

Salvork

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

Beams from portable lumens cut the frozen air of what Myllar's rough schematics identified as the void derelict's embarkation deck. Drifting clouds of debris filled it from end to end, as if the space had been a dumping ground for the crew's junk.

A ramshackle host of vehicles filled one end, secured to the deck by rusted lengths of chain. Broken skull glyphs and tusked poles twisted in the zero gravity, bumping into floating scraps of machinery and spinning off in another directions.

Gelatinous blobs of molten metal spun in the air around the hole Colyns' melta-bore had cut through the ice-locked hull. Motes of drifting ice made the air glitter with a cold beauty.

'Overlord class,' said Myllar, slowly sweeping his lumen pack around the devastated bay.

Colyns shook his head.

'No. Vault radius isn't big enough,' he grunted, aiming a beam towards the curving girders overhead. 'It's a Lunar, maybe a Gothic. Or at least this part was.'

Full augur-penetration hadn't been possible thanks to the thickness of ice, but what data they'd been able to gather on the derelict's internal structure appeared to indicate the presence of at least six distinct vessels; some human, some xenos, all bound by a haphazard agglomeration of rock, ice and metal.

Ejected from the Veiloss belt, most likely the result of a cometary impact, the hulk had been on course to bypass the Kharon system's trinary stars. But the orbital salvage vessel *Ulixes Explorer* had located the derelict, and dragged it through space to the breaker yards in orbit over Arkhona.

Every such piece of spatial wreckage was a potential treasure trove of raw materials and lost technology. Enormous docking clamps and e-mag tethers were already attaching to strategic locations across the hulk.

'Still got atmosphere,' said Colyns, stepping into the icy blackness of the derelict. 'Saves having to suit up the breaker servitors.'

‘And I know how you hate that,’ grinned Myllar as the ten-man boarding team moved out, guns raised and the mag-boots of their vac-suits keeping them locked to the deck. Underslung targeting beams criss-crossed the vault.

‘No signs of life,’ said Myllar, reading the feeds from the threat-auspex. ‘Thankfully.’

‘Agreed,’ said Colyns. ‘Let’s find archaeotech, rare minerals, and structurally sound metals, but life? No thanks.’

‘Remember that hulk drifting out of the Kailexor Reach?’

Colyns touched the Aquila on his vac-suit’s bronze chest-plate. ‘Don’t even say it. You’ll bring us bad luck.’

Myllar grinned. Colyns was always superstitious in the opening moments of a salvage operation, while it was just the two of them and their armed guards. Once the rest of the crew got on board it was all business, but until then, the man was as jumpy as a Whiteshield facing his first battle.

‘You want me to get everyone else aboard?’

Beyond the integrity-sealed breach in the hull, the salvage yard’s thousands of lifter-servitors, hulk-breakers and Tech-Scavs awaited, ready to bring myriad cutting tools to bear.

‘Not yet,’ said Colyns, as a warning rune blinked on the threat auspex.

‘What have you got, Nicodemus?’ asked Myllar, pushing through the clouds of spinning debris and junk. A tusked helmet bounced from his vac-suit’s armoured shoulder guard and spun away, its jagged-toothed visor leering at him.

‘Organics,’ said Nicodemus, the squad sergeant of the armed detail. ‘Non-human. Two hundred metres dead ahead.’

‘Couldn’t have said *straight* ahead,’ muttered Colyns. ‘Had to say *dead* ahead.’

Milo Nicodemus was a humourless man, but the Arkhona Void Salvage Corp hadn’t hired him for his sunny disposition. Ex-Militarum Tempestus, grievous wounds had seen the man rendered unfit for active service, but perfect for life as a mercenary.

Clad in a bronzed vac-suit with armour plates at his shoulders, groin and chest, the inside of Milo's faceplate was illuminated by the red glow of his ocular augmetic. The Hellgun was his favoured weapon; powerful and without any casings or solid rounds to ricochet wildly in zero gravity.

'What have you got?' asked Myllar.

'Greenskins,' said Milo, gesturing with the muzzle of his shouldered rifle.

Colyns made another aquila, not easy when you were holding a lumen pack in one hand. Even Myllar felt a knot of tension settle in his gut at the thought of orks.

He needn't have worried.

These orks were very dead.

Two of the largest specimens floated with their meaty hands locked around each other's throats, their bestial faces twisted in mid-bellow, as though they'd frozen to death in the instant of murder. Dozens more were pinned by heavy machinery or drifting in in a silent dance of brutal mayhem.

'Were they fighting each other?' asked Colyns.

'Looks that way,' agreed Milo.

'Greenskins,' said Myllar, shaking his head.

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Beyond the hull of the derelict, crudely-fashioned generators wheezed with the faint accumulation of power. Frozen solid and starved of light in the icy density of the Veiloss belt, ancient power-gathering panels finally drank of the triple star's light. Anchored in low orbit around Arkhona, mechanisms that would have confounded all but the most radical priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus drew power to hissing, clanking, bellowing furnaces deep in the frozen heart of the derelict.

Ice-locked corridors that had not known light and heat for hundreds of years flickered with light, and shards of ice changed back into water. Primitive motors belched smoke and fumes, and ancient machinery crafted by dead alien races screamed as their function was yoked to the most primitive and barbaric of technologies.

Power spread through the derelict without rhyme or reason, rising up from the depths at ever-increasing speeds. Its engines burned hot, and its sudden lurch towards Arkhona's gravity ripped the salvage yard's docking clamps away in a blaze of hydraulic fluids and electrical discharge.

It would take six planetary revolutions before the derelict's flaming wreckage finally impacted on Arkhona's surface.

And when it did, the terror and devastation would be like nothing the planet's inhabitants had ever experienced.

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Myllar had never been this close to an alien.

Brutish and with solid musculature swollen beyond imagining, the ork was armoured in steel plates riveted directly onto its body. An extravagant bicorn hat was jammed on its skull and one eye had been sealed off with a plate of black iron. A long, multi-coloured coat streamed at its back, and with the hand that wasn't attempting to throttle its frozen enemy, it carried an enormous axe with jagged fangs running around its edge.

Its opponent was no less garishly attired, with a baggy white overshirt sewn together from a number of Imperial war-banners. Black and yellow striped britches were tucked into high boots of brown leather and steel reinforcement. The ork was without a hat, instead sporting a crimson bandanna tied around its brow-heavy skull. It too boasted a black iron patch over one eye, and like its foe, its lip and ragged ears were pierced with gold rings and barbed hooks.

‘Colourful pair, aren’t they?’ said Myllar, leaning forward and tapping a fingertip against the nearest ork’s iron-sheathed fangs. As long as his hand, the beast could disembowel him and drag out his entrails in one bite.

Its eyes were a lifeless, frost-rimed crimson.

‘Freebootaz,’ said Colyns.

‘Then let’s hope they had a profitable haul before their power failed and they froze,’ replied Myllar.

Before Colyns could reply, Myllar felt the full weight of his vac-suit settle upon him as gravity returned. He grunted as he remembered why he hated wearing the heavy rig. All through the deck, machinery and floating scrap crashed to the deck with the thunder of metal on metal.

The mercenaries threw up their arms as broken spars of metal fell like rain. Three men went down, hammered to the deck by chunks of rusted iron. Milo shouted for a medicae. An insistent buzz of vox from the *Ulixes Explorer* sounded in Myllar’s helmet, but he couldn’t hear it over the crash of falling debris.

Blocks of ice shattered of the buckled iron deck plates and began flowing like liquid. Overhead lumens burst to life with a rumble of incoming power.

Light flooded the deck.

Polarisation filters in Myllar’s helmet plunged him into darkness in response. The opacity lifted a second later, and Myllar found himself staring into the face of the Freeboota with the bicorn hat once more.

It blinked.

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Shock paralysed him.

The ork blinked again and the two greenskins threw off their coating of ice as their brawl continued. They throttled one another as though no time at all had passed since freezing temperatures had halted their struggle.

The rest of the orks threw themselves at one another, hacking with toothed blades that sprayed ice chips as the motors thawed.

Myllar's vox exploded with voices. Warnings from the command decks of the orbital salvage yard and shouted orders from Milo Nicodemus. Stabbing beams of lasfire blazed, strobing as the armed team rallied around their wounded.

'No, don't shoot!' cried Colyns. 'Let them kill each other!'

The two orks who had been locked in an eternally frozen battle now paused and turned to the humans in their midst. Myllar was no xenobiologist, but even he could see the dawning light of comprehension in their porcine features.

The orks looked at one another and both let out a series of grunting, hooting barks like augmented fingers down a scholam slate. It took Myllar a moment to realise the horrendous sound was greenskin laughter.

Almost instantly, the battling orks ceased their struggles and turned towards the salvage crew. Whatever hostility there was between them was snuffed out in an instant at the prospect of fresh opponents.

'Run!' shouted Myllar.

But it was already too late.

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Kaptain Grimlug Toofbreaker wrenched his axe from the back of the humie who'd eyeballed him first. He'd looked right at Grimlug and hadn't even flinched. But then he'd run like a grot with a squig biting his backside.

'I's never gonna get wot dese humies fink,' he said, wiping the blood from his blade then licking it from his palm.

'Wot's dat, kaptain?' said Bludface, his jaw swollen and voice mangled where Grimlug had punched out his teeth.

'Dese 'ere humies,' said Grimlug. 'Where did dey come from?'

'Dunno, kaptain,' said Bludface, trying to jam a pair of fangs back in his mouth.

'Yeah, last fink I remember was the natter we was having about which was da best choppa, an axe-choppa or a cleava-choppa.'

'Cleava choppa,' said Bludface with confidence.

Grimlug raised his blood-smeared axe.

'I fink you'll find it was a axe-choppa.'

'Oh yeah, so it was,' nodded Bludface.

Things had gotten heated when each weapons fans started trying to show theirs was the superior weapon by demonstrating just how good it was by chopping limbs off their rivals.

Then it got *really* out of hand.

Bludface, Grimlug's loyal first mate had smelled opportunity and decided to use the developing scrap as a chance to prove he was the best. Grimlug remembered the ship had been shouting at them throughout the scrap, humie words that didn't make much sense. Stuff about things failing, critical this and critical that. Wazzaka had shot the shouty-horns on the wall with his Big Dakka just to shut them up.

Then it got a bit cold and a bit hazy.

He'd been strangling Bludface then suddenly Grimlug couldn't move and felt *really* cold. He must've had a bit of a nap then, because the next thing he knew, there was a humie with his head in a glass bubble looking at him like he wasn't afraid or nothing.

All the lights had come on and Grimlug didn't feel as cold.

Things got shooty and choppy after that, and now all the humies were dead. He could feel the ship moving again, but had no idea where they were going. Felt like someplace warmer than that place where all the big icy rocks were. And if it were getting warmer, that meant there'd be planets where humies wot needed a good stompin' and all their stuff looted could be found.

'Ere?' he said, pointing to a big hole torn in the side of the ship. 'Dat wasn't dere before, was it?'

'Nah, kaptain,' said Bludface. 'Never seen it before. Wot d'you reckon's on da uvver side?'

Grimlug thought about that for a moment, scratching the iron patch over his finkin' eye. The glacial thought processes of his brain shifted gears. Grimlug Toofbreaker weren't Kaptain of *Toofjaw's Revenge* for nuffink. He had a finky-head, and knew the best wot-nots for finding humies to stomp.

'I fink dat's where da humies came from,' he said, the thought slowly grinding its way through his brain. 'I fink dey thought we was all dead and dat they could steal our ship.'

'Why'd dey fink we was dead?' said Bludface.

'Dunno. Humie's are a bit stoopid like dat,' said Grimlug. 'Maybe it was on account of us being all frozen, like.'

Bludface nodded without understanding.

Grimlug lifted a stomped humie helmet from the deck. The glass visor was broken and there was still a head inside. He shook it out as he heard voices coming from inside. He held the helmet to his chewed ear.

'Wot's it sayin', kaptain?' asked Bludface as the rest of the boyz geared up with their preferred choppas and gathered round.

'Dunno, it's humie speaks.'

Bludface's eyes lit up as something almost like a thought surfaced in his skull.

'You fink dere's any left on board da uvver ship for us ta stomp?' said Bludface.

Grimlug grinned, exposing his iron-jacketed fangs.

'Ya know? I fink dere just might be,' he said.