

THE BARAN WAR

PROLOGUE

WAAAGH! ARBUTTZ

Amongst the Orks, it is inevitable that from time to time a great and fearsome leader will arise to sweep aside all rivals and unite countless warring tribes under his brutal leadership. Arbuttz the Incredible was one such Ork who, in 914.M40, emerged from the wild and primitive worlds of the galaxy's south-western rim. Here, Ork battled Ork, just as they had done for centuries on a dozen worlds infested by Greenskins since an age no one could remember.

Arbuttz at first swept over his own world and others in the same system, sweeping aside rival warlords and taking their followers for his own. The Orks revelled in the uproar caused by this ambitious warlord and his ceaseless invasion of other tribal territories. For months tribe gleefully battled tribe, eagerly hurling themselves into the tumult of battle with the kind of abandon only Greenskins are capable of. With each new battle formed, Arbuttz proved his dominance anew, effortlessly defeating all comers.

Now the tide changed. Where once each new warlord had battled and resisted Arbuttz, now they each in turn fell in behind him, joining his warband and bringing with them their own greenskin tribe, keen and hungry for war. Ork battled Ork no more. Tribe after tribe flocked to the ascendant Arbuttz, until at last they formed a great unruly mass, barrelling along to the sound of a single monotonous chant.

Waaagh!

Waaagh!

Waaagh!

Now Arbuttz was unleashed upon the galaxy at large. In such an ancient and distant corner of the galaxy, Arbuttz was first forced to cross thousands of light years of wilderness, rampaging across one uninhabited planet after another, his boyz chasing and hunting any large predators or 'uge beasties they could find, desperate to get to the proper scrappin'. They would not have to wait long.

In the Zypher sub-sector, Arbuttz and his Waaagh! swept across several ancient worlds of the Eldar. Here survivors of the long-ago fallen race lived in their so-called Exodite communities, the last sorrowful remnants of the once great Eldar empire. As the greenskins poured across the system, the Eldar rode to war, mounted atop great beastly lizards, armed with weapons far beyond the technology available to the Orks and moving with a graceful ease that the lumbering greenskins simply could not hope to match. But for all this, Waaagh! Arbuttz was vast, and in its size unassailable, and the ancient Eldar were swept away in the few short months it took the Orks to cross the system.

Arbuttz and his boys marched on, and here, on the most distant boundary of the Imperium, the Orks crashed into a dozen worlds of man as violently as the largest and most unstoppable of waves might smash asunder the shore. Arbuttz's boys cut a bloody swathe through the Imperial defenders until finally running out of steam on the Imperial Deathworld of Gorang, where they were brought low fighting the indigenous life-forms as much as they were by the Imperial defenders. By the end of the fighting the entire Zypher sub-sector had be overrun and conquered by the Orks.



EAGLES & RAVENS

For almost 300 years this new Ork empire was left unmolested, until a campaign of re-conquest was finally begun in M41.204. The re-conquest was led by troops of the Marauders, Eagle Warriors, Raven Guard and Revilers Space Marine Chapters, supported by over two-dozen Imperial Guard regiments. In a long, hard fought campaign these troops battled to reclaim the planets lost to Warlord Arbuttz, until finally in M41.224 the Zypher sub-sector was declared free of the taint of alien infection.

But the Imperium pushed on. Not content merely with reclaiming those worlds lost to Arbuttz three centuries prior, the Imperial war machine raged across the dozens of other worlds which the Ork Waaagh! had claimed, conquering worlds never before touched by the boot of man. An Imperial Guard regiment was assigned to each of these planets and ordered to cleanse the planet of Ork infestation. Troops from the 127th Death Korps of Krieg regiment, commanded by General Himmel von Paulus, were assigned to cleanse a backwater planet named simply Baran. In return the Death Korps veterans were granted rights of settlement on the planet.

Baran was a wild and uncultivated planet, covered by dense forests, rolling steppes, and craggy mountain ranges. Little could these valiant frontiersmen have realised that the soil upon which they now stood was that same ancient soil onto which the brave Eldar Exodites had bled as Waaagh! Arbuttz stole their world from them...

The now Feral Ork tribes that inhabited Baran were quickly driven from the open steppe-lands by the initial Death Korp assault. The surviving Orks scattered and hid in the forests and mountainous areas of the planet, where they proved extremely difficult to eradicate. Lacking the huge numbers of troops needed to destroy the Orks by weight of numbers, von Paulus decided to contain the Ork threat instead, building a series of interconnected fortified positions to hem the Orks into their wilderness retreats. These fortified positions quickly grew into the first major Imperial settlements and cities on the planet.

With the Orks still a major threat, the colonists were under a state of constant siege on a dangerous frontier planet. New cities were built as a curious amalgam of military and civilian structures, where the Imperial Guard's trenches, bunkers and other defences were slowly pushed out to incredible distances so that whole cities could be built amidst them, civilian buildings replacing the old fortifications as these cities snaked outwards.

OLD ENEMIES, NEW BEGINNINGS

Over the course of the ensuing generations, these colonies grew, and although never populous, and under constant threat of Ork assault, Baran thrived. Once the colonies were large enough new Imperial Guard regiments were raised to replace the Death Korps veterans who had long since aged and died. These new recruits were to become the first and foremost of Baran's defenders – the Baran Siegemasters.

THE ELDAR EXODITES

During the Fall the degeneration of the Eldar did not go wholly without resistance. Some, the more far-sighted, began to openly criticise the laxity of their fellow citizens, and to warn against the effect of Chaos cults. These people were mostly ignored or else treated as narrow-minded fools and fanatics. Soon the general collapse of society convinced even the most resolute amongst them that there would be no end to the reign of death and depravity. Some decided to leave the Eldar worlds, and settle new planets free of the creeping corruption. They were the ones still untainted by the touch of Chaos, and by now they were few.

These Eldar are known as the Exodites. Of all the Eldar race they were uniquely far-sighted. Amongst a race naturally indulgent and hedonistic they were reviled as dour fanatics obsessed with misery and self-denial.

In an assortment of spacecraft the Exodites abandoned the Eldar homeworlds and upon the fringes of the galaxy the Exodites made new homes. The worlds they settled were savage and life was often hard for a people unused to physical work and self-denial.

When the final cataclysm erupted most of the Exodite worlds were far from the psychic epicentre and survived. The resultant psychic implosion wiped out the rest of the Eldar, but out on the fringes of the galaxy the Exodites were safe.

Since they were first settled the Exodite worlds have not changed a great deal. The Craftworld Eldar regard the Exodites as rustic and rather simple folk, vigorous and wild in a way that is quite unlike their own introverted societies. Craftworlders and Exodites travel within each other's realms, but their different mental outlook and way of life means that they have their own concerns.

Alongside them, the Raven Guard remained, though in precious few numbers, and concerned themselves mostly with hunting down those cunning Ork warlords believed to be in possession of Imperial technology stolen during the initial Waaagh! On one of Baran's moons, the black rock known as Coron, the Raven Guard established a fortress monastery from where little more than a hundred of their brethren could continue the struggle against remaining Ork elements. The men of Baran and the aloof Raven Guard shared little contact, though the Raven Guard watched their human charges closely, for they realised that such a harsh world as Baran would breed hardy stock – stock from which the Raven Guard might one day draw initiates fit for their own superhuman ranks.

For decades the Siegemasters and the Raven Guard stood guard over Baran and the handful of valuable nearby worlds required for the mining of metal ores, minerals and other precious resources. The Orks remained a threat, and from time to time claimed great successes of their own, though the resolute Siegemasters and the grimly determined Raven Guard time and again proved themselves equal to any threat. Equal, that is, to any threat the increasingly feral Orks could throw at them...



THE TALONS OF BIEL-TAN

The Craftworld of Biel-tan does not journey aimlessly as it glides through space. It does not wander as a lonely and frightened exile might, fleeing constantly from danger, finding itself ever battered, bullied and cast out. This is not the way of Biel-tan. Biel-tan is guardian and conqueror to its people, ceaselessly patrolling all those worlds that lie within the bounds of its ancient route, the same route it has ploughed ever since the Fall of the Eldar ten thousand years ago. This is the Kingdom of Biel-tan, or so they would have it known. Not an empire unto itself, but a great and powerful bastion of the larger Eldar Empire as the proud and warlike ruling Court of Biel-tan see it.

As it journeys silently through the void, Rangers still loyal to their former craftworld roam far ahead, scouting the way to those worlds which lie next upon Biel-tan's route. Alongside their craftworld, the warfleets of Biel-tan streak through the stars, overwhelming any resistance which might endanger or impede the gargantuan craftworld as it sails on inexorably.

Many worlds lie upon this ancient route – worlds populated by men, overrun by Orks, infested by crude and primitive usurpers or else barren, uninhabited and forgotten. But no matter their fate, to the Eldar of Biel-tan these are Eldar worlds once and former, present and future. In the eyes of Biel-tan, the young races who now populate the galaxy are not the natural successors some would claim them to be, springing up to fill the void left by an Empire which long ago betrayed, defeated and destroyed itself, but rather they are greedy and savage usurpers with no right to take these worlds from the Eldar. So it is that as Biel-tan soars effortlessly through the stars its talons fall hungrily upon the Eldar's foes, crushing their primitive colonies and dragging their filthy carcasses away from the beautiful, verdant worlds of the Eldar. No matter that

these societies have dwelled for centuries upon these worlds, no matter that the last flame of Eldar life on these worlds burned out millennia ago, no matter that many of these so-called usurpers have taken nothing which they did not find unused. None of this matters to the proud Eldar of Biel-tan. The mere presence of these young races brings only one outcome – war. War with the Swordwind of Biel-tan.

And so it was that as Biel-tan drew silently through the Zypher sub-sector after long centuries of absence, its scouts ranged far ahead, abroad in all the worlds once held dear by the Eldar, and one by one their sorry accounts returned to the ears of Biel-tan. World after world lay ruined, its people, its culture and its ancient Eldar heritage swept away into nothing. Such tales are ones that the Eldar of Biel-tan have had to endure often in the millennia of their Long Winter, returning to worlds unseen in lifetimes to find them morbid and desolate. Yet for all the familiarity of these tidings of sorrow and despair, the Eldar resented them no less, and the fire of war burned brightly in the hearts of Biel-tan people as all the Craftworld talk turned to vengeance and reclamation.

Of the worlds still known to them, the Rangers reported that no living Eldar now survived. Yet they spoke also of some gates within the webway barred so firmly that they had been unable to pass, and that beyond these might lie worlds yet untouched, or perhaps embattled worlds where the valiant Eldar still fought on. The Exarch Mauryon, Burning Spear of the Fire Dragons, met this news with both fury and determination, and travelled at once to a world he had known as a child to see if it still endured. Taking it upon himself to unearth the fate of his people, Mauryon travelled at once to the world of Baran.

Just as the rangers had attested, no gate now remained open and Mauryon took instead to the Dragonship Illethryr, Chariot of Khaine, accompanied by only a

handful of his most faithful acolytes. Mauryon felt his numbers too few to risk journeying the Baran directly, and instead Illethryr was hidden in orbit around the silver moon of Ephos. The gate to the silver moon had long been barred, but Mauryon hoped that the gate between Ephos and the planet below might remain open, and fortune was with him.

As predicted, the gate was closed (for none had been able to reach it from Biel-tan), but its structure still stood. All about it were carved runes of doom, frantic testimonies speaking of the last desperate Eldar defenders swept away by the greenskinned menace. These same runes barred the gate tight, sealed by those last brave Eldar so that the ancient webway might not be tainted by the Ork filth. Mauryon ordered that Elathith, a seer, a steersman, be brought up and unfasten the magics which bound the gate shut. As he did so, he found many of the roads from the gate crumbled and impassable, so that there was still no direct way to Biel-tan. Yet one path remained open – the path to Baran itself, albeit by only the smallest and humblest of gates.

A GATE UNBARRED, A FURY UNLEASHED

On Baran, Mauryon's rage was given a face, a shape and a name. Hordes of wild Orks, naked or clothed only in the skins of animals rampaged about him.

Familiar landscapes remained, though the forests ran wild and uncultivated, ragged and imperfect. Rivers ran dirty, littered with ugly black rocks, while choking grasses covered the hills which Mauryon had remembered as lush, green and fair. Mauryon's rage was unleashed and he plunged his Burning Spear into the green savages that swarmed about him. The fire with which the Burning Spear raged was Mauryon's own, the fire of rage immolating the Orks all about him, but he and his Aspect Warriors were few and even in his fury Mauryon realised little good would come of remaining amidst the slaughter. Mauryon departed via the newly opened gate. Upon his shoulders he bore the body of the largest Ork, all the proof he would need that the Eldar had been done a great injustice.

On Biel-tan, Mauryon cast the Ork's stinking carcass to the floor as the Court of the Young King gathered in a circle about him. Few words were spoken, none were needed. With a single nod of derision at the corpse beneath him, Mauryon declared his Autarchy and thoughts turned to preparation for the coming war. As had happened a thousand times before, the entire craftworld was suddenly alive with a single monotonous chant...

Khaine!

Khaine!

Khaine!



THE SWORDWIND DESCENDS...

Finding himself without the means to transport anything larger than a man via the single wraithgate open to him, and not yet willing to reveal himself in an all-out assault from space, Mauryon was left with no choice but to begin his war with his Aspect Warriors alone. His entire army on foot, Mauryon and several dozen Aspect Warriors journeyed to Baran and the Swordwind was begun.

THE GATE OF DEATH

The Gate by which Mauryon first journeyed to Baran was known as the Gate of the Dead, the Banshee Gate or the Hag Gate, for it was this ancient gate to which the Exodites of this and other worlds had journeyed in order to convey their dead to sacred barrows which lay near by.

Emerging from the Gate of the Dead, Mauryon found the barrows broken and defiled. Their great structures lay hidden beneath the ground, yet they contained much wealth and Orks have a keen scent for plunder. The great sweeping hills which formed the surface of these barrows had been cracked open by the Orks who now infested them, littering this sacred place with their own filthy greenskin mess, disturbing the spirits of the resting and causing much damage to the delicate wraithbone fronds of the world spirit which formed the barrows' architecture. A whole tribe had made its home within the barrows, just as simple creatures might populate caves and tunnels for shelter. The greatest and most magnificent of the barrows, the resting place of the ancient Exodite Kings of Baran, had been claimed by the tribe's own Warlord, the bloated Bogga-Bogga.

The Eldar were far outnumbered by the Orks, but came upon them unawares, moving swiftly up to the barrows themselves. Each barrow was guarded by the same Ork mob who had taken it for their den, and even with the advantage of surprise the Eldar found resistance fierce. Orks are always ready for a fight, and bare moments after the Eldar revealed themselves a great shout, accompanied by a bellowing roar of Waaagh! energy swept over the landscape, rousing the Orks to battle.

The Orks rushed from the barrows, but the Aspect Warriors moved swiftly and hemmed them in, charging right up to the entrance of the barrows so that the Orks could not pass cleanly, cutting down the greenskins as they filtered into the narrow tunnels and archways which led up from below ground. By means of clever feints and faked retreats, the Eldar cleverly drew the Orks to push against themselves, or else drew them to one side so that Eldar themselves could advance a little further into the barrows. Each and every one of the Aspect Warriors knew full well that their ultimate goal lay deep within these cairns, and that no time could be wasted in reaching it.

As the Aspect Warriors hacked a way through to the Barrows, the handful of Seers who had been willing to accompany Mauryon broke through and took their place within one of the newly recaptured barrows. Here they paused for some moments to read of the fame and repute of those spirits which rested here, so that they might know them by both name and character, before solemnly turning their minds to commune with the dead. As the Seers spoke, the spirits awoke, drawing forth from the deep and hidden refuges to which they had fled when first the greenskins came.

These bodiless spirits surged and rushed around the barrows and cairns, their formless voices ringing out from the walls and pillars of their ancient tombs, calling in voices of thunder and terror, startling the Orks as the battle raged all about. Their deathly wails stopped the Orks dead with fright and the Aspect Warriors found their blows striking home effortlessly as all fight drained from the terrified greenskins. In the Great Cairn of Kings, Bogga-bogga's Wyrdboy, Zoombanga, began his own invocation to the spirits, casting his head upwards, shaking his primitive fetishes and totems in a savage dance before a single, barking howl from the dead shattered the Waaagh! energy building up around him and dropped the Shaman lifeless to the floor.

As he watched Zoombanga assailed by the screaming Eldar spirits, Bogga-bogga himself fled from the barrow, surrounded by his Nobz and Grot attendants. Striking Scorpions of the Grieving Shrine surrounded the Warlord at the entrance to the Great Cairn and cut him down in an instant. With Bogga-bogga slain, the surviving Feral Orks broke and fled, seeking refuge in the great forest which lay in a circle all about the barrows. Mauryon had come for more than simple slaughter though, and with his objective in his grasp the Autarch ordered no pursuit. The Eldar abated their attack and a silent, deathly calm once more fell over this ancient resting place.

But Mauryon had not arrived as some reverential liberator, returned to lay his people to rest – his war demanded greater sacrifice than that. Mauryon called forth the Spiritseers and Bonesingers which he had ordered accompany him from the craftworld. With them they carried the humble beginnings of wraithbone, a few component psycho-plastics, nothing in and of themselves, but it was all that the powerful Seers would need to begin fashioning their intricate constructs.

From the broken tombs, from the scattered bodies and the partly buried wraithbone cores which lined the barrows the Seers plucked all the spirit stones they could find. The Seers muttered words of comfort and forgiveness as they went about their task, for this was sacrilege to them, an affront to the peace of death – an atrocity, some might say – but such was Mauryon's command.

Alongside them, the Singers' voices boomed out as the wraithbone shells of great walking machines sprung upwards and were one by one assembled into silent, motionless ranks in front of the gloating Mauryon. Here and there the line was broken by the outline of a true giant, twice the size of a man, towering over the rest of these automatons.

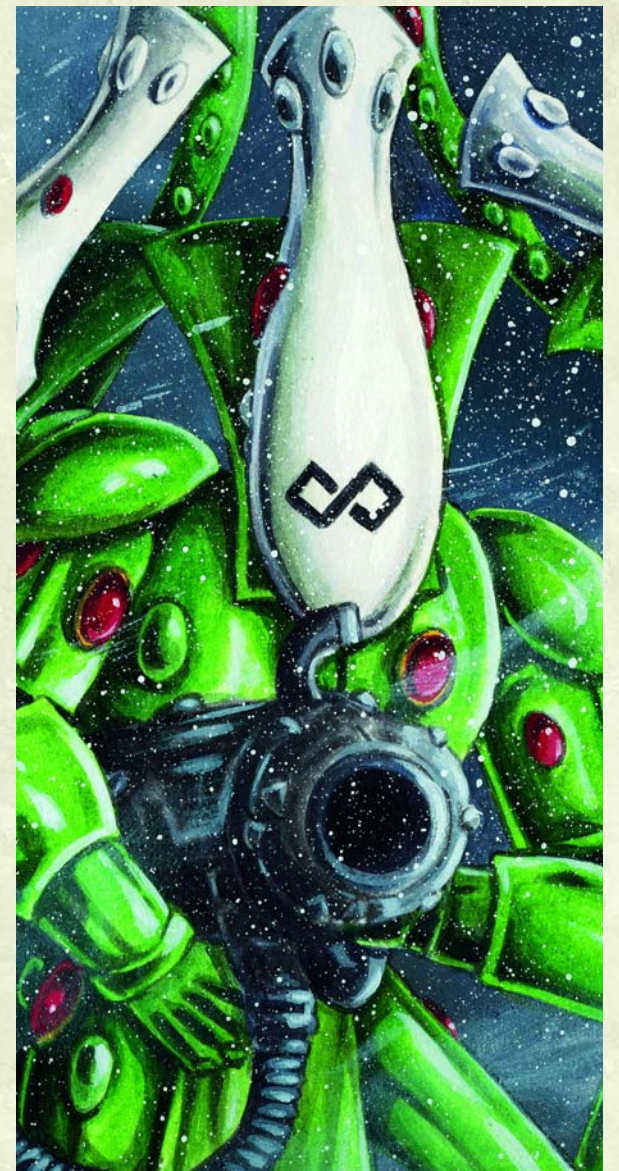
Into these same husks were placed the spirit stones taken from the barrows, and as the deathly Banshees danced and wailed about them, these tired and reluctant spirits were slowly coaxed from their slumber and brought once more to life inside their new wraithbone bodies.

Larger than anything Mauryon could have hoped to get out of the solitary gate available to him, now before him stood Wraithguard and Wraithlords. As Mauryon and his army emerged once more from the barrows, an army of the dead now walked alongside them...

WORLD SPIRITS OF THE EXODITES

The wraithbone core of each Craftworld acts as a repository and conductor of psychic power. It is also the ultimate refuge for the spirits of its people in death. Every Exodite world has its own equivalent to the infinity circuit which is called the world spirit. This is an immense store of psychic energy where the minds of dead Eldar are preserved forever. Exodites too wear a spirit stone and when they die they are taken beneath the earth into one of the great tribal barrows. They are laid to rest there and their spirit stones are broken upon the altars of the worlds spirit.

The world spirit extends over the entire planet, stretching between the tribal barrows, stone circles and standing stones. These important places are where the spirit world and the material world can interact, where they spirits of the dead can flow together and where the living can talk to the dead if they have the power.





THE WAR GOES ON...

With a swift and decisive victory under his belt, Mauryon wasted no time in persecuting his war further. More Aspect Warriors were brought forth from Biel-tan, though as yet Mauryon still lacked any means of deploying larger vehicles to aid his cause. Nonetheless, taking the ancient barrows as their camp, Mauryon divided his forces and began a program of cleansing in battles across much of Baran.

The Barrows had been the resting place of Eldar from all over Baran, and from other nearby worlds. Many wraithgates surrounded the barrows – avenues leading to dozens of ancient Exodite colonies across the planet. Mauryon's seers unbarred these gates and dispatched forces through each of them.

Invariably, the Eldar emerged to find yet more Feral Ork tribes encamped around ancient Eldar colony's, monuments and sacred places, knowing nothing of

their value, but drawn to their riches nonetheless. Without hesitation Mauryon's armies fell vengefully upon the Orks, butchering them in devastating hit-and-run raids before vanishing once more through the ancient wraithgates. Occasionally, however, the Eldar would emerge to find themselves greeted by the colonies of Man, rather than Ork, and here under Mauryon's specific orders the Eldar retreated, slipping away without ever their presence being made known to the men of Baran.

Mauryon's attacks caused much upheaval amongst the Orks, and whole tribes fled away from their tribal homelands, migrating hundreds of miles across Baran before again finding refuge amongst the wild and forgotten places of the world where their simple feral minds felt comfortable. Some tribes survived in such numbers that even as they fled they invaded the territory of rival warlords, taking land from their rivals as their own land was taken from them. In their hurried migrations, other Orks were flung against the cities of the Imperium, putting a great strain on Baran's beleaguered defenders. So it was, that even as the Eldar remained unseen, war still came soon enough to the Baran Siegemasters...

The Orks cared not who they fought and, driven from their own lands, many fell more hungrily than ever upon the cities of Baran. Great tides of Feral Orks swept down out of the wild places of Baran and smashed against the fortress-cities of the Imperium. In each of these cities, the Baran Siegemasters struggled to repel the attackers, though the greenskins surged in numbers never before witnessed, great massed tribes where once they had been scattered warbands. Three colonies were overwhelmed completely and Commander Asaberra, Governor of Baran, faced the greatest test of his time. From his capital at Enderra, Asaberra dispatched extra regiments of Siegemasters, including the few Baran Cavalry regiments available to him to reinforce the most distant and beleaguered cities. Some time was bought by this action, but with Asaberra's forces barely able to defend their own colonies, little could be done in attempting to discover the cause of this great and unexpected Ork assault. All across Baran, in a dozen fortress cities, the Siegemasters were as prisoners, trapped in defence, able only to hold tight and attempt to repel each new wave of Orks with no hope of surging forwards and striking out for themselves.

Such tactics, as Asaberra well knew, rarely suffice for long, and so it was with some urgency that Asaberra dispatched a plea for aid to his black-armoured allies on the dark moon of Coron...

UPON DARK WINGS

Purposeful, if not truly callous, the Raven Guard showed little haste in their response. With their own numbers so few, their own Captain Moradius saw little reward in seeking to defend the cities of Baran. More troubling to Moradius was the sudden onslaught of the Orks, and it was to this which he turned his attention, lest the danger grow and come to pose a threat to the wider Imperium. Intent on discovering the source of this greenskin assault, Moradius and his Raven Guard ventured once more to Baran.



A FOE REVEALED

Arriving on Baran, the Raven Guard chose to make only cursory contact with the Men of Baran and their Commander Asaberra, choosing instead to move virtually unknown amongst the deepest and wildest reaches of Baran, rooting out the Orks in their own lairs, searching for the source of their sudden ferocity. They would not wait long to find it.

At a dozen sites across Baran the Raven Guard found the remains of Ork camps, littered with burned-out huts and dozens of Ork carcasses. Indeed, Moradius could find no Ork settlement standing at all. Something, it would seem, had driven every wretched greenskin from their lair and sent them hurtling against the fortress cities of Baran. It was quite possible that the Orks themselves had wrought such destruction, but to have done so spontaneously across the entire planet seemed too organised for them. Moradius feared that something more deadly lay at its root.

Reconvening the scattered scouting parties, Moradius led his hundred or so men across the Voltus Plains – a great, windbeaten steppe where even the Orks did not settle, but instead prowled in nomadic, predatory packs atop boars, squiggoths and other fungal monstrosities. After a week's hard march, the Raven Guard at last encountered Orks – a curious kind of relief to Moradius. It would seem that the nomadic Orks had proven more elusive than their encamped counterparts, and so here had yet evaded attack.

The Orks, as ever, proved themselves eager for a fight and rushed forwards in great numbers as soon as they caught the sent of the Space Marines. Moradius, however, saw little benefit in sending yet more Orks fleeing across Baran and, after a cursory skirmish, withdrew his men, leaving the Orks to bludgeon their way across the plains as ever they had. His scouts remained close however, hoping that whatever fate had befallen the Ork settlements would soon reveal itself in pursuit of these nomads.

Some days later, Moradius was once more proved shrewd. His scouts returned to report the Orks under attack and Moradius at once led his Raven Guard to their position. Six Thunderhawk gunships skimmed rapidly over the plain, following the signal sent by the remaining scouts, though even in the short time it took them to arrive, the Orks were overwhelmed and slain. Instead of Orks, as Moradius and his Raven Guard emerged from his gunships they were confronted by the Swordwind of Biel-tan.

Recognising the Eldar for the elusive opponent they truly are, Captain Moradius ordered an immediate assault lest the Eldar simply vanish before he return. The Eldar, perhaps, had not intended to engage the Imperium so soon, let alone the Space Marines themselves, and the Raven Guard's first strikes took heavy tolls.

Relying on their favoured hit-and-run tactics, the Eldar rapidly fell back, though not nearly so swiftly as they could. Not so swiftly, more importantly, that the Raven



Guard would not be able to follow. A running battle raged for hours as the Raven Guard, now heavily outnumbering the Eldar harried them from all sides.

At last, as the Eldar's numbers dwindled ever more, they fell back finally into the midst of a great ring of standing stones, ancient monuments left from a time when the planet had been under the Eldar's rule. Here the Raven Guard resolved to wipe out the Eldar army utterly, rushing against them with their full strength. As with so many things, it proved to be just as the Eldar had intended.

Amidst the standing stones, Wraithgates opened. Small gates by the Eldar's standards, but more than large enough for the Aspect Warriors of Biel-tan to pass. Mauryon's armies who had been marauding all across Baran now reconvened amidst the standing stones, Mauryon himself arriving to take command moments later.

Where the Raven Guard had thought they might surround and annihilate the Eldar, they now found themselves surrounded by a foe many times their own number. Even for the sturdy resistance they could offer, the Raven Guard survived precious few hours in the midst of the Eldar's circle of stone.

The Raven Guard were gone, though the Men of Baran would know nothing of their passing, for their minds remained utterly occupied by the ever-growing hordes of Orks which hurled themselves at the Imperial colonies.

THE HORDES GATHER

Elsewhere, the savage displacement of the Orks had created a near uncontrollable migration amongst the Greenskins. While some battled the Baran Siegemasters, others still warred amongst themselves. Ork fell upon Ork as tribes were driven from their homelands and sought to conquer the lands of others, or else were butchered as they fled through the territories of neighbouring tribes. Amidst the carnage, one wily and ambitious Ork saw his destiny awaiting him. Snagga of the Big Teef tribe spread his own horde far and wide, using brutal displays of power to intimidate all the newcomers, all the rampaging, migrating hordes, before offering sanctuary to any who would fight alongside him.

Many of the first to cross Snagga's land rebuked his offer, and sought instead to take his realm from him by force, but Snagga was cunning and defeated his rivals with ease. Soon those that came upon his borders recognised his might and Snagga's horde was swelled by the new arrivals. What's more, word of his burgeoning Waaagh! spread across Baran, carried far on the tribal drums, Suiggoth calls and Grot tellygraffz of the Orks. Word spread of this emerging Warlord, and dozens more tribes flocked to his banner. Many had felt the wrath of the Eldar first hand, and joined with others of their kind only too gladly. Now a full-blown Waaagh! surrounded Snagga-Snagga (his name lengthened in honour of his victories) and the Eldar and Imperium alike had a unified foe to fear.

This unity brought no calm to the Orks, however, it merely galvanised their thirst for war and now an ever more fearsome opponent descended upon the poor, beleaguered Baran Siegemasters.

Snagga-snagga unleashed his horde first against the city of Enderra, one of the oldest and largest cities on Baran, occupying one of the original landing sites of the Imperium's conquest of the planet. The Feral Ork Horde descended upon the city and bludgeoned it with a weltering mass of fire, but the walls stood firm. Snagga's horde was vast, and easily surrounded the city, easily overwhelming any who attempted to break out, but he yet lacked the punch to topple the walled fortresses for which the Siegemasters were rightly famed. Frustrated, but not yet thwarted, Snagga-snagga retired to plot his next move.

AN ENEMY MADE

The Eldar's war, however, went on, and with his forces now gathered on the plains of Baran, Mauryon unleashed his largest attack yet upon the Orks. In his rage, however, he had not reckoned upon the sheer number of tribes now under Snagga-snagga's command, and as the Swordwind fell upon the encamped Orks, Mauryon felt his first taste of defeat.

Hundreds of thousands of Orks rushed to battle as the Eldar sprung their surprise assault. Falcons and Wave Serpents scythed down wave after wave of Orks with their opening pop-up attacks, but nothing could halt such a mass of Orks. The Greenskins smashed into the Eldar army and slaughtered hundreds – a bitter loss Mauryon could little afford. Realising his trap was too soon sprung, Mauryon reluctantly ordered the retreat.

As the Eldar fled, Snagga-snagga sat and gloated. Things were going very well indeed.

BIGGA & BIGGA

Like all powerful Warlords, Snagga-snagga found himself surrounded by a whole host of would be advisors (or 'Elperz) and sycophants, all vying for his affection. Amongst these were the boilerboyz Wurzbag and Durrboz. Wurzbag was a traditional boilerboy, a proven master of steam technology, while Durrboz was once a pigdok, and so sought fame for his legenday 'grot-engine' with which he claimed to have once powered a gargant by the medium of dozens of unfortunate Grots frantically leggin' it inside great caged wheels whose motion powered the Gargant.

Snagga-snagga ordered that a machine be built that would allow him to topple the Siegemaster's fortifications, and set Wurzbag and Durrboz to the task. But the pair were rivalrous, and simply would not work together. Instead the pair conspired to hold a great contest – each would build a machine, and Snagga-snagga and the tribe would choose which was the greatest and would hence win the honour of leading the assault on Enderra.

For days the pair slaved away on their creations until both were unveiled to the startled gasps of the tribes. Alas, however, in typical Ork fashion no one could quite decide which was the winning Gargant – no one could quite decide which was the biggest (as is the Orkish way of deciding all things). The suggestion was



raised that the gargants simply be named Bigga and Bigga, a suggestion loved by Snagga-snagga and loathed by the competitive boilerboyz. Still, two Gargants are better than one, and with his new machines at the head of his army, Snagga-snagga's Horde set off once more for the city of Enderra.

FORGOTTEN PLACES

As Mauryon's army fled their defeat at the hands of Snagga-snagga, not all had managed to follow their leader. Smaller bands, cut off and forced to retreat away from the main Eldar army lest they be surrounded now dashed across Baran, desperately seeking to find a wraithgate by which they might reunite with the main Eldar army.

Mauryon was forced to wait some days as these scattered elements gathered at the Barrows. Last of all came the Striking Scorpions of the Grieving Shrine. Driven far to the south in their humiliating rout, the Scorpions, led by their Exarch Suerymane, had journeyed to an ancient Aspect Shrine, long ago hidden by the savage, cloying vegetation of Baran, but known to the Eldar by some unbreakable empathy.

Here though, disaster was found and their doom nearly met. The temple's wraithgate was barred with a force that the Scorpions simply could not break, and as pursuing Orks descended upon them, hope looked lost. As the Orks attacked, the Striking Scorpions hid themselves about the shrine, lurking deep within its ruins where they stealth might aid them and their lack of numbers not so utterly undo them.

Suerymane himself crouched within the deepest and darkest of the shrine's ancient rooms, and here he found a sorry totem indeed. Scattered about the place were the broken forms and scattered spirit stones of his own kind. Still and perfect, they had lain in this lonely place of dying since Baran had first fallen to the Orks centuries ago. Just as Suerymane now intended, this place must once have been the site of his own people's last stand.

THE BATTLE OF VAUL'S GATE

Mauryon's war had progressed well. With an army of Ghost Warriors taken from the Exodite Barrows, the Raven Guard utterly defeated and now the Phoenix Lord Karandras at his side, the Autarch's victories were great, but he nonetheless remained powerless to tackle the human colonists in their heavily fortified cities. Without his vehicles and Titans, which had so far been unable to traverse any of the wraithgates opened by Mauryon's forward forces, his efforts would all be in vain.

As far as his Rangers could ascertain, only one substantial wraithgate survived on Baran – Vaul's Gate, some several leagues away over the great plain which formed the centre of Baran's primary continent. Mauryon led his army on a swift overland march, the Eldar's swift feet covering the distance in mere hours. Despite their fleet footedness, such a large scale movement could never go unnoticed, and Snagga-snagga soon assembled a great horde to meet them at the edge of the great plain, where the land breaks into shallow bluffs and hard, earthy ground. Upon the highest of these bluffs stood Vaul's Gate itself, a towering Eldar monolith, fully twenty times the height of a man.

The Orks themselves clearly possessed no idea of the true value of Vaul's Gate, though its meaning to the Eldar was not lost on them, and out on the left flank the Orks clustered all about the ancient monument for no other reason than wanting to deprive their enemy of it.

The Ork line was immense, stretched out for several miles across the plain. At its centre stood Snagga-snagga's twin Gargants, Bigga and Bigga. At the far right of the field, a few scattered ruins concealed the

handful of Rangers who had joined the army, but apart from this Mauryon could simply not afford to face the Orks in a pitched battle. A single decisive attack was the Eldar's only hope, and accordingly Mauryon clustered his own forces near the Gate. Swooping Hawks and Warp Spiders formed a thin, broken line down the field, for Mauryon feared the Orks might surround him if he allowed his front to become too narrow. Against such vast numbers of Orks, however, those Eldar in the centre would stand little chance.

Great clouds of dust and smoke arose in the distance as the Orks began to bully their engines to life. Their raucous whoops and shouts rose to a cacophony as the shambling mass prepared itself for battle, but Mauryon and his army, however, were already on the move. Flocks of Swooping Hawks took to the skies, rushing headlong at the greenskins, drawing the centre of the Ork line forward, luring them away from the lumbering gargants behind. At the last possible moment the Hawks turned and soared away as one, and Mauryon unleashed his only gambit. Nightwing fighters and Phoenix bombers burst from the clouds and streaked around the Ork army, homing in on the now isolated gargants.

Many of the Orks turned back to defend the great war machines, racing backwards to turn their fire on the Eldar flyers, but they were too slow. The Hawks swooped back towards them again, as effortlessly as they had turned away in the first place and unleashed a withering hail of short-range fire into the back of the Orks. Bigga fell to the first Eldar attack run. Atop the other Gargant, Wurzbag beamed with perverse pride, gloating as his rival's machine went up in smoke.

Seeing the fight take shape in the centre, Orks from both flanks rushed towards the embattled gargants. On the right, the Ork advance stalled as the Rangers opened fire from their unseen positions amongst the ruins. Several mobs floundered and broke, even before reaching the battle, but as screeching hordes of trukks and wagons arrived to aid the surviving Gargant, a Phoenix crashed earthwards, then a second, then a third and the Eldar flyers were at last forced to speed away from the battlefield. They had already done more than enough.

With the Orks' attention drawn to the centre of the field, Mauryon saw his chance to attack the Gate directly. The Autarch, the Phoenix Lord Karandras and hundreds of Aspect Warriors surged forwards over the shallow bluff between them and Vaul's Gate. At last the Orks found themselves able to get to grips with the enemy up close and proper, and Mauryon's first attack was blunted by the sheer number of greenskins. Karandras and the Aspects close by him, however, battled on and quickly fought their way through to the Gate. Mauryon pushed forwards again and this time broke through the Orks, joining Karandras and the other Aspect Warriors atop the hill, at the foot of Vaul's Gate itself.

With the Eldar flyers gone, the Orks had won the battle in the centre ground and were quickly regrouping. The hulking figure of Da Biggest (as the Orks had hastily dubbed the surviving Gargant) rumbled towards Mauryon's position, surrounded by a rampant mob of



wagons and boyz. Mauryon himself rushed to the foot of the gate and stood guard over the small crowd of Seers gathered there as they frantically began the rituals necessary to re-open the long sealed gate. Even as they did so, the first thunderous blasts from the Orks' soopa guns slammed into the gate, shaking it to its very foundations and crushing two unfortunate Seers beneath the falling rubble.

At the Gate's centre, the portal blinked slowly into life, a streak of glowing energy running from base to peak. The portal flickered and struggled to open wider as more and more Ork fire flew about the heads of Mauryon and his Seers. On the slope below, the fastest of the Ork mobs were already deep in hand-to-hand fighting with the Scorpions and Banshees Mauryon had ordered to guard the approach.

Now Da Biggest itself arrived. Mauryon spun about as he felt the huge shadow loom over him and looked on in horror as all about him Aspect Warriors fell to the blaze of fire from the towering Gargant. At the machine's feet, Mauryon spotted Snagga-snagga himself, and rushed forwards towards him, fearing now that the only way to victory might be to slay the Ork warlord himself. There would be no such need.

Barely had Mauryon taken a step before he felt a surging rush of energy behind him. The Gate was open and Mauryon knew victory was his. Raising his head skyward to look back towards it, Mauryon watched the shimmering portal roll and break apart as the figures of three great Phantom Titans stepped forth onto the field of battle...

Da Biggest lasted scant moments as the three Titans unleashed a co-ordinated burst of pulsar fire. Wurzbag was launched skywards as his gargant's head blew off and the machine came to a halt as a smoking wreck. Under the shadow of the burning gargant, Mauryon and Snagga-snagga met in hand-to-hand combat, though only one outcome was now possible. With the Orks fleeing all around him, and buoyed utterly by the capture of Vaul's Gate, Mauryon was undefeatable and drove his Burning Spear through Snagga-snagga's stomach. The Autarch cast Snagga-snagga's body over his shoulder and swiftly scampered up the creaking frame of the motionless gargant above.

From atop this smoking wreck, Mauryon launched the warlord's body earthward in a rampant celebration of victory. As the slain Ork's corpses crashed to the ground, his army broke and fled, utterly defeated.