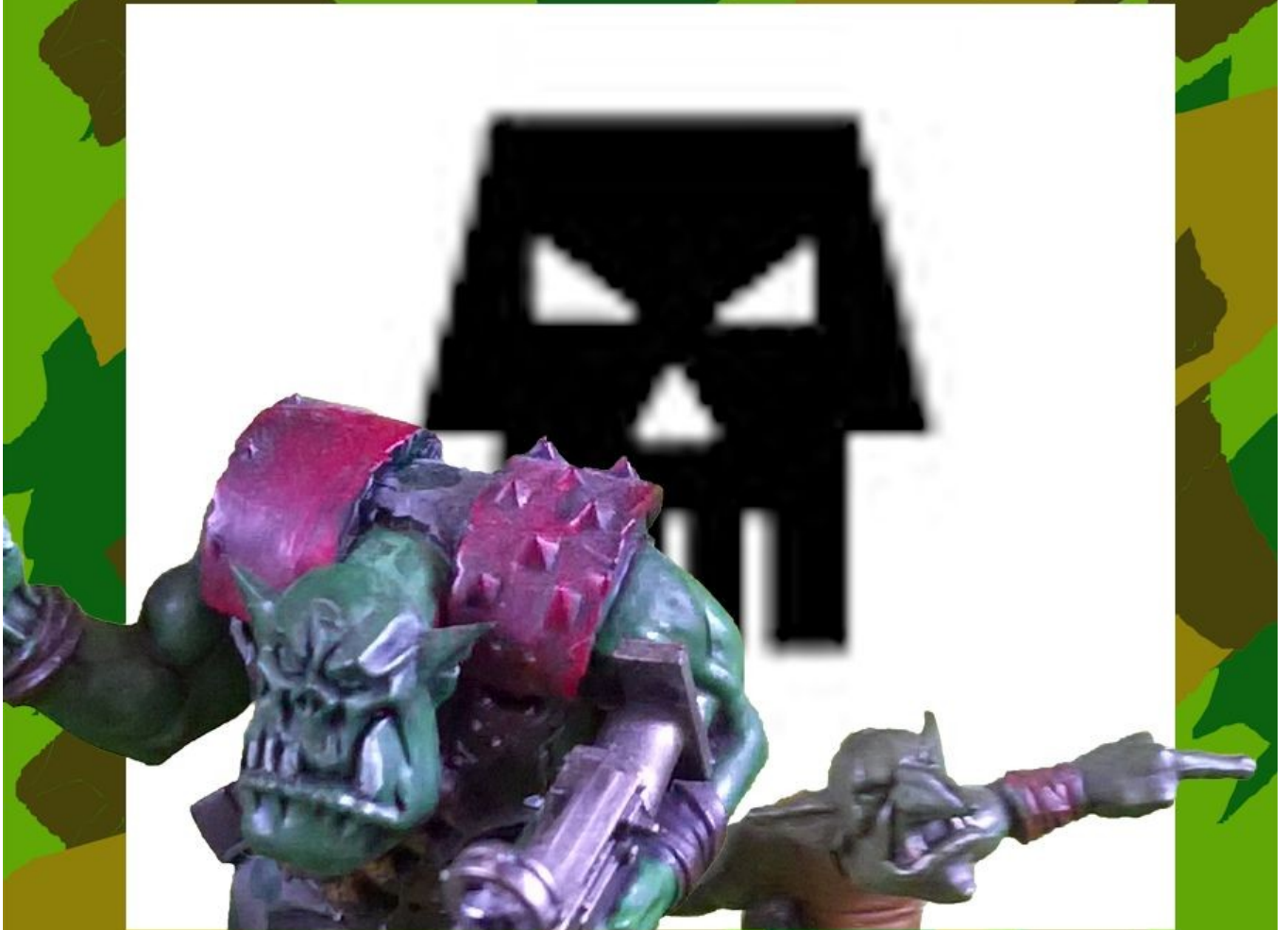


DA 'OLE OF DEATH



**A HAZUG THROATSLITTER STORY
BY STEPHEN J DUTTON**

In da awesome brightness of da far future dare is loads of

WAAAGH!

Da 'Ole of Death

by Stephen J Dutton Bsc(hons) BEng(hons)

The destruction of an Ork space ship attracts little attention from the leadership of the orks on the planet who believe it to be just another accident. But the local weirdboys think that something is not quite right going on. Hazug Throatlitter returns to investigate what lies within da 'ole of death.

The Hazug Throatlitter stories:

1. Who Killed Da Dead Lad?
2. Da 'Ole of Death
3. Da Cybork Menace
4. Da Portal of Darkness
5. Da Raiders From da Shadows
6. Da Boss of da Dead
7. Da Isle of Doom
8. Blood and Rok
9. Waaagh! Hazug!

The Hazug Throatlitter short stories:

1. Da Clockwork Grot
2. Da Day of da Runt
3. Da Steel Beast

All available at:

<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

Author's notes.

Ork speech is crude. This has been reflected in the deliberate misspelling of words when spoken by Ork characters.

No squigs were harmed during the writing of this story.

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PROLOGUE

Aside from the handful of electrical lights that illuminated the hovering workstation, the cavern was in darkness as the military officer entered it, mounted atop his own smaller floating platform that provided him with the latest tactical updates from the war. The officer could make out the shapes of various fungal growths in the gloom, and here and there he caught sight of movement from other, higher life forms. Aware of the presence of the newcomer, the scientist spoke without looking up from his work.

"Ah marshal, it is good to see you again. To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?"

"Five more worlds have fallen," the officer called out to the scientist that was hunched over the controls of his workstation, "two to our enemy, and three to those from the other realm. I have been sent to determine the progress of your weapon, we need it urgently and you have been remiss in keeping us up to date on developments."

The scientist rotated his workstation to face his visitor and looked up from his work.

"This is more than a weapon marshal," he said, "my creation will be an entire self sustaining ecosystem that will stand strong against all our enemies, it takes time to develop such a thing."

"Time we do not have. We need your work now."

"It is not yet ready, the higher specimens still do not quite meet my requirements. I need another hundred years, maybe two."

"That is what you said to the research council five hundred years ago, and records indicate that you haven't left this place since we spoke then."

"Has it really been that long already? I do tend to lose track of time working down here."

"We need to deploy them now, our situation is growing ever more desperate with each passing year. Some amongst us are starting to say that we may actually lose this war."

"There are always those who say that, but as I said marshal my project is not finished yet."

"But you do have some initial specimens prepared?"

"Yes, I have had a few small settlements established on nearby worlds with varying climates and the creatures appear to be flourishing on them all, but they will require further behavioural modification before we can release them in larger numbers."

Nearer to the scientist now, the military officer could make out one of the holographic displays on the workstation. It provided a view of one of the creatures that the scientist was working on, bipedal with forward facing eyes for depth perception and with a muscular build it was clearly a predatory creature. It was curled up in a foetal position surrounded by a pod that made up the root of one of the larger types of fungi growing in the cave.

"Is that one of them?" the commander asked, pointing to the display.

"One particular type yes, one of the more highly developed ones actually, though I am creating many related sub species that will co-exist and support one another perfectly. I have imparted on some of the more advanced specimens such as this one certain aspects of a modern society that will provide them with the skills to produce a thriving, advanced civilisation on any world they settle on with a mere handful of years. They will be born with skills that take most species millennia to develop and decades for individuals to learn. Believe me marshal, what I am creating here will one day come to be regarded as a shining beacon of civilisation in the galaxy."

"Good, because I am ordering you to release these creatures fully now. You can modify them further later on if you have to, but for now they will have to do as they are."

1

Several million years later...

The Deadly Claw was on its way home from the tau empire, where it had been part of a task force despatched by warboss Kazkal Kromag in revenge for their recent attempt to assassinate him. The fleet had inflicted heavy damage on one of the alien worlds and most of the surviving ships, just over two thirds of those who had been sent, were now returning. Other ships had either been destroyed by the powerful tau defences or had instead chosen to stay behind and continue to raid the tau empire. The Deadly Claw had just completed the translation from warp space to real space with a minimum of damage and only a few dozen casualties amongst the crew. Ship Boss Dagraan of the Death Skull clan pushed his way through a crowd of Gretchin rushing to attend to some of the damage somewhere else on his vessel as he made his way onto the command deck. The chamber was filled with Ork meks and their Gretchin assistants carrying out the multitude of tasks necessary to keep a three-mile long cruiser like the Deadly Claw running as best as possible.

"Wot's goin' on den?" he demanded of the nearest mek, "I wos polishin' me choppa when ya went and called me up 'ere so dis 'ad better be good."

"Come look at dis boss," the mek told him, beckoning him towards one of the many display screens. This particular display had a radically different appearance to the others installed on the command deck, where they had images that were intermittently disrupted by static or colours that did not stay quite the same for any length of time this one showed information crisply and clearly. It did however produce images that were labelled in an alien language that was incomprehensible to the orks. The image shown on the screen at this time was of one of the continents on the planet that the cruiser was speeding towards.

"Da stuff we looted from da tau 'as spotted somethin' boss," the mek said, "but it don't show up on any of our other detectors."

Dagraan stared at the display and its depiction of part of the planet ahead. There, the display had highlighted a location some distance from the coast with a symbol and text label in the strange language all flashing red.

"Ave any of da other ships got any of dese tau detectors?" Dagraan asked. As he did he suddenly became aware of a presence behind him, and looking over his shoulder he saw that Hasrad the weirdboy had made his way onto the bridge and was also studying the map on the display.

"Nah," the mek said in reply to his superior's question, "we is da only ones who will 'ave seen it."

"And wot is it?" Dagraan asked.

"Trouble," Hasrad said before the mek gave his own answer.

"I think it's a machine. A big one."

"And if no-one else 'as seen it," Dagraan said with as a grin spread across his face at the thought of loot for the taking filled his Death Skull mind, "den its ours. Lets get in closer and see wot we got."

The mek grinned and began to yell instructions to his fellow bridge crewmen while Dagraan continued to stare at the alien display screen and the flashing indicator.

"Dis ain't good boss," Hasrad said.

"Ah shut it," Dagraan told him.

Hasrad sighed and close his eyes; he had a message that needed sending. Meanwhile the vibration of the vessel changed subtly as it altered course.

Deep beneath the surface of the planet an immense ancient mind stirred, a single word took prominence. *Discovered.*

The mind looked out into space and it saw a crude but massive spacecraft approaching. The mind studied the movement of the alien vessel and saw that it had recently adjusted its course to bring it closer. Looking closer at the vessel itself the mind saw that it had a subtle difference to the others scattered throughout the system. This one was emitting regular energy pulses of the same type that altered the mind to its detection. The mind studied the mass and composition of the alien vessel and compared this to the resources it had available to respond with. The mind had seen vessels similar to this long ago in the distance past before it began its slumber, a suitable course of action was selected and the mind waited for the alien vessel to come closer.

2

Hazug Throatlitter of the Blood Axe clan lay back on his roof and looked up at the night sky. The points of light he saw were not only the stars whose light had taken many years to reach this place, but also the signs of the spacecraft orbiting the planet adjusting their positions to do their best to avoid collisions. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held it as he listened to sounds of the city at night. There was the sound of music from an assortment of locations where orks were gathering to relax, and with those gatherings came the sounds of shouting and sporadic gunfire from personal weapons as disagreements were settled. Occasionally there came a cheer that drowned out the other ambient sounds when the crowds at the fighting pits witnessed something suitably entertaining. Then from beneath him came a crashing sound that dwarfed even the sounds produced by excited orks. Hazug got to his feet and walked to the nearby hatchway that led down into his room.

"Wot's goin' on down dare?" he yelled.

There was the sound of footsteps as a pair of figures dashed into view at the bottom of the ladder below, one was a similar creature to Hazug but considerably smaller with a nose that had clearly been broken at some point and coated in a thick layer of grime. This was Ratish Brownskin, the Gretchin who had been following Hazug around since he had first met him during an investigation into the death of another Ork earlier that year. Close behind Ratish was a human only slightly larger than the Gretchin who had also been hanging around Hazug since that same investigation. One of the type of human known as 'female', though the purpose of this term was still a mystery to Hazug and she had refused shed any light on the issue when Hazug had asked. She answered to the name Sophie. Between the two of them they kept Hazug's home clean, prepared his food and ran errands as Hazug needed them. When not carrying out the tasks Hazug set for them it seemed to Hazug that they spent most of their time arguing with each other, usually about who was of more use to him.

"It was him!" Sophie yelled pointing at Ratish.

"It woz 'er!" Ratish shouted at the same time, pointing back at Sophie.

"Just get 'ere da pair of ya," Hazug shouted, "I'm tryin' to relax and ya is both disturbin' me wreckin' da place."

Hazug went back to where he had been lay, and lay down once more as his two companions emerged through the hatchway and joined him in looking up at the sky.

"Wot is we lookin' for master?" Ratish asked.

"We is just watchin' da ships comin' back from 'ittin' da tau," Hazug told him.

"Will Two Heads be with them?" Sophie asked, enquiring about the mutant Ork who had joined Hazug in his fight against the tau and had subsequently joined the attack on their empire.

"Dunno," Hazug said, "now keep quiet and just watch."

The ships returning from the tau empire appeared as spots of light in the sky that came from nowhere, shining much brighter than the stars around them as their massive engines fired to decelerate them from the vast speeds they had built up on the voyage home and moved across the sky rather than staying still. "Look there's more of them," Sophie exclaimed, pointing towards a new cluster of moving lights that had appeared.

The lights of the engine flames flickered as the ships drew closer and their crews began to reduce their deceleration, ready to enter orbit. The light from one of the ships caught Hazug's attention as it moved in a different direction to the others. It too manoeuvred to enter orbit, but Hazug had to sit up to keep it view as it moved much closer to the horizon. As he sat up Hazug saw a pale green light flash from over the horizon, followed by another flash from the point in the sky where the Ork spacecraft had settled into position.

Almost immediately after this there was another flash, this time of bright orange flame that lit up the entire sky as the massive Ork cruiser was destroyed in a massive explosion.

"What happened?" Sophie exclaimed as the three stared at the many new spots of light created as the wreckage of the cruiser entered the atmosphere and began to burn up.

"Da engines must 'ave gone wrong," Hazug said, not quite sure whether he believed it himself or not, "it 'appens from time to time. Unless..."

Hazug paused.

"Unless wot master?" Ratish asked.

"Well dare wos dat green flash just before."

"Does that mean the ship was shot down?" Sophie said.

"Maybe," Hazug replied.

"So what are you going to do about it?" asked Sophie.

"Sod all, it's not my problem. I'm off to bed, you two can clean up ya mess in da mornin'."

In a desert far away an elderly human prepared for bed. From outside a brilliant green flash lit up the sky outside, then heard a mighty clap of thunder. Supported by a staff, he moved as quickly as he could. Outside there were only the sounds he heard every night in the desert. But then a mighty boom came from overhead, and the old man looked up to see a massive ball of fire streaking across the sky. The fireball grew larger as it lost altitude. It passed directly over the old man before it disappeared over the horizon. There was a further flash of light and the dull thump of an explosion. The old man bowed his head and shook it slowly before he went back inside to bed.

With Hazug gone for the morning, Sophie and Ratish were left to clean up the room before he returned. As usual without the Ork there to keep an eye on them it was not long before they began to argue over the best way to go about this, and who was responsible for which particular task. Ratish decided that the best way to persuade Sophie that his way was best was to wrap his arm around her neck and hold her pinned under his arm unable to stand up straight until she gave in.

"Say I'm right!" Ratish yelled as Sophie struggled to get free of his grip.

"Not a chance," she gasped as she tried hitting Ratish over the back of his head. Unfortunately for her Gretchin, like the larger orks, had very thick skulls and a limited sensitivity to pain so hitting him with an empty hand did nothing to persuade him to let her go.

Pausing for breath, Sophie noticed something out of the ordinary.

"Ratish wait," she said.

"Give in," he replied.

"No, just listen."

"I ain't lettin' ya go till ya give in."

"Just listen for a moment, what do you hear?"

Keeping Sophie pinned beneath his armed, Ratish stood still and listened.

"I don't 'ear nothin'."

"Exactly."

Ratish suddenly realised what Sophie meant. It was mid morning and the Ork city should have been full of the usual sounds of orks going about their lives, from vehicles moving through the streets to weapons fire. But the only sounds were far off, there was nothing from nearby. Ratish began to drag Sophie towards the balcony. There the pair saw that the street below was deserted and scattered with various items that had been dropped and abandoned. Then there came a sound from within the building, a clump followed by a jangling. Still keeping hold of Sophie, Ratish turned towards the direction the sound had come from.

Clump.

Ding, ding, ding.

The sound came from a slightly different direction, and Ratish and Sophie both turned to follow it.

Clump.

Ding, ding, ding.

The sounds were closer this time, and they were coming up the stairs from the street below.

Clump.

Ding, ding, ding.

Now the sounds were in the hallway outside the room, and were getting closer to the door. Both Ratish and Sophie had heard similar sounds before, the clump came from a staff being banged onto the floor as its owner used it for support, while the jangling came from many charms and bells intended to warn others of the individual's approach.

Clump.

Ding, ding, ding.

The sound was right outside the door now, and the handle turned slowly before the door was pushed wide open.

"I is 'ere to see Hazug," Drazzok the weirdboy said as he stood in the doorway, "where da bleedin' 'ell is 'e?"

"Er, 'e's gone out," Ratish stammered as Drazzok strode into the room and sat down at the table in the middle of the room.

"Well den, let go of dat bloody git and sod off and get 'im ya stupid grot," Drazzok said impatiently.

Ratish released his grip on Sophie, who immediately stood upright and began rubbing her neck, and ran out of the room and out of the building.

"Well wot are ya waitin' for?" Drazzok said to Sophie, "Make yaself useful ya git and get us somethin' to eat."

In the yard behind Mek Batrug's workshop, Hazug lifted the rifle to his shoulder and looked down the sights.

"Customised just like ya asked," Batrug told him, "Ya can fire it like a regular shoota or if ya is up against wagons or kans ya can launch a rokket from da mounting underneath da barrel."

"Is dis da trigger for da rokket?" Hazug asked, indicating a secondary trigger located on the bottom of the weapon.

"Dat's da one."

"Wot about dis one?" Hazug then asked as he pointed to another control, what looked like a basic two position switch that was located above the grip.

"Dat's an extra special modification," Batrug told him, "push it forwards and ya get da turbo-dakka mode. Da firin' rate goes up and ya can shoot off a full mag much quicker dan normal. Give it a try," and Batrug gave Hazug a magazine of ammunition for the weapon.

Hazug slammed the magazine into place and cocked the weapon. He pointed it towards an empty fuel drum at the end of the yard. Gretchin working nearby scattered in panic as they saw he was getting ready to fire.

With the selector switch forwards, and the gun lined up on his target, Hazug squeezed the trigger.

There was a loud roaring as the gun fired accompanied by a massive blast of fire at the muzzle, and a stream of empty cases spat out of the ejection port to scatter over the ground beside Hazug. After just a moment the weapon stopped firing and there was a 'click' as the bolt closed on an empty chamber.

"See," exclaimed Batrug, "told ya. Jobs a good 'un!"

Hazug pulled back the bolt and checked the gun, wanting to check that it had not simply jammed, as Ork firearms were prone to do often. With the chamber open he saw that the magazine was indeed empty and that the gun had not malfunctioned. Then he looked at the drum he had aimed at, which now had sunlight shining through numerous holes that had been punched clean through it. Beyond the drum was a workshop belonging to another Ork mekboy, who lent out of a window in the wall facing Batrug's workshop waving a piece of machinery in his hand that had a hole through it.

"Who's shootin' me gubbins?" the angry mek demanded.

"Me," Hazug called back, cradling the customised weapon in his arms, "got a problem with dat?"

The mek looked at Hazug and sized him up. Being one of the Ork leadership known as nobs Hazug stood considerably taller than the mek, and added to that he was holding a large gun.

To orks size makes right.

"No, no problem," said the mek, "it was just a good shot and I wanted to congratulate ya, dat's all," and with that the mek disappeared back into his workshop.

"Not bad," Hazug commented.

"Not bad?" Batrug replied somewhat offended, "Dat's da best shoota I've ever made. Probably better dan any shoota made by any mek anywhere in fact and all ya can say is 'not bad'?"

"So 'ow much is da best shoota ever den?"

"Seven teeth."

"Four."

"Six, and I'll chuck in 'alf a dozen rokkets with it."

"Deal, now wot about da other stuff?"

Batrug beckoned to one his Gretchin servants.

"Oi Krobot, bring out da box of stuff for Hazug." And the creature dashed into the workshop before returning dragging a crate behind him.

"Dis da one master?" the Gretchin asked sheepishly.

"Dat's it, now stop skivin' and get back to work," Batrug snapped as he kicked the Gretchin away. "Ere ya go," Batrug told Hazug as he removed a belt of large calibre bullets from the crate, "dese should fit dat big shoota ya grot found just right, dare's two hundred of 'em in 'ere."

Hazug nodded in acceptance as Batrug returned the bullets to the crate and removed a much smaller and cruder firearm, a short single barrelled gun that hinged open to be loaded.

"Dis should be good for ya grot, it takes regular bullets so ya shouldn't 'ave any problem findin' ammo for it."

Hazug took the gun and opened and closed the breech a few times as he inspected it. It was clearly very old, and had seen a great deal of use.

"It'll do," Hazug said, "now wot about da hummie weapon?"

"Dat took some work," Batrug told him as he pulled another firearm from the crate. Unlike either the gun Hazug had test fired or the one he was holding now this one had been carefully engineered. The size of the weapon's carefully shaped plastic grips indicated that it had been intended to be used by the humans who had originally made it. While it was suitably sized to allow it to be fired with one hand, there was a folding grip towards the front where a second hand could be used to steady its aim. A compact stock could slide out from its back and a sling was fitted for easier carrying. Hazug had seen this gun before in the hands of a human assassin working for the tau before his death in the local warboss's headquarters. Being of no use to an Ork other than as a souvenir Mek Batrug had been able to buy the gun later on.

"Git guns need special bullets," Batrug told Hazug.

"I know dat," Hazug replied. As a Blood Axe he had considerable experience of dealing with humans, and had spent time even with representatives of the Imperium, the galaxy spanning human empire that claimed dominion over all humans. "Dat's why I asked you if you could make 'em."

Batrug pulled several long thin plastic magazines from the crate.

"Dare was plenty of magazines left lyin' around by da gits," he began to explain, "and da guards was willin' to sell 'em real cheap. Same with da used bullet cases, and dare was some unused bullets still left in some of da mags. I copied 'em to get ya eight full mags, but dey is expensive."

"Ow expensive?"

"A tooth per mag, no less."

"So 'ow much is da lot den?"

Batrug paused and waved his finger in the air as he mentally calculated Hazug's bill.

"Twenty one teeth," he said, "call it twenty cos I got loads of parts thanks to ya when you took me to da ruins."

Hazug pulled his money pouch from his belt and began to count out enough teeth to pay Batrug what he owed him onto a nearby workbench. As he finished counting out the payment he noticed that he still had plenty of money left, at least another twenty teeth, and he took a quick look around to see if anything else caught his eye.

"Wot's with dat truk?" Hazug asked, pointing at a six-wheeled vehicle visible inside the workshop.

"Good 'un, I just finished fixin' it up after its last owner had to get rid of it on account of a bit fell off da engine and killed 'im," Batrug told Hazug as he swept the counted teeth up into his hand.

"Lets take a look den," Hazug said and he strode into the workshop to where the truk was, "Is dat blood?" he asked pointing at a dark stain on the headrest of the driver's chair.

"Yeah, da previous owner was drivin' when da bit fell off and den so did 'is 'ead."

"Wot about brakes?"

"Wot do ya mean?"

"I mean, as it got any? I know wot ya is like for slowin' down."

"Yeah its got brakes, and at no extra cost either."

"I'll give ya ten teeth for it," Hazug said, shaking his money pouch.

"Twelve."

Hazug stopped shaking the pouch and stared at Batrug.

"It ain't even red," he said, "in fact it ain't painted at all."

"Okay ten it is den," the mek said before turning to one of his Gretchin, "Get Hazug's stuff loaded into 'is new truk while we go over 'ow to drive it."

Hazug clambered into the driver's seat and looked at the controls. They appeared quite simple, as was the way with most Orkish vehicles, and he had had many opportunities to observe other orks driving, including Mek Batrug himself. The lesson was interrupted by a shout from the front door of the workshop.

"Master are you still 'ere?" Ratish yelled.

"In da truk," Hazug yelled back, and Ratish ran over to him.

"Master come quickly, dare's a weirdo at home and 'e wants to see ya. 'E sent Ratish to get ya, so 'ere I am."

"Its not dat bloody Drazzok is it?" Batrug asked. Drazzok had made several comments regarding his low opinion of Batrug's driving skills and the quality of his work and the mek boy thus had a similarly low opinion of Drazzok.

"It is," Ratish said.

Hazug opened his money pouch and again began to count out teeth for Batrug.

"Get on da truk," he said to Ratish as paid Batrug for the vehicle, and as the Gretchin climbed onto the back of the truck Hazug attempted to start the engine.

Nothing happened.

"Use da assister," Batrug said, pointing at a large spanner that was wedged down the side of the driver's seat. Hazug tried to start the engine once more and this time as it spluttered he struck the dash with the spanner.

The engine roared into life. Hazug carefully backed out of the workshop, turned the steering wheel as hard as he could and drove off down the street at speed, scattering greenskins in all directions.

"Dat nob's a natural driver," Batrug said to one of his Gretchin as Hazug's vehicle disappeared from view leaving a thick cloud of exhaust fumes behind it. Then as the Gretchin nodded in agreement, Batrug struck the creature around the head.

"Get back to work ya lazy grot," he said.



Sophie sat at the table opposite Drazzok and watched him devouring the bowl of soup. When there was no longer enough left in the bowl for him to be able to use the spoon, Drazzok lifted the bowl itself to his face and drank directly from it. Before he finally put the bowl down on the table he stuck his tongue out and licked the final drops of soup from the bowl. For a few moments Drazzok and Sophie just stared at each other, Sophie smiled nervously. Drazzok leaned to one side and there was the sound of escaping bodily gas. Now Drazzok also smiled.

"Dat was actually good soup," he said, "I'm startin' to see why Hazug keeps ya."

"Thank you," Sophie said, but Drazzok just frowned at this. Orks rarely used the phrase, though Drazzok was much larger than Sophie so Drazzok considered it acceptable.

"So tell me," Drazzok began, looking around the room, "why is dare little bits of paper stuck all around da place?" and he held up a small square of paper that had been attached to the table. On it there was written the word 'TABLE' in Gothic, the common language of humans. The letters meant nothing to Drazzok who did not understand the language whether written or spoken, but he knew structured writing when he saw it. "I'm teaching Hazug to read my language, the labels have the names of the objects they are attached to on them."

"Why are ya gits always writin' anyway? Everythin' dat 'appens ya write it down, all dem bits of paper just take up room if ya ask me," nobody had asked Drazzok of course, but he had never waited for anyone to do so before now, so saw no problem in just stating his opinion anyway.

Before Sophie could respond there was the sound of a poorly tuned engine from outside in the street, followed by a squeal of brakes. Then there was a squelch as something soft hit some thing hard. Then Ratish's voice could be heard.

"It's alright master, da wall stopped Ratish from flyin' too far."

Both Drazzok and Sophie got to their feet and dashed to the balcony overlooking the street. By the time they got there, Hazug was nowhere to be seen but Ratish was visible struggling to unload several crates from the back of a truck parked below.

"Ow long 'as Hazug 'ad a truk?" Drazzok asked.

"I didn't know he had one," Sophie told him.

There was the sound of heavy footfalls from the hallway before the door opened and Hazug entered the room.

"Wot're ya doin' 'ere Drazzok?" he asked.

Drazzok returned to his seat at the table, and Hazug joined him.

"Get us a drink," he said to Sophie.

"Did ya see da kroozer blow up last night?" Drazzok asked.

"Yeah, we wos on da roof watchin' 'em all comin' back."

"And d'ya know why it blew up?"

"Nah, not the first time one of dem things 'as gone wrong and taken a bunch of lads with it."

"Well us weirdboys wos gettin' messages from another of us on da kroozer. Da meks 'ad fixed a looted tau detector thingy to da ship on da way home and dey saw somethin' with it, and da ship boss wanted to take a closer look at it."

"Da green light?" Hazug asked, leaning closer to Drazzok as he did.

"Dat wos later. Dare wos somethin' dat only da tau detector could see, da meks thought it looked like some sort of machine and da boss though dat it might be worth lootin'. But when dey got closer and started usin' dare other machines to take a look wotever it wos shot at 'em."

At this point Sophie placed a pair large drinks on the table for the two orks, along with a smaller one for herself and she sat down with them.

"So wot 'as Boss Kromag 'ad to say about it den?" Hazug asked and he took a gulp of his drink.

"E ain't interested," Drazzok replied, "it 'appened in da desert land so 'e ses dat if dare's anythin' wrong its da problem of da boss over dare. But us weirdboys is all getting a bad feelin' about it, somethin' over dare took out a kroozer with one blast and we think someone should take a closer look."

"Why not leave it to da boss over dare like wot Kromag said?"

"Because dare's only a few settlements over dare compared to 'ere, and dey ain't got the same shooty stuff wot we 'ave. Dat's why dare boss does wot Kromag tells 'im to. But Kromag ain't interested in 'aving 'im do anythin' either. Dat means dat if dare's trouble startin' over dare dey ain't goin' to be ready for it. We think dat you can find out wot's goin' on."

"Why Hazug?" Sophie interrupted.

"Because dare ain't no other Blood Axes left on da planet," Hazug said, "and other orks ain't no good at sneakin' about unnoticed."

"Exactly," replied Drazzok before he downed the rest of his drink, "so dat's why each of us weirdboys pulled a tooth to pay ya," and with that comment Drazzok tossed a pouch of teeth onto the table, the blood around the root of one that rolled out indicated that it had been deliberately removed rather than fallen out naturally, "dare's twenty three in total, we reckon dat's enough."

Hazug took hold of the money and stood up. As he turned around he saw Ratish appear at the still open door, dragging a pair of crates behind him.

"Load up da truk grot," Hazug said, "we is goin' on a trip."

"Yes master," Ratish gasped and he began dragging the crates back down to the truck.

"And ya better 'elp as well," Hazug told Sophie before he began to gather up the belongings he was going to take with him.

"One more thing," Drazzok said to Hazug as he was pulling a large automatic weapon from beneath his bed, "I is comin' with ya too, someone 'as to tell wot's 'appenin' if we can't get back and do it in person."

Hazug's new truck was designed to carry an Ork squad of a dozen plus a driver and gunner, though whatever weapon it had carried had been removed at some point, so with only Hazug and three passengers there was plenty of room left for supplies. Even after all of the weapons food and fungus beer Hazug owned had been loaded it was still less than half full. The lack of armament didn't bother Hazug as he had the heavy automatic gun that he could fit if he ever found someone suitable to act as a gunner. Knowing that having a weirdboy in an unearthed vehicle was inviting an uncontrolled release of psychic energy Hazug had the foresight to get Ratish to tie a length of chain to the chassis so that it dragged along the ground and dissipated it before the build up got too powerful for Drazzok to contain.

"So where did ya get dis 'ere vehicle," Drazzok asked from the seat beside Hazug as he drove towards the weirdhuts where Drazzok lived to collect some of his belongings.

"Mek Batrug."

"Is ya mad?" Drazzok yelled, "Dat wazzok can't build 'is way of a sack of Snotlings, and ya is trustin' 'im to build ya a truk?"

"E didn't build it, 'e just got 'old of it after da last owner got rid of it."

"Oh dat's alright den," said Drazzok, now much happier about being in the vehicle, "so wot's dat stain on ya chair behind ya 'ead?"

After a sack containing the few items that Drazzok wanted to bring had been thrown onto the truck Hazug's next destination was the riverside docks to the west of the city. From there he knew that he could buy passage on a boat heading down the river and across the ocean to the desert lands. The docks featured some of the few human structures that the orks had retained for their own use after the invasion of this world over thirty years earlier, the heavy equipment that had been used by the humans to load ore barges was too useful to scrap. This machinery was still for the most part operated by humans, though they did this under the supervision of Ork mekboys who rarely complained if any of the multitude of Gretchin workers who still made up the vast majority of the dock workforce were 'accidentally' flattened by the occasional dropped pallet.

There were several vessels in harbour at that time, and Hazug drove along the dockside until Drazzok suggested he stop.

"Dat one looks like its loadin' up," the weirdboy said, pointing at a large vessel that appeared to have been built by humans prior to the invasion then commandeered and crudely maintained by the planets new Ork rulers. Slowing the truck down Hazug saw that cargo was indeed being loaded onto the ship, indicating that its captain would soon be giving the order to depart, and since ships of this type went nowhere other than the desert lands it would be going where they wanted to go. Hazug swerved the truck towards the ship, scattering Gretchin and a handful of orks out of the way.

"Oi grot!" he yelled at the nearest Gretchin who was clambering out of the crate into which he had jumped to avoid the truck, "Who's da boss of dis boat?"

"Its Barlot Squigbeard," the Gretchin replied, "e's aboard now."

"Well go and get 'im, we need to take a trip."

"E don't allow gits," the Gretchin said indicating Sophie.

"E better 'ad dis time," Drazzok interrupted as he climber down from the truck and planted his staff on the ground, making sure that all of the greenskins in the area got a good look at him.

"Weirdo!"

The warning cry spread around the dock and greenskins scattered once more rather than chance their heads exploding from psychic feedback. The commotion attracted the attention of those aboard the ship also, and it was not long before Captain Squigbeard was standing before Hazug and Drazzok. It was clear how the captain had earned his name; the nob had attached numerous hair squigs to his chin to give the impression that he had a thick, black beard which he stroked his fingers through as he spoke.

"It's a simple rule," he stated, "no gits on my boat, and I ain't too 'appy about 'avin' any git lovin' Blood Axes on board either."

"Well," said Drazzok, "dey is both with me. I needs to get to da desert and you is goin' dare anyway. So ya can either take us or I can do somethin' nasty to dis 'ere rustin' 'ulk."

"Wot d'ya need 'em for?" the captain asked.

"Da git is my slave, it brings me stuff and lets me stay away from other lads dat may make me 'ead burst. Da Blood Axe speaks git so I always know wot it's sayin' about me."

"Okay den, but it'll cost ya extra. Five teeth for da git."

Hazug pointed at a sign next to the boarding plank.

"Dat says one tooth per grot, and two teeth per Ork," he said, "our human is only da size of a grot so ya can 'ave one tooth for takin' her."

"Or I can leave it behind," Drazzok added, "and go wanderin' about ya ship near ya lads."

Captain Squigbeard gulped. His ship was large enough to dissipate a lot of energy through its hull under normal circumstances, but if the weirdboy was near to too many excited orks then he could still explode.

"Fair enough eight teeth for ya all plus ya stuff," the captain said, "but da git stays with one of ya at all times," and he beckoned for Gretchin to get cargo straps to load the truck aboard his ship.

Captain Squigbeard made sure that the group was assigned a cabin as far from the ship's other occupants as possible. The cabin was to the front of the ship next to the hold into which the truck had been loaded, which made it easier for Ratish and Sophie to move all of the supplies they were bringing into the cabin where they would be safer from being stolen. Hazug doubted that any of the Ork crew would steal anything since none of them appeared to be Death Skulls who operated on the principle of 'takers keepers', but there were a lot of Gretchin aboard also who would definitely take anything they though they could get away with. "Dat wos clever thinkin' to get Sophie onboard," Hazug said to Drazzok while the supplies were being unpacked.

"Well ya git can cook," Drazzok replied, "and it won't make me 'ead burst just by bein' near me, so it may come useful," then he looked around to make sure that Sophie was not in earshot, "but don't let it know I said dat will ya?"

"Ya secret is safe Drazzok."

By the time that the truck had been fully unloaded and the supplies moved to the cabin the ship was well underway and heading downriver towards the ocean. It was at this point that Drazzok that reclaimed his sack and removed a hollow tube from it, and then from within the tube he produced a map that showed the continent that was their destination. He rolled the map out on the floor and weighted its corners to prevent it rolling up again as the other gathered around him.

"Dis is where we will land," he said pointing to a square marked on the coastline, "its da biggest city dare is over dare, mainly because its da only one."

"Weren't there any other human cities there before the first orks came here?" Sophie asked. Being well into his thirties Drazzok was, unlike Hazug or most of the orks on the planet, old enough to have been part of the Ork force invasion force that had taken part in the conquest more than twenty years ago.

"Nah, dare wos dis one plus some farms and forts with soldiers in 'em, but not much else. Ya gits didn't seem to be much interested in wot wos 'ere, and neither wos Kromag."

"Wot's dis?" Hazug asked, pointing to a cross that had been drawn on the map some distance inland from the city.

"Da weirdboy on da kroozer let da rest of us see where da thing dey 'ad seen was located, and dis is where it wos."

"But if it's dat close to da city why 'aven't da orks dare seen it master?" Ratish asked, holding up his hands spaced apart roughly equal to the distance on the map between the city and the cross.

Drazzok swung out his hand and struck Ratish, who ducked back behind Hazug.

"It's not life size ya stupid grot," Drazzok snapped as Sophie suppressed a giggle.

"Well I reckon two days on da boat," Hazug said, "and another two to get from da city to wotever dat is if we wos goin' straight dare."

"Where else would we go?" Sophie asked, "There's nothing big enough to be on the map."

"Da git 'as a point," Drazzok added.

"I want to take a look at where da kroozer came down. None of da lads will 'ave survived but dare may still be some clues about wot 'appened."

"It blew up, dat's wot 'appened," Drazzok said, "ya told me ya saw it."

"Yeah but I want to see if dare's enough left to show if it blew up because da shot wot did it powerful enough to smash it completely or if it wos just a lucky shot dat started a chain reaction."

"Ya is spending too much time near Batrug," Drazzok said, "ya is startin' to talk like a bloody mekboy."

4

As Hazug predicted the sea voyage lasted for another two days. Once clear of the river mouth the journey became rougher as the ageing sea vessel was buffeted by the much larger waves of the open sea. Neither Ratish nor Sophie reacted well to this, and it was a source of great amusement to Drazzok, and to a lesser degree Hazug, to watch the pair of them retching and vomiting in the buckets provided by Squigbeard's crew. Only Hazug left the cabin during the voyage, normally to check on his truck, but also to get updates from the crew on the progress of the journey.

The ship reached its destination at the end of its journey just as the sun was setting at the end of the second day and immediately that it docked in port gangs of Gretchin swarmed aboard to begin unloading its cargo. Hazug and Drazzok stood on the quayside waiting until the truck could be winched out of the hold while Ratish and Sophie both found somewhere out of the way to sit down until they recovered from the journey. Unlike the dock where they had embarked none of the old human machinery had survived here and all of the work was carried out by the Gretchin using nothing more than block and tackle winches and what little strength they themselves had under the supervision of the specialist runtherds who trained them. "Ere Drazzok," Hazug said to the weirdboy as he looked around the dock, "ave ya noticed 'ow many flak guns dare are about 'ere?"

Drazzok took a look around for himself, and sure enough he spotting the tell tale clusters of elevated cannon barrels from anti-aircraft batteries silhouetted against the darkening sky on many of the buildings nearby.

"Dare are quite a lot aren't dare," he said, "but so wot?"

"Well d'ya know of anyone other than boss Kromag who 'as any fightas or bommas dat dey could shoot down? I think dat da local boss is worried dat Kromag may decide to 'ave 'im replaced."

"So wot? Neither of us is ever goin' to be a boss so why should we care?"

"Because it means dat da boss around 'ere may 'ave more stuff than 'e's lettin' on to Kromag and if we needs more lads to sort out wot's goin' on we can get 'em 'ere instead of 'avin' to go back 'ome for 'em."

"Don't ya ever get tired of being sneaky?" Drazzok asked, but before Hazug could reply there was a loud 'snap' as the ropes suspending their truck as it was being lifted out of the ship's hold broke and it fell to the ground. Hazug flinched as his new vehicle plummeted downwards but breathed a sigh of relief as its impact with the ground was cushioned by the sturdy Orkish suspension it possessed and by the three luckless Gretchin workers who failed to get out from beneath it in time.

"Right you two," Hazug shouted at Ratish and Sophie, "da truk is ready so we is off. Oh and Ratish..."

"Yes master?"

"Clean da gunk off da truk when ya get a chance."

"Yes master."

At this time of day orks were beginning to gather after a hard day of work and random violence for a night of relaxation and more random violence. Hazug decide that it would not be a good idea to proceed into the city at such a time since the excitement of the orks would increase the strength of the gestalt psychic field that Drazzok drew upon and thus also the risk of his losing control of his power. Instead Hazug drove around the edge of the city until he reached a cluster of small huts, each mounted on the top of a metal pole and accessed by a ladder. These were the weird huts, where weirdboys could live apart from the other orks in relative safety.

"Find ya self an empty one," Hazug told Drazzok, "and we'll stay with da truk for tonight. Den tomorrow we can start askin' questions."

Hazug awoke early next morning to the sound of Drazzok complaining as he descended the ladder of a nearby weirdhut.

"Not surprised all of dese things is empty," he said, "da floors ain't straight and I kept rollin' out of bed all night. Now I know why so many of weirdboys from over 'ere wind up movin' to our city."

Hazug just grunted, he had slept in the front of the truck and his neck felt as though it had been trampled on by an overweight squiggoth. Ratish and Sophie had fared somewhat better, Ratish slept curled up in as small a space as possible anyway and this left more than enough room for Sophie to lie down.

"Right," said Drazzok as he climbed into the truck beside Hazug, "wot's for breakfast den?"

The city was much quieter at this time of day; the orks were sleeping off the events of the night before so Hazug was willing to drive into the city's centre. During the short trip something caught his eye.

"Take a look at dem," he said pointing at a group of large machines. They looked like large effigies of orks with bulging bodies and heavy weapons mounted where their arms should be. Some were only partially built, but others appeared to be complete.

"Are they Gargants?" Sophie asked, remembering the word Hazug had used to describe the two massive war machines that were currently under construction for Warboss Kromag back home.

"Don't be so daft," Drazzok snapped.

"Yeah stupid git," added Ratish.

"Dey is Stompas, Gargants is much bigger," Hazug told her, "Stompas ain't as powerful as Gargants but dey is much quicker to build. Da question is why da boss 'ere as 'em, never mind Kromag replacin' 'im, 'e may be thinkin' of replacin' Kromag."

"Should we try and stop him?" Sophie asked.

"Hah," said Drazzok, while Ratish just stared at her blankly.

"If Kromag can't stop another boss takin' over den 'e don't deserve to be da big boss, its da Ork way things is for orks," Hazug explained, "I'm more interested in 'ow many weapons dare are around 'ere in case dey is needed."

Hazug stopped the truck when he saw the first sign that indicated a business that served food. As the group entered the building Sophie noticed that nearly all of the greenskins around were staring at them, though they appeared to be keeping a safe distance from Drazzok.

"What is everybody looking at?" Sophie whispered.

"You," Hazug said.

"Why?"

"Cos you is ugly," Ratish said before Hazug gave his answer.

"Dare ain't no other humans around," he said, "all of 'em around 'ere was killed in the invasion."

"Dey made a fight of it," added Drazzok, "but dey was crap, most git armies is much more fun to fight."

There were no other customers when Hazug and the others entered the building, and Hazug selected the nearest table for them to sit at, positioning himself where he could keep an eye on his truck.

"Grot!" Hazug yelled and one of the Gretchin who had been cleaning the room rushed over to serve them, "We wants food and drink. Two big lots and two small 'uns," and Hazug handed over a tooth to the Gretchin.

Before the Gretchin could return with the food an Ork emerged from the kitchen brandishing a large cleaver and stormed over to the table.

"I ain't seen no gits in 'ere before," he said seriously, "Is it yours?"

"It's mine," Hazug replied, "is dat a problem?"

"Not so long as you keep it under control. If it craps on da floor den your grot 'ad better clean it up."

"Hey!" Sophie protested.

"Dare won't be a problem," Hazug said, "and in da mean time maybe ya could 'elp us with some information," and he held up another tooth.

"Da name's Fegrid," he said to introduce himself as he took the offered tooth and sat down between Hazug and Ratish, placing his cleaver in front of him on the table as he did so. Hazug noticed that he had positioned himself as far from either Drazzok or Sophie as he could get.

"So wot d'ya want to know?" Fegrid asked.

"Did ya see da kroozer come down?" Hazug asked.

"See it? Wot was left of it went right over 'ead, a couple of bits even fell in da city and a bunch of meks 'ad a big fight over who got 'em. Da boss 'ad to send to lads to bash dare 'eads together when dey started shootin' dem blasta things at each other and blowin' up too much other stuff dat wasn't dares to blow up."

"Dat's all well and good," Hazug said, utterly uninterested in issues of civil disorder, "but we wants to know where da kroozer crashed and whether anybody's been out to take a look at it."

"Didn't ya notice da cloud?"

"Cloud, wot cloud?" Drazzok interrupted.

"Dare's a big cloud of smoke comin' from where it crashed cos of all da burnin' stuff. Ya can just follow dat top get dare."

"Great, now can ya tell us if we'll be da first ones to get dare?"

Fegrid leant back in his chair.

"I ain't 'eard of any lootas 'eadin' out dare," he said after a moments thought, "dey can't take anythin' from da wreck until da burnin' stops and it ain't goin' nowhere and dey can afford to wait cos dare's still plenty of stuff dat da gits left behind."

"Let's 'ave another look at dat map Drazzok," Hazug said to the weirdboy who promptly rolled out the map he was carrying on the table.

"Grab 'old of it den," he said as the ends began to curl up again. Sitting on opposite sides of the table Ratish and Sophie were perfectly positioned to hold down the map as Hazug began to question Fegrid some more.

"We also need to know wot's goin' on 'ere," he said, pointing at the cross where Drazzok had said the Ork cruiser had detected something out of the ordinary.

"Dunno," Fegrid replied, "da gits didn't leave enough out dare for it to be worth lootin' and nobody reckons dat dare's anything else dat far away from 'ere wot's worth takin'. Could be some wild boys and squigs but nought civilised."

"Dat's all we need," Hazug said, "so just 'ave ya grots bring us our breakfast so we can get on."

Fegrid left the table and Drazzok returned the map to its tube just as the serving Gretchin appeared with a tray of food and drinks. Ratish made the mistake of trying to take one of the larger bowls of mushrooms.

"Get off ya thievin' grot," Drazzok snapped as he slapped Ratish over the head and took back his breakfast.

"Eat up quick," Hazug said, "I wants to get out of 'ere quick."

The group ate quickly and after this they returned to the truck, Hazug was pleased to see that it was still early enough for there to be little activity on the streets. The sky was now light enough that the dark plume of smoke that was emanating from the crashed spaceship to be clearly visible.

"Dat's where we is 'eadin' first," Hazug stated as they climbed aboard the truck.

"Ow far d'ya reckon it is den?" Drazzok asked, "We ain't got more dan three or four days of stuff in da back."

"Yeah but we got a grot we can use to find more, right Ratish?"

"Yes master," Ratish replied, a large grin spreading across his face.

5

The truck kicked up a massive cloud of dust behind it as Hazug drove at speed through the desert, the truck's engine making far more noise than at the lower speed at which he had driven through the streets of the cities. He kept heading straight towards the source of the smoke somewhere over the horizon. The size of the cloud concerned Hazug, even at a great distance the lowest part of the plume appeared wide and he was worried that the remains could be spread over a wide area.

"So wot if it is? Won't dat make it easier to find?" Drazzok asked when Hazug voiced his concerns.

"Arder to find wot we is lookin' for," he replied, "we need a nice big bit of scrap if we is goin' to find out 'ow da ship was wrecked."

Hazug drove for most of the day. Ratish was quite willing to relieve himself over the side of the truck when they needed to, but Sophie and Drazzok were both adamant that they would do no such thing and Hazug doubted he could maintain control of the vehicle if he attempted it while driving so some stops were unavoidable, and Hazug kept an eye open for good places for them to top up stores of food and water to take these breaks. It was during one such break, at an oasis surrounded by a cluster of rocks that Hazug found something else to concern him.

"We ain't da only ones out 'ere," he said as he showed the others the remains of a wild squig that he had found decaying beside one of the rocks.

"How do you know it didn't die naturally?" Sophie asked.

"Because dare's an arrowhead still stuck in it," Hazug told her.

"But don't orks carry guns?"

"Only da civilised ones," said Drazzok.

"Yeah," added Hazug, "and Fetrig did say dat dare could be wild boys out 'ere. I think 'e was right."

"What's a wild boy?" Sophie asked Hazug.

"It's an Ork wot ain't made its way to a proper settlement yet. Most of 'em is just young 'uns, but sometimes ya get some who stay out in places like dis long enough for 'em to get bigger, nobs even but dat is rare."

Sophie looked around, worried that there could be a war band of hostile orks nearby before she spoke once more.

"Would they attack us?"

"Of course dey would, dey is still orks," Drazzok said as he and Hazug also looked around for any sign that the arrow's owner was in the immediate area.

"We best get a move," Hazug said, and the group returned to the truck and sped off without any of them seeing the figure crouching in the shadows.

As the sun began to set the crash site was still some distance away, and the sky became orange from the fires still burning.

"I think we is almost dare," Hazug shouted over the noise of the engine so that everyone could hear him, "and I don't want to camp out in da open just in case dare is someone else about so I'll keep on drivin'."

The others muttered their agreement, and Hazug drove onwards.

The first piece of wreckage they encountered was a bent metal disc, easily twice Hazug's height in diameter. It stuck up out of the sand, scorched black by the uncontrolled entry into the planet's atmosphere and the many fires that had sprung up near it after impact though they had now all burned themselves out. Hazug stopped the truck to take a look at the disc to see if it was what he was looking for.

"Just a patch, ya can see all da rivet 'oles round da edges. We need a bigger bit," he said as he drove onwards through the scattered wreckage.

"It looked pretty big to me," Sophie said before Hazug interrupted her.

"Dat's a big bit," he said as he brought the truck to a complete halt before an enormous piece of the destroyed spaceship and disembarked.

Sophie gasped at the size of the wreckage in front of her. She had seen the Gargants under construction back home that towered over the buildings of the city, but this was more massive than those would ever be. The visible length of the wreckage was over half a mile, and there was a trench at one end that marked out the path it had taken when it crashed. An unknown length at the other end had been buried in the impact, creating a hill of sand that in places had been turned to glass by the heat of the wreckage it covered.

Looking down the length of the trench as far as she could see, Sophie saw that this was the source of much of the fire, damaged components had broken off during the crash and continued to burn as they were left behind by the bulk of the wreckage as it continued to plough through the sand. The smell was almost overpowering to her also, regardless of who built them spacecraft were filled with volatile materials and in addition the bodies of the crew had been quite combustible, adding the odour of burnt flesh to the acrid smell of burnt and melted plastics and metal.

"What could do this?" Sophie called out as she gazed around.

"Dare's loads of stuff dat can," Hazug said, "but most of 'em take time to do it, dis wos done in one go. Now I need to find where da ship wos hit," and he set of to search through the vast field of wreckage, Ratish scampering after him.

"Aren't you going too?" Sophie asked Drazzok.

"Nah, I don't know nothing about spaceships or blowin' stuff up," he said as he found a piece of the wreckage that had cooled down enough for him to be able to sit on it, "now get us a snack."

Wandering through the wreckage, Hazug search for anything that looked like it had been struck directly by the attack. He found it on the largest piece of wreckage, located near to what had once been the outer hull surrounding the engineering section. It was a circular hole with a size similar to Hazug's height punched through the hull without distorting the hull around the hole at all. He climbed up the wreckage to the hole and placed a hand into it, running his fingers over the edge. The metal was still warm to the touch but there was no sharpness to the metal edge, it was as if a circular section of the hull had simply ceased to exist in an instant. Next he looked into the hole. Beyond it he saw another hole the same size and shape in the next layer of plating, beyond that another and then more still beyond that. The path of the holes ran at an angle towards the back of the wreckage until it reached the back of the wreckage, right where the ship's engines would have been located. Satisfied that he had found what he needed to know, Hazug climbed back down where he found Ratish waiting for him.

"Did master find wot 'e wanted?"

"Yeah, I found it all right."

Ratish smiled.

"Den master is 'appy?"

"No I ain't, dis ain't good."

"Ratish 'elp?"

Hazug paused, then looking around he responded.

"Yeah, I need ya to take a look around and find anythin' dat may be useful. Bring it back to da truck when ya got it."

"Yes master," Ratish said as he ran off. When Ratish disappeared from view Hazug turned around and headed back to the truck.

"So wot 'appened to dis thing den?" Drazzok said with his mouth still full of food when he saw Hazug return.

"Some sort of zapp gun," Hazug said, sitting down next to Hazug and taking food offered by Sophie, "but bigger dan anythin' I've ever seen, and one dat doesn't melt metal next to da hole it makes. It shot right through da hull into da middle of da ship and hit da engines, den dey blew up and took da ship with 'em."

"So was it just a lucky shot?" Sophie asked.

"Nothing lucky about makin' a hole through 'alf a ship," Hazug told her, "I don't think dat da ship would 'ave survived regardless of where da zappa 'it it."

"The tau had guns that could shoot though thick armour," Sophie said, "could there be more of them on the planet?"

"I've seen wot tau shootas do, and dis wasn't one of 'em. I ain't seen anythin' like dis before."

"Ere where's dat grot of yours?" Drazzok asked, suddenly becoming aware of his absence.

"I got 'im lookin' for anythin' worth lootin'," Hazug replied, swallowing another mouthful of food, "I reckon somethin' 'ad to survive da crash and we may as well be da ones to get it."

Hearing movement, Hazug suddenly dropped what remained of his meal, drew his pistol and spun round to face the source of the noise. As she did so Drazzok also leapt to his feet while Sophie ducked behind the two orks.

"It's Ratish master," Ratish called from out of the gloom as he appeared, dragging something behind him wrapped in a somewhat singed blanket.

"Well wot've ya got den?" Hazug shouted as he put away his gun and picked up his food once more.

"Sluggas master," Ratish said, and he opened up the blanket to reveal a quantity of Ork handguns, "dare wos a bunch of 'em scattered back dare."

Hazug took one of the weapons and inspected it. The gun wasn't loaded, and it had some cosmetic damage but it appeared to have remained functional after being in the crash.

"Any bullets for 'em?" Hazug asked.

"Some master," Ratish said as he pulled a handful of bullets from his pocket. There were perhaps a dozen rounds, fewer bullets than guns recovered but this did not surprise Hazug, most of the ammunition would have gone off when exposed to the extreme temperatures they experienced during the uncontrolled entry into the atmosphere. Hazug took a clip of his own pistol ammunition and tossed it to Ratish.

"Take dis," he said, "I wants ya to fire one bullet from each slugga to make sure dey still work. Den we is restin' for da night, we've another long drive tomorrow."

"Where to master?" Ratish asked, picking up the ammunition clip.

"We is goin' to take a look at wot can do dis to a kroozer," Hazug said.

Hazug woke at sunrise, and he promptly nudged and kicked the others to wake them also. He noticed that the grime covering Ratish now had an element of soot to it from the one handgun tested that had just produced a cloud of smoke before blowing up. The other weapons he had scavenged had been loaded on the truck with the rest of their equipment.

"Let's get goin' den," Hazug said as he got into the truck, "we'll 'ead back to dat oasis to get some more water, den we can 'ead over to wotever da crew of dis ship saw."

Sophie paused at the mention of the oasis.

"What about the arrow?" she said, "Didn't you say that there could be orks near there that would attack us?"

"No problem," Hazug said as he started the truck, "dey may 'ave arrows, but we got loadsa shootas. Now get on."

They reached the oasis as the sun was high in the sky. Hazug stopped the truck short of the cluster of rocks where the source of water was located and got into the back of the vehicle. He located the crate that contained the items he had purchased from mek Batrug before coming on this journey and opened it.

"We'll take dis stuff with us just in case," he said as he pulled out the custom rifle and loaded it. Next he took out the crude single shot pistol and gave it to Ratish whose face lit up as he took the weapon and a bag of ammunition for it. Then Hazug held out the human built automatic pistol towards Sophie.

"Ere you are," he told her, "I managed to get 'old of one of dese things for ya."

Nervously Sophie took the weapon and loaded it.

"D'ya want to borrow my slugga?" Hazug asked Drazzok.

"Well if da grot and da git is getting' guns I ain't goin' without," he said and Hazug handed the weirdboy his pistol.

"Right," said Hazug, cradling his rifle in his arms, "nobody shoots until I say so, got dat?"

The others nodded and murmured that they understood. Holding his rifle at the ready, Hazug sprinted towards the oasis followed by the rest of the group.

They reached the edge of the water without seeing any signs of anyone else nearby. Ratish and Sophie put their guns aside and began to fill the empty water bags and flasks they had carried with them. Hazug maintained a watch, looking down the length of his gun as he panned around checking for any indication that they were not alone.

"I don't know wot ya is worried about," Drazzok said as he wandered around the edge of eh oasis, "dare ain't no one 'ere."

The weirdboy stopped suddenly and everyone else looked at him as his staff hit the ground with a distinct 'clump' rather than the muffled sound of it striking sand.

"Get back," Hazug told him, pointing his gun at the ground where Drazzok stood.

As Drazzok moved backwards and Hazug advanced a trapdoor was flung open and an Ork leapt out of hole hidden beneath where Drazzok had been. There was a rush of movement as more orks burst from carefully concealed locations all around them.

The revealed orks formed a rough circle around the group who all raised their weapons and waited for Hazug to give the order to fire.

"Wot is we waitin' for?" Drazzok asked as he looked at the band of wild boys who were now pointing bows and arrows at them, "Let's let 'em 'ave it quick."

"Wait," Hazug said as he studied their opponents. Most of the wildboys were small by Ork standards, though all were still much larger than either Ratish or Sophie; they had probably hatched from their pods less than a year ago. Some of them were larger however, and they clearly dominated this warband. Hazug noticed the clothing of the orks was coloured to blend in with the desert, and all of them had waited in specially prepared hiding places before they had all emerged at once.

"Dey is like me," Hazug said, "Dey is Blood Axes."



"Lower ya guns," Hazug told the rest of the group as he slung his rifle over his shoulder, "and make sure dat staff of yours is drainin' ya power right Drazzok."

"Wot ya goin' to do?" Drazzok asked as he tucked Hazug's pistol into his belt and drove his staff deep into the sand at his feet.

Hazug didn't answer the weirdboy; instead he just stared at the orks surrounding them. There were about twenty in all, most armed with bows that creaked as their strings were pulled tight and all carried some sort of crude blade just as their more advanced brethren would. Hazug picked the largest of the orks facing them, an individual who was still much smaller than he was, and strode up to him. The Ork raised his bow higher, keeping the weapon aimed at Hazug's chest. As Hazug drew near the Ork stepped backwards, but not in time to prevent Hazug reaching out and with a single swipe he knocked the bow out of the Ork's grip, sending the loaded arrow shooting harmlessly away.

The Ork reached for his blade but again Hazug was too quick for him, and with a powerful blow the Ork was knocked further backwards and fell clutching at his nose as it bled profusely.

"Who's next?" Hazug bellowed as he span around, shifting his gaze from one Ork to another. All of the orks were now concentrating him, either aiming their bows or brandishing their blades towards him.

Another of the larger orks, this one armed with just a blade, raised his weapon in the air and charged at Hazug with a roar. Hazug side stepped the charge and grabbed the Ork as he passed. He lifted up his assailant up off the ground and flipped him over. Then when the Ork landed on the ground Hazug delivered a swift kick to his stomach that left him gasping for breath and unable to stand.

"Come on den," Hazug yelled, picking up the fallen Ork's blade and looking around once more, "Come and 'ave a go if ya think ya 'ard enough."

The other orks remained still, but kept their weapons trained on Hazug, who selected the next largest of the surrounding orks and walked towards him.

"Who's ya boss den?" he shouted as he neared the Ork, "Come on, tell us who ya boss is," and he waved the blade he picked up.

The Ork looked down at the two larger orks that Hazug had incapacitated with very little effort before he spoke.

"You is," he said, and slowly the entire group of orks lowered their weapons, most of them nodding in agreement.

Hazug turned back towards his friends.

"I learned dat," he said, "dealin' with humans. I think it's called negotiatin'."

"What happened?" Sophie said, staring in wonder at the orks who were now waiting on Hazug to tell them what to do next.

"Da biggest wos da boss of dis mob," Drazzok told her, "and Hazug just showed dat 'e wos bigger and better now 'e's dare boss."

"Yeah stupid," Ratish added, "ain't ya figured out 'ow things work yet?"

"I'm not stupid," Sophie protested, "I've just never seen this happen before."

"Ya is stupid," Ratish began before Drazzok interrupted him.

"Shut it da pair of ya. As far as I is concerned ya is both stupid."

At this point Hazug came back over to them, followed by his new subordinates. The orks gathered in close around Hazug and the others, all eager to prove themselves useful to their new leader. A few also moved closer to Sophie, some leaned in closer to her and sniffed her while others prodded her gently.

"What are they doing?" she asked as she dodged away from those reaching out to her.

"Dey ain't seen gits before," Drazzok told her, "dey is tryin' to figure out wot it is dat you for."

"I 'opes dey eat ya," hissed Ratish.

"Dey 'ave a camp near 'ere," Hazug said, "so we'll go with 'em and stay dare until da mornin'."

"I though ya wanted to get to where wotever shot down da kroozer wos," Drazzok said.

"I do," Hazug replied, "but we is takin' dis lot with us too, and I want to teach 'em some stuff before we go dare. Now let's get dem flasks filled."

The orks that now followed Hazug found the group's truck very interesting. They instinctively understood what it did, and knew that they too should have vehicles such as this, but their warband lacked the specialist Ork caste necessary to create such vehicles for them. Instead they relied on an alternative form of transport.

The two squiggoths were each slightly larger than the truck, and both of the creatures carried a howdah mounted on its back in which they could carry passengers. One of these was fitted with a large crossbow like weapon that could fire a bolt the width of Hazug's arm. Drazzok was disappointed when Hazug told him that he still had to ride in the truck because they did not have a length of chain long enough to reach from a

howdah to the ground and drain away his excess power. Given the space used up by their supplies there was enough room in the truck for five more orks from the warband and the largest five were eager to claim these places, including the two who Hazug had beaten to gain leadership. Sophie was worried about this, but neither of the defeated orks regarded their loss as anything other than a formality in the transfer of power to a better candidate.

"Bigger and stronger is better and I is bigger and stronger," explained Hazug when she queried this with him.

Hazug poured the contents of a spare fuel can into the truck's tank before he clambering into the driver's seat next to the Ork who had taken Drazzok's place in the front passenger seat while the weirdboy now sat in the back, where he helped himself to some of the stored food.

"Just keepin' me strength up," he commented as he devoured a smoked squig.

"Right den," Hazug said as the truck's engine spluttered into life, "point da way lad."

The Ork sat next to Hazug did exactly as Hazug had said and pointed in the direction that led to the Blood Axe camp.

"It's over dare boss," the Ork said.

Hazug accelerated, easily moving ahead of the squiggoths that carried the majority of the warband.

When Hazug parked the truck at the camp he took a moment to study the surroundings. The camp itself was a collection of crudely built huts and tents in the shelter of a large rocky outcrop. The smell in the air told him that there was a pool of water nearby, probably in a cave somewhere within the rocks. Such a place would be a likely spot for the fungal growths that produced the various Ork species. Given enough time the various specialised castes of orks would appear and this camp could develop into a full-fledged greenskin city.

A few orks had remained in the camp and the noise of the truck's approach brought them running to investigate. When they saw one of their own sat in the front of the vehicle one called out to him.

"Ere Gobnok, wot's goin' on?"

"E smacked Feggitt and Ghukil," Gobnok replied with a large grin on his face that suggested that he had not been an eager follower of the warband's previous leader.

There was some amusement from these orks at the idea of their leaders having been displaced, especially when they saw the damage inflicted to their faces when they also disembarked from the back of the truck and when they heard just how easily Hazug had defeated them.

As Hazug himself got out of the truck he found Sophie standing next to him.

"Wot d'ya want?" he asked her.

"They won't really eat me will they? Ratish said they might."

"If dey is thinkin' of eatin' ya den dey is likely also thinkin' of eatin' Ratish too, and I ain't letting 'em eat either of ya. Ya is too useful, so ya can relax and stop 'oldin' dat shoota so tight."

Sophie looked down; realising that she was still holding the weapon Hazug had given her tightly. She let go of the gun and let it hang on its sling, now longer worried that she would have to keep an eye out for any hungry orks.

"Right," Hazug said, "now ya don't look like ya is about to start shootin' lets go and see wot dis place is like." The camp was strewn with litter, broken and discarded possessions plus scraps of waste food could be seen everywhere.

"Why ain't grots cleaned dis up?" Hazug asked, waving his hand at the rubbish.

"Wot grots?" one of the wild Blood Axes asked.

"Well dare should be grots around who'll clean all dis up."

"When grots come out of da caves dey just try and steal stuff so we chase 'em off," Gobnok said.

"Well of dey'll try and steal stuff if ya don't give 'em anythin' to do," Hazug said, "if ya keep 'em busy dey ain't got time to go thievin'."

The Blood Axes looked at one another and considered this for a while.

"So, 'ow do we get 'em to do wot we want 'em to?" one of them asked.

"Ask 'em," Hazug said, irritated that being the new leader of this warband meant that he also had to try and civilise them, "but dey won't do wot ya say so ya will 'ave to give one of 'em a good kickin' until 'e does.

Make sure da other grot see ya doin' it too. Dat way ya won't 'ave to kick da others as 'ard to get 'em workin' for ya. Now go find us some grots, I got stuff I need to teach ya all and I ain't doin' it in this squig pit," and he kicked a half eaten squig across the camp.

When the two squiggoths arrived only Hazug Drazzok, Ratish and Sophie were in the camp, the other orks had gone off to track down wherever the Gretchin in the vicinity were living. Hazug explained to the newly arrived orks about how Gretchin were supposed to clean up after them just as he had with the others, and while this was at first a difficult concept for them to grasp the orks did notice the improvement that had been made with just Ratish picking up the rubbish and dumping it all at one end of the camp.

The other orks returned as the sun was setting, bringing with them over a dozen Gretchin. Hazug noticed that one appeared severely bruised, while two others also appeared to have been slightly injured.

"Dat's it lads," Hazug shouted, "Now get 'em working while I teach ya somethin' important."

With a handful of shouts and slaps the Gretchin were set to work. Ratish enjoyed this, since he knew more than these other Gretchin about what was expected he became their de-facto leader and was able to avoid the worst of the cleaning up himself. Though both Hazug and Drazzok noticed that Sophie appeared less than happy at Ratish's new influence.

Meanwhile, the orks all gathered around Hazug who had at his feet a crate that he had taken from the truck.

"I is about to teach ya one of da most important things ya will ever 'ave to know," he said seriously and took one of the handguns Ratish had found at the crash site and handed to the nearest of the orks, "dis is a slugga, it's a weapon and ya is goin' to learn 'ow to use one," he proceeded to take more of the guns from the crate, "pass 'em around, though dare ain't enough for one each."

Naturally it was the larger orks who each got a pistol, while the others just looked on enviously.

"So wot do we do?" Feggit asked as he stared at the empty weapon he was holding.

Hazug drew his own pistol and removed the magazine as he did so.

"Ya do dis," he said and he slammed the magazine back into the gun and chambered a round, "now its ready for firin'. Ya aim it like a bow, like dis," and he aimed the gun away from the cluster of orks around him, "and ya pull da trigger."

The single shot rang out, startling both orks and Gretchin who had never heard gunfire before. The orks quickly regained their composure however, instinctively knowing that this was something that they were born for. Those with guns now moved closer to those who had them, trying to get a better look and prompting the armed orks to shove several of them back.

Next Hazug picked up a box that contained all of his pistol magazines.

"Pass dis around," he said, giving the box to the nearest Ork, "I wants each of ya to take one magazine from da box and put it in ya gun like I showed ya. If ya ain't got a gun just take a mag and pass on da box."

The orks scabbled for the box as it was passed around, and Hazug was satisfied to see all of the orks with guns were repeating his loading demonstration without fault. He stood up and spoke again.

"Now everyone in two lines over 'ere lookin' out to dem rocks over dare. Dem with guns in front, dem without behind."

This took a bit longer as the orks sorted themselves out into the line formation requested, an unnaturally regular formation for most orks.

"Now cock da guns and point 'em at da rock," Hazug said from behind the orks, and there was the sound of bullets being chambered into the guns. When Hazug saw that the front row of orks was now all pointing their guns towards the rock they were facing Hazug shouted a single word.

"Fire!"

Almost simultaneously the orks each fired a single shot at the rock, and Hazug noticed that at least some of them had hit the target.

"Again!" Hazug shouted and there was a second volley of gunfire followed by some puffs of dust that suggested again some of them had hit the target.

Two of the orks decided to try a third shot without being told to, but their guns produced nothing but a 'click' as the firing pins struck only empty chambers.

"I only gave ya two bullets each," Hazug said, "now take out da empty mags and give da guns to dem without so dey can 'ave a go."

As the orks were passing the guns between themselves there came a shout from the other side of the camp.

"Keep da bleedin' noise down!" Drazzok yelled, "I is tryin' to get some sleep over 'ere."

"Carry on lads," Hazug told the orks, "I wants each of ya to 'ave a go shootin' at da rock, and while ya is doin' it I'll be shutin' up a whingin' weirdo."



Hazug wanted to get to the source of the mysterious energy blast as soon as he could, and was relieved that when he woke the next morning Ratish had seen to it that the Gretchin had already loaded up the squiggoths ready for departure.

"All done master, Ratish tell others proper way to do stuff," Ratish said while Hazug inspected the work, seeing that the Gretchin had indeed packed everything in a satisfactory manner.

"Where is we goin' boss?" Gobnok asked, the Blood Axes had been somewhat surprised to discover most of their belongings packed when they awoke.

"Somethin' made one our spaceships blow up and killed all da lads on it," Hazug explained, "and da weirdoes reckon dat its somethin' dat we ought to do somethin' about, so we is goin' to where it is."

"So we is goin' to fight somethin'?" another of the orks asked with a smile on his face.

"I reckon so," Hazug replied, "I don't think dat wotever we is lookin' for is just goin' to give up and leave."

"We is goin' to fight!" Gobnok yelled, waving his axe in the air, "Yeah!"

"No!" Hazug shouted, giving Gobnok a slap, "Ya don't do it like dat. When ya is goin' to fight ya do it like dis," and Hazug raised his own blade into the air, drew in a deep breath and let out a mighty roar of "Waaagh!"

As Hazug yelled Gobnok also raised his axe again and joined in.

"Waaagh!"

As Hazug and Gobnok shouted together something came over the other Blood Axes, a primal instinct telling them that this was why they existed, to do battle until death and to spread their warring nature across the entire galaxy. Now they too lifted weapons above their heads and cried out in one voice, "Waaagh!"

"Not bad," Drazzok said from behind Hazug as he made sure his staff was planted firmly in the ground while the orks were excited, "I expects dey'll all be sneakin' about just like you do in a couple of days. Dem dat don't wind up dead anyway."

When the orks finally finished their war cry all that remained was to decide which of the Blood Axes would get guns. Including Hazug's, there were enough pistols for just under half of them, plus the machine gun and Hazug's new rifle. Hazug had no intention of giving up his rifle, so just handed out the other weapons to the largest of the Blood Axes starting with the machine gun, or big shoota as orks called it, being given to Feggit who as the largest of them Hazug supposed would best handle the weight of the automatic weapon. Hazug had brought his entire stockpile of ammunition for his pistol, but with so many guns to be supplied there were only enough bullets for two full magazines per pistol plus a handful of spare rounds, which he gave to Ratish for his crude gun.

"Keep 'em safe, just in case," Hazug told the Gretchin.

Ratish grinned and turned to Sophie.

"Master gives Ratish bullets," he boasted, "not git."

Sophie responded by tapping her own gun.

"He's already given me more than you stupid," she said, and Ratish's face fell as he realised that she in fact had more ammunition than anyone else.

Drazzok reclaimed his place in the front of the truck for the journey so that he could direct Hazug towards their destination. Hazug kept the speed of the truck down so that the orks on the squiggoths could keep up with him, and whenever he caught sight of anything that appeared to be vegetation or an oasis in the desert he would steer towards it so that they could take a break. Aside from these slight detours Hazug continued to drive in a roughly straight line as directed by Drazzok. As nightfall approached Hazug believed that they were getting close to their destination and he stopped and gathered the orks together so that he could give them orders.

"Make sure dat dare's someone up top watchin' out," he said, "it'll be dark soon and I don't want anyone sneakin' up on us. We is Blood Axes, so if dare's sneakin' to be done its us wot'll do it, alright?"

The orks signalled their compliance, but Feggit had a question.

"Wot 'appens if we do see somethin' boss?" he asked.

"Give out a yell and point at it den we'll 'ave to charge straight at wotever it is, dem squiggoths ain't fast enough for us to outrun any trouble."

Again the orks indicated their agreement, almost eager for there to be something for them to fight ahead.

"We ain't stoppin' for da night den?" Drazzok asked when Hazug returned to the truck.

"Nah, we is almost dare, and I ain't stoppin' out in da open anyhow."

Setting off once more, Hazug became increasingly aware that the growing darkness was making it harder to keep track of exactly where the two squiggoths were. Normally Ork convoys would light burning torches to mark their positions, but Hazug was reluctant to take any action that would give away their position. He

knew that at least the noise of his truck's engine would keep the squiggoth riders aware of his position, so he just had to concentrate on keeping his speed low enough to keep them within earshot.

Hazug was soon forced to halt once more when they reached a cliff. He looked to either side, but in both directions the sheer face of the cliff extended into the darkness.

"Okay den Drazzok, which way now?"

"Its straight on," the weirdboy replied.

"Well if wos in somethin' dat could fly maybe we could go straight on, but we ain't. Do we go left or right?"

Drazzok peered along the cliff himself, also seeing nothing but darkness ahead. As Hazug grew impatient waiting for Drazzok to direct him, he instead turned to Feggit sat in the back of the truck.

"'Ere Feggit lad," Hazug said, "'ave ya ever been out 'ere before?"

"Nah boss," Feggit replied, "we reckoned we 'ad everythin' we needed where we wos so we stayed put."

"We is goin' right," Hazug announced, and he turned the steering wheel hard.

"'Ow do ya know dis is da way?" Drazzok shouted.

"I don't but its quicker dan waitin' for you to figure it out."

As Hazug continued to drive along the top of the cliff he kept watch for a way down, and he did not notice anything out of the ordinary until Sophie called out to him.

"Look!" she yelled, pointing out over the cliff. Hazug glanced over the cliff and braked sharply when he saw what Sophie had seen. There in the distance was a light. It was white and steady; unlike any that Hazug had seen produced either by natural means or Ork technology. Hazug got out the truck, followed its other occupants, and walked to the cliff edge to look at the light.

"What is it?" Sophie asked from beside him.

Rather than reply, Hazug went back to the truck before returning with an object that was not of Orkish construction. The object was made by the tau and was designed to record images for future use. Mek Batrug had explained to Hazug how to operate the device properly, though it was designed for use by aliens with hands much smaller than Hazug's. Lifting the device up to his eyes, Hazug activated it. Through it he saw the landscape ahead as though it were in daylight, according to Mek Batrug some part of the device amplified light to allow vision in near total darkness. Hazug pointed the device in the direction of the light which stood out as a bright blur against the background, then he turned a dial on the side of the device, taking care not to disturb any of the other controls near it. As the dial turned the picture changed, zooming in on the light and revealing a small cluster of structures in the desert, the structures were laid out in a regular pattern, with a mixture of smooth lines and straight lines in their design. No Ork constructed buildings in this way, in fact Hazug knew of only one species that did.

"Well wot is den?" Drazzok asked.

"Humans," Hazug said as he lowered the device.

"Humans?" Sophie repeated, "Did they shoot down the cruiser?"

"Dey built da buildings down dare, but I didn't see anythin' dat could shoot down anythin', let alone a kroozer. But we better take a look anyway."

They found a trail running down the cliff just after dawn. At the bottom of the trail Hazug used the tau device once more to observe the human built structures in the daylight. The angle of his view was not as good from here, but he could still make out the distinctive shapes of the individual buildings clearly.

"I still don't see anyone movin' about," he said, "but I reckon dare must be someone dare to 'ave turned dat light on last night."

"So are we going there now?" Sophie asked.

"I am, but you ain't."

"Yeah git, ya is stayin' 'ere," Ratish said.

"Ya is stayin' 'ere too," Hazug said.

"But master..."

"But nothin', I is only taking a couple of lads so we can sneak up on whoever's dare."

The two orks that Hazug selected to go with him, Roggot and Nizz were two Blood Axes that had not been given guns. Hazug regarded searching the structures as a stealthy reconnaissance mission rather than an attack and he did not ammunition wasted by novice troops, he would have his rifle and some grenades in any case so they would not be entirely without modern weaponry.

"Stay low, and stay behind me," Hazug told the two orks, "Dem buildings is quite away from 'ere, but we is goin' to run dare so whoever's dare won't 'ere us comin'."

"Wot about da rest of us den?" Drazzok asked.

"Stay 'ere. If we ain't back by night den ya will 'ave to go on without us, Feggit can lead da other lads but I'll remind 'im dat you is in charge. If he gets out of line just 'it 'im with ya staff until 'e sees sense. Right?"

"Right," Drazzok said, tapping his staff, "I'll keep 'im in 'is place."

Hazug and the other two orks set off on foot soon after, with Hazug leading. He was impressed at the ability of the younger Blood Axes to move stealthily. This behaviour was instinctive to most of his clan, but there were exceptions. For most of the morning they moved towards the human structures without any indication that they were being observed at all. Then, as the sun was almost overhead in the sky the structures lay immediately ahead of them Hazug took cover behind a rock and the other two orks joined him.

"Wot now boss?" Roggot whispered as Hazug studied the structures. From this distance the building appeared somewhat dishevelled, exposed metal was rusting and there were signs of damage such as broken windows and missing doors. This was all minor however, more indicative of neglect than damage from combat. Hazug thought for a moment and then spoke.

"I wants ya to split up. One take cover there and da other over there," he said indicating what looked like two piles of broken down machinery that would give anyone behind them a clear view of the central building, the largest in the cluster, "I is goin' straight in. Ya is to stay put until I calls ya."

"Right boss," Roggot said and he sprinted towards one of the piles of machinery. Nizz followed suit and dashed for the other pile while Hazug readied his rifle and watched out for trouble. Both of the young orks reached their destination, and when he saw that they were safe Hazug made a run for the building.

There was a door on the near wall and Hazug headed straight for it, keeping his rifle ready.

He paused at the doorway and looked around again. He could see Roggot and Nizz peering around their respective hiding places, but aside from that there were no signs of life. Hazug tried the door; it was unlocked and he opened it slowly before peering inside.

The interior of the building was in a similar state of disrepair to the outside and Hazug was about to write it off as abandoned when he caught sight of footprints in the dust on the floor. Hazug had seen tracks like this before, Sophie left tracks the same except for their size. There was at least one human here, and whoever it was they were larger than Sophie.

Hazug waved to Roggot and Nizz and the two orks ran over to him.

"I think dare's someone in 'ere," he told them and showed them the footprints, "dose are human footprints. We're goin' to 'ave to search da entire place for whoever left 'em. Watch out, humans break easy but dey is cunnin' fighters and dey'll surprise ya if ya ain't careful. Now follow me and keep quiet."

Hazug did not consider his rifle suitable for use in such a confined space as the inside of the building so he slung it over his shoulder and drew his blade before making his way slowly inside. The floor creaked as Hazug put his weight on it, and in response he slowed his movement to try and lessen the noise, behind him Roggot and Nizz duplicated the way Hazug was moving and peering into places that looked like they could be used to hide in.

There was only one other exit from the room and it lacked a door, so as Hazug crept up to the doorway he moved to one side and pressed himself up against the wall beside it, beckoning for the other orks to keep behind him and away from the door. Hazug leant through the doorway and quickly looked into the hallway beyond. Like the first room the hallway was in a state of disrepair, but showed signs of having someone moving through it recently.

"Its clear," Hazug whispered and he moved into the hallway ahead of Roggot and Nizz. The hallway offered a choice of direction for the orks.

"Shall we split up?" Nizz asked in a low voice.

"Nah lad," whispered Hazug, "I don't want ya goin' off on ya own just yet, I know wot I'm doin' 'ere so stay with me and lets follow dese tracks."

"Right boss," the other two orks replied.

As Hazug lead the way down the hall there was a noise from elsewhere in the building, a crash followed by what sounded like cursing. The orks stopped dead in their tracks.

"Wot's dat boss?" said Roggot.

"Sounded like human speech, but its 'ard to tell from dis distance. Let's keep goin', I think it came from dis way."

Hazug continued to lead the other orks through the building, following what appeared to be the most recent set of tracks in the dust on the floor. As they approached a doorway leading to a room that looked to be full of shelves Hazug spotted something move. He signalled for the others to stop.

"Oof, careful," said Roggot as Nizz bumped into him when he stopped suddenly. Hazug glared at him for making too much noise.

"Hello?" came a voice from the room ahead, a voice that called out in Gothic, the language of humans,

"Hello, is someone there?"

Hazug sheaved his blade and un-slung his rifle.

"Wait 'ere lads," he whispered before moving slowly into the room, his rifle raised ahead of him, "Get ya 'ands up!" he shouted out in Gothic.

Before him Hazug saw an elderly human male dressed in ragged clothing, who supported himself with a wooden staff.

"Don't shoot!" the man shouted, raising one of hands into the air while the other retained a grip on his staff. "Who are ya?" Hazug demanded as he advanced on the human, "And are dare any more of ya around 'ere?"

Clearly terrified at the sight of Hazug, who towered over him, and also the other two orks now entering the room the man took some time to reply.

"You s-s-speak? B-b-but you're an alien," he stammered.

"I know ya language, now answer me."

"My name is Castus, and there is no one else here. You're an Ork aren't you? Are you going to kill me?"

"Not if ya behave ya self. Now wot is ya doin' 'ere anyway?"

"May I sit down?"

"Huh? Yeah okay, sit down."

"Thank you," Castus said as he pulled a chair towards himself and sat down, "I am the only survivor," he began to explain, "many years ago my masters found something here beneath the sands and built this place so that they could recover it."

"So dare's somethin' hidden right 'ere den?"

"No, there's a well here that still supplies me with water, it's the closest one to the dig site and my masters wanted to make use of it."

Glancing over his shoulder Hazug spoke to Roggot and Nizz.

"Check out da rest of dese buildings," he said, "den come back 'ere and let me know wot ya find," and the orks nodded and left the room.

Hazug lowered his rifle and began to look around the room. Its shelves were filled with various pieces of human machinery that Hazug did not understand.

"So wot 'appened to these others den?" he asked.

"Whatever they found was protected, its guardians emerged from the sands and killed everyone who stood in their way. At first my masters saw these guardians as divine and pure, but they attacked even those who bowed down in worship to them. Some of us ran into the desert to escape, but all of our supplies were here and we decided to come back in the hope that the guardians would have gone and that we could send for help."

"Ya said dare wos no one else 'ere."

"There isn't. We radioed to the capital for help, but the aircraft that came were full of the governor's soldiers and they killed those that the guardians had not. Except for me, I ran when I saw the soldiers first open fire. I have been here alone ever since."

"Why did ya boss want ya dead den?"

"I don't know. I know that my masters did not ask his permission before they came to this world, but we didn't think that he would be that angry about our being here."

"Ow long ago wos dis den?"

"I was but a young man, newly inducted into the ways of the Omnissiah, my flesh was not yet blessed by his ways."

This meant little to Hazug; he only understood that the man had been here for a very long time, since well before the orks first arrived on the planet.

"So wot's all dis stuff den?" Hazug asked, waving at the shelves.

"My masters used this equipment to search beneath the sand," Castus told him. Then he noticed that Hazug didn't appear to have been paying attention.

"Are you alright?" he asked, but Hazug did not answer, instead he just stared at an object on one of the shelves.

The object resembled a skull, but was much narrower than an Ork's and narrower even than a human's it included what would have been a separate jaw on a real skull. Made of metal it appeared to be brand new, unlike the other objects in the room which all showed signs of ageing. The eye sockets were nothing but black pits, while the mouth was a simple shallow pit with no sign of an opening behind it. Hazug picked it up and stared into the empty eyes, concentrating. Something about this was familiar to him, he knew he had never seen anything like it before, but still he knew it. One word summed up the skull in Hazug's mind.

Evil.

An entire clan of orks had the word in their name, but this was different. The concept of evil itself had no place in Ork society where casual violence and death occurred daily, but it was as if this thing that Hazug could pick up and hold in one hand was calling out to him and telling him that it had to be fought. Orks fought for any number of reasons, to relieve boredom if nothing else, but Hazug felt that fighting to destroy things like this skull was related to the purpose of his existence.

"Wot's dis?" demanded Hazug, thrusting the skull out towards Castus.

"That lead us here, one of my masters found it in an ancient ruin. He discovered that it was communicating with something else and we followed the signal here."

There was the sound of footsteps as Roggot and Nizz returned.

"Dare's no one else 'ere boss," Roggot said.

"Run back to da others," Hazug ordered, "tell 'em we is close to wot we is lookin' for and dey should get 'ere quick."

"Right boss," the two young orks replied and they turned and ran from the building. Hazug turned back to Castus.

"Right," he said, "now ya is goin' to tell me where I can find wot ya bosses found."

It was nightfall by the time Roggot and Nizz returned with the others, unable to drive Hazug's truck the other orks had simply tied it to the back of one of the squiggoths and towed it. While they had waited for the arrival of the Blood Axes Castus had shown Hazug a series of charts that indicated the relative positions of the structures and the location of whatever his late masters had come here in search of. Hazug assumed that this was also what he was looking for. For there to be two different mysterious and deadly alien forces beneath the same patch of desert was far too unlikely for him to contemplate.

Drazzok shoved Castus out of the way when he came to look at the maps for himself. The old man said something in gothic, but the weirdboy neither cared nor understood what it was and the old man left the room.

"Ya thin dis is wot we is after den?" Drazzok asked when he saw the map.

"I'm sure of it. Da humans who were 'ere years ago 'ad dis," and Hazug held out the metal skull for Drazzok to see. The weirdboy's reaction was much the same as Hazug's had been when he first saw it, something deep inside him called out to him to destroy everything touched by this thing and its like.

"So when is we goin'?"

"Tomorrow mornin', I ain't 'ad no sleep and I want a good night's kip before I go 'untin' aliens."

Sophie appeared with two plates of food.

"I've made you some dinner," she said to the two orks.

"Wot's dis?" Drazzok said looking at the strange meal Sophie gave him. The mushrooms he recognised, but the meat was like none he'd seen before.

"It's called chicken," Sophie said, "Castus keeps lots of them and he said we could have some to eat. Try it." Hazug and Drazzok both picked up their chicken and sniffed it. Then Hazug took a bite.

"Well," asked Sophie, "how is it?"

"Tastes like squig," said Hazug.



The map left behind by the humans accurately showed the route from their structures to what Castus referred to as the dig site so he decided to take it with him as they prepared to leave the next morning. "So 'ow many gits is ya plannin' on collectin'?" Drazzok asked Hazug when he saw Castus climbing onto the back of the truck. Since Drazzok had last seen the old man, he had acquired a bag that appeared to be filled with odds and ends of electronics.

"If 'e worked with dem wot reckoned dey knew somethin' about wot we is lookin' for, den 'e may know somethin' useful."

"Or 'e could just be a waste of space dat can't even talk properly. Ya know, just like a mekboy."

"I know wot 'e says."

"But ya is a git lover with bits of paper stuck to everythin' 'e owns."

"And I is da only one who can 'elp ya."

As Drazzok muttered under his breath Hazug started the truck's engine.

"Right lads," he yelled at the top of his voice, "let's go smack some 'eads!" and from the back of the truck and the riders of the squiggoths came a shout of "Waaagh!" as the warband set off.

In the back of the truck Castus sat himself down opposite to Sophie. For some time he just watched her. He noticed that she seemed perfectly at ease around the orks, though for some reason the smaller Gretchin made her uncomfortable. What was more she appeared to accept a submissive role to the aliens.

"You willingly work for these beasts?" he said softly so that Hazug would not hear him. He knew that the Ork nob spoke gothic, but none of the other greenskins had shown any ability to understand the language.

"You're here with us too," she replied.

"That may be true, but I have no intention of remaining a slave once this is over. I will help the orks to destroy whatever lies beneath the sands of this desert but I will not serve them any longer than that."

"I'm not a slave," Sophie protested, "Hazug pays me for my service and he treats me better than many orks would. Better than the old government treated the people of this planet."

"What do you know of the Imperial government? You are too young to remember it."

"My parents told me all about it. The governor took whatever he wanted from the people here, and used his enforcers and soldiers to kill anyone who wouldn't give in to his demands. The orks don't care about what we do just so long as we don't get in their way."

"So your parents work for the orks too?"

"They're dead," said Sophie solemnly, "my father was murdered by humans who wanted to bring back the old ways because he wouldn't let them hide on his farm. My mother got sick and died soon after. I'm only here because the Death Skulls clan took me in as a servant. When they were killed Hazug saved me and gave me a home."

Castus remained silent for a while.

"This explains much," he said eventually, "I have wondered for many years why the governor's troops killed all the others of us who survived. If your governor had been acting beyond his official powers then he could have faced investigation by the Administration to find out why he had to run his world in this manner. Had any of us returned to the Adeptus Mechanicus then word of his brutality would have spread. We weren't an official expedition so he could wipe us out without worrying about the Mechanicus coming looking for us."

"Then the Imperium isn't all like that?"

Castus took his time in answering again.

"The galaxy is a dangerous place, and for humanity to survive there have to be some sacrifices, but the Imperium exists to defend us not subjugate us. Governors who behave in the way you have described are removed from power. One way or another."

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted.

"Oi Castus!" Hazug yelled, "Do ya know wot dat is den?" and he pointed to a smooth sided rock pillar that was sticking up from the sands. Castus stared at the pillar as Hazug drove towards it. Plain black in colour, it had four equal sides that tapered slightly towards the top before there was a sudden change in the angle of the slope forming a point at the summit many metres above the ground. Despite being in the middle of the desert, the surface was in pristine condition without any signs of wear.

"Remarkable," Castus said in amazement, "and no, I've never seen anything like it before."

"Well it ain't the only either," Hazug said as he passed the object. Looking forwards Castus saw that there were many more of the pillars arranged in a straight line.

"How many are there?" he said out loud.

"Ya can count em if ya want," Hazug replied, "dey seem to be goin' da same way we is."

Assuming the speed of the truck to be constant, Castus counted not only the number of pillars that they passed, but also the time lapse between passing them by. He determined that the pillars were evenly spaced, and when his count reach seven Sophie gave out a shout.

"Look, there's more of them over there, and there too," she shouted in gothic.

Breaking off his count Castus saw that there were indeed two more rows of the pillars in the distance, one each approaching from left and right. Then Hazug added something in his own language.

"I think we is dare," he said as the truck approached where the intersection of the rows of pillars. Where they met was a gaping hole in the desert sands.

The entire party dismounted a short distance from the hole, and while the orks prepared to move closer Hazug had the Gretchin see to feeding the squiggoths. There was a crunching sounding as one of the Gretchin did not move away from a pile of feed quickly enough and was consumed by one of the creatures. "It's alright master, Ratish is fine," Ratish called out, even though Hazug hadn't so much as looked around to see which Gretchin had just been consumed. He did however notice that Castus was walking towards the hole ahead of them.

"Wotcha doin'?" Hazug called out to the old man.

"I need to know what is down there," Castus shouted back.

"It could be dangerous," Hazug told him, "We'll let a grot take a look first."

The ancient mind stirred once more. For millions of years it had slumbered, and now three times within less than a century it was disturbed. Once again it studied those who disturbed it. This group was small but close, much like the group that disturbed the mind several decades previously. But there was something more dangerous about this group; they had something with them that bore the marks of the mind's ancient enemy, one of the abominations that had almost brought victory to the enemy before instead helping to accelerate their downfall. Regardless of the presence of this abomination, a pattern was forming that suggested to the mind that it was time to act in a more decisive manner, and it began to wake its brethren en masse. While the mind waited for the necessary actions to be carried out it took the time to study the intruders once more.

"Ere Drazzok is ya alright?" Hazug asked the weirdboy, who did not appear to be well.

"I is fine," Drazzok replied, "I just got the feelin' dat dare is somethin' lookin' at us."

The Gretchin was called Fobbit, and he got the assignment of having to look into the hole simply by being the first one to be pushed forwards by the other Gretchin when Hazug asked for a volunteer. Cautiously he crept towards the hole, glancing over his shoulder he saw everyone else concealing themselves behind the truck, squiggoths, unloaded boxes and the closest of the alien pillars. As he drew closer to the hole he noticed that the feel of the desert sand changed beneath his feet.

"Dis bit's different," he called out.

"Ow come?" Hazug shouted back from behind the truck.

The Gretchin crouched down and swept aside some sand. Beneath a shallow layer of the sand was a smooth stone surface with a similar appearance to the material of the pillars.

"Dare's more stone 'ere," he shouted, "Shall I come back now?"

"No!" yelled Hazug.

"But it don't feel right," Fobbit protested before he saw Hazug raise himself up and aim his rifle.

A single shot rang out and Fobbit leapt backwards towards the hole as the bullet ricocheted off the stone at his feet. Hazug fired again and once more Fobbit jumped backwards.

"Alright, I'm goin'," Fobbit shouted, and the Gretchin began to creep towards the edge of the hole once more.

The hole was massive, easily large enough for the largest types of squiggoth to be thrown into whole. The edge was a neat circle, and Fobbit could see that the stone material ran around the entire edge.

"I'm 'ere," Fobbit called out, "wot do I do now?"

"Look in da 'ole," Drazzok shouted.

Fobbit bent over slightly and took a brief glimpse into the hole, just long enough to see that the stone also lined the inside of the hole and that it went down beyond where it became too dark to see.

"Dare's nothin' 'ere," Fobbit shouted, "just a big 'ole."

Hazug stood up.

"Right lads," he said to the orks around him, "let's go," and he walked confidently towards the hole, followed immediately by Ratish and Sophie and by the others a moment after that.

Standing at the edge of the hole, the warband spread out around its edge and looked into the hole. All they could see was the featureless stone lined walls descending into the pitch darkness below. Hazug produced

the tau viewing device and attempted to use its night vision function, but it failed to provide any more details about what was further down in the hole.

"Somebody's got to go down dare," he said as he put the viewer away, "someone get dat grot a torch and some rope."

A length of rope was tied around the waist of the struggling Fobbit, and a lit torch was thrust into his hand. "Keep 'old of dis," Gobnok said as he gave the torch to the Gretchin and Feggit and Ghukil lifted him over the side of the hole.

The rope creaked as Fobbit was lowered into the hole, juddering as Feggit and Ghukil let out more rope at an irregular rate. From out side the hole the others looked in as the Gretchin went deeper into the darkness. Occasionally the Gretchin cried out as he bounced off the side of the hole as he was lowered even deeper. Before long Fobbit disappeared from view entirely, and only the light of the burning torch gave any indication that he was there. Suddenly Fobbit gave out a shout.

"It's different 'ere," he yelled, "and I think I can see da floor."

"Wot does it look like?" Hazug yelled into the hole.

"Its da same stone as everythin' else. 'cept dare's somethin' green in da middle of da floor."

"Keep lowerin' 'im lads," Hazug said to Feggit and Ghukil before shouting into the hole once more, "Oi Fobbit, give out a yell when ya hit da floor."

"Okay, now."

Feggit nodded, indicating that the rope had gone slack.

"Chuck some more torch down dare," Hazug ordered, "and get Fobbit to light 'em for us, and we'll need ladders to get everyone down dare."

Just as Fobbit had described, the hole opened out into a chamber that, by the time the orks had lowered rope ladders and descended, was partly illuminated by almost a dozen flickering torches. The surfaces of the chamber were made from the same stone that everything else had been, and the only feature that stood out was a large green crystal set into the floor. It was polished flat and its edges blended seamlessly into the floor around it.

"Spread out," Hazug said as he looked around the chamber, "check out dis entire place."

The orks picked up the torches that lay on the floor and spread out and began to search around the edge of the chamber, the parts that remained in darkness. Meanwhile Castus examined the crystal closely.

"I think it's a lens," he said, "this could focus a tremendous amount of energy."

"I ain't got a clue wot ya just said," Hazug said, "I ain't no mekboy."

"I think this could be part of the weapon that destroyed your spaceship," Castus explained, "though I don't have any idea of how it actually works or where the energy is supplied from."

"'Ere boss," an orks shouted from across the chamber, "dare's somethin' over 'ere."

"Come on lad," Hazug told Castus, "I think ya ought to take a look at anythin' we find."

Hazug and Castus made their way over to where a small group of orks was peering into an alcove. There at its back was a patch in the wall that was not made of the same stone as everything else in this alien structure. Instead there was a reflective surface set into the wall. Like the green crystal at the centre of the chamber, the surface of this reflective area was perfectly aligned with the stone wall that surrounded it.

"So wot is it?" Hazug asked Castus as the human moved to examine it more closely.

"I'm not sure," Castus said, "but I think that this may be a door."

"Den where's da 'andle?" Hazug asked him.

"There isn't one, this door isn't solid, it's a liquid held in a force field. Some sort of signal probably moves the liquid out of the way when someone wants to go through it."

"So 'ow do we get it to open den?"

Castus fumbled through his bag, "I've got something here that may help," he said, "I can send radio waves at the force field and measure its strength as it reacts to different frequencies."

"Ya remember wot I said about not bein' a mek?" Hazug said.

"I'm sending some signals to the door," Castus explained as he activated the device he removed from his bag, frustrated at having to dumb down everything he said for Hazug to understand it, "and the nearer I get to the correct signal the weaker the force field will get."

"Ah right den," Hazug said, still not exactly clear about anything Castus had told him. Instead he watched the human as he adjusted a dial on the device in his hand back and forth as he studied a screen above it. Then he caught sight of the effect it was having on the door. Where it had previously been perfectly flat it was now quivering like the surface of a pool that had just had a rock or a snotling hurled into it for fun.

"I think I've got it," Castus shouted.

"Over 'ere lads," Hazug called out, "Everyone get ready."

"I've got it!" Castus shouted as the reflective surface retreated back into the wall surrounding it. He just had time to look into the passageway beyond before his head was separated from his shoulders.



"Let rip!" bellowed Hazug before Castus's headless corpse had even fallen to the floor, and in almost perfect unison, the orks that possessed firearms, joined by Ratish and Sophie, opened fire on the group of skeletal metal figures with eyes that glowed menacingly from within skulls that were identical to the one that Hazug had found on the shelf at the old human outpost that were now advancing through the open doorway. Just as when he had found eh skull, Hazug could not shake the sensation that these figures were something that he was meant to fight.

The figures advanced in at a slow but steady rate, their arms hung by their sides, and large blades could be seen extending from their fingers. Only the figure at the head of the group differed, its greater size told the orks that this was the leader, and instead of blades built into its hands it carried a long staff like weapon that glowed at an end tipped in a straight blade, the same blade that had sliced through Castus's neck seemingly without any effort being needed.

Even though the orks were poor marksmen it was difficult for them to miss the figures in their close formation, but still the orks' gunfire had little effect on them. The metal of their bodies provided excellent protection and most of the bullets bounced off them harmlessly. More frustrating to Hazug was that where he saw damage inflicted, plating cracked or wires severed, the figures seemed to repair themselves rapidly. Even Feggit's heavier weapon seemed unable to harm them.

Hazug raised his rifle to his shoulder rather than continuing to fire it from the hip and reached for the secondary trigger. There was a 'whoosh' as the rocket mounted beneath the barrel was launched, and one of the figures was blown apart as the explosive projectile struck its chest. Unfortunately there was no time for Hazug to load another rocket, so instead he dropped his rifle, drew his blade and let out a mighty cry. "Waaagh!" and he charged directly for the leader of the advancing group.

The other greenskins repeated Hazug's yell and also charged their new enemy.

One of the figures tried to get in between Hazug and the largest of the enemy, and with a single swing of his blade he knocked it aside, relieved to see that the impact of his weapon severed the figure's arm and that it did not repair itself. Then he reached the leader.

Rather than attack with his blade, Hazug dived at his opponent. Though larger than the other metallic figures this one was still considerably smaller than Hazug, and his impact knocked it from its feet. Hazug tried to force his blade through the figure's armoured chest plate, but achieved nothing more than to scratch the surface as the tip of his weapon screeched across it. The figure tried to push Hazug from on top of it using its free arm, while with the other it attempted to swing its bladed staff at him. Hazug parried his opponent's weapon with his own blade, but in doing so he was forced to roll to the side and the figure began to rise to its feet once more.

There was the distinctive sound of Sophie's small automatic weapon firing, and a shower of sparks indicated that the burst struck the side of Hazug opponent's head. The distraction was just enough for Hazug to able to safely launch another attack and he brought his blade swinging down on the figure's neck, but where a living target would have most likely have been decapitated there was nothing more than another shower of sparks as his blade cut into a cluster of exposed wires. As the figure stepped back away from Hazug he saw the once again the damage inflicted was repairing itself, but he had regained the initiative and he lunged forwards again, aiming his blade for what passed for the skeletal figure's spine. Again the figure's metal construction deflected his attack, but this time in addition to sparks a jet of fluid erupted as Hazug hit a pressurised line. The figure fell, floundering and for a moment Hazug was able to take how the battle was progressing.

The greenskins vastly out numbered their enemy, and they were ganging up on individuals to strike at them from different directions. Even the Gretchin were following this pattern, and Hazug could see one of the figures covered in a swarm of the smaller creatures using small, crude knives to try and find a weak point in its armour. Unfortunately the metal from which the skeletal figures were made provided them with excellent protection, while the blades that extended from their hands were razor sharp and Hazug could see that already several orks and Gretchin lay on the floor in pools of their own blood. Not wishing to let himself get too distracted, Hazug stopped looking at what was happening around him and launched into another attack on the alien leader before it could recover from his last strike.

The main effect of the battle on the orks was to increase their level of excitement, and this meant that the gestalt psychic field grew in strength. A strength that found its way straight to Drazzok. The weirdboy's metal staff gave him away of dissipating the energy before it became harmful, but he preferred to put it to use. A ranged blast was out of the question, he was quite willing to fry a few random orks if necessary, but he wasn't confident that he would avoid hitting Hazug. So instead he lifted his staff from the floor and charged at the nearest of the alien figures with the traditional Ork war cry of "Waaagh!" Hearing Drazzok's

shout, the figure ceased fighting against the two other orks attacking it and moved directly towards the charging weirdboy. Drazzok's held his staff out in front of him, and he jabbed the end of it into a space in the figure's structure before releasing the energy stored inside him.

The figure was suddenly swamped in white lightning that cascaded across it, and as Drazzok continued to scream he saw that the figure's surface was starting to crack. Within from those cracks there came more brilliant white light. The cracks widened as the figure's metal body began to peel open until there was a sudden burst of light and an explosion as the alien was utterly consumed by Drazzok's psychic attack. The blast distracted several of the orks, who turned away from the bright light and instinctively shielded their eyes. The aliens did not react to their comrade's destruction, however, and when the orks turned away from them they struck and several more fell dead.

Hazug meanwhile was continuing to rain blows down on the alien leader, who was unable to do more than crawl backwards away from the large Ork and try to block his attacks with its staff. Most of Hazug's attacks did no damage, either parried by the retreating alien or unable to pierce its armour plating. A lucky blow hit the hand that the alien was using to keep hold of its weapon, smashing its fingers and causing it to drop its weapon. Seeing his opportunity, Hazug dropped his own blade and dived onto the prone figure. He wrapped his hands around the figure's neck; gripping it in the same way he would grip a living opponent to choke it to death. Knowing that figure did not breathe, Hazug did not attempt such a futile method of attack however, instead he used his grip to lift the alien's head off the floor and then slam it back down against the hard stone surface. The alien tried to break his grip as he repeatedly bashed its head on the floor, with each impact the alien's head jerked and the lights in its eyes flickered. The alien became limp beneath Hazug, and instead of continuing to slam its head against the floor, he instead pulled with all his might. There was a groaning, followed by a snapping sound as the alien figure's head was pulled away from its body. Hazug threw the severed away from him, and he got back to his feet.

Around him, the orks were still battling the strange skeletal aliens and Hazug looked for his weapon. However, rather than the blade he had cast aside, Hazug caught sight of the bladed staff that his opponent had dropped and remembering how it had killed Castus so easily, he picked it up.

"Hazug! Look out!"

Sophie's warning came just in time, as an alien who had just finished off the trio of orks who had tried to kill it swung a bladed arm at him. He sidestepped the attack and, rather than slicing open his chest, the alien just caught his arm. Ignoring the pain, Hazug swung his new weapon. He felt no resistance in the swing and assumed that he had failed to hit his attacker, but as he got ready to attack for a second time he saw that the alien had been sliced in two at the waist. Its legs staggered backwards under the influence of whatever signals had been sent before they were quite literally cut off while the body floundered on the floor before it stopped moving all together. Then, as Hazug watched, a pale green light enveloped both halves of the fallen alien and they faded away. He turned to look at where he had killed the alien leader, and he saw that it too had vanished.

Gripping his new weapon tightly, Hazug charged towards the nearest of the remaining alien figures and just as it was about to slice open an Ork as it had clearly done to the two lying dead at its feet he rammed the tip of the weapon into its back. Again he felt no resistance, and the unexpected ease with which the blade penetrated the metal body of the alien caused Hazug to stumble slightly. As he steadied himself, Hazug saw that like the previous two aliens he had despatched, as the weapon cut its way through this one's body it was enveloped in a greenish light and faded away leaving no trace that it had ever existed in the first place.

"Where did 'e go boss?" the Ork whose life Hazug had just saved asked in amazement.

"Dunno lad, but dare's still so left for us to kill," and he ran towards another of the alien figures.

Another alien faded away as Feggit was able to jam the muzzle of his weapon under its chin and fired a burst directly into its skull, which promptly shattered from the impact of the heavy calibre bullets. In spite of these few successes the greenskins were still taking casualties, over half of the orks and most of the Gretchin lay motionless on the floor, many of them missing body parts that had been cut away by the aliens' vicious blades.

Hazug reached another alien just as it impaled another Ork on a set of blades that were now coated in the dark red of fresh blood. As it turned to meet Hazug's charge he brought up the staff weapon and sliced it in two from groin to head. Now expecting the blade to slice easily he retained his footing and saw that the two halves of his opponent had faded away before they even hit the floor.

Feggit's weapon roared as he got a clear shot at an alien who had just killed the last of the orks who had attempted to mob it, and it collapsed to the floor as its left leg was shot away below the knee. Whereas any normal opponent, even a large Ork, would have been at least temporarily incapacitated by such an injury, this alien instead began to drag its way across the floor towards the nearest member of the warband. This was Sophie who had spent much of the battle keeping out of the way, she was reluctant to fire her gun indiscriminately into the melee for fear of hitting one of the orks and was too afraid to try engaging any of

the aliens in hand to hand combat herself. Fortunately for her, this meant that she saw the crippled alien crawling towards her, and with no orks in her line of fire she brought her gun to her shoulder and emptied the magazine into it. The alien's head jerked about as the burst of bullets hit it, and with a 'crack' that was barely audible in the mayhem one of the bullets punched through one of its eyes. The crawling alien's other eye ceased to glow and it collapsed, moments later it too faded from sight surrounded by same eerie green light as the others had done.

Drazzok attempted to send a second psychic blast into one of the remaining aliens, but with the number of orks seriously depleted and his power still drained from his last attack, he could do little more than make the alien convulse as he sent as much energy through it as he could. This at least gave the other two orks attacking the alien an opportunity, and they rained blows on their temporarily helpless target. Some of their attacks struck vulnerable point, exposed wires and joints, and the alien vanished as it ceased to function.

The ancient mind studied the battle and saw that it was not going well. Though they had taken a heavy toll on the intruders, only three of its troops were now left fighting. Rather than leave the remaining troops battling the intruders, the mind decided to withdraw them and investigate alternative strategies.

Hazug was about to engage one of the last three alien figures that remained when all of them began to glow with the same green light that had surrounded their colleagues when they had been destroyed, and as these other figures had done, the remaining ones faded away leaving the warband staring into thin air.

For a moment everyone just looked around the room in bewilderment. Then Feggit spoke up.

"We is too 'ard for 'em, dey ran away!" and he lifted his gun over his head as he let out a cry of "Waaagh!" which the others orks joined in.

While the other orks celebrated their victory, Hazug took stock of their situation. Aside from himself and Drazzok only a dozen orks remained, though he was relieved to see that the largest two, Feggit and Ghukil had both survived, and there were only four Gretchin including Ratish left. Sophie still crouched on the far side of the room to where they had found the doorway, cradling her gun in her arms.

"Right lads," Hazug shouted, "pick up wot weapons ya can, and Ratish..."

"Yes master?"

"Start pullin' teeth from da dead lads."

"Yes master, Ratish do it right away."

The casualties suffered by the orks meant that there were now enough guns to go around with one left spare, though Hazug was concerned at the shortage of ammunition. Each pistol armed Ork had started out with two full magazines, and each of them had fired between one half and a full magazine at the metal alien skeletons as they had advanced. What was more, the high rate of fire of the larger weapon that Feggit carried had depleted the amount of ammunition remaining for that weapon also. Only he and Sophie still had more than fifty rounds left.

"Dis will just 'ave to do," Hazug said as he made sure that ammunition was shared out equally. Then he took the spare pistol and passed it to Drazzok, "Take it," he said, "just in case ya run out of zappin' power again." Silently, Drazzok took the weapon and tucked in one of his many pouches. Then Hazug spotted Castus's headless body still lying near to the doorway, the device he had used to open the door was still grasped in his lifeless hand. Hazug strode over to the body and crouched down to take the device he had watched the now dead human use earlier, then as he was about to get up he remembered that Castus had brought more than just this one piece of machinery with him. Hazug removed the bag and stood up as he took a look inside. As he had expected, it was full of human devices with functions that he could not fathom. Instead he fastened the bag shut and turned towards Sophie, "Ere ya go," he said as he tossed the bag towards her, "carry dis lot."

"Wot d'ya want dat stuff for?" Drazzok asked, "Its just a bunch of mek gubbins dat ya can't use."

"I know," Hazug said, "but I might get a few teeth for da stuff from Batrug."

"And wot about dat fancy choppa den?" Drazzok asked indicating the alien weapon that Hazug still held.

"I think I'll hang to dis," Hazug said, "it cuts better dan me old choppa, though it is a bit bigger I'll give ya."

At this point the pair were interrupted by Nizz.

"So is we leavin' now?" he asked.

"Leavin'?" Hazug said in amazement, "why would we be leavin' now?"

"Because dare's no one left to smack boss," Nizz replied.

"Don't be so daft," Hazug said as she gave the young Ork a clip around the ear, "dat lot were just guardin' da doorway. Wot we want is through dare," and he pointed through the doorway into the empty passage beyond.

10

The alien mind watched as the warband made its way down the passage, switching from one remote sensory system to another. Their ability to not only open the access portal, but also to defeat the unit that it had been able to awaken in time to position there was unexpected. What was more they now possessed a warscythe taken from one of the minds best troops before it could be recalled to the main tomb complex below.

The mind continued to monitor the warband as it continued, but turned its main focus to the state of the occupants of the tomb. Most of the occupants remained in their slumber that had lasted for aeons, but those who maintained the tomb had the process of waking them up underway. Soon there would be an army ready to march and cleanse the planet of the life forms that dominated it, but that army would not be ready before the intruders reached the outer portion of the tomb itself if they continued at their present rate and they had proven that they had the capacity to cause damage. The mind came to the conclusion that the revival process would have to be delayed slightly, and some of those performing the revival would instead be used to deal with the intruders.

Satisfied that a suitable strategy had been determined, the mind shifted its focus back to the intruders themselves while above its servants moved into position.

For what seemed like an age the warband had made its way down the winding passage, the only illumination provided by the torches they had brought with them. The irregular light that they provided made it difficult to see a great distance ahead, and Hazug was concerned that they could meet another party of the strange alien skeletons with very little warning. With this in mind he had slung his rifle and was instead wielding the alien weapon he had taken though its size prevented him from carrying a torch. Most of the other orks had chosen to follow his example and had tucked their pistols away and were carrying their own assorted blades in addition to the torches lighting their way.

"Ang on a mo," Hazug said, stopping suddenly, "I think dat dis passage opens out ahead, dis could be it."

"So wot do we do boss?" asked an Ork, one of the larger members of the warband.

"Simple Zhagrad me lad," Hazug said to the Ork, "we send in a grot."

Fobbit should have realised what was about to happen, but he had not learnt his lesson from earlier and once more the other Gretchin shoved him forwards once more.

"Good on ya for volunteerin' grot," Hazug said, "now go take a look at wot's down dare," and he kicked Fobbit towards what appeared to be the end of the passage.

Picking himself up, Fobbit advanced slowly ahead of the warband. As Hazug had predicted, the passageway ended a short distance ahead. It emerged on a ledge in a giant underground cavern. In the centre of the cavern a green light shone from within a spire that reached almost to the cavern roof, illuminating the entire area and Fobbit gasped as he saw the city that stretched out as far as he could see.

"Well wot's dare grot?" Hazug yelled from within the passageway.

"Dare's a big city 'ere master, I don't see no-one movin' about in it."

"Ang on grot, we is comin' for a look."

Fobbit heard the sound of footsteps from behind him as the warband advanced while he continued to stare down at the city. Then something caught his eye; there was something immediately below him. Fobbit peered over the side of the ledge as saw five objects rising rapidly but silently up the side of the rock face. As they came closer he saw that they did not actually touch the rock face itself, but instead were floating in mid air. He jumped backwards as they reached the level of the ledge and he saw that they were multi limbed machines, with numerous legs like an arachna-squig, though they did not use them for locomotion, and a pair of large menacing claws. The machines looked at the small creature before them and moved closer. Fobbit turned to run, but one of the giant machines took him in one of its claws and crushed him without any effort.

Inside the passage, the warband heard Fobbit's scream and the crunching sound that ended it suddenly.

"Move it!" Hazug shouted, and the warband broke into a run. Before they reached the end of the passageway they were confronted by the five hovering machines moving towards them, the lead machine had blood dripping from one of its clawed arms.

Feggit was the first to react, firing his gun until it clicked on an empty chamber. The hail of bullets struck three of the machines but only one appeared to be damaged, with one of its rear limbs being blown loose. Hazug raised the alien weapon high and a cry of "Waaagh!" he charged at the machines, followed by the other orks.

The machines continued to advance, meeting the Ork charge head on. Hazug brought his weapon down at the last moment, and its unnaturally sharp blade impaled the lead machine through the centre of the cluster of eyes on its head. Then, by bringing the weapon upwards again he cut the upper plating away from the

machine's back. He was about to bring the weapon down again for another strike when the machine glowed green and faded away just as the skeletal types had done earlier when critically damaged. There was a series of sharp metallic clangs as the other orks attacked the remaining machines in close combat, followed by a scream as one of the machines pushed a claw through the abdomen of an Ork. There was a flash of light as Drazzok poured psychic energy into the already damaged machine and flames erupted from within it and it crashed to the floor before it too disappeared.

Swinging his empty weapon by its muzzle, Feggit struck one of the machines on its head. But the attack did no more than jerk its head momentarily before it span to face the Ork and, grasping him with both claws, ripped him in half. As the machine dropped the two large chunks of flesh that had once been Feggit, Nizz leapt onto its back and began to jab his blade down to where its short neck emerged from beneath the armoured shell of its body. The machine trashed about with its claws, trying desperately to dislodge the smaller or, but he held on tightly with his free hand until, with a shower of sparks, the machine's head was cut free.

"Ow d'ya like dat den?" he yelled.

The now familiar green glow surrounded both the severed head and the body, and Nizz jumped clear before the remains could vanish and, possibly, take him along with them to wherever it was that they were going to.

"Nice one lad," Hazug shouted as he saw the young Ork take out the machine single-handed. Then he swung his own weapon and watched, first with glee as he cut a clawed arm from the machine that he was currently fighting, and then with frustration as a cluster of wires erupted from the stump of the arm and dragged the claw back into place almost as though it had never been damaged in the first place. He swung the weapon again, but the alien machine caught hold of it held it fast. Then the machine pulled on the weapon, and Hazug toppled to the floor. Unwilling to let go of his prize, Hazug also held on to the weapon, but only with one hand. With the other he reached for his slung rifle and jammed the muzzle up against the underside of the machine, then flicking the selector switch to the 'turbo-dakka' position he snatched the trigger back and held it there.

The machine quivered as the hail of bullets from the rifle struck the same spot one after another. About a third of the way through the magazine its armour finally cracked, and the rest of the burst punched through and bounced about inside its armoured casing. The machine finally released its grip on Hazug's weapon as the glow in its many eyes ceased, and he rolled out of the way before it could come crashing down on top of him. He got back up just in time to see not only the wreckage of the machine he had just destroyed, but also the final functional machine both fade away in their customary green glow.

With the disappearance of the alien machines the warband looked around to make sure that there were no more enemies left for them to fight.

"Why do they keep vanishing?" Sophie said out loud.

"Dunno," Hazug replied, "but unless dey is busted dey only vanish when most of da others 'ave been."

"So if we 'it enough of 'em," Zhagrad said slowly, "da rest will just vanish before dey can be 'it an' all?"

"Looks like it lad," Hazug said, "now everyone pick up wot ya can, and lets go take a look at dis city da grot said 'e saw."

Hazug and Drazzok began to continue down the passageway straight way, followed closely by Sophie. Meanwhile the rest of the warband went over the bodies of their fallen comrades to recover whatever possessions they had on them and to pull their teeth.

The ancient mind was incapable of feeling true frustration, but it was aware that twice now the forces it had sent against a band of comparatively primitive intruders had been beaten back with heavy losses. What was worse, now four of the tomb's maintenance units had been suffered critical damage and would have to be repaired before they would be able to assist in the revival of the main army.

Have patience.

The thought suddenly occurred to the mind that it was not necessary to do anything immediately. The intruders were now at the edge of the primary area, and appeared set on continuing deeper into the complex. Therefore, rather than rushing forces to meet them mind could instead wait until it had an overwhelming force available to utterly crush them. Beyond the abomination brought into being by the ancient enemy, most of the rest of the intruders also appeared to be one of the enemy's servant races. If this observation was correct, then the available information suggested that they would not withdraw even when faced with a vastly superior force. There would be plenty of time to despatch them before they could leave the tomb and spread word of its existence.

Hazug stared out at the ancient city before him. Illuminated by the strange light emanating from the gigantic spire at city's heart, the rest was an eerie arrangement of pyramids, towers and bridges that did not look like

any place that anything would actually live in. He pulled the tau viewing device from his pouch again and used it to look closer at the city.

The dim light cast from the spire required the use of the night vision feature, but the strange green tint that this overlaid on the picture he saw did not make the city look any less strange to Hazug. As far as he could tell the entire city was deserted. The many streets and plazas were empty of both traffic and pedestrians, while apart from the central spire none of the buildings cast any light from within. Zooming in further, Hazug could make out carvings on some of the walls. Carvings that were arranged in straight lines, with patterns that repeated like some form of writing that he could not understand. Hazug activated the viewer's recording function and stored images of this cold, abandoned place within it. He focused on the spire at the heart of the city since it was the only structure that showed any signs of life. As he examined a magnified image of the top of the spire he noticed that directly above the tip of the spire there was a crystal set into the roof of the cavern. A crystal that looked familiar.

Then something caught his eye. More light sources had appeared away from the spire, these came from a cluster of small pyramids that appeared to be made of metal similar to machines that had attacked them twice now rather than the stone that everything else had been constructed from. Each of the pyramids mounted a large green crystal atop it, crystals which now produced a light similar to that which came from the spire. Hazug recorded some images of these pyramids, and as he did so he saw them begin to move. At first the just lifted up from the floor, but then they began to float slowly through the city streets.

"Dat looks like trouble," he said.

"Wot does?" Drazzok asked.

"Can ya see dem other lights down dare, dem dat is movin'?"

Drazzok looked for the lights.

"Yeah I see 'em, wot are dey?"

"Wagons I think, though they ain't comin' dis way yet they... 'Ang on, I see somethin' else."

"Wot?"

Through the viewer, Hazug watched as the base of the spire opened and from within a column of skeletal figures emerged, marching in long straight lines. Similar in appearance to the first group that had attacked them, these lacked the long blades on their hands and instead each one wielded a rifle like weapon.

"More of dem skeleton lads," Hazug said, "lots of 'em, and I think dat dey all got shootas."

"So what do we do know?" Sophie asked.

"We is leavin'," Hazug said as he returned the viewer to its pouch.

"'Ang on," Drazzok said, "ya vos paid to sort dis out."

"I vos paid to find out wot vos goin' on," Hazug corrected him, "and I think dat its safe to say dat we all know wot is goin' on around 'ere. Now we needs to get out of 'ere and let da local boss know wot's goin' on too. Den we can figure out how to sort it out."

The expression on Drazzok's face indicated that he was not happy with the thought of withdrawal. As a member of the Snake Bite clan he was very conservative in his outlook, and to do anything other than charge straight into a fight regardless of the odds struck him as being distinctly un-orky. However, in this situation he was reluctantly forced to agree. Not that was about to admit it.

"Soddin' Blood Axe," Drazzok muttered, "do ya know wot ya problem is?"

"I reckon ya is about to tell me anyway."

"Ya thinks too bleedin' much. One day ya'll think so much ya brain'll pop and we'll 'ave to get a painboy to stuff a new one in."

Entering the passage once more they met the rest of the warband.

"We got everythin' useful boos," Ghukil said, "where is we goin' now?"

"To da Ork city," Hazug told him, "we needs to let da big boss know wot's goin' on down 'ere. Den we can come back with 'is boys to sort dis lot out."

11

Unexpected.

The ancient mind now experienced some confusion. All of the available data indicated that the intruders were of a species that, once a course of action had been begun, would not deviate from it. There was of course a member of another species with them, the same species that had intruded a handful of decades earlier, but its demeanour suggested that it was subservient to at least the majority of the others. Allowing the intruders to escape could cause complications by giving them the opportunity to warn others before the army was ready to be fully deployed, but their route was taking them back through the inspection corridor of the complex's primary weapon and none of the units currently active would be able to intercept them before they could reach the surface. The mind checked the status of the portal that the intruders had forced open. The signal applied had caused the mechanism that maintained the barrier to fail completely, and it would be possible to reseal it until key components had been replaced. Again this could not be done before the intruders escaped. An interception would therefore have to take place after they had left the complex entirely.

Hazug hurried the warband along the passageway, ever alert for any sign that they were being pursued by any more of the alien machines. Given that over half of the orks he had originally lead into this place were now dead, it was a great relief when they reached the first chamber they had encountered, where rope ladders leading to the surface still dangled from above.

"Right lads," Hazug said, "let Drazzok Sophie and da grots up first, den we follow 'em."

"Ow come dey go first boss?" one of the orks asked

"Cos dey is less use in a fight Ubgrub," Hazug said, reinforcing the point with a slap around the Ork's head.

"Ow! Alright I was only askin'."

"Less askin, more doin'. Now everyone keep watch in case we 'as been followed. Drazzok give us a shout when ya is all at da top."

The Ork warriors kept their weapons trained on the open portal while the first group ascended to the surface. When a shout came from Drazzok that they had all reached the surface safely Hazug pointed to five of the orks one after another.

"Get up dem ladders ya all, den we'll follow ya when ya is at da top."

The five orks all signalled their agreement, and sprinted to the ladders and began to climb. Again a call came from the top of the shaft that everybody was safe and Hazug spoke again.

"Right now us," he said, and the remaining orks all made for the ladders.

Part way there Hazug stopped suddenly.

"Wot's up boss?" Nizz asked from one of the ladders.

"I just want to try somethin'," Hazug said and he went to the crystal at the centre of the chamber with the alien weapon in his hands, "dat human mekboy Castus said dat dis was for focusin' energy, and I reckon dat makes it part of da zappa dat shot down our kroozer. Maybe if I smash dis up den wotever's runnin' dis place won't be able to do dat again." Hazug lifted the alien weapon above his head, gripping its end tightly in both hands. Then in a single, fluid motion he brought the impossibly sharp blade down on the crystal itself. There was a flash of light as the blade struck the crystal, followed a fraction of a second later by a loud bang as it exploded sending fragments of the crystal flying in all directions.

"Wot's goin' on down dare?" Drazzok demanded from above.

"Da boss just blew up dat crystal thingy," Nizz shouted back, "'e's smacked it real good an all, dare's bits all over down 'ere."

Hazug checked the weapon just in case it had been damaged, but it appeared that the blade was undamaged. Then he looked down at his feet and saw that, as Nizz had said the floor was covered in fragments of the green crystal, some of which were almost as big as his fist. He bent over and scooped up a couple of handfuls and stuffed them in a pouch. Then he examined where the crystal had rested before he destroyed it. The hole stretched down quite a distance, but below Hazug was sure that he could see the green glow being emitted by the spire at the heart of the alien city.

"Thought so," he said, and then he slung his weapon and made his way to the surface.

Error.

Damage.

Weapon system shut down.

Events were unfolding in a manner that would have triggered all sorts of distracting emotions in a lesser being, but the ancient mind had been separated from these long ago. Now the destruction of the primary focusing element for the complex's main armament was just another event to be filed and acted upon. Not

that it was insignificant, however, the mind was very much aware that it longer possessed any weaponry capable of firing on targets in deep space, and those that could fire on targets in near orbit could not guarantee a one shot kill on targets the size of the vessels it knew the inhabitants of this world had at their disposal. Theoretically it was now vulnerable.

Assistance.

The thought occurred that help could be sought from another source, but a check on the data of nearby forces indicated that there was nothing close enough that was had sufficient power to be of use.

Alone.

The mind knew that it would have to make do with its own forces. It quickly calculated the chance that an orbital weapons strike could harm it down here based on its observations over the years.

One in fifteen thousand, three hundred and eighty-two.

So it was unlikely, but still an outside possibility.

The casualties suffered underground meant that there was now enough room in the truck for everyone.

"We needs to move fast," Hazug said as he started the engine, "and squiggoths ain't anywhere near fast enough. Just let 'em go and everyone climb on."

The engine roared as Hazug accelerated away from the gaping hole, unsure as to whether the aliens underground possessed any vehicles fast enough to follow them.

"Everyone keep an eye," he said, "if ya see anythin' just shoot at it."

In the desert beyond the outer most of the pillars that lead to the central hole the sands shifted slightly, not from the movement of anything solid, but from the displacement of air as something began to appear.

Green lightning danced across the sand momentarily as the teleport sequence progressed and three hovering platforms, each with a humanoid torso mounted on top materialised. The torso resembled the skeletal figures that had confronted the orks, only slightly larger. Each of them had a single humanoid arm, the other terminating in a bulky weapon made of crystal and metal below the elbow. Once fully formed, the three machines scanned their environment. They detected the noise of a crude liquid burning engine, and concentrating in that direction saw that an object moving across it at high speed was disturbing the desert. Moving without any sound, the three hoverers moved to intercept, kicking up their own cloud of dust as they did so.

Sat in the truck, Drazzok quizzed Hazug regarding his intentions.

"So we is just goin' to tell da local warboss dat dare's a city full of killin' machines under da desert and 'e really ought to do somethin' about it den?"

"Dat's da idea. We'll show 'im dat skull, and da pictures I took. I reckon dat should prove wot we is sayin'."

Suddenly there was gunfire from the rear of the truck.

"We is bein' followed boss!" Gobnok shouted as he and the other orks fired.

Hazug chanced a look over his shoulder. At first he saw nothing but the cloud of dust he was leaving behind him, but then he caught sight of more dust plumes in the distance.

"Quit shootin'," he yelled, "Dey is well out of range."

Reluctantly the orks ceased fire.

"We is well ahead of 'em," Hazug said, "but if we need to stop for anythin' dey'll catch up with us."

"Will we 'ave to stop?" Drazzok asked.

"Maybe, I'll 'ave to put some more fuel in sooner or later."

"So dey is goin' to catch us up den."

Hazug didn't answer; he was too busy searching the desert ahead for something. He soon found what he was looking for, a large rocky outcrop in the sand. He steered towards it.

"Get ready lads," he shouted, "I got a way to get behind 'em."

Drawing closer to the rocks, Hazug reduced the speed of the truck and as he drew level with it there was a green flash and a beam of light shot past the vehicle as one of the alien machines fired. The orks in the back of the truck began to shoot back.

"Old ya fire," Hazug shouted, "dey ain't in range yet."

The three machines pursuing the truck watched as it disappeared behind the rocks just as it came within firing range. Without a second thought they kept up their pursuit and followed the path taken by the truck.

Which was exactly what Hazug wanted them to do.

Rather than continue to drive on past the rock, Hazug steered his truck around it. Having allowed the alien machines to get closer mean that by the time he appeared on the far side the rock was in between them.

Grinning, Hazug accelerated once more and continued to drive around the rock until the three hovering alien machines appeared in front of the truck.

"Now," Hazug shouted, "let rip!"

The aliens had been operating under the assumption that the Ork truck had continued driving straight past the rock formation, so the sudden appearance of the crude vehicle behind them was unexpected. The

gunfire had little effect; the orks' pistols lacked the stopping power necessary to inflict serious damage. However, the truck itself was a different matter. Hazug continued to accelerate when the aliens came into view, and directed the truck straight at them.

He easily caught up with the rearmost alien just as it was turning to face him, and smashed into it. The thick metal plating mounted at the front of the truck buckled under the impact but the effect on the alien was far more severe. The torso was ripped clear by the impact, and while the body remained lodged in the truck's frontal armour plate the torso flew over the heads of the orks. It disappeared into the dust cloud behind the truck and only a faint green light from within the cloud gave any indication that it had just vanished as the orks had seen the other alien machines do when destroyed. Simultaneously the body jammed to the front of the truck vanished, taking with it a large part of the armour plate itself that was wedged into it.

Unfortunately the high speed of the truck did not allow Hazug to repeat his manoeuvre against either of the other two machines, and as he passed them they fired on the truck from point blank range. One of the energy beams struck an Ork, where the beam struck first his skin and then his flesh was peeled away. The remains of the Ork fell from the truck and rolled across the desert.

In response the remaining Ork passengers fired from point blank range at the nearest alien machine. Again the bullets failed to penetrate the machine's armour, but it was nevertheless forced to abort its attack.

Meanwhile Hazug aimed the truck towards the third machine. Used to Hazug's ramming tactic the machine easily moved out of the way of the truck, but as it sped past Drazzok grabbed Hazug's alien blade and held it out, slicing through the machine and triggering its disappearance.

Hazug looked around, expecting the final alien machine to have also vanished, but this was not the case. Instead it had increased its altitude, now hovering above the ground at a height that made it impossible for Hazug to either ram it or reach it with the staff blade. Some of the orks tried shooting at the machine once more, but yet again the bullets ricocheted off its heavily armoured body. Green light spat from the alien's weapon, narrowly missing the truck as Hazug swerved wildly, prompting several shouts of complaint from his passengers in the back.

"I needs me shoota!" Hazug shouted, "We'll 'ave to stop. When I do everybody jump out and keep shootin' at dat thing."

True to his word, Hazug slammed on the brakes and brought the truck to a complete stop, spoiling the aim of the alien machine which fired a burst at where the truck would have been had it kept moving at the same speed. The occupants of the truck bailed out and fired at the alien, still without any success. In return the alien shot back, and the body of another Ork dissolved when struck by the deadly energy beams.

Meanwhile Hazug himself retrieved his rifle from the rear of the truck and also the crate that contained the rockets for mounting beneath it. He clicked one of the explosive projectiles into place and lifted the weapon to his shoulder. Looking down the barrel he saw the alien machine hovering motionless in the air, apparently confident that the orks' gunfire could not harm it. Hazug squeezed the trigger of his rifle gently, and fired a single bullet. It missed. Adjusting his aim he fired another bullet just as an unfortunate Gretchin was consumed by another burst of fire from the alien. This time he hit his target dead centre with sparks flying as it bounced off, and now satisfied that his aim was true he depressed the secondary trigger before the machine had chance to move away and launched his rocket along the same trajectory as the last bullet. Unable to react in time, the alien machine took the full force of the rocket attack when the round slammed into it where the humanoid body joined the hovering platform and the two parts were blasted apart in an explosion that consumed them in flame. No wreckage fell to the ground however, it having vanished into thin air.

The orks cheered their victory, some of them firing into the air until Hazug ordered them to cease fire.

"We ain't got dat many rounds left remember," he told them as he stowed his rifle next to the drivers seat, "now everyone back on da truck, we still got a long way to go."

Once again Hazug pushed the truck hard, wanting to reach the continent's main city before more of the alien machines could catch up with them. But as it happened, it was not the mysterious aliens that were to be the next obstacle.

Assist.

In a star system many billions of miles away another equally ancient and powerful mind awoke as it received the call from one of its brethren. This mind was located in the coldness of space itself, and was surrounded by many crescent shaped craft a mile or more across that floated lifelessly near it. When the call for help was received the mind began to awaken some of these craft, and soon after they began to accelerate away towards the source of the distress call. Satisfied that it had done what was required of it, this second alien mind returned to its own slumber once more.

The attack came as the sun was setting. A cloud of dust in the distance indicated the presence of vehicles moving through the desert. At first Hazug was concerned that the aliens had been able to overtake the truck with more of their fast moving skimmers, but as the cloud of dust drew closer he saw that it was being created by a group of lightweight wheeled vehicles of Ork manufacture. Each of the vehicles carried a pair of orks, one to drive the vehicle and the other to operate the weapon mounted centrally. With no information regarding why these orks were driving towards them, Hazug decided to be cautious.

"Get ready lads," he said, "dis lot could be out 'ere lookin' for trouble."

Right on cue a burst of gunfire erupted from the lead buggy, kicking up plumes of sand in front of the truck as the shots fell short. The Blood Axes drew their pistols, but only two of them actually fired before they realised that they were well out of range. Hazug swerved directly towards the war buggies, and the distance between them began to shrink rapidly.

The buggies fired again, but only a few shots actually struck the truck, and those that did all bounced off the remains of the frontal armour plate. The buggies were now close enough for Hazug to see that the orks riding on them all had varying amounts of blue paint covering their clothes and faces.

"Death Skulls!" Hazug shouted, "Dey is after me truck! Well dey ain't getting' it without a fight, right lads?"

"Right boss!" came the chorus of replies.

Hazug drove straight through the centre of the squad of war buggies, two of them passing either side, "Let 'em 'ave it!" he shouted as the distance between them was reduced to almost nothing. The roar of gunfire was directed both at and from the truck, a single bullet from one of the Death Skulls' weapons killed another Blood Axe and the dead Ork fell from the back of the truck, his body rolling across the sand. On the other hand the mass of fire from the Blood Axes' pistols caught one of the Death Skull Drivers in his throat. On reflex he clutched at the wound with both hands and lost control of his vehicle, which promptly flipped over and crushed both of its occupants beneath it.

Another burst of fire erupted from one of the war buggies, and the truck lurched as first one of the middle tyres exploded and then its wheel shattered completely. There was the sound of grinding metal as the misshapen metal that was all that was left of the wheel ground against the chassis of the truck. Hazug brought the truck to a stop before the damage got worse.

"Everybody out!" he shouted, and the truck's passengers began to jump down.

With both hands free, Hazug was now able to use his rifle and with three short rapidly fired bursts he killed one of the Death Skull gunners.

"Everyone stay low!" Hazug shouted as a further burst of fire came from the Death Skulls, and most of the group followed his order. However, one of the Blood Axes instead got up and charged towards the nearest war buggy as it circled them, yelling the traditional Ork war cry of "Waaagh!" as he did so. The war buggy's gunner aimed at the charging Ork, but before he could gun him down the driver had also aimed the vehicle itself at the Ork who was thrown into the air as it ploughed into him. The change in the war buggy's direction proved its undoing however, as Hazug plucked a grenade from his belt and hurled it at the vehicle as it headed towards him rather than speeding past. He watched as the explosive tumbled through the air and landed just behind the driver of the war buggy. Both of the vehicles occupants had just enough time to realise what had landed between them before the grenade detonated and tore the lightweight vehicle, occupants and all apart.

Meanwhile the remaining two war buggies moved further away from the truck and the group huddled around it, anxious to avoid further grenade attacks. But the growing cloud of smoke from the wreck of the buggy destroyed by Hazug's grenade made shooting at the group much harder, even without the poor marksmanship that was common to orks.

Ubgrub suddenly got to his feet and dashed towards the buggy that had upturned after the death of its driver, and when he reached it he dived underneath it. Moments later he emerged holding the ammunition for the buggy's weapon. Looking around briefly, he ran back to the truck when he was sure that both of the remaining buggies were not near him.

"'Ere ya go boss," he said as he crouched down once more, "will dese fit dat big shoota of yours?"

Hazug grinned as he saw the nearly full box of ammunition.

"Dey will indeed, good work lad. Someone get dat big shoota for us."

Ratish and the Gretchin began to scabble back up onto the truck to retrieve the heavy weapon. There was another burst of gunfire as the smoke cleared just enough for the Death Skulls to see the two Gretchin. Ratish reacted quickly enough to duck behind a crate and avoid the attack the second Gretchin did not, and he fell backwards from the truck, dead before he hit the sand.

"Is ya alright grot?" Hazug shouted.

"Ratish is fine master," the Gretchin replied, "and Ratish find da big shoota."

The weapon landed with a 'thunk' in the sand as Ratish pushed it over the side of the truck. Hazug grabbed the end of the ammunition belt from the crate and loaded into the gun. Then he cocked the weapon and stood up with it at his hip.

"Kop dis!" he shouted as he gripped the trigger tightly and sent a stream of heavy bullets towards the nearest war buggy. He saw both the driver and gunner twisting as they were struck by the burst. He let go of the trigger when it became clear that its occupants were dead and it ground to a sudden stop. The only war buggy remaining had only a driver, and with no one to operate hi vehicle's weapon he decided to withdraw. A cloud of dust concealed the war buggy as its driver drove straight away from Hazug, but he did not take any evasive action and when Hazug fired another burst into the centre of the cloud the driver was hit several times and died immediately.

Hazug turned to Ubgrub and handed him the automatic gun, "Ere ya go lad," he said, "ya can use dis from now on. Ya deserve it for dat idea," then he spoke to the remains of the warband, "Now everyone get lootin', dare's probably more ammo in dem buggies."

While most of the orks began to search through the remains of the Death Skull war buggies that were not burning wrecks Hazug went to inspect the damage to his own vehicle accompanied by Drazzok, Ratish and Sophie. There they saw that the destroyed wheel had made a deep gouge in the chassis.

"That looks bad, can we still travel in this?" Sophie asked.

Hazug bent down to take a closer look at the damage.

"We'll 'ave to wot's left of da wheel off," he said, "but it ain't one of da drive wheels so we should still be able to get somewhere on it."

"Bah!" Drazzok snorted, "Its knackered. We ain't goin' to get back to da city in dis."

"We don't 'ave to," Hazug said, "We can get it fixed."

"Fixed? Where?" Drazzok demanded as both Sophie and Ratish also stared at him with puzzled looks on their faces.

"Da Death Skulls must 'ave a camp somewhere near 'ere," Hazug said, "and I reckon dat last buggy was runnin' straight towards it. We'll go dare instead."

"But they just tried to kill us," Sophie said.

"But dey didn't manage to did dey? Even if da other Death Skulls know wot's 'appened 'ere, day ain't goin' to care provided we can pay."

"Can we pay?" Sophie asked.

"We can once we pull all da teeth from da Death Skulls," Drazzok commented.

"Exactly," said Hazug. Then he looked up at the darkening sky, "We better not try findin' da camp in da dark though, we could wind up anywhere. Problem is we can't go wanderin' off lookin' for somewhere to camp ourselves, so we is goin' to 'ave to stay 'ere for da night."

"Wot out in da open?" Drazzok said

"I know, I don't like it either, but we ain't got no choice dis time," Hazug admitted, "we'll leave some lads on watch just in case."

13

The alien mind studied the small settlement via one of the vehicles now approaching it. There was no sign of the vehicle that had successfully eluded pursuit since the intrusion into the complex, but there were indications of numerous life forms matching those who had recently intruded and several lightweight vehicles. There was evidence of a relatively large number of weapons, but these appeared to mainly be personal arms and would not constitute a threat to the heavy vehicles now closing on the settlement. The mind prepared warriors to be sent to the teleport portals of the vehicles and awaited the destruction of the settlement.

With only six of the Blood Axe boys left, Hazug had two of them stand watch at a time. Another large automatic weapon had been recovered from the wreckage of the war buggies, along with plenty of ammunition for them both, so each sentry could be equipped with one of the powerful weapons, and by scavenging one of the weapon mounting from a war buggy also Hazug had one of them mounted to the vehicle before they set off in the direction where Hazug believed the Death Skulls camp lay. Aware of the damage to the truck, Hazug kept its speed low. Drazzok noticed something about the way they were heading.

"ain't dis goin' back da way we came? Towards dat 'ole and da machines rather dan to da city where we wants to be?" he asked, jabbing at the map taken from the human outpost.

"I know," Hazug said, "but dis is da way we 'ave to go if we is goin' to get da truck fixed so dat we can get to da city."

Roggot them interrupted them.

"Look boss!" he shouted, pointing ahead, "Dare's smoke from camp fires."

Sure enough, a column of smoke was rising from over the horizon. Hazug was about to compliment Roggot for being the first to spot the smoke when soothing odd about it occurred to him.

"Dat's a bloody lot of smoke for a few camp fires," he said, "dat's a bloody awful lot of smoke. Everyone get ya guns ready, we could be about to run into trouble."

Hazug reduced speed further as the Death Skulls camp came into view. The camp had been built by an oasis, and had consisted of a set of buildings varying from the crude lean-tos often used by Gretchin to a pair of solidly built mek workshops, while a single watch tower had been built in the centre of the camp flanked by totems to the gods Gork and Mork. It looked like had it been intact it could have offered a wide variety of services to travellers willing and able to pay. However, much of the camp was wrecked, and it had happened recently. The plume of smoke that had been visible long before the camp itself was coming from a row of fuel tanks that were burning, while most of the more lightly built structures had been reduced to nothing more than smouldering ruins. Wrecked vehicles were scattered about the area and the watchtower and one of the totems had collapsed. As the truck drew closer to the camp Hazug spotted what looked like body parts, and he stopped the truck.

"Ubgrub cover us with da truck's big shoota," Hazug said, "Sophie and Ratish can wait 'ere with ya, everyone else come with me. Ghukil, ya can bring da other big shoota."

Hazug lead the orks to the body parts scattered around the smashed remains of another truck. It appeared that none of the bodies were complete; it was as if parts had just vanished.

"Da machines did dis," Hazug said, "dis is wot dare shootas did to our lads yesterday."

"So it ain't just us dat dey is after," Drazzok said.

"Spread out," Hazug shouted, "and give a yell if any of ya finds anyone left."

Hazug remained where he was with Drazzok while the other orks ran off and began searching the ruins of the camp.

"Wot is it with Death Skull camps dat ya visit?" Drazzok said, "Dis is da second one dat's been torched by da time ya got to it. Unless dare's more dat ya ain't told about dat is."

Hazug ignored the weirdboy's comment and began walking towards the remains of the watchtower where something had caught his eye, "Wot's under dare?" he yelled pointing at the pile of twisted metal. Nizz and Zhagrad ran over to investigate with Hazug. Reaching the tower they saw that wreckage was moving slightly and this was followed by a muffled banging sound from underneath. Hazug aimed his rifle at the source of the movement.

"Get rid of dat metal and I'll cover ya," he said to the other two orks who nodded and began to pull metal from the pile.

Beneath the wreckage was a wooden trapdoor, and when it was clear of metal it was thrown open from beneath to reveal a pair of Gretchin in a hole beneath.

"Don't shoot us please!" one of them shouted as they both raised their hands when they saw the three orks pointing guns at them.

"Get out!" Hazug shouted, then added, "Ow many of ya are dare down dare?"

"Just us lord," one of the Gretchin responded as they both scrabbled out of the hole.

"Just us lord," the other Gretchin replied, "we 'id down dare when da fightin' started, but den we couldn't get out."

"So wot 'appened?" Hazug asked when the Gretchin were both clear of the hole.

"Dare was dese big floatin' wagons," a Gretchin told him.

"Dey was big triangles dat shot lightnin'," the other one added.

"Yeah, it wos dis weird green lightnin' dat made stuff disappear wasn't it?" and the two Gretchin nodded to confirm the point, "And no matter 'ow many rokkits our masters fired into 'em dey just kept on comin'."

"And dare was dese metal boys dat came marchin' out of 'em too. Sometimes when dey was shot and we thought dey was dead, dey just got back up again so we ran and 'id in our 'ole."

"So ya don't know if dare's anyone else left den?"

The two Gretchin looked at each other and then shook their heads.

"We couldn't see anythin' from in da 'ole, and all we 'eard was a big crash when somethin' landed on da door and we found dat we was stuck."

More of the orks began to congregate around the remains of the watchtower and the open trapdoor.

"I ain't found no one boss," Ghukil said, and the other orks made similar comments.

Hazug thought for a moment.

"Dare ain't no meks left," he said to the other orks, "as anyone seen anythin' dat looks like a wagon dat's still runnin'?"

The orks first looked at each other then at Hazug and shook their heads, and commented that they had not.

"Wot's up with ya truk?" one of the Gretchin asked.

"Its missing a wheel, and dare's a big crack in it," Hazug replied, "da wheel I can replace if I can find one da right size, but da crack needs weldin'."

"We can weld," the Gretchin said, indicating himself and his companion who was nodding in agreement.

"Ow do ya know 'ow to weld?" Hazug asked.

"We worked for da mek," the Gretchin replied.

"Yeah," the other Gretchin asked, "da mek didn't do 'is own weldin', 'e got us to do it all for 'im."

"Den ya can fix me truk," Hazug told them, "and in return we'll take ya to da city."

"Deal," the Gretchin said simultaneously, and they dashed off to find the necessary tools.

"Rights lads," Hazug said to the other orks, "take a look around again, dis time look for anythin' useful," and then he turned back to the truck and shouted, "Ratish, dare's a pair of grots 'ere who'll weld da truk up. I want ya to scavenge a new wheel and den take a look at wot else is lying about."

"Yes master," Ratish shouted back as he ran from the truck and began to search the camp.

"And Sophie," Hazug shouted.

"Yes Hazug?" she replied.

"Get us somethin' to eat."

"About bleedin' time," Drazzok shouted.

The orks ate while the Gretchin fixed their vehicle.

"So 'ow cob da mebal bings wob 'ere bob?" Gobnok said with his mouth full of squig meat. Everyone else just stared at him bewildered.

"I said 'ow come da metal things wos 'ere boss?" he repeated having swallowed the mouthful of food.

"Dunno lad," Hazug admitted, "but I get da feelin' dat dey is thinkin' about more dan just killin' us."

"Tell 'em wot else da attack 'ere means," Drazzok said before tipping his plate up to pour the last scraps of food into his mouth. The Blood Axes all stared at Hazug.

"Wot does it mean boss?" Ubgrub asked.

"It means dat since we 'ave come back 'ere, dey will be ahead of us if dey kept on goin'."

"So dey could be waitin' to ambush us?" Gobnok said.

"Yeah lad," Hazug replied and then to the entire group he added, "so I'll be needin' da lot of ya to be keepin' ya eyes open. With any luck we'll reach da city before night tomorrow, but just in case we need to warn Warboss Kromag about all dis."

"Wot do we need to tell 'im about dis for?" Drazzok asked, knowing that a message sent over such a long distance would require his help.

"Because dese metal things may about to start attackin' everyone, and 'e's got more boys dan anyone else to stop 'em with if we can't. I know ya can send a message dat far if ya want."

Drazzok stood up.

"Alright den," he said, "but I'll need a fair bit of power to do it, so we better gather round dat totem of Mork dat's still standin'."

Hazug assembled the orks in front of the totem to Mork.

"Now dis is easy," he said to them while Drazzok stood at its base, "we is just goin' to stand 'ere and chant da name of Mork and dat will generate enough power for Drazzok to send 'is message," then he looked at Drazzok, "and it better be da right one if ya know wot's good for ya, nothin' about anyone thinkin' dat 'e's got a squig brain or anythin' got it?"

"Just get on with da chantin'," Drazzok replied.

Hazug turned back to the other orks and began to chant.

"Mork, Mork, Mork," he repeated waving the weapon taken from the aliens above his head as he did so. At first he chanted alone, but the other orks rapidly caught on.

"Mork, Mork, Mork," they chanted waving their weapons in the air.

Drazzok concentrated, feeling the increased flow of power through him and into his staff before draining away. Then he lifted his staff off the ground and the power instead began to build up within his body.

Picturing the strange underground city and its machine inhabitants he reached out with his mind, and found another mind similar to his own several thousand miles away. Hazug sent the images in his mind to the other one before he slammed his staff back down to the ground and the power dissipated almost immediately with a brief flash of light.

Hazug stopped chanting and looked at Drazzok.

"Well did ya get through?" he asked.

"I did it," the weirdboy said.

"Right lads," Hazug said, addressing the other orks, "ya can stop now."

The orks stopped chanting.

"Was dat it?" Nizz said.

"Yeah lad," Hazug said, "dat wos it."

"Boss?"

"Wot lad?"

"Is it always dat crap?"

"Well sometimes dare 'eads explode, but normally, yeah it is."

"Bah!" said Drazzok, "Wot would either of ya know about it?"

14

Disturbance.

The alien mind noticed the anomaly immediately; the abomination was using its abilities and was doing so from an area thought cleared.

Irrelevant.

It did not matter, a single being with the powers given by the ancient enemy to its underlings was not a serious threat and the sterilisation could continue.

Warboss Kazkal Kromag glared at the mekboy who had just finish explaining his latest idea, and why the warboss ought to give him several thousand teeth so that he could get it to work. Rather than thinking about giving him any money, however, Kazkal was instead thinking about how much pain he could inflict on the mekboy using only the small squig bone he had just finished chewing the meat off of. The mekboy could tell that his presentation had gone down as well as he had hoped it might, and evaluating the positions of the exits from the room. Fortunately for the mekboy warboss Kromag's train of thought was interrupted by the commotion caused when a weirdboy pushed past his guards into the main hall.

"Does dis weirdo 'ave an appointment?" Kromag asked the human standing next to him who functioned as the keeper of his diary.

"No lord," the human said.

"Wot d'ya want weirdo?" Kromag yelled.

"I 'ave a message," the weirdboy said, "it is a dire warning from da desert land, it is from Drazzok 'Eadbanga of da Snake Bite clan and Hazug Throatlitter of the Blood Axe clan."

"Ah crap," said Kromag, his shoulders slumping and the bone falling from his hand to the floor, "not dem two again."

15

The orks had made a pile of everything they had found that they thought could be useful and Hazug was going through it. A lot of what they had collected was obviously useless, ammunition clips without any rounds left in them, punctured fuel and water drums and random pieces of metal that had been picked up for some reason that escaped Hazug entirely. But through all of this there were some useful items. There was still some ammunition left that would fit their weapons, and the Death Skulls had left a large amount of provisions behind that had been untouched by the fighting. The prize find was an intact flamethrower that, when tested, proved to be in good working order, Gobnok had found this so Hazug decided to let him keep it, for the time being at least. Water would not be an issue, Sophie was busy filling all of their canteens and water skins from the oasis, protected by a pair of orks just in case there was anything nasty lurking there. The issue of fuel had concerned Hazug however, the truck's tank was less than half full and he had only enough to refill once fully. Fortunately not all of the Death Skulls' stockpile had been destroyed, and he was now confident that they possessed an adequate amount to reach their destination with plenty to spare, as well as enough to supply the flamethrower.

Engrossed as he was with the pile of salvage, Hazug still noticed the approach of one the Gretchin survivors from behind him.

"Come see lord," the creature said when Hazug spun round to face him, "I finished a weldin' ya wanted."

"So its fixed den?" Hazug asked as he inspected the piece of metal welded across the crack in his truck.

"Yes lord," the Gretchin said while his companion and Ratish approached pushing a replacement wheel, "da jobs a good 'un."

"Hmm," said Hazug, rubbing his chin, "okay den, I'll trust ya. 'Ow long to get da new wheel on?"

"Not long, quick job lord."

"Good, because we 'ave to get out of 'ere quick. So get da new wheel on and den we can be off."

"Take Gretchin with ya like ya said?" the Gretchin asked, clearly worried that it may be left behind.

"Yeah, I'll take ya. Bring ya tools in case anythin' else needs fixin' though. Den when we get to da city ya can find a new mekboy to work for. In da mean time ya got my guarantee about ya work."

"Guarantee lord?"

"Yeah, I guarantee a lot of pain if it don't do wot it should. Understand grot?"

"Yes lord."

Then Hazug walked away while the Gretchin fitted the new wheel.

"Right lads," he shouted, "we is off so gather ya stuff and get it loaded."

"D'ya really trust dese grot to fix dis anythin' properly?" Drazzok asked Hazug as he climbed into the seat beside him as the loading of the truck was completed.

"Well dey is comin' with us, and I promised 'em dat we'd give 'em a good kickin' if it don't work like dey say it will," Hazug replied, "and I is an Ork dat keeps 'is promises, dat's wot is said about me."

"Is it?" Drazzok said, "Cos I 'eard plenty of lads sayin' stuff about ya, but never dat."

"When we get back, let me know who won't ya?" and with that, Hazug started up the trucks engine and, slowly at first to test the Gretchins' repair work, he drove off into the desert towards the continent's capital city, not knowing what may be waiting for them.

Out in the desert the warband occasionally spotted more plumes of smoke that were too large to be from mere camp fires that were common to remote Ork settlements, and when they passed close to any of these plumes they saw that the alien machines were continuing to attack Ork settlements as well as groups of travellers in the desert.

"ain't we goin' to stop and take a look?" Ubgrub asked when they first drew near to the scene of one of the attacks, the ruins of a fortress that looked to have been built by the humans before the Ork invasion.

"We got everythin' we need lad," Hazug said, "and stoppin' to look around would just waste time."

"What if there are survivors?" Sophie asked.

"Den dey is on dare own," Hazug said.

As Hazug had hoped, they reached the city before nightfall, and the two Gretchin recovered from the Death Skulls camp were dropped off so that they could seek new masters. After that Hazug simply drove towards the largest and most heavily fortified building in the city since it was certain to be the residence of the local war boss. As he expected the building in question was well guarded.

"We need to see da warboss," Hazug yelled at the leader of the guards who came up to the truck when Hazug parked it outside the fortress.

"And who is ya?" the guard leader asked as the warband dismounted from the truck.

"I is Hazug Throatlitter of da Blood Axe clan, and dese are me lads."

"And I is Drazzok 'Eadbanga of da Snakebite clan, I ain't no Blood Axe," Drazzok added not wishing to be taken for a member of Hazug's clan.

"Wot about dat?" the guard said pointing at Sophie.

"My name's Sophie," Sophie said, but the guards ignored her.

"Well," said the guard leader, "wot's it doin' 'ere."

"She works for me," Hazug said.

"Well if ya wants to take it to see da boss it'll 'ave to be on a lead," the guard leader said. Hazug was tempted to just try barging past the guards, but the squad facing him was larger than his own warband and there was sure to be further units of guards nearby, plus whatever emplaced weapons were pointing at him. Reluctantly Hazug agreed to the guard's conditions, he had to see the warboss and he didn't want to let Sophie out of his sight in this strange city. So after tying a length of rope around Sophie's waist to use as a leash Hazug and his warband was lead into the fortress home of the local warboss.

The main chamber of warboss Golgoth Zhagrad was reminiscent of that belonging to warboss Kazkal Kromag, but because Golgoth was an Evil Sun rather than a Bad Moon the decoration was less lavish and had a much greater emphasis on the cult of speed, additionally given the lack of a local human population all of his serving staff were greenskins. A Gretchin that had been sent running ahead by the guards had already informed the warboss of who they were, though Hazug had not yet given out any details of why he needed to speak with the warboss. As they entered the main chamber a guard announced them.

"Drazzok 'Eadbanga of the Snake Bite clan, Hazug Throatlitter of the Blood Axe clan and warband, plus er, a short git," the guard shouted.

"Hey," Sophie protested.

"Silence git!" the guard leader who had escorted the group here shouted and he raised his hand to strike Sophie, though he thought better of it when Hazug stepped in between them.

"Just keep it quiet," the guard leader told Hazug.

"So," warboss Zhagrad's voice boomed out, "why is dare a bunch of Blood Axe git lovers and a weirdo standin' in front of me?"

"Boss Zhagrad," Hazug began, "dis is about da kroozer wot crashed."

"Wot about it?" Zhagrad asked.

"It was shot down."

"Shot down? I ain't 'eard about any fightin' between da ship bosses, and dare ain't no one else who can shoot down a kroozer without it givin' 'em a good smackin' first. Not even Kromag."

"It wasn't one of da other ship bosses, dare's somethin' under da ground out in da desert 'ere."

"Wot? 'Ow can dare be somethin' under da ground?"

"I don't know exactly wot it is but its dare. I saw a whole city dat looked like it 'ad been dare since before da gits was in charge 'ere."

"Show 'im da skull," Drazzok said to Hazug, prodding him.

"Wot's dis about a skull?" boss Zhagrad said.

"Dare's a skull in me trukk," Hazug said, "its made of some metal dat I ain't seen before. I found at some git base. Dare was a git dare who said dat dey found on another planet and it led 'em 'ere to da city under da ground. Den a bunch of metal skeleton things came out and killed 'em. Now it looks like da skeleton things is comin' out again and 'aving a go at us. We was at a Death Skull camp dat dey torched, and we passed wot looked like lots of other camps dat dey were attackin'."

"So wot? So a few camps get torched, I got loads of boys 'ere, plus wagons and big gunz. If anyone reckons dey is 'ard enough to 'ave a go at me I'll put 'em straight."

"Dis lot is different, dey is dead 'ard to kill. Even dem marines dat da humans 'ave ain't as 'ard to kill as dese boys is."

Warboss Zhagrad leant back in his throne, and tapped his fingers on the helmet that had once belonged to one the Imperium's elite Adeptus Astartes marines that he had personally killed that he kept beside his throne as a kill trophy.

"Ya is talkin' crap," he said, "if dare is anythin' out in da desert I can 'andle it, now sod off before I kill da lot of ya."

The guards around the room shifted their stance as their warboss made the threat, adjusting the grip on their weapons so that they could bring them into action more readily.

"Its da truth," Hazug insisted, "ya need to get ya lads together and attack dare city before dey get 'ere first."

"Da boss said to get out," the leader of his guards said, "so ya can either sod off, or we can startin' smackin' 'eads."

The sun was down when the warband was ejected from warboss Zhagrad's fortress, and Hazug decided it would be good idea to find something to eat and drink.

"About bleedin' time too," Drazzok commented.

"So ya is back den," Fegrid said when he saw Hazug entering his establishment, this with the warband, "and with mates too. Well I just about got room for ya so sit down and I'll 'ave da grots bring ya somethin'," he said pointing to an empty table towards the rear of the room.

"Water for da human, grot and weirdboy, beer for da rest of us."

The other orks present stared at Sophie as the group made its way to the vacant table, which made her feel distinctly uncomfortable.

"Are they going to keep doing that?" she said, "I don't like it."

"Wot, starin' at ya?" Hazug said out loud, "Not if dey don't want me choppa down dare throats dey ain't," and orks across the room all suddenly found something other than Sophie to look at.

"So wot do we do now boss?" Roggot asked.

"We go back and see warboss Kromag lad. If dis berk Zhagrad gets 'is 'ead kicked in by dem machine things den 'e's goin' to 'ave to do somethin' about 'em instead."

"If we sent dat message," Nizz began, "den won't 'e be comin' 'ere anyway?"

"Don't be so daft lad, 'e ain't goin' to come 'ere unless 'e 'as to, and anyway it would takes 'im ages to get enough lads together and move 'em all 'ere, so 'e ain't goin' to 'elpin' us anytime soon. Ah 'e's da grub." Five Gretchin had appeared holding trays of food and drink.

"Dat's five teeth," one of them said as they placed the meals on the table and Hazug paid them.

"Tuck in lads," he said, though Drazzok had begun to eat before his bowl was even on the table, snatching it away from the serving Gretchin, "den we'll find somewhere to stay for da night before we find us a boat to get us out of 'ere. 'Opefully dem skeleton lads won't be 'ere before den."

"Wot if dey is boss?" Nizz asked.

"Den we'll fight. We is orks, wot else would we do?"

"Come quick master," the Gretchin said, "dey is 'ere now."

"Dis better be bloody good grot," the Ork said as he followed his diminutive servant through the streets of the shanty town inhabited by the local Gretchin.

"It is master, it is. Look, dare dey are."

The Gretchin pointed at a pair of similar creatures who were addressing a group of Gretchin that had gathered around them. The Ork noticed that the two Gretchin talking were in possession of tools associated with mekboys and that they had a significant amount of blue in their clothing.

"Dey used to work for Death Skulls," the Ork's servant told him, "and dey just came 'ere from da desert. Ya 'ave to 'ear wot dey 'ave to say."

The Ork pushed his way through to the front of the crowd and stared at the two Gretchin at its heart.

"Right den," he said, "tell me wot all dis crap my grot is spoutin' about metal lads in da desert is or I'll thump ya real 'ard," and he waived his fist to emphasise his point.

The two Gretchin looked up at the large newcomer, and repeated the story they had been telling since Hazug dropped them off in the city.

16

Hazug was having difficulty in booking passage. There were few ships in the harbour the next morning, and each one that Hazug checked appeared to have not been in port very long so were still unloading from their most recent voyage and would not be departing anytime soon.

"Any luck yet den boss?" Ghukil said when he returned to the truck parked at the perimeter of the docks.

"Nah, dare ain't no one leavin' for at least another three days. Except for some wreck dat looks like its about to sink anyway," Hazug said, "So it looks like we is stayin' for a bit longer yet."

As Hazug began to climb back into the truck an Ork strode up to him.

"I 'ear dat ya is called Hazug Throatlitter," the Ork said.

Hazug stepped back down from the truck and turned to face the newcomer.

"Yeah dat's me," he said, "who's askin'?"

"I is Karfok Graknok," he said, "I is one of da local runtherds, and I've 'eard a real interestin' story about wot ya 'ave been up to out in da desert. Ya needs to come with me for a bit, we needs to talk."

"Dat depends. Where 'ave ya been 'earin' stories about us?" Hazug asked.

"Ya brought a pair of grots to da city with ya, other dan dat one still ya truck dat is," Karfok said, "and dey ain't been lazy about tellin' all da other grots dat dare's somethin' bad goin' on out dare."

"Yeah dat's true, but I don't think dat we should be talkin' about out 'ere, so 'ave ya got somewhere dat we go to discuss it?"

Joining Hazug aboard his truck, Karfok directed him to his home on the outskirts of the city adjoining the pens that held untrained squigs.

"So let's 'ave a look at dis skull wot ya got," Karfok said after inviting the group into his home. It was a small hut that became crowded when Hazug's entire warband squeezed their way inside. Inside the walls were adorned with crude sketches of Gretchin, Snotlings and various breeds of squig with brief notes and labels identifying various features.

"Ya 'eard 'im," Hazug said to Sophie, "its in dat bag ya got, 'and it over to 'im."

Sophie took the metal skull from her bag and passed it to the runtherd. Karfok sat down and stared at the skull much as Hazug had done when he first laid eyes on it on the shelf in the human outpost.

"And is it true dat ya is sayin' dat dare is a city dat could be full of dese under da ground den?"

"I saw da city," Hazug confirmed, "it looked empty at first, but den I saw a whole bunch of 'em with shootas. Plus dare was wagons."

"I 'eard about da wagons from dem grots who ya rescued, dey reckon dat dey is dead 'ard. Even rokkits didn't stop 'em. Wot else d'ya know about dese metal things den?"

"Only dat dey is 'ard to kill. Most of 'em dat we got I killed with one of dare own choppas."

"Ya still got it?"

"Yeah, in me truck. I ain't lettin' go of dat anytime soon, its too good."

Karfok passed the metal skull back to Sophie before turning back to Hazug and asking, "So, 'ow much d'ya know about where we comes from?"

"I ain't spent much time in ya city, and I was planning on leavin' pretty quick," Hazug replied, but Karfok shook his head.

"No, I mean 'ow much d'ya know about where all of us come from?"

"Wot, orks?" Drazzok interrupted, "We 'as always been around ain't we? Da universe wouldn't be right without us."

Karfok leant back in his chair.

"Dare was a time when dare was no orks," he said, "A real long time ago, and dare was a war. A really big war dat went on for ages and ages and spread everywhere. But dare was a problem dat stopped anyone from ever winnin' it ya see. Da problem was dat everyone dat was fightin' in da war was crap, even though dey 'ad loads of flash shootas and wagons none of 'em knew 'ow to fight proper like, and dis really pissed off Gork and Mork. So dey let out a mighty 'Waaagh,' and it was big and loud enough to split da universe wide open, and da orks, runts and squigs came pourin' in. We was sent to show everyone else 'ow to fight cause only we could do it right.

"But because we was so good at fightin' da war ended soon after dat, and dem wot started it all went away and left us alone to get on with more fightin'. Most of us didn't bother rememberin' about da war cause it was in da past and dat ain't much us to anyone, but da runtherds still remembered it, and dey made sure dat da next lot of runtherds remembered it too and so on, we keep tellin' da next lot wot's gone before cause we need to know about wot's already 'appened when we is tryin' to get da best out of da runts and squigs, just to keep 'em in line like."

"Ya ain't got to 'ow dat relates to da metal lads," Drazzok said.

"I would if ya would stop interuptin'," Karfok replied.

"I wouldn't need to interrupt if ya would just tell us wot we needs to know."

"I'm gettin' to it.

"Well 'urry up den."

"Drazzok will ya just shut it!" Hazug yelled, finally losing his patience with the weirdboy, then he spoke to Karfok, "Go on."

"Well as I was about to say before I was interrupted," he said staring at Drazzok as he did so, "da main lot dat we 'ad to fight in da war was a bunch of lads wot was made of metal. It was good fun for da first orks fightin' 'em because dey was dad 'ard to kill. If ya shot 'em or smacked 'em dey just got up most of da time, even if dey didn't dey just vanished for a while before comin' back for another go. I reckon dat sounds like dis lot ya say is livin' under da ground 'ere. Dey 'ad a lot of forts under da ground apparently, dey lived like dey was dead and buried."

"So do dese metal lads 'ave a name den?" Hazug asked, "If I'm goin' to be fightin' 'em I wants to know who it is dat I'm fightin'."

"Da only names I've 'eard for 'em come from da gits. Dey normally calls 'em Necrons or somethin' similar, but I've also 'eard da word C'tan used to dare gods."

"Ya said dey went away. Why?" Hazug asked.

"Well because da orks beat 'em of course, like I said only da orks knew 'ow to fight proper."

"So 'ow did they beat dese Necrons den?" Hazug asked, leaning closer to Karfok.

"Dare is only one way to stop 'em without 'em comin' back again. Ya 'ave to destroy dare forts wot is under da ground, dat way dey can't fix 'emselves."

Hazug leant back again.

"But I saw just 'ow deep underground dare city is. Dare ain't no cannon or rokket powerful enough to blast through dat much rock."

"Dat's why dey build dare cities down dare," Karfok said, "so to blow 'em up ya 'ave to go into da city itself and smash it up from da inside."

"Dat would be da city wot's full of metal lads with flash shootas protectin' it yeah?" Roggot commented.

"I didn't say dat it was easy," Karfok replied, "and I don't know exactly 'ow da cities was smashed up, I only know dat dat is wot ya 'ave to do if ya wants to stop 'em for good. I was told so by da last runtherd to live 'ere."

"I don't suppose dat 'e told ya 'ow many lads it took to do any of dis did 'e?" Hazug asked, "I only got wot ya see 'ere."

"'E said dat sometimes one was enough. Sometimes a single lad could just sneak in and plant a bomb dat was big enough to blow da 'ole place."

Drazzok wasn't about to let this pass.

"'Ow can one lad carry a bomb big enough to blow up an entire city?" he snapped, "even a kroozer's torpedo ain't got enough explosive in it to take out an entire city in one go, and it takes dozens of grots to push dem about."

"Da stories ain't clear about dat either," Karfok answered, "dey just say dat it 'as been done."

"If it's already been done," said Hazug, "den I can do it again. But I'll need to talk to a mekboy first."

"If it ain't bad enough dat ya reckon ya can take out an entire city," said Drazzok, "now ya got to get a bleedin' mek involved too?"

"Well who else can build us a bomb?" Hazug replied, and then he turned to Sophie, "And while I'm lookin' for a mek, I wants ya to go with me lads and buy some cloth to make 'em some proper clothes. I'm not 'avin' 'em running round lookin' like savages. 'Ere's some teeth to pay for it, and get anythin' else ya reckon dey need an all."

Mek Garspark paused when Hazug informed him that he needed a bomb big enough to blow up a city, but small and light enough for him to be able to carry it. Then he responded with a question.

"'Ow much does ya know about liftin' gas?" he asked.

"Wot da stuff dat ya put in airships to make 'em float?" Hazug asked.

"Dat's da stuff, wot d'ya know about it exactly?"

"Dat it floats. Oh and dat it burns real good too, dat's it. Wot else is dare know?"

"Well if ya squash a particular type of it real tight like, ya can get bits of it to stick to other bits of it and ya get a different type of liftin' gas dat doesn't burn. But da thing is ya also get a massive bang when ya do it, and dat bang can be big enough to flatten a city. Gits is big on usin' bombs dat work dat way when dey blast planets from space."

"So 'ow d'ya squash dis gas enough to get da bang?"

"Dat's easy, all I needs to do is build a kustom forcefield dat's like a ball, and fill it with da liftin' gas. Den I get da forcefield to get smaller and it packs da gas together tighter until 'kaboom!' and Garspark spread his arms out as he shouted this final work, "Easy peasy. But it'll cost ya."

"Ow much?"

"Well dare's a lot to take into account see, first dare's getting' da liftin' gas..."

"Ow much?"

"...and den dare's da kustom forcefield to be designed and built..."

"Ow much?"

"...and den I 'ave to get da gas into da forcefield."

Hazug grabbed Mek Garspark by his collar.

"Just tell me 'ow bleedin' much," he shouted.

"An 'undred teeth," Garspark replied and Hazug released his grip.

"An 'undred?"

"Yeah, well I ain't got all da parts dat I need for a forcefield at da mo, I can get da gas, dat's easy, all I 'ave to do is send some seawater through one of me gas makin' machines and collect wot comes out, but da forcefield will need some really special parts on account of ya wantin' it to be small like."

Hazug opened one of the pouches on his belt. The losses suffered by his warband in the alien city, added to the casualties they had inflicted on the Death Skull raiders in the desert had provided him with quite a sizeable reserve of cash. It would have been more, but the strange alien guns were quite capable of destroying the teeth of victims and relatively few had been recovered from the Death Skull outpost. Hazug dug his hand into the open pouch and pulled out a handful of teeth. He put the teeth on a workbench and began to count them out. He took another handful of teeth when he had finished and repeated to do so until he had counted out one hundred of them. He now had only a handful remaining.

"So 'ow long will it take for dis bomb to be built?" he asked.

"A day to get da parts and da gas, den two more to build it," Garspark told him.

Hazug separated the pile of teeth into two equal amounts.

"Den ya get 'alf now, and 'alf when its done," he said scooping one of the piles back into his pouch, "deal?"

"Deal, but ya 'ad better be 'ere with da rest of dat cash in three days."

"Trust me," said Hazug as he was leaving the workshop, "I ain't got no where else to go."

When Hazug returned to the lodgings the warband had secured by the weirdhuts he found Sophie hard at work outside sewing combat fatigues for the Blood Axes. He was pleased to see that she had selected a dull grey cloth, similar to the shade he wore, and as she did when she made new clothing for Hazug, Sophie had imprinted a green camouflage pattern onto it. Nearby orks were pointing not only at Sophie herself, but also at the patterned clothing and questioning what sort of Ork would wear such ridiculous colours. None of them were the size of nobs though, and when Hazug with his rifle cradled in his arms arrived they stopped their insults and got on with anything else they could find to do.

"Ya got everythin' den?" Hazug asked Sophie.

"Yes," she replied, "the Ork selling tried to hike up the price because I wasn't an Ork, but Ghukil and Gobnok convinced him to drop his price by threatening to burn down his stall with that flamethrower you found."

"Ah, dey is learnin' quick," Hazug said, "so 'ow many teeth did ya bring back den?"

"None."

"None?"

"Well we had to buy boots, belts and pouches as well, and then Ratish took what was left for paint."

"Paint? Wot does that bloody grot need paint for?"

Just then Ratish himself appeared, patches of green and grey paint now mixed in with the layer of grime that was a permanent feature of his appearance.

"Master," he said gleefully, "come see wot Ratish do for ya!" and he ran back around the building, beckoning Hazug to follow him. Hazug went after the Gretchin, ready to give him a beating for wasting money, until he saw why Ratish had wanted the paint. There parked exactly where Hazug had left it earlier was his truck, but now it had a uniform coat of grey paint with crossed green axes on each side and the armoured plate at the front.

"Does master like it?" Ratish asked.

Hazug patted Ratish on his head.

"Actually I do," he said, and he decided that there was no need to beat Ratish after all.

17

The fortress had existed for centuries. The humans had built it to provide a secure base from which to patrol the surrounding area, and when Ork warriors had overrun it, the greenskins had simply patched the holes they blew in its thick stone walls and used it for exactly the same purpose. In the heat of the midday sun most of the garrison was keeping to the shade, and only an unlucky few were standing watch on the walls when a row of floating metal pyramids came into view. The sentries sounded the alarm rapidly and a nob soon joined them on the walls to see for himself. Realising straight away that these were not Ork vehicles that were drifting silently towards them he gave the only order that made any sense.

"Get 'em!"

The orks' small arms were the first weapons to be fired, but only because they were the only weapons that were at the ready, their weak rounds made no mark on the approaching pyramids and many of the rounds fired didn't even have the range to reach their targets. Next came the shoulder launched rockets, and several volleys roared towards the pyramids with varying degrees of accuracy, but even those that struck them cleanly did no more than leave scorch marks that disappeared moments later. Finally the fortress's artillery weapons were ready to fire and, with a succession of booms and crackles, an assortment of heavy shells and energy bolts were launched at the oncoming pyramids. These were more effective, and one of them suddenly dropped to the desert sands below. But now the fortress was in range of the weapons carried by the alien pyramids, and in a matter of seconds the entire wall facing them was blasted to atoms by a concentrated volley of energy blasts that erupted from the large crystal mounted atop the pyramids. As larger orks attempted to impose some sort of order on their remaining troops the pyramids reached the gaping hole in the fortress's defences, when they suddenly halted. A panel on each pyramid slid upwards to reveal a wall of green light behind it, from which stepped hordes of skeletal warriors whose metal bodies glistened in the desert sun.

"Waaagh!"

One Ork after another let out their war cry and charged towards their attackers who responded by raising the strange rifles they carried and firing bolts of green lightning at the orks as they rushed towards them. More lightning erupted from turrets mounted on the corners of the pyramids to engulf those orks who avoided the massed fire from the infantry. The few orks who got close enough to strike any of the metal figures attacking them watched in horror as any damage they inflicted repaired itself almost immediately. The fortress that had stood for centuries was destroyed in minutes.

"Wot d'ya mean it's gone?" warboss Golgoth Zhalrad yelled at the Ork nob who had just charged into his main hall with the news that one of the largest fortresses on the continent had been annihilated.

"A bunch of bikers who'd been ridin' around da desert went back and found it dat way boss," the nob explained, "dey said dat everythin' 'ad been torched so dey rode back 'ere as quick as dey could."

"So wot did it?"

"Dunno boss, da bikers said dat dey only saw bits of orks and runts and dat dey all came from da fort's mobs. Whoever destroyed it must 'ave taken dare bodies away with 'em. But dey also said dat dare was no tracks outside da fort to show which way anyone went."

Warboss Zhalrad roared with anger.

"Ow does one of me best forts get wrecked, and dare ain't no clues left about who did it?" he yelled at the nob.

"Dunno boss."

"Well I wants to know who did it, cause I'm goin' to smack 'em back real good like. So get as many bikers and dethkoptas as ya can and tell 'em to find who did dis, and don't ya come back until ya know."

"Right boss," and the nob fled from the hall while the warboss was still willing to let him leave with his life. Still fuming with rage, warboss Zhalrad snatched a roast squig from a plate beside his throne and stuffed it into his mouth whole while the various advisors and hangers-on in the room waited in silence for him to speak again. None of them wanted risk his anger being directed at them should they accidentally say something that offended him further. Finally one of them, a nob in the traditional black leather garb of the Goff clan plucked up the courage to speak.

"'Ere boss," he began cautiously, "didn't dat Blood Axe git lover say somethin' about some aliens dat was torchin' stuff in da desert?"

Warboss Zhalrad roared with anger again and leapt to his feet and dived at the nob. He grabbed the Goff around his throat and squeezed hard as the rest of the room looked on in silence. The Goff struggled to shake free of the warboss's grip but it was to no avail, and it was not long before there was the sound of the bones in his neck being crushed and he slumped limply in Golgoth's grip.

Golgoth let go of the Goff's corpse and it fell to the floor in a lifeless heap. Then he turned to face the rest of the orks present.

"Yeah I think dat 'e did," he said calmly, "someone go bring da Blood Axe 'ere."

No one dared move.

"Now!"

Every other Ork in the room ran for the exit.

Hazug watched his Blood Axes sorting out their new equipment around the truck. Just a few days earlier they had been armed with crude bows and arrows and dressed in clothing made of animal skin. Now they had modern firearms, grenades, load carrying equipment and camouflage uniforms of woven fabric. Only their blades remained, the more advanced equivalents of these weapons were more expensive than they were worth. It had been some time since Hazug had last been in charge of a mob of his own, and it felt good to be a real nob once again.

"Now ya look like proper kommandoes," he told the assembled orks, "and I expect ya all to act like 'em as well. So just cause ya got shootas doesn't mean dat ya 'as to go usin' 'em as soon as ya see da enemy like most of da clans do, sneak up on 'em so dey is easier to shoot and get stuck in."

The mob grinned back at Hazug, but before he could speak again they were interrupted by the arrival of a group of Ork nobbs, the assorted colouring of their clothing indicated that they came from more than a single clan.

"Wot d'ya want?" Hazug asked, looking the nob closest to him straight in the eyes.

"Da boss wants to see ya and da weirdo," the nob replied.

"I've already seen 'im," Hazug replied, "he told me to sod off."

"Well now 'e wants to see ya again, and 'e wants to see ya now. So come with us or else..."

"Or else wot?" Hazug said interrupted the nob as his mob raised their weapons and the nobbs before them realised they were facing a well-armed commando group that included a flamethrower. One squeeze of the trigger from that weapon would incinerate them all in one go.

"Or else we can wait until ya is ready maybe?" the nob said as he re-evaluated his position.

Hazug turned to his mob once more.

"Right, Ghukil's in charge until I gets back," he said, "I is off to see da warboss again."

Hazug was somewhat surprised that nobbs working on behalf of a warboss from the Evil Suns clan would have come on foot, but they had not brought a vehicle so, after collecting Drazzok from the nearby weirdhuts, they had to walk the way to the warboss's fortress. Once there, they were shown straight in to see warboss Zhalrad. However, rather than being taken to the main hall they were instead taken to a different chamber with a sign on the door that read 'WAR ROOM – NO FIGHTIN' IN 'ERE'. A single table that was painted to provide a map of the continent dominated the interior of the room. Then onto that map small wooden markers had been placed to represent settlements and the estimated locations of forces of orks. Hazug noticed that several of these markers had been placed on their sides, suggesting that they had been destroyed at those locations. Warboss Zhalrad leant on the edge of the table studying it while several of his advisors stood behind him.

"Ah Hazug, Drazzok, come in," he said as the pair were lead into the room, then he pointed at the table, "so where's dis 'ole ya was tellin' us about den?"

Hazug produced the map he had taken from the human outpost and laid it on the table, and then he compared the two maps.

"Its 'ere," he said pointing to the location on the table that matched the mark representing the position of the alien structure on his map. Warboss Zhalrad beckoned a Gretchin to the table, and the creature placed another marker where Hazug had pointed.

With the position of the alien headquarters now marked, warboss Zhalrad took another look at the table.

"Dat means dat dese metal things 'ave already made it more dan 'alf way 'ere," he said pointing at the table and its little wooden markers.

"As anybody beaten 'em yet?" Hazug asked.

"Nah," the warboss replied, "we ain't even found any survivors from any of dese attacks yet, and we're guessin' about wot we got left cause we ain't been able to get in touch with 'em yet. 'Ow did ya get of dare fort?"

"We only met up with a couple of mobs of 'em before I decide we was goin' to get out of dare," Hazug said, "and I was able to get one of dare own choppas which is pretty good at cuttin' 'em up. I still lost more dan 'alf me boys though."

"So ya ain't got no sneaky Blood Axe way of killin' 'em all den?"

"Ya is better speakin' to da runtherds."

"Runtherds? Wot do dey know about dis?"

"Apparently dese metal lads is called Necrons and dey've been around a long time, and da runtherds is da only ones who keep track of stuff wot 'appened dat long ago."

"Someone go get dis runtherd den, wot's 'is name?"

"Karfok."

"Right, go get Karfok," Zhalrad told a Gretchin who promptly scampered out of the room, "Now wot did 'e tell about fightin' dese metal lads den?"

"Necrons."

"Yeah right, Necrons. Now 'ow do we fight 'em?"

"'E told me dat if ya want to stop da metal lads den ya 'ave to find dare base and smash it, otherwise dey just keep on comin' back at ya."

"'Ow is we supposed to smash up a base if its under da ground? Even a kroozer will 'ave an 'ard time reachin' it."

"I've already asked a mek by da name of Garspark about dis, and I got 'im buildin' me a special bomb dat will take care of it for us."

"And 'ow is ya plannin' to get da bomb into da city?"

"I'm goin' to take it dare myself, sneak into da place, set da fuse and den get out before it goes off."

"When can ya do it?"

"I can leave in three days, and it'll take two more to get dare."

"So dem metal lads will likely be 'ere well before ya can blow up dare base?"

"Dey will, ya can count on it."

The two Gretchin clambered over the remains of the battlewagon. It had once been one of the tanks used by the humans who inhabited the planet before the orks invaded, after the invasion had taken place it had been salvaged and put into use by the orks themselves. Now it was nothing more than a burnt out wreck, just the latest victim of the advancing alien warriors. Standing on top of the wreckage one of the Gretchin took out a small telescope and looked around. In the distance he saw the tips of almost a dozen metal pyramids disappearing over the horizon, looking to his companion he nodded. The other Gretchin lifted a horn to his lips and blew.

18

In the war room Hazug and Drazzok observed warboss Zhalrad giving orders as new information came in regarding the locations of Ork forces on the continent so they were present when an Ork nob brought the note saying that alien vehicles had been spotted closing on the city itself. He had already sent someone to order more meks to locate Garspark and hurry along the construction of the bomb.

"Grots spotted 'em boss," he said, "and dey blew dare alarm 'orn to let a bunch of nearby biker boys know about it. Dey went for a look dem selves, and when dey saw wot it was dey came straight back 'ere to tell ya about it."

"More like dey just ran away," warboss Zhalrad said in disgust, "still at least we know where dey is now. Mark it grot," and he prodded a Gretchin who promptly placed a marker where the report said the aliens had been sighted, "but go and make sure dem cowardly grot brains is on da front line for when da aliens get 'ere," he instructed the nob..

"Dat's pretty close," Hazug said when he saw where the Gretchin had put the marker.

"Close?" said Drazzok, "Any closer and dey'll be in da room with us."

"At dis rate dey'll get 'ere tonight," Hazug said to Zhalrad, "'Ow soon can ya get ya Stompas walkin'?"

"'Ow does ya know about dem?" the warboss asked.

"Dey ain't difficult to see, I drove right past 'em when I got 'ere."

Warboss Zhalrad turned to one of his advisors, a mekboy the size of a nob.

"Well?" he asked

"Well wot boss?" the big mek replied and Zhalrad clipped him about the head.

"Ya 'eard da Blood Axe, 'ow long will it take to get da Stompas walkin'?"

"Dare's ten of 'em finished boss, we can 'ave dem movin' today, and den dares another four wot ain't got all dare guns on 'em yet but dey still 'ave dare engines. We can get dem movin' too if ya want."

Zhalrad looked back at Hazug who nodded at him. Zhalrad looked back at the big mek.

"Yeah, get it done, looks like we needs everythin' we got."

"Right boss," the mek said before leaving the room.

"Right," the warboss said turning his attention back to the table as a Gretchin put in place markers to represent the Stompas, "so we'll 'ave a line of Stompas ready and waitin' for 'em. D'ya thing it'll be enough Hazug?"

"Dunno," he replied, "I ain't seen wot da wagons dese metal lads use can do, either way I reckon ya'll need a whole lot of lads to back 'em up."

"Dat ain't a problem, I'm 'avin' nob's go round and get dare mobs together. We'll 'ave a whole bunch of 'em ready by nightfall."

Joined by Karfok the runtherd, the occupants of the war room were informed that large alien vehicles had been spotted near the city, but that they were currently stationary.

"Dey can teleport dare lads usin' dare wagons," Karfok said, "so ya better be ready for loads of 'em to show up real quick."

"No sense in us waitin' 'ere," warboss Zhalrad said, "we better go take a look for ourselves."

The city ahead was far bigger than any of the settlements that the Necron mind had sent its forces against so far. It was walled, and weapon emplacements could be discerned at random points all along the wall. This was nothing new, more than one of the smaller forts already destroyed had employed artillery in fixed positions but had so far done nothing more than temporarily disable a single monolith.

Movement.

The gates of the city had opened, and a group of large walking machines was emerging from within the city. They resembled large, crude statues of the creatures inhabiting the surface of this world themselves and it appeared that they all carried significant weaponry, both ranged and suitable for close assault. Rather than advance towards the approaching force of monoliths, the enormous walking machines instead formed a defensive line between them and the city walls, more than thirty of them in all.

Reinforce.

The Necron mind connected with its other forces in the field, there were several groups of fast attack vehicles active, and the mind ordered them all to converge on the city while the monoliths held their position temporarily. The sterilisation of the planet would not be stopped by this crude, if large, opposing force.

From the ramparts of the city walls Hazug watched as squads of alien soldiers began to emerge from the floating pyramids. After appearing the skeletal figures organised themselves into regularly spaced rows and stood motionless in front of the pyramids. At random intervals there were loud booms as the city's guns fired shells towards the growing ranks of skeletal Necron warriors forming up in neat rows.

"Dey ain't attackin'," he said, "dat ain't good."

"It gives us longer to get ready," Zhalrad said.

"Yeah, but if dey attack da city its easier for me to slip around 'em. With 'em all just waitin' out dare I ain't goin' to get past 'em."

A shell landed amongst a large group of the Necrons, about half of which repaired themselves and stood back up again. The others faded away as Hazug had seen them several times before. The reaction of the remaining alien warriors appeared to be one of indifference, they were far enough away that they were beyond the range of most of the orks' weapons and they had reinforcements emerging from the pyramids that floated silently behind their ranks faster than they were taking losses.

"'Ere Karfok," he asked, "wot's appenin' to 'em when dey disappear after ya kill 'em?"

"Dey is goin' back to dare base to be fixed," the runtherd said, "dat's why ya 'ave to destroy it if ya want to stop 'em from comin' back again."

Hazug remembered the alien machine that he had rammed with his truck.

"When one of 'em disappeared it took a bit of me truck with it," he said, "So wot if I was 'oldin' on to one real tight when it went back to its base?"

"Den ya would probably go with it," Karfok said.

"Den I got a new way into dare base," Hazug said, and it ain't goin' to take me two days to get dare either."

Word was sent for Hazug's warband to join him and warboss Zhalrad on the ramparts where they were observing the growing number of alien soldiers massing beyond the city walls.

"We is goin' to use da aliens' own teleportas," he announced. In response he received a lot of puzzled expressions. Drazzok unsurprisingly chose to express his confusion rather more loudly.

"Do ya 'ave a squig brain in dat git lovin' 'ead of yours? Or ave ya 'ave just gone bonkers," he said, "dey ain't goin' to 'and over a teleporta to ya, and even if dey did 'ow will ya know 'ow to work it?"

"We don't need to know how to work it," Hazug said, "dem skeleton lads vanish usin' a teleporta, right Karfok?"

"Er, yeah, dat's right."

"And when a bit of me truck got caught in one of dare machines it got taken too. So I figure dat if I 'ang onto one 'em when dey teleport back to dare base dey'll take me along with 'em."

There was a moment of quiet, even Drazzok was for once stuck without anything to say. It was Gobnok that broke the silence.

"Ya isn't thinkin' of goin' alone is ya boss?"

"Don't worry lad, I'll need all me kommandoes with me for dis," Hazug reassured him, "I can't be findin' somewhere to shove a bomb and watchin' me back at da same time."

"'Ow is ya expectin' to get close enough to grab one of 'em?" Zhalrad asked, "Dey is right over dare and we ain't even got many guns dat can shoot dat far."

Hazug pointed to the Necrons' right flanked as he viewed it. There lay a river running past the aliens and into the city itself.

"We'll sneak up on 'em dare," he said, "da river bank looks tall enough to conceal us until we chose to climb out of it behind 'em. Den we'll 'ave a go at 'em with our choppas."

"Ya'll never be able to get dat close without 'em noticin' dat ya is dare," Zhalrad said, "dey is too close to da river."

"Dat's why I need ya to create a diversion," Hazug told the warboss, "send ya Stompas and ya lads in to fight 'em and dey'll be distracted. We'll be able to get real close to 'em den. All we need is dat bomb Garspark's buildin' for us."

"Bloody brilliant," Drazzok said, "all of dis relies on wot a mek can do. Bet 'e just gives ya a box full of bolts."

"If I die cause of a mek I is goin' to kill 'im," Ubgrub said, and the other Blood Axes nodded in agreement.

"'E'll give ya wot 'e promised ya," Zhalrad said, "dare's another two of me own meks givin' 'im an 'and."

"And 'ow much is dat costin' me?" Hazug asked, "I barely got enough to pay Garspark as it is."

"Dis is on da 'ouse," Zhalrad said, "and ya needn't bother payin' Garspark any more either, 'e ain't doin' all da work any more."

Hazug just grinned in response.

Mek Garspark's workshop was a hive of activity when Hazug arrived to check on the progress of his bomb with Ratish close behind him. In addition to Garspark himself there were the two other meks sent by warboss Zhalrad plus the Gretchin servants of all three scurrying around and, to a certain degree, getting in one another's way.

"'Ere Garspark," Hazug shouted over the noise of the workshop, "'ow's dat bomb comin' along den?"

Garspark stopped what he was doing and walked over to Hazug.

"Not long now," Garspark said, "dese two meks dat da big boss sent to 'elp out already 'ad an 'alf finished forcefield machine for one of dare kustom Stompas. Now all dey 'ave to do is kustomise it a bit more to make it smaller and lighter for ya."

"And 'ow long will dat take?" Hazug asked.

Garspark turned to the other two meks and shouted at them.

"Ow's it goin'?"

Without even bothering to look up one of the meks shouted back.

"Nearly got it. It ain't dat 'ard, da bomb's goin' to be a lot smaller dan da Stompa dis was meant for so we can rip loads of gubbins out dead easy."

"Wot about da liftin' gas ya said ya needed?" Hazug asked when Garspark turned back towards him with a smile on his face.

Garspark looked around the workshop and let out another shout.

"Grot! Bring us one of dem canisters over dare, quick!"

A Gretchin dashed to a stack of metal cylinders located at the back of the workshop and struggling with the weight he dragged it to where Garspark and Hazug stood. Garspark picked up the cylinder with both his hands.

"I got a dozen of dese already," he said, "a dozen more and I'll ave enough to fill da bomb with."

"Dey look 'eavy," Hazug said, "'ow is I supposed to carry more dan twenty of 'em?"

Garspark put the cylinder down again.

"Take dat back now grot," he told his servant, who mumbled something unpleasant as he began to drag it back to where it had been to begin with. "Ya don't carry da cylinders," Garspark told Hazug, "just da gas inside 'em. Da forcefield will 'old it all in."

It was then that Garspark caught sight of the large bladed weapon that Hazug had slung across his back.

"Kor, where d'ya get dat choppa?" he exclaimed, leaning to try and get a better look. Hazug took the weapon from his back.

"It belonged to one of dem metal boys. One of dare bosses I think. 'E wasn't 'oldin' it when 'e vanished and I kept it. It cuts through anything real easy like."

"Wanna sell it? I'll give ya a dozen teeth right now."

Suddenly, before Hazug could turn down the offer an explosion rocked the workshop.

"Wot was dat?" Garspark exclaimed, and both he and Hazug dashed outside, swiftly followed by the other two mekboys and the assembled Gretchin.

"Master, Ratish see fire!" Ratish shouted.

The night sky was orange with fire from the direction of the docks. The fuel stores there had ignited, and several of the alien floating machines of the same type that had struck Hazug's warband on the journey back to the city could be seen silhouetted against the flames. There was the rattle of automatic gunfire as the numerous anti-aircraft batteries attempted to track the fast moving targets.

"I better get goin'," Hazug said, "It looks like we need dat bomb quickly. I'll be in da warboss's place on da walls, can ya bring it to me dare?"

"Yeah sure, we'll get back to it now. I reckon it'll be done tonight," Garspark said as he watched one of the Necron machines be struck by cannon fire and then vanish as it spiralled downwards.

Hazug ran through the streets towards the location on the city walls that functioned as warboss Zhalrad's forward command post. Several times Necron machines passed overhead, eerily silent as they moved rapidly through the air. Each time a group of the machines appeared nearby orks fired wildly into the air, though Hazug did not see any of them take any noticeable damage. Conversely he saw plenty of evidence of the damage that the Necron machines could inflict, with the partial remains of orks scattered in the streets. As often as not, what was left of the bodies had groups of Gretchin or even other orks removing any possessions or teeth that had survived intact.

The line of floating Necron pyramids had increased dramatically in number since the first advance unit arrived, and there were now more than thirty of them holding their position outside the city. But still for a few brief moments it had seemed that the orks would be able to destroy the army of metal warriors arrayed before them without even having to leave the city walls. A barrage of heavy shells had slammed into one of the floating pyramids from which the alien infantry was emerging and blasted it apart, taking a number of the nearby warriors with it. Swiftly followed by a chorus of cheering and small arms fire directed into air from all along the wall, but then the Necron army was bolstered by numerous waves of small but fast moving machines that came hurtling over the horizon and passing over the growing army before striking at the artillery emplacements that lined the walls. A few had attempted to strafe the Stompas lined up in front of the walls, but their close in weapons had driven them away and they had instead turned their attention to the city itself also.

"Duck!" Drazzok shouted as the next wave approached.

"Oi git!" warboss Zhalrad yelled at Sophie, "Where's ya owner and 'is lads gone?"

"Hazug said he said he was going to check on his bomb," she replied before ducking as the alien machines Drazzok had spotted passed low overhead, "I don't know about the others."

"Bah!" the warboss exclaimed, and he took a look along the city walls.

After suppressing the guns on the walls the aliens had moved inwards and struck at various targets, most significantly the main fuel reserve had been attacked and ignited. Now there would be precious little fuel on which to run his army's vehicles, many would have only whatever fuel they were carrying.

"E better 'urry up or else dare ain't goin' to be much left for a diversion at dis rate," Drazzok snapped.

"Grot!" Zhalrad shouted, and a nearby Gretchin ran to the warboss, "Get down to dem Stompas and tell 'em to get movin'," the Gretchin nodded quickly and ran off to deliver the order to attack. The he turned to Sophie again, "Well I ain't waitin' for 'im to get back, I is off to lead me own lads," and the warboss stormed off into battle followed by his advisors.

Now alone on the ramparts, Drazzok and Sophie stared at one another.

"Well I ain't goin' nowhere," Drazzok said, "me 'ead'll probably burst down dare."

19

Advance.

The Necron control mind sent the command for the troops it had already been able to send to the Ork city to move and meet the horde of green skinned savages that now poured from every available gateway. The crude walking machines that had formed a line between the mind's army and the city walls also began to advance, and for the first time they opened fire.

"Waaagh!"

The entire Ork army gave their traditional war cry as it charged head long towards the assembled Necron army that was now also moving. The noise was great enough that it even drowned out the sound of the Stompas launching their missiles. More than just crude rocket propelled bombs; these each carried a Gretchin pilot who guided them to their targets. The Gretchin of course died when the missiles detonated or, in the case of those that turned out to duds, just crashed into something solid. Most of the missiles were flown towards the Necron pyramids, though the armour of these was so effective that none of them had any lasting effect and the barrage slowed none of the pyramids for more than a few moments. A handful of the missiles instead crashed into the neat rows of advancing foot soldiers where their payloads had more effect, blasting several holes in their numbers. Only the larger ones of them were able to repair themselves, the smaller type who made up the vast majority of the force just faded away when they were caught in the blasts.

Warboss Zhalrad had made his way to the front of a massive horde of Ork warriors and he now led them into the centre of the Necron lines. He saw flashes of light ahead, and initially though they were muzzle flashes, but then he saw that the flashes were appearing randomly within the ranks of the Necrons and that they were breaking their formation to engage in hand to hand combat with swarms of tiny green creatures that were materialising next to them. He grinned as he realised what was happening, and he briefly looked back towards the city walls where he saw a group of large Ork mekboys holding strange contraptions over their shoulders with propeller like spinning arms at the front. Behind the meks Gretchin with pointed sticks were herding even smaller Snotlings towards the backs of the machines carried by their masters where they were being sucked into them and teleported into the midst of the alien ranks. Those that survived emerged insane and attacked whatever was nearest to them. Others either failed to emerge or died as a result of the teleportation or materialising inside something solid, such as the alien warriors themselves some of who were fading away as their internal systems attempted to coexist with the matter that had made up teleported Snotlings that appeared within their bodies.

"Da snotzoggas is getting 'em lads!" he yelled, "Move faster or dare won't be any left for us to kill!"

As the orks got closer to the aliens they came within range of their weapons, and orks began to fall as the strange energy weapons carried by the Necrons that disintegrated the flesh of their victims struck them. In response, orks with rifles stopped their advance and returned fire. Their accuracy was poor, but the numbers of both Ork riflemen and their alien opponents were so great that many rounds struck the metallic skeletons. Most shrugged off the crude bullets and continued to fire at the charging orks, while others fell temporarily before repairing themselves and rising to their feet once more and getting back into the fight. Some did not get up however, and instead faded away leaving no evidence that they had ever been there. Zhalrad was still at the front of the horde of orks as it smashed into the ranks of the Necrons and began to lash out at their enemy wildly.

"Dis is da life!" he shouted as he ripped the head from an alien and hurled it away before moving on the next opponent.

Another of the pyramid shaped vehicles fell to the ground in a ball of flame as it was struck by volley after volley of energy blasts and shells from artillery guns that had been dragged into position by their Gretchin crews under the supervision of the meks that had built the weapons. Gretchin cheered as the wreckage of the alien vehicle continued to burn, but the meks used whips and chains to get them back to work.

"Less shoutin', more shootin'!" the largest mek yelled at the gun crews as they pushed their heavy weapons around to face at another of the oncoming alien vehicles.

But the vehicles were not without their own armaments and before the gun crews were ready to fire another volley a brilliant beam of light erupted from several of the crystals mounted on top of the pyramids and shot towards the artillery position far too quickly for either the Gretchin gunners or their Ork supervisor to be able to seek any sort of cover.

The power of the beam roasted the flesh of the greenskins before it even hit them and their weapons. Before they even had time to scream their lungs were scorched, and then their bodies were blasted apart as ammunition for the guns was detonated. Rounds for some of the cannons and rocket launchers was thrown clear before it could detonate, and as they exploded further away they spread the destruction

caused by the alien energy blasts. Unperturbed by the destruction of their artillery, the orks continued to surge towards the aliens as more greenskins of all sizes, from Snotlings to nobs, emerged from the city gates.

With so many of its forces deployed to attack the city, the Necron control mind limited its observation to the data feeds from the monoliths and the commanders in the field rather than trying to interpret the information sent back by each individual warrior. Even this provided a wealth of data to be processed. The city's inhabitants had proven themselves to be well armed and determined and many warriors had returned to the complex for repair and even some of the monoliths had been destroyed by artillery.

Situation satisfactory.

In spite of the losses suffered there was little doubt that the city would fall. Their most powerful weapons that it had possessed had been destroyed by the destroyer platforms, and the lighter artillery guns had been blasted to atoms by the monoliths they had threatened. Only the Ork spacecraft in orbit now posed a serious threat to the monoliths, and the poor accuracy demonstrated so far by the city's defenders suggested that if they were able to call down supporting fire with the two opposing forces so close together it would be as likely to strike their own lines or even the city itself as it would hit any the Necron forces. In any case, the spacecraft were all in low orbits and their orbital paths did not appear to be bringing any of them into a position where they could provide fire support. The mind was aware that there were spacecraft closing in response to its request for assistance that would be more than capable of dealing with those in orbit now, so rather than concern itself with them the alien mind would wait for the appropriate forces to arrive and deal with them.

Shifting its attention back to the battle under way, the Necron control mind decided to continue to bolster its forces with more of the troops that had been revived from their slumber and bring the battle to its inevitable conclusion more quickly.

Surrounded by the skeletal Necron warriors, warboss Zhalrad lashed out in all directions. Each swipe of his heavy blade cut into another of the figures, and in spite of their heavily armoured bodies he was amassing an impressive tally of kills. He was however infuriated with the situation. Firstly there was the fact that his defeated foes simply faded away to nothing, making it impossible to recover any form of trophy as proof of his achievements, and secondly he occasionally caught sight of another group of the Necrons stepping from the front of one of the pyramids they used instead of real vehicles that travelled on tracks or wheels. The Stompas at least were cutting a swath of destruction through the ranks of the enemy. Their gatling cannons had run dry of ammunition moments after the battle had started, but each had taken many dozens of the aliens down first, and each machine still retained a formidable arsenal of weapons that they were putting to good use.

Zhalrad became aware of something strange approaching. Long and slender it floated across the battlefield towards him, a flexible tail hanging beneath a set of broad shoulders. As it moved it appeared to fade and then become clearly visible before fading again, thought it never quite fully disappeared. Zhalrad forced his way through the group of Necron warriors he had been fighting, leaving the other nearby orks to deal with them and raced towards these newcomers.

He lashed out again, and was startled to see his blade pass through the body of one of his new opponents without there being any resistance to the attack. The machine became easier to see once more and lunged forwards to counter attack. Zhalrad raised his blade to parry the strike and this time his weapon connected. Clearly he could only strike his enemy when it was fully visible. He strained to push his own weapon against his opponent's bladed arm and drive it back into its body, but as he began to make progress the Necron faded, becoming ghost like again and Zhalrad's blade slipped straight through it, almost overbalancing the warboss in the process. Movement to his side caught his eye, and he swung around with his blade extended just as another of the Necrons attempted to attack him. The force of his attack cut the Necron in half, and both parts disappeared fully as they fell to the ground.

"Boss! Over 'ere!"

Hazug stopped his dash through the city when he heard Gobnok's yell and looked around. Ratish didn't stop in time and crashed into the back of his master, but Hazug barely noticed the impact. He saw the other Blood Axes rushing towards him from a side street.

"Lads!" Hazug shouted back, "Wot is ya doin' 'ere?"

"We went for somethin' to eat," Ghukil said as the Blood Axes reached their leader, "and den dare was all dis shoutin' and things started explodin' so we came to look for ya. We figured that ya would go back to da warboss's place on da walls so we was goin' dare ourselves."

There was the dull 'thump' of a large explosion from the direction of the battle, and the orks saw a ball of flame shoot skywards.

"Looks like one of da Stompas just went up," Hazug said, then added, "come on den lads, let's get movin'." Sophie ran to Hazug and wrapped her arms around his waist when he burst into the command post followed by the other Blood Axes.

"I was so worried," she said.

"Yeah, well I is just fine," Hazug said as he pulled himself free, "now wot's 'appened to da boss?"

"E's gone to get some fightin' done," Drazzok said, "if ya 'as got dat bomb ya better get movin' with it."

Hazug went to take a look at the battle raging on below. Behind him the other Blood Axes also crowded around for a look. Unsurprisingly the Ork army had charged the Necrons head on, and as a result they had taken many casualties as they had run across open terrain, they remains of many orks still lay where they had fallen, their comrades had not yet had the opportunity to loot what remained. As Hazug had expected, one of the Stompas was a burning wreck, while another appeared to have been disabled without exploding and there were signs of damage to most of the lumbering walkers. On the other side of the battlefield there were the remains of some of the pyramids that had disgorged the ranks of skeletal warriors prior to the battle, so clearly it was not all going the Necrons way. Weapons fire still erupted from positions occupied by both sides, most of it was small arms fire, marked either by the muzzle flashes of Ork projectile weapons or the green lightning from the alien weapons. The volume of weapons fire was steadily decreasing as more and more Ork units got close enough to engage the Necrons hand to hand or were either forced to flee or wiped out entirely.

"So when do we get to join in boss?" Ghukil asked. Being the largest of the other Blood Axes he had pushed his way to the front of the group and stood at Hazug's side as he watched the battle as it unfolded below.

"We ain't goin' into da middle of dat," Hazug said, "We is still goin' along dat river. Just as soon as dat bomb gets 'ere anyway." Hazug pointed to the river he intended to follow. As he had hoped it had remained on the periphery of the battle with only a handful of units from either side anywhere near it.

"So when is da bomb getting' 'ere boss?" Ghukil asked.

Hazug shrugged.

"Dunno lad," he said, "mek Garspark reckoned 'e was almost done last time I saw 'im so I 'ope we ain't goin' to 'ave to wait much longer."

"If ya do," Drazzok interrupted, "den dare may not be anythin' left to provide ya distraction."

"I can see dat."

"Just makin' sure, someone needs to remind ya 'ow crap ya plan is."

Hazug didn't bother to argue with the weirdboy. Drazzok wouldn't be going on the raid anyway, he lacked the infiltration ability that was innate to all Blood Axes. Instead he took a sheet of paper and some charcoal from one of his pouches and began to write. It was at that point that there was a shout from the street below.

"Oi!" mek Garspark yelled up to the command post, "Is Hazug dare? I got 'is bomb."

Everyone in the command post dashed to the back and looked down into the street. There they saw mek Garspark standing beside a truck from which a pair of Gretchin were unloading a metal cylinder that was the size of a small barrel.

"I'm 'ere," Hazug shouted back, "we is comin' down now," and after giving the he led the Blood Axes down into the street where Garspark was waiting for him.

"See told ya it wouldn't take long," the mekboy boasted, "and ya'll need dis," and he produced a crude key, which he handed to Hazug.

"So 'ow does dis work den?" Hazug asked.

Garspark turned to where his Gretchin had put the bomb down and pointed to a hole near the top of it.

"Ya put da key in 'ere," he said, "and turn it all da way around." Next he indicated a glass tube beside the keyhole, "Den dis fills with liquid metal until it makes da contacts and dat makes da forcefield shrink real quick which squashes da gas inside da bomb and it goes off."

"Ow long will it take?"

Garspark pulled another device from a pocket; this was clearly not of Ork manufacture. Hazug had seen such devices in the hands of humans from the Imperium, and occasionally on this planet also. They called them watches, and used them to measure time far more accurately than most orks every bothered to do. Warboss Kromag organised his time in the human way, but he used human staff to assist him do so. The example Garspark had was damaged. Hazug knew that there should be two or three straight bits of metal to show the time, but this only had the largest one present.

"Ya 'ave da time dis takes to go around once," Garspark said, "should be plenty to get out of da blast radius providin' dat ya don't 'ang about too much."

Hazug took the watch and put it in his pocket. He hadn't covered time keeping with Sophie yet so he didn't actually have any idea of just how long it would take for the metal strip to complete a full rotation, but it was too late to do anything about that now.

"Right lads," Hazug said as he picked up the bomb, "get ya weapons ready cause we is off." The Blood Axes began to check their weapons, and Hazug saw that Sophie was also inspecting hers. "Ya ain't comin'," he told her, "ya ain't got wot it takes to sneak into a fortress. Ya'll just get 'urt so ya is stayin' behind."

Sophie just stared at him.

"But I want to go with you," she protested.

Hazug gave her the piece of paper on which he had been writing.

"If I don't come back," he told her, "den I want ya to take dis letter and find Two 'Eads. It tells 'im wot to do."

Then he turned away as Sophie continued to stare at him. Then he remembered the crystal fragments in his pocket. He dug his hand into the pocket and pulled them out.

"And I got dese for ya when I smashed dat crystal," and he pushed the pieces into Sophie's hand. "Right lads," he then said, "let's be goin'."

As Sophie watched as the Blood Axes walked away in the direction of the river, followed by Ratish who threw a look in her direction and stuck his tongue out at her. Tears welled up in her eyes at thought of Hazug leaving her here and the possibility that he wasn't coming back.

"What do I do now?" she said.

"Read da letter," Drazzok suggested, and she unfolded the piece of paper that Hazug had given to her that was covered in the pictographs used by the orks.

TWO 'EADS,

IF SOPHIE'S GIVEN YA DIS NOTE DEN I 'AVE PROBABLY STUFFED IT. IF A BUNCH OF METAL LADS TURN UP WITH SHOOTAS WATCH OUT FOR 'EM CAUSE DEY IS REAL TOUGH. DEY IS CALLED NECRONS. USE YA 'EAVY GUNS TO SHOOT DA FLYIN' BIKE THINGS, AND KEEP CLEAR OF DARE WAGONS, EVEN ROCKETS CAN'T TAKE 'EM OUT EASILY. YA IS PROBABLY BEST JUST DRIVIN' OVER DA LADS CAUSE DEY DON'T MOVE DAT QUICK. DARE'S A RUNTHERD 'ERE WOT SAYS DAT ORKS WAS FIGHTIN' DESE NECRONS AGES AGO. 'E SAYS DEY CAN BE BEATEN IF YA CAN BLOW UP DARE FORTRESS. DA FORTRESS DIS LOT IS USIN' IS UNDER DA DESERT NEAR AN OLD HUMAN BASE. DARE'S SOME STONE SPIKES AND A BIG 'OLE RIGHT ABOVE IT SO SEE IF YA CAN GET WARBOSS KROMAG TO 'AVE 'IS KROOZERS BLAST IT FROM SPACE. I WANT YA TO LOOK AFTER SOPHIE FOR ME, I GOT A TRUCK YA CAN 'AVE IF YA DO. SHE CAN COOK AND CLEAN REAL GOOD, BETTER DAN ANY GROT. SHE DON'T EAT MUCH, BUT SHE NEEDS LOTS OF WATER CAUSE SHE LIKES TO HEAT IT UP AND SIT IN IT MOST DAYS FOR SOME REASON. BUT SHE DON'T LIKE YA TO SEE 'ER DOIN' IT SO DON'T GO STICKIN' A MUG IN DA WATER WHILE SHE'S SAT IN IT NO MATTER 'OW THIRSTY YA IS. SHE PUTS SOMETHIN' IN DA WATER DAT MAKES IT SMELL AND TASTE FUNNY ANYWAY, AND YA'LL BURP BUBBLES ALL NIGHT IF YA DO DRINK IT.

HAZUG

"See," Drazzok, who had stood looking over Sophie's shoulder while she read the letter, "dare ain't nothin' for ya to worry about. Now get me somethin' to eat, and I'll tell all about wot's wrong with Hazug's plan."

Sophie began to cry, and she threw her arms around Drazzok as she did so, squeezing him.

"Wot is ya doin' now?" he said as he pulled her off, "I is 'ungry, get me somethin' to eat."

20

At about the time that mek Garspark delivered the bomb to Hazug, the last of the spectral aliens warboss Zhalrad had been fighting had finally faded away for good, and Zhalrad was now looking for another opponent when he realised that he was now alone behind the enemy line, the rest of his army was still engaged much closer to the city than he was. While he had been fighting the serpent like Necrons that could cause his weapons to pass straight through them the battle line had shifted dramatically. As far as he could tell the aliens were continuing to drive the orks back slowly but surely, and though more orks continued to pour from the city gates their numbers appeared to too few to hold the aliens back here. It would likely not be much longer until the Necrons were inside the city itself and the fighting would have to take place in the streets and buildings there. He caught sight of a small group of Gretchin who had also wound up behind the enemy's lines. Their handler was presumably dead, and they were picking over the remains of some orks whose position had been over run by the Necrons. Zhalrad ran over to them. "Grots!" he yelled, and the creatures looked up in terror as they recognised the warboss approaching them rapidly, "Get back to da city now!" Zhalrad shouted, "Tell whoever's left dat we need da wagons out 'ere quick, and I don't care about 'ow much fuel dey got."

The Gretchin just stared at Zhalrad.

"Move!" he yelled, and the Gretchin ran off towards the city, scattering and each taking a different route. As the creatures disappeared from view Zhalrad got back to the important business of searching for someone to fight.

The river that Hazug and his kommandoes were heading for entered the city through a short tunnel under the city wall some distance away from the command post, and without Hazug's truck the Blood Axes had to walk the entire way there. Even with the weight of the bomb and both his rifle and the alien weapon he carried on his back, Hazug found himself easily able to keep pace with the other orks. In spite of the battle raging outside of the city there were still plenty of greenskins about. Many Gretchin darted from street to street passing messages and running errands for orks keen to join the fighting, while orks sought out sellers of weapons and ammunition that they needed. As they drew closer to the river there was a rumbling sound that grew in intensity. Hazug knew what this was caused by but the other Blood Axes were not yet used to the hazards of civilisation.

"Lookout lad!" he shouted at Nizz before the young Ork could run straight out of the side street they were running along and get crushed by the stream of vehicles that was approaching. Apparently the fuel shortage was not preventing warboss Zhalrad from deploying his mechanised units, and they were all being deployed in one go. Hazug's kommandoes stared in wonder at the convoy moving past them, since joining with Hazug they had seen a handful of vehicles here and there, mainly bikes, buggies and trucks, and also seen the Stompas from in the command post but this was different. There were many dozens of vehicles, a large number of which were large and heavily armed and armoured. These were not the mere transports and light raiding vehicles they had become used to, they were powerful weapons of war.

"Come on lads," Hazug shouted when a gap appeared in the procession of vehicles, and they sprinted across the road and continued on their way to the river.

The river itself entered the city at the location of one of the Gretchin shanty towns that were dotted around the settlement. This was much quieter than the areas inhabited by the orks themselves, it having been cleared by runtherds looking for cannon fodder for the battle still raging, but the Blood Axes still caught sight of some of the creatures moving around but trying to avoid being noticed in case they too were forced to go and fight. Hazug jumped down into the river, water and mud splashing upwards as he did so. Then he reached down and picked up a handful of mud, which he then proceeded to rub onto his skin and equipment.

"Do wot I is lads," he said, "It'll make it 'arder for anyone to see us comin'."

One after another the other orks jumped into the river and took mud from the bank to camouflage themselves with. Only Ratish, who was already covered in a layer of muck did not rub any more onto him. It didn't take long for one of the orks, this case Ubgrub, to hurl a handful of mud at one of the others, Nizz, and for him to throw some back.

"Cut dat out!" Hazug shouted, and he grabbed each of them by their collars and slammed their heads together, "We ain't got time for messin' about."

With his force covered in mud to help them blend in with their surroundings, Hazug began to lead them through the tunnel that allowed the river access through the city walls, and up the river towards the Necrons.

"Careful not slip into da river," he warned the others, "it'll wash all da mud off ya and dem metal lads'll be able to see ya. Understand?"

The other orks nodded to indicate that they did, and Hazug continued to lead the way towards the battle. They kept low as they moved, the bank was not quite as tall as Hazug even at its tallest so he had to duck down, but the others did it just to copy him even when there was no real need for them to do so.

The booming of large calibre guns and the explosions of the shells they fired heralded the arrival of the Ork armour on the battlefield. Orks cheered as their metal opponents were blasted limb from limb, and few of those caught in the blasts rose to their feet again. But even as the Necron warriors already fighting were being devastated by this sudden onslaught another wave of them began to emerge from the portals of their own pyramid vehicles. Some of the faster moving Ork vehicles streaked towards the opposing armour and launched a barrage of rockets and automatic weapons fire at the pyramids and the Necron warriors they disgorged. Some of the infantry fell as soon as they could step from their portals but even the rockets, specifically designed to knock out tanks, failed to make any impact on the silent hovering pyramids. Now the orks found their vehicles engaging both armour and infantry at point blank range.

The Necron infantry fired their rifles as the Ork vehicles bore down on them, and even though they were not dedicated anti-armour weapons the strange green energy beams fired by the Necron weapons appeared able to damage targets protected by even the thickest armour. Individually the hits were nothing more than a nuisance, but the weight of fire was so heavy that many Ork vehicles began to suffer more serious damage. As the surviving vehicles were about to crash through the alien infantry storms of green lightning struck out from the pyramids, striking every Ork vehicle that was close to them. Operating on the same principles as the Necron rifles this lightning ripped apart its targets, and all that reached the Necron lines was burning wreckage. With the lighter, fast moving vehicles dealt with the alien pyramids prepared to face off against the heavier tanks and Stompas.

Hazug heard the sounds of the Ork vehicles joining the battle, and he chanced a quick look over the top of the riverbank. The ground immediately around the Necrons was littered with the burning remains of lightweight Ork raiding vehicles, and the alien pyramids now appeared to be duelling with the heavier ones. "Wot's goin' on boss?" Ghukil asked.

"Zhalrad's got 'is wagons 'avin' a go at da pyramids."

"Who's winnin'?"

As Hazug watched a group of battlewagons was reduced to piles of burning scrap by a series of massive energy blasts from the pyramids and further away he could make out the wreckage of another destroyed Stompa.

"Da pyramids looks like," he said bobbing his head up once again, "but da metal lads ain't got to da city yet and dare's still plenty of Stompas and wagons in dare way."

"Wot about da lot we is after boss?" Nizz asked, and Hazug took a look along the length of the riverbank.

There he saw a small group of Necron foot soldiers holding back from the fighting.

"Dey is still right where we wants 'em to be. Looks like dey is lookin' out for anyone else turnin' up from out in da desert so dey ain't goin' to be ready for us."

Hazug ducked back below the level of the riverbank and continued on his way, followed by the other orks. Ratish ran along side him, able to move more quickly because his shorter stature kept him out of sight even when standing straight up.

Warboss Zhalrad found fighting his way back to his own troops easier than going the other way had been. The few Necrons he encountered were easily surprised, and he soon found himself approaching a large group of Ork nobbs engaged in combat a variation of the standard Necron warriors but which were armed with vicious looking blades protruding from their hands rather than the rifles than most of them carried. Amongst these Necrons he saw one that stood slightly taller than the others and carried a staff that shot rapid pulses of light that were powerful enough to stop even an Ork nob in his tracks. Zhalrad had found another opponent. He raised his weapons above his head and charged towards the Necron leader.

"Waaagh!"

Upon reaching the melee, Zhalrad shoved orks and Necrons alike out of his way until he reached the leader he was aiming for. The mysterious figure turned as he approached and attempted to fire at him with its staff, but Zhalrad was ready for this and he used his massive strength to grab the staff and push it aside just as another burst of energy was released from it, causing the attack to pass harmlessly overhead. With his other hand, Zhalrad swung his blade upwards in an arc that connected with his opponent at the shoulder and smashed through the metal joint, severing its arm. With one arm on the ground fading into nothing, and the other held fast by Zhalrad's vice like grip the Necron was helpless, and the Ork warboss brought his blade down again, this time smashing it into the Necron's head. The alien sank to its knees, and Zhalrad pressed his weapon to its chest and pushed with all his might. The tip of the blade broke off against the Necron's chest plate, but Zhalrad continued to push and the alien's armour gave way, the blade suddenly

sinking into its body. The red glow of the alien's eyes died, and Zhalrad knew what was coming. Hazug had taken a weapon from an alien leader before it could fade away and now Zhalrad intended to do the same. But as he let go of the lifeless Necron's arm the entire thing faded away before he could grab the staff it held.

Zhalrad was furious. The trophy he desired had literally escaped his grasp and now he was going to make someone pay. Fortunately there were plenty of choices to hand.

Ratish crawled up the side of the muddy riverbank, keeping his stomach to the ground. Slowly he pulled himself to the top and looked at the group of skeletal metal warriors standing motionless nearby. Then he pushed himself back down the bank and ran back to Hazug.

"Dey is right dare master," he said excitedly, "Ratish saw 'em just like master said I would."

"Nice work grot," Hazug said, patting the Gretchin on his head. Then he turned to his troops.

"Dis is it lads. We is goin' in. We'll lob some stick bombs in first, I don't think dat dey will take many of 'em but dey should shake 'em up a bit. Den we jump out at 'em and 'it 'em with our choppas till dey disappear. But when dey stop movin' make sure ya grab on to 'em real tight so dey take ya with 'em when dey do."

"Wot den boss?" Nizz asked.

"When we is all in dare base we'll find somewhere safe to stash da bomb, set da timer and den get out of dare. Any more questions?"

The other orks shook their heads.

"Good, cause I ain't got no more answers. Now lets go."

21

The Necron warrior squad had been tasked with providing advanced warning of any reinforcements that the city may receive from the surrounding desert, but so far they had not encountered anyone, so they simply stood and waited for further instructions. It had not occurred to either the remnants of personalities that remained in their metal bodies or the vast mind that directed them that any of the city's occupants might decide to come out and attack them specifically.

The warriors barely had time to acknowledge that the objects that had just landed amongst them were grenade before the first of them detonated. The blast sent shrapnel through most of the warriors, and caused the detonation of the next grenade while it was still in mid air. This blast, and the next two that followed almost immediately after knocked the warriors to the ground. There was another succession of explosions as the remaining grenades went off and kept them pinned down, but none of them suffered enough damage to trigger their emergency teleport system. As they began to get back to their feet and repair the damage inflicted there was a mighty shout from the direction of the river.

"Waaagh!"

Ratish was actually the first of the greenskins to make it over the top of the riverbank, and fortunately for him the aliens were still unprepared for combat when he came into view. He fired his small pistol as he ran forwards, then leapt at the nearest warrior, grabbed hold of it tightly, and began to hammer away at its head with the grip of his gun.

Hazug was only a few steps behind him, and he barged into the Necron warriors as they began to regain their senses and were raising their weapons. He batted the Necron's rifles aside as he passed the first warriors in his path; using the long grip of the weapon he had taken from one of their own in the underground complex. The rest of the orks followed rapidly behind Hazug, and with the Necrons distracted by both Hazug and Ratish now fighting in their middle they closed the distance from the riverbank to the aliens without being fired upon.

Gobnok made the first kill, with his flamethrower set to deliver an extremely hot blast but only at point blank range, more like a welding torch, he sliced the head from an alien warrior. However, as he tried to grab hold of the headless body as it fell to the ground it disappeared before his eyes.

"Ah crap!" he yelled as he realised that he had been too slow, "Now I got get another."

"Over 'ere!" Zhagrad shouted, and Gobnok turned to see him and Ubgrub holding one of the aliens between them, pulling its arms in opposite directions and stopping it from moving. Grinning, Gobnok charged the captive alien with the muzzle of his flamethrower raised. He pressed the weapon against the alien's chest plate, and watched with glee at it first glowed red, then erupted in a shower of sparks as melting metal short circuited internal systems.

"'Ere we go!" Ubgrub shouted, "'Ang on!" and the alien's twitching body faded away, taking the two orks with it.

Hazug ducked a blow from another Necron warrior and swung his weapon around, taking the legs out from under the warrior that Ratish was still clinging to. Moments later both the warrior and the Gretchin disappeared.

Ghukil had slung his automatic weapon in favour of his axe, and he struck repeatedly at any alien that came within his reach. However, no matter how hard or fast he struck, none of his blows did more than scratch the armour of any of the Necrons. One of them aimed its rifle at him from point blank range, but rather than try to doge out of the way, he grabbed the muzzle of the weapon with his free hand and pulled it along with its owner towards him. The alien stumbled forwards as Ghukil's sudden and unexpected pull dragged him closer to the Ork, and as it stumbled Ghukil brought up his axe and struck under its chest plate. The alien fell and writhed on the floor as it attempted to repair the damage that Ghukil had just inflicted. Still keeping a firm hold on the end of the alien's rifle, Ghukil brought his axe down again and again on the prone alien. Each blow caused the Necron warrior to jerk again, and when Ghukil axe came crashing down on its head hard enough to crack open the metal skull the glow in the alien's eyes died. Ghukil almost relaxed his hold on the rifle that the alien still held onto, but reinforced his grip just in time to be taken away when the remains of the alien vanished.

While the disappearance of the Necron warriors and the orks holding on to them was, hopefully, getting Hazug's troops to where he wanted them to be, it also meant that the remaining orks were becoming increasingly outnumbered and those that remained had to be especially vigilant for attacks from unexpected quarters. Roggot unfortunately failed to do this, and a blast from an alien rifle seared the flesh from his arm. He fell to the ground, clutching at the stump of his arm and screaming. Hazug went to help, swinging the alien weapon as he did so. Three more aliens faded away from Hazug's attacks, but there were no orks other than Hazug himself near enough to take advantage of their disappearance.

"Get up lad," Hazug said, as he pulled Roggot back to his feet, "leg it back to da city and find ya self a painboy, ya ain't no good for dis mission any more."

Roggot sprinted in the direction of the river, at first ignored by the remaining alien warriors who were far more concerned with the orks who were still fighting than a single fleeing Ork who was no threat to them. But just as he reached the riverbank and was about to jump down out of sight a Necron warrior fired at him. The energy bolt hit him directly between his shoulders, and Roggot died instantly as his flesh was stripped from his body.

Hazug launched an attack on the nearest Necron warrior to him, and he succeeded in impaling through its chest. Rather than pull his weapon free he dragged the alien towards him and wrapped an arm around it. He felt the air tingling as the alien's emergency teleport activated and his surroundings faded.

Now only Gobnok and Nizz remained facing the remaining Necrons. Seeking to even up the odds a little, Gobnok reset his flamethrower and fired it, spreading a sheet of flaming liquid that adhered to whatever it struck. This proved too much for some of the Necron warriors who had already been damaged by axe blows and grenades and more of them vanished. Of the remaining Necrons some of them were now burning, and Nizz took a chance by diving onto one of these, driving his axe down into the Necron's neck and behind its chest plate. For a few seconds he felt the heat of the flames, but he kept his grip on the Necron and his disappearance left Gobnok alone to face the rest of the Necron warriors.

Dodging an energy blast from a nearby alien, Gobnok reset his flamethrower once more and lunged for the first of them that he saw. He pushed the muzzle of his weapon against one of the Necron's eyes and activated it. He kept his finger on the trigger as he took hold of the Necron's arm with his other hand, and he grinned as he joined it in teleporting away.

With no further opponents left to fight the remaining Necron warriors took up their role of looking out for the approach of reinforcements once more. The data they fed back to the underground complex was modified with information on the orks using the emergency teleport of their damaged comrades to gain access, but they were merely standard warriors and the controlling mind was not giving priority to their reports.

Zhagrad and Ubgrub materialised in a dimly lit chamber, with the remains of the Necron warrior still clutched between them. They had appeared on a raised dais, one of many in the room. They let go of the alien and it collapsed in a heap at their feet. They leapt down to the floor, Zhagrad drawing his pistol and Ubgrub unslinging his larger weapon.

"So wot now?" Ubgrub whispered as they looked around the room. The dais on which they stood was just one of many laid out in neat rows. The surfaces of the room were all made of the same stone that had been used in the construction of the chamber and passageway that lay at the bottom of the hole they had descended into in the desert. There were many shallow alcoves in the walls that were filled with strange machinery that looked to be made from the same metal as the skeletal Necron bodies and their other fighting machines were. Likewise, each dais seemed to be made of this metal also.

"We should keep out of sight until da boss gets 'ere with da bomb," Zhagrad replied and the pair of them took cover at the base of the dais where they had arrived.

Moments later another damaged Necron appeared on one of the other dais, collapsing immediately. The two orks heard the sound of something jumping down from to the floor and looked over to see that Ratish had just arrived.

"Oi grot," Zhagrad called out, trying to keep his voice low, "'ide."

Ratish looked around, and catching sight of the two hidden orks he also moved out of the open. For a while the chamber was silent aside from the soft sounds of the hidden greenskins breathing until a clatter indicated the arrival of another damaged Necron on a different dais.

"'Ello?" Ghukil called out, "Anyone 'ere?"

"Shhh!"

"Who said dat?" said Ghukil jumping to floor and unslinging his gun.

"It's me, Ubgrub. We're 'idin'."

"Oh right," Ghukil whispered back and he darted over to the other two orks and crouched down with them, "Wot is we 'din' from?" he asked.

"Anythin' dat may be movin' about," Zhagrad said quietly, "We is waitin' for da boss to show up, wot was 'e doin' when ya came 'ere?"

"'E was still fightin'," Ghukil said, "so 'e could be next."

More of the Necrons appeared and collapsed as soon as they materialised, but no more orks appeared with them.

"Where's da boss?" Ghukil whispered impatiently, "'e's got da bomb."

He had no sooner finished asking his question when Hazug did appear with the body of a Necron warrior impaled on his weapon. On his back he still carried the bomb made by mek Garspark.

"Boss!" Ubgrub shouted, jumping to his feet, "we is over 'ere."

"Quiet lad," Hazug said, "I don't want anyone 'earin' us."

"We was 'idin' down 'ere," Ubgrub said, pointing at his hiding place, "and da grot is over dare."

"Where is da others boss?" Ghukil asked quietly.

"Roggot ain't comin'," Hazug said, "'e's lost 'is arm, so I sent 'im off to find a painboy to give 'im a new one. 'E didn't make it though, da Necrons got 'im before 'e could get away. We'll give Gobnok and Nizz a bit yet."

They were interrupted by the arrival of smouldering Necron bodies, evidently they had been on fire recently but it had been extinguished either prior to or by the teleportation process. Another smouldering Necron's remains arrived, but this time with Nizz holding on tight.

"Whoa, dat was so cool," he said as he let go of the alien.

Hazug beckoned him, and as he approached Gobnok materialised with the muzzle of his flamethrower pressed against the head of a Necron warrior.

"Wot is dis place?" Gobnok asked out loud as joined the rest of the orks. Hazug found that they were all staring at him, expecting an answer.

"Ow da bleedin' 'ell should I know?" he said, "I ain't no mek, and dis place is clearly somethin' to do with mek stuff."

"So wot do we do now we is all 'ere den boss?"

"Like I said," Hazug replied, "we find somewhere for da bomb and den leg it out of 'ere before it goes off."

There was only a single doorway from the room, and there was no actual door to block it. Followed by the other greenskins, Hazug strode to the doorway and stuck his head outside the chamber that they had arrived in. Beyond the door was a wide corridor that extended in either direction, and there were more doorways of the same size and shape as this one all along each side. In addition there was another doorway at one end of the corridor, but a closed door blocked this one.

"I reckon dat's da way out," Hazug said, indicating the door at the end of the corridor, "Guns ready, let's move. But keep it quiet."

The greenskins sprinted down the corridor in short bursts towards the closed door, pausing as they approached each open doorway along the way and looking in quickly to ensure that the rooms beyond were not occupied. All of the rooms appeared to be duplicates of the one they had arrived in with rows of daises, some of which were occupied by the remains of damaged Necrons that had teleported back here.

Approaching the door Hazug noticed that there was no handle on it, or lever nearby that appeared to be intended to open it. The greenskins stopped in front of the door and stared at it.

"It looks like dat one dat da human opened master," Ratish said, and Hazug realised that he was right, it did indeed seem to be made from the same liquid metal as the door they had encountered with Castus, and Hazug still had the device that Castus had used to open it. He pulled the device from his belt pouch and activated. Straight away the device lit up, and though Hazug could not understand the display properly he saw ripples appear in the door before it flowed back into the wall.

Beyond the doorway was a spiral ramp that extended both up and down. Periodically level areas, each of which was adjacent to another door like the one Hazug had just opened, interrupted its slope.

"We go down," Hazug said, and he led the way down the ramp.

Error.

A minor disruption caught the attention of he Necron mind. A door had just malfunctioned in one of the stasis towers, and it was now open for no apparent reason.

Power consumption indicates deviation.

Upon closer inspection this was not the only fault that this building was reporting. The power consumed in order to retrieve the remains of several warriors had exceeded the standard amount by up to two hundred percent, and this had happened repeatedly, all to the warriors of a single unit.

The unit concerned was not one committed to the main fighting. It was instead positioned on a flank to give advanced warning of any forces arriving to reinforce those in the city. According to the data fed back from that unit they had been attacked, but not by anything coming out of the wilderness, rather it appeared that a group of soldiers had used the river to sneak up on them from within the city itself and attacked them. The unit reported taking numerous casualties from the attack, and visual data illustrated that in many cases their assailants had been in sufficiently close proximity to disabled warriors as their emergency teleport units had been triggered, thus carrying them along too.

Intruders.

The complex had been breached. The inhabitants of the city were launching a counter attack, and had succeeded in infiltrating a team. Examining the relevant visual data records more closely an image of the creature leading the intruders was isolated. The mind recognised it instantly, it was the same creature that had breached the outer reaches of the complex once already.

The mind had no reason to believe that the intruders had any specific knowledge of the complex in their possession despite their previous attempt at gaining access to it, so it was unlikely that they would have a

specific target that they would head for. Unfortunately this meant that all critical areas of the complex would have to be guarded in addition to forces being used to hunt down the intruders. The mind was aware of the disposition of all of its forces, most were still in stasis and awaiting revival, and of those that were already active, most were deployed in the attack on the city.

It appeared that disposing of the intruders would take some time. The Necron mind did not consider this a significant problem however, the intruders had only the weapons they could carry and did not constitute a significant danger to the complex itself.

22

Hazug had seen the Necron city from high up on the ledge, but from down here at street level it was somewhat more impressive. Vast structures towered over the greenskins as they stood outside the pyramid shaped structure they had just emerged from. But in spite of the size of the surrounding buildings the spire at the centre of the city was still visible. Indeed it provided most of the light that made it possible for the greenskins to see without having to light torches.

"Dat's where I reckon we should go," Hazug said, pointing at the spire, "its da biggest buildin' dare is, so its probably da most important," he then took his rifle from his back and put to his shoulder before darting towards the shadow of the next building along in the direction of the spire.

The greenskins began to move off, following Hazug through the city. Unlike Ork of human settlements there was no clutter or irregularity to the city. Both of those species frequently constructed decorative sculptures and allowed the growth of plants in their urban areas, but the streets of this city were clear of all of this. Buildings were constructed to serve a purpose, and were not modified in way to reflect the character of the builders.

Or maybe it was just that the builders had no character to impart in their buildings, Hazug thought. The lack of these features was a cause for concern to Hazug; the presence of them would have allowed his troops to move through the city with a greater degree of concealment than just keeping to the shadows cast by buildings allowed. Even though they were inexperienced with urban environments, Hazug's Blood Axes knew it also.

"Wot if somethin' comes boss?" Ghukil asked.

"I reckon we'd 'ear da lads walkin' on da roads," Hazug said, "but dare flyin' stuff and wagons don't make no noise, so everyone make sure dat ya keep an eye out for 'em."

The other orks and Ratish all suddenly looked upwards, expecting Necron machines to come swooping down upon them right at that moment. Hazug continued to move ahead until he realised that everyone else was still standing where they had been. He looked around and saw them still facing him, but now looking upwards. Had any of them turned around to face the same way that Hazug now was then they too would have seen the machine bearing down upon them.

Rather than shout a warning Hazug just opened fire.

The Necron machine was beyond the effective range of his rifle, so Hazug ceased fire after only a short burst as his troops sought what cover they could. The machine returned fire. Though it was similar to the machines that had attacked them in the desert on the return journey to the Ork city it was differently armed. Those machines had been fitted with short multiple barrelled weapons that fired multiple blasts of energy in rapid succession, whereas this machine possessed a much longer weapon with just a single barrel. The energy beam that shot from it's muzzle when it was fired was brighter than any Hazug had seen these Necrons use before aside from the massive weapons mounted on top of their pyramid vehicles. The beam failed to strike any of the orks it was aimed towards, instead it sliced a neat groove across the ground and also up a nearby wall until the machine ceased firing. Ghukil and Ubgrub responded in kind. Hefting their heavy weapons towards the rapidly approaching alien they snatched back their triggers and held them down, sending two streams of bullets flying upwards.

The Necron mind had established that news regarding the location of the intruders would be given priority among the data it was receiving. Therefore, when a heavy destroyer platform that had been tasked with carrying out an aerial patrol had located them moving through the streets of the city the mind gave the data feed from the destroyer its full attention.

The mind watched remotely as the intruders scattered while their leader opened fire on the destroyer, and then saw the flashes from two more automatic weapons launching projectiles at a high rate.

Both of them missed.

The two streams of bullets flew past the Necron machine, boxing it between them. The machine continued to get nearer and Hazug aimed his rifle once more, but this time his hand moved to the secondary trigger that operated the anti-armour rocket that was mounted beneath it.

There was a 'whoosh!' as the rocket was launched and the rifle kicked back into Hazug's shoulder.

The Necron machine fired at the same time.

The beam of energy clipped one of the stabilising fins on the rocket and sent it tumbling towards the ground, where it detonated on impact. Beam was neither stopped nor deflected from its path by the impact with the rocket and it continued on its way towards the Blood Axes. Hazug ducked as the beam passed over his head and sliced another groove in the ground before the machine it self flew over him.

The destroyer's data feed clearly indicated to the Necron mind that the intruders possessed weaponry that was capable of bringing it down. It was only random chance that had caused the explosive device fired by their leader to miss. The Necron mind was also fully aware that the heavy gauss cannon carried by this particular destroyer was not intended for engagements against groups of infantry, it was a procession anti-armour weapon. Should the intruders scatter as a result of casualties then the task of finding and killing them all would be come significantly more difficult.

Instead the Necron mind ordered the destroyer to disengage as it was passing directly over the intruders. Their exact position had now been established, and other, more suitable, forces could converge on that location.

Hazug watched as the Necron machine continued to increase its altitude and fly away from him. He then became aware that the other orks were congratulating themselves on driving it off.

"We was too tough for it," Gobnok said.

"Yeah," added Ghukil, "it just legged."

"We need to get out of 'ere quick," Hazug said sternly.

"Wot for boss?" Ubgrub asked.

"Because I'll dat dat machine is tellin' its mates where we are right now, so if we ain't out of 'ere soon den we is goin' to be up to our necks in dem metal lads."

His troops saw his point and nodded in agreement. Then Hazug noticed that Ratish was not with them, instead the Gretchin was crouched by the crater left where Hazug's rocket had detonated and was looking down into it. Then Hazug noticed that light was being cast onto Ratish's face, light that could only be coming from within the crater.

"Wot is ya lookin' at grot?" Hazug called out.

"Ratish can see a tunnel master," Ratish responded, looking up at Hazug. Puzzled, Hazug walked over to his servant and looked into the crater. However, rather than a crater in the road there was a hole that lead down into tunnel that ran beneath the street. Leaning in closer he saw the tunnel was lined with glowing pipes that were casting the light out of the hole.

Hazug stood up straight again and turned to his troops.

"Over 'ere lads," he called out, "I think dat Ratish 'as just found us a way to move about without bein' spotted."

"Wot down dare?" Nizz asked.

"Dat's right lad, down dare. It may be a bit of a squeeze, but it'll stop dem flyin' machines comin' after us. Now everyone get in da 'ole. Ratish, ya can go first."

"Yes master."

Warboss Zhalrad roared in anger as his troops were driven further back. His army had been split in two. The twenty or so remaining Stompas were now cut off from the city itself, and the Necrons appeared content with merely containing them rather than taking action to destroy them straight away. The Stompa crews on the other hand were making one attempt after another to find a weak point in the Necron lines that would enable them to break through and join up with the rest of the Ork army. But the weaponry carried by even the standard Necron warrior was capable of damaging the heaviest vehicles when used in sufficient quantities, so without their own supporting infantry the Stompas were unable to force their way through. Many of the other Ork vehicles were now burning wrecks, with ammunition and fuel detonating randomly as flames reached them. The Ork crews had abandoned many more of them when they ran out of fuel and were overrun by the Necron troops. Now Zhalrad himself had been pushed back so far that he was almost back within the city itself. The only advantage to his current position was that orks on the city walls were now near enough to be able to engage the Necrons with small arms fire. Though they were not immune to counter attack, as more of the small fast moving flyers had appeared to repeat the strafing runs of the first wave that had been responsible for the destruction of the fuel reserve.

The progress of the battle for the Ork city was acceptable to the Necron mind directing the attack, however it was not satisfied with the results of the search for the intruders within its own complex. A unit of destroyers had flown over the area where they had last been spotted and there was no sign of them, and only now were warriors getting close enough for a ground search to take place.

The feed from the warriors confirmed that the intruders were no longer in the street where they had last been reported, and there were no tracks leading away from the site. A high-resolution scan of the ground revealed the slight difference in temperature of the ground where the intruders had stood, but the shape of tracks indicated that none were in a direction that left the area. The intruders had come here, then moved about the street and simply vanished. All of the doors along this section of the street remained sealed shut, so the intruders had not attempted to escape by hiding in a nearby building. The mind considered the

possibility that the Necrons had activated some form of teleportation device to relocate themselves, but such a device would have left a significant thermal signature, and there was none. Then the mind observed that there was one particular spot in the street that had a much higher density of temperature hotspots than the rest, locate near damage that had been inflicted by one of the intruders' high explosive projectiles, and it had the warriors move in closer. There beneath the surface of the street one of the complex's service ducts was exposed. The heat given off by the equipment within the duct made an infrared scan such as that run on the street itself pointless, but there was no other credible explanation for how a party of armed intruders could apparently vanish into thin air.

Sending warriors into the ducts would be risky, they were not optimised for close combat and their weapons could inflict significant collateral damage to the complex's systems. All of the flayed ones and wraiths that the mind had been able to bring back on line were already committed to the battle for the city. Instead the mind decided that it flood the ducts with large numbers of much lesser units, and it directed some of the remaining Tomb Spyderys to abandon the task of reanimating those who still slumbered and directed them to access points to the service ducts.

Hazug was finding the ducts somewhat awkward, even though the light produced by the equipment that lined them meant that they were better lit than the streets above. He was much larger than any of the other orks, and the height of the duct was forcing him to stoop more than was normal for an Ork. Fortunately he was the only one in the group so affected, even Ghukil, largest of his troops now that Feggit was dead was able to adopt his usual standing position without striking his head. So Hazug just put up with the situation. What was of greater concern was the direction they were travelling in. They had begun by heading in the general direction of the spire, but without any visible point of reference for them to be able to check their progress they had no way of knowing if they were still travelling in the right direction. Ratish was moving ahead of the orks through the ducts, yelling out whenever he encountered a junction. But he had yet to indicate that he had encountered anything that looked as though it may lead up to street level once more. "Oi Ratish!" Hazug shouted.

"Yes master?" came the reply from further down the duct.

"ain't dare nothing dat looks like a way out yet? I want to see where we is."

"No master."

"We've been down 'ere ages and dare ain't even any vents," Ghukil said, "wot if dem metal lads need to come down 'ere and fix somethin'? Where is dare air goin' to come from?"

"I don't think dat dey need to breathe," Hazug said, "Dey is machines."

"So does dat mean..." Nizz began before Ratish called out from further ahead.

"Master! Ratish 'ear somethin'!"

The orks all stared down the duct ahead of them as Ratish came running back.

"Wot is it grot?" Hazug asked.

"Lots Ratish think."

"Wot d'ya mean lots?"

"Dare is a lot of 'em, and dey is comin' dis way master."

Hazug pointed his pistol down the duct.

"Get ready lads," he said and the other orks and Ratish all followed suit, pointing their weapons in the direction Ratish had heard the sound coming from.

From around the curve of the duct they saw something moving. Something small and mechanical that crawled along the floor then suddenly took to the air and hovered silently, as all of the Necron machines did when they floated above the ground.

"Is dat it?" Zhagrad said with disgust, and he fired three shots from his pistol along the duct. The first two missed, but eh second hit the hovering machine and shattered it. The glow from the numerous light sources in the duct would have made the flickering of the Necrons' emergency teleport difficult to see at this distance, but the noise from falling debris confirmed that the remains of the machine had not vanished in the way that the larger ones did when critically damaged.

Hazug began to move forwards, but stopped when Ratish tugged at his trousers.

"More yet master, Ratish 'ear dem."

Hazug looked ahead again just as there was the sound of many small metallic footsteps on the floor of the duct and a swarm of the tiny machines came into view. For a moment they paused, and the Necron machines and the greenskins just stared down the duct at each other.

As one, the entire swarm took to the air and raced towards the greenskins, who, without even waiting for Hazug to give an order, opened fire with pistols and machine guns. The noise of gunfire filled the duct, echoing repeatedly in the confined space. The tiny machines hurtling towards them lacking the resilience of the humanoid and larger versions and they broke apart under the impact of the orks' bullets. But what they

lacked in individual resilience the machines made up for in numbers and when the swarm reached the orks there were still many of them remaining.

As soon as the first of the machines came within arms reach the greenskins stopped firing and began to swat at them as though they nothing more than the troublesome insects that they resembled. But even though gunfire was enough to stop them, a simple blow, even from an Ork's fist was not, and all they achieved was to bat the things towards one another.

"Use ya choppas!" Hazug yelled. Unfortunately for him he had not brought his old blade with him. He had favoured his Necron weapon since he had obtained it, and it was far too long to be of use here so he was forced to continue to just push the machines away when they came in to attack. The other greenskins, Ratish included, did however have some form of axe or blade that they drew, and as Hazug had hoped they proved quite adequate for dealing with individual members of the swarm. Unfortunately each time an Ork split open one machine, three or four others were able to attack them with tiny blades mounted on their heads and though each attack did little more than scratch at the thick hide of the orks, they did distract them from their own strikes. Ratish fared slightly better, the machines ignored him almost entirely and he was able to stab at the insect like machines with his tiny knife.

Hazug brought his heel down on a machine that had failed to move quickly enough and smashed it. The orks were definitely thinning out the numbers of the machines, but their counter attacks were beginning to take a toll on their stamina, the tiny wounds they inflicted were mounting and most of the orks were now bleeding from several places.

"Sod this!" he yelled, and he reached for the large Necron weapon still carried on his back, "Down lads!"

The other greenskins immediately dived to the floor as Hazug pulled the Necron weapon free and swung in a wide, horizontal arc. The blade passed effortlessly through the air, any of the tiny machines that it struck and also the wall of the duct. There was a brilliant flash of light as the impossibly sharp blade sliced through the cables and pipes that lined the duct, and a blast of hot gas came spurting out under pressure.

Hazug was thrown back against the opposite wall, crushing more of the tiny machines beneath him, while the blast consumed all of the remaining machines while passing over the prone greenskins entirely.

As quickly as it had begun, the flow of the gas was suddenly cut off as the complex's emergency systems activated to limit the damage and the greenskins began to get back to their feet again, bruised and bleeding but other wise unharmed.

"Is master alright?" Ratish asked, rushing to Hazug's aid.

"Yeah grot, I is fine," Hazug said as he stood up with the assistance of his weapon. Then he looked at the remains of the tiny mechanical insects scattered about them.

"Gobnok, ya is on point from now on," he said, "ave ya burna at da ready and let rip if ya see any more of dem metal bug things."

"Right boss."

23

Apart from the Stompas, which remained cut off, most of the remaining Ork army had now fallen back to within the city walls, and fresh troops that were arriving were being directed to take up positions on the fortifications themselves. Zhalrad pushed his way through the crowd of orks attempting to get through the city gates ahead of him.

"Geddout of me way!" he bellowed as he swung his axe to clear a path, lopping the heads from a pair of orks who did not get out the way fast enough.

He stopped just within the gates and looked back out onto the battlefield. There he saw the line of Necron pyramids getting ever closer, though they moved at such a ponderous rate that the few remaining Ork troops could easily out run them. What was a greater concern to Zhalrad was that the portals on the front of the pyramids continued to spew forth more and more of the skeletal warriors. There was no way that these silent Necron troops could be stopped before they reached the walls, and the city's fortifications would have to be made as strong as possible.

"Get dem gates shut!" ordered Zhalrad.

"But dare is still lads out dare boss!" an Ork nob replied.

"Shut da bloody gates!" Zhalrad shouted as he put a bullet between the eyes of the nob who had dared to question him, and orks flocked to the inside of the gates to push them closed. As they did so orks still outside the city ran for all they worth to try and get back inside before they were locked outside and caught between the Necron army and the city walls. The gates shut with a dull thump and also a crunch as an unfortunate Ork was crushed between them as he failed to get inside the city quickly enough.

While a heavy metal bar was being lowered into place to seal the gates that still had orks hammering on from outside, Zhalrad himself made his way back to his command post on the ramparts. Reaching the command post he found Drazzok and Sophie still there. Sophie sat near the back, with her face discoloured from tears, while the weirdboy was looking out over the walls, watching the battle.

"Was dat da best ya could do?" he said without taking his eyes off the battlefield as Zhalrad entered, "I is startin' to think dat Hazug's plan is better da wot ya 'ave just done down dare."

"Watch it weirdo," Zhalrad replied, "it's a long way to drop ya accidentally fall over."

Drazzok just grunted and continued to watch the fighting.

Gobnok remained on point, his flamethrower held at the ready, though the greenskins were not ignorant of the possibility of an attack coming from behind them, and Nizz who was bringing up the rear frequently looked over his shoulder to make sure that there was nothing behind him. However, since the attack by the swarm of metallic insects there had been no signs of any Necron presence, but neither was there any sign of an exit from the duct.

"Dis is getting' annoyin'," Ghukil said, "Dare 'as to be a way out somewhere."

"Hold it," Hazug said, stopping, and the others also stopped. "I reckon we ought to make our own way out."

"Yeah," said Ubrug, who reached for a grenade, "let's blast another 'ole."

"Don't be daft lad," Hazug scolded him, "let off a stikkbomm in 'ere and ya'll blow us all up with it."

"So wot is we goin' to use boss?" Ghukil asked.

"Me choppa," Hazug replied, "it sliced through da wall easy enough when we was fightin' dem bugs, so I reckon dat it'll cut through da roof just as well. Stand back."

The other greenskins stepped away from Hazug to give him room to swing the alien weapon. He moved it in a vertical arc, and just as he had hoped it gouged a long slit in the ceiling of the duct. Fortunately the ceiling above him lacked the volatile conduits like the one that had ruptured during the earlier fight, and so there was no sudden release of gas this time. Turning the weapon through ninety degrees, Hazug swung it again a cut a second slit the intersected the first one. With a third swing Hazug cut yet another slit to create a rough 'U' shape in the ceiling before stepping away.

"Stand clear lads," he said before swinging the weapon again and cutting a square section of the ceiling free. The section of ceiling came crashing down into the duct and smashed onto the floor where small bits of stone broke off on impact. Most of the section remained intact, however, and Hazug used this a step to stand on while he slowly stuck his head up through the hole. At first he saw nothing, but there was the pounding of metal on stone coming from behind him and Hazug turned to see what was causing it, and found himself staring at an army of metal warriors all marching in step. As quickly as he could, Hazug ducked back into the hole.

"Wot's up dare boss?" Gobnok asked.

"Keep ya voice down lad," Hazug whispered back, "dem metal skeleton lads is above us."

"Ow many boss?" Ghukil whispered.

"Undreds at least, thousands maybe, marchin' right past us. Ratish get up dare and see wot dey is doin'," and with that Hazug grabbed hold of the Gretchin and lifted him up to the hole above his head. He let go when he felt Ratish grab hold of the edge of the hole and heave himself out of it.

Ratish saw the ranks of Necron troops as soon as his master lifted him up to the hole, but just as when Hazug had seen them they were all looking directly ahead of themselves rather than in the direction of the hole. Ratish saw that there was a doorway in the shadows nearby that would give him somewhere to observe the Necrons while making it less likely that they would also notice him. He dashed towards the shadows and pressed himself against the door and looked at the Necrons once more.

The Necron warriors were identical in their appearance, humanoid metal skeletons carrying rifle-sized weapons that had barrels made of the strange green crystal that appeared through out their machinery. Row after row of them marched past Ratish without any of them making any form of movement other than to keep in step with all of the other marching skeletons. Ratish ran back to the hole.

"Dey is just marchin' master," he said into the hole.

"Where to grot?" Hazug asked.

"Ratish not know master, but they all go da same way."

In the duct below the street Hazug turned to his troops.

"Right lads," he said, "we is getting out 'ere. I ain't cuttin' no more 'oles over me 'ead if dares a chance dat an army of dem skeletons fallin' on top of us. I think we is better off takin' our chances with da flyin' machines."

The other orks all nodded and made comments supporting this strategy as Hazug began to pull himself out of the duct and on the street above. When he was clear there was a scrabble to determine the order in which the remaining orks would follow him.

"Quickly master," Ratish said as Hazug climbed free of the hole, "da shadows," and the comparatively tiny creature took hold of his master to pull him towards the darkness nearby. Upon reaching the relative safety of the shadows Hazug turned back to the hole and saw Ghukil climbing out. Seeing that Hazug was not at the top of the hole, Ghukil looked around before exiting it completely, and upon seeing where his leader was concealing himself he passed the information back into the hole.

"We 'ave to leg it for da shadows at da side of da nearest buildin'," he said before pulling himself free of the hole and sprinting towards Hazug and Ratish. One after another the remaining orks also climbed out of the hole and ran into the shadows where Hazug was using the tau viewing device to observe the Necron warriors marching past at the end of the road.

"Wherever dey is goin', I bet its important," Hazug said, "and I wants to know wot dat is."

"But 'ow boss?" Zhagrad asked, "If we goes closer dey'll see us."

Hazug looked down the street away from the marching Necrons.

"We go down dare," he said pointing in the direction he was looking, "den we move along da next street dat runs in da same way as da one dey is marchin' along. Every time we finds another road dat links da two together we can take a look down it to see if dey is still marchin' past," then, without waiting for his troops to react to his instruction, Hazug stood up and ran down the street away from the marching Necrons, keeping to the shadows as he did so. Almost immediately Ratish followed his master, followed by the other orks after a brief pause.

Yet again, and in spite of the many sources of information available to it, the Necron mind had lost track of the intruders to the complex. It knew that a swarm of scarabs had engaged them in the complex's service ducts, but also following an explosion not only had the scarabs ceased transmitting but also damage had been caused to the complex itself. This could be repaired, but it was still an unwelcome distraction when the mind was not only searching for intruders but also directing a battle half way across the continent.

The battle was at least progressing well, the city's occupants had fallen back to within its thick walls while the largest of their fighting machines had been isolated from their supporting forces and were for the moment nothing more than a nuisance on a flank. With the forces that were now amassed to be sent via the monoliths to join the attack on the city, its destruction was a certainty.

Peering over the low wall on the side of a bridge that stretched over a wide ravine that ran through the city, Hazug used the tau viewer again. In front of him was an enormous open area that was full of Necron troops. Most were of the basic rifleman type, but he also saw some armed with the long blades on their hands that the first of these Necrons had possessed, while elsewhere were slightly larger models that carried bigger rifles also, and finally, here and there, were more of the Necrons' equivalents of himself. These lords stood alone rather than in the ranks that their troops had formed, and much like Ork nobbs they carried a variety of weapons and equipment.

Without exception, the Necrons all faced in a single direction and ahead of them were a row of platforms and on each platform was a glowing vertical rectangle of light. As Hazug watched, some of the Necrons

advanced towards one of them and as they got closer they reorganised themselves into a column. When the alien warrior at the head of the column stepped into the light he vanished.

"Teleportas," Hazug said as more Necrons advanced towards the rectangles of light and disappeared.

"Where is dey goin'?" Ghukil asked.

"To da city I think," Hazug said, "dem lights look just like da ones on dare pyramid wagons."

"Shall we blow 'em up before all dem lads go through 'em boss?" Nizz asked.

"With wot lad? We only got da lifta gas bomb and a few stikkbomms, and we'd 'ave to fight our way through da metal lads first too. Besides I want to keep dem teleportas workin'."

"Why master?" Ratish asked.

"Because we is goin' to use 'em to get out of 'ere," Hazug told him, before he looked up to where the spire at the heart of the underground city reached upwards towards the roof of the cavern, "Now let's find a way around dat army and plant dis bomb."

All along the city walls orks fired their weapons towards the advanced horde of Necron warriors as even more of them emerged from the pyramids that floated behind them. Here and there some the Necrons fell from the gunfire, but many of those that did were able to get back to their feet after a short time.

Warboss Zhalrad was growing increasingly angry as one Gretchin messenger after another brought news of Ork units reporting that they were out of ammunition and withdrawing from the walls to find more.

"At dis rate dare won't be anyone left on da walls at all," Drazzok said.

"Wot would a weirdo like you know about it den?" Zhalrad replied.

"Only wot I seen in thirty years of fightin'. Ya need to get some runtherds up 'ere, den ya tell 'em to send all dare grots to da mek shops and bring back all da ammo dey can carry. Split it between ya lads and 'ave da grots go back and bring more before it runs out."

Warboss Zhalrad stared at Drazzok for a moment and the Ork nobbs gathered around looked at one another nervously, some of them remembering what had happened to the nob who had pointed out that Hazug had warned him about the Necrons and that he had ignored the warning. Sat in a corner, Sophie noticed their agitation and pressed her seat up against the wall. She had seen orks lash out in anger many times.

"Good idea weirdo," Zhalrad said and there was a collective release of breath from the assembled nobbs.

Then he yelled out "Grot!" and a Gretchin stepped towards the warboss, "Go find me a runtherd, and bring 'im 'ere."

"Yes lord," the Gretchin said before running from the command post.

"And ya'll want to get as many stikkbomms together as ya can for ya lads," Drazzok said to warboss Zhalrad, "dey should be able to chuck 'em pretty far from upon da walls. Oh, and if dare's any lobbas left ya should 'ave 'em shoot over da walls."

"Watch it weirdo," Zhalrad said sternly, "I is still da warboss and I is much bigger dan ya."

Drazzok just grunted and sat down next to Sophie.

"I 'ope Hazug's 'avin' better luck dan dis berk," he whispered to her before grabbing a half eaten roast squig that someone had abandoned on a nearby table and devouring what was left of it.

The direct route to the spire would have taken Hazug and his warband right through the middle of the Necron army assembled in front of him, and there were many orks who have died trying to fight their through. But, as Blood Axes, Hazug's warband regarded stealth and deception as acceptable strategies rather than being unhandy, sneaky and fit only for Gretchin and humans. To begin with the group travelled back the way they had come for a short distance until they reached a point where there were no more Necron troops marching past on the road that had been filled with them. Then they made their way directly towards the spire, passing behind the last of the marching Necrons as they approached the Necrons' assembly area.

"Right lads," Hazug whispered, "I think we is past 'em all now so let's get a move on."

The greenskins quickened their pace towards the spire, ever alert for any signs that they may have been discovered. Then Hazug stopped suddenly and the others barely avoided crashing into one another as they also came to a stop behind him.

"Right lads," he said, "looks like dis is it." Ahead of them lay the base of the spire, though wide at street level it appeared to taper rapidly further up though even at its highest point there would be enough room on a single level to hold hundreds of orks if it were a single open area. The spire was at the centre of a circular clearing in the surrounding buildings, between which many roads led directly towards the spire itself. The crystal that illuminated the cavern that held the city was directly above this place, and its eerie green light provided ample light to see here rather than the strangely coloured twilight that permeated much of the rest of the city. With such visibility Hazug could see that the Necrons had positioned no guards around this side of the base of the spire. More importantly he could see that there was another of the doors of liquid metal almost directly ahead of them.

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“Da way is clear lads,” he told the warband, “when I say we leg it for dat doorway over dare and I’ll use dat hummie mek’s gismo to open it up for us. Got it?”

“Got it boss,” the orks responded almost in unison.

“Right. Go!” and with that command the warband ran for the door.

24

Error. Intrusion.

The Necron mind's attention was suddenly diverted away from the forces under its control and instead to the structure in which it was housed. One of the doorways to the spire had just malfunctioned and opened in the same way as those which the intruders to the complex that it had been seeking had been able to do twice already.

They are here.

There were no guards in the building, and the mind had just despatched another large force to join the attack on the walled city. There were other units active, those that had been involved in the hunt for the intruders, but they were mainly maintenance units or destroyers that could not enter the building, and were scattered across the complex in any case. There was only solution left to the Necron mind.

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The metal body that the Necron mind had once inhabited, the one that it had been awarded by its god when it gave up the flesh that once held it, still rested here in the spire, and this body remained fully functional. The Necron mind began the preparations to revive the body and inhabit it once more. It would deal with the intruders itself.

Before separating itself from the complex's control system the mind sent a transmission to tell its army to change to independent control.

"Well dat was unexpected," Drazzok said as the entire Necron army assaulting the city stopped, and most the command post's occupants moved to the front wall for a better look. Every metal skeleton, flying machine and pyramid had halted its advance and ceased fire. For a well disciplined army this would have been an opportunity to annihilate a large portion of them, but even the best Ork armies could not be described in such a way, and while some orks did take their chance to attack while the Necrons were not defending themselves, most instead just cheered and claimed victory, firing their weapons only into the air in celebration.

"Wot is dey doin' now?" an Ork nob said.

"Maybe Hazug did it," Sophie said, "Maybe he's stopped them."

The respite did not last. After less than a minute the army began to move and fight once more, and the orks who had emerged from cover, standing high on the ramparts of the city walls to get a better line of fire, were the first to feel their wrath. The flesh of hundreds of orks melted away as the green lightning from the Necron weapons struck them.

"'E ain't stopped 'em yet," warboss Zhalrad said, "We is goin' to 'ave to do dat ourselves."

Behind the doorway lay a corridor leading directly towards the centre of the spire.

"Right den," said Hazug, "Ghukil and Gobnok, I wants ya to wait 'ere and watch dis door. Ratish stay with 'em an all. If any of dem metal lads show up den I wants ya to come and warn mew while dem two 'old 'em off. Goddit?"

"Yes master, Ratish stay 'ere."

"Good. Now da rest of ya lets go."

Hazug moved slowly down the corridor, followed by the remaining three orks he had not instructed to remain at the door. The corridor had no turns, junctions or doors to either side, it was just a straight passageway that lead to another doorway at the far end. Upon reaching this doorway Hazug activated the device he had taken from Castus's corpse once again and the door melted away. Beyond the now open doorway was a large circular chamber with four doors including the one Hazug had just opened equally spaced around it. Between the doors the chamber was lined with strange alien machinery that pulsed with the green light that was typical of their technology, while in the centre of the chamber a spiral staircase led both up and down.

"Do we plant da bomb 'ere boss?" Nizz said as he stared at the machinery all around them.

"No lad, not 'ere. I want it next to somethin' vital just in case it ain't powerful enough to destroy everythin' and dis stuff just doesn't look important enough to me," Hazug replied, "So da real question is do we go up or down?"

"I reckon important stuff would be 'eavy," Ubgrub said, "and who'd carry 'eavy stuff upstairs when dey could go down instead?"

"Good point lad. Down it is den."

Before the orks descended the staircase ahead of them, Hazug leant over the edge and looked to see how far down the stairs went, aiming his rifle over the edge as he did so just in case there was something there for him to shoot. The stairs went down beyond where the light from machinery around them reached, but

Hazug estimated that there were at least three stories worth of steps descending beneath them. Cautiously, with his rifle still at the ready he led the way down into the darkness.

The Necron lord felt the motion of the platform on which its body had rested for countless millennia as one end was raised to bring the lord to a standing position. The process of transferring its consciousness from the core of the complex to this body was now complete. The lord could still receive information from the core and issue orders via it, but the process was now far slower and less efficient.

The lord stepped away from the now vertical platform and reached out its arm. At the same time a mechanical arm extended out from a nearby wall. This arm held a long bladed weapon identical to the one the lord had observed the leader of the intruders carrying while still merged with the core. The lord took the warscythe and then, for the first time since it had been tasked with control of the complex, it began to walk.

The city gates exploded, sending burning debris flying into the buildings nearby. Some of these promptly caught fire also, and panic stricken Gretchin ran to and fro to extinguish the blazes while the orks continued to fight.

The Necron troops advanced towards the hole where the gates had been, seeking to enter the city, but for once the orks had an advantage. As the Necrons reached the open gateway they were pelted with grenades hurled from the walls and rooftops around them. One after another the grenades exploded among the Necron warriors just as they were crowded into the opening, and the mix of the blasts and the lethal fragments each grenade produce brought many of them down. Even as their internal systems attempted to repair the damage from one blast another grenade went off and caused even more damage to them. Not one Necron warrior got back to its feet this time, and every one that had tried to storm the gates faded away as the damage inflicted upon became too much for it to repair in the field. Just short of the city walls the Necron army halted again, though it continued to fire at upon the orks defending the walls.

"Dat's 'ow its done!" warboss Zhalrad shouted from his command post towards the Necron lines, "Me boys ain't givin' up!" Then he ducked instinctively as the floating pyramids turned their powerful weapons upon the city walls.

As the light given off by the machinery in the circular chamber above began to fade, Hazug became aware that there was more light entering the stairway from below. Once again it was green, but a much darker shade that did little to provide illumination.

"Right lads," he said, "we'll 'ave to use our torches from 'ere on. Light 'em up."

Apart from Ubgrub who needed both hands to wield his heavy weapon the orks all produced torches from their backpacks and lit them using the flints they carried. For the first time since arriving in the underground city the orks were able to see by a light source that didn't have a green tint to it. Now using just one hand to hold his rifle, Hazug continued to lead his troops down the stairs to whatever was producing the light below. As the orks got further down the stairs they heard something that they had not heard from any of the Necron technology they had encountered thus far, the sound of running machinery.

The sound began as a soft hum, but by the time the bottom of the stairs became visible it was a much louder, pulsating sound and the light given off by the equipment in the room located here increased and decreased its intensity in time with the pulsing sound.

"Wot is dis place?" Ubgrub said as the orks all looked around.

The room was larger than the one at street level, and the staircase was located at one side next to the wall. The machinery here not only lined the walls but was also dotted about the room in small clusters. Pipes and wires sprouted from the tops of each piece of machinery ran up to the ceiling and crossed it to link all the machines together. Only the equipment at the centre of the room was not connected in this manner. Here was a large featureless box made not of the metal that was the primary material used in the construction of the other Necron machinery, but of the green crystal material that augmented it. Unlike all of the other crystal that the orks had seen however, this did not glow.

"I don't know wot any of dis stuff does," Hazug said, "but I reckon its dead important. We'll plant da bomb in 'ere."

"But where in 'ere boss?" Nizz asked, "Dis place is 'uge."

"Where else lad?" Hazug responded, "Right dare," and he pointed towards the box at the centre of the room.

Ratish was the first to spot movement between the buildings adjacent to the spire.

"Look!" he said loudly, pointing towards where he had seen something move. Both Ghukil and Gobnok raised their weapons and pressed themselves to the side of the doorway for cover. As they watched a swarm of the metallic insect machines they had fought in the tunnel beneath the city streets came flying towards them.

Ghukil fired slightly sooner than Gobnok, and a stream of bullets passed through the oncoming swarm into the shadows beyond, where a shower of sparks indicated that they had just bounced off something made of metal. The sheet of flame from Gobnok's flamethrower was more effective however, whereas the bullets had passed through the swarm without striking any of the insect machines the sheet of fire produced by his flamethrower consumed them all and burning debris fell to the ground in front of the orks. The thick liquid fuel continued to burn, and it illuminated the shadow beyond where Ghukil's burst of automatic weapons fire had hit something. There the orks saw one of the large spider-like machines that had attacked the warband the first time they had seen the city from the ledge up above. The spider machine's two clawed arms were in motion; it had dug through the stone of the street below and was pulling out pieces of the alien metal and crystal from below. It was then using these materials to produce another swarm of the tiny insect machines. "Let rip!" Ghukil shouted, and he fired his automatic weapon once more. This time firing a longer burst deliberately aimed at the spider machine.

"Ratish go tell master!" Ratish yelled before running off down the passageway to the chamber at the far end.

He stopped suddenly when he reached the open doorway, his keen Gretchin hearing having detected the sound of metal on stone. He crouched just outside the chamber and peered around the edge of the doorway to see if he could see the source of the sound, and there on the spiral staircase he saw a figure descending from the floor above. The figure was alone, though it was clearly one of the aliens who inhabited this place, in one hand it carried a long bladed weapon identical to the one Hazug had taken from a Necron leader the first time they had fought with the aliens. Ratish watched as it came down the spiral staircase and continued down the same way Hazug had earlier gone. Pulling his small pistol from where he had tucked it into his belt, Ratish crept after the alien.

25

Hazug approached the crystal box in the centre of the room. It was larger than his truck along its sides, and it came up to his chest in height. Standing by the box he saw that the top surface was not as featureless as the four sides. Instead some of the crystal had been hollowed out to leave an indentation that looked as if a massive figure had lay down and the crystal formed around it. Hazug looked up to the ceiling, and in the gloom above him he saw another crystal box of the same size immediately above this one. This second box also had a humanoid shape carved out of it. Hazug had seen moulds many times, and the impressions in the two crystal boxes made him think that they were a gigantic mould meant to form an enormous humanoid figure that would be at least twice his height. Hazug could not see any channels through which molten material could be poured into the mould, if that was what it was, nor did he have any idea of what the Necrons could want to make in this way, but he could see no other possible function for the crystal boxes.

Hazug took the bag containing the bomb from his back, removed the bomb itself and placed it into the impression in the crystal box in front of him, making sure that he aligned it correctly. Then he produced the key that would activate the bomb and reached out to insert it into the slot provided. At the last moment he stopped, remembering the time keeping device that mek Garspark had given him. Rummaging through his pockets he found the device. Hazug inserted the key and turned it at the same time as he started the watch. As he turned the key, Hazug saw a drop of silver coloured liquid fall into the glass tube at the side of the bomb, followed a few moments later by another. The bomb's timer was running. Then Hazug turned to leave, as he did so he saw a single Necron coming down the stairs.

"Behind ya lads!" he yelled at the orks he had left at the bottom of the staircase. All three of the orks spun around and raised their weapons as the Necron advanced on them. The Necron struck first, swinging a bladed weapon identical to Hazug's in front of it. The blade sliced through the barrel of Ubgrub's automatic weapon, and took his left hand with it. Clutching at the stump of his wrist, Ubgrub slumped to the floor where he was decapitated by a return swing by the Necron.

Both Zhagrad and Nizz opened fire with their pistols, but even from point blank range the bullets just bounced off the Necron and it was not even slowed by them. Nizz swung his axe and the Necron stepped back to avoid the strike. Nizz swung his weapon again, but this time the Necron stepped towards him and grabbed his arm as he attacked. The Necron's grip was powerful, and Nizz cried out in pain as a loud 'crack' signified that the Necron had crushed the bone in his arm. The Necron pulled on Nizz's ruined limb and the young Ork was dragged closer, where the Necron impaled him through the chest on his blade. Zhagrad leapt backward to put more room between himself and the Necron, he knew that the alien's weapon was useless at a distance so he thought that the more space he put between them the better. He fired another volley of pistol shots at the Necron as it pulled its weapon free of Nizz's body and turned to face him. Sparks flew as the bullets bounced off the Necron once more. Rather than charge towards Zhagrad the Necron instead gripped its weapon in one hand at its middle and lifted it over its shoulder, pointing it towards Zhagrad. Then the alien hurled its weapon at the Ork.

The weapon struck Zhagrad at his neck and the impossibly sharp blade cut his head from his shoulders. But the weapon did not stop moving once the Ork was dead, instead continuing to fly through the air until it embedded itself deep in the wall beyond Zhagrad. The Necron strode forwards and stepped over Zhagrad's headless corpse to retrieve its weapon.

While the alien had been fighting with his troops, Hazug had picked up his rifle once more and aimed it at the lone alien. He snatched the trigger and fired a rapid burst at the Necron. The attack struck the Necron on its side, most of the bullets promptly bounced off but some of those that struck the alien's arm penetrated the thinner plating there and the arm suddenly fell limply to the Necron's side. The Necron halted and turned towards Hazug, then it looked down at its damaged arm as the damage inflicted by Hazug's attack began to spontaneously repair itself. Then the Necron turned back towards where its weapon was lodged in the wall.

Hazug fired another burst at the Necron, but the bullets all failed to inflict any damage. Then Hazug reached for the secondary trigger.

He was about to launch the rocket at the Necron when he instead changed his point of aim to the weapon the alien had thrown. Then he pulled the trigger.

The rocket launched with a 'whoosh' and it flew directly towards the alien weapon sticking out of the wall. The rocket hit just above the weapon and exploded. Moments later there was a secondary blast, as the rocket inflicted critical damage to whatever equipment lay behind the wall it had struck. The weapon that was lodged in the wall shattered under the force of the two blasts, and pieces of it joined the fragments of the wall blown clear by the explosions.

The Necron was thrown backwards by the shock wave from the exploding equipment, and it skidded across the floor back to the staircase. Hazug slowly moved closer to the prone alien, inserting a fresh magazine into his rifle. The Necron lay still as Hazug approached, but after he had taken about a dozen steps first its fingers twitched and then it sat upright, its eyes glowing red. Hazug lifted his rifle to his shoulder and switched the selector to the 'turbo-dakka' position, and then he pulled the trigger. The entire contents of the magazine were discharged in under a second, and the Necron took the entire burst in its chest. Yet again the armour plating of the Necron's body proved tough enough to withstand the attack, and not a single round pierced its chest plate.

Hazug grunted as he watched the Necron get to its feet, all the time staring directly at him. He slung his rifle over his shoulder and instead drew the alien blade. Holding it in front of him he stared straight back at the Necron.

"Well?" he said out loud, "Wot is ya waitin' for den? Come and 'ave a go if ya think ya is 'ard enough." Hazug and the Necron stood staring at one another as Hazug waited for the alien to make its move, aware that the bomb was armed and he needed to leave. Unfortunately, the Necron was blocking his escape from this place. Then the Necron did something unexpected, something that Hazug didn't even know that it could do.

It spoke to him.

"Krook," it said in the Ork language.

"Who?" Hazug replied.

"Krook," the Necron repeated, "you cannot escape. You have trespassed where gods are born and for that you will die."

"Da name's Hazug," Hazug said, "not Krook. Ya must 'ave me mistaken with some other nob."

The Necron indicated the bodies of Hazug's troops that lay on the floor.

"You are all Krook. I fought your kind millions of years past, and I will be fighting whatever other life forms dare to challenge the glory of the C'tan millions of years hence. Your mockery cannot change that. Now give me the warscythe and I will make you death swift and easy."

"So ya call it a warscythe den do ya?" Hazug said as he looked down at the weapon he held, "Pansy name for a choppa, especially a big choppa like dis 'un."

"You cannot agitate me with your words Krook.," the Necron said, "I moved beyond such weaknesses when I embraced the will of the C'tan. Now return the warscythe and we will finish this."

"Oh we'll this alright," Hazug said, "but I stole dis 'ere choppa from one of ya dead mates fair and square. So if ya wants it back, ya will 'ave to come and get ya self."

"You will suffer Krook.," then the Necron charged.

As soon as the Necron began to move Hazug also charged straight at the alien and let out a cry.

"Waaagh!"

The Necron reached out to grab the warscythe as Hazug drew close, but the Ork surprised it by pulling the weapon closer to his body, and instead of attacking with the warscythe Hazug slammed his body into the Necron and both of them tumbled to the floor.

The Necron recovered first, and it reached out for where the warscythe had landed. But before it could retrieve the weapon, Hazug grabbed the Necron by its leg and pulled it back towards him.

"No ya don't," he said before bringing his fist down on the back of the Necron's head.

The attack did no damage to the Necron, but in the time it took it to process what had happened and determine that there was no damage Hazug reached the warscythe and picked it up. The Necron stood up and lunged at Hazug who swung the weapon at his opponent. The blade sliced clean through the Necron's outstretched arm at the elbow, and its forearm fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Need a hand?" Hazug asked rhetorically, swinging the warscythe again. The Necron sidestepped the attack, and with its one remaining arm it grabbed the warscythe between where Hazug's hands were gripping it. Hazug fought to pull the warscythe free of the Necron's grip so that he could launch another attack, but even with just one hand to use the alien's grip was too strong for Hazug to break it.

The Necron saw that Hazug was focusing all of his attention on the warscythe, and it lashed out with its leg, kicking Hazug in the knee.

"Arrgh!" Hazug cried out as his knee gave way and he collapsed, but he still retained his grip on the warscythe and he dragged the Necron down with him. Lying on the floor, with the Necron kneeling over him, Hazug continued to try and wrestle the warscythe away from his opponent.

The Necron spider machine had collapsed in heap following a prolonged stream of gunfire from Ghukil's automatic weapon, and its remains had faded to nothing as soon as it hit the floor. Then they heard the explosion from beneath them.

"Was dat da bomb?" Gobnok said.

"Da bomb's supposed to blow up da 'ole city," Ghukil replied, "da boss must 'ave run into trouble down dare, and 'e's 'ad to blow somethin' up."

"Should we go 'elp 'im?"

"Nah. 'E's got da other lads with 'im, dey'll be alright."

Then, from outside came the sound of marching, and a group of Necron warriors came into view from the street where the spider had been positioned just a few minutes earlier.

"Besides," said Ghukil, "it looks like we 'ave our own fightin' to do," and he opened fire again.

Hazug had tried to wrest the warscythe free by twisting it, but so far he had had no success. Now he instead looked for an alternate method of attack. Against a human soldier he would have probably brought his knee up between his opponents legs, but Hazug reasoned that the Necron would, like an Ork, be unaffected by such an attack. Instead he bent his arms some more and brought the warscythe lower until it was lay across his chest. Then, with one sudden movement, Hazug lifted his head up and butted the Necron as its head was brought closer to his own. The alien's head snapped backwards, and when it lowered it to look Hazug in the face again he repeated the attack and watched as the Necron's head jerked backwards once more.

The Necron was momentarily distracted by Hazug's unexpected strikes, and Hazug used the opportunity to push upwards with one arm on the warscythe and now it was the Necron who was thrown to the floor rather than him.

Hazug stood up in an attempt pull the warscythe free of the Necron's grip but, rather than letting go, the Necron instead retained a firm hold of the weapon and used Hazug's pull to help it get to its feet again.

Hazug stretched his arms out in front of him, wary of letting the Necron get close enough to kick him once more. Then something caught his eye on the staircase.

"I'm out of ammo!" Gobnok shouted. Though potentially devastating assault weapons, infantry portable flamethrowers carried only enough fuel for a handful of shots before they need replenishing, and he had just used up the last of what fuel had brought with him to set fire to some of the Necrons who were now advancing on the two orks guarding the doorway.

"Use ya slugga instead den," Ghukil told him as he continued to fire his automatic weapon at the oncoming Necrons.

Ghukil removed the now empty flamethrower's fuel tank from his back and let it fall to the floor. He drew his pistol and began to fire through the doorway. The Necrons outside continued to advance towards the doorway, though some of them fell under the weight of fire being put out by the orks defending it, and not all of them got back up instead of teleporting away.

Gobnok lowered his pistol and pulled a grenade from his belt.

"Stikkbomm!" he yelled as he hurled the explosive device at the Necrons, where it exploded in the midst of them.

The doorway had until now provided adequate cover for both of the orks against the gunfire from the Necron warriors, but when Gobnok revealed himself in order to throw his grenade he presented too good a target to miss, and several blasts of green lightning struck him. He fell to the ground with a hole burned right through his chest, and the flesh on his face burnt away so that it exposed his skull. He died without a sound. Though momentarily distracted by the death of his friend, Ghukil continued to fire on the Necrons as they drew closer until his weapon also ran out of ammunition. There were only three Necron warriors left now, and Ghukil drew his pistol to engage them. His first shot was a lucky one, striking a Necron in its eye and the alien faded away before it had chance to fall.

Ghukil screamed in agony as blasts from the two remaining Necrons' rifles clipped his body and he fell backwards with blood pouring from the massive gashes ripped in his side. The two Necron warriors stepped through the open doorway in unison and saw Ghukil lying face down on the floor, bleeding heavily. As they aimed their rifles at the helpless Ork, Ghukil rolled over and faced them.

"Kop dis," he gasped, and as he breathed his last breath he let go of the grenade he was holding.

26

Deep below Hazug and the Necron lord continued to struggle for control of the warscythe. The two combatants stood facing one another, each holding on the weapon between them at arms length. Neither of them wished to let the other get too close in case they launched an attack from some unexpected quarter. Hazug looked briefly towards the stairs again, but the Necron did not adjust its view in the slightest, even though it was slightly shorter than Hazug it continued to stare him straight in the eyes.

"Do it!" Hazug shouted.

The Necron remained silent, it did not understand what Hazug was referring to, nor did it care. It just wanted to kill him and for that it needed the warscythe. The Necron noticed Hazug glance quickly at the stairs once more.

"Do it!" he shouted once again, and the Necron attempted to determine what Hazug was talking about.

"Do it ya useless bloody grot! Take da shot!"

Retaining its hold on the warscythe, the Necron turned rapidly to face the stairs, and there at the bottom of them it saw Ratish pointing his battered pistol straight at it. Glowing brightly, the Necron's eyes stood out in the gloom of the chamber and they made easy targets for Ratish, Gretchin possessing much better marksmanship abilities than orks.

The single shot that Ratish's pistol carried echoed as he squeezed the trigger back and the gun kicked upwards violently. There was the sound of breaking glass as the bullet penetrated the Necron's left eye and it head jerked backwards and to the side. More importantly, its grip on the warscythe relaxed.

Hazug stepped backwards, pulling the weapon free of his opponent's remaining hand. He lifted it over his head and brought it crashing down on the Necron from the side. The blade cut through the Necron's head and continued on through its body, finally emerging near the base of its spine. For a brief moment the Necron was motionless before the back of its body and head began to slide towards the floor while the front half toppled forwards. Then there was the customary green glow, and the pieces disappeared without a trace.

"Ratish do good master?" Ratish said as Hazug hobbled towards the stair, his knee still aching from the Necron's kick.

"Yeah grot, ya did good," Hazug said as he looked at the watch, "now lets get out of 'ere before it all blows up. I don't think dat dare's much time left."

"Dare's more of 'em upstairs master. Ratish came to warn master," Ratish said as they began to ascend the stairs.

"I reckon I can 'andle 'em, I still got dis big choppa after all."

"Wot about dare teeth master?" Ratish asked, pointing at the Ork bodies on the floor.

Hazug paused for a moment.

"We ain't got time to pull teeth grot," he said, "so just grab dare money pouches and any ammo dey 'ad left and let's get goin'."

The Necron army had broken into the city. Their pyramid vehicles had fired one volley after another at a single point on the city walls and blasted a breach in it wide enough for three of them to pass through side-by-side. The vehicles did not advance, however, instead they remained outside of the city and took over the task of keeping the Ork Stompas separated from the city's other defenders. Meanwhile, the legion of troops that the Necrons had assembled outside of the city began to march through the gap and onto the streets. Ironically, as the Necrons forced their way into the city that the orks had fought so hard to keep them out of, they found themselves in an environment where the orks held the advantage. Greenskins, especially orks, excelled at the short ranged brutal combat that occurs when armies fight in built up areas. Bands of Ork warriors used the myriad of tunnels normally used by Gretchin workers to move about the city discretely to move past the invading Necrons and strike at them from unexpected directions, while the superior shooting skills and ranged weapons of the Necrons counted for little when much of the fighting took place hand-to-hand. It was only the innate toughness of their armoured bodies and their ability self repair that prevented the Necron army from being completely wiped out by the city's defenders as soon as they stepped through the breach.

Hazug looked down at what was left of Ghukil and Gobnok. It was clear to see that one of them, Ghukil apparently, had used a grenade against Necrons who had been standing right next to him and their bodies had been ripped apart by the explosion confined in the passageway. But in spite of their deaths they had held back the Necrons and allowed Hazug to plant the bomb.

"Nice work lads," he said as he stepped over their remains and through the doorway, before adding, "pick up da big shoota grot, it worth seven teeth, no sense leavin' it 'ere."

Ratish picked up the automatic weapon and supported it on his shoulder, and then he followed Hazug out of the spire. Hazug was hurrying towards the Necron teleporters, and though the kick to his knee still bothered him somewhat his Ork physiology made sure that he was not so badly impaired by the injury that he suffered anything more than a slight limp, though the Necron warscythe came in handy as an improvised walking stick. He knew that that too would heal given a few days, providing he could escape from this place before the bomb detonated of course.

"Hurry up grot," Hazug said, noticing that Ratish was lagging behind, "now ain't da time for daudlin'."

"Yes master," Ratish replied.

The teleporters were not far from the spire, and before too long Hazug and Ratish were back on the bridge and looking out at the wide-open space that the Necrons had assembled their forces on the last time they had been here. The Necron army was gone now, through the teleporters to join in the attack on the Ork city Hazug supposed, but there was still a small contingent of troops left here. Whether they were guarding the teleporters or were standing ready to step through if commanded to Hazug could not tell. All he knew was that they were in his way.

"Looks like ten of 'em," Hazug said taking a quick head count of the Necron warriors, "all of 'em with shootas."

"Wot do we do master? Do we sneak up on 'em?"

"I reckon so. Up close I can probably take out most of 'em," Hazug said before a sudden thought hit him, "'ere did Ubgrub 'ave any ammo left for 'is bug shoota?"

"Yes master, Ratish 'as it in me bag."

"Den give it 'ere grot, cause I got an idea."

Ratish took what was left of the ammunition belt for the heavy weapon from his bag and gave it, along with the gun itself to his master. Hazug loaded it, and steadied it on the wall that concealed them.

"I is goin' to give 'em da entire belt," he explained, "I reckon dat den dey'll start marchin' dis way, and when dey does we'll leg it around behind 'em and go through da teleportas. Goddit?"

"Yes master."

Hazug aimed for the centre of the Necron unit near the teleporters. For a few moments he tried moving the gun around to see how wide his arc of fire was, then he returned to pointing it at the centre of the group once more. Then he fired.

Hazug held the trigger down and hosed the Necron squad with gunfire, and with glee he saw that three of them fell to the ground, while only one got back up before the ammunition was all expended. Turning to face the direction of the attack, the Necrons spotted Hazug's firing position and they began to advance.

"Right, dey is comin'. Take dis," Hazug said as he gave the gun back to Ratish, "and let's get movin'."

The Necron squad advanced along a street that ran along the edge of the ravine, so Hazug could see that his attack had lured all eight of the surviving Necrons away from the teleporters.

"Right leg it!" Hazug yelled, and he and Ratish dashed across to a side street opposite end of the bridge, bolts of green lightning zipped past them as the Necrons opened fire.

"Ow long do we keep runnin' dis way master?"

"Until we is sure dat dey is not goin' to 'ead back to the teleportas."

More energy bolts flew through the air as the Necron squad reached the side street and turned down it after the two greenskins. The sound of the Necrons' footfalls quickened as they too broke into a run in pursuit of them.

"Next turnin' we 'ead back towards da teleportas!" Hazug shouted.

"Yes master."

There was a street just ahead that appeared to head in the direction of the assembly area and its teleporters, and Hazug and Ratish ran around the corner with the Necrons still in hot pursuit, and found themselves staring straight into a dead end ahead of them.

"Ah crap," Hazug said.

"Dey is right behind us master!" Ratish cried out.

"I know dat, put down da big shoota and get ya pistol and dagga ready."

Ratish dropped the heavy weapon and drew his own weapons while Hazug pressed himself up against the corner that they had just run around.

Hazug listened for the sound of the Necrons running after them, holding his warscythe at the ready. As they drew close he roared and spun around the corner, swinging the warscythe by the end of its shaft as he did so.

The long tubular grip struck two of the Necron warriors as Hazug swung and the force of the impact knocked them both over, while the blade at its end sliced effortlessly through the necks of three more and all three promptly vanished.

A shot rang out as Ratish fired his pistol from point blank range, and another warrior collapsed as its knee exploded. It flailed about on the ground as Ratish leapt on top of it and stabbed at its neck repeatedly with his small knife.

"Get off it!" Hazug shouted to Ratish as he adjusted his grip on the warscythe to one more suitable, "If it teleports it'll take ya with it."

Ratish rolled off the prone Necron, taking one last swipe at its neck with his knife as he did so. The short blade clipped a critical wire and the neck's eyes grew dark just before its emergency teleport system activated and took the warrior from sight.

Too close to make effective use of their rifles, the Necrons instead had to rely on the short bayonets fixed to their muzzles, but neither Hazug nor Ratish was an easy opponent in such a situation. Ratish moved quickly enough to be able to dodge the few strikes that the remaining four Necrons directed towards him, while not only had Hazug been fighting hand-to-hand for his entire life but he was also armed with one of the Necrons own weapons, and it was a weapon that continued to prove itself easily capable of despatching its original owners.

Hazug rammed the warscythe through the abdomen of one a Necron warrior, then freed it simply by cutting across the alien's body and moved one to the next Necron before that one had even begun to fade away.

"Lookout master!" Ratish warned as a Necron warrior lunged at Hazug from behind, and its bayonet sliced into the flesh of his leg, just above his already injured knee. Without even crying out, Hazug threw his head back and it smashed into the Necron's face at the same time as he used the handle of the warscythe to strike at another of the Necrons. Both of the warriors struck by Hazug's double strike stepped back in reaction to his blows, and as they calculated their next move Hazug side stepped from between them and turned to face the third Necron warrior just as it too lunged forwards with its bayonet aimed at Hazug's chest.

Before the blade could hit Hazug, Ratish dived towards the warrior and tackled it around its knees. The Gretchin's attack had no chance of damaging the Necron, but it diverted the alien's attention away from its attack, and as it looked down at Ratish, Hazug sliced off the arm that gripped its rifle trigger. Attempting to step away from Hazug, the Necron was overbalanced by Ratish still holding one of its legs and it toppled to the ground. Ratish let go of the Necron as it fell, just as Hazug stabbed it through the chest with his warscythe.

Hazug turned to face the final two Necrons once more, expecting them to be about to attack once more. Instead he found that they had turned their backs on him and were fleeing from battle. He was about to go after them when he changed his mind. Ratish noticed this and queried it.

"Isn't master goin' to go after 'em?" he asked.

"Nah, leave 'em," Hazug replied, "pick up da big shoota and lets get to da teleportas."

Ratish picked up the heavy weapon once more, and the pair of them ran back the way they had come.

27

The two Necron warriors ran through the city. They had signalled for reinforcements, and another squad of warriors located nearby had broadcast its location and confirmed that it was en route to them. It took very little time for the pair to meet up with this squad running the other way; its warriors were arranged into a column with its members in pairs. When the two fleeing warriors reached this squad they joined the column at its rear and then all of the warriors continued to run towards where Hazug and Ratish had last been seen.

The repeated injuries that Hazug had suffered to his leg were beginning to bother him, and even though he was weighed down by the heavy weapon he carried, Ratish was easily able to keep up with his master. "Master hurt bad?"

"Don't worry grot, we is almost dare now, I can see da teleportas ahead."

Ratish looked ahead of him, and he too could make out the glowing light of the active teleporters. This time there were no guards however; the squad that Hazug had lured away had not yet been replaced. However, as the two greenskins drew closer to their method of escape they heard the sound of rapid footfalls from behind them.

"More of dem master!" Ratish yelled when he saw the squad of Necrons gaining on them.

Hazug turned to take a look for himself. The Necrons were gaining ground fast, normally he would have been confident that he could outrun them easily with the head start he had, but on this occasion his leg was slowing him down. He considered discarding the warscythe to lighten his load, but he was using it help support him as he ran.

"Leg it grot!" Hazug yelled and he spun around and broke into a run, regardless of the pain in his leg.

Just as Hazug and Ratish reached the assembly area that held the teleporters the green energy bolts of the Necron rifles began to flash past them as the pursuing Necrons came into firing range. Ratish dived to the ground.

"Get up!" Hazug bellowed, and he dragged Ratish back to his feet, "Just leg it!"

Ratish began to run for the nearest teleporter, but he quickly realised that Hazug was not following him. He turned around and saw that the Ork had un-slung his rifle and taken aim at the rapidly closing Necrons, a rocket was already loaded beneath the main barrel.

Hazug pulled both the main and secondary triggers at the same time and sent both a stream of bullets and an explosive missile at their pursuers. Without waiting to assess the effect of his attack, Hazug slung his rifle again and picked up the warscythe.

"Quickly master!" Ratish shouted as Hazug began to run again. A moment later he heard the sound of the missile detonating.

Another volley of green lightning shot past Hazug's head as he approached the teleporter, but he continued to run supported by the warscythe. With the teleporter right in front of them, both Hazug and Ratish dived forwards into the pulsing green light.

The Necrons in pursuit halted when their quarry vanished through the teleport portal. They signalled the departure of the intruders to the complex's control system, but without a Necron intelligence to direct it no orders came back and the warrior squad instead took up the position in the assembly area previously occupied by the squad that Hazug had lured away.

In the giant crystal box in the chamber beneath the central spire another drop of liquid metal fell into the glass tube. The level of the liquid in the tube rose so that an electrical connection was made between the two contacts inside and the forcefield within the bomb's casing shrank rapidly around the gas held within it. The destruction spread across the tomb complex at the speed of light, the heat of the nuclear fusion created in the bomb spread out much faster than the air allowed the shock wave to travel.

The central spire and the vital systems it contained were consumed first, metal and stone turned first to liquid then gas as the temperature within rose thousands of degrees in the blink of an eye. The air in the cavern turned to fire and both the city and its inhabitants, beings that had long ago given up an organic existence in favour of the metal bodies that their gods had bestowed upon them, were consumed. The destruction was total, structures that had stood undisturbed for millions of years ceased to exist in an instant.

The force of the blast found an escape through the hole in the roof of the cavern where Hazug had smashed the crystal that focused the energy of the complex's primary weapon and through the passageway that led up to the chamber above it. From there, the nuclear fire vented up through the hole in the desert sands and extended up into the sky while the sand around the hole was turned to glass by the heat.

Hazug and Ratish tumbled from the portal mounted at the front of a Necron pyramid located near to the breach in the city wall, and as they stood up they found themselves surrounded by thousands of Necrons warriors and fighting machines.

"Ah crap," Hazug said as he stood up and saw hoards of the aliens now turning to face them.

The Necrons suddenly halted, as a brief flash lit up the sky in the direction of the Necrons' underground city, and the army arrayed before the orks suddenly halted. There was a succession of crashes as the pyramid vehicles dropped from the air to the ground and the glow of their teleport portals grew dim. Simultaneously, the glow in the eyes of all of the Necrons attacking the city grew dim also, and then they began to fall over. At first just a few, but then more and more of the metal bodied alien soldiers keeled over and lay on the ground unmoving.

"Why ain't dey vanishin' master?" Ratish asked as he looked around at the Necron bodies littered around the battlefield.

"I think dat when da bomb went off we destroyed whatever it was dat let 'em do it," Hazug replied, also gazing around the battlefield filled with the remains of the defeated Necron army.

"Hazug!" came a shout from the breach in the city wall, and Hazug looked up to see warboss Golgoth Zhalrad striding towards them surrounded by an entourage of heavily armed nobbs. Behind them Hazug saw Drazzok and Sophie also making their way towards them. Sophie broke into a run and spread her arms out wide to embrace Hazug when she reached him.

"I was so worried," she exclaimed, "I thought you were dead."

"Hazug ya git lover!" Zhalrad shouted, "Ya did it!" then he looked around before adding, "Where's ya lads got to den?"

"Dead," Hazug replied.

"Never mind, dare's always more lads, right? Now I reckon ya deserve a reward for wot ya've done. 'Ow's ten teeth sound to ya?"

"Cheapskate," Drazzok commented, but Hazug didn't bother to say anything. Then the weirdboy walked up to Hazug and slapped him on the back, "I knews ya would do it," hew said.

In the cold depths of space just outside the system, the force of Necron spacecraft closing in noted that transmissions from the tomb complex had ceased. With the applications of immense energies they slowed to a speed that was a mere fraction of that of light and waited. Some time later they detected the energy release of a nuclear explosion centred on the tomb as it made its way through space far more slowly than the Necrons' communications. Satisfied that the complex they were being sent to assist no longer existed, the Necron ships changed course back towards their home base. They accelerated rapidly to faster than light speeds and left the system.

EPILOGUE

Hazug took another look around at the bodies of orks as parts of the city continued to burn. There was a roaring from overhead as a flight of bright red ground attack aircraft flew over. The flak batteries meant to protect the city from them were all burning wrecks, on the orders of warboss Kazkal Kromag, Hazug had landed ahead of the main invasion force and planted explosive charges next to them all without being seen. Then when he heard the sound of the aircraft approaching he had used a wireless transmission device to trigger them all simultaneously. By the time warboss Kromag himself had arrived with the main force by sea fires were burning across the city. He loaded a fresh magazine into his rifle, even though it appeared that apart from some final mopping up the fighting was now over. He had left the Necron warscythe at home. Whatever power source the alien weapon used had failed when the bomb destroyed their underground city and mek Batrug had not yet been able to produce a replacement for it.

When Hazug had returned home the first thing he did was to inform warboss Kromag about the force of Stompas that Golgoth Zhalrad had been assembling in secret. Warboss Kromag gave Zhalrad some time to repair some of the damage inflicted on the Stompas during the battle with the Necron army, though not enough time to enable him to get a large number of them fully functional again, before he launched the attack to remind Zhalrad who was the biggest boss on the planet, as well as to take control of the Stompas. Warboss Kromag approached Hazug with a grin on his face.

"Hazug!" he shouted as he placed an arm around Hazug's shoulder, "Ya may be a lousy git lover who smashed up me front door, but I couldn't 'ave done dis without ya. Me lads 'ave got 'old of all da Stompas, more dan thirty of 'em give or take. Not all workin' of course, but we'll soon sort dat out. So I reckon dat we're even now. Wot d'ya think about dat?"

Hazug said nothing.

"Aye mate," Kromag said, "I killed Zhalrad me self, cut 'is 'ead off and chucked it somewhere. I is puttin' Grobba in charge 'ere now. D'ya know Grobba?"

"'E's a goth ain't 'e?"

"Aye, 'e's a goth alright. I ain't trustin' another evil sun with this place. Now come on, dare's a lot of beer needs drinkin' tonight."

As Hazug and warboss Kromag wandered away to get something to drink, another Ork watched them from the shadows, meanwhile a Gretchin scampered around at this Ork's feet examining the bodies.

"Will dis one do master?" the Gretchin asked, standing on top of one of the Ork corpses, "Its still one in one bit, and dare ain't dat many 'oles in it."

"It'll do," the Ork replied, "they'll all do for wot I wants to do with 'em. Now get 'em loaded on da boat so we can get started."