

Findaz, Keepaz

An Eternal Crusade short story by Graham McNeill

The *Ork o' War*, heaved to, the ragged cloth of its tar-cloth sails billowing in the swirling thermals of battle. Its battered metal prow cut through the smoke, and its broadside cannons thundered as it crushed heaps of blazing wreckage beneath its spiked roller wheels.

The debris scattered through the crater floor was still glowing cherry-red from its fiery descent through the atmosphere, and choking banks of burning petrochemicals coated every breath.

Bludface Eadbasher spun the battlewagon's wheel, hauling the clanking, rumbling behemoth into a skidding left turn. He bellowed with laughter as the whirling blades mounted on the front grille noisily sliced these new orks on the block to bite-sized chunks of green meat.

Ork o' War had once been a piece of agricultural machinery, but Redgun Razzung's Meks had up-armoured it and weaponised it into a deth-wagon of fiendishly killy power. Now it boasted a bladed prow of harvester threshers; long claw-arms to drop victims into a hopper of crushing, pulping machinery and a host of skull-stamped crow's nest turrets with more dakka than you could shake a pointy stick at.

The deck shuddered beneath him as something exploded in the gubbinz, and a plume of tar-black smoke pumped from the engines. They were still going, so it couldn't have been anything important.

He held the battlewagaon at full speed, roaring around the vast oval crater blasted in the landscape by the falling orbital remains of something meant to stay in space. The rocks were strewn with metal, debris, and all sorts of shiny booty Kaptain Redgun had ordered him to salvage before Skarblitz's boyz got wind of it.

Trouble was, some of the big bad warlord's boyz had roared into the crater not long after Bludface and his boyz had begun loading the trucks to take back to Redgun Bay. Seeing the red of their wartrukks, bikes and battlewagons, Bludface knew he'd have to fight them, which was fine and dandy by him.

'How many of 'em d'you fink are here?' he asked.

'Lotz,' said Pugzwas.

His gretchen spotter stood against the mast beside Bludface, a pair of crooked bronze tellyscopes jutting from his skull. Doc Zogin' Eck had bolted them on and fastened a pair of lookin' googles onto the back of the gretchen's head.

'I can see dat!' snapped Bludface. 'Use dem eyes of yours!'

Pugzwas craned his scrawny neck, trying to see all around him, which wasn't easy, since "nailed to" was probably a better description of his relationship to the mast than "stood against". But when bullets started flying, the runty little fella tended to run off if Bludface didn't keep him stuck in place.

'Lotz and lotz,' said Pugzwas.

'Dat's better,' said Bludface.

You could look through the googles stitched to the back of Pugzwas's head and see stuff that was dead far away, even if it did look a bit wet and blurry through the little fella's skull meat.

'Don't look like they's even interested in the loot,' said Pugzwas. 'Looks like they just want to race...'

Bludface nodded. He'd seen that most of the new orks vehicles were red. They roared around at insane speeds, smashing into the freebootaz and each other, shooting, ramming at random and exploding. Load of vehicles were on fire or smashed to junk, and ork corpses littered the ground, cooking in the heat from the rocks.

Whoever won this fight (and it was hard to tell who that might be in the swirling morass of vehicles) would have plenty of hot food at the end of it.

'Evil Sunz,' he grunted, watching a bright red buggy flip over onto its side and skid to the bottom of the crater, where it plunged into a smoking split in the rock. 'Speed freekz da lot of em.'

But he was enjoying this screeching, slamming mess of vehicles. Freebootaz were swinging on ropes from truk to truk, curved swords clenched between their teef. Sometimes they even landed on the enemy ones.

'Thar she blows!' shouted Pugzwas.

Bludface looked to where the gretchen was pointing his head and grinned. A squadron of buggies was on fire behind them, careening madly out of control after a lucky hit from Nazrag's quarterdeck's battery of shootaz. They exploded, hurling greenskin bodies through the air on fire. Shells blasted from the burning bodies, the orks still firing with their last breath.

Nazrag's boyz were busy bashing their heads together in celebration. The nob himself stood on the timber railings, waving his hook hand in glee, like he thought he was some sort of hero.

Bludface took a potshot at him with his blasta, and Nazrag ducked back as the fiery shell zoomed past his head.

'Gettin' too big fer iz boots, dat one,' said Bludface.

'Who's dat?'

'Who'd ya fink?' snapped Bludface. 'Nazrag. Gonna haf ta keep a close eye on dat one.'

'Aye, kaptain,' said Pugzwas.

'I ain't kaptain,' said Bludface, remembering the krumpin' he'd gotten from Toofbreaker just before their ship crashed onto this world. The skinny gitz they'd first captured called this place Arkhona, and so far the orks hadn't had much of a fight.

But then Skarblitz had arrived on a big fiery rok, thinking he was all big and clever just because he'd landed – more or less – in one piece. Da Big Red Rok they called their big fort, like it was some fancy 'umie castle or something.

Bludface had only seen it once, when they'd ran the *Ork o' War* past it to see how big and how red it actually was.

Really big and very red was the answer.

A trukbashed into the side of *Ork o' War* and Bludface forgot about strategy things and grinned as he spun the wheel again. Against *Ork o' War* the trukb didn't stand a chance, and it exploded like someone had planted a bomb underneath it. Maybe they had; that sort of thing sometimes went on in scraps like this.

Ork bodies tumbled through the air, laughing and yelling. Gunfire blazed past Bludface as a few of the flying orks slammed down on the deck like they'd intended that all along.

A boarding action, Speed Freek style.

'Stand by to repel boarders!' he shouted.

A dozen orks with red and yellow bandanas wrapped around their heads nodded and stood watching the dazed boarders pick themselves up.

'Wot you doin?'' yelled Bludface, when none of them charged in and got to killing.

'You said stand by,' said Pugzwas. 'Dat's wot they's doing.'

Bludface slapped a palm against his face. 'Well stop standing by and stomp 'em!'

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Brakenek Wazcrash slapped out the fires burning on his legs and pushed himself upright. That he was alive came as a welcome surprise, as was the fact he didn't have a load of swords sticking out of him. For some reason the dirty, stinkin' Freebootaz were just standing around watching him and the ladz who'd made it over from the truck.

He'd make them pay for that mistake.

A big ork at the wheel shouted at them, and they ran at him shouting things that made no sense; avast and skurvy and something about timbers shivering. Unlike Brakenek, who wore proper armour, these boyz wore stupidly bright clothes. Stripy trousers and waistcoats of red, brown and blue. Some of them even had funny hats instead of metal on their heads. A couple fired pistols that made a lot of smoke and noise, which was pretty shooty, but the bullets bounced from the thick plates of metal Brakenek had strapped on.

He roared and threw himself into their midst, hacking with a vast cleaver with a motor strapped to the blade. Tearing teef chewed through green flesh and he bellowed with laughter as his opponents came apart.

The deck became a mad, whirling free-for-all of blades and booming shootaz. Brakenek fought whooping orks along planks cantilevered out from the gunwales, up knotted nets of rigging and swung from one end of the thundering battlewagon to the other on burning ropes.

It was a strange kind of battlewagon, more like something that should be on the water. Brakenek didn't hold with things that floated. Wasn't natural. Metal things on water sank. And any ork that thought this was a good look for a battlewagon, a vehicle that only ought to go land in Brakenek's experience, needed a good head-stompin'.

Though this *had* been a good scrap. The crater was a great place to get some proper speed up (even if they could only turn left) but Skarblitz wan't far behind. If Brakenek wanted to keep breathing, he'd have to kill these Freebootaz quickly.

He landed on the deck in front of an ork wearing a baggy white shirt made from war-banners. Black and yellow striped trousers were tucked into brown leather stompin' boots with steel reinforcement. A crimson bandanna covered its skull and one eye was hidden behind a black iron patch. Gold rings and barbed hooks pierced its lip and tooth-torn ears.

'Pretty boy, aint' cha?' said Brakenek.

'Prettier than you'll ever be again,' grunted the Freeboota.

They hurled themselves at one another, fighting without thought for defence, only attack; hacking, clawing and brawling like skull-bashed pit-fighters. Brakenek had to admit, this ork was pretty handy with his cleava-choppa. Most of his riveted armour was lying in carved chunks around his feet. But he'd landed some good whacks with his own blade, and the two of them were bleeding heavily.

'Wot they call you?' asked Brakenek, as they broke apart on the sagging bowsprit of the battlewagon, the breath heaving in their chests like rusted exhausts.

'Bludface Eadbasher,' said the ork.

‘One of Redgun’s boyz?’

‘Yeah, wot’s it to ya?’

‘Nuffink,’ said Brakenek, ‘Just wanted to know, so’s I could tell Skarblitz who you was.’

‘Skarblitz ain’t here.’

Brakenek pointed his notched and buckled cleaver over Bludface’s shoulder.

‘Yeah, he is...’

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Bludface saw the two orks standing in in the path of the wildly careening battlewagon. One was a hunched wretch of an ork, carrying a bronzed staff and surrounded by a crackling green haze. Beside him stood a towering brute, the living, breathing embodiment of Gork (or was it Mork) himself.

But, standing where they were, neither would be living or breathing for much longer.

Wheezing, groaning struts of mega-armour surrounded the warlord’s colossal form, but even that wouldn’t be enough to save him from being crushed to red paste beneath the *Ork ‘o War*’s wheels.

Bludface’s opponent turned and leapt from the battlewagon with a wild yell, leaving him alone on the bowsprit.

He roared and lifted his cleava-choppa high.

‘Waaagh!’ he yelled as a booming flare of green light erupted from the smaller of the pair, and the *Ork ‘o War* slammed headlong into it.

Its tapered prow crumpled as though it had run into a cliff face. Momentum carried it onwards, the behemoth of steel and fire and gears and timbers flattening itself in a thunder of buckling metal

against the crackling, orky power. The battlewagon's rear end flipped up into the air, twisting in midair as though enormous hands were wringing it like a humie's neck.

'Zog me!' said Bludface as he was catapulted into the air.

The blazing wreckage described a perfect arc over the two orks, before crashing down and flattening itself in a heap of smouldering wreckage.

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Bludface tried to open one eye, realised it was the one covered by the eye patch and tried again. The other eye was gummed shut by blood and oil, but it opened anyway, pulled open by rough fingers.

'Would ya credit it?' said a voice with a grunt of amazement. 'You was right, boss, e's still alive.'

All Bludface could see was a grainy, blood-filled smear of light and smoke and the end of a dirty finger holding his eyelid open.

He was lying on his back, that much he could tell.

The last thing he remembered was the *Ork 'o War* ramming the Weirdboy and the Warlord. Then things got strange. Instead of squashing them, they'd somehow broken the battlewagon.

Rough hands pulled him upright and he found himself face to face with the two orks that should be dead. Behind them, the wreckage of the *Ork 'o War* lay strewn in a trail of buckled, unrecognisable metal.

The Weirdboy cackled with a lopsided grin, his eyes dancing with green fire and the bristles of hair on his head standing upright on his tattoo and glyph-covered skull.

'Told ya I could do it,' the Weirdboy said to the hulking brute of a warlord. Straight away, Bludface knew there was only one ork who'd be willing to trust the word of a Weirdboy and stand in the path of a battlewagon.

‘Skarblitz,’ he said.

The warlord leaned down, his armour clanking with the movement and venting a stinking burst of fumes. Cogs and gears squealed and pistons growled as the huge claws on his arms snapped open and shut. A necklace of fangs and teeth hung around his neck, some still wet with the saliva of the mouths they’d been ripped from.

Skarblitz was the biggest ork Bludface had ever seen.

Bigger than Grimlug Toofbreaker, bigger even than Redgun Razzung.

Almost as big as a Killa Kan.

‘You’se one a Redgun’s lads, ain’t ya?’ said Skarblitz.

Bludface thrust out his tusked jaw. ‘Yeah. Wot about it?’

Skarblitz hooked him under the jaw with his claw, lifting him into the air. His booted feet hung two metres off the ground.

‘This ‘ere’s *my* world, innit?’ said the Warlord with a steel-fanged grin. ‘Redgun made a deal wiv me, and it’d be a shame if I hadda kill ‘im, wouldn’t it?’

Bludface tried to shrug, which wasn’t easy when he was hooked like a fish.

‘Redgun knows ‘e made a deal, Skarblitz,’ said Bludface. ‘An ‘e ain’t about to try and cheat you.’

‘I fink e’s lyin’ to ya,’ said the Weirdboy. ‘I smells it off his thoughts as sure as da stink of da drops.’

Skarblitz grinned, exposing yet more metal-sheened fangs.

‘Is Guzzagug right? You lying to me, freeboota?’

Bludface considered lying again until he looked into the Weirdboy’s sizzling green eyes. That psychic fire crawled inside his skull, peeling back layers of what little cunning he possessed with a cruelty that went way beyond anything he’d ever known a Weirdboy to possess.

To lie was to die.

‘Well? Is ya lyin?’ said Skarblitz.

‘Little bit, yeah,’ admitted Bludface.

Skarblitz swept a powerful arm around the crater, a crater that was now being picked over by his ladz.

‘So you was plannin’ to keep all dis booty for Redgun, eh?’

Bludface tried to nod, but only ended up working the warlord’s claw deeper into his jawbone.

‘Yeah, findaz, keepaz and all that,’ said Bludface, ‘but it won’t ‘appen again, Mork’s honour!’

Skarblitz dropped him to the ground, and Bludface landed in a numb heap before the towering warlord.

‘Yer right it ain’t gonna happen again,’ said Skarblitz, leaning down. ‘You go back to dat cheatin’ heap o’ squig droppings and tell ‘im that if I fink e’s holding out on me again, then I’s gonna come down on dem ruins you’s call home and crump ‘em so flat dere won’t be nuffink left worth a single toof. You get me?’

This time Bludface did nod.

‘Ya can’t send im back like this,’ said Guzzagug with a manic gleam in is burning green eyes.

‘Howzzat?’ said Skarblitz.

‘You send ‘im back in one piece, Redgun’s gonna think you’s gone soft.’

Bludface shook his head. ‘No, no, no, I’ll tell Redgun dat you’s pure ded hard, da toughest, meansesst ork dat ever lived!’

‘Yeah, but how’s he gonna know that?’ said Guzzagun.

‘Guzzagug’s got a point,’ nodded Skarblitz. ‘You got’s ta go back wiv a good wound, so Redgun knows ya at least put up a bit of a fight. Uvverwise, he’ll fink you just gave up, right?’

'Right,' agreed Bludface before realising what Skarblitz meant. Before he could protest, Skarblitz leaned down and severed Bludface's right arm at the elbow with a blindingly swift flick of his power claw.

He howled in pain, staring at the blood jetting from his arm. It hurt, *Gork it hurt*, but not as much as it probably ought to. At least he could finally get that whirling hook-blade gubbinz Doc Zogin' Eck kept wanting to bolt onto him.

He clamped a hand over the bloody stump.

'Yeah,' he said. 'I gets ya.'