbled from the entrance to Sacred Mountain. He saw the blackened circle where Aesor and the greenskin had fought, and smelled the last wisps of the machine-curse daemon dissipating on the mountain wind. Ahead of him, down the slopes, the orks were in rout, fleeing from the Space Wolves and being chased down by the Blood Claws. Ulli held his axe out in front of him and used the last reserves of power inside him to will onto its blade the runes of hatred and rage, the purity of war, revenge and contempt.

The sun by then was low on the horizon, and the rocks around the peak cast long shadows. The burning runes made a pool of light around Ulli as he took up the hunter's howl. He let himself forget what he had done there on Sacred Mountain, the things he had seen, the memories he had dredged up, and replaced them with the hatred of the greenskin and everything it represented.

Ulli ran down the slope at the orks. His mind was full of nothing but the desire to destroy them. The Fenrisian joy of battle was all that mattered now, and it was with a great relief that he felt nothing else as he plunged into the fray.

An hour after the sun had set, the last ork was hunted down around the mountain peak and despatched by a Blood Claw's chainsword. Ulli heard the sound of it dying as he cleaned the blood off his axe in the snow heaped up by one of the Stormwolf gunships. Ulli took a handful of the snow and rubbed it across his face to wash the worst of the ork blood out of his eyes. It was thick and gelid in his hair, smeared across his armour, and its taste was like a mouthful of metal.

A shadow approached, cast by the moon hanging high in the clear sky. Wolf Lord Blackmane approached. He was no older than Ulli, for Ragnar Blackmane's rise to Wolf Lord had been faster than any in memory and the men of Fenris called him the Young King. His face was tanned and noble, the hair pulled back in a topknot of braids, and in spite of his youth his canines were already as prominent as those of a Long Fang.

'Brother Ulli Iceclaw,' said Ragnar. 'You fought well today. Before we reached you, and afterwards. The Knights of Alaric Prime and your brothers alike owe you much.'

'What victories we won here were not without their price,' replied Ulli. He scraped a gobbet of blood from his eye with his thumb. 'I cannot take solace in a battle well fought when of my brothers who came to this mountain, only I lived. I do not know whether to rejoice that I live, or mourn those who did not.'

'There will be a place for both,' said Lord Blackmane.

'How did you find us?' asked Ulli.

'I am not the one to answer that,' replied Blackmane. He pointed to a band of Blood Claws returning from the hunt. 'Brother! Come forth.'

A familiar figure walked out of the Blood Claws – this one was not a Blood Claw, but wore the pack markings of a Grey Hunter, with the eagle's wings badge of the sky hunter on one knee guard.

'Sigrund!' cried Ulli, and jumped to his feet to embrace the pilot of the *Skjaldi's Lament*. 'I thought you lost, my brother. I thought I saw you die.'

'Indeed you did,' said Sigrund. 'But the *Lament* did not let death take me all the way. She lodged in a crevasse halfway down. Her vox-booster still worked and the last thing she did before she died was tell Lord Blackmane here that my brothers needed help.' Sigrund had a broad face, always smiling, and hair shorn close to allow for the cranial jacks with which he interfaced with the controls of his gunship. His face fell a little as he looked up towards the peak. 'Did they die well?' he asked.

'They did,' said Ulli.

'And is what they say true of Aesor? I did not see it myself, but you were closer.'

'What do they say?' asked Ulli.

'That he died that glorious death we always fated for him.'

Ulli's eyes passed across the battlefield strewn with ork bodies, the dense

drift of snow at the bottom of the slope where hundreds more were buried by the avalanche. It passed across Lord Blackmane – and behind him, watching from a distance, the black armour and skull-helm of Ulrik the Slayer.

'It is true,' he said. 'The greenskin had harried us all the way up the mountain and slain Saehrimnar and Starkad, but in Aesor it met a foe it could not beat, and it knew it. It must have overloaded the machinery grafted to its body to destroy the both of them. An act of spite from the alien, but an act that proved Aesor was a greater warrior than any ork.'

'Then that is what will be inscribed upon his cairn!' said Blackmane, turning to the Blood Claws. 'And sung of in the Great Hall when we come to tell the tale of Aesor Dragon's Head! He struck fear into the alien too brutal to know fear!'

The Blood Claws cheered at his words, one brandishing the greenskin head he had taken as a trophy of the hunt. They were the last party to return – the force was embarking onto the gunships that had swept in as the second wave, to carry them back down the mountain to the lower slopes where the battle for Alaric Prime was being fought.

Ulli finished wiping the worst of the blood off his axe. The runes on it had grown dim now, but once he joined the main force below, they would have to glow bright again.

It would be good to fight down there. It would be good to let himself forget.

The battle lines had stayed fluid throughout the day. The orks had launched berserk charges from the landing sites of their crude landing craft, each time met by a counterattack from the squadrons of Imperial Knights who charged under the banners of Alaric Prime's great houses. The Space Wolves had struck hard and fast into the flanks of the orks, deployed by gunship and drop pod and whisked away when the harvest of dead greenskins was reaped. But there were more orks with new landing sites established by the hour, and whole tribes were gathering ready to charge towards the Imperial lines. They were testing the Knights and the Space Wolves, spending greenskin lives to see the war machines in battle. The real fight for Alaric Prime would come later, after these opening moves had yielded no victor. The real battle would be close and vicious, a fight at

which both greenskin and Space Wolf excelled.

The battle lines shifted as Blackmane watched through the port of the gunship. A wedge of orks, led by salvaged Imperial tanks and orkish war machines, was grinding across the battlefield in a pall of filthy smoke. Facing them was a phalanx of Imperial Knights, holding their ground in close order as they waited for the command to charge.

Watching the battle beside Ragnar was Ulrik the Slayer, wearing his wolf's-skull helm as he always did. It was his mark as a Wolf Priest, the barrier between him and the rest of his Chapter, a symbol of how he must remain apart from them as the Rune Priests did, for it was his duty to judge them.

'I had heard that Ulli Iceclaw was ill-starred,' said Ragnar Blackmane as he watched the battle unfolding. 'I do not listen to such rumours. They are foul and base things, not becoming of battle-brothers. But I am glad they will be dispelled now, when the rest of the Chapter learns of what he did on Sacred Mountain today.'

'It was always his burden,' replied Ulrik. He carried the only part of Aesor Dragon's Head the Space Wolves had recovered from the battlefield – the hilt of his shattered frost blade, the fat uncut emerald gleaming in the centre. 'And he was the only one who could throw it off.'

'Would that Aesor had lived also,' said Blackmane. 'There was no limit to how high he could have risen. He could have succeeded any one of the Wolf Lords, save perhaps Grimnar. But even the Old Wolf will not last forever, and it is men like Aesor who will vie for his post when he is gone. We have lost more than a Space Wolf in him, keen though we feel that loss. We have lost the hero of the Imperium he could have become.'

'He will serve on as an example of his heroism,' said Ulrik. 'Even in death, a Space Wolf fights on.'

'To think that Ulli alone should survive of all that pack,' continued Blackmane. 'I was certain that if any one of them were to return to us, it would be Aesor.'

The gemstone set into the broken frost blade's hilt appeared cracked. On closer inspection, however, it was riddled with dark threads, slowly squirming their way through the emerald. On the hilt, the black marks where Aesor's fingers had gripped the sword looked like scorches inflicted when the ork detonated itself – but they, too, were liquid darkness, as if

something had left a stain of living corruption there.

'I am not so surprised the Rune Priest is still among us,' replied Ulrik, glancing down at the blade. 'I know what Ulli Iceclaw can do.'

ICECLAW

BEN COUNTER

The bunker was small and dark, the only light coming from a fire that crackled quietly in a grate on the wall. Two Space Wolves stood near the roaring flames, one clad in storm-grey battleplate carved with eldritch runes, and the other the black of the Wolf Priests.

'So, Ulli Iceclaw,' said the Wolf Priest, 'I hear you gave a good day's battle. I wish I had witnessed it myself. The fight for Alaric Prime will demand many such days from all of us.'

'My thanks, Wolf Priest. But you did not call me forth to congratulate me. Ulrik the Slayer does not give his time to such small talk.'

Ulrik smiled, revealing sharp fangs.

'I do not. And you know why I must speak with you.'

'About Lord Ragnar,' said Ulli.

'You were at his side. You saw it all. It is my duty as senior Wolf Priest to examine the conduct of all Space Wolves, even the Wolf Lords – or Rune Priests like yourself.'

'Of course, Ulrik. And yet the consequences of what I witnessed do not sit easy with me.'

'I will deal with the consequences,' growled Ulrik. 'Think only of the truth.'

Ulli Iceclaw sighed heavily. Very well. The greenskins had come at us not just on the ground, but from the air…'

We held a ridge of ruins and shell craters. A whole tribe of greenskins was arrayed against us. Tens of thousands of them seethed towards us in waves, as if the foothills had become an ocean of greenskin flesh. The Cadians held our flank and fended them off with las-fire, and we did the same with

our bolters. And at the heart of our line stood Wolf Lord Ragnar Blackmane.

'Space Wolves! The ork is cunning and without number, but he is still an animal! He has but one tactic in this battle, to spend the lives of his fellow greenskins to find a weak point in our line! But he will not find it where the sons of Fenris hold their ground!'

All the warriors of Fenris around us cheered, and I too was caught up in the Young Wolf's fury.

'And you men of Cadia! They will not find it where you stand, either. For there walks the Scorched Knight!'

Dyros Kamata, the Scorched Knight. He alone had stood proud of the Knightly Houses' politicking and pledged himself and his war machine to the fight when the first orks landed. Ragnar Blackmane saw in Kamata a fellow hunter and asked that the Scorched Knight fight alongside him in person. Kamata spoke through his steed's vox-emitters.

'The greenskins thought they would find good hunting on Alaric Prime, Lord Blackmane. But now an Imperial Knight stands alongside Space Wolves and Guardsmen of Cadia, and none of us are used to being the prey!'

Ragnar grinned.

'For every Imperial loss, Baron Kamata, I will take ten orkish heads. Can you keep up with that?'

'*I have never turned down a hunter's wager yet, Blackmane*!'

There is much scorn I could pour on the Knightly Houses, for their politics slowed the response to the greenskin invasion and cost many lives. But they produced a warrior of the Scorched Knight's calibre, and so I cannot show them too much disdain. It was then that I received the vox-report from our Stormwolf wings in the air.

'Lord Blackmane,' I reported. 'Thunderfall Squadron is pursuing a wing of ork aircraft. It's a bombing run. We have accounted for half their number but they will still hit us hard.'

'Then the greenskin attacks were to keep us in place while they hit us from the air,' Ragnar replied. 'It passes for a plan by their standards. But it will not work. Space Wolves, Cadians – take cover!'

There were more aircraft than the orks should ever have been able to field on Alaric Prime. The greenskin technology was possessed of some kind of

mad genius that made those rusting crates airworthy. Dozens of bombers bore down on us. Hundreds of bombs fell.

They hit the Cadians. I could hear the men burning. They lost hundreds in moments. Good men, brave men. I saw Lord Ragnar silhouetted by the firestorm as the worst of it rained down. And then the vox-net opened up, and I heard the voice of the Scorched Knight.

'*Lord Blackmane, my power plant is ruptured. Plasma is leaking into the thorax and the hatch is jammed. It's not looking too good from where I'm sitting.'*

'Hold fast,' growled Ragnar. 'I shall be with you soon. My Blood Claws can make it. We will get you out of there.'

'*Everything around me is burning. My life is not worth the Space Wolves who will be lost if the plant goes critical. We had a fine hunt, Ragnar.'*

'Lord Blackmane does not abandon his brothers. Hold fast and survive. We will be there! Damn it, fetch me a jump pack!'

'*It was always going to end this way, Ragnar,'* said the baron. *'This Knight has served me well but she does make for a tempting target. I'm amazed I–'*

Static drowned his words and we could hear sirens blaring within the cockpit of the Scorched Knight.

'No!' screamed Ragnar as the Knight exploded.

When the smoke blew off the ridge, the destruction was terrible. Hundreds of Cadians had not reached shelter in time. They lay dead or dying in burning craters. But the most awful sight was the Scorched Knight. It still stood, but the upper half of its chest was a melted ruin. The cockpit was gone. Dyros Kamata was dead.

When I think back, I still cannot read what I saw on Lord Blackmane's face. It was as if his eyes were flecks of ice and his skin was of cold iron. For a moment there was just silence. Then he turned to me.

'Rune Priest, place the mark upon my blade. Frostfang hungers.'

'What rune should I strike, my lord?'

'Vengeance.'

'The greenskins are massing for another charge,' I warned him.

'Then be quick about it.'

It seemed I had placed a thousand runes on the weapons of my battle-brothers while we fought for that ridge. I pictured a symbol of chill hatred,

and I laid my hand on Frostfang's blade. The rune burned there in cold fire. I could feel the same rune burning across the heart of Lord Blackmane.

I could see the orks approaching, thousands of them in a green tide. In their midst was their warlord, a towering creature riding a tank festooned with gun turrets and blades. I could see its fangs bared as it grinned. I could see, through my psyker's eye, the alien's joy at the prospect of slaughtering Space Wolf and Cadian alike.

'Sons of Fenris!' bellowed Ragnar. 'The greenskin thinks we are defeated! He thinks we are weak! But all he has done is stoke in us the rage the whole galaxy has learned to fear! Ten ork heads are not enough for one Imperial corpse. I will not take ten! I will not take a hundred, nor a thousand. This rage will not be quelled until every greenskin on Alaric Prime is dead!'

I have seen the volcanoes that rise from the oceans of Fenris in the Season of Fire. I have witnessed storms that bring down mountains. But I have never witnessed such rage as burned inside Ragnar Blackmane then. And though I am a Rune Priest and must always strive to keep my soul in check, I felt it too. Blackmane's rage is no mere anger. It is a force that floods into every Space Wolf. I wanted nothing more than to leap into the fray and kill every ork I could see. Forgive me, that anger burned in me.

Ulrik looked thoughtful. His snarling wolf-helm, reputed to be that worn by Leman Russ himself, sat on the table beside him. He stroked it absent-mindedly as he spoke.

'But what then, Ulli? What of Blackmane?'

'The Great Wolf Grimnar was behind our lines, leading the battle alongside the Imperial commanders. I had access to the command vox and I heard his response…'

'Blackmane! I have reports of an air attack on your position. What is our situation?' The Great Wolf sounded tense.

'The wounds have done no more than bloody our claws, Great Wolf. I am giving the order to charge.'

'No, Blackmane. Your orders are to hold that ridge. If the orks break through the whole Imperial line could fall.'

‘The orks have taken our lives for too long. The time has come to slaughter them!’

‘Ragnar, hold your position! Ragnar Blackmane, in the name of Russ and the Allfather, your liege lord commands you to hold your position!’

The vox-channel went dead. I looked in Ragnar’s face and knew that our lord’s orders would go unheeded.

‘I go now to extract the price of our dead in greenskin flesh. Who is with me?’

He was answered by a chorus of howls and oaths.

‘Then charge, sons of Fenris! By fire and blade, by tooth and claw! Charge!’

Even as the Cadians were pulling their wounded from the rubble, we abandoned their side and joined Ragnar’s charge. Brother Einar’s Swiftclaws leapt into the saddles of their bikes and roared after him. The Skyclaws hurtled in his wake on their jump packs. Even the Grey Hunters and Long Fangs, whose rage should have been tempered by the discipline of a veteran, ran from cover to join the fight. And of course, I was amongst them.

‘It was the death of the Scorched Knight that spurred Blackmane’s anger?’ asked Ulrik.

‘So it seemed,’ replied Ulli. ‘But I am not certain.’

‘How so, Rune Priest?’

‘Whenever Lord Blackmane was near, I could feel that rage inside him, under the surface. It was quiet while he kept it caged, but it was always there. I wonder now if it needed much reason to be unleashed. When the Scorched Knight fell, was it a terrible enough blow that it could only be answered with such anger? Or did the rage itself simply use Kamata’s death as a trigger to take Ragnar over?’

‘But what of the battle that followed?’ prompted the Wolf Priest.

Ulli hesitated before answering, and when he did, his voice was dark.

‘It was slaughter…’

‘What vermin are these that stand before me? I am Ragnar Blackmane! I am the Young King of Fenris! What senseless animal thinks he can look upon me and live?’

The greenskins were without number and I could see no end of them. I told Blackmane so.

'Then cut them down until there are few enough to count!' he shouted. 'Stand by my side, Rune Priest, and should I die here, live on that the Chapter might know of what I did!'

He lashed out with his frost blade, hewing an ork in two.

'That one tasted sweet, but Frostfang is still thirsty!'

Another greenskin fell to his blade, then another.

'These aliens know our greatness, Ulli Iceclaw. See how they throw themselves on our blades!'

One large beast wielding a huge chain-toothed axe growled a challenge at the Young Wolf, who laughed in response.

'This one thinks he's clever. He's not so quick to charge in. He wants to find an opening. But Frostfang isn't my only weapon. These are the fangs and teeth of a Fenrisian!'

Ragnar leapt and drove Frostfang's whirring teeth through the haft of the ork's axe. It shattered and the alien roared in anger, throwing himself at the Wolf Lord.

'A blade through the gut is too good for you, greenskin. A broken neck is all you get!'

He took the beast in a headlock and snapped its neck with an audible crack. Behind him another, even larger, brute raised a crude sword, aimed for Ragnar's back.

'Behind you, Lord Ragnar!' I shouted as I fired a volley of bolt pistol rounds that turned the ork to mush. 'They're pressing in on all sides!'

Through the clamour of combat, I heard another sound, the rumbling of engines. I glanced around and saw an immense shape closing on us.

'It's the war machine. The warlord's heading right for us.'

Ragnar grinned. 'Ulli, Blood Claws, keep them off me. This one's mine.'

The warlord was one of the biggest of its kind I have ever seen. Only the strongest and most vicious orks ever get to lead a whole tribe to war.

Lord Ragnar vaulted onto the tank and ran at it as if there was nothing else he wanted in this galaxy but to kill that greenskin. It wielded a giant hammer. I was sure Ragnar would have to evade it or be crushed flat, but he caught the weapon on his chest and wrenched it out of the ork's hands.

Then Frostfang flashed, and those hands were sliced off. The warlord

stared down at the stumps of its wrists, and that moment of shock was the opening Ragnar needed for the kill. Frostfang sawed through the warlord's neck and its head came free of its shoulders. Ragnar held the head up high, so all the tribe could see what had become of their leader.

'*This* is the one you followed across the stars, to despoil this world? *This* is the lord who made you cower? Look at it now, greenskins, and know what you are. You are prey!'

'So,' said Ulli, 'Lord Ragnar had made good on his promise of revenge. Many orks lay dead and their leader was among the slain.

'But then I saw how much we had paid. Of Einar's Swiftclaw pack, half lay dead, dragged down off their bikes and butchered on the ground. As I watched a Grey Hunter, cut off from his pack, was surrounded, beaten down and torn apart. We had paid for this with Space Wolf lives. And there was worse to come.'

'Ragnar, we are surrounded,' I told him. 'The orks have flooded in behind us and cut us off from the ridge. The Cadians could not hold our flank, we have pushed forwards too far.'

'Then we fight on, Rune Priest.' His tone brooked no argument, but I could see the danger we were in.

'Even Ragnar Blackmane cannot kill them all.'

'Then we die well.'

'But what of the people of Alaric Prime?' I argued. 'What of all the dead from defeats that would have been victories, had we not died here? For revenge on this day, you have sacrificed our future. Half your Great Company stands here, surrounded by foes we cannot defeat. Was it worth throwing their lives away, to brandish one orkish head?'

Ulrik looked startled by this. 'You spoke thus to him?' he asked.

'I knew I had gone too far,' said Ulli, shaking his head. 'It was my duty to follow my Wolf Lord into the jaws of hell, not curse him as a headstrong fool. But I could see nothing then save the bodies of my brother Space Wolves trampled in the mud.'

'What did Blackmane say in reply?'

'Nothing…'

He fixed me with a stare that could freeze an ocean. But then the greenskins found heart again. I felt their anger rise to a crescendo, and they charged.

In the shadow of that war machine, I fought back to back with my Space Wolf brothers, and in moments my axe was heavy with gore. The ork bodies piled up into a rampart of the dead. But though we might each kill ten of them, a hundred, eventually they took one of ours.

I saw Brother Halfrad of Gundar's Grey Hunters pack, his head split open down to the collar by an ork's cleaver. The Blood Claws howled and counter-charged whenever they opened up enough space, but each time they fell back with one of their number wounded or dead.

I lost sight of Lord Ragnar, so dense was the press of orks around us. Then, above the gunfire and the cries of the wounded, I heard the sound of engines.

Three Stormwolf gunships, wearing the livery of the Great Wolf Logan Grimnar, swooped down from the sky. And leaning from the ramp I saw Grimnar himself, the Axe Morkai in his hand.

'Blackmane!' shouted the Great Wolf. 'I see once more the alpha wolf must drag the headstrong whelp out of trouble! Much as I would love for you to learn your lesson, I cannot let my brothers die out here surrounded. My Wolf Guard will cut a path for you back to our lines. I trust you can show enough sense at least to follow it!'

'The Great Wolf brought with him three packs of Wolf Guard, Grimnar's own personal troops in Terminator armour,' said Ulli, watching the flickering of the firelight. 'They were amongst the best warriors in our Chapter. Our ranks cheered as they leapt down from their gunships.'

'And did you cheer as well, Ulli Iceclaw?' asked Ulrik, curiosity in his voice. 'Were you as relieved as your battle-brothers?'

The Rune Priest sighed. 'I do not know, Wolf Priest. True, where we had faced death we now had a chance. But with the certainty of death removed, my thoughts had leave to go elsewhere, and I saw how troubled I was. Ragnar was my Wolf Lord, the Young King of Fenris. We idolised him. Already, my brothers and I had memorised his sagas and sought to emulate the skill and fury he showed in battle. But now, I saw something else in Ragnar Blackmane.'

‘You speak of Blackmane’s rage. The rage that had cost so many lives, and brought a whole Great Company so close to destruction.’

‘My brothers lay dead. The Imperial line was compromised. All that could have been avoided. Had we held our ground, we could have weathered whatever storm the orks threw at us. The cost would have been high, but we would have held. Imperial command had a plan to shatter the army of orks that faced us. Now whatever that plan was, it was in tatters, for we had not played our part. Instead we had followed a leader driven by headstrong anger, and many of us lay butchered in the mud because of it. This mighty lord of Fenris, in whom I had seen the very exemplar of our Chapter, now seemed to me no more than a berserker who would lead us all to a fruitless death.’

‘I have served as Wolf Priest for many years, Ulli. Since before you were ever made a Space Wolf. And in that time my purpose has been to minister to the spiritual needs of my brethren, to watch for the sins of the mind that might lead them down a wayward path. And of those sins, one of the gravest is doubt. What you saw in Blackmane’s conduct planted that doubt in you. That is what I must fight, just as you fought the greenskins.’

Ulli struggled for a moment to find the words. ‘But how can I forget the sight of my battle-brothers torn apart by orkish hands? How can I ignore the despair I felt, to know that we would die there for nothing?’

‘Go on, Ulli Iceclaw,’ urged Ulrik gently. ‘Your tale does not end there.’

Ulli shook his head. ‘No. No it does not.’

Grimnar and his Wolf Guard landed beside us. With a roar of assault cannon and storm bolters, they forced back the first ranks of the orks. The Stormwolves circled overhead, strafing the orks or picking out their war machines with pinpoint fire. Then Grimnar held the Axe Morkai aloft so all could see it.

‘With me, sons of Fenris!’ the Great Wolf roared. ‘We will cut a bloody canyon through this greenskin flesh!’

‘Fight beside me, Ulli!’ laughed Ragnar. ‘The rune you placed on my blade still burns bright. It will take plenty more ork blood to douse that fire.’

And so I fought. I had lost count of the orks I had killed, though they numbered a pittance compared to Blackmane’s tally. We forged through

the ork ranks, following the bloody wake of Grimnar and the Wolf Guard.

Even as the greenskins reeled, I saw one of the Wolf Guard fall. He was pulled down by a mass of orks who used crude cutting torches to carve his armour apart. One of our finest, lost to the Chapter because Ragnar Blackmane had given in to his rage.

We were within sight of the Imperial line. The Cadians had suffered badly and their fortifications were aflame, but they were still manned. The remains of the Scorched Knight still burned. We were close. I let the hope kindle in my hearts that we would survive this. But this battle was not over.

A great shadow passed over us. I looked up to see an enormous war machine flying above us in a mockery of logic. From its hull hung hundreds of gibbets, each containing an Imperial Guard prisoner, stripped of his wargear, bleeding and left there to die for the amusement of the orks. Its gun turrets blazed and our Stormwolves had to back away or be blasted from the sky.

'What you saw was called the Skygouger,' said Ulrik. 'It had led attacks on Imperial positions since the beginning of the war for Alaric Prime. Already it had gained a reputation like death itself, for wherever it went it left just corpses. Imperial command had tried to track it, but some xenos technology made it invisible to our augurs. It was only seen when the orks wished to inflict punishment on Imperial forces, and they summoned it to punish the Space Wolves.'

'The Skygouger,' mused Ulli. 'So that is what they called it. To us it seemed a final insult. That orks can even build something that flies is obscene enough. That it should intercept us just when our line was within sight – that seemed calculated to drain us of hope. Perhaps the timing was deliberate. Perhaps the orks wanted us to know hope, and then have it snatched away, so we would be weakened in the final moments by despair.'

'But Space Marines do not know despair,' said Ulrik.

'No, Wolf Priest. We do not. But the orks were going to try their best to make us know it…'

Their assault forces launched from the Skygouger in their dozens. They were jump pack troops in black-painted armour. Where most greenskins

fought with wildness and savagery, these were disciplined and ruthless. They fell upon our Grey Hunters and Blood Claws, avoiding the guns and blades of Grimnar's Wolf Guard.

Cannons on the Skygouger rained fire, forcing our formation apart so the greenskin assault could isolate and butcher us. I saw the Great Wolf surrounded by seven or eight of them, keeping them at bay with great swings of the Axe Morkai. The rest of the orks took heart from the Skygouger's appearance and they massed once more, ready to swarm and finish us off.

'No!' shouted Ragnar. 'Not now, not when we are so close! It will not end this way, my brothers!' He gestured to a nearby Space Wolf. 'You, Skyclaw. You are wounded. Can you fight?'

The young warrior shook his head. His right arm had been crushed and though I knew that he would fight on with his teeth if needs be, the day's battle was over for him.

'Then give me your jump pack,' growled Ragnar.

'Lord Blackmane, what are you doing?' I asked.

'If I am to fall here it will not be in the mud, on my knees. It will be taking the fight to the enemy, as a Space Wolf should!'

'You will die,' I told him.

'Not so, for I will not be alone. There lies another fallen brother. He will not fight any more, but his wargear can still serve. Take his jump pack and follow me. The rune on my blade has grown dull and I have need of a Rune Priest. Your Wolf Lord has spoken, Ulli Iceclaw.'

I buckled on the jump pack. I knew what insanity this was, but my Wolf Lord *had* spoken.

'Was that the only reason you followed him?' asked Ulrik.

Ulli considered the question. 'In truth, Wolf Priest? I cannot say.'

The Skygouger had drifted low to drop off its troops, low enough for a bound of the jump pack to reach it. Ragnar leapt before me. I barely made it onto the war machine. The hull of the Skygouger was crawling with ork drop troops massing for the next wave. Ragnar dived into them, full of the fury that had caused him to abandon our lines.

I felt, kindling in my heart again, that same fury. I had not thought it

possible, for I had seen the cost of such recklessness, but I could not deny it. My mind was full of the battle-brothers who had died that day – the Blood Claws and Grey Hunters slain as the orks surrounded us, the Wolf Guard who had followed Grimnar's rescue mission, all butchered by greenskin hands. And I wanted what Ragnar wanted. I wanted to kill them all.

He howled and it filled my heart with joy to hear it.

'What alien eyes are worthy to look on a Space Wolf?' I growled at an ork who approached with an axe in each hand. 'Look well, for it is the last thing you will see! This is my Rune Axe, an extension of this psyker's mind. I hear your kind can fight on with a severed limb. But how can you fight when I sever your soul?'

I brought the blade down and siphoned a portion of my power through it, obliterating the greenskin.

'That is the fate of all your kind,' I told its remains. 'To be turned to red mist and ash!'

'Well fought, Rune Priest! We must bring this metal beast down.'

Blackmane reached the prow of the Skygouger. He tore the canopy off the cockpit.

The ork pilot barely had time to show surprise before Frostfang took his head. I followed Lord Blackmane inside the hull. The stench was awful, of rotting meat and sweat. Gnawed bones and body parts were everywhere. The Skygouger had taken hundreds of Imperial Guard prisoners and this was where they had died. Stunted versions of the greenskins scurried away at our approach. Orks tried to bar our way but Blackmane was possessed with a rage, and so was I.

'It is an honour greater than you xenos filth deserve to die on Frostfang's blade!'

He gave it that honour regardless.

'We should let one of you live, to tell the other greenskin filth of what happens when you make war on the Space Wolves,' I laughed at my opponent. 'But not you.'

I hacked it down and turned to find another, but Ragnar had made short, bloody work of them.

'Press on, Rune Priest,' he ordered. 'We need to find something this hulk cannot fly without.'

But I did not see the shape in the shadows, looming up from the depths of the Skygouger's hold. It hit me before I could react.

It was an ork, one of their leaders by its size, perhaps even huger than the warlord Ragnar had slain. Around its neck hung a hundred dog tags torn from Guardsmen's necks. It had taken their medals, too, and wore them on its armoured chest in mockery of the brave men it had killed. On its head was a Cadian officer's cap, still stained with the blood of the man who had worn it. The ork's limbs were clad in black steel and each hand was a mechanical claw to tear and crush.

The greenskin howled, as if in mockery of the noble howls of our Chapter, and beckoned Ragnar forward. The Wolf Lord leapt.

Blackmane and the ork commander clashed, and they were matched in strength. In the confines of the Skygouger there was only room to wrestle. In the open, Ragnar's swordsmanship might have cut the ork to pieces and left him open for the killing blow. But here it was face to face, the claws seeking to grab and crush as the ork's bulk pinned Blackmane to the ground. My head swam and my body would not respond as I wished. I crawled closer.

'Ulli,' Ragnar roared, 'if this creature bests me, return to the Chapter. Tell them how I died.'

But this time, I did not obey. I placed my hand on the side of Ragnar's breastplate. I willed there a rune of defiance, of honour and fury, a symbol of the high kings of Fenris from an age remembered only by the stones. I dredged up every drop of will I had. My body was spent, but my mind was still a weapon. And as the claws crushed home, the rune flared bright.

The ork's claw bit into Ragnar's armour, and there was a great pulse of energy. The greenskin roared in agony and anger.

'Fenrisian guile beats xenos brawn,' growled the Wolf Lord. 'And Space Wolf steel beats everything!'

Frostfang pierced the greenskin's heart. I saw the light go out in its eyes. I felt the rage-filled fires of its life extinguished as it fell to the deck. Ragnar paused to help me to my feet, and rampaged on through the carrier.

The greenskins were dismayed to see their commander fall and they fled before us as Lord Blackmane tore engines and fuel lines apart. I felt the Skygouger lurch.

'Come, Rune Priest. It is time to leave,' said Ragnar.

As we leapt from the carrier and our jump packs slowed our descent, I watched the Skygouger falling in flames. It crashed into the heart of the orks.

I saw a thousand of them die in the storm of flame and wreckage that followed.

The orks fled from us. The Great Wolf led the way back to the Imperial lines, with Lord Ragnar fighting by his side. When we reached our positions on the ridge, I saw the Cadians rejoicing that the Skygouger had fallen and the orks had been so thoroughly beaten.

'But you did not rejoice, Ulli Iceclaw,' said Ulrik, looking intently at the Rune Priest. 'Though your battle-brothers cheered the deaths of so many greenskins, I see no joy in your face.'

'No, Wolf Priest. I thought only of my brothers who had fallen, and of how the rage of Ragnar Blackmane was scarcely less responsible for their deaths than the greenskins.'

'But you do not have the perspective of a Wolf Priest. You saw Ragnar's rage bring the Space Wolves to the edge of defeat. But what did you see when Ragnar boarded the Skygouger? You felt that same rage then, and you saw what it did to the enemy. Do you think anyone else could have brought down the Skygouger? It was Ragnar's rage that made it possible. That anger cost us many lives, but it also brought us a victory where nothing else could have.'

Ulli considered this. 'Then it is no surprise for you to hear of what his rage can do.'

Ulrik shook his head slowly. 'It is not. Long ago, we looked on the young Ragnar Blackmane, promoted to the Wolf Guard directly from the Blood Claws, an unheard-of feat. We knew what would happen if he ever rose to the position of Wolf Lord, of how many of our brothers would pay for his anger with their lives. But we also saw how many victories it would bring us, how many enemies would fall before it who would otherwise survive. And we decided the price of his recklessness was worth the victories it would bring us.'

There was a long silence broken only by the crackling of the fire.

'I see,' said Ulli at last. 'I have but one question for you, Ulrik, if I may.'

'Speak on, Rune Priest.'

‘You say the Wolf Priests made a decision on Ragnar’s fitness to serve as a Wolf Lord. But if the cost became too high, if the Chapter suffers too greatly from his rages... could that decision be reversed?’

Klaxons sounded from outside and Ulrik looked up.

‘The orks are charging again,’ he said. ‘Look fast, Rune Priest. We need all battle-brothers on the line.’

The question went unanswered. Ulli thought he might be glad of that.

Outside, Ulli watched Ragnar Blackmane as he addressed the warriors of his Great Company.

‘Sons of Fenris,’ the Young Wolf began. ‘The orks will not stop until this world is barren and despoiled. But when the smoke has cleared and the blood soaked into the earth, it is the Space Wolves who will be standing atop a mountain of orkish dead!’

He howled, and his Wolves howled with him.

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An extract from *Overfiend.*

And so they had his brother too.

Merentallas strained against his shackles. There was no point to his struggle. The ork bindings were as solid as they were crude. All he did was sink the metal into his flesh and come close to dislocating his shoulders, but the psychic agony of knowing that, in another system, Elisath had been taken by the ork warlord's flagship demanded expression. He could howl his desperation, or he could pull against his bonds. So he struggled. He struggled, in the painful twisting of his body, to push away the despair that closed around his mind.

He failed. The despair was as strong as the ork metal, as oppressive as the walls of the underground cave. With Elisath prisoner, the orks, whether they knew it or not, had taken a great step towards a terrible victory. The eldar's great fear was coming to pass. The humans had withdrawn from what they called the Octarius system, deciding to do nothing more than observe the conflict between the orks and the tyranids from a distance, hoping for mutual annihilation. They didn't understand. They didn't realise that the only possible outcome of that war was a strengthening of both species as they honed their rage and adaptability on each other.

For the moment, the tide of the war was with the tyranids. The orks were spilling out of Octarius, set upon conquering new systems. And so they had come to this one. There were strategic rationales for them to do so, but there was another reason too. He prayed that the orks were unaware of it. Only he and Elisath knew the full secret of what gift the orks could find here. It was the secret he had come to remove. He had seen the danger. The Saim-Hann had acted.

The cruiser Serpent's Strike *was faster and more manoeuvrable than anything the orks possessed. It came to the Lepidus system to scour it of the beasts. Instead, it fell to their numbers. The Overfiend's ships came at it relentlessly. Many died, but there were always more, and more, and more. The orks boarded at multiple points. They came straight for him. He and his kin fought hard. In the image of their ship, they killed many of the invaders. Like the cruiser, they could not kill enough. Merentallas could foresee the attacks, but there were too many, and they were too concerted, for advance knowledge to do any good. Barricaded on the bridge, cornered, deprived of the space to deploy with speed, the Saim-Hann of the* Serpent's Strike *made their last stand.*

The orks took the doors down with high explosives. Massive brutes in thick armour barrelled through the burning entrance. The eldar cut the first two down, but again there were more. And behind them, something worse. It registered upon the skein of time as a dark, nomadic tangle. Merentallas couldn't get a proper reading on it. He couldn't formulate a counter. Then the bridge filled with fire and shock, and it was all too late.

The orks had taken him. And now they had Elisath too.

The orks didn't fully understand the prizes they held. That was the only consolation. It was too small a glimmer to count as hope. It was only a matter of time before the orks discovered what they held. They had taken the moon. They were taking the planet. They would find the secret. It would already be affecting them.

And then these orks would shatter the galaxy.

The lighting in the chamber flashed brighter. The shadowed figure that had doomed him on the *Serpent's Strike* snarled something. The ork working the devices cackled with brutish delight. Merentallas caught a glimpse of energy arcing on the back of a hulking shape, and then felt the electric surge as a violent prickling of his flesh. The electrodes in the band

around his skull came to life, stabbing their energy into his brain. He writhed again, involuntarily this time. The pain was a spike driven from the back of his skull to his forehead as power was forced to flow *out*. It was the power that defined him. His very identity was being torn from him by savage technology, reducing him to an energy source.

Blinded by the pain, shocked into near unconsciousness, his awareness floated out onto the skein. He tried to think. He brushed along the tangled weave of moments to come. For all their interconnections and contingency, there was also a dreadful unity here, all those moments moving together to a single end, a cataract plunging to doom. And he could do nothing.

Except. He could see a possibility. It was a thin thread, easily broken by the vicissitudes of war and the ignorance of those upon whom it depended. But it was there, a potential course of events that might deny the orks the victory that they themselves could not consciously anticipate. Merentallas could not influence events. He could not change this potential into the actual. But if the players upon whom it depended played their parts as they should, then a moment would come when he would have a choice. It would be a poor choice, one evil or another. But it would be his to make. It would be an action, and one of the evils was lesser. The thought of bringing it about would have made him weep, if the machine that grasped him had allowed him that luxury.

The greater evils approached him. The mirage of hope faded. The two orks loomed over him, each the bringer of a different sort of pain. They grinned at him, and got to work.

The White Scars strike cruiser *Legnica* was in sight when the visions came for Ghazan again.

The figure of darkness and lightning, a brute mass of savagery and lethal cunning. The swirl of power, of reality bending, twisting, collapsing into a fury of energy. The figure hurling the nova rage through shattering worlds. Ghazan standing against the foe. The battlefield a confusion of up and down, a vortex of metal, of gears and pistons, of destruction given mechanical form and fate become a grinding clockwork. Ghazan launching his own attack. A war of storm against storm. Thunder speaking with the voice of destiny. Battles and worlds teetering in the balance.

The figure of darkness and lightning must be stopped.

The Stormseer blinked. The visions receded for the moment, waves pulling back before another crash. His surroundings clicked back into place. He was once again in the troop compartment of the Thunderhawk, looking out the viewing block as the *Legnica* drew nearer. He was the lone passenger.

The visions had left Ghazan alone during the bulk of the voyage, though it was their power that had impelled his journey in the first place. He had been headed to join the defence of the next system when the revelation had burst upon him. The White Scar had a destiny here, instead, on the moon of Lepidus Prime. The Sixth Brotherhood's frigate *Talskar Pride* had dropped out of the warp at the Lepidus Mandeville point, sending him by gunship to the Fifth Brotherhood's strike cruiser now closing in on the moon.

The Lepidus system was a small target for the greenskins. The uninformed might have thought it unworthy of the confrontation that was building within sight of its sun. Only Lepidus Prime and its moon were habitable. The rest of the planets were either gas giants or cold rocks shrouded by toxic gases. Human colonisation was so recent that the only permanent establishment was a large city on Lepidus Prime.

A small enough prize. Yet the orks had committed major resources to taking it. And the Imperium had responded with forces from three Chapters of Space Marines: the White Scars, the Raven Guard, and the Salamanders. The orks were spilling out of Octarius in numerous directions, but Lepidus was a near neighbour to Octarius, and in turn was the gateway to a series of densely populated Imperial systems. If it fell, the orks would have an easy resupply point, free of the tyranids, from which to mount further invasions. Lepidus was key to the spread of the ork empire, and key to ending that spread.

Ghazan knew that the hope, hatched in the grand war rooms where the Imperial Navy and the captains of the Adeptus Astartes plotted strategy, was that if the orks wanted Lepidus badly enough, and if they were hurt badly enough, then the Overfiend itself would attack the Imperial forces. This would give the Imperium the chance to end the greenskin menace in the subsector once and for all.

Ghazan held definite views about this hope. Though he had not spoken to

him yet, he suspected that so did Temur, the khan of the Fifth Brotherhood, tasked with taking back the moon alongside the 64th Regiment of the Mordian Iron Guard. Ghazan could believe in a strong blow being dealt against the Overfiend. He *did* believe in the necessity of preserving Lepidus. But the talk of ending the threat came from the mouths of admirals who had been removed so long from the front lines that they had become more politician than warrior. Did they imagine the orks and the tyranids would remain contained within the Octarius system indefinitely? Very likely they did. It was an illusion that allowed them to sleep at night, and so they chose to act as if it were a reality.

To be a Stormseer, a *zadyin arga*, meant having a much more firm hold on the hard edges of reality. That was true, he knew, for all Space Marine Librarians. He and the other brothers of his calling had an added responsibility, though. The zadyin arga were the guardians of the spirituality of the White Scars. Grasping the soul of the Chapter brought visions, and to parse those visions, to understand the path along which they dictated he must ride, it was necessary to view the undreamed world all the more clearly. It meant piercing the false visions that tried to disguise that world. Hopes and wishes and lies were the raw material of those illusions. So were names.

Octarius. The name was a lie, a veneer of Imperial nomenclature that had come into use at the very time that the Imperium had had to abandon the system entirely to its warring monsters. To call it *Octarius* was to attempt, by naming alone, to lay a claim where none was possible. But Ghazan remembered. The subjects of the Imperium had declared the planet Orrok home. Perhaps the names had come to echo their doom too closely, a reminder of the conquest by the orks. So now the system was *Octarius*, and there was rarely a mention of the colony that had been lost centuries before.

Such pretence was not helpful to Ghazan. It clouded the context in which his visions appeared. So he did his best to identify the bad faith that surrounded this mission. He focused on what he and his brothers were here to do, and interpreted the visions in terms of the bearing they might have on the mission, and not the web of hopes and political expediency in which the mission existed.

Such rigour also demanded he be honest with himself. He had to guard

against his own desire for a universe that was better than it was. Applying that honesty meant admitting that he had come to Lepidus for reasons that extended beyond the success of the mission. There were personal ones. His own destiny awaited him somewhere on the surface of that moon.

Unbidden, the question came: *Are you being honest?*

Yes. Yes, I am.

Your coming here is destined. There is no free will. You have no choice.

Choice. The word was a thorn, stabbing at his certainty. Duty was not a choice, and that was no cause for discomfort. But the means by which duty was performed, there was choice there. Strategy was all about choice, and the khan was facing difficult ones. Did Ghazan see himself as freed or bereft of the need to decide? Were his visions so definite in their meaning that his every important action, up to the moment of his death, was preordained?

He set the questions aside. They remained in the back of his mind, gnawing.

Through the viewing block, Ghazan could see the ship and the moon. The sense of imminence rose up, more powerful than ever. The beat of his hearts sped up even as his breathing slowed to a trance-induced somnolence. His mind's eye filled with the rage of the battlefield. He was swept up in a torrent of images. They were momentary fragments. Some were concrete: a ceramite gauntlet crushing a snarling green face to pulp, screaming humans squashed beneath monstrous treads. Others were abstract: the shape and sound of combat and loss, a synaesthesia of colour, angle and noise.

From the centre of the images came the prophecy. A figure appeared. Its shape was ill-defined, but bestial. It reached out for him, and in its hands were the naked energies of creation and destruction. His soul rushed to meet the enemy. They clashed in an exultation of war.

The visions ended. Ghazan blinked, steadying himself in the here-and-now once more. He was right to have come. Something was waiting for him on the moon. It was eager for his arrival.

He would make it regret that wish.

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