

WARHAMMER
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

EVIL SUN RISING



GUY HALEY

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It is the 41st millennium. For more than a hundred centuries the Emperor has sat immobile on the Golden Throne of Earth. He is the master of mankind by the will of the gods, and master of a million worlds by the might of his inexhaustible armies. He is a rotting carcass writhing invisibly with power from the Dark Age of Technology. He is the Carrion Lord of the Imperium for whom a thousand souls are sacrificed every day, so that he may never truly die.

Yet even in his deathless state, the Emperor continues his eternal vigilance. Mighty battlefleets cross the daemon-infested miasma of the warp, the only route between distant stars, their way lit by the Astronomican, the psychic manifestation of the Emperor's will. Vast armies give battle in his name on uncounted worlds. Greatest amongst his soldiers are the Adeptus Astartes, the Space Marines, bio-engineered super-warriors. Their comrades in arms are legion: the Astra Militarum and countless planetary defence forces, the ever-vigilant Inquisition and the tech-priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus to name only a few. But for all their multitudes, they are barely enough to hold off the ever-present threat from aliens, heretics, mutants – and worse.

To be a man in such times is to be one amongst untold billions. It is to live in the cruellest and most bloody regime imaginable. These are the tales of those times. Forget the power of technology and science, for so much has been forgotten, never to be re-learned. Forget the promise of progress and understanding, for in the grim dark future there is only war. There is no peace amongst the stars, only an eternity of carnage and slaughter, and the laughter of thirsting gods.



CHAPTER 1

THE RED WAAAGH!

From a dozen brawling orkish domains, the Red Waaagh! gathered: a billion orks pulled in the wake of the rust-ships of Warlord Grukk.

Grukk the Unstoppable, he liked to call himself. Grukk Face-Eater, he was more often called. Grukk the Zogging Maniac, the boyz said.

They did this behind his back. He really was a maniac.

Grukk's fleet of blunt-nosed kill kroozers smashed across the cosmos, pillaging half a dozen star systems. His followers multiplied with every victory, attracted not by the fact of these conquests, for many a lesser Waaagh! has accounted for more devastation, but by the sheer violent finesse with which Grukk achieved them. By the time the Red Waaagh! dived into the Karasoon Warp Rift en route to Sanctus Reach, its ships filled space as far as the eye could see; the largest Waaagh! for centuries. Members of every clan and faction imaginable had thrown in their lot with the Face-Eater. As a representative sample of ork-kind, it was unsurpassed in recent millennia, the kind of gathering a xenobiologist would have given his eye or tooth to survey. In truth, had any xenobiologist got close enough to accomplish such a study, he would have given a lot more than his tooth in payment for the privilege.

With this cloud of marauding violence travelled the Red Sunz Mob – Uggrim, Snikgob, Bozgat and their Stompa, *Fat Mork*. From system to system they wandered, following a path of bloodshed and teeth away from the domains of the tau in the galactic east, heading ever corewards.

'Dunno why,' said Uggrim, when surly Snikgob asked him why. They were in the hangar of the *Evil Sun Rising*. (This vessel they had acquired with a small

amount of cunning and a large number of teeth from the crazed Pirate Boss Gunmouth Nazog, but that's a tale for another day.) 'I just feel it in me bones, ya know? I reckon Mork wants me to go.' Uggrim jerked his thumb over his shoulder at their war god sleeping soundly.

Uggrim and Snikgob said little more on this matter than that. The meks were clever, but they were orks, and proper boyz are uninterested in philosophy.

From the battlegrounds of Hurdlian to the meteor-wracked plains of Bork's Mistake, onwards from there through an unfortunate and near-fatal brush with the arsonists of Charadon and the tyranids locked in never-ending war against them. There was a fruitful contract with a flotilla of freebooterz lost and down on their luck, and a sadly short-lived association with the deadly Dread Dok and his Kan Katastrophe Karnival... *Fat Mork* fought on a hundred battlefields. Sometimes the Red Sunz lingered so long in one place Snikgob thought they'd stay forever, only for Uggrim to stick his nose in the air and sniff the wind like a squighound on the chase. Days after, they'd be gone. However long they stayed, always they headed off eventually, and when they did, always they went to the galactic west.

So it was that Uggrim and the Red Sunz Mob found themselves pulled into the orbit of Grukk's mighty Red Waaagh!, shortly before it hit Sanctus Reach. Not that Grukk or his followers knew that was what it was called, or would have cared had they known.

It is on one of the Red Waaagh!'s larger ships, the *Toof o' Mork*, that we find Boss Mek Uggrim toiling, reduced in station from *the* Big Mek to a big mek, one among the many hundreds working their strange genius on the behalf of Grukk. Or rather, on behalf of the Bad Moon Big Mek Mogrok, Grukk's chief adviser and aide. This is how Mogrok styles himself, and for the time being at least, so Grukk believes him to be...

'Nah, nah, nah!' Uggrim swung his arm in a broad arc, catching the pointy heads of a brace of gretchin with the back of his hand. He chucked his great spanner down, bringing forth a howl from one of the oilers as it smashed its foot. Uggrim shoved the gretchin out of the way and grabbed at the wires they had been fiddling with. 'See?' he said, pointing emphatically. 'That one goes here, that one goes there! You thick or what?'

The gretchin grinned with great servility at him, and shrank back.

Uggrim growled and gathered himself up to his full, imposing height. He was among the biggest big meks in the Waaagh!, and had once led a small tribe

himself, although he'd got rid of them as soon as he could. 'I'm going for "or what",' he said. He dusted his apron off and snorted back a noseful of snot. 'Just get it right, or it'll be bad for you, you get it?'

'Oooh, yes, boss, yes, boss. We geddit.' The gretchins' little heads bobbed enthusiastically, and all the while they shoved and pinched at the least of their number like Uggrim couldn't see them doing it.

Uggrim groaned and ran his hand over his long face. 'You grots are the worse grots I have ever seen. You don't buck your ideas up, I'm going to have meself a little barbecue. Now get on with it!' he roared.

He let them run off, tutting and cursing after them. When he was alone he leaned on railings that looked across a massive metal cavern, deep in the guts of Mogrok's gargant, carried itself deep within the guts of the *Toof o' Mork*. Hundreds of mekboyz of every conceivable subtype laboured away in its steel belly, and a hundred times as many grots. The racket in there was enough to make a boy go deaf. Runtherds bellowed at whimpering runt teams, mekboyz halloed and shouted at each other. Power tools whined, burnas whooshed, thousands of hammers banged away. They were fitting a belly gun, the biggest belly gun Uggrim had ever seen. This sight ought to have excited him, but somehow it didn't. Instead Uggrim felt deeply dissatisfied. What was wrong with him he didn't like to admit, but he knew all right.

Ambition, that was what. It wasn't *his* gargant. And that made him mad.

A horny nail tapped on his shoulder. Uggrim looked behind him, ready to roar at the interruption. He turned it into a snarl, curling his lips back over his long fangs at Mek Snikgob, the closest thing Uggrim had to a friend.

'You all right, Uggs?' said Snikgob mildly, for he was well used to Uggrim's rages. His welding mask was flipped up on his head, a greasy smoke stick jammed into the gap between his fang and one of his smaller – although no less sharp – teeth.

'Yeah,' said Uggrim grumpily.

'Don't look all right.' Snikgob fished about in a leather shoulder bag hanging at his hip. 'Here we are.' He handed over a half-burned morsel with a surprised look on its face. 'Squig on a stick – that'll cheer you up, no worries. Lunchtime, ain't it? I knows you, a right git when you're hungry.'

Uggrim took the snack and looked at it dubiously.

'Go on then,' said Snikgob, 'chow down.'

Uggrim growled and took a bite. It was surprisingly good, burned on the outside, half raw in the middle – just the way he liked it. He waved the creature

around at the cavern, its rubbery limbs flapping with the motion. ‘All this – thought it’d be fun, ya know?’ He chomped and swallowed noisily. ‘Working together and all that, making something real big.’

‘It is fun, ain’t it?’ said Snikgob. ‘Come on, Uggs, this is a Mega-gargant. A Mega-gargant! There’s two in this Waaagh! Two! Now ain’t that something?’

Neither of them are mine, thought Uggrim. ‘Well, yeah, yeah,’ he conceded. ‘But it’s not right. Not right! Too hard, taking too long.’ He sniffed. ‘I blame the staff. These grots are worthless. Always cheekin’.’

‘Get Frikk on it then,’ said Snikgob. ‘Beat him if he don’t sort ’em out.’

‘Don’t you tell me how to beat my grot. I’d give him a right shoeing! Frikk’s guarding *Fat Mork*. Only one of them little zoggers I trust. Got so many meks wanting to come and look at the little sun, can’t be leaving *Fat Mork* alone any more.’ Uggrim stared daggers at a bunch of gretchin swinging from a plank some metres below, slopping yellow paint all over everything. They laughed at him and pulled faces. ‘Zogging Bad Moons. Not one of ’em’s got any respect,’ he grumbled, deep in his chest. ‘Ya know, I miss being me own boss sometimes,’ he said more loudly.

Snikgob groaned. ‘Don’t tell me you want those Deathskulls back, mate. I mean, yeah, our own crew, but to tell the truth, since the blue boyz went over to Bluefinga, I’m enjoying knowing me socks will be where I left ’em every morning. Gets mighty tiresome shaking down twenty thieving gits for your grog mug every five minutes.’

‘Huh. Gork’s arse, no. Want them back on *Evil Sun Rising*? Good riddance to ’em. When I’m a real boss, it’ll be proper orks, not blue faces.’ He gave an involuntary shudder. Perhaps he was remembering the great underpant snatch. It had been a particularly testing time for all the meks. ‘I just want to get out there, feel the stars on me face, sail the void with no big zogger tellin’ us what to do!’ Uggrim finished his squig and tossed the stick over the edge. A grot squeaked somewhere down below.

‘Steady, ye’re sounding like a freebooter.’

Uggrim glared at his friend. ‘Done that. Never again.’

‘Gunmouth,’ said Snikgob knowledgeably.

‘Gunmouth,’ agreed Uggrim. ‘Though the Dok and Happy Basher weren’t no better.’ He drummed his fingers on the railing and sighed. ‘I thought it was bad back on Garbax World, but this is worse! Thought *Fat Mork* was us hitting the big time, but it weren’t so. And then I thought joining up with this Waaagh! would be it. And you know what? It ain’t either.’

Snikgob grunted. His habitually sour expression became ever so slightly less sour. ‘Ain’t that true?’

‘Politics! Always the politics. Time was, you could just shoot someone in the face and get it all your own way. Not now, oh no.’

‘We’re getting old, is all.’ Snikgob gave him a sympathetic look. ‘You think one day, you play your cards right, you’ll be the biggest zogger. But there’s always, always a bigger zogger, Uggrim. Just the way it goes. You be careful. That Mogrok’s top mek round here. You rile him up, it’ll be trouble for all of us. You want to play at being king, you go ahead, but we need to find us a different Waaagh! if so. It ain’t so bad here. Look at it all. It’s exciting to be a part of.’

‘You changed your tune.’

‘Yeah,’ said Snikgob. ‘Well, pays to keep a positive attitude, don’t it?’

Uggrim frowned, his heavy brows crowding his sunken eyes. Snikgob had just said something positive, and he was *never* positive. Far from it.

‘Did you go funny when we was in the warp, Sniks?’ said Uggrim. He squinted at his friend suspiciously. ‘Mogrok puts a lot of faith in them shields of his, but I ain’t convinced. Bit rocky that ride. Something might have happened, something... unnatural. You ain’t got nothing unnatural in there with you, have you?’

Snikgob was taken aback. ‘What? Me? Nah! Anyways, it’s been days since we come out! What do you reckon I been doing? Drinking snotling blood down in the drop sump and waiting for me moment to pounce?’

Uggrim shrugged. ‘Weird universe, pal.’

‘Well I ain’t!’ Snikgob scowled. ‘All I is saying is that you can’t be too careful round here. You got a lot of orky know-wots, Uggs, and a lot of smarts. But you also got too much ambition.’ Uggrim’s size told the truth of that. He was bigger than most nobs these days. Good in the fighting pits, good with a spanner, that’s what they said about him. Uggrim was getting a lot of admirers, and that was a bad thing as far as Snikgob was concerned. ‘We got to make the best of what we got. We need to keep a low profile.’ Snikgob stared at his friend for a moment, as if he reckoned Uggrim should shrink a bit in order to keep said low profile. ‘I dunno. Gotta get back to work.’ He put up his hand to flip his welding mask down, but didn’t. ‘Oh!’ he said. ‘Nearly forgot. Speaking of big zoggers – Mogrok. He wants all the chief meks with him on the *Wrath of Gork*. Big meet on with the biggest boss. That means you an’ all.’

‘Zogging brilliant,’ said Uggrim. ‘Sneak and snipper in one place together. All I need.’

‘Hey!’ said Snikgob. ‘Remember what I said. Be careful. We ain’t our own operation no more. Too many ears listening. Grots everywhere, most of ’em working for Mogrok. Don’t want your arms snipped off now, do ya?’

Not really, thought Uggrim. He snarled in return.

Snikgob gave a scowl that contained just the hint of a smile. ‘That’s more like it. Proper ork face. Now, off you go.’ Snikgob made shooing motions with his hand.

Uggrim stared at him.

Snikgob curled his lip. ‘Boss,’ he said.

That was more like it.

‘There ya go, there ya go, little fella.’

In the stomach of *Fat Mork*, Frikk crooned over his latest racing squig – a snuffling, bald sack of flesh with big, big eyes at one end and a flatulent arse at the other. Frikk turned it over gently, inspecting its over-sized rear legs with a practiced eye. ‘Yeah, yeah. You’s gonna earn me all me money back. You’re a right little champ, you are. Yeah, that’s what you are.’

He spoke quietly. Bozgat, the third member of the Red Sunz Mob, snored gently in a hammock. The war machine’s captive evil sun burned brightly in its invisible magnetic bottle, encased by a squat cone of iron. The sun’s ruddy light spilled out into the engine room through the thick glass of the observation window, keeping it nice and cosy, which was why Bozgat liked to sleep there.

Fat Mork was sleeping too. All his systems were off-line. The killy beam-eye of his head was dark and his arms hung limply by his sides. The tiny evil sun fizzed every so often, as the Stompa dreamed cunning Mork-dreams of war and slaughter. Otherwise he was silent and lightless, as still as a spent shell casing, and possessed of as much life.

Frikk tickled his squig. Its tiny forelimbs waved and it chirred with pleasure. Frikk laughed softly.

Absorbed by his pet, he never heard Urdgrub, not until the gretchin was right on top of him.

‘Hello, Frikk.’

Frikk whirled round to see Urdgrub’s horrid blue face half a handspan from his own. He got the lot – beady, wicked eyes, flaking lucky blue paint and killer breath in one unpleasant instant, and it frightened the life half out of him.

Frikk squealed. Urdgrub slapped his hand over Frikk’s mouth, cutting off the scream. Frikk clutched hard at the squig, which responded by sinking its teeth

into his thumb. Frikk howled into Urdgrub's smelly hand. The squig leapt for its freedom. Claws pattered on metal, and it was gone into the dark.

Both gretchin froze, staring instinctively up at Bozgat. He was short for an ork, but still much bigger than either of the grots and would beat them both to bits if they woke him up. He snorted at the disturbance and rolled over. His hand flopped out of his filthy hammock.

'Mmmph. Gotta fix them power couplings. Yeah,' he said sleepily.

The gretchin did not stir until Bozgat was snoring loudly again.

Urdgrub recovered first. He was a head taller than Frikk and far more confident. Somehow he'd escaped the slaughter at Garbax World and had been bothering Frikk ever since. Rather than leaving with the surviving Deathskulls to join their clanboss, Bluefinga, he'd stuck around the *Evil Sun Rising* when the Red Sunz had come to the Waaagh!, hiding out in its darkest recesses. Worse luck for Frikk. Frikk thought often. Ever since he'd got Urdgrub to perform one little job – one tiny bit of thievery – for his boss, he'd not been able to shake the bigger grot. Urdgrub held up a finger to his lips, shook his head and removed his hand from Frikk's mouth.

'You,' hissed Frikk, his ears going flat under his grubby forage cap.

'Me,' said Urdgrub, planting his thumb in the centre of Frikk's skinny chest. 'And you,' he jabbed a finger at Frikk, 'owe me a fat stack of teeth, runt.'

There were runts in this life, and there were *runts*. Urdgrub might have been a bigger runt than him, but Frikk couldn't handle being called so by this riff-raff, whether it was true or not. 'Oi, oi, oi!' he said, standing slowly, eyes darting from Urdgrub's hands to his face. 'Don't you come in here calling me runt. You got no boss. One word, just one word from one of the big 'uns and you're dead.' Frikk gave a nasty grin, his tongue poking through needle teeth. 'What ya think about that?'

The gretchin conducted their conversation in furious whispers. This was life and death business they were about, but it wouldn't have done to wake the ork, or they'd both get it.

'They'll have to catch me first,' said Urdgrub.

Urdgrub was shiftier. When he was standing still he wasn't ever really standing still, stepping from foot to foot like the floor was hot, opening and closing his hands like they were paining him. It made Frikk nervous. But then, everything made Frikk nervous. 'No one's caught me yet. And I got friends.' He jabbed his thumb at his chest again. 'Me? I'm too useful. I got connections. What you got? That old fart, Uggrim? Nobody listens to him.'

This insult against his boss outraged Frikk, and he said loudly, 'He built *Fat Mork!*'

Urdgrub gave him a look of alarm, and Frikk clapped his own hands over his mouth this time. Both of them glanced up at Bozgat.

'Get us some pie... Mmm, pie,' said the ork, and belched in his sleep.

'Five teeth you owe me, Frikk,' whispered Urdgrub harshly. 'You got two nasty habits. One is gambling with a lot of teeth that ain't yours. I mean, that racing squig you were getting all sappy over. Per-fettic. Make a better snack than a racer.' He smacked his lips.

Frikk cast about for the squig. If Urdgrub caught it he would eat it, and Frikk couldn't afford another.

'That's one bad habit, ya zoggin' zogwit,' said Frikk.

Urdgrub smiled: a slow, evil leer that showed off all his teeth and had Frikk shrinking back. 'I was gettin' to two,' he said. 'And two's this. You is always losing. Worst habit of all that, bad luck. You can lose at worse things than squig-racing, Frikk.' Urdgrub patted the sharpened sliver of metal thrust into his waistband meaningfully.

Frikk swallowed, torn between anger and fear. 'All right, all right! I gets the message. What do ya want?' he hissed.

'Well, five teeth's five teeth. I'd like it back. It's mine after all, innit?'

Frikk's shoulders slumped. 'Don't have it.'

'There is something else you could give us. Gone and got meself a new boss, I have. There's something he's interested in. You help me help him, and I'll forget your little debt.'

'Rubbish! How you get off the ship?'

Urdgrub smirked. 'Ways and means, runt, ways and means.'

'What is it you want?' said Frikk, afraid to ask. He hunched in on himself protectively, peeking up over his knees. Urdgrub bent over and stared him full in the face.

'That,' he said, pointing a filthy finger at the little sun. 'My boss wants to know how that works.'

'Tell him to come see himself.'

'Who says he ain't? Your boss ain't sharing his secrets, apparently. So you're going to tell.'

'I don't know how it works!' squeaked Frikk.

'You got a better idea than most, I reckon. Find out. Say, I is feeling generous. Even if it's just a pointer in the right direction, I might knock a couple of teeth

off. Either that or,' he smiled nastily, 'I could just knock a couple of teeth *out*.' He pushed his face so close to Frikk's that their noses pressed together. Frikk pushed back, his ears standing erect. A while back he was bossing this grubby thief about. Now here Urdgrub was pushing him around in his boss's own place.

'I'm not having this, Urdgrub.'

'Oh yeah you are.' Urdgrub stood up, and paced stealthily backwards. He spared a glance for the snoring ork. His face went from violence to fear to violence again as he looked from grot to ork then back to grot. 'You got till before the drop to squeal or pay up, or you'll be squealin' for real.' He retreated into the shadows until only his pointing finger and the top of his dirty blue head were visible. 'You pay me off soon, Frikk, or I don't care who ya boss is, me and my grots'll come in 'ere and skin you alive.'

Urdgrub's eyes flashed in the dark. Frikk held his breath until he was sure the shadows were empty. He ran round the Stompa's engine deck, checking every nook. He opened the side door. There was nobody outside in the hangar, not even any of the ship runts. He blew out his cheeks hard, and brought his head back inside. He pushed the door to with exaggerated care, and leaned against it.

'This is not good, not good at all,' he said to himself.

'What ain't?' said Bozgat sleepily.

Frikk looked up with an obsequious expression plastered across his sneaky little face. 'Nothin', boss. Thinking about the squig race, boss, that's all, boss.' His false smile spread until he thought his cheeks would split. 'Nice cuppa, boss? Reactor's good and hot. Brew ya one up right quick, yes siree. Squig stock special? Mushroom surprise? What's yer fancy?'

'Course the reactor's hot, it's a self-contained, self-sustaining fusion reaction,' said Bozgat, in that strange, oddboy way meks had when they spoke a load of old jabber they didn't understand. He farted loudly. When he spoke again, the dreaminess had left his voice. 'Yeah, cuppa'd be nice. Mushroom. Got the squig farts something chronic.'

'Right you are, boss.'

'And Frikk?'

'Yes, boss?'

'Ye're an idiot,' said Bozgat.

'Yes, boss.'

Up above on the main deck, Talker started up, howling and shouting. If oddboyz talked odd, madboyz talked, well, mad.

'Oh don't you start!' said Bozgat. He swung his legs out of his hammock. His

booted feet landed with a clang on the floor. ‘Mork and Gork’s drops. Oi! Shut it – shut it now!’

Talker didn’t shut up. If anything, his mad talk rang madder and louder through the Stompa.

Frikk sighed resignedly. It was shaping up to be one of those days... just like every other.



CHAPTER 2

GRUKK FACE-EATER

Uggrim took an uncomfortable ride over from the *Toof o' Mork* in a shuttle boat crammed with all manner of meks. The compartment reeked of ork sweat and dirty clothes mixed with oil, flatulence and ill-humour. The meks were jammed in tight as snotlings in a pen, and angry about it, for these were orks more used to good treatment.

The shuttle boat shuddered as it flew, strange spanging and roaring noises coming from under Uggrim's feet. The pilot managed to restrain himself for most of the trip, performing only half a dozen unnecessary and somewhat hazardous manoeuvres as he made his way across the fleet. Uggrim could see the endless ships through the gaps in the hull. There was the gaudy yellow of the *Toof o' Mork*. Behind it, he caught sight of his own small ship, the *Evil Sun Rising*, and looked at it longingly. That's where his boys were and *Fat Mork* waited. His vessel slid out of sight, and his longing passed.

Windows, he supposed a more generously inclined mek might call the viewing gaps. They had no glass, and not all of them were a regular shape, but they had that essential window-y quality of letting an ork look through that which would otherwise be entirely opaque. Honestly, he'd have been happier without them. He was thankful of the bubble field encasing the ship, keeping the air in and whatever was in space out, but they failed as often as they worked no matter what Big Mek Mogrok had to say about it. Bubble expert my green arse, thought Uggrim.

Uggrim gritted his teeth. Normally he would have talked long and loudly about how poorly put together the shuttle was, and how much better he could

have done – and he could have, all right? – but he was surrounded on all sides by mean-eyed boss meks, some of whom were getting on for being as big as him. One of them might well have nailed the sorry mess together. His money was on the Snakebite in the stinky furs. Rubbish at proper machines, Snakebites were. He let it lie and tried not to think too hard about dying as the pilot looped the loop into the main hangar of Warlord Gruk's flagship, the *Wrath of Gork*.

The shuttle bounced twice before its mismatched wheels touched down, scattering grot deck crew. There was a bump as it mowed one down.

'Please stay seated until da shuttle has come to a complete stop!' cackled the pilot. A wheel came off and the shuttle clanged hard to one side, sending cursing meks stumbling everywhere. Sparks flew behind it as it slewed across the deck at an alarming speed. The pilot laughed louder.

The shuttle banged into a wall and came to a halt. The pilot whooped and banged his fists on the ramshackle dashboard. Deck crew came running up and the cockpit door was wrenched open with quite a lot of help from a crowbar.

'It's always like this,' Uggrim muttered to the mek next to him, a solid fellow with a huge jaw.

'Yeah,' the fellow said, in a voice as deep as space itself. Dozens of tiny spanners dangling from piercings in his lips jangled as he spoke. 'Comes of giving zoggin' speed freeks jobs flying transport runs.' They watched through a window as a dozen gretchin prised the pilot, who was by now insensible with laughter, out of his cockpit and carried him away. 'Trouble is, it'd turn anyone into a freek doing this day in, day out. Not right, I says.' The mek spat on the floor mightily. 'Should let the grots do it, if you ask me.'

'Anyone asking?' joked Uggrim, immediately feeling foolish for having done so.

The ork gave him a long, hard stare.

The big meks were grumbling and swearing and shuffling about. The landing ramp creaked open and hit the deck with a bang.

Revealed outside was the flashiest flash git Uggrim had ever seen. Of course he was a Bad Moon, all yellow silk and gold and extra knives, and a massive hat stitched into the shape of a leering moon. Half a dozen grots stood to attention behind him, each wearing an exact copy of their boss's foolish outfit and aping his smug expression.

'Git,' muttered Uggrim.

The Bad Moon beamed a smile at them so laden with gold caps and plates it vied with the stars for brightness.

‘Welcome!’ he said with outrageous cheer. ‘Welcome, big meks of the Red Waaagh!, to the *Wrath of Gork*, home of our master, the mighty Warlord Gruk!’ He held up a finger. ‘I warn you, gentle-orks, before you step out, that his name is as his temper – short, and to the point. Say nothing, do nothing, and we’ll all get out of this alive. Most of us might even be able to go back to work with all our limbs attached! Get yerselves ready to meet the boss! You can have a few minutes. Make yerselves look presentable, because we’re off to see the boss!’

‘Ya said dat already, boss,’ squeaked one of his aides.

‘Shut it, you,’ said the Bad Moon and knocked the yellow-clad grot flying. No one paid any notice. Such was life for gretchin.

The ork, who smelt suspiciously clean to Uggrim, stood waiting as the meks filed out onto the deck. Being so crammed together, they’d been forced to leave all their gear in the hold. Uggrim reckoned some ork was making a point about pecking order – as in, these big meks weren’t as important as they thought they were. Seeing as Mogrok and his cronies hadn’t come over in the same shuttle, even though they were coming from his own vessel, that ork was certainly Mogrok.

Swarms of grots appeared shivering and miserable from the runt-hold aft of the passenger ramp. A couple were noisily sick as they tumbled out. A few cuffs round the head from the meks cheered them up, and they went to work, fastening on back banners, shining tools dangling from utility belts, and passing large and improbable weapons into the hands of their masters. ‘Spit and polish, sir! Yes, nice and shiny, nice and bright!’ said Uggrim’s runt.

Uggrim had a lot of runts and had no idea what the two attending him were called. Counting runts was what Frikk was for. He wished now he’d brought his head runt, but what he’d told Snikgob was no exaggeration; Frikk was literally the only creature he trusted and Uggrim needed him to keep watch on *Fat Mork*.

‘Zoggin’ Bad Moons, zoggin’ gits. What’s Gruk want with all these silky ponces? They jibber on as much as madboyz,’ growled the ork with the spanner piercings. ‘There’s a load of ’em about. Followers of Mogrok. Something’s not right here. Not right at all.’

‘Boss Mek Uggrim,’ Uggrim introduced himself. ‘Red Sunz Mob.’

The other ork stared at him again – not hostile, at least not openly. Uggrim stared back. They might fight, or they might not. You can never tell with orks.

Without warning, the other ork butted his beetling brow hard against Uggrim’s. Their skulls made a noise like logs clacking together.

‘Chief Boy Skarbutkin, Koghead’s Krew,’ he said. ‘Evil Sun, yeah?’ He took

in the scarlet trimmings of Uggrim's clothes, the ork-face belly-plate glowering red from his gut. 'Used to be one of them, long time ago. Gave all that speeding stuff up. Too old for it, 'sides,' he sniffed. 'Evil Sunz? All they want is faster. Got no 'ppreciation for a good steam engine, and always, always meddling! Can't leave ya alone to work. Steam's where it's at – brilliant stuff, if you ask me.'

Uggrim refrained from repeating his earlier comment.

'Fire and water, that's all it is. Dead simple, but still dead killy, you see? Remarkable.' Skarbutkin belched. 'But apparently, not fast enough for the boys. Too slow, they said, too boring. So zog 'em, said I. I stopped wearing the red and went solo. Still, I'm an Evil Sun at heart and always will be. Can't take the clan out yerself, can ya? Might as well pretend I'm no mek. You halfway to a speed freek yourself, I s'pose?' he said disparagingly.

Uggrim grinned back. 'Oh no. Me, I build Stompas. Dead killy Stompas.'

Skarbutkin nodded appreciatively. 'Ooh, nice.' He shoved one of his gretchin oilers aside as soon as it finished buckling on a complicated looking gauntlet festooned with pointless cogs. He flexed his hand and poked at a few brass toggle switches.

'Hey!' an individual with a tall black squig crest on his scalp called out. 'Is you Uggrim?'

'Yeah,' said Uggrim, his chest puffed up at the recognition.

'I heard about you. Me mate Daffbag came over to see your Stompa. Little sun engine, ain't it? Brilliant. How'd ya do it?'

'Can't say,' said Uggrim, tapping his finger against his nose. He was correct – he couldn't say, because he didn't know.

'Ah, I see,' said the other mek, nodding and winking. 'Trade secrets, eh? Ah well, I'd love to see it meself.'

'Stompas, ya say?' shouted a tall Bad Moon with a mouth full of fine teeth. 'I heard about you too. What was it? Rebel Sun, Uffgrit?' he said, getting Uggrim's name wrong on purpose. 'I heard that you got that little sun in the guts of your machine. Can't say I'm impressed as this lot. Don't see what's wrong with squig oil meself, Uffgrit.'

'Red Sun. Uggrim,' growled Uggrim.

'Whatever. Now when you want to see a proper Stompa, come and see *Big Mouth* sometime. I built him for Gashrakk the Flash – heard of him? Well important, just like me.' He put a ringed hand on the belts crossing his chest, wherefrom hung numerous spanner icons and golden half-moons.

‘Can’t say I’ve heard of you,’ said Uggrim, which was true, although he did know who Gashrakk was. ‘I’m the top boss of fifteen work mobs on Mogrok’s gargant, *Gungutz*. If you’re so important, how comes you is not working there too?’

‘He’s dead good that Uggrim!’ called someone else. ‘I seen ’is Stompa meself!’

The Bad Moon opened his mouth as wide as it would go, showing off a dental fortune. He slapped his fat gut and stared round at the others. ‘Oh, I’m well impressed now. Fifteen work mobs, you say? *Gungutz*, you say? At least I would be, if I weren’t top boss on *sixteen* work mobs on *Gork’s Fist*.’ He inspected his talons insouciantly. ‘That’d be Gruk’s *personal* gargant. Grimgutz is my name and beating pipsqueak Evil Sunz meks like you is my game. Leave the big killers to the experts. Go off and tinker up a few pretty little bikes for the speed heads to wreck. That’s what you lot’s good at, ain’t it? Rubbish little speedies? Vroom vroom?’ he said in a piping grot-voice, delicately miming opening a throttle with his hands. ‘Tell you what, why don’t you tell me how your little sun works, and I’ll put it to work in a proper Stompa. Deal?’

A couple of the others laughed, although none who did were Evil Sunz.

Uggrim bristled. He shoved his way through the crowd to where Grimgutz stood. Grumbles at being so manhandled turned to eager chuckles when the meks scented a fight in the offing.

‘You take that back, moon ponce. I ain’t sharing nothing with the likes of you,’ said Uggrim. ‘*Fat Mork*’s the finest Stompa you’ll ever see, and the last, if you don’t watch that stupid gob of yours. What happen? You fall face first into a freebooter’s treasure chest or something?’

‘Ooh, spicy one, ain’t we?’ said Grimgutz. He had to draw himself full up to look Uggrim in the eye, but although he was shorter than the Evil Sun, he was heavier. They’d be a good match in a pit fight. ‘You want to take this to the pits, you be my guest.’

‘Nah. Stompa to Stompa. Then we’ll see who’s best.’

‘Oh, can’t handle a little ork to ork, can we?’

‘I’ll kill you either way, git.’

‘You’re on,’ said Grimgutz. ‘Stompas. *Big Mouth* can shout louder than you. He’s gonna shout yer head right off yer stupid red shoulders.’

‘Hey,’ said Skarbutkin, putting himself in between the two meks and forcing them apart, hands on their chests. ‘We’d love to see you two biff each other, wouldn’t we, lads?’

A subdued cheer went up.

‘But word is the boss wants Stompas for the big drop.’ He said this more to Uggrim than Grimgut. ‘You want yer faces bit off? No shortage of spanners round ’ere would take yer beasts off you lickety split, and if you was lacking a face, I reckon it’d be a bit hard for you to object.’

Grimgut’s smile stayed just as toothy, but he backed off. He slumped back down into his usual slouch and jabbed a ringed finger at Uggrim. ‘We’ll see. We’ll see about that. Next time, speedy.’ He winked and sauntered off.

Uggrim grumbled low in his throat. All he wanted to do right then was smash Grimgut’s face in.

‘Not clever that, mate,’ said Skarbutkin. ‘But as I likes you, thought I’d step in.’

Uggrim relaxed a little. ‘I’ll ’ave ’im.’

‘Sure you will,’ drawled Skarbutkin, ‘just not right now. You start scrapping here, Gruk’ll kill you both. Them Goffs are right killjoys.’

Uggrim snorted. Reluctantly he nodded his head. Skarbutkin felt the fight go out of Uggrim, and removed his hand from his chest.

‘Say, I can do you a really fine steam engine, if yer interested? Mates’ rates. I likes the look of you, Uggrim.’

The grots returned to their duties, and the meks primed themselves up without further incident. All decked with their unwieldy totems and favourite inventions humming on back and hip, they followed the Bad Moon and his herd of bright yellow gretchin across the busy hangar deck. Through the throng of swaggering mekaniaks Grimgut remained visible to Uggrim, his cocky back banner waving high over all the big meks’ heads. Then they were led into a corridor off the hangar. The boasts and grumbling conversation of the big meks became quieter, losing some of its joviality. There were thousands of Goffs and Bad Moons about. A group of nobs glared at them, red bull emblems prominent on their chests and ’ard boy checks all over their armour. One spat on the floor as the meks went by.

‘What’s he want to see us for anyways?’ said Skarbutkin. ‘That’s what I wants to know.’

‘No idea,’ said Uggrim. ‘Probably wants to boss us, just for bossing’s sake.’ He shrugged. ‘Not normal this, is it? Goffs and Moon boyz closer than close.’

Skarbutkin nodded. The Evil Sunz, Deathskulls and Blood Axes produced more meks than the other clans, and were disproportionately represented in the delegation. In such circumstances, clan rivalry could easily flare up. So could the

resentment some orks felt towards oddboyz. All it'd take would be one hard-headed Goff wanting to prove hitting people with a pointy object was more effective than thinking up clever killy things and it'd all kick off.

It did not. They went on without trouble, although the sense of danger only grew. The smug Bad Moon nob at their head dealt with set after set of surly Goff guards, opening the way for them with a word or flourish of his hand. Squads of stormboyz thundered past. Banging came from workshops. Slaves whimpered, whips cracked. The corridor widened. There were uncountable numbers of black-clad Goff grots running about everywhere on errands for their masters. A deep throaty hum, the ship's engines, or its bubble shield generators maybe, grew louder the further into the *Wrath of Gork* they went, the metal plates of the deck vibrating with it.

They came to a giant set of double doors. Untidy heaps of trophy weapons spilled from each side into the thoroughfare. Hundreds of alien heads – from old skulls through rotting to reasonably fresh – were pressed onto spikes over the archway. A bull's head of black iron decorated the doors, glaring with eyes carved from huge rubies. Two gigantic Goff nob in their full regalia of war glared equally hard at the meks from either side. The mekaniak delegation came to a stop.

'Big meks of the Red Waaagh!, we are here.' The Bad Moon pointed at the doors. These opened onto a giant hall, full of very large orks and the banners of defeated weaklings. Conversation ceased. At the very middle of the hall there was an archway of skulls – thousands of them – wired together. Spotlit under its apex was a tall iron throne, which reeked of drying blood. Spikes adorned its high back and heads adorned the spikes, recent gore glinting blackly below their ruined necks. Many of them – ork and alien alike – were missing their faces.

Their destroyer was Warlord Gruk, the most ferocious ork for light years in any direction. He sat brooding and mighty on his sticky throne. His eyes were red coals above the great metal scuttle of his prosthetic jaw, and they were fixed unblinkingly on the doorway. The meks went in, careful not to meet Gruk's stare. There were brave orks there, and reckless ones. They were all big meks after all: clever orks with a mek's mind and a nob's ambition. But if there were times to be clever and times to be tough, there were also times to shut up. Not one of them said a word.

Gruk Face-Eater tended to have that kind of effect on an ork.

Gruk was among the largest of all orks, twice the height of a regular boy and more than twice as broad. His muscles strained all over his body, fibres standing

to attention as if they would break free from the confinement of his skin. His whole demeanour was of tension. He sat forwards on his throne, his jaw jutting – the razor sharp, over-powered mechanical jaw whose face-shearing abilities had won him his name. Pistons at its left and right shifted, giving little hissing noises as he ground his gob from side to side. His massive torso was naked to the waist, criss-crossed with scars as complex as the wiring diagram for a shokk attack gun. He wore simple black trousers, a line of checks down the outside of each leg, terminating in enormous boots. A grot was polishing blood off their spiked, metal toecaps.

Grukk's hulking suit of mega armour was displayed on a no-nonsense stand behind him. His infamous power shears were held in similar stands within grabbing distance. You could tell his fingers wanted to be in the shears, to be working their worky bits, closing their gleaming snippers around the limbs of... Well, anybody that annoyed him. Choosing who would be a tricky matter, for everyone annoyed Grukk. Denied the snippers, Grukk's hands gripped the armrests of his throne like he wanted to tear them off. These were worn smooth and shiny. When he relaxed, which he did just barely, his fingers made constant, tiny ticking motions towards the claws, fidgeting of their own murderous accord.

Only madboyz and grots fidgeted like that, and they only did so because they couldn't keep a thought in their heads for more than a second. Grukk looked anything but distracted. In the main, he just looked really furious.

What would it be like to fight that zogger, thought Uggrim? Fatal, most likely, but part of him – that part of him that seethed with schemes, dreams and plans yet unrealised – wanted to find out.

Grukk snorted like a bull, drew a hand across his flat nose and sat back. He glared at the grot boot boy, and kicked it halfway across the room. It skidded to a halt in front of the meks, pulled itself up, bowed, and limped out.

'You's the big meks then,' grunted Grukk. His expression was as uncompromising as an avalanche.

'That they are, oh favoured of Gork,' said another. Only then did Uggrim notice that the line of orks to the left of Grukk were all also big meks. This was not unobservant on Uggrim's part. Grukk was a massive threat, and a threat held an ork's attention like nothing else.

These were the biggest big meks of the Waaagh!, the bosses of bosses, some of them mek-warbosses in their own right. A few Uggrim had met while working on *Gungutz*, others he knew only by reputation.

There was Rokstik Ironstitch, a mek so obsessed with upgrading himself he

was more machine than ork – and the bits that were ork weren't necessarily originally bits of Rokstik. Next to him was the fabulously unlucky Gutmash Festork, whose reputation for ill-fortune, judging by his station in life, was probably overstated. Midgit Mogrok, Mogrok's freakish sidekick, capered in front of them, tittering like a shroom-happy snot. He was rumoured to have been created by Mogrok, and that could have been true – there certainly was nothing natural about him. Gitfink Hollowskull stood at the end, a sneering Deathskull whose prodigious skills in direct energy weapon mechanics were only outweighed by his talent for larceny.

And there was Mogrok himself, the one who had spoken. He stood near to Gruk, slightly ahead of his crew. Mogrok was flanked by the shock attack nutcase Daggog, and Dok Fourklaw, Mogrok's best mate. Mogrok was very big, as you'd expect, overtopping the other big meks by a head. He was also tastelessly attired in many shades of yellow, and over-endowed with weaponry – again, as you'd expect, him being a Bad Moon and all. But what was unusual about Mogrok was his physical state. There was something *wrong* with him. His red eyes were shot through with black veins. And his skin... This was particularly nasty. It was covered in scabs, which lay atop each other like plates of bark on a sick old tree. The cracks between crawled with squig-parasites of every kind. Whatever ailed Mogrok attracted all manner of things to feast upon his flaking flesh. Something wormy poked out of a pockmark in his cheek and waved around. Mogrok dug around in his face, pulled it out and slurped it up like a noodle. It made Uggrim feel a little bit queasy.

Perhaps this unusual affliction and the unwanted attention it doubtless brought – orks were not prone to disease, malformation, or disability – had moulded Mogrok's devious nature, for he was exceptionally devious. Being an outcast and a target sharpened a boy's wits.

Fourklaw's friendship with Mogrok also stemmed from this sickness. Whenever Uggrim saw Mogrok, Fourklaw wasn't far behind, waving some pot or other of gloopy ointment at him. Some whispered that Mogrok was the power behind Gruk, but Uggrim reckoned Fourklaw might be the power behind Mogrok. Where did it stop? Probably with some maniac grot telling everyone what to do. Uggrim decided there and then to give Frikk a good kicking when he got back, in case he was getting ideas above his station.

There was no denying Mogrok was powerful. If he had been spawned a boy, he'd have been cast out, probably killed. But he was made a mek, and one of the very best at that. A boy could overlook a heavy infestation of squiglice in a

vendor if he could buy a reliable gun that would blow a beakee in half with one shot. And if Mogrok had suffered at times because of his condition, at least he never lacked for a snack.

‘These are the lads working on the gargants, your mightiness,’ said Mogrok, his voice as deep as an oil well. He scratched at his cheek, sending a shower of scurf onto his rich clothes. ‘Clever lads, hard workers – some real talent there.’ He nodded at the visiting big meks.

‘None as talented as you, eh Mogrok?’ said Gruk. He turned his head very slowly to look at his adviser, as if to do so more quickly would cause his head to twist off at the neck and uncork his rage. Uggrim imagined it whizzing round the room like a deflating squig, metal jaw snapping.

‘Naturally not, oh git of Gork.’

Gruk yawned, the pistons of his jaw hissing loudly, exposing a terribly scarred tongue. ‘Shame. Gonna have to keep you alive then. A big pity, because you is too big for your boots.’

Mogrok bowed very low. ‘Oh no, your grand high scarred one. I’m only after building bigger and better for you, Gruk – see you smash up some humies with it. My boots is big enough.’ He waggled one. ‘Fit right well, they do. Don’t want any bigger.’

‘Right,’ said Gruk, unconvinced. He shifted in his throne. ‘Are me rust-ships ready for the drop? Is *Gork’s Fist* ready for a scrap?’

‘Sure is, your mighty Gorkishness,’ said Mogrok. ‘We’s all ready for the first drop.’

‘Good.’ Gruk stood up. He was even bigger than he looked sitting down. ‘Because I am bored. Boring meeting. Boring meks. Bored!’ He strode over to the meks. He dwarfed them; Uggrim had seen smaller carnosaurus. ‘You is here for two reasons!’ He held up three fingers. ‘One, you better be ready!’ he shouted, showering them all with spittle. ‘And three...’ He pivoted round on one foot, taking them all by surprise. He grabbed the Snakebite big mek by the shoulders and hauled him off his feet. The mek had enough time to look shocked before Gruk’s metal jaw opened wide and clamped down onto his face. The Snakebite struggled under Gruk’s iron grip, punching the ork warlord’s body. He might as well have been hitting a cliff. Dark blood ran down from the mek’s skull, spilling over Gruk’s iron gob. Gruk worked his head from side to side. There was a mighty crack, and the mek went limp. Gruk let the corpse fall. The Snakebite slumped to his knees, blood gouting from his head, and fell to the floor. The front of his skull had been sheared off. Thick bone, nasal passages and

the pulsing remains of the big mek's brain were visible in cross section. Even an ork wasn't going to be getting better from that.

Grukk spat out the mek's face. It landed next to its ex-owner with a wet slap. 'Don't you forget who's in charge.' He swung his head back and forth along the line of meks, and gave Mogrok a fierce stare. 'I'm watching all of you. Oddboy gits. Too clever by half!' He wiped his bloody metal jaw with his forearm.

The meks said nothing. Normally what Grukk had done would have been very funny, but there had been no provocation, no posturing, nothing. Grukk was as unpredictable as rumoured. A good guffaw at the dead mek's fate might set him off again.

Grukk stalked back to his throne, flinging his arm out in the direction of the dead mek. 'Take that away! Snakebite mek. Gah! What use are they anyway? Want guns! Want tanks! Want Stompas – not a better squiggoth saddle.' He sat down heavily. 'Now get out!' he roared.

They got out, trying hard not to look like they were hurrying.

'Zogging maniac,' said Uggrim to Skarbutkin. Very quietly.



CHAPTER 3

MOGROK'S OFFER

The days rolled past, the star of the Sanctus Reach became bigger and bigger until, almost suddenly it felt, the orks were through its wall of comets and had arrived within the confines of the system proper.

The orks breached the system with minimal resistance, swatting aside the few ships sent to oppose them in a storm of red metal. Victory, they all knew, was inevitable. Not that that took the fun out of it. Not at all.

They approached the world of Obstiria first, where the horde fell upon the Space Marines of the Obsidian Glaives and annihilated them in a series of entertaining battles. Beakees being beakees, they tried to counter-attack, and it didn't go well for them. There was a particularly ace bit when Gruk scissored his way into a drop pod and chopped up all the beakees inside, snippety-snip.

Whatever else you could say about Gruk, he was a proper ork.

Mogrok's bubble fields allowed the biggest kroozers to make planetfall, including the *Wrath of Gork*. Now that was impressive. What was even more impressive was that Mogrok could not only get them *down*, but had some cunning means of getting them back *up* into orbit too – a number of massive traktor kannons.

'We're goin' to have to get in on that,' said Snikgob, his eyes lighting up at the thought of such a big lifta-droppa.

Uggrim grunted non-committally. Mogrok was a sneaky one, and he was trying his best not to get too close to the Bad Moon. His huge cadre of hangers-on contained many meks jealous of Uggrim. Grimgutz, especially, made public insults about the Red Sunz. Others attempted to bring him on side.

‘I can get you in, mek like you,’ said Daggog, the mek renowned for his shokk attack expertise. ‘Say the word, I can have a natter with Mogrok. He and I are good buddies. We go way back.’

Uggrim remained unmoved. Despite this and similar promptings that he should go and make himself useful to Mogrok, Uggrim had decided he didn’t want anything to do with him.

Envy, it probably was.

Grukk called the invasion of Obstiria ‘target practice’, and many of the Waaagh!’s more powerful creations were kept in orbit. To his annoyance, Uggrim and his crew were left behind to work on the gargants. After Obstiria a neat pyramid of glossy black Space Marine helmets was piled behind Grukk’s throne. Someone, or rather someone’s grots, went to a lot of time and effort to describe pretty patterns with the few differently coloured ones. Most humies were all the same size. Even the big ones were the same size as all the other big ones. Stupid colours and badges were all they had to tell themselves apart and help them figure out who was in charge. It hadn’t done them any good. After the orks had finished with them, helmets were all that was left of the Obsidian Glaives.

The world the humies called Ghul Jensen saw more of the orks descend to plant green feet upon solid ground. This time the Red Sunz mob got some fun too, although again *Fat Mork* was kept from the action and they were left to content themselves with patching up battlewagons. Still, it was nice to get out of the cramped confines of the fleet, and Uggrim, Snikgob and Bozgat had a wonderful couple of weeks burning and looting until there was nothing left to burn or loot. The whole planet was a playground for the orks, a wasteland you could drive fast over with no stupid trees to get in the way, studded with giant cities full of people eager to fight. The fight didn’t last long. Uggrim was there when Grukk dragged the humie king out of his big house and bit his head off. Very amusing. Once the final humie city fell, the orks spent another couple of weeks chopping up the humie towns and carting metal back up into the sky.

The next world was small and deserted, swift ships fleeing before the approaching green storm. The humans took all they valued, but still the planet burgeoned with all manner of bits and bobs handy to a mek. The orks consoled themselves with stripping it of everything useful and blowing up the rest. The junk-ships trailing the Waaagh! got so crammed with gubbins and scrap they had to stop awhile and make dozens more.

The next world after that was full of fields of beans, which went deliciously

with the inhabitants in the post-battle feeding frenzy. No one properly opposed them, and if it hadn't been for the quality of the fight the Space Marines gave, the Waaagh! might have fragmented under the weight of disappointment.

But all this, Gruk said – although Mogrok actually said it for him – was merely an appetiser, something to test the choppa's edge on before the real blade work began. One further world awaited. Ork freebooterz, back from raiding the boring beanworld, had told Gruk about it: a place where humies stomped about in big walkers, bashing at each other over petty insults. Almost, they said, like the boyz did. If there was going to be a good fight, it was going to be there. This world, known to the humans as Alaric, was the real target of the Waaagh!

In all the time they pillaged and plundered, Frikk did not see Urdgrub, and he began to calm down. The greenskins were distracted, their blood up for the big battles yet to come. There were plenty of scraps to be had on the fleet, the flames of rivalry fanned by the hurricane blast of the Waaagh! Fights, official and impromptu, became a common occurrence. The Red Sunz Mob built, drank, fought, and built some more. They were having a good time, even Frikk, and he as a rule was not overly fond of warfare.

Still, as any wise old skarboy will tell you, just because the biggest biter squig in the drop hasn't been seen for a while, it doesn't mean it won't bite you on the behind.

Construction reached a fever pitch as the orks approached the final humie world. Work on *Gork's Fist* was nearly done, so mek teams were taken from the *Wrath of Gork* and brought over to Mogrok's *Toof o' Mork* to be put to work on *Gungutz*. So big was the gargant, and so many meks were there working on it, that the orks there swarmed as thick as snots at the drops. Fights broke out as contradictory plans and meks' egos collided. The big meks had their hands full keeping the lesser meks in line. Brawls between rival grot work gangs were frequent. All the while gimlet-eyed Goff bruisers kept watch in case of any real trouble. Last time the meks had fallen out, the resultant warp breach had swallowed up three rust-ships. Gruk had made it quite clear that was not to happen again, naturally by biting someone's face off.

Uggrim, Snikgob and Bozgat kept well out of it. They worked hard and quickly, supervising the building of power field projectors on the gargant's fifteenth and sixteenth decks. They were good at it, well respected already, better respected when they finished ahead of schedule.

It wasn't long after this that Mogrok himself sought Uggrim out. He found him

with his backside in the air, humming loudly into a duct.

‘You got a minute, mek boss?’ said the Bad Moon. He waited a moment while Uggrim retracted his head and arm from the service hatch he was jammed into and wiped oil from his face. Mogrok seemed genial enough, but Uggrim eyed him warily.

‘Yeah, I suppose so.’

‘Good. Mek like you, clever ork. We should have a little chat. Come with me.’ Mogrok scratched his nose and beckoned. ‘This way.’

They made their way through the gargant. The shell was all in place, most of the workings too. The finishing touches were under way. They passed grot painting crews stencilling checks and dags on stuff, others fixing glyph plates to this gubbins or that, describing hazards, operating instructions or the boasts of their makers.

You could never trust these glyphs. You’d as likely get clear instructions to blow yourself up as operate the machinery properly, but the orks put them on anyway. Like everything else they did that wasn’t fighting, eating, or sleeping, they were driven to it by an instinct they neither understood nor questioned. They simply got on with it, accepting that there was only one right way, and that was the ork way. Uggrim was pleased to see it being done properly.

Mogrok opened a door leading into *Gungutz*’s main bridge. He motioned for Uggrim to pass through first. It was darker in there than out in the corridor. Uggrim had no choice but to go in. He gripped a spanner at his belt lightly. A number forty-six: long, with a head the size of his fist. It’d do for a weapon. He couldn’t risk openly loosening his blasta pistol in its holster – too aggressive a move. Instead he readied himself to spin about and smash Mogrok in the face in case he tried anything funny. He almost wanted it to happen.

Mogrok came in after the other big mek. There was no fight.

Dim orange bulbs burned in the bridge, lighting five chairs, the periscope and the lift that would carry grot signallers up to the very top during battle. Mogrok kicked out a couple of gretchin malingerers he found asleep in a corner. They tried hard to look like they’d been busy but they weren’t fooling anybody. Mogrok didn’t care, and they left relieved they’d only received a couple of hard kicks. Once they had gone, Mogrok gave the room a quick once over, checking behind banks of levers and opening a couple of lockers. Satisfied they were alone, he went back to the door, closed it, and spun the lock wheel tight.

‘Put the control bridge way down here in the guts,’ he said, when he was sure they were alone. ‘No point putting it in the head. Humies always go for that, see?’

Dunno why other meks always do that. Always thinking, me.’ He tapped his forehead with a warty finger. ‘And I reckon you is too. I’ve had a look at that Stompa of yours.’

‘When?’ said Uggrim.

‘Never you mind. *Fat Mork*, innit?’

Uggrim nodded slowly. He held the spanner lightly in his hand, still in its loop on his belt.

‘Impressive that. Not many meks can make a little evil sun like that, keep it all bottled up without blasting themselves to bits or cooking each other slowly. Very clever. Morky, that. Clever stuff. You got the know-wots. I could work with an ork like you, but...’ Mogrok pursed his lips and sucked in air through his gold-capped teeth. ‘Thing is, Uggrim, I hear a little whisper that you’re steering clear of me.’

Uggrim’s face was a perfect study of mild surprise and denial. ‘Been busy, boss,’ he said. How calling this scabby Bad Moon boss choked him!

‘Do you think you’re smart, Uggrim?’ Mogrok usually stood with his hands hooked into his wide belt, but had a habit of gesticulating broadly when agitated or inspired. He did so now. ‘Humies think they is the smartest, making twisty plans and laying cunnin’ traps like they come up with war. We come up with war! Orks are the best at scrapping. Get us close and we’ll tear anything to bloody bits. All the boyz need is a shove in the right direction, and Mork’ll do the rest!’

Speech delivered, he rocked back on his heels. Now he put his thumbs back into his belt. Mogrok really was scabby for an ork, and that was saying something. Uggrim watched fascinated at the squig parasites writhing across the big mek’s skin. He stank real funny too, a cheesy, mouldy smell that filled the bridge. Mogrok didn’t take offence at Uggrim’s stares. He pulled a maggoty thing out from under a scab on his chin and popped it into his mouth. It crunched when he bit down.

‘Trouble is, a lot of orks isn’t as smart as they think they is. Now, Gruk there – he’s a follower of Gork, pure and simple. But the likes of you and me, you need a bit of cunning, some sneaky thinking. He hates the likes of us, does Gruk. But where would he be without Mork? Bashing the brains out of big lizards with a rock on some nowhere world as Gork intended, that’s where.’

Uggrim found his voice. ‘What do you want exactly, Mogrok?’

‘Well. Well there we are. What do I want?’ He gave a toothy, Bad Moon smile. ‘I want you to tell me how you got your little sun up and running. Power source

like that, well...’ He sucked his teeth. ‘I know some of the others have been making big talk about this thing or that thing what they would build with your evil sun, but I’m not like the others. I’m not all talk. If you gave me something like that, why I’d build a gargant that’d make *Gungutz* here look like a snotling. What do you say? You interested? You can be in on the whole thing.’

Of course Uggrim was interested. What mek wouldn’t be? And Mogrok was making a real overture here – no mek liked to admit he was lacking certain knowledge. It was bad for business.

The only problem was that Uggrim had absolutely no idea how the evil sun at the heart of *Fat Mork* burned. Bozgat had wanted to make it. They’d almost failed. He still wasn’t sure what they’d done to get it going. There was an atmosphere on Garbax World. It was a dump, but it was inspiring – made him work harder and better than before or since, Bozgat and Snikgob too. Probably because it was a dump, he figured, and they wanted out.

Not that he was going to admit that. Pride would not allow. Mogrok was confident enough to put his own inability out there, but he was far too dangerous to have Uggrim’s secrets. Mogrok was right – Uggrim had tried to keep clear of the old devil. It hadn’t worked. What would he do if Uggrim fessed up? Uggrim decided he’d rather not find out. He needed to play for time.

‘Tricky,’ said Uggrim.

‘Tricky?’

‘Tricky,’ said Uggrim. ‘Difficult. Bit temperamental, they are, little suns. Scaling that up to this size... Well, let me tell you.’

‘Tell me what?’ said Mogrok.

‘Problems. Big problems. The alignment of the compression beams, containment...’

‘Bubble field,’ said Mogrok. ‘I’m an expert, remember? Dead easy. I’ve been thinking on it. You tell me how you initiate the primary reaction, I’ll contain it. Bang!’ He smiled lazily. ‘Or rather, not bang. It’ll work great.’

‘There are... other problems,’ said Uggrim flannelling desperately. ‘Let me go away, have a think, then you and I can sort it out together, yeah? Gonna have to draw up some plans. *Complicated* plans.’

Mogrok seemed satisfied by this. Mostly. He came right up to Uggrim. Not quite close enough for it to be an outright challenge, not quite far enough away for it not to be one either. Uggrim’s mind did a bunch of swift calculations on whether he could take the fatter, bigger ork. They all said no.

‘Good,’ said Mogrok nicely, in a way that was not at all nice. ‘You have a

think. I'd like you to figure it all out, because I always get what I want, and I don't like to be disappointed.' He leaned in a bit nearer. Uggrim's nostrils flared at the reek of him. 'Ever.'

He stepped back, went to the door and spun the wheel. 'You better get back to work. *Gungutz* is coming down in the second wave, so I want him ready. You get it?'

'Oh yeah. I'm done on my bits.'

'I knows that. Why do you think I'm here? I'm making a point. You're a good mekaniak, Uggrim.' He held his finger up, in the manner of an ork who has just had a splendid idea. 'Tell you what, I hear you got a bit of a thing going on with Grimgutz. Well, I reckon you and him should go down on *Wrath of Gork* with *Gork's Fist*, *Big Mouth* and *Fat Mork* right into the rumpus. Would you like that?'

'Oh yeah,' said Uggrim, whose head filled with thoughts of crumping. He was starved of action.

'Great. We'll move *Fat Mork* tomorrow then. Needs to go on *Wrath of Gork*, don't he? I'll be seeing you around, Uggrim.'

Mogrok came back from the door, stared at him a moment, patted him on the shoulder and walked off whistling.

Uggrim brushed off the flakes of pale green skin Mogrok left behind on his shirt. Going down with the spearhead was fantastic news, and he couldn't wait to tell the lads.

All the same, there would be another reason for it. Uggrim was arrogant enough to think Mogrok might see him as a potential rival, and there were few better ways of getting rid of a potential rival than having him stand right in front of the enemies' guns and happily shout 'Waaagh!'

Uggrim gripped his spanner tightly. Things might be getting problematical.



CHAPTER 4

DA DROP

‘Look at that – will you look at that!’ said Frikk, peering through Snikgob’s gunsights. ‘There must be...’ Frikk did a quick mental calculation. ‘Lots of ’em!’

Snikgob smacked Frikk on the back of the head, bashing his face into the eyepiece. ‘Lemme look, runt,’ he said genially. Frikk jumped down from the seat, rubbing his eye and setting his cap straight.

‘Yeah, boss. Sorry, boss.’

Snikgob put his eye to the scope. ‘Huh,’ he grunted.

‘Wow. He’s right. That’s a lot of boyz. Hey! Hey! Isn’t it great? We’re going in first!’ said Bozgat from the reactor deck. He was babbling almost as much as Talker. Whatever Mogrok’s motives, all the Red Sunz were happy to be part of the first assault. Except the grots; they were terrified, but they were always terrified and so they didn’t count.

There were tens of thousands of orks in the cavernous hold of the *Wrath of Gork*, ranked by clan or mob, their nobs up at the front in their best fighting get-up. Back banners waved. Iron icons bobbed. Orks barked and shouted at each other, the voices of individuals competing with the deep hum coming off the crowd. The boyz hung onto chains dangling from frames on multiple open, stacked decks. At the very top, high above the crowds, fighters sat in rocket sleds at the end of rickety launch tracks, facing slots in the metal that opened directly into space overhead. The bubble fields glimmered out there, distorting the light of the stars.

Fat Mork’s squawker was alive with cackles and bragging, threats of extreme

violence and the squeals of abused grots. In front of the boyz, hundreds of different war machines waited, their wheels clamped to the floor: little, faster ones up front, the big ones at the back.

Biggest of all were the Stompas. *Fat Mork* had a bay all to himself. He was so tall he filled the hold halfway up its height, only the fighters in their racks above him. As Mogrok promised, Uggrim and his lads were riding down from orbit with Gruk himself. Deeper in the ship, at its broad, high waist where the hold went up many more decks, Uggrim could just about make out the massive shape of *Gork's Fist*. Uggrim was proud they were going in with the boss. What he wasn't so pleased about was the presence of *Big Mouth*, Grimgutz's eye-wateringly bright yellow Stompa, in the next bay. A crowd of boyz separated them. They looked like two fat old orks, dressed up in their finest, a million little squigglings swarming around their feet.

Big Mouth lived up to his name. His metal teeth were spread jaw-crackingly wide, an array of giant speakers jammed into his gaping maw. Black moons were daubed all over him, and black flames licked up along the edge of his yellow armour. One arm mounted a huge chainsaw, the other bristled with rockets and guns. Another rack of rockets was held high on stanchions over his smokestacks.

'Flash git,' grumbled Uggrim.

There was no warning when they started to fall – no countdown or klaxons, no call to action stations – but somehow the orks all knew it was going to happen just before it did. Uggrim, who'd worked out the rough time they would be landing, got in first.

'Hold on, lads. This is going to be a bumpy ride.'

The pulsing murmur of the orks became definite words and a raucous song emerged.

'Ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go, 'ere we go-oh!' Over and over, louder and louder, with increasing tempo. They stamped their boots and roared. Some of the more foolish ones let off their guns.

The Red Sun meks felt it in their guts – that shift when gravity stops tickling and grabs hard. The ship groaned, a long metallic grumble that ended in a ping. Uggrim glanced upwards. He wrapped one hand into a squigskin strap dangling from the roof of his cockpit. The pair of grot fixers by his feet clung on to each other and whimpered.

'Shut it, you bleeding runts!' he said indulgently. He gave one a comforting kick.

Uggrim took one last look out of the periscope and shoved it up out of the

way. With his free hand, he keyed on *Fat Mork's* telly-scope. Multiple pictures sprang up on half a dozen primitive glass screens. He twiddled a knob, tuning in to the ship's scopes until he found the image he wanted. Upon the biggest screen embedded in the Stompa's dashboard, an image of Alaric emerged from a storm of glowing phosphor dabs.

An orange world, with dark seas and brown clouds. The curve of it crossed the top part of the screen, limned in pale blue, black space beyond. This curve receded rapidly, disappearing from view until brown wastes filled the screen up. Uggrim saw wreckage spin past, the remains of the humie space-guns, smashed to bits by the fleet's approaching salvo. There were so many ships firing so many cannons, nothing could stand up to them. Nothing at all.

At that moment, Uggrim and his fellow orks felt invincible. The world was literally at their feet, and they were raining down upon it like a vengeful green comet.

The ship began to shake. A pale corona of fire flickered at the edge of his screen, growing brighter with each moment: the atmosphere of Alaric rubbing hard against the bubble fields of the kill kroozer.

Fire of a different kind came in hard a few seconds after that, great pillars of laser light first, which burst harmlessly against the rust-ships' bubble fields. The *Wrath of Gork* fell faster and faster, the rumbling of the ship drowned out the frenzied singing of the orks. The telly-scope image wobbled hard. Uggrim grappled with its controls to compensate. More fire was coming in, and aerial shell bursts joined the defence lasers. He saw first one, then two, then two more of the rust-ships disintegrate into hails of fiery debris. Whether that was because of their shoddy construction or the efforts of the humans didn't really matter – it was hilarious either way.

'Fightas away, fightas away!' shouted out the kaptin of the ship over the squawker. There were multiple booms as the pilots ignited their rocket slings, slamming them at high speed vertically out into the rush of burning air. More booms followed as a handful of fightas smashed into launch slots that were slightly too narrow, showering burning fuel over the orks below. There were further explosions, briefly viewed before being whipped away, as more fightas were torn apart by the violence of their exit and the speed of their descent, but dozens of the flyboys somehow wrestled their craft under control, gunned their engines and shot off past the hurtling kroozer, already firing at the Imperial craft coming to greet them.

The *Wrath of Gork* shook. The odd buggy and tank came loose, chains

bursting under the strain. One particularly large gun wagon skidded across the drop deck, into the hull, crushing boys on the way. Uggrim laughed.

On *Fat Mork's* telly-scope, he watched the ground rush at them at ridiculous speed. Sulphurous clouds parted. He saw a brown river running into a brown ocean, the straight cuts of two roads on bridges breaking its wiggly course into three. The spider-lines of humie fortifications grew thicker and thicker, resolving themselves into fat pen strokes, then into crenellated ramparts. There were a lot of them, a number of lines on the west side of the river, the majority surrounding a regularly shaped mountain on the eastern side. The *Wrath of Gork* was coming down not too far from the forts on the west bank of that river, a few kilometres out, so Uggrim reckoned.

Ochre ground sped at them, and then it was over, just like that. The ship didn't so much land as smash into the planet with bone-crushing impact. The singing stopped. There was the horrendous metallic crash of more tanks flying from their moorings. Uggrim jerked forwards, smashing his jaw on a drive lever and biting his tongue. He sat up and shook his head, wiping blood from his mouth.

A fresh cacophony of mechanical noises started up: engines, creaking, rattling chains. Landing ramps slammed down into the orange dust of Alaric. Hatches popped open. Doors swung wide.

Thick orange sunlight flooded into the hold, lighting up motes of dust like waterfalls of gold. There was a pause, wherein all the universe turned, and a silence fell. Other races might have found a beauty in this moment, a swift vision of peace before extinction. And in truth, there was a swell of emotion that passed over the boyz and the runts. All the greenskins felt it, but it was of an altogether more savage kind.

'Waaagh!' bellowed thousands upon thousands of orks. 'Waaagh!' bellowed a thousand speaker-grilles. 'Waaagh!' roared thousands of engines. Gripped by the need for violence, the greenskins poured out of the ship with a noise like the end of the world.

The buggies and bikes were out first, a buzzing cavalcade overflowed by Deffkoptas that shot down the ramp faster than fast. Hard behind, battlewagons clanked. Dreads and Kans clumped down the ramps and out of hatches after the wagons, then the boyz, so many of them the orange dust turned green. On and on the horde went, Goffs, Evil Sunz, White Spiders, Deathskulls, Snakebites, Bad Moons, flash gitz, freebooterz of every kind, Blood Axes, Kill Blades and more. Every clan, every faction, and every kind of ork you could imagine. And this was just one rust-ship; dozens had made planetfall together and dozens more

were descending from orbit. Hundreds, *thousands* more waited to join them.

Uggrim breathed heavily; his nostrils were full of the scent of his own blood. His throat was thick. His head hurt – not with the blow he had sustained, but with the need to kill.

‘Steady, lads,’ he said, more to himself than to his boyz. ‘We’re up next.’

The *Wrath of Gork* emptied rapidly, leaving the Stompas alone. The pop and crackle of explosions sounded from outside as the humie big guns opened up on the boyz. The bubble fields held around the rust-ship, but the metal shook under *Fat Mork*’s feet as the ground beyond was pounded by high explosives. The Red Sunz waited long minutes. Nobody spoke. All the orks were tense. It was all they could do not to snatch up their weapons, throw themselves out of *Fat Mork*’s doors and rush headlong to join the charging mobs. The pulse rushed in Uggrim’s ears. He drooled freely, his hands gripped so tightly on *Fat Mork*’s steering sticks he almost bent them. Even Talker was quiet.

Fat Mork’s squawker hissed: a message from *Gork’s Fist*. ‘Humie walkers coming in. We got the go. Stompas out!’

Across the hold, *Big Mouth*’s head squealed around on its neck.

‘’Ere we go, ’ere we go, ’ere we go!’ it bellowed. Grimgutza laughed through the machine’s massive gob. ‘I’ll be first out, Evil Sun, then we’ll see who’s the best Stompa mek!’ *Big Mouth*’s engine roared. Black smoke poured out of his exhaust pipes.

Uggrim narrowed his eyes at the rival Stompa. He bellowed down the ladder well. ‘Lads! Fire up the reactor. I don’t want that yellow git Grimgutza killing anything big before we do!’

Outside the Stompas the hold erupted into activity. Runt teams emerged from holes all over the place. There were none, and then there were lots, just like that. Directed by their runtherds, gretchin clambered all over the two idols, smacking retaining pins out of their drop-harness chains. Grots whistled and shouted, flags flapped, squighounds barked. Grotbosses gave the thumbs up. Runtherds bawled commands and curses through megaphones. ‘Heave! Heave, you laggardly grots!’ Teams of sweating grots and slaves turned capstans set behind the war machines. The chains holding the Stompas slid over their armoured plates and crashed to the floor, where they slithered and rattled their way back onto drums. It was a smooth operation. Only a handful of runts were crushed to bits as the chains whipped free.

A klaxon honked. The runts ran back to their holes.

A series of explosions went off around the slab in front of *Fat Mork*, a second

series starting a split second later in front of *Big Mouth*. The crackling detonations blew out the minimal seams holding the panels in front of the Stompas in place. The plate fell slowly outwards. Then with a gathering speed that mirrored the rushing need for violence pounding in every ork's chest, it crashed forwards, forming a drawbridge for *Fat Mork* down to the parched ground. Ochre dust rushed outwards in a low billow, obscuring the view of the battle.

Fat Mork's bridge was down first, but *Big Mouth* didn't wait for his plate to topple all the way out. He bashed it down with his rounded belly plates and waddled out of the ship. Rockets flashed from the rack at his summit before he had got outside, and then he was out of sight and into the battle.

Uggrim howled his annoyance and slammed his drive levers forwards. 'Let's go! That git's stealin' a march on us. Get a move on!' he shouted.

The captive sun in the Stompa's gut flared at Bozgat's coaxing. Gears ground. *Fat Mork's* stumpy feet were set into motion. Uggrim whooped as the Stompa emerged into the orange sunlight of Alaric, blasting and roaring, and not too far behind *Big Mouth*. Seeing the two embodiments of Mork and Gork march down the ramps onto the field, the orks sent up a huge cheer. 'Waaagh!' shouted *Fat Mork* in reply. 'Waaagh!' shouted *Big Mouth*, far more loudly.

The sweep of the battle was revealed to Uggrim in full, and it was exhilarating. Ork boyz poured across the plain, thousands of them heading in a great stream towards the human fortifications. Hundreds of kans and trukks and trakks, and all the orky might of war went ahead of them. Other rust-ships dotted the plains in the distance, bubble fields flaring under fire, each disgorging its own green flood, although none were so big as the *Wrath of Gork*. Explosions were going up everywhere. A big kerfuffle to the south-east marked the point where some of the boyz had already broken through the defence line. The humans kept up a spirited rate of fire, cutting down hundreds of orks, and falling back where they were threatened with hand to hand combat.

These humies didn't worry Uggrim. They were as weak as their weapons, unable to penetrate *Fat Mork's* bubble field. Most of their guns were out of range in any case, which was, now Uggrim thought about it, as much a curse as a blessing.

Luckily for them all, the fight was coming to them. As promised, humie Stompas, Knights, were loping towards the horde – twenty of them at least, decked with flapping banners, all in different colours but variations on a single theme. They were hunched over like orks, their high carapaces rising over

cockpits shaped like giant helmets. Each one had a massive gun for one arm and a big chainsword for the other. Polyphonic warhorns boomed as they ran; they were quick and closing fast. Uggrim caught some squeaky humie talk over his squawker. It sounded angry.

The Knights tore into the ork army, cannons spitting shells at an impressive rate of fire. They stamped a bloody channel through the horde, heading directly for Gruk's drop-ship. A big group of Deff Dreads formed up in their way, and were promptly smashed down. Orks were hurrying to get clear, in a manner that, to Uggrim, looked suspiciously like running away.

Uggrim pressed his eye to his periscope. Looking through its magnifying lenses past the enclosing bubble field of the ship, things weren't going too well. Orks were being blasted to pieces by the hundreds, caught by long-range artillery and the up-close repeater cannons of the humie Stompas. Burst cones of ork body parts and parched soil shot upwards. Battlewagons came apart in showers of scrap, buggies were lofted high into the air, but the orks ran onwards heedlessly. It was glorious. The Red Sunz laughed and cheered with excitement. Even the grots stopped snivelling. *Fat Mork* jolted as Talker opened fire with the gigashoota, sending a highly inaccurate fusillade at the Knights.

'Oi, madboy – stop that!' Uggrim shouted down the talky-tube. 'We're out of range.'

'Well do something about it!' Snikgob replied grumpily. 'What we doing standing around here for?'

Snikgob had a point. Uggrim slammed the left lever forwards. *Fat Mork* waddled around, heading towards the encroaching phalanx of Knights. Most were approaching the ship's mid-section, but a couple of them had scoped the two Stompas and altered their own course to intercept.

'Hur hur,' said Uggrim. 'This'll be a good fight!'

At that moment, Gruk chose to make his entrance. Four massive explosions tore through the side of the rust-ship a way down from the Red Sunz. A good chunk of the ship's flank, where it was at its very fattest, fell outwards. Uggrim and his lads laughed to see the humie Stompas come to a halt and then go frantically running backwards as the metal bore down on them. A stripy orange one didn't make it, and was flattened by the falling debris, its reactor making a pathetic *phutting* noise as it blew.

Dust washed outwards, covering a large part of the fight. A loud metallic 'Waaagh!' rolled out from the rust-ship, and *Fist of Gork* strode onto the battlefield. Nearly twice the size of *Fat Mork*, huge as an entire orktown, it

bristled with cannons. Its iron hide was mostly the dark red of old blood, for that was the substance Gruk favoured as paint. Where it was not crusty red it was goff-black, covered in bulls' heads and the neat, checked patterning of the discerning skarboy.

The orks answered the gargant's cry with their own mighty 'Waaagh!'. They lunged forwards again, swamping the first line of the humie defences across a broad front.

Uggrim salivated at the prospect of the fight. Knights encircled *Fist of Gork*, firing madly at it. Thinking it would be highly politic to get involved in this biggest of scraps, as well as loads of fun, Uggrim lined *Fat Mork* up with the foe and depressed his acceleration pedals.

The Stompa took one step, lifted his foot to take another, and came to a juddering halt. There was a noise like a farting squiggoth and a faint smell of burning, before *Fat Mork* tipped uncomfortably forwards to balance precariously on the toe of his upraised foot. The lights went out.

Uggrim looked around with disbelief. He toggled a couple of switches. He snarled, slammed his fists into his skull. He cast about, settling on a grot as a target for his anger.

'No, boss, no... Oooof!'

The grot flew down the ladder well, dead.

'What the zog's going on? What the zog is *going on!*' bellowed Uggrim.

'We've stopped!' shouted Snikgob. 'Lost all power!'

'I knows that! I know! I can see that, can't I?' Uggrim watched in dismay as *Big Mouth* ploughed on towards the human lines, racking up a very impressive kill count while *Fat Mork* stood there like a madboy picking flowers. 'What the zog is going on?'

To make matters worse, a Knight was zeroing in on them.

'Boss, boss! Humie Stompa coming in fast!' shouted the lookout grot from the tower above.

'I know, I know! I can see that as well!' bawled Uggrim back up the talky-tube, too angry to be impressed the grot hadn't run off. He rammed the drive levers back and forth. They had no effect, so he started slamming his gnarled fists into the dashboard over and over again. The Knight fired. Uggrim winced.



CHAPTER 5

THE BIG SCRAP

‘What’s going on? Why aren’t we moving?’ shouted Talker, only now grasping the situation. Then, ‘I think I needs the drops. My tummy isn’t well.’

Fat Mork shuddered as a shell burst on his crackling shields.

‘I don’t know! I don’t know!’ wailed Bozgat, down on the engine deck. He ran to and fro, clutching his head in his hands.

‘Well I’d zogging well find out, you useless squig turd!’ shouted Uggrim, his voice all hollow and tinny down the talky-tube. ‘Because that humie Stompa don’t look like he’s coming round for a cup of fungus beer and a nice chat.’

‘Ooooh! The emblems, the heraldry! The badges are nice!’ hooted Talker. ‘Pretty! Male line left, distaff right. Clever pinkies!’

Another of the enemy Stompa’s shells exploded harmlessly, absorbed by *Fat Mork*’s energy shield.

‘Oh, that’s pretty, that’s nice. At least that still works then,’ jabbered Talker. ‘A predictable outcome of a polarised muon deflection matrix.’ He belched loudly. ‘Well orky.’

‘Boss, boss!’ shouted Bozgat. ‘Reactor’s still on. I don’t understand!’

Uggrim’s mind was highly compartmentalised. On the one hand he was an ork, possessed of and possessed by all the unthinking rage that suggests. But the other part of his brain brimmed over with inherited knowledge, some of which was so complex it would have kept the assembled priesthood of a forge world occupied for a generation or two. As his subkind had been made to react in such situations so many aeons before, this part kicked in and took over, pushing his roaring orky aggression aside. He wanted to kill, but before he could kill, he had

to fix. The red mist receded from his vision. Diagrams and charts and rotating schematics spilled dizzily into his mind's eye, and his innate technical know-how spilled in its turn out from his fanged mouth.

‘Check the fuses, check the shunts! Initiate testing on the couplings. That’s got to be it!’

Bozgat pulled himself together, for a while. He swung under the criss-crossing pipes and bracing spars that webbed the periphery of the engine room like a great green ape, frantically grabbing at everything that conveyed power anywhere. His concentration didn’t last. Unable to find what was wrong in a time commensurate with his limited span of patience, he lost his temper, grabbed his biggest axe-spanner and started randomly hitting things very, very hard. Sparks and arcs of electricity shot out of the abused machinery, flashing on Bozgat’s teeth as they earthed through the Stompa’s metal deck. The little mek’s ears smoked, but he went on battering everything in sight. ‘I can’t do it! I can’t do it!’ he wailed.

Up top, Uggrim leaned back from *Fat Mork*’s periscope eye. The Imperial walker looked altogether too close through it. *Fat Mork*’s shield generators screamed as round after round pounded into them from the big cannon on its arm.

‘Bozgat! Bozgat! Bozgat! Fix it or we’re all dead!’

‘Waaagh!’ howled Bozgat, and not in a good way. He battered the casing of the reactor, putting shiny gouges into its paintwork. ‘I’m tryin’! I’m tryin’!’

‘Try harder, you bleedin’ runt! Pull yourself together. You an ork or a grot?’ bawled Snikgob. He gave up, ramming the levers on his lifta-droppa backwards and forwards in frustration, and dropped from his chair, ran across the gun deck and slid down the ladder to the engine room with his feet on the rails. ‘Gork’s arse, you want something doing, do it yourself!’

Frikk, meanwhile, was scurrying about on his hands and knees, looking for things Bozgat might have missed. He had already soiled himself twice, and the mess of metal shavings, old screws and bones littering the place were cutting his palms and knees up something chronic. Bozgat was panicking, Snikgob was shouting, and there were a great many things outside that were trying their best to kill him. He tried to ignore the reality that he was, to all intents and purposes, inside a poorly constructed tin can with a fusion bomb in the middle. He failed.

There are few things that can be as physically terrified as a gretchin. Fear, however, is a friend to a rare number of them. There are grots that will die on the spot under the duress of such terror, but Frikk was of the other sort. Fear

motivates this unusual breed like nothing else. Frikk's small brain was in overdrive, his mean red eyes scanning every scrap of the engine room. Instinct drew his gaze downwards, round about Bozgat's boot level where the ork would not think to look. In a small gap, close to the floor, he spotted something awry. A thick tube of fungus rubber had been hacked through, the bundle of wires inside cut. The metal that made them up had melted together.

He scrambled over to it, grabbing onto a scalding pipe as *Fat Mork* rocked back on his heels. 'Argh!' he wailed, sucking his fingers. 'Bozgat! Bozgat!'

Frikk noticed a pair of glyphs scratched into the wall. His eyes widened with shock. He hastily scrubbed them out with dirt before the mek scrambled over and shoved him out of the way.

'Sabotage!' Bozgat snarled. He yelled over his shoulder at Snikgob. 'We've been done!' Bozgat pulled the ruined cables close to his face, flipping a magnifying lens down over his eye. 'Been cut just enough to melt when stressed. Someone with the know-wots gone done this! I bet you it's that bleedin' glory hog Bad Moon. Frikk, Frikk! Get back here!' Bozgat grabbed the gretchin by an ear and pulled him squealing into the hole. 'You gotta help. We gotta join all these back up!'

'But there's loads of 'em!' protested Frikk.

'Best work fast then, lazy grot,' said Bozgat, his own thick fingers already working with surprising dexterity, separating the melted strands and twisting the wires back together.

'Lemme at it,' shouted Snikgob, and he pulled roughly at Bozgat's shoulder.

'No room,' said Bozgat, elbowing Snikgob hard.

'Stop fighting and fix it!' yelled Uggrim down the talky-tube. 'Snikgob, get back on the gun deck. Don't want Talker doing anything weird.'

Uggrim redirected his attention back outside. Seeing its shells had no effect, the Knight had pulled back and was circling the Stompa warily. *Fat Mork* was taking plenty of fire from all around, but luckily *Gork's Fist* was attracting most of the humie Stompas' attention.

Great, thought Uggrim. Means we only got the one to deal with.

The Knights ran round and round *Gork's Fist*, blasting away at its iron hide. His bubble fields were out and his armour glowed hot with the impact of fusion weapons. Runnels of molten steel dribbled down the gargant's broad skirt, flash-cooking boyz who got too close. But the Knights could not penetrate the thick plating. One of the humie walkers was doing some right fancy prancing, ducking this way and that. It got carried away, ran forwards and carved a gash into *Gork's*

Fist's belly plates.

'Ooh, that was pretty stupid,' said Uggrim to himself.

The gargant reacted swiftly, taking the Knight off guard. Its shoulder weapons ratcheted down, sending a massive rocket straight into the humie Stompa's chest. The explosion was huge, but the walker was only staggered. Uggrim narrowed his eyes at that.

Bubble field? He thought. Humie bubble field?

If so, it did little good. *Gork's Fist* smashed the humie Stompa down to the ground with its battleship-sized chainblade, then finished it off with a gut barge, bashing the smaller war machine into scrap. Uggrim would have laughed, but suddenly he found himself rather preoccupied. While he was watching the fight, the nearest humie Stompa started to charge right at them, massive chainsword arm raised. He only looked back at it when its warhorns wailed a terrible cry that, quite frankly, gave Uggrim the fear. He banged away at his useless fire controls. He howled with annoyance, bashing and beating everything he could get his hands on. The lookout grot screamed as it fell past his viewing slot, deciding to jump from the spotting tower rather than risk the Knight's wrath. Uggrim covered his face with his arms.

The humie Stompa swung hard at his cockpit. The chainsword teeth spun wildly. Lightning crackled all across *Fat Mork's* front, but the shield held.

'Get on with it! Fix it! Fix it! *Fix it!*' roared Uggrim. He was enraged. The enemy were all around them and he could not fight them. 'What a shambles. This is pathetic. Pathetic!'

'Almost there, boss!' came Bozgat's shout.

Almost there was no good. 'No good at all!' he said aloud. His hand groped for his custom super blasta. 'Right,' he bawled. 'That's it!' he grasped the lever of the hatch above him, swung it open with a bang, and heaved himself out the top.

Up on top of *Fat Mork's* head he had a wider view. The battle was swinging back in the orks' favour. The boyz had learned their lesson, parting around the humie Stompas' advance, then flooding in behind them again. Those ranged about *Gork's Fist* were in danger of being cut off, but they ignored their worsening situation, doggedly harassing Gruk's gargant. *Big Mouth* had marched ahead right into the defence line and was happily pulverising humie bunkers with its cannon, the enormously loud 'Waaaghs!' coming out of its mouth speakers audible even so far away.

The Knight attacking *Fat Mork* retreated for another run and angled its

chainsword for another strike. Streams of tracer bullets from a big shoota in its shoulder smacked into the pulsing energy field of *Fat Mork* only a couple of metres from Uggrim's face. Their momentum arrested, the slugs fell from the air.

'Right, you!' he shouted at the Knight, levelling his pistol directly at its helm plate. 'Leave my zoggin' ride alone!'

His gun was small for an ork weapon – small as in the size of a human torso – but packed quite the punch. He squeezed the trigger. Gubbins whirred all over it. The charging chamber flickered a satisfying shade of electric green. A searing line of energy belted from the muzzle. *Fat Mork's* shields were configured to keep things out, not in, and the beam passed through without hindrance. It splashed on the Knight's own energy shield and dissipated harmlessly.

'Oh ho ho!' shouted Uggrim. 'What's this? What's this? So you do got your own bubble, do you? That's why you're such tough nuts, eh? Well, well, we'll see about that.'

Uggrim twisted a couple of knobs on the side of his gun, amping up the power to the max. 'Eat this, pink git!' he hollered. He fired again. This time when the beam intersected with the Knight's field it flared brightly and some of its force got through. The humie Stompa rolled adroitly as the beam connected with its helm, blackening one of the eye lenses and blistering the thing's paint.

'Ha ha! Ha ha!' bellowed Uggrim. 'Ha ha ha!'

Fat Mork lurched, banging Uggrim into his hatch rim so hard he dropped his gun. It clattered down the front of *Fat Mork*.

'Now I'm angry,' he growled. 'That was me favourite blasta!'

'We got power, we got power!' shouted Snikgob from below. *Fat Mork's* arms came up. Talker opened fire without waiting.

'Right then,' said Uggrim, looking the Stompa dead in its clear eye lens. He pointed to where he assumed the pilot was. 'You're dead, mate.'

He dropped back down into the hatch, and slammed the drive levers forwards. *Fat Mork's* upraised foot shifted, fighting the earth and the weight forced on it by his awkward poise. *Fat Mork* shuddered, metal squealing. Centimetre by centimetre, he pushed himself back into an upright position. With a lurch he was in motion. The few orks in front of him wisely got out of his way.

'Let's see how you like this!' roared Uggrim. He depressed the big red button that activated *Fat Mork's* gaze. A beam of energy much like that emitted by his pistol, only many hundreds of times bigger, spat from the Stompa's killy eye. It splashed onto the humie Stompa's shield like a torrent of water hitting a bucket. Uggrim blinked afterimages from his vision and sniffed the ozone in the air

appreciatively.

The zogging thing was still standing!

‘It’s that zoggin’ energy bubble,’ he shouted. ‘Trip the zogger up, Snikgob. Let’s step on its face!’

‘Can’t snatch it, boss. It’s like trying to grab an oiled squig,’ shouted Snikgob up the tubes. He snatched up a speeding buggy and tossed it at the walker. It exploded on the shields, buffeting the Knight but not bringing it down. The two war engines circled each other. Away off to his left, Uggrim caught the flash of a massive explosion. He turned to see a huge cloud of flame billowing up out of *Gork’s Fist’s* engine. The gargant stopped dead. A heavily decorated Knight was loping around from the back.

‘Sneaky gits,’ he growled. No time for that now; he had his own problems to worry about.

The Stompa thundered with the noise of the gigashoota. Talker’s shells bounced off the energy shield of their enemy. The air wobbled like jelly where the powerful grav-beams of the lifta-droppa slipped off. The two walkers traded fire, neither machine piercing the other’s energy fields.

‘Sort it out!’ bellowed Uggrim. Talker wailed and sang as he fired the gigashoota at the humie Stompa, the ammo runts stationed around him sweating to keep up with the weapon’s high rate of fire. They slammed magazine after magazine into the rotating ammo feed. Snikgob cursed, and so did Uggrim as their respective big guns did nothing to their foe.

Uggrim was very angry. And then something funny happened. A killa kan, separated from its mob, took a pot shot with a rocket at the rear of the humie walker. It corkscrewed in on a cloud of black smoke and exploded on the thing’s engine stack.

The Knight moved fluidly, torso pivoting. It destroyed the kan as a second rocket came off the small walker’s arm. This exploded well short of the body of the thing, fire smeared across the tell-tale flare of an energy field.

Uggrim saw that Talker’s rounds got through, shattering armour on the side, until the humie Stompa’s attention was back on them.

His face creased, long lips pointed in a v-shaped flute. Inspiration struck as hard as Mork’s own fist. ‘It doesn’t go all the way around. It doesn’t go all the way around!’ he shouted.

‘What do you mean?’ said Snikgob.

‘Never mind. Snikgob, left leg, on my mark.’

‘Which one’s that?’ said Snikgob, who was ordinarily very intelligent for an

ork, but currently was burning with full battle rage and so was as thick as the next boy.

‘The one that’s not on the right! Talker, fire everything you got at the right-hand side!’

Whether Snikgob got that or not, it was too late. At least he was powering up the capacitors in preparation. Uggrim couldn’t expect much more than that.

Uggrim pushed *Fat Mork* into a tottering run. Talker’s gun swung out to track the humie. Uggrim followed with the head. *Fat Mork*’s beam eye joined the stream of bullets spewing out of the gigashoota.

‘Keep it up, keep it up,’ said Uggrim. He squinted through his most powerful telly-scope. If he was right, the humie could only cover part of his facing at one time. Sure enough, as Talker’s gun played over the machine’s front, Uggrim saw the last rounds batter into the chest directly. He fired again with *Fat Mork*’s gaze, targeting the right.

‘Now, Snikgob – left leg, left leg!’

Snikgob worked his levers, setting the lifta-droppa’s grav-beams to ‘lift’. He got it wrong, targeting the right leg. Air wobbled. Weird whoops and feedback burbles sounded from the lifta’s gubbins.

‘The other left! The other left! Quick, before he notices,’ shouted Uggrim.

The Knight’s shield shone with violent patterns of disharmonious energy as the lifta-droppa beam played over it, going for the left. Uggrim saw the pilot’s reaction; the shield was sliding along with the lifta-droppa beam. Talker’s bullets suddenly found their mark on the right arm in a hail of sparks and spall.

The humie pilot was too slow. There was a sudden howl in the Stompa’s power lines as the lifta snagged solid matter. With a nonchalant ‘Down he goes!’ Snikgob tugged back on the levers just as the capacitors gave up their last, yanking the Knight’s left foot forwards. The humie Stompa flipped backwards, landing on its back with an almighty crash.

‘Now,’ said Uggrim, ‘I’m willing to reckon that fancy shield don’t cover the nasty bits. Let’s kill it, boys.’

He depressed a big red button embossed with the ork glyph for ‘Boom!’. One of the rockets mounted alongside the gigashoota slid free and sped off into the prone walker. *Boom!* it went, exploding pleasingly right on the thing’s chin, rolling the head back and knocking it cold. It had been trying to get up before that, but not any more. Talker blazed away at it anyway as they marched forwards, blowing great chunks out of its colourful plating.

Fat Mork came to a shivering standstill over its prey. Uggrim jiggled the

levers, shuffling his creation about, until it was in a position to drive one huge iron foot down hard on the humie Stompa's battered gun arm.

'Yeah!' said Uggrim. 'Not so clever now, is we?'

A bunch of burna boys came from nowhere to swarm all over the machine, intent on hacking it apart.

'Oi!' bellowed Uggrim through *Fat Mork's* speakers. 'That's my salvage. Zog off!'

Talker pivoted the gun down to point right at them. They sheepishly slunk away. By Mork, that Talker was mad as they came, but he knew where to point that cannon. Not for the first time, Uggrim was grateful the crew put up with Bozgat's pet.



CHAPTER 6

AFTER THE BIG SCRAP

The battle was coming to a close. Artillery shells fell on the ork horde with lessening frequency. The orks had overrun the defence lines on a front many kilometres across and the humies were pulling back towards the river. Worse still for the humans, most of the Knights that had been attacking *Gork's Fist* were smoking wrecks and the rest had turned to flee. Uggrim wasn't sure how most had bought it, but he thought he saw a massive armoured shape that could only be Grukkl clinging to the front of one, biting at the face-plate as it went down. The remaining bright walkers were entirely surrounded. Orks clambered up them as they retreated. Little flashes lit up joints as stikkbombs blew. Soon there were only a handful left.

Larger explosions erupted all around the walkers then, bringing the battle briefly closer again. Uggrim zoomed *Fat Mork's* eye in on their source, finding a line of humie battlewagons cresting a low rise to the north-east, those in the lead firing as they advanced. More joined in as they all lined up, tearing ragged holes in the ork horde. The freed walkers accelerated at a run. Light ork vehicles and mobs moved to intercept the tanks. Many were killed, and by the time the orks managed to get close, the three surviving humie walkers were safe behind them. The tanks commenced driving backwards no faster than walking pace, still firing. Flame tanks emerged from between them to burn up any boyz who got too close, and in the end the orks gave up the fight as a bad job.

It didn't matter. Everywhere, the humans were in retreat. Fightas and Deffkoptas harried them as they fled. Buggies roared in hot pursuit. The orks had won. They'd come down on the planet, smashed up the defences, and had

themselves somewhere to build a base. A good start. Already meks were on the rust-ships, temporarily reconfiguring them into forts.

Big Mouth, Uggrim was very pleased to see, had an enormous hole in one side, its jagged edges blackened with soot, although it was still operational. Uggrim cursed Grimgut's name colourfully, then turned on the squawker, hailed the other Stompa and did it all over again.

'Don't brag, Evil Sun,' said Grimgut. 'I think we all know who did the most crumping today.' Grimgut cut off the squawker feed.

'Yeah, right,' said Uggrim to himself. 'Try bashing my Stompa, will you? Sneaky git. We'll see who's best.'

Grimgut couldn't bring his mood down. Uggrim sighed a happy sigh. He had that warm glow he always got after a strenuous fight. That they had nearly been killed only added to the delicious feeling of it. 'It's over, lads. We won, like always.' He slid out of his chair, and climbed halfway down the ladder. He looped his arm over a rung and hung there above the gun deck. 'Right, Sniks, let's get to work – we got to cut up that humie walker for parts before those burnas come back and snaffle the lot.'

'What about the sabotage?'

'Obvious, innit?' said Uggrim, climbing down the ladder. 'Mogrok did it, didn't he?'

'Eh?' said Snikgob.

'I reckon it was him. He grilled me well hard about the worky bits of our sun here. Didn't tell him nothin'.'

'Right.'

'He's a powerful enemy, Uggs,' said Snikgob.

Uggrim waved his concerns away. 'Nah, don't worry. We'll show 'em.'

Snikgob wasn't convinced.

Bozgat popped his head through the hole leading down to the lower deck. 'Wow, now that was fun! That chainsword, gotta get one of those. Dead killy, dead killy! Come on, if we got one weakness it's up-close crumping, boss. Let's put it on – go on, boss. It's brilliant!'

Frikk popped his head up close behind Bozgat and nodded enthusiastic agreement.

'Yeah. Yeah, it is.' Uggrim clambered down the remainder of the ladder's rungs. 'Let's stay here and get started. Battle's nearly over. Should be safe to get working. Tool up, boyz, we got a job on.'

The meks clambered down to the lower deck, and out of the door in the side of

the Stompa. The hard ground was torn up by artillery fire, and dead and nearly dead orks were strewn about in great multitudes. Piles of scrap lay everywhere, but the Red Sunz were fixated by the fallen human Knight. Bright heraldry torn and scratched, its long legs folded up uncomfortably under it. Weapons and eyes pointed to the sky. The meks took it all in with greedy eyes.

‘Would you look at that,’ said Bozgat. ‘Look at it!’

‘A veritable treasure trove of alien technological salvage,’ said Talker in a foolish voice. ‘Ain’t it pretty?’

Uggrim rubbed his hands together. ‘Right then...’

‘*Trousers!*’ yelled Talker at the top of his voice. Bozgat, Uggrim and Snikgob all jumped.

Talker immediately slapped both hands over his long snout and stared in shock at the three meks.

‘Will you keep him quiet?’ growled Snikgob. ‘I nearly messed meself.’

‘Sorry, Snik,’ said Bozgat.

Uggrim was about to give Talker what for when, from behind them, came an embarrassed cough. Uggrim turned to see a mob of six Blood Axes sheltering under the lip of *Fat Mork*’s iron skirt.

‘Great battle that, the way you did for that Stompa...’ started up the bravest of them. The others grinned with embarrassment; one stared fixedly at the ground, twisting the pole of his rocket launcher like he was trying to strangle it.

‘What you doing under there?’ said Uggrim incredulously.

‘Um, strategic placement? Er, tactical evaluation!’ ventured the brave one. The others nodded enthusiastically. ‘We was told to wait ’ere by the boss while he called in reinforcements but, ah...’ He nodded at a muscled arm lying in the dirt a couple of metres in front of the meks. It still held an axe in its hand, gold braid in evidence at the red squishy end.

Uggrim looked at it.

‘Ya know,’ said the Blood Axe, and shrugged apologetically.

‘Strategic placement... Tactical...’ spluttered Snikgob, who was more embarrassed about them seeing him jumping at Talker’s outburst than anything else. ‘Gork’s arse! Ye’re hiding! Skulkin’ about under our bubble field like you was grots! Get out! Go on!’ Snikgob kicked a lump of metal at them. They ducked and it rang off the side of *Fat Mork*. ‘Get on with you! Zoggin’ pansies.’

‘Er, see you then.’

‘Not if we see you first! Get!’ shouted Snikgob, tossing another piece of metal at them.

The Blood Axes sloped off.

‘Sneaky lot, them,’ said Bozgat. He belched. ‘‘Scuse me.’

‘Cowards,’ growled Snikgob. ‘Cowards!’ he hollered after them for good measure. ‘Cowards,’ he reiterated for the other meks’ benefit.

‘Not like you then, jumping at a madboy’s boo?’ said Uggrim.

‘Now that’s entirely different!’

‘Hey, hey, calm down,’ said Bozgat. ‘Let’s live the moment a bit, yeah, Snik, boss?’

Snikgob spat hard, dislodging a surprised looking cheek squig. ‘Yeah. All right.’

‘Great, isn’t it?’ said Bozgat.

And it was.

The battle rumbled still, noisy enough in parts that they had to shout to be heard over it, but already moving further away. Fires guttered in the heaps of flesh and metal around them. They watched and listened and sniffed the scorched air while the sun sank towards the horizon. By unspoken agreement they broke apart, stretching out their long arms and hunched backs, kicking bits of debris out of their way as they ambled round *Fat Mork*.

Uggrim pulled a pencil out from behind his ear, got a notebook out of his belt pouch and started to make drawings. Much of the time his eyes were on the fallen Knight. Snikgob checked all around the Stompa for any other skulkers before lighting a smoke. He had a sit on a burned-out buggy and surveyed the carnage with little sighs of pleasure. After a while he got to checking over nearby scrap. ‘That’s junk,’ he said. ‘Junk. Junk. More junk...’ His muttering and the clatter of discarded parts moved nearer, then further and then nearer again as he scavenged. Bozgat scouted about for a bit, gathering up a bunch of unnameable debris. When he had a little pile of scrap, he settled into the dust and started to take a battered something to bits, tongue poking out in concentration. Talker started to sing. They were all in such a good mood – nobody told him to shut up for once.

They went on like this for a good time. The orange light took on the colour of burned sugar as evening set in. The battle’s noise dwindled to a comforting background din, quiet enough now that they could hear the smallest sound, near and far: the hisses of squabbling gretchin looters, orderlies planting flags by not-quite-dead boys and calling their dok masters over, the moans of the wounded, the screams of captured humans, orks laughing and shooting off their guns in celebration.

It was soon quiet enough that they caught the muffled banging coming from the fallen humie Stompa.

Bozgat looked up from his little heap of gubbins. ‘Can you hear something, boss?’

‘Hmmm?’ said Uggrim distractedly. He was drawing power couplings that might join the Knight’s chainsword to *Fat Mork*.

Snikgob took his smoke out of his mouth and cocked his head.

‘I think...’ said Bozgat.

Snikgob frowned, finger to his lips. Bozgat shut up.

The banging came again.

Snikgob laughed: a low, throaty and wholly unpleasant chuckle. ‘Oh I can hear it, I can! Back in a jiffy.’ He ran into the Stompa, puffing smoke as he went.

‘There! There it was again.’ Bozgat clambered up the fallen vehicle and stood on its face-plate. He stamped hard, and listened for a reply.

Some kilometres away the fighting continued. Uggrim idly thought that far too many of the humies had made it over the bridges, but he didn’t care. It just meant the fun would last longer. There was nothing nicer than a good long war.

Bozgat bent over, his hands on his knees. ‘Hmm. Stopped now.’ He stamped again on the buckled face-plate.

The banging started up. Muffled words came in between.

‘There! There is something in there!’ said Bozgat, pointing.

‘Oh yeah,’ said Uggrim, not much interested. ‘That’ll be a humie.’ He kicked a buckled armour plate on the humie Stompa’s leg and nodded at the sound it made.

Snikgob came jogging back, his burna tanks sloshing on his back, his welding mask open on his head. He bounded up the fallen metal giant and shoved Bozgat out of the way, pushing a crowbar into his hands as he did. ‘This is going to be fun!’ he cackled. He lit his burna flame from his smoke, flipped his mask down and set the flame to blue and hot. He carefully cut into the shell of the walker. When he’d made a full, square cut, he beckoned and Bozgat came in to pry the front open. Snikgob got his fingers under it and with a loud grunt hurled the plate back.

An angry, soot-stained human stared back at them, his gubbins and worky bits smashed all to zog around him. He shouted something at them in his squeaky humie voice.

Snikgob flipped up his mask. He and Bozgat shared a merry look. ‘Hello, humie!’ Snikgob said, very loudly and very slowly. ‘We is going to get you out –

you savvy?’

The human pulled a stupid expression on its flat, pink face and started squeaking again. Snikgob got on his hands and knees. With one hand he reached in, smacking the human across the head when it tried to shoot him with a tiny pistol. Grabbing the man’s clothes, Snikgob hauled him halfway out, yanking repeatedly when the human got tangled in his straps and the wires coming out of his skull. This made the human scream. Bozgat laughed and pulled harder.

The human was soon screaming a whole lot more. Snikgob took his time with him, not stopping until he got hungry and decided it was dinner time.

‘Frikk. Frikk! You want some? There’s still a bit left!’ shouted Snikgob, waving one of the human’s thigh bones at the gretchin.

‘That was a cracking cook up,’ said Bozgat happily. The pair of them were sitting in chairs they’d knocked together from junk, enjoying the embers of their cooking fire glowing in half an oil barrel, the shiny sunset, the stink of war and – best of all – the sweet, sweet taste of pinky flesh.

Frikk wasn’t hungry. He sat with his back against *Fat Mork*’s foot. He shivered even though it was warm. He was frightened out of his wits, but not so frightened that he did not recognise the glyphs he’d seen scratched into the wall by the broken wires.

Urdgrub.



CHAPTER 7

FRIKK IN TROUBLE

Night fell.

Battle retreated further from the *Wrath of Gork*. Artillery fire rumbled no louder than distant summer thunder. The howling of the boyz was the pounding of a faraway sea upon the shore. Sinister warbles and crackles split the gathering dark, the discharge of ork energy weapons made close by tricks of the atmosphere. The gretchin and Deathskulls combing the battlefield looked up at the flashes in the sky when this happened, before going back to their looting. Injured orks who still had not been seen by the doks shouted angrily. The doks took their time. Floodlights marked where they worked. When done, they dished out their version of post-operative care, haggling over the price. Their lisping negotiations were usually brief, giving way to the crunch of pliers ripping out teeth. Screams of discovered humans still came and went, although only rarely. Most had already been tormented and eaten.

The oddboyz were out in force. Runtherds marshalled huge mobs of industrious grots. Surgery tents sprang up around the *Wrath of Gork*, and to the southern end of the ship the mekboyz had begun work on their own settlement, a massive pile of salvage rising rapidly next to it. Loud arguments, some punctuated by gunfire, drifted on the wind from the direction of *Gork's Fist*. Already the superstructure was covered in blazing arc lamps. The blue tongues of welding torches stabbed at the gargant in multiple places. Whether the meks were repairing it or cutting it up was hard to tell from that distance, but knowing orks, the likelihood was that different mekmobs were doing both simultaneously.

Snikgob was still out and about, scavenging from human and ork alike.

Uggrim and Bozgat were arguing over the best way to dismember the humie walker and get all the good gubbins out. Now it was dark, the Red Sunz' grot fixers patrolled a wide cordon around this valuable piece of plunder, beating the slaves of rival mekmobs when they got too close.

'I tells you, going in from underneath, underneath!' said Bozgat, gesticulating wildly. 'Got to get that shield generator out in one piece. Armour's too thick at the front, boss – we'll get bored, go at it too hard and mash up all the good stuff by accident. Armour's weak at the back, boss, and all crumped up anyhow. We can get at it if we dig a trench right there.' Bozgat stomped across the fallen Knight, steel-shod boots booming on the metal. He pointed at the ground between the walker's legs.

Uggrim was equally annoyed that Bozgat was right and that he had the nerve to disagree with him. He harrumphed and crossed his apish arms. He realised he was just being stubborn for the sake of it, but giving in irked him. 'All right! All right! You win. When Snikgob comes back we'll get him to cut from the back.'

'Boss, listen. It's the only way to do it,' began Bozgat. He stopped, puzzled. 'Did you just agree with me?'

'Yes. Yes, I did. Don't let it go to your head.' Uggrim approached Bozgat. 'Now let's start getting that choppy arm off. We can do that without Sniks, no worries. I got plans for that.' Uggrim looked up at *Fat Mork's* gigashoota thoughtfully. With a sneaky shove to the chest, he sent Bozgat off the walker and sprawling on the ground below. He laughed. 'Watch yourself there, Bozgat! Frikk. Frikk!' he bawled.

Frikk had been hiding under *Fat Mork* all this time, obsessing over his Urdgrub dilemma. His hands were raw with his wringing them. 'Yes, boss. Sorry, boss. Coming, boss!' He trotted over to the humie walker, and stared up at his master.

'Go get me some fungus beer, you waste of space,' shouted Uggrim. 'Why I don't just eat you is beyond me. I'm getting soft – sentimental!'

'Yes, boss, sor– Ow!' A large, rusty nut caught Frikk squarely on the shoulder. Uggrim put his hands on his hips and stared down. He was a dark silhouette against the dirty brown of Alaric's late evening sky.

'And be quick about it!'

Frikk looked up at Uggrim fearfully. The mek's tusks glinted in the light of undoused fires. He was a good boss to Frikk, better than most. But Frikk was still just a grot, and Uggrim as unpredictable as any ork.

'Right away, boss,' he said, trying to sound chirpy. 'Right away!'

He ran the twenty metres back to *Fat Mork*, just to show willing, around the back, up through the side access door, onto the bottom deck and straight into Gulgul, Urdgrub's most vicious henchman.

'Hello,' said Gulgul. He grabbed Frikk by the scruff of the neck and tossed him into the engine room. A villainous looking bunch of gretchin stood around him, all bigger than Frikk. 'Jakar, get that door locked. I want to talk to this runt in private.' He leaned in over Frikk. 'I've come to collect.'

'For who?' said Frikk, innocently.

A tittering, flatheaded gretchin, whose eyes pointed in different directions, slammed Frikk hard against the reactor house. Gulgul's lackeys giggled maliciously as Frikk's flesh hissed on the hot metal.

'How does it work? How does this little sun work? Urdgrub's got people who need to know!' said Gulgul. He jerked his head. Flathead failed to take the hint, so Gulgul punched him in the face. Frikk fell to the floor.

'Whaddya do that for?' said Flathead.

'I wanted you to let him go!'

'Well why didn't you say?' said Flathead, rubbing at his cheek.

Gulgul curled his lip at the gretchin. Flathead shrank back, ears flat against his head in submission.

The three gretchin with Gulgul looked mean but not too bright; either way they were brawny for grots. Frikk didn't fancy his chances, but at least Urdgrub wasn't there. He rubbed his face. The smell of his own singed flesh overwhelmed his sensitive nose.

'I don't suppose I could just give you the teeth back?' he said hopefully.

'You could,' said Gulgul, spitting on the floor. 'Six, ain't it?'

'Five!' protested Frikk.

'Six. What about me?' said Gulgul nastily. 'I need one. Pay for me time retrievin' them. You got 'em?'

'Um, no,' said Frikk.

'Well,' said Gulgul, and began kicking Frikk in between each word, a form of brutal greenskin punctuation. 'You. Can't. Give. Them. To. Me. Can. You?' He gave Frikk a final kick in the ribs for good measure, and stood panting.

Frikk writhed on the floor. That had hurt.

'Now, how's it work? You tell me, we'll zog off. You don't, well, you saw. We can fix this Stompa right easy so it don't ever get fixed again, you understand?'

The gretchin with Gulgul giggled. He cuffed them and swore at them until they shut up.

Frikk's red eyes flicked about. He licked his swollen lips. 'Er,' he said, 'Er...'
Gulgul raised his boot.

Frikk's hands shot up. 'Wait!' he called. 'Wait!'

Gulgul lowered his foot.

'Look,' said Frikk. 'I don't know how it works.'

Gulgul's foot swung backwards again.

'But I have got an idea!' squealed Frikk.

'What?'

'Well, I was thinking. Why make your own little sun, when you could...' he shielded his mouth with his hand, and said, sneaky quiet, 'just nick this one.'

There had been many times in Frikk's life when he'd prayed to Gork and Mork that his enemies were as thick as he thought they were. This was one of those times.

'Ye're joking,' said Gulgul uncertainly.

'No, no, I'm not,' said Frikk. 'Catch it, in a net,' he said. 'I've seen it done. Honest.'

'Urdgrub never said nothin' about that. You is having me on, runt,' said Gulgul. 'It's way too hot!'

Gulgul's three lackeys were looking at one another uncertainly. 'He might be right,' said Jakar.

'Shut it, you!' said Gulgul.

Frikk sat up and laughed, shaking his head. 'You don't use a normal net, silly. Look, Bozgat fishes it out every week, regular as clockwork. Got to clean in the reactor, see, or the... Or the light, that's it, the light clogs up all the pipes. Yeah.' Frikk winced at this poor improvisation.

'Then why don't it burn the net?' said Gulgul.

'He uses a metal net?' Frikk said doubtfully.

Gulgul looked around. 'Right. Where is it then?'

'I dunno, but we could use that. Should do the job nicely. Scoop it out, nice as pie.' He pointed at Snikgob's welding mask. 'Tell you what, I'll go get it. There's a couple of taps need turning off down there before we can open it. Don't touch though, hot hot hot!'

'What do you mean?' said Gulgul.

'Well,' said Frikk, all wide-eyed innocence. 'I've got to turn the heat down, or it will be too hot even for that, won't it?'

'Which taps?' said Gulgul. Suspicion was writ so large on his face that the dumbest, blindest ork could read it.

‘Oh, it’ll be easier if I just do it meself...’

‘Which ones, runt?’ Gulgul smacked Frikk hard.

‘Can I show you?’

‘Not likely. Gizkor, you go with him.’

‘Boss, shouldn’t we wait? Urdgrub’ll be here in a mo – he’s only up top having a skwizz around, and this runt is right tricky...’ said Jakar.

‘Shut it, Jakar! Urdgrub’s not here. I’s biggest! I’s in charge! Gizkor, you go with him.’

‘Right,’ said Frikk, getting into the swing of it. ‘I’ll show him which to do. You open the door, and we’ll bring the mask back over, okay?’

Gulgul looked at Gizkor, considering. ‘This better not be a trick, runt.’

‘What?’ Frikk made an outrageous face of wounded innocence, fingers resting gently on his heart. ‘I always pay me debts! Just think how happy...’ he narrowed his eyes, time for a gamble, ‘*Mogrok* will be when you come back with a little sun he can call his own.’

‘How do you know who my boss is?’

A lucky guess, thought Frikk. ‘Everyone knows,’ said Frikk. ‘Talk of the town, how Urdgrub is in his good books and all. And you!’ he added hastily.

‘Yeah, yeah!’ said Gulgul. ‘Yeah, yeah!’ He nodded at his lackeys, who giggled obediently. ‘You think you’re so smart! It ain’t *Mogrok*, nothing to do with *Mogrok*!’

‘Who is it then?’ said Frikk.

‘Not telling you that, am I? But take a look. I’ll give you a clue. Gave me this, he did.’ He held up a tooth on a chain, its gold cap stamped with a grinning moon. ‘Pays me, lets me go where I like. I got one just like Urdgrub.’

‘Urdgrub got two,’ said Jakar.

‘Shut it, you!’ snapped Gulgul. ‘You should get a new boss, Frikk – you’re wasted down here.’

‘Yeah,’ said Frikk sadly, and he half meant it. ‘Oh, but I’m not so clever as you, Gulgul,’ he said, with a massive, insincere smile.

‘That’s the truth, ain’t it?’ sniffed Gulgul, pocketing his tooth. ‘Urdgrub don’t think so neither. He thinks everyone but him is thick. Even me!’

He might be right there, thought Frikk.

‘But he don’t know me, he don’t know me at all.’ Gulgul went on. ‘Wait here, he says, do that, he says. Wait for me and don’t go in while I has a scout about. Well, I thought, I’ll show him! I’ll show him and get him his little sun, no bother, and we can be out of ’ere in no time. Ain’t that right, runt?’

Gulgul looked very pleased with himself. Frikk was high on relief; Gulgul was a certifiable idiot. He had a chance. ‘Now, shall we?’ Frikk got up, dusted his cap off on his knees and set it carefully on his head.

Gulgul jerked his head back towards the reactor. This time, his lackeys obeyed.

‘You need to spin those wing nuts, then open the door. Yeah, that one – the one with the observation window in it.’

There was a sizzling sound as Flathead grabbed the wing nuts. ‘Ow! It’s hot, boss.’

‘Tsk,’ said Frikk. ‘Course it’s hot. I haven’t turned it down yet! You got to wait.’

‘You thick?’ growled Gulgul. ‘Get a cloth! Then grab a spanner or somefink to open the door. Idiot.’

‘Right then,’ said Frikk. He was aiming for confident, although terror was closer to what he felt. ‘We need to go over here, by the mask. That’s where the taps are.’ Frikk led Gizkor over. Gizkor looked unhappy. ‘I’ll do it,’ he said, ‘save you the bother.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ said Gizkor genially. ‘Got a bad back,’ he whispered. ‘Don’t like to bend over.’

Frikk bent down, putting as much of his body behind Snikgob’s welding mask as he could. One of Snikgob’s tool bags was next to it. He selected a spanner with exaggerated care and fiddled with some taps that didn’t do anything at all to the output of the sun, but did turn off part of its magnetic containment field.

‘All right!’ called Frikk over his shoulder. ‘You open it now. If it’s too hot then I’ll turn it down a bit, then we’ll bring the mask back!’

‘It’s still very bright,’ said Jakar. Curse him, thought Frikk. Urdgrub’s crew had half a brain between them, and it all seemed to be in Jakar’s skull.

Jakar peered through the glass of the observation window. ‘And it’s acting funny.’

‘Turned down the heat, not the light!’ said Frikk cheerfully. ‘Taps for that are up in the head. Bad design, if you ask me – should have them both together. Orks is dumb, yeah?’

The gretchin shared a little laugh at this, united briefly by the misery of their oppression.

Frikk smiled. ‘It’ll settle down in a second. Right, you ready?’

Nods all round.

‘Go!’

‘Not doing it,’ said Jakar.

‘Jakar!’ said Gulgul.

‘No, I ain’t.’

‘All right then. Flathead, *you* do it,’ said Gulgul.

Flathead, an oily rag wrapped around his fingers to protect them, unscrewed the wing nuts.

Frikk ducked down behind the welding mask. ‘Okay! You should be fine to do it now!’ he said. He watched through its smoked glass visor as the reactor’s service door was flicked open. He flinched.

A blast of terrible heat seared the room. Flathead burst into flames. Gulgul and Jakar reeled back screaming, hands flung up to protect their faces.

An alarm bell on the wall clamoured out a warning. There was a rumble from the reactor, and a burning arc of white heat, with the form and effect of a miniature solar flare, licked out and cut Jakar in half. Gulgul threw up a hand and lost it. He keened horribly, eyes wide and staring at the cauterised stump. The flare continued on, growing longer and wider as it travelled. It connected with the inner hull in a spitting shower of molten metal, slashing a burning hole right through *Fat Mork*.

‘What the zog is going on here?’

Frikk’s eyes were a mess of after images, and watered something awful, but he recognised that voice: Urdgrub.

‘Shut the door! Shut the door! What the zog are you doing? Idiots! Zogging idiots!’

The flare ran its course.

Squealing in pain, Gulgul slammed the door shut with his stump. The light and heat ceased immediately. Urdgrub dropped down the ladder and ran up to his lieutenant. Gulgul was a terrible sight. All the right side of his body had been burned charcoal-black. One eye was blind, the ear on that side burned away entirely. Gulgul staggered towards Urdgrub, who stepped back in horror.

‘Sorry, boss,’ said Gulgul, and died.

Urdgrub stared madly around the room. ‘You!’ he roared over the bell’s din. ‘Frikk! You little git! Gizkor, Gizkor is that you? What you standing there for, Gizkor? Kill him!’

Gizkor stumbled round to face Frikk. From the back, he looked fine, but the front was another matter. His skin was peeling away from his face in red strips like squig rashers. His eyes were cooked white, moist and blind as soft poached eggs. Frikk blinked the afterimages of the sun away, grabbed at the smoking tool

bag and pulled out a screwdriver. He whimpered as the hot metal singed his hand. Gizkor swiped for Frikk, only to find the screwdriver buried up to the handle in his heart.

The ringing went on deafeningly. A commotion came from outside. Ork voices. Ork fists hammering on the door. Urdgrub turned this way and that.

‘I’m going to kill you slowly, grot,’ he snarled. He flung himself out of the gash in the wall and was gone.

Frikk limped over to where Gulgul’s smoking hand lay. Next to it, the links of its chain fused together, was the blackened tooth. Frikk held it up in front of his eyes, fascinated. A dull whoosh came from outside. Seconds later, the blue knife of a burna turned to cutting flame slid through the door and the bar locking it. Molten steel dribbled onto the floor, spitting as it fell.

Frikk pocketed the tooth as the door clanged open.

‘What the zog is going on here?’ bellowed another voice, this one much deeper, orkier, far angrier. It belonged to Snikgob, who was leaping through the door with a murderous look on his face. Frikk whimpered. The ork came over the deck in two great strides, dropped his burna, grabbed the gretchin by the throat and hauled him into the air.

The other two meks were close behind. Bozgat clapped his hands to his head. ‘What’ve you done? What have you done to me Stompa?’ he said.

Uggrim’s eyes followed the still glowing crack from the floor all the way up the wall and into the ceiling. The darkening sky was visible through it. He examined the damage silently, tutting and humming and hawing. Frikk dreaded the moment he’d face him, which he duly did. ‘What’s all this about, Frikk? Don’t make me bake you. Ye’re me favourite grot, you are. But I am perishin’ hungry. That humie was very thin.’ Uggrim seemed calm. Frikk quailed – that was when his boss was at his most dangerous.

‘Thanks, boss,’ choked out Frikk, dangling from Snikgob’s claw. ‘It wasn’t me, I swear.’

Snikgob shook him.

‘All right! I mean, it was me, but... Look, boss, it was Urdgrub. I had to get rid of him.’

‘Urdwho?’

‘That sneaky blue-face git we got to nick the gubbins out of Grabskab’s battlegon back on Garbax World. Do you remember, boss, do you?’

Uggrim smiled fondly at the memory. ‘Hur. Yeah. What’s ’e still doing about?’

‘Never went away, boss. Most of his lot went off to Bluefinga, but not him.’

He's been skulking about in the ship's drops, making all sorts of new troubles for us grots with his gang! He's a menace, he is. I, er, I owed him some teeth...'

Uggrim looked at him admonishingly. 'Don't tell me you been gambling again, Frikk.'

Frikk nodded miserably.

'Oh, Frikk, I am so disappointed.'

'Oh, yeah, sorry, boss. I was. Hard habit to break. But look! He said he'd let me off if I told him how *Fat Mork's* little sun works...'

This admission prompted another bout of furious shaking from Snikgob. Frikk's collection of pencils spilled out of his shirt pocket, and his cap came off again.

'Another one? Another one after our stuff? What'd ya tell him, you little runt?'

Frikk made a series of horrible noises in his throat and clawed feebly at Snikgob's hand.

'Er, you know, I don't mean to butt in and all, but I don't think he can answer, Snikgob,' said Bozgat. 'He's gone blue.'

'Well he won't mind that will he?' snarled Snikgob, shaking Frikk harder. 'Cause it's a lucky colour!'

'Stop a mo, Snik,' said Uggrim. He laid a hand on Snikgob's arm. Snikgob bared his teeth and growled at his boss, but stopped and loosened his hand.

Frikk could barely speak. His nails still scraped at Snikgob's fingers, desperate to relieve the pressure, but Snikgob's hand was as immovable as a vice – he never used one, he had no need. 'Thanks, boss,' gasped Frikk. 'I told him nothing. I don't know, do I? I'm just a grot.'

'True that,' said Uggrim.

'And he says he has a new boss. And I think I knows who it is!'

'Mogrok,' said Uggrim with dead certainty.

Frikk tried to shake his head, but he couldn't. Spots wheeled in front of his eyes. His view of the room was growing an unattractive and terrifying black border. Then he remembered the tooth.

Still scrabbling at Snikgob's fingers with one hand, he flailed at his pocket with the other.

'Here, what's he doing now?' said Bozgat.

'Why don't you put him down and we can find out?' said Uggrim.

Snikgob pursed his lips. 'Nah.'

Frikk pulled the token from his overall's pocket. 'Here, boss. Here!' His voice was a croak. His world had become a dim circle containing three very angry orks

and a large measure of pain. With the last of his strength he held up a gleaming white object, long as a finger, capped with gold bearing a cleverly worked leering moon.

Uggrim snatched it and examined it.

‘It’s a tooth,’ said Bozgat, who although he had the most orky know-wots of any of them was somewhat prone to stating the obvious.

‘Course it’s a tooth!’ said Uggrim.

‘Whose though?’ said Snikgob.

‘Grimgut. It’s Grimgut!’ croaked Frikk. Then he went back to grabbing at the hand around his throat and kicking feebly.

‘Zoggin’ heck,’ said Bozgat.

‘Grimgut?’ said Uggrim. ‘Oh yeah. Look here. That moon, same as his clan badge. Cheeky zogger! See?’

‘Oh yeah,’ said Bozgat. ‘Nice design. Bit fancy.’

‘Bad Moon, ain’t he?’ said Uggrim.

‘Could we get back to the important stuff, like who’s trying to kill us?’ snapped Snikgob. ‘Sounds like you know what’s going on, Uggs.’

‘What *is* going on?’ said Bozgat.

‘Don’t know if I do. Thought I did, but...’ Uggrim stroked his wide jaw.

‘Trouble,’ said Uggrim. ‘You can put him down now, Sniks.’

‘Oh yeah. Sorry,’ said Snikgob, in a manner that could only be described as highly sarcastic. He dropped the gretchin. Frikk landed in a little heap. He stayed there coughing and retching and making funny little hitching sounds in his throat, like he was finding it hard to breathe or something. Pathetic.

‘I thought Grimgut thought his Stompa was best?’ said Bozgat. ‘Squig oil, all that?’

Uggrim gave a massive grin. ‘Yeah, he did say that, didn’t he? Obviously he’s a liar. He reckons *Fat Mork* is better than *Big Mouth!* That’s why we got sabotaged! Ain’t that nice, lads? He wants our secrets.’ Uggrim made a proud face. ‘He wants our secrets! Ha!’ He slapped Snikgob on the back. Snikgob glowered.

‘So what about Mogrok?’ said Snikgob. ‘Tell Bozgat what he did, Uggs.’

Uggrim’s face fell. ‘Oh. Yeah. Grimgut ain’t the only one. He, er... Well, Mogrok wants to know how the little sun works an’ all,’ said Uggrim.

‘Why? Don’t he know?’ said Bozgat.

‘Maybe he does. Maybe he’s just Morking on us, see what we got. A sneaky one that Mogrok,’ said Uggrim. ‘And stinky.’

Snikgob shook his head and spat on the floor. ‘This ain’t good. Rumour has it lots of them what displeases him go missing,’ said Snikgob.

‘I heard that too,’ said Bozgat.

‘Last thing we need is that git getting uppity with us. Gah. Why can’t a Waaagh! be simple, like it was in the good old days?’ said Snikgob.

‘Like I said, politics,’ said Uggrim.

‘You going to tell him how it works then, or what?’ said Snikgob.

‘Why, do you know how it works, Snikgob?’ said Uggrim.

‘Well, er, not exactly... But I could sketch out the general... Er, no. No I don’t,’ he said limply. Admitting so soured his temper further.

‘Do you, Bozgat? You wanted it. You did most of the work.’

‘Um, I... I reckon I could do it again, but...’ He threw up his hands. ‘You finished it! Not me. You knew which gubbins to lift from the blue boyz.’

Uggrim nodded. ‘That’s right. Truth is, it was all three of us. Mork working through our orky know-wots.’ He tapped his sloping forehead. ‘Bozgat, you did the most...’

‘You didn’t tell Mogrok that, did you?’ Bozgat said, a little alarmed.

‘Gork’s right arse cheek, Bozgat! Ye’re as snivelly as a grot! No, I did not tell him. And don’t interrupt.’

‘Sorry.’

‘Apology accepted. Nah, to make this again, we’d all have to do it. It’s a rare piece of technorkology, this.’ He flung his arms around his compatriots. ‘Red Sunz Mob. We can’t give him the secret alone, only together. And even if we could, I don’t reckon we should, just in case any of youse lot is thinking on that.’

‘Fair enough,’ said Snikgob with a scowl. He shucked off Uggrim’s arm. ‘But now he’ll probably want to kill us.’

‘That’s right,’ agreed Uggrim. ‘But he won’t. Come on boyz, he’s only a Bad Moon! More teeth than sense, that lot. We’re Evil Sunz! We’re the Red Sunz! We have a little sun!’

‘What’s that mean?’ said Bozgat.

‘Beats me,’ said Uggrim. ‘But it’s got to mean *something*. We aren’t going to let him kill us! And if he does try to go all sneaky-sneak on us, we’ll be ready.’

‘Fine, fine,’ said Bozgat, shrugging off Uggrim too. ‘But what about Grimgut?’

‘Oh, him we’ll have to kill,’ said Uggrim. ‘Right, Snikgob?’

‘Right, Uggs.’

‘So!’ exclaimed Uggrim, clapping his hands together. ‘First order of the day.’

Check out the damage.’

The orks thumped around the room, checking out the damage.

‘Oi! You got blood on my best screwdriver, you runt,’ shouted Snikgob.

‘Sorry, boss,’ Frikk said. It wouldn’t have mattered which screwdriver he’d chosen. As far as Snikgob was concerned, they were all his best. The gretchin was so beaten up now his bruises had bruises. The feeling had left his ribs some time ago. He idly wondered if they were still there or had all been kicked to flinders. He curled into a tight little ball and waited.

‘Well?’ said Snikgob. ‘What you lying round for? I’m too busy to beat you. Punch yerself in the face!’

Frikk sighed and sat up. He began smacking himself as instructed.

‘Oi, you little runt,’ growled Bozgat. ‘Harder!’

Uggrim stayed staring at the hole. Snikgob came up to Bozgat with a finger to his lips. ‘You know what that means, don’t you?’ he whispered, nodding towards Uggrim.

‘He’s not? Not *again*.’

‘He is,’ said Snikgob. ‘He’s thinkin’.’

Uggrim had that glazed look on his face an oddboy gets sometimes. He was talking to himself, low in his throat, a rumbling stream of words the others couldn’t quite make out.

‘We is going to Mork up the Gork on *Fat Mork* so we’s ready for them zoggers, either one of ’em, when they come a callin’.’

‘Er, righty-ho, boss,’ said Bozgat, his brow furrowed with confusion. He looked at Snikgob, who gave the exaggerated shrug of cluelessness.

Uggrim looked at them both. ‘You is both idiots! I mean we’ll make *Fat Mork* the stompiest, shootiest Stompa there is in the whole Waaagh!’ he explained. ‘That Mogrok tries to do us in on the quiet, he’ll look well stupid, sneaky as a runt.’ Uggrim was energised. ‘And if he comes at us proper Gork right, we’ll blow his stuff to bits. Same for Grimgut – we’ll do him first. Get the grots organised. I want lights up outside, big lights! We’ve wasted enough time. We have to get those arms off of that humie Stompa, dig out its bubble generator and all. Snikgob! We’re going to have to work fast, and we’re going to need some big burna action. You still mates with the Flaming Fire crew?’

‘Yeah, Uggs. Seen them, not so long back today, cutting up junk near the gargant.’

‘Go and get ’em, and no one else, got it? Someone – Bozgat – go find Talker. There’s complicated sums needs doing.’

Bozgat nodded. 'All right, boss. I'll cook up a squig, always brings him running.'

Uggrim clapped his hands together and jutted his tusks out. Things were getting fun. 'Excellent! Excellent! Get to it, we've not got time to waste! I'll wipe those smug looks off those fat Bad Moon faces and no mistake...'



CHAPTER 8

THE BIG BURNY RIVER BATTLE

Fat Mork's reactor grumbled loudly. The little evil sun inside his belly spat with anger at the increased demands placed upon it. The Stompa had changed inside and out. His belly had been sliced open, the repeating humie cannon mounted on the reactor deck to jut out of his gut like a little version of *Gungutz*. Up top, the gigashoota loading mechanism and the rest had been removed. In its place was the humie Stompa's choppy arm, the smooth lines of its manufacture a glaring contrast with *Fat Mork's* solid but ugly construction. Patches of its original colourful heraldry showed up underneath its new red paint; the orks had been left with little time to do a good job.

Bozgat hummed happily to himself as he played with the humie shield. It wasn't a proper orky bubble, but a moveable wall that could be swung to protect the most vulnerable parts of the Stompa. Bozgat spun it round on its new gimble mounts, panning it up and down and round about. He fiddled with it, now slow, now fast, narrowing and widening its field of effect. He kept his eye on an array of dials set into the wall near his station. He sucked his lip in through his fangs and nodded.

'Reactor's up to ninety per cent of tolerance, boss,' said Bozgat.

'Caution must be taken when interfacing ionic technologies, especially those that originate with alien species whose consciousness wavelengths are incompatible with the psychically motivated etheric generators of the krork,' said Talker.

'Shut your jabber,' said Bozgat aggressively, before tweaking a few knobs and closing a few valves on it anyway. The reactor calmed down.

‘Wibble,’ said Talker.

‘Ahem, just to be on the safe side,’ said Bozgat to a gaggle of grots. ‘What you looking at anyway?’ he growled when their blank faces did not change. ‘Move!’ He clapped his hands. They moved. Frikk found them all jobs to do.

‘Hur hur hur. I’d like to see ’em stop *Fat Mork* now!’ said Uggrim through the talky-tubes.

‘Burple,’ said Talker.

Bozgat gave Talker a filthy look and grabbed the nearest talky-tube. ‘What’s he doing down here, boss? It ain’t fair.’

‘Who said fair’s got anything to do with it? He’s your pet, so you can have him. We’re sick of his yapping up there anyway. Ain’t that right, Snikgob?’

Snikgob nodded. ‘S’right, Uggs. I’m sick of his yammer. You’re the one that’s always saying how useful he is.’ Talker was useful too; some of his babble hid real insight that had got them out of many a technical knot. Not that they would ever own up to it.

‘I just wanted a little break,’ complained Bozgat, ‘just a little one! It’s a lot of responsibility having a mad ’un to look after.’

‘Your problem, matey. You found him, you took him in, you look after him!’ said Uggrim. ‘Besides, he’s the best shot. He’s staying in the belly gun and that’s final – got it?’

After the drop, the war was proceeding in a most satisfactory manner. The humans skulked on the other side of the river. The water was hot and burned the skin, as early kommando forays had discovered. A few had got across, fewer had come back, their skin bleached horribly white. Their stomachs were a mess too, and these brave scouts had been banished far from the main drops until they sorted themselves out.

Still, their intelligence was as useful as their drops-smell were unbearable. The humies were hoping, said Mogrok, to funnel the orks over the narrow bridges and blast them as they did so.

Grukk didn’t listen and went charging in anyway. The humies blocked the bridges with ogryns, and hammered the ork horde at range. Pandemonium was too gentle a word. Orks battling ogryns, orks swimming, orks drowning. In the end they got over the river, but the humies were acting all smart, isolating the orks and cutting them down. Their guns were puny only if you were facing one. But a thousand? Ten thousand? Orks were las-burned by the hundred. Grukk had gone in himself, trying to take the south bridge. He snipped up a lot of the ogryn boys, a great fight, and it looked like it was all going his way until this big

floating island ship thingy plugged the end of the river and sent out a whole bunch of quick humie Stompas to get on with shooting everyone up. One had smashed up the bridge; a big white boss Stompa had lifted the end! Lifted it! Humies were weak, but that was impressive. Gruk had been giving it some in the middle when it happened, and had gone missing when the whole lot crashed into the river. Fallen in, by all accounts, but no one reckoned he was dead. He'd only fallen into some burny water; what harm was that going to do to such an ork?

So the orks kept on coming, because that's what greenboyz do – keep on coming until the last one, leastaways provided not too many of them get fried. In any case, the humies had reckoned without Big Red and the other weirdboyz telly-porting a whole crowd of mobs behind their lines. The artillery buzzing in from the other side of the burning river rapidly petered out, before being redirected with redoubled fury. That was a surprise for them. The humans were in disarray again, just like the last time. Orks bashed their way through the lines, and it all started to fall apart for them. True, some humie flyboys came swooping in and knocked out the artillery, but by then the humies were running away. Again. Uggrim thought it was all pretty predictable. It was disappointing, really.

And that's where the lads of the Red Sunz were called in. The humie Stompas were still a problem. *Fat Mork* advanced across the desert under the cover of a dust storm kicked up by a million pounding orky boots. He marched alongside *Big Mouth*, a shiny patch in his side. Uggrim felt pretty pleased with himself, because *Fat Mork* had been refitted in the time it had taken that show-off Grimgut to stick a fresh plate on his machine. That's what being a mekaniak was all about: out-Morking the other meks.

Mogrok's Gorkanauts waddled in front, a new kind of walker halfway between a Dread and a proper Stompa. Uggrim looked down on their heads sniffily. The pilots weren't proper meks, but nobs who had bought their walkers from Mogrok like they were common bikes. Uggrim did not approve.

'*Waaagh!*' bellowed one.

'Shush!' shouted Grimgut over the squawker. 'We're supposed to be sneaking up on 'em!'

'Proper orks don't sneak,' came a belligerent reply. 'Come on, lads – let's show these snivelling oddboyz a proper orking!'

The Gorkanauts opened fire, sending a highly inaccurate storm of metal towards the humie walkers crowding the end of the fallen bridge. Not much of it got anywhere near them, but enough did to grab their attention.

‘Zog it,’ said Grimgut, and activated *Big Mouth*’s big mouth. Raucous ork music blared from the Stompa.

‘Great,’ said Uggrim. ‘Talker! Get that belly gun ready!’

‘Yeah, ur, hic, boss.’ Talker blew a big raspberry into his talky-tube.

‘Out the way! Out the way, you nobs – let some proper shootas do their work!’

The half a dozen or so Gorkanauts in front of *Fat Mork* waddled reluctantly aside. A good few of them got in *Big Mouth*’s way as they did, causing a clumsy waltz as they tried to avoid crashing into each other. It looked ridiculous, and Uggrim laughed as Grimgut swore mightily. Grimgut’s tirade got even more imaginative when *Fat Mork*’s stolen battle cannon opened up, landing four shells in the middle of the Knights. The Stompa shook on its short legs as it absorbed the recoil. The noise of its report dinned the machine like a bell. When it fired the orks could hear nothing else, not even the music coming out of *Big Mouth*’s big mouth. The meks found this exhilarating, whooping until their throats hurt. Three of the shells exploded on the shielding of the humie war machines, but the last powered through, ripping the leg off a bright blue one. It toppled over, raising a cloud of dust.

‘Ha ha!’ shouted Uggrim, slamming his hands into his periscope handles. ‘Ha ha! That’s how you do it. That is how you do it!’

An uproarious buzzing surrounded *Fat Mork*, as hundreds of buggies, bikes and trakks held back to shelter behind the Stompas were released. They shot past, speed-crazed orks hanging from their backs with their tongues lolling out.

With a storm of fire coming from both sides of the river, the humie Stompas that came from the sea wised up enough to retreat.

‘Oh no you don’t!’ roared Uggrim. ‘Bozgat! All power to the feets. All ahead full!’ He had a little mechanical dial that he rammed backwards and forwards to ding a bell in the engine room.

Snikgob was getting frustrated. Buggies were running alongside the human walkers, volleying rocket and blasta fire at them. A lot died, but they were as numerous as biting flies, and their weight of fire was stupendous. ‘All the freeks are killing the humies! There’ll be none left for us! Get me lifta in range!’

‘We’ll get closer than that,’ said Uggrim. ‘Want to try out our new choppa, don’t we, lads?’

‘Yes, boss!’ shouted the orks.

Uggrim pushed his drive levers to full. *Fat Mork* picked up speed and barged the Gorkanauts out of the way. Uggrim ignored most of the complaints from the nob pilots, and yelled threats at the most persistent. *Fat Mork*’s new gut cannon

thundered after the retreating Knights. They were dropping into the river, away from the boyz on foot and the buggy swarm; pretty sneaky, as Uggrim reckoned it, but not sneaky enough. The ork Stompas were getting closer. The Gorkanaut's shells sparked off the humie Stompa's shielding, and the cavalcade of light vehicles kept pace with the Knights along the bank, sending dozens of rockets screaming at them. Plumes of acid water erupted from the river, scalding anything they hit.

The Knights formed up into a box formation, their clever shields making a mobile castle wall of flickering light around them, and marched onwards at a steady pace. They traded weapons fire where they could, but their attention was on escape. The Knights were slowed by the acid stream dragging at their legs, allowing the lumbering ork walkers to gain. The buggy swarm had no trouble keeping pace, but the humies were outpacing the footsloggers on the eastern bank.

'Get on! Get on!' yelled Uggrim. *Fat Mork* groaned in progress. His short legs were moving so fast that the machine had taken on a pronounced wobble, and most of Talker's shots missed. 'We got only one kill! We can't finish this battle with only one kill – what will the others say?' asked Bozgat.

'No worries, Boz,' said Snikgob. 'The humies are getting away, but at least we're running ahead of that Grimgutz.'

Uggrim swung his periscope around. Sure enough, Grimgutz's way forward was blocked by the smaller Gorkanauts. His engine lacked the power to allow him to bash his way past them, and he was steadily shrinking into the distance. The din of his wide metal gob got quieter and quieter the further they drew away from him.

'Squig oil engines my green behind!' crowed Uggrim. 'Get yourself a proper reactor, Bad Moon!' he yelled into the squawker. 'Ha ha!'

Fat Mork waddled through the burning wreckage of ork light vehicles, caught up with the stragglers from the buggy swarm, and then they were into the main body of the buggies. The swarm had slowed to match pace with the humies in the river, the vehicles looping great big donuts in the desert to keep their speed up. Ork gunners hanging from pintle weapons made obscene gestures at *Fat Mork* as he got in the way. Snikgob chucked a couple in the river to teach them some manners, and they zoomed off ahead, black exhaust washing into Uggrim's cockpit and making his eyes water.

'Faster! They're getting away! We need to go faster!' shouted Bozgat. 'I'm upping the juice.'

The Stompa lurched, his wobbling jog becoming violent. Gretchin squealed as they were flung from their posts. Uggrim grabbed his squigskin straps. The human island-ship loomed ahead of them. It was loads bigger than even the *Wrath of Gork*, and that had him thinking.

An uncomfortable thought crossed Uggrim's mind. 'Snik, how many guns do you reckon a big humie boat like that has?'

'Not enough!' shouted Snikgob.

'Er, lots?' said Frikk, who'd somehow got to a talky-tube.

Uggrim ignored this flagrant violation of Stompa rules and slammed his left stick backwards. 'I'm turnin' us round.'

Gretchin, junk and ammo slid everywhere as *Fat Mork* executed a high-speed pirouette.

'What? No! Uggs! No! Wanna do some crumpin'!' roared Snikgob. He sent a lifta beam after the Knights, ripping up a linear burst of spray from the water. He stopped mid tirade. 'Hang on a minute... Hang on a minute! Oh yeah, oh yeah!' He became agitated as the threat sank in. 'Er, don't you reckon we should be goin' faster?'

'We were going faster,' said Bozgat sulkily.

'Stop your whinin', Bozgat, and get us goin' as fast as you can the other way. And get that humie shield pointin' at our behind!'

'Sure thing, boss,' grumbled Bozgat. Uggrim checked his readouts and the telly-scope to make sure Bozgat was doing it right. They were cutting this very fine.

A few bikers and buggy boys caught on and screeched around to follow. *Fat Mork* was going a ferocious pace when it met the Gorkanauts. 'Ye're goin' the wrong way!' crowed Kaptin Blackfoot, one of the pilots. 'Ye're goin' the wrong way!'

General hilarity from the nobs in the smaller walkers blasted out of the squawker, mixed with insults concerning oddboyz' cowardice and Uggrim's unnatural predilection for being pleasant. A massive explosion cut it short. One of the Gorkanauts detonated in a shower of red-hot iron fragments. A lot more followed.

'Who's goin' the wrong way now, you dumb zoggers?' shouted Uggrim, totally intoxicated by the fight. 'Who's laughin' now?'

Mork alone – and perhaps Gork – knew how many guns there actually were on the humie island thing, but the rippling flashes that signalled each broadside suggested a great many indeed. The orks were engulfed in a firestorm. Buggies

flipped end over end, bikers dug heels in to spin their mounts on the spot and flee. Trakks went into reverse, only to throw their tracks or be smashed apart by the dozen. The humie Stompas stopped firing altogether. They were wading as fast as they could through the stinky water. A giant ramp dropped down from the floating stronghold, and the humie Stompas made right for it.

Fat Mork juddered as it took a direct hit. Flames billowed around the Stompa, filling the telly-scope, the glass viewing eye and the periscope. The squawker was a din of screaming, howling orks being blown up or baked alive, Uggrim caught the high-pitched wittering of humies too. Over all that Uggrim could hear Grimgutza laughing it up in his Stompa.

Fat Mork strode from the fire storm. *Big Mouth* was waiting for them a few hundred metres away.

‘Wow! If it weren’t for that humie shield we’d be dead!’ said Bozgat.



CHAPTER 9

BIG MOUTH VERSUS FAT MORK

‘What you laughin’ at, Grimgutz?’ bellowed Uggrim into the squawker.

‘Cause you nearly got your squig cooked. Evil Sunz is as Evil Sunz does – always goin’ faster, always falling right into a trap. Idiots,’ said Grimgutz, all cocky from the safety of *Big Mouth*.

‘Wasn’t just us, was it?’ yelled Uggrim. He squinted at his grot signallers, at the squawker and the talky-tubes. All he had to do was say the word and the big yellow fool would be as dead as dead.

‘Not talking about that trap, moron.’

‘Er, Uggs...’ said Snikgob.

Big Mouth levelled his gigshoota at *Fat Mork*. ‘You’re trouble, you are. Too ambitious, too clever by half, and you won’t share.’

‘You never asked,’ growled Uggrim. ‘You came pokin’ about into my Stompa like a grot sneak!’

‘Don’t know where you got that idea, pal. It was Mogrok behind it all.’

‘Really? Let me see,’ Uggrim tapped his chin with a nail. ‘Oh yeah, that grot was carryin’ your tooth...’

‘Don’t mean anything,’ Grimgutz said.

‘I think it means you reckon *Fat Mork*’s better than *Big Mouth*!’

Grimgutz snapped. ‘So what if I was interested? No, I didn’t ask. Mogrok did, and look where that got him! This is your last chance. Tell me how to make more of them little suns. I’ll be king of my own tribe in a week. I’ll be generous. Don’t tell me, and I’ll smash yer stupid red walker to bits right here and now.’

Uggrim was cunning. Uggrim was smart. Uggrim might, on a different day,

have told Grimgutuz that he would do exactly as he wanted, and later try to wriggle out of it. That was the way Mogrok would have played it.

But Uggrim was also an ork of action. The raw, red violence that dominated all his kind was a raging blaze in his forehead, stoked by Grimgutuz's impertinence.

'Fire!' he yelled.

There was a loud *thwack-boom!* from the Stompa's gut. The shell piled right into *Big Mouth's* chest, wreathing the yellow machine in fire. Green lightning crackled around it as his power fields absorbed the energy. *Big Mouth* took a sharp swerve to the left, and a second shell sailed past him.

'You'll have to do better than that!' crowed Grimgutuz over the squawker.

The volume of *Big Mouth's* music increased, so loud it was almost a weapon in itself. Bellowing metallic Waaaghs!, the machine stumped around *Fat Mork* in a wide circle, its turn of speed taking the Red Sunz meks by surprise.

'Track it with the humie shield,' ordered Uggrim.

'I'm trying, I'm trying, b—'

Another deafening report from their new belly gun. Uggrim's ears rang. 'Need to overload the shields, bring 'em down!' he shouted. 'Snikgob, get ready with the lifta.'

'On it, Uggs,' said Snikgob. Indeed he was. One of the buggies fleeing from the battle was snatched from the ground by a delicate movement of the lifta arm. Uggrim pressed his eye close to his periscope so he could catch the surprised looks on the crew's faces as their ride was smashed into *Big Mouth's* shield. 'Hur hur hur. Funny that!' Uggrim said. 'But wait till I give the say so next time – got to hit it all at once!'

Big Mouth's head swivelled to track his opponent. A checked rocket shot off his shoulder, corkscrewing madly before the grot in the nose cone got it under control; unfortunately for Grimgutuz, 'under control' meant a straight line three hundred metres wide of *Fat Mork*.

Talker was firing again, not a bad shot this time, his shell raising a burst of earth near *Big Mouth's* foot.

'Wait for my orders, you maniac!' shouted Uggrim.

Big Mouth's gigashoota arm could not rotate far enough out from his body to target *Fat Mork*. It didn't stop the gunner trying, and a spray of incandescent streaks spat from the weapon. The bullets were so off target that Uggrim ignored them. He pressed his eye to the periscope. He twiddled knobs, calibrating *Fat Mork's* death-eye to the energy frequency he reckoned Grimgutuz had set his shields to. 'High' was his guess. More was always more with Bad Moons.

Biggest, best, loudest, brightest, fanciest... They lived in a world of superlatives, the yellow clan. It was their weakness. Gits.

Fat Mork's eye thrummed next to Uggrim. The Stompa wobbled slightly as Snikgob panned his lifta arm out to the far left, looking for a good piece of scrap to lob.

This was the situation: the battle was virtually over. The humans were flooding away from their defences. Orks from both sides of the river were running after them, reinforced by the boyz of Blacktoof's and Dok Killa's crews spilling out of the newly arrived rust-ship, *Steeljaw*, to the south. Squawker chatter had it that more and more of the ork ships were coming in from orbit. Reports were also getting to Uggrim that Gruk had indeed survived and was in a terrible temper, his skin bleached by the acidic river. He would carry the sulphurous stink of it with him until his none-too-distant demise.

Only to the south, where the river joined the sea, were the humies holding the upper hand. There, orks were streaming away from the humie island. Those that didn't were being methodically obliterated.

'Pulling back! Just getting our breath – we'll be back for more! We'll show 'em!' shouted nobbs over the squawkers, but it was plain to see that they were all pegging it as hard as they could. When ork morale fails, it fails spectacularly.

As one battle came to a close, another was beginning. A touch outside the extreme range of the humie island guns, *Fat Mork* and *Big Mouth* danced slowly around one another. *Big Mouth* went in a circle at the centre of which was *Fat Mork*. On the straight, *Fat Mork* was more than a match for *Big Mouth*, but *Big Mouth* was going slightly too quickly for *Fat Mork*, stomping round on the spot with a somewhat comical shuffling motion, to catch. The belly gun had a clear shot, and then it didn't. When it did, the killy eye next to Uggrim's command seat hadn't. If both could get him, Sniks couldn't get a good throw for the burning Gorkanaut body he'd spotted on the ground. And so on.

Uggrim held off, waiting for the killy eye to charge to maximum. Talker banged off the odd shot, but it had percolated even his mad mind that each one only exploded – admittedly excitingly – on the rival Stompa's bubble field, and so he orkfully managed to restrain himself and not fire off all his ammo. This wound him up terribly, and his stream of nonsense reverberated around the Stompa when the din of his cannon didn't. *Big Mouth*, on the other hand, continued wobbling past, unable to shoot any of his weapons at all. Trouble was for Grimgut, *Fat Mork* outgunned his own *Big Mouth* significantly. Uggrim knew Grimgut knew it.

Straggling buggies roared past these duelling metal godlings, eager to get out of the way. Orks on foot steered well clear – a couple of mobs that didn't got stomped.

'This is stupid!' said Snikgob.

'And boring!' said Bozgat.

Uggrim put his hand over his squawker microphone, then leaned into the talky-tube and spoke conspiratorially. Well, as conspiratorially as one can bellow down a metal pipe embedded in the guts of a noisy war engine.

'We just got to wait him out! Either he'll break down, or he'll lose his cool. Then we can nail 'im.'

Snikgob sniffed disgustedly. 'That ain't very orky.'

'Mebbe,' said Uggrim. 'But winning is.'

'What happens if we break down?' asked Bozgat.

Shocked silence greeted his words. *Fat Mork's* engine seemed to grumble less loudly. It was quiet enough to hear the grots whimpering for a second.

'You what? You *what*?' shouted Snikgob.

Uggrim roared furiously. 'None of us stuff never, ever, breaks down. You got that! We is the Red Sunz meks!'

'Except for last time,' said Bozgat.

'Sabotage!' protested Uggrim.

'What about all the other last times?'

'Shut it, you!'

'Just sayin',' said Bozgat.

'Bleep,' said Talker.

Evidently Grimgut did get bored. As *Big Mouth* was almost in the rear arc of *Fat Mork*, where his armour was thinnest, *Big Mouth* pivoted and came right at them.

'Fi–!' began Uggrim, but he stopped and pressed his eye harder against his periscope. He upped the magnification. 'Oh, that's new,' he said.

Big Mouth had been modified more extensively than Uggrim had suspected. His motion brought into view a weapon the meks had not seen before. A panel in *Big Mouth's* right side below the gigashoota swung open. Held up by chains, in the manner of a drawbridge, this dropped hatch allowed a rack of rockets to extend outwards. Not your usual fat, short-bodied rockets, but sleek, deadly, and more importantly *accurate* looking rockets. They were the business.

I am not the only sneaky one, Uggrim thought. I am not the only sneaky one.

Big Mouth let out a deafening roar, and all the rockets whooshed off their rack

to streak at *Fat Mork*. The Red Sunz' Stompa was turning as the shoal of missiles hit it. Bozgat had got the narrow-arc humie shield to cover some of the threatened area, but not all. Six of the rockets exploded harmlessly on the looted energy field, another three on *Fat Mork's* bubble field. Two got through, armour-piercing heads smacking into the side of the Stompa. The steel core of each warhead was instantly melted and squirted forwards by the explosions, drilling through the layered plates of *Fat Mork's* side. Grots screamed as they were splashed with molten metal. There was a massive bang and screeching. The acrid smell of burning filled Uggrim's cockpit and made his eyes water. A bell clanged – not the same bell that had rung when Urdgrub's grots had opened the reactor, because *Fat Mork* had a lot of bells, but equally loud and equally alarming.

'Fire! Fire!' wailed a grot.

'You don't give the orders, runt!' shouted Uggrim, wrestling with the drive sticks to bring *Fat Mork* back under control.

'No, boss, no! We is burning! Burning!'

On the gun deck, a second bell, this one a hand bell, was rung: the bell to summon all the grots to fire-fighting duty. Uggrim's eyes widened at the smoke coming up from below. He looked over his shoulder down the ladder well to the middle deck. Gretchin were passing buckets of sand to each other. They were dappled by the light of flames.

Big Mouth's rubbish gunner had finally drawn a bead on the rival Stompa, and massive bullets were smacking into the Red Sunz' own protective bubble field. Bozgat swung the stolen ion shield to cover the weakened area, just in case.

'Bozgat!' Uggrim called.

'Still going, boss – reactor's fine.'

'Snikgob!'

'Just waiting for the word,' replied the other.

'Talker!'

Talker made a noise like a squig being trodden on. Uggrim took that for a yes.

'Fire!' shouted Uggrim.

'I know!' yelled Frikk. 'I'm on it, boss!'

'No! Fire the guns – all of 'em!'

'Right you are,' said Snikgob. 'Now?'

'Now!'

The belly gun boomed. Snikgob tossed his lump of wreckage at the rival Stompa. Uggrim roared and banged the big red button that activated *Fat Mork's* killy eye.

With a noise like a backwards cough building to a whoop, a wobbly, braided stream of green energy slammed out of *Fat Mork* and into *Big Mouth*'s shields. Uggrim kept it on as long as possible. The bubble field burned bright, green lightning playing over it in crackling starbursts, so much of it the shield resembled some great membrane patterned with veins. Talker gibbered and let off three rapid shots. Snikgob was tossing pieces of junk at the Stompa like a snot at the drops hurling dung. Snikgob was an artist with the lifta. He waved the thing around like a painter with a brush – a dab here, a flick there. Uggrim sometimes wondered what it would be like if they had *two* liftas. Snikgob could rip a limb off a Dread with one; with two they could grab hold like he possessed the hands of Mork himself, and rend such machines in two.

He stored that idea for later, mainly because he was getting hot. He glanced from the viewing slit to the wall by his chair. It was glowing a dull red.

'Whoops!' he said. 'Got to keep going, a couple of moments more...'

Big Mouth carried on coming at them, its power field making warbling and boinging noises as it deflected *Fat Mork*'s attacks. Grimgut was cackling over the squawker.

'Can't get me! Can't get me!' he laughed. 'Oh, you is dead, so dead! Soon, I'm going to have me two Stompas!'

'Not after you, am I? Dumb zogger,' muttered Uggrim. He pressed his eye to the periscope. *Big Mouth* turned from side to side, a monstrous runtherd admonishing a soon to be dead runt. Its chainsword revved in anticipation of the coming crumping.

'That's right, that's right. Come on, come on!'

The wall between Uggrim and the killy eye glowed hotter and hotter. Worrying fizz-pops sounded from the mechanisms on the other side.

It was Talker that did it. One last battle cannon round, and the power field round *Big Mouth* burst like a soap bubble. *Fat Mork*'s gaze suddenly burned unhindered, slicing into the Bad Moon walker, shearing *Big Mouth*'s top shoota bunker off its struts and sending it crashing down. Uggrim hastily turned the eye off before it cooked him. Snikgob's next piece of wreckage, a large, solidly built buggy that must have been the pride of its owner, slammed squarely into *Big Mouth*'s mouth. His music stopped as his speakers were smashed to bits, and the Stompa rocked back on its heels, sending the stream of its gigashoota streaking off sideways.

'Charge!' shouted Uggrim. He slammed the drive sticks for both feet forwards as far as they would go, and bashed his speed dial from 'dead stop' to 'fastest'.

A dinging below indicated Bozgat had the order. *Fat Mork*'s reactor roared and the Stompa ran full tilt at its damaged opponent.

In too close to use the lifta-droppa, Snikgob slipped out of his chair straps and ran over to the far side of the room, jumping up into the new chain-choppa's operator's cage. Uggrim heard him hooting with glee as he powered the stolen weapon up. The edge of it blurred as Snikgob raised it up past the head, ready to strike.

Grimgutz's mek raised his own chainblade to block the blow. Snikgob, jiggling about madly in the operator's cage, slashed down. The two weapons met with a terrific racket. Metal clashed together, teeth squeaked off each other and gears ground as their chains locked.

Big Mouth's gave out. The toothed chain whipped off its mount, striking sparks from the armoured aprons of both Stompas. Snikgob swung back for another hit. *Big Mouth*'s gigashoota came up. Snikgob smashed it aside. Two more chops at its vulnerable joints and it hung uselessly from *Big Mouth*'s shoulder. Too late, Grimgutz began to reverse away. *Fat Mork* was on him. Snikgob brought the Mork machine's blade down hard onto that of its rival. The toothless weapon was forced back, juddering. The Stompas remained locked a moment, then *Fat Mork* jolted as the Knight's stolen sword cut *Big Mouth*'s weapon clean in half. *Fat Mork* lurched forwards with the release of energy, his entire weight bearing down hard upon the chest of *Big Mouth*.

The sword squealed on *Big Mouth*'s armour. Teeth screeched on metal, putting shiny scars in the Stompa's bright yellow paint. Another swing knocked *Big Mouth*'s head askew. Uggrim backed up a couple of paces.

'Talker! Fire!'

The battle cannon boomed once more, blasting *Big Mouth* at point-blank range. The explosion swept around both Stompas, but *Fat Mork* was protected by his bubble field. *Big Mouth*, who bore the brunt of it, was not.

A gaping hole opened in the lower level of the Bad Moon Stompa. Fire licked out of it. Grots ran screaming from the burning *Big Mouth*, followed by Grimgutz's ork crew. As the machine tried to move, one of its feet came off its mountings, and *Big Mouth* fell sideways to rest at a steep angle. It moved no more.

Smoke gushed from *Big Mouth*'s mouth. Grimgutz popped out of the head hatch. He threw his helmet down hard at the shoulders of his wrecked creation. He was screaming and gesticulating at *Fat Mork*. What he said, they could not hear, because the meks were helpless with laughter. They laughed louder still

when Grimgutz took out his shoota and started blasting hopelessly at *Fat Mork*.

‘Not so loud now, are you?’ crowed Uggrim out of *Fat Mork*’s speakers.

‘Shall we finish him, boss?’ shouted Bozgat. ‘Say the word, and Talker’ll do the honours.’

‘Nah,’ said Uggrim. ‘Let him stew. We’s the best, that’s all that matters, and now everybody knows it! He’s learned his lesson.’

With that, *Fat Mork* pivoted, took two steps backwards, swung about, and swaggered off towards the rust-camp, Grimgutz’s curses chasing him home.



CHAPTER 10

MOGROK COMES CLEAN

No one was going to say anything about the fight. It was nobody else's business. Orks fought and that was that, and it had been a good fight. The story of the Stompa battle got round the camp, growing with each telling. Uggrim received much praise; Grimgut was laughed at when he finally came limping home, smeared in soot and so ashamed he seemed a good half-metre shorter. The Red Sunz Mob were all there, drinking beer outside his work shack, beating up his grots and waiting to mock him.

'Loser! Loser!' they shouted as the Bad Moon approached.

'I'm not done with you yet,' said Grimgut.

'Right here, right now then!' said Uggrim.

Grimgut growled but shrunk a little more into himself. 'That'd prove nothing.'

'I'll tell you what it does prove,' said Snikgob.

'What?'

'Who's got the best Stompa,' said Bozgat.

'Steady, lads. I think that's changed to who's got the *only* Stompa,' said Uggrim. The Red Sunz meks laughed in Grimgut's face.

Grimgut growled, went into his work shack and slammed the door hard.

'Now that's what I call a sore loser,' said Uggrim.

He whistled happily and walked away, swinging his biggest spanner by his side. He stopped abruptly when they got back to their own workspace.

The Red Sunz had their own visitors. Mogrok was waiting for them, sitting in a chair under an awning anchored to *Fat Mork*, a handful of very big bodyguards

lounging around him.

He got up when they came in through their new scrap wall, and gave them a hard stare. 'Bit of a mess you made today, lads,' he said.

Uggrim shrugged. 'Grimgutuz had it comin'.' Snikgob was tensing up at Uggrim's shoulder; Bozgat was dismayed.

'Maybe he did, maybe he didn't, but that was Gashrakk da Flash's Stompa you totalled. Grimgutuz built it, sure, but Gashrakk paid for it. What am I supposed to tell him? He's a good mate of mine. What are you going to do about it?'

Uggrim shrugged again.

'I tell you what you're going to do – you're going to build me a little evil sun. Bigger. Like what we agreed.'

Uggrim didn't remember agreeing anything of the sort. 'All right,' he said.

'You do agree, then?'

'Orks what don't agree with you die,' said Uggrim.

'Terrible, terrible these accidents we're having,' said Mogrok. 'There should be a committee.'

'Ha,' said Uggrim. 'It's not that, though. It'll be fun. Thing is, you asked me. I don't know, gave me a turn, that. But together, I reckon we Red Sunz meks can do it again, no worries. Because if you ain't got yer mates, what have you got? You got any mates, Mogrok?'

Mogrok glared at him.

'Not a good idea to try and nick it off us, though, is it lads? I'm not so sure Grimgutuz was working off his own back there. Two Bad Moons? Thick as thieves you are, and bossing Deathskulls for a while. I've known some pretty thick thieves.'

Mogrok's fury was frightening. He stood up tall, hand on his gun. His bodyguards were up behind him in an instant.

'What did you say? Listen, you jumped up grot coddler, I asked you all nice to cooperate. And you didn't. By rights, you should be dead, and if you cheek me like that again, you will be.'

'Uggrim...' warned Snikgob.

Uggrim was undeterred. 'You kill us, you'll have to find another bunch of experts, won't you?'

Mogrok's hand relaxed a little. A twitch in his eye betrayed his anger, no more. He smiled.

'Don't see how's you can go believing a word what the likes of Grimgutuz says to you.'

‘Look,’ said Uggrim. ‘Let’s be honest. We’s orks, not grots.’

‘Very well,’ said Mogrok.

‘Everyone knows you is the real power round here,’ continued Uggrim. ‘I do, you do. Everyone does. I don’t want to fight you, Mogrok. But me secrets is me secrets. You’re a mek, you know that. Tell me how you make such good bubble fields,’ said Uggrim.

‘No,’ said Mogrok. ‘Don’t you be Morking at me, Uggrim. You are smart, it’s true. But is you smart enough?’

‘I dunno,’ said Uggrim. ‘Smart enough not to get got by you, that’s for sure.’

Mogrok’s hand was still on his slugga, a plain-looking weapon for such a powerful mekaniak. No gubbins or whirly bits, no extra juicing chambers or blasta mods. Simple steel, well oiled, well made. All the bits looked like they fit together without being persuaded by a bit of hammering; a proper gun. Uggrim folded his hands behind his back, lightly grasping the handle of his second favourite blasta pistol, ready to draw.

For a moment, it looked like Mogrok was going to go for it. Then he laughed, a snorting wheeze, once, twice. He slumped down and hooked his thumbs into his broad yellow belt. His bodyguards relaxed.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘All right. We’ll leave it be. But you is going to have to demonstrate your loyalty to me, Uggrim. You’ve been standoffish, little bit... proud. The other meks respect you. They like your work.’ He thrust his diseased face close to Uggrim. ‘And I don’t like that. Makes me nervous – don’t want you getting ideas. You led a tribe to war once.’

‘Not a big one,’ said Uggrim. ‘And they was thieving Deathskulls, like I said. Couldn’t wait to be rid of ’em,’ said Uggrim. ‘Blue zoggers.’

‘That’s as may be, but you done it once – mebbe you could do it again.’ He poked a finger at Uggrim, careful not to prod him just the same. The tension had not left their encounter by a long shot. ‘You prove to me that you’re just interested in mekking, we can rub along fine.’ He plucked a grub from under his shirt, popped it in his mouth and bit down.

‘I got an idea, but I need your know-wots, that’s all I want. It’s for me grabber, see.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Need more power, don’t I? The kind of power your little sun can provide. Only I want a big one.’

Uggrim scuffed the dirt with the toe of his boot. ‘You need to get something big back up into space? Snikgob is well impressed with your tricks.’

‘Yeah,’ said Snikgob flatly. ‘I am.’

Mogrok smiled wider. ‘Nah,’ he said. ‘Don’t want to put stuff up. I want to bring it *down*. You help me, we’ll get this war done and dusted and have the biggest Waaagh! on our hands since... Well, since forever!’ Mogrok was excited, his sour breath panting out in strong gusts as he related his plan. ‘We’ll smash the humies to bits, and take on the galaxy! Mark my words, what I’m going to do will be remembered for all time.’

‘What are you goin’ to do?’ said Uggrim, who was intrigued despite himself.

‘Simple,’ said Mogrok. ‘I’m going to drop a comet on the humies.’

‘What?’ said Snikgob. ‘You *what?*’

‘You heard. Now shut it, I’m talking to your boss. Are you in, or do I have to kill you all?’

Uggrim looked to his companions. Snikgob’s smoke hung from his bottom lip, his mouth agape. Bozgat’s eyes glowed with the possibilities presented. Through them Uggrim could almost see the mekky dreams parading through Bozgat’s skull. They didn’t need to say anything. Uggrim reached out his hand. He tried not to flinch when Mogrok gripped it with his scabby fingers.

‘We’re in all right, oh we are in!’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A prolific freelance author and journalist, **Guy Haley** is the author of *Space Marine Battles: Death of Integrity*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Valedor* and *Baneblade*, and the novellas *The Last Days of Ector* and *Broken Sword*, for *Damocles*. His enthusiasm for all things greenskin has also led him to pen the eponymous Warhammer novel *Skarsnik*. He lives in Somerset with his wife and son.

Taking refuge from deadly desert storms, the Imperial Guardsmen of the Cadian 267th find themselves in even more danger as they face the might of a Morkanaut.



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