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SHADOW STALKER

*A short story by Gav Thorpe*



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*‘Golgof’s kommandos are the best there is. The sneakiest there is. We’ll kill your death-ghosts, no problem, boss.’*

Words that Gologof lived by. Words he had proclaimed boldly to Skullkrak himself. Words Gologof was beginning to regret.

The fort was some distance ahead, but there was still plenty of time until the sun set. Using a look-closer taken from a dead human, Gologof studied the hill on which Nazdakka had built his outpost. The trees had been stripped down to the base and gun platforms dug into the earth all around the metal and wood palisade.

More importantly, the towering speaky-box mast was still standing.

Gologof passed the mechanical tube to his second-in-command, Tufnurd. The other ork was short and wiry, the opposite of his leader, barely bigger than a runt. But from the moment he had dragged himself out of his cocoon, Tufnurd had a stringy, wily quality that refused to give up. He had certainly been smart enough to ally himself to the much larger Gologof when they had been yooofs, an alliance that had served them well.

‘Gotta be some other reason they stopped transmittin’, eh?’ said Tufnurd, handing back the look-closer. ‘Think the death-ghosts got ’em?’

‘Yeah, think they musta done,’ said Gologof. ‘No smoke. No fire. Where’s the bodies?’

‘We should send out Grippa and his boyz,’ said Tufnurd. ‘If there’s anyone waitin’ in the trees Grippa will find ‘em.’

‘Good plan,’ said Gologof. ‘Go tell Grippa the good news. We’ll keep goin’. Need to reach the fort quick as we can.’

‘You think they mostly come at night, boss?’

‘Yep. That’s what I’d do. Get us on the road when it’s dark.’

Tufnurd nodded and headed down the track they had been following, shouting

for Grippa. Golgof closed up the look-closer and stuffed it into his pack. He pulled out his heavy pistol and loosened his choppa in his belt. There would be some krumpin' done before long.

They made good time with Grippa's mob sent out to scout ahead, confident that they would be warned of any enemy lying in wait.

In a sense, that was not wrong.

They came across the bodies not much later. Grippa was the first one they found. They knew it was Grippa because of the glyphs on his breastplate. There was no other way of knowing, since his head had been taken off. And an arm. And both legs.

In the woods around the scout's corpse they found the others: some headless, others missing limbs or eviscerated.

*Lurkzagsnikskraga.*

The boys started to whisper the name. Hidden-fast-slay-veterans. The death-ghosts. The enemy that had been taking out convoys and forts all across Skullkrak's World for many days.

'I thought they came out at night, boss?' said Tufnurd.

'Mostly,' Golgof snapped back. 'Looks like they *mostly* come out at night.'

'Didn't hear no dakka or nothin',' Tufnurd said quietly, looking left and right, his shoota following his gaze.

From the woods ahead came a drawn-out scream – a sound an ork rarely made, but undeniably green in origin. Golgof broke into a lumbering run. Tufnurd was right on his heels.

'Get to the fort,' the kommando nob shouted. 'Quick as you can, boys!'

A burst of fire rang out to the left, followed by a thrashing in the undergrowth not far away. Golgof stopped, pulling free his choppa. He peered into the gloom beneath the leaf canopy. He saw a flash of muzzle flare and turned to see something spring from the shadows. There was a crackle of blue lightning and then darkness.

'Keep goin', come on, boss!' Tufnurd called out from ahead.

Golgof needed no further encouragement and sprinted up the muddy track winding through the trees. Now and then he hurdled the body of another ork, slashed apart or decapitated. He was distinctly aware of something moving through the trees to his left, easily outpacing him.

'Give 'em some dakka, boys!' he bellowed, skidding to a halt. A few of the lads gathered around him and poured bullets and energy bolts into the treeline,

shredding leaves and bark. Golgof was reloading for the third time when he told them to stop firing.

‘Did we get them, boss?’ asked Snagdrak. ‘Did we, boss?’

‘Go an’ check, if you want to know,’ said Golgof. He glared around, but there were no volunteers. ‘Right, get to the fort, sharp-like.’

The nob grabbed Tufnurd’s arm as the others set off. Golgof held his pistol to his lips as a sign to keep quiet and waited while the din of the other orks receded. With a wink to Tufnurd he slinked into the woods, picking his way carefully through the broken branches and across the litter of fallen leaves. Tufnurd circled ahead just in sight, drawing a blackened knife.

Branches snapped behind Golgof and he whirled around, pistol at the ready. He could see the canopy swaying above and looked up into the branches, expecting to see something leaping from limb to limb. A sharp retch and a wail cut short turned him around again, just in time to see Tufnurd disappearing through a bush, leaving his legs behind. A moment later his head arced out towards the nob and bounced through the mulch, coming to a stop with Tufnurd’s grizzled face looking up at him.

Golgof fired as an armoured giant sprang towards him. It was almost as big as he was, covered in black plates, with white fists crackling like lightning. On its chest was a white bird of some kind, and its beaked face was also white.

‘Just one?’ he shouted, incredulous but defiant. He fired a long burst as his enemy hit the ground hard and jumped again, a flare of jets behind it. ‘Just one of you?’

The bullets bounced off his attacker without effect, pattering harmlessly into the undergrowth as the Space Marine landed with a whine of turbines.

Looking into the lenses of the creature’s face mask, he saw himself reflected in crimson. The claws lashed out, ripping the ork’s guts to the floor. He toppled backwards, weapons dropping from numb fingers.

The *Lurkzagsnikskraga*, death-ghost, loomed over him. He heard a crackle and a muffled voice.

‘This is Shrike. Ork infiltrators eliminated. Returning to the company.’

The last thing Golgof saw was the energy-wreathed claws flashing towards his throat.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

GAV THORPE is the New York Times bestselling author of ‘The Lion’, a novella in the collection *The Primarchs*. He has written many other Black Library books, including the Horus Heresy novel *Deliverance Lost* and audio drama *Raven’s Flight* as well as fan-favourite Warhammer 40,000 novel *Angels of Darkness* and the epic Time of Legends trilogy, *The Sundering*. He is currently working on a new Dark Angels series, *The Legacy of Caliban*. Gav hails from Nottingham, where he shares his hideout with the evil genius that is Dennis, the mechanical hamster.



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