

X Marks da Spot

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

It shouldn't be able to fly.

That was Captain Cymeon's first thought.

It's coming right at us, was his second.

The crew of *Belisarius Indomitus* hurried to carry out his orders, diverting power to the manoeuvring thrusters and forward voids. It wouldn't do any good. Alarm klaxons echoed from the high vaulted, wood-panelled bridge, its fittings more like those of a patrician's antechamber than the bridge of a starship.

Such was the way with vessels belonging to the great Navigator Houses of the Navis Nobilite. So much stock was placed in appearance and front that anything less would be seen as poverty-stricken weakness.

The main viewer was bordered by velvet curtains, and fronted by a vast proscenium, like a Terran playhouse of the *Theatrica Imperialis*. Cymeon had always liked its grandeur, but the image of the vessel hurtling toward them from the Veilless asteroid field was grotesque and ill-befitting such splendour.

It shouldn't be able to fly.

The thought returned again as Cymeon stared at his doom.

A greenskin scraphulk of monstrous dimensions, asymmetrical and wrought from the bones of space debris and scavenged wrecks. A monster of the void, its rusted metal plates were held together by force of will as much as by its crudely welded seams, lashed cable-tethers and tens of thousands of punch-bolted rivets.

Its prow was a vast jaw of serrated iron teeth, each hundreds of metres high and caked in agglomerated junk like flesh from devoured victims. Enormous guns, hooks and cavernous openings covered its bloated bulk, and primitive glyphs covered its hull like war-paint.

Leering skulls and fang-filled jaws.

‘Emperor preserve us,’ said Cymeon. ‘It’s the *Reddgun’s Revenge...*’

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‘You’se lot ready?’ shouted Kaptain Radrukk Reddgun over the roaring sound of the Skrullboyz roaring vehicles filling the cavernous hangar. His giant hammer was poised over the katapult release.

‘We was born ready, Kaptain!’ roared the Fragga from within the iron shell of his Deff Dread, its hulking, barrel-like form towering over Reddgun. Its stumpy legs wheezed and leaked oil. Its four mechanised battle limbs were festooned with rokkit, blades and crackling power claws. Two of those arms carried an enormous metal hook.

‘Then go get ‘em, boyz!’ bellowed the kaptain, swinging the hammer around in a crushing arc. The head slammed the katapult release and the clanking war-machine buckled the deck as its vast spring-loaded arms hurled the Deff Dread from the *Reddgun’s Revenge*.

Irregular booms of thudding metal swiftly followed as more katapult arms slammed forward. Kaptain Radrukk Reddgun grunted with amusement as he watched entire mobz of Deff Dreads fly from the hangar towards the fragile looking vessel ahead.

Hundreds of Boyz in Reddgun’s black and red gripped the thick metal links of chains attached to the hooks the Deff Dreads carried. Each wore a ridiculous oversuit of filth-caked orange to which was attached bowl helmets of smeared glass. Sheet metal axes, spiked mauls, shootas and motorised cleavers were slung at their shoulders.

No sooner were the Deff Dreads away than the chains pulled taut and the boys were yanked out of the ship in their wake. They howled and cheered as they flew through space towards the enemy ship, waving their weapons in anticipation of the coming fight.

Radrukk himself was a monstrous, leathery skinned ork with swollen muscles and a boulder-like skull. One side of his face was all but caved in, rebuilt with a patched eye in a metal mask and iron

jaw. One fang was yellowed bone, the other a rusted butcher's hook rammed through his thick bottom lip.

Like his Boyz, Reddgun wore a rudimentary space helmet, something that had once been the cockpit canopy of a human aircraft. He didn't bother with a vacuum suit, preferring to let everyone see his flamboyant kaptain's coat and patchwork overalls of many colours.

One leg ended at the knee, its replacement the steel haft of a human banner-pole and the foot a bent eagle. A chain-cutlass hung at his waist and a rotary-barrelled blasta was fully loaded with extra dakka.

'You ain't gonna bovver wiv a spacesuit, kaptain?' said Skrag, his scurvy gretchen slave-cum-whatever-he-needed.

'Nah, a bit of cold don't trouble me none,' said Reddgun.

'Wot wiv me already being dead.'

Scrag nodded and said, 'Good point, kaptain.'

'I ever tell you how I got killed, Skrag?'

'No, Kaptain,' said Skrag, rolling his eyes.

Scrag was spared yet another retelling of Reddgun deposing as Warboss by by a blast of fire from the Skrullboyz vehicles.

Radrukk had once been the master of da Bloody Waaagh until a sneaky git had challenged by him by whacking him on the head with a thunder hammer. Upon recovering consciousness in the drops, Reddgun had, naturally, assumed he was dead. No self-respecting challenger would leave a defeated rival alive. That he was able to get up and sneak out of the camp that had once been his did nothing to dent the confidence of his mortal diagnosis.

The Skrullboyz revved their engines again and a few couldn't wait for the order. Wheels spitting grit, they roared straight out of the cavernous hangar after the boyz. Their red vehicles arced through space, entire mobz of ladz clinging to their sides.

‘Skrullboyz ladz is keen to get over there and stomp ‘umies,’ noted Skrag.

Reddgun grunted. ‘Those ladz’d be keen even if there weren’t no ship neiver.’

‘True enough,’ said Skrag as Reddgun grabbed the end of the rapidly unspooling length of chain attached to the Fragga’s Deff Dread.

‘Go get ‘em, Skrullboy!’ yelled Reddgun.

Like racers at the start line, Skrullboyz remaining vehicles wheelspun and roared from the hangar. Some were actually intended for use in space – or at least the air – but most were simply vast engines on wheels they hoped would hit the human ship. Some might even fly in through the holes the Deff Dreads were cutting.

‘See ya over ‘dere!’ laughed Reddgun as the chain pulled taut and yanked him from the ship.

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Itsobal gripped the bulkhead tightly as the colossal impact of the two ships coming together echoed through the *Indomitus*’s hull. It even overshadowed the sounds of battle ringing through its structure. Vox-thieves implanted in the bone of his skull were relaying inter-ship communications, and it made for grim listening.

Greenskin war-machines hurled into space had cut their way through the hull and hordes of alien warriors had swung in through the breaches on long lengths of chain. Ork vehicles roaring from the scraphulk had slammed into the ship, clamping themselves to the hull with giant magnets before blasting their way inside.

Those chains had winched the two ships together and now there was no escape. Frantic vox-traffic between the ship’s armsmen told the same tale of swarming hordes of orks on the rampage, killing and looting everything they could find. Istobal sat with his knees hugged tight to his chest, rocking back and forth on his sumptuous bed.

‘Greenskins are aboard the *Indomitus*. It’s going to be a massacre,’ he said, close to tears. ‘Why did Cymeon take us so close to the Veiloss belt? He knew the greenskins had bases there.’

‘It was a calculated risk,’ said Bacauda, swiftly arming himself with a selection of wide-bore pistols, thick blades and grenades from his lacquered supply cabinet.

Bacauda was Istobal’s Lifeward, a scarred veteran of the *Militarum Tempestus*. The only survivor of a greenskin assault on a House Belisarius outpost on Armageddon. He’d kept the teeth of the warlord he’d killed that day, wearing them around his thick neck like a gory totem.

‘House Belisarius doesn’t require Cymeon to take risks,’ said Istobal, his anger at the captain stiffening his spine. He adjusted the bejewelled bandanna over the third eye in his forehead. ‘It requires him to get my family’s valuables and the Charter to Terra in one piece.’

‘The *Indomitus* is a fast ship and the odds against actually encountering an ork scrapship was low.’

‘Not low enough it seems,’ snapped Istobal, wiping his hands over his face. They came away wet with tears and snot. He cleaned them on the silk coverlet of his bed and took a deep, calming breath.

‘I am a Navigator of House Belisarius,’ he said, pushing himself off the bed. ‘Such craven fear is beneath me.’

But the stories he’d heard of the greenskins...

Piratical raiders who lurked in the asteroid belts and preyed on Imperial shipping. Feral savages, brute murderers and pitiless slavers. As much as he’d thrilled to Bacauda’s tales of killing orks, the thought of actually facing one had all but unmanned him.

‘Give me a gun,’ said Istobal, striding to where Bacauda had packed himself with enough weapons to assassinate a moderately populated hive district. ‘Something big enough to put down a greenskin.’

‘Not a chance,’ said Bacauda.

‘You’re refusing my command?’ said Istobal. ‘Aren’t you forgetting your place?’

‘You’re not trained, sire, and I don’t want you behind me with a loaded weapon.’

‘I need a gun, Bacauda,’ insisted Istobal. ‘If a greenskin gets past you—’

‘The only way a greenskin is getting past me is if I’m dead, and if I’m dead then so are you. Gun or no gun.’

Istobal was about to protest when Bacauda put his hand on his shoulder. A breach of protocol and entirely too over-familiar, but, under the circumstances, Istobal let it go.

‘It’s noble you want to fight, sire, but you will be a distraction to me, and in combat, distractions get a man killed.’

The Lifeward guided him to the dresser where the gold and ouslite chest that had seen them abandon Arkona sat.

One of the Sector Charters of House Belisarius sat within the chest, a document of incalculable value. Signed by High Lords Xavier Belisarius in ages past, it granted the Navigator House exclusive, sector-wide trade rights in perpetuity. House legends claimed it had been touched by the hand of the Emperor himself at the dawn of the Great Crusade.

With the outbreak of the tyrannid infestation and the increase in system-wide fighting, the Belisarius elders had chosen to withdraw all House personnel from Arkhona. Istobal and the *Indomitus* were bound for Terra, but now this...

‘You are the bearer of the Belisarius Charter,’ said Bacauda. ‘Stay behind me and move as I move and we will reach the saviour pods. You will not die here. I will not allow it, do you understand?’

Istobal nodded, Bacauda’s certainty giving him strength.

‘Where are the Wolfblades?’ he asked as Bacauda opened the door to the corridors beyond. ‘Shouldn’t they be here too?’

‘Where do you think they are?’ replied Bacauda. ‘In the thick of the bloodiest broil.’

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Godric Widdowsyn sang as he slew the ork boarders. A lusty drinking song taught to him by the Fell-Handed on one of his rare wakings in the shadowed halls beneath the Fang. He buried the smile of his axe in the guts of a bellowing greenskin.

He wrenched it clear and the ork folded up, hewn asunder with the blade having bit deep into its spine. Godric grimaced at the stinking blood coating the blade. Crafted on the ice of Fenris under the baleful gaze of the mightiest storm to ravage the Fang in centuries, it was a frost-bladed thing of beauty.

‘Too fine a weapon for greenskin blood!’ he roared.

‘No weapon is too fine to sup that red feast,’ answered Aelfan Slayfell as he shoulder barged a greenskin brute and rammed his storm-bladed sword up and under its rope-strapped breastplate.

The two Space Wolves stepped back and fired their bolt pistols down the corridor. Half a dozen ork skulls detonated under the explosive fusillade. Scores more pushed forward from the ruptured bulkhead and the hewing began again.

‘You think we should get back to Istobal?’ asked Godric.

‘When there’s killing to be done here?’ roared Aelfan, slamming his helm into a greenskin’s face. Fangs snapped and blood sprayed his visor. ‘The Wolfblades are sworn to House Belisarius, and what better way to keep Istobal’s pretty little hide attached to his bones than by killing the greenskins before they get to him?’

‘Good point,’ agreed Godric, hammering his axe down through an ork and splitting it from neck to groin. ‘Besides, Bacauda never leaves his side.’

‘Aye, that one’s handy, right enough.’

‘For a mortal,’ said Godric.

‘For a mortal,’ agreed Aelfan.

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Bacauda shot an ork through the eye socket, another in the heart. A third he put down with a thick-bladed knife across its throat. It took another three stabs of the blade before its collapsed. He lobbed a grenade and ducked behind a projecting stanchion, keeping his body in front Istobal Belisarius.

The blast filled the companionway with shrapnel and put down another two orks. Even as the echoes faded, Bacauda spun out and searched for targets. One ork was still alive and he put a high-calibre shell through a gaping wound in its skull.

‘Come on,’ he said, all but dragging Istobal behind him.

‘You killed them all,’ said his charge. ‘So quickly.’

‘It’s what you pay me for.’

He moved down the companionway, gun tracking left to right. Hard to pinpoint any one threat. Sounds of battle were coming from all around. Certain to be more greenskins ahead. They passed over crossways and past the sites of furious battle where orks corpses had been so thoroughly dismantled it looked as though they’d been put through a threshing machine.

Human corpses were thick on the ground and Bacauda heard Istobal snivelling in fear at the sight of their butchered remains. Orks didn’t kill cleanly or surgically, their weapons were wrought to cause as much bloody harm as possible.

Vox-reports put orks on the starboard laterals, but they’d cut a number of the transverse links. The armymen were being pushed back to the portside halls. Three upper decks, where the greenskins had first breached, had already fallen. Not long before the fighting was over and the slaughter began.

And all this for an old piece of paper.

The ridiculousness of it all was not lost on Bacauda, but ridiculous or not, he’d sworn a life-debt to Belisarius. That was a sacred bond, and he’d be damned if he’d renege on it, even if Istobal was a spoilt brat without a spine.

They pushed on and Bacauda brought his gun around as a huge shape loomed out of the smoke and shadow before him. He managed a single shot before his arm was wrenched to the side.

‘Ho there! Watch where you aim that thing,’ said a gruff, heavily accented voice that could only belong to a son of Fenris. ‘You’ve scraped the paint of my plate.’

‘Some lax fire discipline there,’ said Aelfan Slayfell, moving past him to get behind Istobal.

‘Mortals,’ said Godric Widdosyn. ‘What do you expect?’

‘Where in the name of the Emperor have you two been?’ demanded Istobal. ‘Wolfblades are sworn to protect the heirs of House Belisarius!’

The two Space Marines laughed, the sound incongruous in this place of death.

‘What do you think we’ve been doing?’ grinned Widdowsyn.

‘You think you’d have reached this far without us clearing the way for you?’ added Slayfell.

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Kaptain Reddgun swung his hammer and a bunch of humans came apart in a red shower. He grunted with laughter and stomped through the ruin that remained. He was annoyed these humans weren’t giving him a better fight, but his gut told him there were rich pickings to be had here.

His ladz were running amok through the ship’s cramped hallways, their whoops and bellowed yells telling him they were getting some good killing done. A kaptain had to make sure his boyz had a steady supply of enemies to fight. More fighting meant stronger boyz. Not enough fighting meant they’d turn on you.

That was the mistake that got him killed the first time, resting up after a big fight instead of going looking for the next one. He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

He paused as he smelled something out of place.

Even amid the spilled blood and guts, it was unmistakable.

‘Wot is it, boss?’ said one of the ladz, blood drooling from his tusks and caking his blades.

‘I smell da big meat,’ he growled.

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The two Wolfblades led the way, talking in a guttural tongue that sounded no better than the grunting bellows Istobal heard from the orks. He was out of breath, far from used to this kind of physical exertion, and the chest was heavy in his arms.

‘How much farther is it?’ he wheezed.

‘Two more decks,’ said Bacauda.

‘I can’t make it that far,’ said Istobal, stopping and leaning against the bulkhead. It was hot to the touch.

‘You don’t have a choice, sire.’

Istobal held out the chest. ‘Carry this for me.’

‘I can’t fight holding that.’

‘And I can’t walk with it weighing me down!’

‘Ho now,’ said Godric Widdowsyn. ‘What’s occurring here? We don’t stop, we keep moving.’

‘Orks breathing down our necks,’ said Slayfell. ‘We’d happily kill them, but we’re oathbound to keep you alive.’

‘How inconvenient for you,’ snapped Istobal.

‘True,’ agreed Widdowsyn.

Slayfell spun and raised his sword. ‘Greenskins.’

‘Where?’ said Bacauda.

‘Everywhere,’ said Widdowsyn.

The bulkhead behind the Space Wolf tore open as a vast circular sawblade ripped through it. Widdowsyn had barely begun to turn as the roaring, toothed blade clove him from breastbone to spine. Apocalyptic quantities of blood sprayed the corridor as his shorn remains collapsed.

Istobal screamed as he was drenched in the stuff. He threw the chest away, wiping the sticky mess covering him from head to foot in horror. He saw what happened next through a haze of sticky red gore.

A clanking mass of iron and rust barged its way into the corridor. Bulkily rotund, its mechanised arms snatched up Slayfell and tore his armour with enormous claws.

The Wolfblade hacked his sword through the arm’s hissing feed-pipes and the Deff Dread released him. Its guns battered his armour with chugging blasts of gunfire that filled the corridor with choking clouds of tar-black smoke. Slayfell roared and fired back. His rounds spanked from its armour.

Greenskins forced their way into the corridor behind the Deff Dread and Bacauda picked them off one by one. Their howling bloodlust was primal in its ferocity and they didn’t care how many of them died. If anything it only seemed to spur them to greater heights of bloodlust.

Slayfell hacked his blade through the hissing, creaking pneumatics at the Deff Dread’s knee and the lurching machine toppled onto its side, squirting jets of reeking oil. He vaulted over it and Istobal saw a pair of grenades wedged beneath an overlapping plate of its rusted armour. Bacauda turned and threw himself at Istobal, slamming him to the deck as the grenades detonated.

The noise was deafening, and Istobal yelled as something sharp embedded itself in his leg. Bacauda’s weight pinned him to the deck.

‘Get off me, damn it!’ he yelled, but the Lifeward wasn’t moving. He squirmed out from beneath him and saw why.

In saving Istobal’s life, Bacauda had sacrificed his own. The man’s back was a bloody mess of burns and shredded meat. Spars of sharp metal jutted from his body like grotesque spines and the white gleam of bone was clearly visible through the churned mass of ripped flesh.

Istobal sobbed and pushed Bacauda’s corpse away. He pushed himself to his knees and fled, only to see a baying pack of greenskins coming back towards him.

At their head was an oafish, outlandish figure that had all the appearance of an animal in a menagerie dressed in rags for the amusement of gawpers. The riot of colours in its overalls and long stormcoat would have been laughable were it not for the blood caking it and its gore-smeared warhammer. The monster’s face was a mask of metal and it wore an archaic, tricorn hat jammed down over its bestial features.

‘Dis one looks important,’ said the creature, and Istobal’s horror was magnified a hundredfold at the abhorrent notion of the monster possessing even rudimentary intelligence. ‘I fink we’ll keep him as a pet.’

Istobal dropped to his knees and closed his eyes.

‘In the Emperor’s blessed name, protect me from—’

A heavy fist slammed into the side of his head and the prayer was over before it had truly begun.

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Reddgun let out a frustrated sigh as he stomped up and down the corridor.

‘I was ded sure I smelled...’ he paused and held up his hand, his brow furrowing as he stared at his fingers, ‘...two of ‘em.’

‘I dunno, kaptain,’ said Skrag. ‘I can only see one of da big humies. Mind you, he’s in two parts if dat helps...’

Reddgun smacked Skrag on the side of the head.

‘Don’t be clevver, Skrag, it don’t suit ya.’

‘Sorry, boss.’

Reddgun had already pulled the teef from the dead humie in the animal skins and heavy armour. The warrior had an axe with a shiny blade, but it was too small and too fragile for Reddgun. It had broken on his first test swing at the wall. The other wolfy human was nowhere to be found, but Reddgun wanted his teef more than anything.

A humie that could put down a Deff Dread? His teef *had* to be good and sharp. The skinny runty one was already in chains, snivelling and wet with his own soil. He’d make a fun plaything for a while before Reddgun got bored of him and tossed him to Skrag.

The ship was his now, and he’d already heard from Skrullboy’s mobz that the holds were full to bursting with gold, precious-looking statues and plunder. This had been a prize ship to scalp.

‘A good haul, kaptain,’ said Skrag, reading his expression.

‘Yeah,’ agreed Reddgun, scraping his face with the tip of his hook hand. ‘Loads of plunder to spread around.’

‘Too much maybe,’ ventured Skrag.

‘Wot you mean?’

‘We don’t got no room for it all on da *Revenge*,’ said Skrag. ‘We’s already pretty stuffed wiv salvage and loot.’

‘We ain’t leaving it,’ Reddgun warned him.

‘No, course we ain’t!’ squealed Skrag. ‘Wot I meant was that we could, y’know, bury it somewhere.’

‘Bury it?’

‘Yeah, stick it somewhere safe and come back for it later.’

Reddgun nodded. That made sense, but it was Skrag’s idea, so he had to claim it for his own. No sense in letting the little zogger get ideas above his station.

‘Yeah, we’ll bury it,’ he announced. ‘We’ll take it to the planet the ‘umies came from and bury it. Then we’ll come back and dig it up when we’ve got da room.’

‘Good idea, boss,’ said Skrag.

‘How we gonna remember where we put it?’ said Reddgun.

Skrag thought about it for moment before his cunning little eyes lit up and he ran back down the corridor to where a shiny box had broken open. Its contents had spilled onto the blood-slick deck.

‘Here,’ said Skrag, holding up an old-looking piece of parchment with a lot of humie writing on it and a bright red X at the top. ‘We can make a map. X marks da spot, don’t it?’