

**WARHAMMER**  
**40,000**



A KILL TEAM SHORT STORY  
**CHOKER POINT**  
**MIKE BROOKS**

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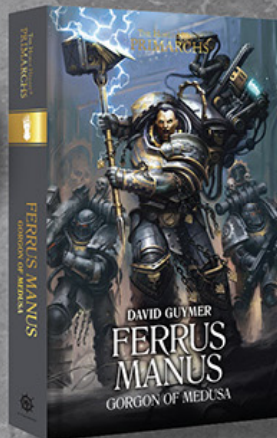
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# CHOKE POINT

by Mike Brooks

Three weeks, virtually no sleep, waves of the green-skinned monsters coming at us, sparsely at first, but now more and more of them at once. They attacked as soon as they came within sight of the line, with no thought to tactics. We'd mocked them to start with for how few they were, at how brashly they assaulted our fortifications. More fool us.

'Heads up, they're coming again!' Sergeant Rosel shouted. She was a transfer from the 16th, one of the few survivors after their Throne-cursed fool of a colonel had ordered an advance into the teeth of the enemy. Their literal teeth, according to Rosel's account: an ork had bitten the colonel's head clean off. He'd thought to throw the xenos back, to drive them off the isthmus and back into the rain-drenched forests of the northern continent, where the space hulk of Waaagh! Zogreb had crash-landed after a desperate battle in low orbit. The greenskins had given way before the 16th's assault and then enveloped the regiment, crushing it. Only a few had escaped.

Now those few were with us in the 27th, holding our section of the twenty-five-mile zigzag of hastily but effectively erected fortifications that stood between the orks and our kin on the southern continent. We had to pen the xenos in, keep them from the cities and the manufacturing plants. Let the Hydras worry about the skies, let the Navy worry about the seas. The Kilgannor regiments just had to hold this narrow strip of land against anything on foot or wheels or tracks. We were at the choke point. We'd choke them with their own dead, and with ours. Back in the days of basic training, we hadn't thought it would be our own planet we'd end up

defending, but now here we were.

Rosel was right – a new mass of orks was coming for us. There were too many of them to easily count, certainly many more than us, with vehicles scattered amongst them. Normally I'd have discounted wheeled or tracked transports being sent against a wall, but as I watched, they raised long, sturdy-looking ladders to which orks clung like aphids on a plant stem. The xenos were not mindless beasts: they were savage, yes, but also adaptable.

‘Stations!’ I bawled. ‘Same as before! Heavy weapons, target the vehicles! Everyone else, wait until they get past the stumps, then give'em hell!’

We'd left a few tree stumps visible at the maximum effective range of a lasgun, although ‘effective’ had proved to be a term of dubious truth against these monsters. The orks were rapidly approaching them already.

Our heavy bolter teams opened up. I'd have preferred them to be strafing the mass of foot-sloggers, but they were the best tools we had to take out the trucks. Sparks flew and panels fell off, but it always seemed hard to hit anything that mattered on the damned things. One of them slewed and slowed, but the orks inside just piled out and came on. The others were still rolling, and closing fast. My platoon's lasguns began firing, snap-hisses of desperation. I joined in with my own, uselessly wishing for something with more stopping power. It's all very well burning a hole straight through your enemy, but I'd found that the orks didn't tend to notice such niceties.

I could already tell that our resistance wasn't going to be enough this time.

‘Fix bayonets!’ I yelled, and my troopers pulled out their combat blades and obliged. They'd be barely more than toothpicks against orks, but we had to make the best use of what the Emperor gave us. I turned away from the onrushing horde for a moment. ‘Fyven! Vox the Third and the Eleventh! Tell them...’

I hesitated, caught between the warring desires to communicate effectively and to not risk shattering what morale remained in my platoon. I went with honesty.

‘Tell them we're probably about to have orks on top of the wall with us.’

‘Yes, lieutenant,’ Fyven said, and bent to his vox-caster. It was probably

too much to hope that our neighbouring regiments could send reinforcements to our position, but hope was all we had.

Still they came on. I saw orks take half a dozen lasgun shots before they fell. There were simply too many of them, and our weapons were inadequate.

‘Target the ladders!’ I shouted. I’d come to believe that orks could climb our wall eventually, but the ones on the ladders were our most pressing concern now. My troops shifted their aim, but our accuracy was poor when the enemy wasn’t pressed up against each other. Perhaps it was sleep deprivation, perhaps it was fear. Perhaps it was both. Regardless, our marksmanship suddenly seemed little better than that of the greenskins.

Four ladders were coming. A final burst from a heavy bolter killed the tracked vehicle bearing one, leaving the orks on it stranded in mid-air, unable to reach us.

The other three struck the wall.

My troops swarmed forwards, Emperor bless them, seeking to deny the enemy a beachhead. I dropped the lasgun and drew my laspistol, revved my chainsword into action and ran for the nearest ladder. Before I got there, I heard a scream as someone was yanked off the wall and hurled downwards to their certain death, then I saw a horned ork helmet rise head and shoulders above the men and women of the Kilgannor 27th. A thunder-volley of las-bolts flashed out at point-blank range, and it seemed that this was too much for even an ork to take. It fell, but two more were right behind it, and they fell upon my troops with roars of bestial delight and crude, savage blades before they could be brought down with gunfire.

The Valkyries erupted from the guts of the storm, as though the bruise-coloured, lightning-wracked clouds had vomited them forth.

Four of them, engines screaming like the souls of the damned, shaking in the crosswinds but holding firm to their course. They were a tantalising glimpse of salvation coming in hard from the west, flying along the line of the fortifications. I faltered, wondering if high command had ordered them to purge the top of the wall of the orks, and casualties of the 27th be damned. I waited for their multi-lasers to open up, bringing death to us all.

They never did. Instead, the Valkyries swung low over us, and suddenly the air was full of bodies.

I took a moment to realise that these bodies were floating steadily

downwards instead of plummeting to injury or death. Grav-chutes engaged, they opened fire at the orks below with startling composure. Even when one of their number was caught in a hail of return fire from the greenskins, his comrades continued to aim and shoot, aim and shoot, as swiftly and calmly as troopers stood on a target ground.

Hotshot lasguns, more powerful by far than our standard-issue Armageddon-pattern models. Red-and-black carapace armour. Berets, worn even into the midst of the front lines in place of the helmets we all wore, and the cold-faced arrogance of trained killers.

Tempestus Scions.

‘Clear the wall first!’ a voice bellowed from above. Emperor preserve us – a commissar. He was descending just above the ladder I’d been on my way to, and even as I caught sight of him, he disengaged the harness that held him in his grav-chute and fell the rest of the way. I saw a power sword crackle to life, and he got two shots off with his bolt pistol before landing in the midst of my beleaguered Guardsmen.

There were brutal, agonised roars that were cut off a moment later. Then my troops rushed to the edge of the ramparts and began pouring las-fire downwards, seeking to drive back or kill any orks on the ladder. Seven figures remained behind, six of them prostrate on the rockcrete.

Three of my troopers, cut down with savage blade wounds and clearly beyond any medical help. Three orks, one split near in two from head to stomach, the other two with heads blown open by bolt-shells. One’s head had then clearly been removed by the power sword still clutched in the hand of the seventh figure.

I holstered my laspistol and saluted. I could hear the barks of the Scions’ hotshots above me as they used their elevation to pick off the orks that had made it onto the wall without risking hitting my own troops.

‘Sir.’

‘Commissar Dorin, with the Three Hundred and Ninety-Fourth Deltic Lions. Who’s in command here?’ he demanded. He didn’t return my salute but kept both his weapons in hand, and I immediately felt like a foolish child for holstering a weapon while a battle was still in progress.

Then again, we’d all heard the stories of commissars. Rumour had it that some of them really would execute you for not saluting them, no matter the circumstances.

‘Me, sir.’ I swallowed. ‘Lieutenant Kaseen.’

‘Kaseen.’ Ice-hard eyes studied me for a moment. ‘Where’s your captain?’

‘Deceased as of a week ago, sir. He caught a round to the head while leading the defence.’

A twitch at the corner of his mouth. Irritation? Wry amusement? A simple tic? I didn’t know. ‘Lieutenant, as of this moment I am assuming command of this platoon.’

An unseen weight seemed to lift from my shoulders, but then tightened around my neck. Had my command been judged inadequate? Was I about to be executed for incompetence? I became aware of the Tempestus Scions touching down around us. One of them, a handsome fellow with hazel eyes whom I took to be the Tempestor Prime, gestured towards the north face of the wall.

‘Grenades!’

The Scions pulled out, primed grenades and hurled them over the ramparts. A moment later we heard massed explosions from below, and the bellows of the swarming orks took on a more pained tone.

Then, to my astonishment, almost all of the new arrivals stepped up onto the ramparts and threw themselves off. I saw my own troops cease fire in shock and confusion, but heard the bark of hotshot lasguns and the rapid roar of hotshot volley guns as the Scions’ grav-chutes bore them down once more.

The Tempestor Prime, who – along with what I assumed was his command squad – hadn’t gone over the side, stepped up to the commissar and me, and saluted. I returned the gesture, trying not to appear faintly stunned at what had just taken place. The man showed no sign that he had any concern over the welfare of the squads he’d just so casually sent to their deaths.

‘Lieutenant Kaseen, this is Tempestor Prime Avarus,’ Dorin said, as calmly as though we’d met at an officer’s ball. ‘Now, can you give us an honest assessment of your situation?’

Honest? I didn’t want to eat a bolt-shell for damaging morale, but lying to a commissar wasn’t a great plan either. I decided to give him the truth. ‘One more push from them could break us, sir. We’ve lost too many, and the xenos seem to know it. Now they know they can reach the top of the

wall—’

‘That won’t be an issue, lieutenant.’

I blinked in surprise. ‘Sir?’

The faintest hint of a smile appeared at the corner of Dorin’s mouth. Avarus’ countenance was so blank it could have belonged to a statue.

‘Why don’t you take a look to the north, lieutenant?’ the commissar said. It sounded like a suggestion, but my feet were already moving. I became aware as I walked the few steps that everything had gone quiet, that my troops had stopped firing. Were they worried about hitting the Tempestus Scions?

No, wait. *Everyone* had stopped firing. Including the orks.

I looked over the ramparts onto a charnel field of corpses and ramshackle vehicles, barely any different to what I’d been looking at for the last couple of weeks... except that standing amongst the greenskin bodies were most of the 394th Deltic Lions. A few were down. Two were being treated from medi-kits that looked substantially better equipped than ours. But most were still on their feet, in the middle of ork bodies that were riddled with the sort of wounds that only a hotshot pack could inflict.

It looked like the orks noticed you burning a hole right through them, so long as the hole was big enough.

My platoon rapidly went from open-mouthed shock into applause, then into cheers and whoops. Dorin appeared at my left shoulder, Avarus at my right.

‘Your honest assessment again, lieutenant,’ Dorin said quietly. ‘Are your troops ready to strike back at the xenos filth?’

‘They’ll do as you command, sir,’ I replied immediately.

‘I know that, lieutenant,’ Dorin said, even more quietly. ‘Because they know that to disobey me would lead to their deaths. But what happens when we meet the orks face to face? We have a way to hurt these greenskins, but I will need troops who will stand and fight with us, not turn and run and leave us exposed.’

‘Sir.’ I swallowed my immediate response and went with something that contained the same overall message, but was slightly more weighted in its delivery. ‘We’re the Kilgannor Twenty-Seventh. This is our planet. If we can strike back instead of sitting here and waiting for them to come at us, we’ll be with you every step of the way.’

Dorin actually smiled at that, a there-and-gone flash of teeth on one side of his face, brief as the lightning that still flickered away to the west.

‘Good.’

He turned away from me, holstered his bolt pistol and raised his voice.

‘Soldiers of the Twenty-Seventh! The time has come to hit back at these vile invaders. Orbital augurs show that the greenskins have what appears to be a construction site approximately five miles north-north-west of our current position. We don’t know what they’re building there, but it’s almost certain to be something intended to bring these fortifications down. Since the Basilisk batteries are still coming up the coast road and we can’t bombard that position, we are going to destroy it ourselves!’

He turned back and raised his power sword to point it at me.

‘Your lieutenant tells me that you are brave and true sons and daughters of Kilgannor, and that you will not rest until this filth has been driven from your world. Are you with me?’

The shout of assent was immediate and heartfelt. I hadn’t been lying to Dorin.

‘Good!’ The commissar pointed at the nearest ladder. ‘As you know, these fortifications were constructed with no gates on the north side, as they’d be obvious weak spots. However, the xenos have obligingly left us both a way down and the means to infiltrate their lines. Collect as many demo charges as you can, then down the ladders, men and women of the Twenty-Seventh, and into those vehicles! We’ll use their own foul constructs to serve the Emperor, and be in amongst them before they know what’s going on!’

With that, he sheathed his power sword, turned and vaulted over the parapet, twisting in mid-air to catch the ladder and slide down it. I’ll give the man his due – his words lit a spark under my troops, battle-weary and sleep-deprived though they were. The queues to follow his lead were as enthusiastic as any I’d seen at the mess when we were in basic.

‘Tempestor,’ I said to Avarus just as he went to step over the rampart. ‘How will we drive the vehicles?’

‘You won’t,’ he replied, turning to me. ‘We will.’ He had a scar down his left cheek, but other than that, he reminded me of Paeter, my old sweetheart back in the south. We’d known we’d likely never see each other again when I signed up, but it had given me strength to know that I’d be

fighting to protect him. I'd just never expected that fight to start so close to home.

'I'm sorry, Tempestor, I don't follow,' I said, trying not to sound patronising. 'Have you experience with such vehicles?'

'We're the Three Hundred and Ninety-Fourth Deltic Lions,' Avarus snapped. 'We're the best damned ork-hunters in the Imperium, and you don't fight the greenskins that much without learning a bit about them. Have you ever stormed an ork battlewagon, killed the crew, loaded it with explosives and sent it back towards their own lines? Or pulled a governor out of a city in an ork vehicle because your Taurox just got blown to bits?'

I didn't reply. I'd have written his words off as bragging had he belonged to most regiments, but from what I knew of the Tempeustus Scions, he was almost certainly telling the bare truth.

'I have.' Avarus looked down at one of the red-painted vehicles below us, weighing it up with a look of distaste, and his tone softened very slightly. 'Most ork technology I've seen is... bizarre. But the vehicles are simple enough. They're just designed to go very fast, and shoot things while doing so.'

He turned those hazel eyes back to me. 'Get in, lieutenant. I can promise you it'll be a ride you won't forget.'

He wasn't exaggerating.

I was in the cab alongside Avarus and another Scion, ostensibly in recognition of my rank. I'd always thought the journey up the coast road to the front line in a Chimera was the most uncomfortable I'd ever been: crammed in like grox on their way to slaughter, the engines straining and the driver seemingly aiming for every pothole and bump in the surface. But that was before I'd ridden along a dirt track in a vehicle built by a species that believed solid metal was a good substance for seats and suspension was entirely unnecessary. I held on to my helmet, but in practice I was simply trying to keep my head from flopping around too much and breaking my own neck. I'd begun to understand how orks could shrug off las-fire like rain, if they had to be this tough simply to travel from place to place.

'*There!*' Dorin's voice came through the comm-bead in my ear. A moment later, the truck we were in rounded a bend in the road and I saw it:

a looming wall of metal and wood that straddled the track with a gateway shaped like a fanged mouth. Above it, silhouetted against the rapidly darkening sky, rose two horns that spouted flame into the rain for no apparent purpose other than aesthetic. I was stunned. How could the orks have built this so quickly?

Flashes from the walls and accompanying cracks and booms announced gunfire.

‘They’ve seen us!’ I shouted, eyeing the distance to the gate. It was too far – surely we wouldn’t make it?

‘They probably think we’re just other orks!’ Avarus replied, wrestling with the steering wheel.

‘But they’re shooting at us!’ I pointed out, as dirt kicked up not far from the vehicle in which Dorin was travelling.

‘If they knew we weren’t orks, they’d be trying harder!’ Avarus retorted, then added, ‘Probably. It’s hard to tell, with their marksmanship.’ For a moment I thought this was a flash of deadpan humour, but I strangled my reflexive, nervous smile before it showed on my face. I had seen no sign that the Tempestus Scions had heard of humour, and Avarus’ expression of concentration gave no indication that he had meant anything other than exactly what he’d said.

I flinched as a round of some sort spanged off a wheel rim, and felt my guts tighten even as I gave thanks, for once, for this filthy vehicle’s unlikely hardiness. Were these xenos truly so barbaric that they would fire like this on their own kind? I doubted us, for a second. How could we hope to triumph against such mindless, furious aggression when it was housed in the powerful bodies of such beasts?

*‘The xenos will be on us in moments once we’re inside,’* Dorin said into my ear, his voice sounding glacially calm. He was broadcasting on the commissarial command frequency, and every squad leader would be able to hear him. *‘We’re here to cause as much damage as possible, as quickly as possible. The Lions have the greatest experience with ork machinery so their primary responsibility is placing and detonating the charges. Our comrades of Kilgannor will keep the orks off their backs. The Emperor protects.’*

I listened to my sergeants responding, and smiled grimly. Their voices were steady and determined. We knew that we weren’t all going to come

back from this – maybe most of us wouldn't, maybe all of us wouldn't – but Dorin had been right, back on the wall: we had a purpose now. We weren't sitting in a muddy ditch and waiting for death to come to us; we were here to strike a blow for the Emperor of Mankind. A small blow it might be, but enough small blows could turn the tide of a war.

I thought of Paeter, working for the Munitorum in the south, and of my parents. I hoped someone would survive to report my fate if I fell today, so they would at least know that I died doing something worthwhile. I briefly considered asking Avarus if he had anyone he was fighting for, any family such as mine, but I held my tongue. Even those as new to the Guard as I knew that the Tempestus Scions were all orphans of noble Imperial families, with no connection to anyone save their squad-mates and the Emperor Himself. For a moment I found myself envying that purity of purpose, that knowledge that everything you were was there with you, with no distractions or responsibilities beyond your duty.

Then Commissar Dorin's vehicle passed through the monstrous maw of the gate, with ours hard on its heels, and there was no more time for reflection.

The construction was a huge oval, the walls of which stretched away until they were lost in the rain. The ground inside had been cleared of trees – undoubtedly immediately used for fuel – and churned into mud. All around us was the xenos' handiwork: ranks of battle trucks, tracked vehicles fitted with oversized guns, crude rocket launchers and things that resembled primitive flamethrowers. Here and there lurked the larger shapes of ork flyers: brutal, blocky craft that looked as though they relied on brute force and malice to take to the skies rather than aerodynamic ability.

Most terrifying of all, though, was the monstrosity looming up in front of us that appeared to be built of scavenged starship hull plates. I recognised it from the brief holos we'd been shown in basic training, incomplete and semi-skeletal though it was: the beginnings of a heavy-jawed metal skull, the barrel-shaped body, bristling with weapons both large and comparatively small. Easily tall enough to tower over the fortifications we'd so recently been defending, it was the foul, orkish equivalent of one of our noble Imperial Knights, or possibly even one of the smaller Titans. We had arrived not a moment too soon.

‘WAAAGH!’

The brutal cries rose all around us, for it seemed that orks were a race permanently so close to violence that it was impossible to take them by surprise. Our last vehicles were still bouncing and skidding in through the gate when the greenskins drew their guns and began firing in earnest, with most of them surging towards us still clutching tools that were barely distinguishable from clubs and mauls in any case.

Most, but not all. My eye was drawn to a few indistinct orkish shapes directly above the gate we’d just come in that did not immediately start scrambling down ladders or dropped lines. Instead they were handling large, heavy-looking items. I stood up in the cab and squinted up at them through the rain even as my men and women and the Tempestus Scions disembarked with war cries of their own, and a storm of las-fire stabbed outwards at the xenos approaching to cut us down where we stood.

‘Out of the truck, lieutenant!’ Avarus shouted. He sounded as close to angry as I’d heard him so far, but I ignored him. There had to be a very good reason for those orks not to seek to close with us, and it could not bode well.

I fumbled my magnoculars from my belt and held them to my eyes just as there was a fortuitous gust of wind that thinned the rain for a moment. To my horror, the indistinct shapes resolved into half a dozen orks aiming guns nearly as big as a man down at us. Was this some greenskin equivalent of a heavy weapons team? Inaccurate though orks had proved to be, with weapons like that, firing from that elevation, they could end our raid almost before it had begun.

The distance was far too great for my laspistol. I dropped my magnoculars, seized the oversized gun fitted to the truck I’d been riding in, aimed it upwards at the orks above the gate and squeezed what seemed to be the trigger. For a moment the resistance was too great and nothing happened. Then, as I tightened my grip with all my might, the gun roared into life.

I had never experienced anything so loud, so invasive, so *violent*. The weapon kicked and bucked as though it sought to tear itself from my grasp, and it took all my strength not to spray shots over my comrades. I fought the recoil furiously, wrenching the barrel around and upwards so the roaring shells tracked over the fort’s inner wall. They kicked up sparks

from the metal even in the rain, allowing me to see the point of impact and adjust my aim as far as possible, until with one final yell of effort I pulled the gun's muzzle across where the orks were standing. I saw their dark, blurry forms jerk, flail and fall from their position into the mud far below. Then the ork weapon's extensive belt of ammunition was finally expended and the gun fell silent. I realised I was still clinging to it, fighting a recoil that was no longer there and screaming wordless aggression and hatred, as though I had become a greenskin myself.

*'Good shooting, lieutenant,'* Dorin's voice said into my ear. *'Now move, before you get left behind!'*

He was right, I saw, forcing my crabbed and cramped hands to let go of the ork weapon's grip. Our troops were pushing forwards into the yard, each squad of Scions heading for different objectives presumably coordinated between themselves, while my Kilgannor troops sent volleys of bitter las-fire spearing out at the xenos filth that surrounded us. The vehicles were being abandoned, and I would soon be left alone. I drew my laspistol and chainsword, jumped down from the cab and nearly slipped over in the mud underfoot, then hurried to catch up with the nearest squad. It turned out to be Rosel's team, survivors of the 16th to a soul, keeping pace with a squad of Scions some forty-five yards to their right.

*'Sergeant!'* I greeted her, raising my laspistol and squeezing off a shot at a gretchin that was aiming some form of crude blunderbuss at us from the top of a huge pipe. My shot must have found its mark, as the creature's legs abruptly gave way and it pitched backwards out of sight. One or two of the troopers saw it and let out a whoop, so it bolstered their morale in at least some small way.

*'Lieutenant!'* Rosel replied, shaking the rain out of her eyes to fire her own weapon with rather less immediately noticeable effect. *'I'm glad we actually have a plan, this time!'*

The man next to her abruptly flew backwards, a hole erupting in his chest with a spray of blood and gobbets of meat. I twisted to avoid his falling body and fired blindly back in the direction the shot had come from. *'Press forward!'*

*'But—'* the trooper beside me began.

*'He's dead!'* I shouted. And so he was. The body might still breathe and its heart beat for a few seconds or even minutes, but we could not stop to

assist him, nor carry him with us. We had to keep covering the Scions, and speed was hard enough through this quagmire without trying to drag the wounded along with us. ‘Those who fall behind get left behind!’

‘You heard the lieutenant!’ Rosel bawled. ‘Form up, keep moving, and—*Throne of Earth!*’

In daylight we’d have seen them coming, but this rain-soaked gloom had hidden their approach. They emerged from behind the huge pipe off which I’d just shot the gretchin, vaulting into view, roaring – four shapes of hulking muscle, yellowed fangs and red eyes that seemed to glow dimly in the rain-filled half-light. A volley of las-fire flash-burned one ork’s face and chest so badly that even its inhuman resilience was overwhelmed, and it dropped into the mud.

Then the other three were on us.

The closest to me strode forwards, wielding an enormous axe in two hands that it swung in a diagonal downward stroke. One of Rosel’s men raised his lasgun to try to block the strike, the bayonet fixed under the barrel looking like a shiny toothpick when set against such a foe. His weapon splintered and broke and the axe carried on, splintering breastbone and ribcage, slicing through lungs and spine. The poor wretch spasmed and fell limp, but the ork simply shook the dead weight of his body off its blade and turned on me, roaring its hatred and bloodlust.

The trooper’s death gave me the opening I needed. I lunged forwards as the ork swept its axe to one side to rid it of the encumbrance of my comrade’s body, and I ripped my chainsword across its belly. The ceramite teeth tore through rough fabric, tough skin and the iron-hard muscles beneath with a screaming whirr and a spray of dark blood and scraps of flesh. Purplish-green viscera erupted from the wound and the ork staggered, but brought its axe around in a sweep that would have bisected me had I not stumbled backwards. The rain suddenly felt colder, my fingers numb with fear. My blow would have dropped a man, but the ork was little more than inconvenienced. It lurched forwards, faster than I’d anticipated, and I barely got my chainsword up in time as its axe swept down again. I’d deflected the blow more than parried it, clumsily sidestepping and leaving the ork to cleave the mud, but still the impact nearly knocked my weapon from my grasp.

I drew back my arm for a desperate thrust, and the ork went up like an

Emperor's Day pyrotechnic as the squad's flamer trooper managed to get a clear shot. I dived into the mud, away from the stream of burning promethium, then scrambled sideways as the ork lumbered blindly off, a flailing, howling figure being consumed by hungry flames.

The last ork had cut down two more of the squad, roaring with foul glee, then its brutish face took on an expression of confusion as Rosel's chainsword chewed through its wrist and sent its axe hand flying. It pulled the trigger on its cannon-like pistol, but the gun clicked empty. The sergeant yelled in triumph and prepared for what we all hoped would be a killing blow.

The ork simply swatted Rosel in the face with its gun, knocking her prone, then dropped the weapon and reached down to grab her skull with its one remaining hand, dragging her towards its enormous, fang-studded mouth. It was going to bite her head clean off.

Rosel didn't even try to fight the ork's grip. Instead she clawed feebly at her belt, then plunged her hand down the ork's looming throat. The greenskin fumbled at her with its other arm, apparently forgetting that it now lacked a hand there. A moment later the krak grenade Rosel had just primed blew it apart from the inside.

We'd lost half the squad in a handful of seconds. I ducked instinctively as something exploded to my right, echoing the detonation that had marked the sergeant's sacrifice of her own arm. Looking around, I saw one of the half-built flyers had gone up in flames. Orks whooped and howled, and in the semi-darkness several of their hulking shapes changed direction. The Scions who had wrought that piece of arson had drawn quite a bit of attention.

I looked down. Rosel stared back up at me, blood spouting from the mangled shred of her ruined arm and her cheek caved in from the blow she'd taken to the head.

'Sergeant...'

'Leave me a frag belt and keep moving,' she told me, her voice snagging with the pain as she tried to sit up. She threw me her laspistol. 'Go! I've only got seconds left – get clear!'

Her heroism deserved a fitting end. I swiftly unbuckled my own belt of frag grenades and passed it to her, then yelled at the squad to keep moving. They offered brief salutes to their sergeant as they hurried past and we

pressed on into the rain.

A double handful of heartbeats later, whatever greenskins may have been dogging our steps got a nasty surprise when Sergeant Rosel went to meet the Emperor by detonating all her frag grenades at once.

*‘All Lions, converge on the ork Titan,’* Dorin’s voice said in my ear, as calm as ever. *‘I’ve assessed our situation and it looks like the only worthwhile target. Kilgannor units, you’re providing cover fire.’*

‘The Titan?’ Trooper Voray asked me, aghast. ‘They won’t be able to scratch it!’

‘If we can’t damage it when it’s unfinished, how much luck do you think the Third and the Eleventh will have when it hits the front line?’ I demanded. I activated my comm-bead. ‘Commissar. Please advise of your location.’

*‘Signal going up now, lieutenant.’*

Moments later a red flare went up, away to our right. The remains of Rosel’s squad – my squad, now – shambled into as close to a run as we could get in the conditions. The rain was increasing, if anything, and it was getting harder and harder to see where our enemies were. We slogged around a shack of some sort and there in front of us were sweeping beams of light, stabbing through the gloom. The Tempestus Scions, at least, had ways of piercing the storm to pick out their targets.

A beam swung across me, dazzling me for a moment. Then I heard Avarus’ voice in my ear.

*‘Lieutenant, get down!’*

‘Down!’ I yelled at my squad, and threw myself into the mud for the second time in a minute. Squelches around me told me the troopers on my heels had followed my lead, and no sooner had they done so than spitting blasts of hotshot las-fire ripped through where we’d been only a moment ago.

*‘You’re clear.’*

I pushed myself back to my feet and looked over my shoulder, squinting against the rain. Several greenskins now lay on their backs not far behind us, their weapons still clutched in black-taloned fists. They would likely have been on us before we noticed them.

‘My thanks,’ I voxed, staggering onwards and revving my chainsword quickly to clear the muck from its teeth. I’d never been this tired, ever.

This sortie had spurred me awake, prompting a new hit of adrenaline after the draining weeks throwing back ork assaults, but the bill was coming due now.

The Tempestus Scions had taken cover behind yet more ork vehicles, not far from the feet of the Gargant. I managed to get into cover next to them, each one of them alert and clear-eyed as they snapped off shots at targets I could barely make out. Of course, they weren't coming off weeks of a continual ground war, but I wasn't convinced it would make much difference if they had been.

'Lieutenant,' Dorin greeted me, his bolt pistol barking. 'Status report?'

'Lost half the squad I was with, but we have their charges,' I replied. 'What are your orders, sir?'

'Squad Dovarus will go in to target the main power core, or whatever the orks have rigged up as an equivalent,' Dorin replied. A Tempestor behind him saluted and gestured to the Scions around him, who began collecting up charges, including ours, keeping low to try to avoid any unfeasibly accurate greenskin shooting. Other squads had made it here too, I saw: my Kilgannor troops had converged on Dorin's flare as I had. 'The rest of us will prevent the orks from following them in.'

'What if there are orks in there?' I asked, handing my own belt of demo charges over.

'We're the Three Hundred and Ninety-Fourth Deltic Lions,' Tempestor Dovarus replied simply, and turned away. A few seconds later he and seven – no, eight – Tempestus Scions were sprinting towards the Gargant's bulk.

'May the Emperor protect,' I muttered. I would have made the sign of the aquila, had my hands not been occupied with my weapons.

There was a sudden crackling roar and a truck exploded. Guardsmen were engulfed in pinwheeling metal shards and a roiling flower of yellow flame, which licked outwards with a blast of heat that punched through the cool of the rain. The man next to me let out a whimper and slumped against our own, suddenly frail-seeming cover: a quick glance at him showed me metal piercing his chest, prompting a fresh red stain to leak out onto his already-sodden flak vest.

I staggered to my feet, my ears ringing, as I searched for this new threat. I didn't have far to look, and my guts turned to water as I saw it.

Twelve feet high, perhaps? Possibly more. Painted a deep blood-red, with

two arms ending in crude claws that crackled and fizzed with energy in the rain. One of its monstrous guns looked to be an energy cannon of some sort, presumably what had just blown our cover apart. The other was just starting to cycle up, ready to launch a hail of projectiles at us.

An ork walker. Their equivalent of a Sentinel, maybe, only bigger, more intimidating and more heavily armed. It was but a pale shadow of the Gargant that loomed overhead, but it was under power and fully operational, and coming straight for us.

A plasma gun spat white-hot energy at the walker, gouging a rent in one side of its torso and searing a brilliant after-image into my retinas. The machine barely wobbled before turning its gun on the brave Tempestus Scion who'd taken the shot. Its accuracy was no better than its comrades, but the sheer volume of shells it unleashed took their toll and the luckless Lion was shredded where he stood as shots split the air all around him.

'Fall back!' I shouted, although where I hoped to find sanctuary in this Emperor-forsaken mud hole I couldn't have said.

'Hold!' Dorin roared in response. 'We hold here or we die here!'

He vaulted over the pipeline he'd been sheltering behind and charged the thing. I stared in open-mouthed astonishment for a moment, but only for a moment. I was a soldier of the Astra Militarum, and I was loyal to the Emperor. So I followed the commissar, my voice raised in a wordless war cry and my weapons held tightly, certain that I was about to die.

The ork pilot must have noticed Dorin's fearless approach because it swung a gun towards him. It spat the same crackling bolt of energy that had destroyed the truck, but Dorin read its intentions and threw himself to one side just before it fired, leaving the bolt to chew a sizzling furrow through the mud behind him. I expected the thing to open up with its belt-fed cannon next, an attack that surely even the brave commissar could not avoid, but instead it let out a metallic roar and stomped forwards, its claws reaching out. Clearly whatever controlled the thing had not lost the orks' love of close combat.

'For the Emperor!' Avarus roared, suddenly beside me, and followed the commissar in. I went after him, screaming my defiance to try to drown out the fear in my own head. However, I was still thinking at least somewhat rationally: my laspistol would barely scratch the walker, whereas perhaps my chainsword could cut some wires or damage hydraulics.

One great, spiked claw swung for Dorin, seeking to impale and crush him, but the commissar twisted nimbly aside despite the uneven footing and let the blow pass, then hacked at the vehicle's leg with his power sword. There was a spray of sparks, but to my dismay there was no other appreciable effect. Avarus' powerblade was similarly ineffective, and he was taken off guard as the machine whirled suddenly with startling speed for something so ungainly. The barrel of the energy cannon caught the Tempestor Prime's head a glancing blow and he fell to the ground, stunned despite his helmet. The ork walker bellowed again and raised one clawed foot, ready to stamp on him.

I dropped my chainsword and raised both my laspistols, my own in my right hand and Rosel's in my left, then switched them to full auto and pulled the triggers. I sent a volley of shots at what looked to be a visor slit on the front: whether I hit anything of import I cannot say, but the barrage seemed to disorientate the machine for a moment. A few seconds later my power packs ran dry, but by that time I was close enough to grab hold of Avarus by his combat webbing and start to pull him backwards. It was a futile effort: as soon as my shots ceased the walker seemed to settle itself again, and both its monstrous guns whined into position to target us.

But it had forgotten Dorin.

The commissar suddenly appeared, using a smokestack as a handhold to haul himself up onto its chassis. Now the walker realised he was there, and it started to lurch in a clumsy circle in an apparent attempt to throw him off, but the commissar clung grimly on with one hand and raised his power sword with the other. Light flashed as he struck at the top of its carapace once, twice, thrice. For a moment I thought he was trying – and failing – to hack his way through by sheer brute force, but then I saw him sheathe his sword and take hold of a plate, which he wrenched upwards. No, Dorin had been shearing bolts away, and now he could gain access to the interior. He drew his bolt pistol and emptied the magazine inside, heedless of the risk of ricochets.

The walker abruptly seemed to droop. Whether it was linked directly to the nervous system of the pilot or whether the ork inside had simply slumped across some crude control system, I knew not. Either way, whatever insane gyroscopics had been stabilising its two-legged rampage abruptly failed as it keeled forwards onto its front. Dorin jumped clear as

it fell, landing almost gracefully in the mud not far from where I stood, then took in me helping Avarus back to his feet.

‘Lieutenant,’ Dorin said with a nod. Even such small recognition from a commissar was high praise indeed. I saluted him, taken aback by the sheer skill and bravery I had just witnessed from him.

The unfinished Gargant exploded.

Dovarus’ team must have achieved their objective, because the explosion lit up the rain-soaked dusk like a brief and violent sunrise and shook the ground beneath our feet, as though the monstrous war machine were under power and had started moving. Great panels of metal buckled outwards and began to crumple towards the ground with tortured rending noises so loud it went beyond sound. I clapped my hands desperately over my ears, trying to fight off a pain that felt like needles being stabbed into my brain. Secondary explosions fired as ammunition stores cooked off, but I could no longer hear them. I couldn’t hear anything other than a high-pitched ringing. Nor could I tear my eyes away.

It was like watching a god die.

Flaming detritus began to rain down, and I saw something large and ragged hit near where the remnants of our troops were sheltering. Dorin began to sprint back towards them. I steadied Avarus with one arm as we followed, although he got his feet under him and shook me off after a few steps, despite the blow he’d taken to the head. My balance seemed little better than his, and the world felt oddly dreamlike through the bone-splitting whine that had replaced my sense of hearing.

Hotshot las-fire reignited the gloom. The remaining Tempestus Scions were targeting the greenskins they could see as the xenos staggered here and there, holding their heads or shooting even more wildly than usual. As I watched, an unusually coordinated group of orks made a loping rush for our troops, driven to an even more berserk fury than usual by the death of their war-idol, only to be cut down by disciplined fire from the Deltic Lions. The commissar appeared to be giving orders solely through some form of gesture-based battle-sign. The few Kilgannor troops I could see were prone, vomiting or weeping. Were the Scions even still human?

Of course they were. We all were, Guardsman and Scion alike, and we’d done the Emperor’s work this day.

The far wall of the yard blew in, a new noise loud enough to faintly

register through the slowly receding ringing in my ears. For a moment I was wrong-footed as I tried to tie up the explosion with some outlying part of the Gargant, or perhaps a fuel pipeline that had been damaged and now ignited. It wasn't until a few seconds later, when the first wave of crude, tracked vehicles swept in over the debris, that I realised the truth. There were more orks in these forests, after all. It seemed that our sabotage had not gone unnoticed, and they were too impatient to use one of their own gates.

Then the machine that had done the damage appeared.

It was an immense wheeled monstrosity, as crude and ramshackle as the rest of the orks' creations but near enough the size of a Baneblade, bristling with guns and sporting an enormous spiked roller at the front. It would have been intimidating enough anyway, but I saw a hatch open on the top and a monstrosity of metal clambered out. At first I thought it was another ork walker, but then I realised it was the largest ork I'd ever seen, almost fully encased in gaudy yellow armour. It shook one enormous fist at us and looked to be roaring in rage, although I couldn't have heard it at that distance even if my hearing had been working properly.

Avarus grabbed my arm and I looked around at him.

'It's the warboss!' he shouted, the words buzzing in my ears.

This was Zogreb Bloodfang himself. The warboss had been closer to the front lines than anyone had thought, and we'd just brought his wrath down upon our heads.

Avarus broke into a run towards the remnants of our force and I followed him. If I was going to die, I would die alongside the troops of my command.

I scrambled into our makeshift cover behind some as yet undamaged ork buggies, just as Dorin was snatching the handset from the vox-array on the back of one of the few remaining Scions. I ejected my laspistol's spent powercell and replaced it, eyeing the fast-approaching horde with a certain numbness. Surely the commissar wasn't calling for an extraction? We'd be dead before they could get a Valkyrie airborne.

'This is Commissar Dorin of the Three Hundred and Ninety-Fourth Deltic Lions,' Dorin snapped, his voice tense but steady, so far as I could hear. 'Commence immediate bombardment five hundred and fifty yards in advance of my position, saturation fire, half a mile horizon, withdrawing!'

I didn't hear a reply. What reply could there be? Dorin himself had told us that the Basilisk batteries were still crawling up the coast road towards the front lines. The commissar was surely calling for a miracle that could not materialise...

A buzzing shriek reached me, but this wasn't a recurrence of the tinnitus I'd just suffered; the air was being split asunder by a new noise. I looked around for any threat, searching for what devilishly inventive way to end our lives the greenskins had now conjured, but I saw nothing.

At least, until the northern skyline was lit up by explosions. A moment later, the concussive thunder hit my ears. The marching curtain of fire raced closer, but this wasn't the shock wave of those first detonations; this was shell after shell falling from the sky and obliterating everything in their path. In a matter of seconds, the far wall of the yard had disappeared. Bloodfang's monstrous crawling vehicle came apart in an obscenely beautiful flower of flame. The other ork vehicles jinked and swerved, but there was nowhere for them to flee. The destruction was absolute, crushing the xenos beneath the iron fist of the Emperor. I began to weep with unashamed joy. In defiance of everything we'd thought possible, the Basilisk bombardment had begun.

But it didn't stop.

It came inexorably on towards us, as deceptively quick as flowing lava and just as devastating. I turned to Dorin, seeking reassurance. 'Sir?'

The commissar just stood there, a faint smile on his face.

'Sir?' I shouted over the rapidly increasing noise. 'Should we...?'

No, we couldn't run – it was moving too fast. We couldn't rely on any of the ork vehicles, either. 'Sir, call it off!'

Dorin looked at me now, but made no move to do as I asked. My few remaining Kilgannor troops started to flee back towards our lines, limping steps that wouldn't buy them more than a few seconds. The Tempestus Scions, by contrast, were silent and stationary, as though they hadn't noticed the approaching destruction, or as though they simply accepted it.

As though this had been the plan all along.

Fear of obliteration suddenly trumped fear of a commissar's wrath. 'Call it off!' I shouted, lunging for the vox. 'Call it off!'

Dorin moved like smoke, grabbing me from behind and wrapping his arm around my throat. His breath was warm on my cheek as I struggled against

him.

‘None of the greenskin command must escape now we’ve drawn them out,’ the commissar said into my ear. ‘This is the only way.’

I couldn’t speak, not from a lack of air but from the icy knife of betrayal that twisted in my heart.

‘I’ve seen so many deaths in service to the Emperor,’ Dorin said as the explosions tore up the ground in front of us. He sounded almost wistful. ‘Trust me, lieutenant, it could be worse. It could be so much worse.’

Everything became fire and heat and pain.

Tempestor Prime Avarus became suddenly and painfully aware that, in spite of all expectations to the contrary, he wasn’t dead.

He remembered the shells hitting; he remembered gouts of mud blasted into the air; he remembered the ork vehicles being thrown asunder by the bombardment. He was lying on wet, sticky ground. He reached out with his left arm, and stopped as it erupted into sickening agony. *Compound fracture*, he thought, trying to master the pain through mental clarity. He shifted his weight slightly and used his right hand instead. It encountered metal. Now, as he tried to focus, he could see faint chinks of dim light. He experienced an abrupt sense of enclosure.

*One of the ork vehicles? It must have landed over me, sheltering me from the worst of the bombardment.*

It took several minutes to dig out enough of a hollow in the mud for him to slither under the upturned wreck’s battered metal skin using just one arm, and nearly as long to pull himself through it. By the time he regained his feet he was light-headed from the exertion and pain.

He looked around. What had once been an ork manufacturing yard surrounded by verdant forest was now a cratered wasteland of mud as far as the eye could see, liberally littered with twisted metal and body parts. Most of the latter had green skin and repulsive xenos proportions, but his eyes lit briefly on the bisected upper torso of the Kilgannor lieutenant, identifiable only by the rank markings on one largely undamaged sleeve.

Amazingly, his comm-bead was still in his ear. He activated it, searching for a frequency that could connect him to high command.

‘This is Tempestor Prime Avarus,’ he began, turning in place and trying to orientate himself in his now near featureless surroundings. ‘The

commissar's plan worked. Aside from myself, casualty rate is at one hundred per cent—'

He slipped in the mud, biting off a curse as pain shot through his battered body.

'—as predicted. I am returning to the fortification line to await new orders.'

From out of the darkness around him came a high-pitched chittering. Gretchin, probably squabbling amongst themselves. The little greenskins were nowhere near as tough as their ork cousins, but could be as hard to kill as an Eechanite grain-roach. It wasn't surprising that some had survived the bombardment.

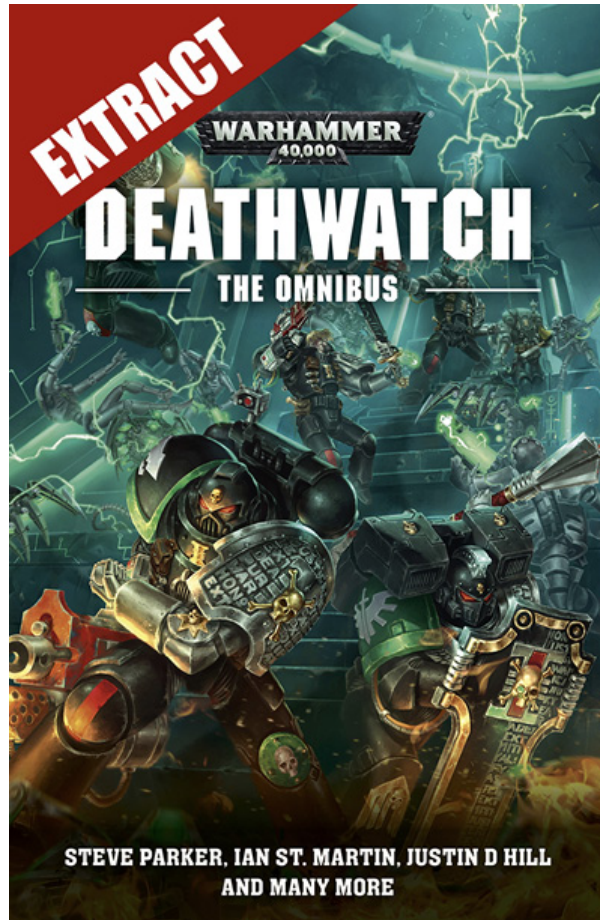
Avarus gritted his teeth and gripped the hilt of his power sword. Gretchin would pose a very minor threat to him were he at full health, but that was not the case here.

'I am expecting some resistance...'

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Mike Brooks** is a speculative fiction author who lives in Nottingham, UK. His work for Black Library includes the short stories ‘The Path Unclear’ and ‘Choke Point’, and the novella *Wanted: Dead*. When not writing, he works for a homelessness charity, plays guitar, sings in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

An extract from *Deathwatch: The omnibus*.



Something vast, dark and brutish moved across the pinpricked curtain of space, blotting out the diamond lights of the constellations behind it as if swallowing them whole. It was the size of a city block, and its bulbous eyes, like those of a great blind fish, glowed with a green and baleful light.

It was a terrible thing to behold, this leviathan – a harbinger of doom – and its passage had brought agony and destruction to countless victims in the centuries it had swum among the stars. It travelled, now, through the Charybdis Subsector on trails of angry red plasma, cutting across the inky darkness with a purpose.

That purpose was close at hand, and a change began to take place on its bestial features. New lights flickered to life on its muzzle, shining far brighter and sharper than its eyes, illuminating myriad shapes, large and small, that danced and spun in high orbit above the glowing orange sphere of Arronax II. With a slow, deliberate motion, the leviathan unhinged its massive lower jaw, and opened its mouth to feed.

At first, the glimmering pieces of debris it swallowed were mere fragments, nothing much larger than a man. But soon, heavier, bulkier pieces drifted into that gaping maw, passing between its bladelike teeth and down into its black throat.

For hours, the monster gorged itself on space-borne scrap, devouring everything it could fit into its mouth. The pickings were good. There had been heavy fighting here in ages past. Scoured worlds and lifeless wrecks were all that remained now, locked in a slow elliptical dance around the local star. But the wrecks, at least, had a future. Once salvaged, they would be forged anew, recast in forms that would bring death and suffering down upon countless others. For, of course, this beast, this hungry monster of

the void, was no beast at all.

It was an ork ship. And the massive glyphs daubed sloppily on its hull marked it as a vessel of the Deathskull clan.

Re-pressurisation began the moment the ship's vast metal jaws clanged shut. The process took around twenty minutes, pumps flooding the salvage bay with breathable, if foul-smelling, air. The orks crowding the corridor beyond the bay's airlock doors roared their impatience and hammered their fists against the thick metal bulkheads. They shoved and jostled for position. Then, just when it seemed murderous violence was sure to erupt, sirens sounded and the heavy doors split apart. The orks surged forward, pushing and scrambling, racing towards the mountains of scrap, each utterly focused on claiming the choicest pieces for himself.

Fights broke out between the biggest and darkest-skinned. They roared and wrestled with each other, and snapped at each other with tusk-filled jaws. They lashed out with the tools and weapons that bristled on their augmented limbs. They might have killed each other but for the massive suits of cybernetic armour they wore. These were no mere greenskin foot soldiers. They were orks of a unique genus, the engineers of their race, each born with an inherent understanding of machines. It was hard-coded into their marrow in the same way as violence and torture.

As was true of every caste, however, some among them were cleverer than others. While the mightiest bellowed and beat their metal-plated chests, one ork, marginally shorter and leaner than the rest, slid around them and into the shadows, intent on getting first pickings.

This ork was called Gorgrot in the rough speech of his race, and, despite the sheer density of salvage the ship had swallowed, it didn't take him long to find something truly valuable. At the very back of the junk-filled bay, closest to the ship's great metal teeth, he found the ruined, severed prow of a mid-sized human craft. As he studied it, he noticed weapon barrels protruding from the front end. His alien heart quickened. Functional or not, he could do great things with salvaged weapon systems. He would make himself more dangerous, an ork to be reckoned with.

After a furtive look over his shoulder to make sure none of the bigger orks had noticed him, he moved straight across to the wrecked prow, reached out a gnarled hand and touched the hull. Its armour-plating was in

bad shape, pocked and cratered by plasma fire and torpedo impacts. To the rear, the metal was twisted and black where it had sheared away from the rest of the craft. It looked like an explosion had torn the ship apart. To Gorgrot, however, the nature of the ship's destruction mattered not at all. What mattered was its potential. Already, visions of murderous creativity were flashing through his tiny mind in rapid succession, so many at once, in fact, that he forgot to breathe until his lungs sent him a painful reminder. These visions were a gift from Gork and Mork, the bloodthirsty greenskin gods, and he had received their like many times before. All greenskin engineers received them, and nothing, save the rending of an enemy's flesh, felt so utterly right.

Even so, it was something small and insignificant that pulled him out of his rapture.

A light had begun to flash on the lower left side of the ruined prow, winking at him from beneath a tangle of beams and cables and dented armour plates, igniting his simple-minded curiosity, drawing him towards it. It was small and green, and it looked like it might be a button of some kind. Gorgrot began clearing debris from the area around it. Soon, he was grunting and growling with the effort, sweating despite the assistance of his armour's strength-boosting hydraulics.

Within minutes, he had removed all obstructions between himself and the blinking light, and discovered that it was indeed a kind of button.

Gorgrot was extending his finger out to press it when something suddenly wrenched him backwards with irresistible force. He was hurled to the ground and landed hard on his back with a snarl. Immediately, he tried to scramble up again, but a huge metal boot stamped down on him, denting his belly-armour and pushing him deep into the carpet of sharp scrap.

Gorgrot looked up into the blazing red eyes of the biggest, heaviest ork in the salvage bay.

This was Zazog, personal engineer to the mighty Warboss Balthazog Blutwrekk, and few orks on the ship were foolish enough to challenge any of his salvage claims. It was the reason he always arrived in the salvage bay last of all; his tardiness was the supreme symbol of his dominance among the scavengers.

Zazog staked his claim now, turning from Gorgrot and stomping over to the wrecked prow. There, he hunkered down to examine the winking

button. He knew well enough what it meant. There had to be a working power source onboard, something far more valuable than most scrap. He flicked out a blowtorch attachment from the middle knuckle of his mechanised left claw and burned a rough likeness of his personal glyph into the side of the wrecked prow. Then he rose and bellowed a challenge to those around him.

Scores of gretchin, the puniest members of the orkoid race, skittered away in panic, disappearing into the protection of the shadows. The other orks stepped back, growling at Zazog, snarling in anger. But none dared challenge him.

Zazog glared at each in turn, forcing them, one by one, to drop their gazes or die by his hand. Then, satisfied at their deference, he turned and pressed a thick finger to the winking green button.

For a brief moment, nothing happened. Zazog growled and pressed it again. Still nothing. He was about to begin pounding it with his mighty fist when he heard a noise.

It was the sound of atmospheric seals unlocking.

The door shuddered, and began sliding up into the hull.

Zazog's craggy, scar-covered face twisted into a hideous grin. Yes, there *was* a power source on board. The door's motion proved it. He, like Gorgrot, began to experience flashes of divine inspiration, visions of weaponry so grand and deadly that his limited brain could hardly cope. No matter; the gods would work through him once he got started. His hands would automatically fashion what his brain could barely comprehend. It was always the way.

The sliding door retracted fully now, revealing an entrance just large enough for Zazog's armoured bulk to squeeze through. He shifted forward with that very intention, but the moment never came.

From the shadows inside the doorway, there was a soft coughing sound.

Zazog's skull disintegrated in a haze of blood and bone chips. His headless corpse crashed backwards onto the carpet of junk.

The other orks gaped in slack-jawed wonder. They looked down at Zazog's body, trying to make sense of the dim warnings that rolled through their minds. Ignoring the obvious threat, the biggest orks quickly began roaring fresh claims and shoving the others aside, little realising that their own deaths were imminent.

But imminent they were.

A great black shadow appeared, bursting from the door Zazog had opened. It was humanoid, not quite as large as the orks surrounding it, but bulky nonetheless, though it moved with a speed and confidence no ork could ever have matched. Its long adamantium talons sparked and crackled with deadly energy as it slashed and stabbed in all directions, a whirlwind of lethal motion. Great fountains of thick red blood arced through the air as it killed again and again. Greenskins fell like sacks of meat.

More shadows emerged from the wreck now. Four of them. Like the first, all were dressed in heavy black ceramite armour. All bore an intricate skull and 'I' design on their massive left pauldrons. The icons on their right pauldrons, however, were each unique.

'Clear the room,' barked one over his comm-link as he gunned down a greenskin in front of him, spitting death from the barrel of his silenced bolter. 'Quick and quiet. Kill the rest before they raise the alarm.' Switching comm channels, he said, 'Sigma, this is Talon Alpha. Phase one complete. Kill-team is aboard. Securing entry point now.'

'Understood, Alpha,' replied the toneless voice at the other end of the link. 'Proceed on mission. Extract within the hour, as instructed. Captain Redthorne has orders to pull out if you miss your pick-up, so keep your team on a tight leash. This is *not* a purge operation. Is that clear?'

'I'm well aware of that, Sigma,' the kill-team leader replied brusquely.

'You had better be,' replied the voice. 'Sigma, out.'

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