

ENGINE OF MORK

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WARHAMMER
40,000

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Deep in the jungles of Garbax World stood an idol of rust-streaked steel. Three storeys tall topped with a bucket head of such crudeness that it'd make a boy laugh if it weren't for the face... A grim face, a stern face, a face full of orky confidence and orky power – the kind of face that stared you down and promised a good beating if you didn't back off, and maybe one if you did. Over the outermost outskirts of Grabskabdur it reared high, fenced into a compound between the drops and madtown where the madboys lived, trees and stinking forest mud behind it. It wasn't an auspicious place for a god, but the builders did not trust Boss Grabskab, and Boss Grabskab did not trust them.

The idol gazed over the shacks of the madboys like it was looking into far off wars – it could show you the way if only you could see as far. Huge and as fat as you like, the idol roused the soul of any greenskin who looked upon it. And it was a time for rousing, for the Waaagh was coming. The sprawling ork shanty of Grabskabdur hummed with anticipation of it. Boss Mek Uggrim was well pleased with the effect the idol had on the orks, even if he had to put up with dribbling madboys gawking at it through the fence day in and day out.

But the idol was also unfinished, and that was what the trouble was.

The Red Suns mek mob's compound was so small and so crowded with stompa and scrap piles that the meks' workbenches were crammed tight against the fences. There were three meks then. Only three of them built that idol of Mork all by themselves, and that's clever right there. Cleverness like that leads an ork on to great things, and Uggrim was headed that way.

Grabskab should have killed Uggrim when he had the chance.

Uggrim was boss mek of the mek mob. He was bigger than the other two, but not nob big, not yet. He was getting there, swelling up, because Uggrim had big ambitions – big mek ambitions. Boss Grabskab had marked that well, and he didn't like it. As yet he had chosen not to act. Uggrim could push a boy about with no bother, but a boss? Maybe, truth was he hadn't tried. That was

Grabskab's mistake to make, and he made it.

Then there was surly, sharp-tongued Snikgob – who, no matter how much he moaned, had stuck with Uggrim through it all – and lastly Bozgat. Smaller than the others, and nervous for it, but he had the smarts. A lot of Orky-know-wots Bozgat had. Too much, some say.

The day was tropically close, the mek mob boys were in a foul mood. Clanging echoed from the fat belly of the idol where Bozgat worked. Snikgob had his mask on and was welding plates. Uggrim puzzled over his plans, faithful grot Frik at his side. Gretchin scurried about, their shoulders marked with the runt tattoos of the mob. The compound reeked of hot metal and ork sweat. The hiss of Snikgob's burna was loud, and Bozgat's curses louder. Neither loud enough to drown out the hooting of the madboys outside the fence, or the drone of the jungle insects in the dark beneath the trees.

Uggrim and Frik spoke quietly to each other, pointing at this or that scrap of paper, trying to figure out why the stompa wouldn't go.

'Bozgat's fault,' said Uggrim to his oiler. 'Engine's too complicated. Little sun, hard to get it lit. What's wrong with a good old squig oil injection system?' He rested his bucket jaw on his fist, deep in thought.

Frik went rigid, his ears flat against his head.

'Boss!' he said, tugging at Uggrim's red shirt. 'Boss, sneak's a-coming!'

Gitskul – head fixer of Boss Grabskab the Snitcher, and Death Skull robber-baron of the Western Wood – rolled lazily into the compound. The nob affected that air of supreme nonchalance that had the meks and gretchin of the mekmob patting their pockets before he was within shouting distance. A couple of blue-faced grots slunk out from behind him as he walked through the gate and came to a swaggering stop. Uggrim's runts fronted them up to make sure they didn't nick anything.

Gitskul hooked his thumbs into his belt and frowned. He looked the idol up and down. 'Oh dear,' he said. 'Oh deary, deary me. Still not finished Uggrim? That won't do. Oh no, that won't do at all.'

Gitskul looked ridiculous to Uggrim. His long fangs were tipped with gold, but there was something grubby about the metal, like it was dishonest. And it was, for all Death Skulls are thieves and this was thieves' gold. Gitskul's face was painted lucky blue. His hands and arms were blue. His scalp sported a stiff crest of hairsquigs, and these were also blue. His shirt was blue, at least it probably was under the dirt. The armour plates on his shoulders and his gut were blue. His backplate too, the horned skull of Grabskab's Death Skull Boys daubed

proudly on it. In fact, the only bits of him that weren't blue were the odd patches of scuffed skin where orky-green showed, and his eyes. These were red and smouldering as the eyes of any proper ork, but they were devious with it. Eyes like a grot were Gitskul's eyes, beady, thieving eyes. Death Skull eyes.

'And what the zog is that?' asked Gitskul. He pointed at the stompa's right arm, a long, complex limb of gubbins that terminated in a three-pronged beam focussing unit.

'Lifta droppa. Lifts stuff, drops it,' said Uggrim, lifting and dropping a hand by way of demonstration. He folded his arms. 'Dead killy. We's got a top energy burner inside to make it go, very know-wots, very powerful. Special-like.'

'And it's not finished?'

'Complications,' said Uggrim tersely.

'Now that's where you are going wrong!' said Gitskul, jabbing a long talon at Uggrim. 'We wants guns! Not droppy things, what good is that? Cannons see, bang-bang? Don't do special mate, don't do it. Don't want special. Grabskab wants working, and he wants working on time.'

'Got cannon,' he said, indicating the megacannon and the gigashoota on the stompa's other arm. 'Got a zappy eye too.' He jerked his head at the goggling left eye of the idol.

'Don't want zappy, don't want droppas, we want big booms, yeah? And we want it finished.'

Uggrim growled. He hated working for the Death Skulls. Evil Suns – his clan – were bad, because they knew enough about engines to be a pain, but Death Skulls were far worse. They all seemed to have a bit of the mek in them, and offered their inexpert opinions when they weren't asked for or wanted. If you'd have asked him, he'd have said it was almost as bad as their light-fingeredness. He'd heard they were thieves before he came here, but he hadn't seen it, and he wished he'd known how bad it was. 'If you blue-faced zoggers stopped nicking everything, it'd have been finished ages ago.'

'That's not very nice,' sniffed Gitskul. 'Fighting talk.' The nob looked around the compound as he spoke, appraising everything.

'Name the time, I'm there,' said Uggrim. He picked up his biggest spanner and slammed it hard onto his workbench, making the grots cringe. 'Could do with some exercise.'

Gitskull strode over to Uggrim, right up into his face. The two orks locked stares, backs straightening. Uggrim might have been a mek, but he was nearly as big as Gitskull. A challenge was in the offing. Muscles twitched on their long

faces, nostrils flared. Lips slid back along the full length of their dagger teeth. Deep rumbles emanated from their chests. Frik cowered back behind the work table.

A hollow bang sounded from the interior of the stompa. A ball of black smoke puffed from a hatch in the side. ‘Zogging heck!’ shouted Bozgat as he tumbled from the idol, his face streaked black. His pet madboy, Talker, followed mumbling his incomprehensible nonsense. Bozgat jumped to his feet, coughed loudly and spat. ‘Don’t work. It. Don’t. Zogging. Work!’ He flung a small mechanism to the ground and glared at it as if he was going to smash it to pieces. Instead, he picked it up, set it on his own bench and gave it a puzzled look. He sat down and snatched up a screwdriver. Then he noticed Gitskul, and caught the aggression between his boss and the blue boy nob. ‘What’s going on here?’ he said cautiously.

‘Oh dear. Oh deary, deary me.’ Gitskul said, his body losing its tension. He smirked, looked the soot-streaked mek up and down and shook his head. ‘What a sorry sight.’ Frik sighed and pushed his cap back on his head. There would be no fight.

Uggrim grumbled as the nob poked him in the chest, but bore it without retaliation.

‘Do me a favour. Fight an oddboy? Too bleeding weedy aren’t you? Nah. Not worth the bother.’ Gitskul sniffed and turned away, looking for stuff to fill his pockets with, stuff that wasn’t his. ‘Thing is, Boss Grabskab’s not happy. He wants this finished last week. And it’s not finished, is it? So he’s knocking your fee down again.’

‘You can’t do that—’ sputtered Frik. Uggrim cuffed him.

‘Oi oi oi, runt! You mind who you is speaking to! Besides,’ he said with an unpleasant smile, ‘I ain’t doing nothing, am I grot? Grabskab is and can do what he likes, can’t he? He’s the boss, not you or your boss. Thing is Uggrim, not only is you slow, but you is getting ideas above your station. You might want to think about that.’

Gitskul’s beady eyes fell on Bozgat’s mechanism. The little mek clutched it instinctively to his chest.

‘You using that?’

‘Yes!’ said Bozgat.

Gitskul spat on the floor. ‘Alright, don’t get uppity, I’m just asking. Could do with one of them, that’s all.’

‘Thieving git,’ muttered Bozgat.

Prompted by Bozgat's agitation, Talker started up with his jabber. 'The birds, the birds,' said Talker. 'The birds of Ulsorc are of varied type, divided into forty-six separate families... Fusion is the inescapable consequence of the collapsing of mass in stellar nurseries...' No one listened.

'Another week, Uggrim, another week to get it done,' said Gitskul. 'Waaagh's coming. All the boys is getting het up, ready to fight. You can feel it, I knows you can. The madboys are singing. Other meks work faster than you. Big lifters is nearly done.' He pointed upwards. 'Hulk's ready, up there, in the black. Time to leave this mudball and kick some slashface arses. Warlord Skartoof's getting ready to leave. Grabskab's gonna go with him, and he wants his stompa for the party. One week! Or it's you is gonna end up owing Grabskab teeth, and boy,' he leaned in close, a nasty expression wrinkling his long face, 'I'm looking forward to pulling them out meself.' Gitskul laughed as he sauntered away.

Uggrim strode angrily after him, halting in the compound gateway. 'Gitskul!' he shouted. 'Give that box of sparkies back.'

'Which box of sparkies?' said Gitskul, all innocent.

'The one you've got up your shirt.'

'Oh yeah!' said the Deffskull, patting at his stomach. 'How did that get there?' He threw the box over his shoulder back into the compound. Uggrim caught it. The meks' grots surrounded Deffskul's runts and similarly divested them of various odds and ends, hissing and pushing at them as they did.

Gitskul walked away, up the filthy street through Madtown.

'How do they do that?' said Bozgat.

'Thieving gits, boss. All of them blue boys are,' said Frik.

'I told you we shouldn't have come here, I did tell ya, didn't I?' Snikgob, who'd done a sterling job of ignoring Gitskul, flipped his mask up and lit a fat brown smoke stick on a spike of burna flame. He puffed blue clouds out of his sour mouth. 'Join me, you said, come on, let's build the biggest big things you can think of.' He mocked Uggrim's voice. 'Come with me to Garbax world! There's a Waaagh brewin' I can feel it in me teeth!' He wagged his fingers desultorily. 'Idiot, I was. Zogging idiot. There's nothing here but big flies and zogging trees. It's hot, it stinks. Nothing to kill, nothing tasty to eat, compound next to the drops and us living side by side with zogging madboys. I ain't slept in a month. Brilliant you are Uggrim, zogging brilliant.'

'We'll get it finished,' said Uggrim. 'The Waaagh is coming, Mork and Gork'll make sure we gets it done.'

Snikgob snorted, but he could feel the Waaaghs charge – they all could, a

febrile glee that infected Grabskabdur and every other ork shanty on the planet. The orks of Garbax were ready to move. They weren't the only meks building, but Uggrim's dreams were grander than most.

'How?' said Snikgob. 'Them blues nick everything as soon as we got it bolted on.'

'And we can't sort out the power flow from the reactor,' said Bozgat. He stared at his mechanism. 'These shunts don't work. Dunno why.'

'Don't see why we can't put a big oily in,' muttered Snikgob.

'That's why,' said Bozgat, pointing up at the droppa. 'Your idea, Snikgob, wasn't it? Oily's no good. Need a little sun, or no lifting and no dropping.'

'Just saying,' said Snikgob.

Uggrim went quiet. He stared off into the distance, perhaps into the same glorious, faraway war their unfinished stompa saw, and scratched at a scab on his arm. Snikgob nudged Bozgat and took his smoke out of his mouth.

'He's thinking,' he whispered.

'He's not.'

'He is,' said Snikgob with a grin and a knowing nod.

Bozgat ran his hand down his face. 'Oh no.'

Night-time is when grots like to lurk, and Death Skull runts enjoy lurking more than most. Frik brought the blue grot in to see the mekboys after the sun went down – a flat-headed, mean-looking, filthy grotboss. Shifty too. Grots are shifty. Death Skull grots are shiftier still, but this grot was about the shiftest grot Uggrim had ever seen, and that's saying something. The grot couldn't stand still, moving from foot to foot. His hands opened and closed constantly, his eyes darted about like they could harpoon things and reel them to be hidden in his pockets.

'This is him, boss,' said Frik. 'Urdgrub. Best thief in Grabskabdur.'

'That right?' asked Uggrim dubiously.

'Yeah, that's right, that's right. Urdgrub the best,' said the grot. He wouldn't look Uggrim in the eye, but there was an air of defiance to him. His voice rasped deeply. He had little of the servility of your usual runt.

'All right,' said Uggrim. 'You've got a job.' He ordinarily despised grots with big ideas, but tonight they had something in common. Both of them were at the wrong end of the food chain. Uggrim planned to change that. 'And this is what I want,' he said.

Uggrim detailed the bits and pieces he needed, the fixings and gubbins the idol

required if it were to live. As he delivered his list, scores of eyes blinked in the dark beyond the fence: Urdgrub's thieves.

Urdgrub looked up at the last item. 'You sure? That's dangerous work. Sneaking into Grabskab's household that, nicking his stuff. Gonna cost ya.'

'How much?'

'Twenty up front. Ten when we deliver.'

'Thirty teeth? Thirty?' Snikgob rolled his eyes. 'We ain't got that much teeth! What a waste of time, nicking stuff, off Death Skulls? You have lost it Uggrim, you have lost it big time.' He threw his arms up and clasped his hands on the back of his sloping head.

Uggrim grabbed Snikgob's shoulder. 'Hang on, don't be hasty. We got the teeth.'

'We haven't... Ah.' Snikgob followed Uggrim's gaze to Bozgat's mouth. Both of them grinned evilly.

Bozgat looked at them, eyes flicking between the two. 'What?'

'You hold him down, I'll get the pliers,' said Snikgob.

Urdgrub's grots came to them in a steady stream. Between them they bore all manner of bits and bobs. The meks worked through the night, feverish with more than the jungle heat. The call to Waaagh! was growing stronger. Other orks were fighting and carousing, waiting for the time when the need to move would send them spilling out of their hovels toward their ships. Not the meks, not any of the oddboys. A switch was thrown in the heads of them all – doks, runtherds, meks and the rest, sending them to heights of activity. The meks sawed and hammered, welded and screwed. Uggrim roared with delight when the gigashoota barrels rotated for the first time. He laughed long and hard when Urdgrub's grots hauled half the engine of Da Basha – Boss Grabskab's battlewagon – into his yard. He and Bozgrat fell on it, stripping it down in seconds and taking in the bits they needed. He clanged up and down ladders, directing the others, telling the grots where to go and what to do, proper boss-like, and that's when he got the first inkling of where he was going. What he might end up being.

His mind was a whirl, his instinctive grasp of technology bubbling up into his mind to pop in bright bursts of inspiration. He could not articulate what he knew, nor did he, if truth be told, really understand it. He just *knew*. His fingers worked without him thinking, putting together machines he didn't fully understand. The others were the same, toiling happily in isolation with little speech, all of them heading in the same direction. But that's oddboys for you – odd.

Bozgrat fixed his power shunts. He jiggled switches in the belly of the idol until his pusher beams intersected the precise right way, and pushed so hard a tiny bit of hot stuff collapsed in on itself and the little sun ignited in its reactor. Steam hissed from the trio of magnetic field generators that kept it stable. The grots looked nervous, but it held, and the tiny sun didn't go anywhere it shouldn't. That made Bozgrat happy, and helped him forget about his sore mouth. He got busy with hooking it up.

'Higher resistance is to be expected in copper compounds of lower purity...'

said Talker. Somehow, that made sense to Bozgrat, and he reached for better wire. Then he changed his mind, and began to cobble together a cooling system for the main power lines leading from the fusion plant to the secondary systems out of scattered pieces of junk.

Snikgob whistled as he welded, expertly bringing together unpromising hunks of metal into intricate mechanisms. A few judicious bashes with his hammer, and he had a gearbox. He smiled, then stopped and looked about when he thought someone might see him.

Floodlights bathed the exterior of the idol. Rattling bangs and shouts rang out from the machine. A large crowd of madboys gathered around the fence. On other nights they spouted their gibberish, acted out their peculiar rituals, or stood there rocking and mooing, clutching at fetishes, praying at the idol in their own crazy way. Tonight they were silent. They could feel it coming, they could feel the spirit of Mork approaching to inhabit the metal shell of the idol. Ork eyes driven mad by fragmentary, incomprehensible knowledge glittered with religious fervour. Gunfire, engine noise and laughter, all the raw ebullience of an orktown about to Waaagh, drifted over from the centre of Grabskabdur. But Madtown was eerily silent aside from the clatter of Mork's imminence.

The last weld was still cooling when Uggrim clambered up to the top deck beneath the stompa's head. Frik was there, bossing the other runts. Snikgob lounged in the saddle attached to the lifter dropper, long arms draped on its firing mechanisms. Talker babbled to himself in the seat at the megacannon firing controls. Uggrim wasn't happy to have the madboy on the gun, but they didn't have time to find a proper ork and it was Talker or a grot. They'd been making so much of a racket, it wasn't going to be long before Grabskab's boys came to investigate, and Uggrim intended to get in first.

'All finished?' he said.

'Yes, boss,' said Frik. The other grot oilers were polishing and dolloping thick squig grease onto everything.

‘Good lad, Frik, now you get up to the tower. Keep an eye out for them blues.’ Frik gave a proud little salute. ‘Whatever you say, boss,’ he said, and scurried away.

‘Engine ready?’ shouted Uggrim down the speaking tube.

‘Yeth Uggwim, weactor’s burnin’, got a pwoper squig-sized sun in a bottle down here. Say the word and I’ll fwick the switch,’ replied Bozgrat. Uggrim smirked at Bozgrat’s lisp. It’d be weeks before his teeth grew back, but as he looked around the finished top deck of the stompa, he knew it was worth it. It was a beauty. ‘All right then, all right.’ He slapped his hands together. ‘Okay boys, time to take fat Mork here for a test drive!’

‘That the name?’ Snikgob said, sitting straighter.

Uggrim stopped. He thought. ‘Yeah,’ he said, his enthusiasm growing. ‘Why not? Fat Mork! It’s good. I like it. To the point.’ Uggrim’s mind was undergoing a further shift. His mekboy’s fugue scudded away, clouds before a green sun. The lust for violence suddenly blazed bright. He felt the need to take charge. Someone was going to get a real talking to, and that someone was Grabskab. ‘No one puts the screws on Uggrim,’ he growled. ‘Snikgob, power up the weapons!’ he shouted. ‘Bozgrat, fire up the engine! Stand by grots!’

‘Yes, boss!’ they squeaked eagerly.

A tremor shook the idol. Then another. A coughing roar, and the whole thing was shaking as Bozgrat’s reactor spooled up to full power and he opened the juicing lines to the machine’s systems. ‘Engine on!’ shouted Bozgrat. The rumble of the engine was loud – really, brilliantly loud. Uggrim grinned wide, took one last look around the top deck, and then clambered up the ladder into the head. He sat himself in the driving chair, bare metal poking his behind. No squigskin cushions yet, no time to put them in. Not a problem, he could do that later. First they had a score to settle. Comfort could wait.

‘Engines, all ahead full!’ He threw a lever. A klaxon answered from the engine room. Gears crunched. Tentatively, but with great satisfaction, Uggrim set the stompa in motion.

The madboys gave a little ‘Ooh!’ of excitement as the stompa juddered to life. The pot-bellied war machine rumbled as its engine ignited. Black smoke boiled from its smokestacks. Grime and rust shook free of it as its arms moved. The head turned, squealing at first, then increasingly smoother as its bearings took up the oil and grease being pumped into its mechanisms. Growling with divine ire, the stompa lifted one massive foot, and stepped forward.

‘Aah!’ went the madboys. ‘It’s Mork. Mork’s alive!’ They chanted. Those that had weapons shot them off into the air. The rest waved their bizarre collections of possessions about their heads: buckets and sticks and battered pieces of trash.

Fat Mork’s foot descended with ponderous force, coming down square on a pallet piled high with paint. Cans squashed flat, sending lucky blue squirting in all directions. Fat Mork had not been painted, its armour plates remained a flat, steel grey. It was certainly never going to be blue, not now. When this was done, Uggrim was going to paint it red, with a big red sun on the front. That was a proper colour for a stompa. Sun inside, sun outside. Apt.

With increasing speed, the growling war engine of Mork waddled up through Madtown, crushing shacks into dust as it went. The mekboy’s compound was left in ruins. Uggrim and his lads would not be coming back.

His roars amplified to deafening levels by the stompa’s speakers, Uggrim set Fat Mork toward Grabskab’s citadel, a tottering iron castle surrounded by thick earthen walls studded with gun towers. Parts of it had been dismantled over the last few weeks to feed the need for Waaagh! materiel, but it was still formidable. Fat Mork was more formidable still. The stompa woke the whole town as it marched. Madboys streamed in its wake.

‘Boss, boss! Warboss, dead ahead! Blueboy nobs coming in!’ Frik said, his voice hollow down the speaking tube.

‘I see ’em, I see ’em.’

Uggrim brought Fat Mork to a halt right in front of Grabskab and his retinue in the muddy square by the citadel gates. There were a dozen of them, huge, hard nob orks as big as ambulls with evil eyes and eviller expressions. All of them were blue from head to toe, hung about with bones and skulls, and armed with a wicked assortment of weaponry.

Grabskab was the biggest of the lot, but even the bosses of the Death Skulls had that sly look to them. Scrawny, thought Uggrim, scrawny and sneaky. He wanted to squash him flat right there and then. Grabskab was not a proper boss ork.

The warboss cupped his hands around his mouth. ‘I see you’ve finished me stompa, Uggrim. Good lad. But I’m not too happy about the mess you’ve made. What are you playing at?’

Uggrim shouted out of Fat Mork’s speakers and it was as if Mork himself spoke. ‘Not yours. Mine, Grabskab. Mine! I’ve had enough of being pushed around by the likes of you. I’m keeping Fat Mork for meself.’

The warboss looked at his lackeys as if to say I told you so. They shrugged

and spat in the dirt.

‘Uggrim, I seen this before, a mek getting big ideas. Always, always before the Waaagh! What is it with you cog heads? You build something big, for teeth – *my* teeth I might add – honest teeth, and suddenly you want to be a Big Mek? Do it proper, fight in the pit, make some boss gear. Then we’ll see who’s a Big Mek and who isn’t. Step out now or I’ll murder you. Dead simple, your choice.’

‘Yeah right,’ said Uggrim. He said this to himself, but it was broadcast across the square ear-splittingly loudly. ‘Get out of my way, or I’ll squash you flat. Dead simple, *your* choice.’

Snikgob’s laughter came up the tube.

‘Fine. I want a fight anyway,’ said Grabskab. He signalled behind him to where his pride and joy, Grabskab’s Basha, sat. The battlewagon’s killcannon pointed directly at the stompa’s head. ‘Blast it,’ he said.

Nothing happened. Grabskab’s grin turned to a frown.

The interior of the stompa echoed with the mekboys’ laughter, gretchin tittered, and Fat Mork laughed along with them all. Uggrim could imagine the furious battlewagon driver jabbing at buttons, not knowing that half the gubbins to make it work were currently inside Fat Mork.

‘Lads,’ said Uggrim. ‘Swat them, kill them dead.’

Talker let rip with the megacannon. A ball of flame erupted on the side of the fort as a heavy shell ploughed into the walls. Earth fountained heavenwards. Orks all around Fat Mork opened fire. Bullets pinged off the stompa’s thick armour. Grabskab’s nobs scattered and ran for cover, firing behind them. A column of blue buggies came hurtling into the square, but Talker obliterated them in a hail of fire from the stompa’s gigashoota. The madboys, galvanised by the noise of battle, poured into the square and started brawling with blue-faced orks coming to see what the fuss was about. Everyone was fighting everyone else. The orks of Grabskabdur were overbrimming with Waaagh energy, and Uggrim’s personal revolt gave them the excuse they needed to have a good scrap.

Frik screamed out warnings from his exposed position in the crow’s nest. Rockets came in on looping trails of greasy black smoke. Fat Mork’s innards rattled to a cacophony of bullet strikes and explosions. None could burst his iron skin.

Uggrim blazed a trail of death with the stompa’s zappy eye, setting orks and grots on fire with crackling energies. He spotted Grabskab and his nobs, yelling at runtherds to get cannons into position.

‘Snikgob, show Gitskul and the rest of the blues why a droppa is a good thing to have.’ Uggrim moved Fat Mork to the right, to give his friend a better shot.

Snikgob whistled tunelessly as he set up the lifta-droppa to fire. A low, penetrating hum joined the music of battle, rising to a crescendo as the lifta-droppa’s capacitors charged themselves off Fat Mork’s fusion reactor. Snikgob swung the weapon across to target the warboss’s vehicle. With a flourish, he slammed a bank of four levers forward with one push, setting them to pully force.

A beam of antigravitons snatched at Grabskab’s Basha, plucking it from the ground like a ripe mushroom. Snikgob dipped the droppa up and down, yanked the levers to push and toss the heavy vehicle across the battlefield just before the last capacitor pulsed empty.

The Basha arced gracefully right onto Grabskab’s position. The Deffskul nobbs had time to look up before they were squished flat. Uggrim laughed so loud he cried. He leaned on his levers, sending Fat Mork into a lumbering jig. Mork really was there that day, dancing and laughing at the chaos he’d caused. He was.

The boys, realising they were fighting themselves rather than a proper enemy, had discarded their guns and were cheerfully smashing each other in the face all over the square. Large parts of Grabskabdur were smouldering ruins, but nobody cared. Affectionate acts of violence took the place of proper warfare and the battle degenerated into a brawl. A clanging sounded on the engine deck door. When Bozgat opened it, gun ready, barrels of fungus beer were pushed in, followed by happy orks who slapped him on the back and told him what a great show the mekboys had given them. Soon they were all quite drunk, and orks hung off every part of Fat Mork, shooting their shootas gaily into the sky. The celebrations went on all day. Uggrim stomped around in wobbly circles, scattering orks and grots, Snikgob graciously acceding to requests to pick up this bit of the town or that, and drop it on somebody or other’s house to great and appreciative hilarity. The tribe’s grots were sensitive to their masters’ moods, and soon long tables groaned under the weight of food and beer and barbecue pits glowed hot. The fighting subsided, the doks came out, touting for business and stitching boys back together where it was needed. It was, all things said, a great party.

The next day, Uggrim woke up with a splitting headache to find he was the Big Mek Boss of the tribe. He’d single handedly killed two-thirds of the tribe’s nobility. No one felt like fighting him. Size is power, every boy knows that, and when it comes down to it there aren’t very many orks who will pick a fight with

a twenty metre tall metal demi-god.

A week after that, the Waaagh started for real.

It was unimportant to the orks of Garbax world that the tau had come to them, rather than them going to the tau. It didn't matter to them either that the ethereals of the Vior'la Sept, having been horrified by earlier ork incursions, had determined to stop the gathering ork Waaagh! before it had begun. It didn't even bother the orks that the Tau had delivered a precision blow to the dropships which waited to take the boys into orbit, smashing the lot into scrap. What really mattered to the orks was that they were fighting, and that made them happy.

In the skies, ork fighta-bombas duelled with sophisticated tau strikecraft, and in orbit tau capital ships pounded the ork hulk while the orks, already aboard, ran howling into kroot boarding parties.

But it was in the ground where the real battle was.

What was supposed to be a rapid, surgical strike had escalated into a pitched battle as the tau taskforce found itself pinned in the wrecks it had created. Surprised by the ferocity of the ork response, more tau arrived from the fleet, fighting hard to extract their comrades. It was not going well for the tau, who found themselves bogged down fighting thousands of orks.

Boys from near and far congregated on the tau beachhead. Fat Mork was among them, Uggrim's warcries roaring from its speakers, the orks of Grabskabdur advanced behind it. The blocky, robotic forms of battlesuits swept through the sky, boiling orks in their own skins with fusion gun and plasma rifle fire. Amid the wrecked ork shuttlecraft, gunlines of pulse-rifle armed Fire Warriors reaped a heavy toll on the charging waves of boys. No matter how many they slaughtered, there were always more. The Waaagh! were upon them, and the orks wanted to fight.

Fat Mork attracted a lot of attention from the slashfaces. There were other stompas, and dread mobs, even a small gargant. But these were sorely harried. To Fat Mork's right, one of the other stompas burned. The gargant rocked under an endless battery of rocket fire. Dredmek's Dread Mob had looked very grand as it stomped onto the field, but not so much now, being reduced within minutes to a collection of smoking craters scattered with red-hot gubbins.

Fat Mork though, he was doing fine. A fresh coat of bright red paint and a huge Evil Sun painted across its belly, the mek mob's stompa waddled on unperturbed. The Red Suns mob had more than their fair share of know-wots and, after the fight with Grabskab, Bozgat had added a couple of stacked

powerfields to the war engine's defences. These glowed bright with rippling energies as the aliens pounded away at the idol, like a shiny pond with stones plopping gently into it – the tau's bullets were about as effective.

Snikgob swung the lifta-droppa back and forth across the sky with a flourish. He didn't have to aim. The sky was thick with slashfaces. They liked flying, the slashfaces, and the droppa liked to drop things that flew. The pulsed waves of pushy stuff tickled the underside of a hammerhead tank, flipping its gravity field and sending it ploughing into the ground at terminal speed. Snikgob hummed to himself and yanked at his levers, flicked the main switch bank to 'pully' and looked for something else to grab and drop.

Talker wittered on endlessly, snatches of ancient natural history and gunnery techniques tumbling out of his mouth. He bobbed backwards and forwards in the megacannon gunner's chair. Mad as he was, he reaped a high score of Tau. Sweating grots banged fresh shells onto a conveyor belt going out the stompa's side behind him. They worked hard, because as much as Talker talked, he shot faster. The heat from the cannon's barrel blazed through the shell slot.

On the deck below, Bozgat moved quickly, ducking under lines and wiring, adjusting this, tweaking that, hitting other things with his fists and his correcting mallet to keep the reactor running. He glanced repeatedly through the heavy, glass viewing slit into the heart of the reactor, where his own little evil sun boiled angrily away. Crackling jags of electricity arched from it, into the collecty points he had installed on the inner surface of the casing to gather the reactor's energies and lend them to Fat Mork's wrath. Grots worked everywhere, switching and fiddling, heavy goggles and gloves protecting their feeble grotty bodies. This was the noisiest part of Fat Mork. Every tread of the stompa shook the room. Machinery whined and whirred. The reactor made a constant, hissing roar and with each round that slammed into the shields outside, the tiny sun growled louder.

Uggrim bellowed down the tube. 'The tertiary plasma overflow conduit looks like it's about to overload,' he said, using the special mek words they sometimes used but none of them properly understood.

Bozgat glanced at the gubbins in question. Bits of it glowed red-hot. He didn't think they should be doing that. It was probably bad. 'Yeah,' he said.

'Don't yeah me!' called the newly elevated Big Mek. 'Fix it! Couple of nails should sort it right out.'

Bozgat ducked his way through the crowded reactor room and made a grot hold the nails in place. He ignored the whimpering and smell of roasting runt as

he slammed the nails in with two blows apiece from his number four hammer. He stood back as the metal lost its colour.

‘All done!’ he shouted. ‘All done.’

Up top, Uggrim directed the stompa against the slashfaces. His pressed his eye against the yielding rubber of the machine’s far-seeing scope, seeking out targets. He tugged at levers and depressed pedals, but, in truth, all feeling of separation between he and the machine had dwindled. He felt at one with it, as if stompa’s arms were his arms, its heavy feet his feet and, the beams of powerful, green energy that shot from the left eye, his own burning glare.

Three slashfaces in lumpy tinboy armour leaped around like grots on a hotplate, belting high energy packets toward his face. Fat Mork’s shields glowed gold as they absorbed and dissipated the energy. The tinboys fired, flew backwards on blue blades of flame, landed, and fired again. Little round things, like wildboy shields, buzzed about their boxy masters. They too had guns, but they were rubbish, and did nothing at all to the stompa’s electrical armour of orky power.

‘Boring! Stupid! Zogging Slashfaces, you can’t hurt Fat Mork!’ yelled Uggrim. ‘Take them out, Talker!’

Uggrim didn’t listen to Talker’s rambling response, but watched intently as the madboy loosed a shot from the megacannon at the Tau. It detonated slightly off target, a hemisphere of brilliant fire that engulfed all but one of them. This one was hurled sideways, sprawled to the ground. Earth heaved skywards. Bits of metal and sod pattered down as the stompa waddled forward toward the impact site. One of the little tinboy drones buzzed about, as lost-looking as an abandoned pet snot. Of the two tinboy slashfaces Talker had hit, there was no trace remaining. The third was clawing pathetically at the ground, trying to stand on ruined legs, jets flaring hopelessly. Uggrim zoomed right in with the scope. Smoke leaked from gashes in its armour, exposing gubbins and juicing cables.

Three more steps and the stompa was on top of the remaining slashface tinboy. It raised its plasma gun as the energy shield passed over it and fired off three shots. The miniature sunbursts splashed molten metal from the thick hide of the idol, taking glowing scoops from the armour, but did not penetrate. Fat Mork’s foot descended with finality on the figure and Uggrim felt the crunch through the idol’s superstructure.

Uggrim roared. Fat Mork roared with him. They were drawing close to the wrecked dropships. Points of light flashed where hunter teams fired from the wrecks. The stompa swayed with the motion of the lifta-droppa as Snikgob

played it backwards and forwards across the nearest ship. The reactor sang as it pumped power into the weapon's battery of capacitors. Tight beams of gravitic particles caressed the crippled ork spaceships, ripping free tons of metal with each sweep. Then Uggrim had Fat Mork wink at them.

There were fewer lights after that.

Bozgat concentrated, Talker gibbered. Snikgob cackled, grots scurried. Uggrim shouted. They were the vital organs of Mork. Fat mork, and Uggrim had built him and brought him to life, not some stupid Warboss! Him!

But there's always someone that'll try and spoil an ork's fun. The slashfaces gave it a good try.

Shimmering air, that's all the stealth team seemed to be, little faults in your vision like the shimmer coming up off a fire, and the mek's didn't see them because of that. Three slashfaces snuck under the protective cape of energy around the mekboy's stompa, and strapped their tankbustas to the side of Fat Mork. Then came the explosions, three of them, one close to the other – Boom, boom, boom!

'What the zog?' bellowed Uggrim. Fat Mork wobbled more to the left than the right. Red lights blinked. Buzzing alarms and bells rang. He wrestled with the controls as Fat Mork decided he might like a little lie down. 'Me foot! The zoggers have done for me foot!'

Bozgat had it worse. He picked himself up groggily from the floor of the reactor deck. The big bell was ringing, the one that meant something very bad was about to happen. Smoke roiled in the belly of the idol. Bits of grot were scattered around like scraps after a big feast. Hull plating had been bent inwards by the blast, jagged and hot. The stompa's gait was erratic. Every time the left foot went forward, the machine swayed alarming, and a horrendous grinding noise came with it. Bozgat plucked a rivet from the flesh of his arm and tossed it to the floor.

'Grots! Grots!'

'Yes, boss?' came a timid voice. Gretchin pulled themselves out from hiding.

'Only three of you?'

'Sorry, boss. Sorry about the others. Being dead on duty. Slackers. Not us, boss, right lads?' The grots nodded with forced enthusiasm.

'Never mind. Get me big hammer! Get me burna! We need this fixed and pronto. Chop chop!'

'Boss!' A grot pointed a wavering finger at Bozgat. 'Look!'

'What?' the mek looked down. A triangle of red laser dots marked his chest.

‘Uh oh,’ he said, throwing himself sideways. The reactor compartment filled with the racket of gunfire. Weedy gunfire, all ‘pop pop pop’ not ‘bang bang bang’, like a proper shoota only there was a lot of it.

Bullets punched into the Stompa’s interior, tearing up gubbins and juicing lines. Steam whooshed out of the main power feed’s coolant system. More alarms. More bells. More problems.

Bozgat popped his head out from behind the reactor casing. He reached for his pistol, a massive, blocky thing packed full of over-charged bullets of his own devising.

A shimmer, a hole in the smoke. Movement where there shouldn’t be movement. Bozgat frowned at it, but he was a mek, not a thicko boy, and was not confused for long.

He opened fire at the hole in the smoke, and his gun made a proper noise as it discharged. Bullets spanked off something hard. Five, six, seven. He hit something important and then he could see what attacked him.

Light fizzed all over the Tau battlesuit as its camouflage collapsed, revealing a stumpy, ovoid thing a bit like a tiny dread. A helmet with one glowing lens set into it swung in Bozgat’s direction and then the Tau opened fire again.

‘Oh no you don’t!’ shouted Bozgat.

He ran around the reactor, bullets chasing him, pinging off the casing. He rounded the other side before the armoured alien could bring his big gun to bear and launched himself across the room. His tackle brought them both down with a clatter. They skidded into a wall, tried to get up, but stumbled again as Fat Mork took another uncertain step. The tau brought his gun up, Bozgat slapped it out of the way. He jammed his pistol into the alien’s face and emptied the magazine at point blank range. Dents hammered themselves into the metal. Things sparked and fizzed in the armour’s mechanisms, but the tau did not die. Bozgat rammed his clever fingers into gaps, wrenching at armour plates with all his cunning mek and orky might. He had no luck, and so resorted to bashing at the alien with the biggest spanner he could grab off his belt. The alien’s glass eye lens was all smashed in and it was blind. It tried again and again to throw him off, but Bozgat held him down. He jammed his spanner under the chin on the helmet, and with a mighty heave pried it loose. The slashface within was pathetic, sickly blue-grey, and wimpier than a grot. Bozgat wrapped his hands round both sides of its face and snapped its neck with little effort.

‘Waaagh!’ he bellowed in the dead alien’s face.

A gout of flame roared over his head. He spun around. Snikgob clung to the

stairway leading down from the top deck, burna in hand.

‘Oi!’ shouted Bozgat.

‘You want to stop your waaaghing and watch your back instead,’ said the other Mek. ‘Two more of them, trying to get in.’ Snikgob pointed his burna nozzle at the breach.

Bozgat pulled out a spare magazine, slammed it into his gun and went to the breach in the armour. He hung carelessly from the sundered metal into the outside. Fat Mork was waddling around in circles, hampered by his gimpy foot. The battle raged ferociously: ork boys running and bellowing, shells exploding, slashfaces zooming through the air. The dropships were close, he could see orks thumping hunter teams, the pathetic tau being battered to bits now that the lads were in close. Behind the stompa, Bozgat saw two figures afire, like the one he’d killed, slashfaces in tinboy suits. One was prone, dead it looked like, but the other was aiming right at him. He shot first, most of his bullets going wild. He ducked back into the reactor room, and a returning spray of high velocity munitions peppered the stompa’s hull.

‘Nice bit of fun this, ain’t it?’ said Snikgob.

Bozgat leaned out and fired again at the tau in his tin suit. He missed. But a shell detonated with gratifying loudness near the last tau, and when the smoke cleared, it had gone. Bozgat surveyed the glorious maelstrom of fire and war, and howled before swinging himself inside.

He looked around the reactor room. ‘Spare any grots? We need to get this fixed.’

Meks work fast. Orky-know-wots run in their veins, part of their blood. They didn’t think as they patched, hammered, welded and nailed, calming their little evil sun and putting it back to work. They had Uggrim stop the idol and duck outside. Hordes of orks ran past them, blasting mindlessly and roaring as they went. Trukks bounced over shell holes. A fighta bomba screeched overhead, wings wagging as it tried to shake off a pair of pursuing slashface attack craft. This was what orks lived for, the tumult of combat. But Snikgob and Bozgat had a job to do, a job they had been made for, and it consumed them utterly.

Snikgob set his burna from burn to cut, a hot knife of fire slipped swiftly through the buckled plates of Fat Mork that dragged against the idol’s foot. Five minutes it took. Five minutes, outside in the fury and holler of it all, to free the foot. The stompa was taking a massive amount of fire, but the shields held, and none of it got through.

‘We winning?’ asked Bozgat.

Snikgob didn't look up from his cutting. 'Dunno. Does it matter?'

Bozgat thought. 'Nah,' he said. 'All done?'

'All done. Get on the talky box, tell Uggrim we's good.'

Bozgat yammered into his lumpen radio. As Fat Mork began his ponderous stride, the two mekboys and their grots clambered aboard.

Frik hollered down the tube, caught between excitement and terror, pointing out proper targets for the idol. The tau were completely surrounded, but more and more of their fighting ships were coming down from orbit. Through his scope, Uggrim could see the hulk up in the black, pale as a moon through the filter of the atmosphere, wreathed in fire and starbursts. Bright dots whizzed about it. On the ground, the Tau had abandoned their attempts to extricate themselves, and had gone on the offensive. Troop carriers disgorged team after team of green-clad riflemen. Flying tanks roared in from the upper atmosphere. Bombs exploded left and right, forward and back. Pillars of energy slammed down from space.

'If we wins, we wins – if we don't, we fought,' said Uggrim to himself, and aimed Fat Mork right at the thick of the fighting.

He looked down the swell of his metal belly at the masses of Orks scurrying before him. They looked weedier than snots. Big, strong, strapping ork boys, and he was bigger than them all.

'Waaaagh!' he yelled.

'Waaagah!' Fat Mork shouted.

Mork strode the battlefield, a metal god incarnate. That day he fought well.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GUY HALEY began his career on *SFX Magazine* in 1997 before leaving to edit Games Workshop's *White Dwarf*, followed by SF magazine *Death Ray*. Since 2009 he has been a wandering writer, working in both magazines and novels. He lives in Somerset with his wife and son, a malamute and an enormous, evil-tempered Norwegian Forest Cat called, ironically, Buddy.



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