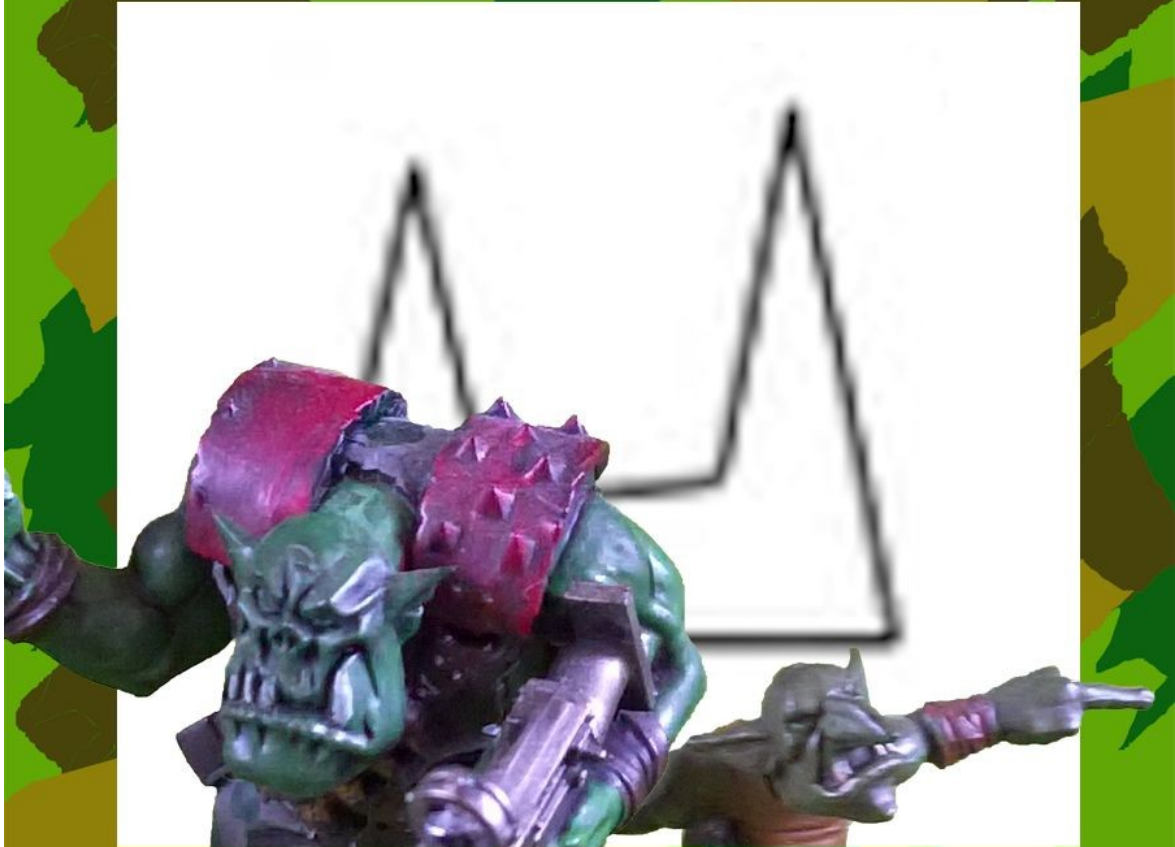


# DA PORTAL OF DARKNESS



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

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

# WAAAGH!

## Da Portal of Darkness

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

To the Orks what happens to the local human population is generally considered unimportant but when an explosion destroys the headquarters of the small human police force it draws the attention of Hazug Throatlitter, last Blood Axe of the tribe. Joined by a force of both Orks and humans he uncovers a plot that threatens the existence of all life on the planet.

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 Roks
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

The rifle butt slammed into him between his shoulder blades and he dropped to all fours. Around him well-armed men looked down upon him. Many of the men were on foot, while half a dozen others in finer clothing sat on horseback.

"He doesn't look like he'll be much sport at all," one of the men on horseback stated with a sneer on his face, "not like the usual specimens your men obtain for us."

"Today isn't just about sport gentlemen," Governor Venris Highbalt said, "Toris here may be a lowly scribe, but he has certain beliefs that must be corrected."

"Beliefs such as what?" a second horseman asked.

"He's been comparing the output of our mines with what we export and declare to the Administration and he believes that the numbers don't add up properly."

"So he thinks that you're diverting some of the output elsewhere then?" the second horseman added.

"I know he is," Toris gasped, "and I know who you're sending the rest to as well. Ugh!" and he was silenced another blow from a rifle butt which caused him to fall flat on the ground.

"You see," Governor Highbalt said, "He thinks that what I'm doing is somehow wrong."

"Its treason," Toris was able to get out before the guard nearest him kicked him while he lay on the ground and he doubled up in pain, clutching at his stomach.

"Looks like your men will finish him off before we get any sport from him at all," a third horseman said.

"Yes, do please be careful," Governor Highbalt told the guards, "scribes tend to break easily," then he looked at the other horsemen again, "So gentlemen, today we will remind this scribe that I own this world and everything and everyone, on it."

The sound of an engine cut the governor short and he and his guests all turned in the direction of the sound to see a ground car approaching at speed, mud and stones being kicked up by its tyres. The vehicle braked sharply and one of the horsemen struggled to keep his mount steady. The driver's side door of the car opened and a man in a uniform of a junior officer in the Planetary Defence Force leapt out.

"Your excellency!" he shouted as he ran towards the governor's horse, "We're under attack!"

"Attack?" the Governor replied, "Preposterous!"

"It's true your excellency," the officer said, halting immediately in front of the governor and saluting him, "Its orks, dozens of capital ships plus at least thirty escorts heading for us."

"What about our defence ships?" one of the horsemen asked, a slight trace of evident panic in his voice while the others looked at one another concerned.

"Gone sir," the officer replied, "the Ork ships blasted them apart and our orbital facilities are close to being overwhelmed as well, there are just too many orks for them to handle. General Weiss expects the greenskins to begin an invasion at any time. He sent me to get the governor to his shelter while he mobilises the defence force."

"Yes, of course, my shelter. I should go there now," Governor Highbalt said and he climbed down from his horse. As his feet landed on the ground the sky overhead turned dark.

"What's happening?" a horseman cried out as there was a sound like thunder from high above.

"They're here," the officer said and everyone present looked up to see the massive fiery bulk of an asteroid adorned with the crude constructs of greenskins as it shot across the sky.

"The capital! It heading for the capital!" one of the guards shouted out and as everyone watched jets of flame shot from the front of the Ork vessel as it flew and it began to loose speed as it disappeared over the horizon. Everyone watched, waiting for the impact and they were rewarded with a flash, followed by a dull boom as the massive Ork vessel made its landing.

"Your Excellency, we have to go!" the officer said, climbing back into his vehicles.

"Yes I'm coming," Governor Highbalt said as he ran towards the vehicle himself. When he reached it he turned around and looked at Toris, "Somebody kill him will you," he said and as he got into the car a single shot rang out.

# 1

The door slid open automatically when Jarr approached it. This made him suspicious for a moment, it was rare for inquisitors to allow anyone access to their chambers without assessing them carefully first. Then it occurred to him that Inquisitor Darien Rell had already assessed him, in fact he had probably monitored his movements since he stepped onto the space station eighteen minutes earlier. Not waiting for any further invitation from the man who had requested his presence here, Jarr stepped through the open doorway and the door slid shut behind him.

As usual, Jarr quickly took in his surroundings, assessing what weapons were present and determining the locations of all of the ways in and out. At first glance the room appeared to be full of mirrors of various shapes and sizes, but then Jarr observed that all of the reflective surfaces were mounted flat against the walls of the room. They weren't mirrors at all Jarr concluded, they were stasis fields. Within each of the time nullifying energy fields would be an artefact of alien origin, preserved perfectly against the rigours of time until Inquisitor Rell had use of it.

"Do take a seat," Inquisitor Rell said, standing up as Jarr walked towards him. A second man sat by the inquisitor's desk, in addition to the pair of half human, half machine servitors that stood behind the inquisitor himself. From the looks of him the man was a savant, a human databank who would keep track of all the information that Rell needed to carry out his duties. While no where near as heavily modified as the servitors, the savant's body and especially his brain, was still enhanced by the meshing of arcane technologies with his flesh. Jarr noticed the small shaped charge embedded at the base of the man's skull, with a single command, whether spoken, electronic or psychic, the savant brain could be destroyed immediately to prevent the knowledge held within it from falling into the wrong hands.

Instinctively, Jarr eyed up the available chairs as he approached them, looking for any signs of a trap. Detecting none, he sat in the nearest seat.

"So," Jarr began, "who I am to kill?"

"Straight to the pint, good," Inquisitor Rell replied as he sat down again and took a sip from the glass in front of him.

"I was not raised for small talk Inquisitor. Other temples train disciples in interpersonal skills, mine saw no need."

"Indeed. I have recently commissioned several readings of the Emperor's Tarot and the results have been consistent with one another. Their predictions relate to the world of Crassus Minor at the edge of this sector. Are you familiar with it?"

"I am not."

"Well the world of Crassus Minor was part of our glorious Imperium up until about thirty years ago when it was taken by a force of orks as part of the migration of the creatures that cost us so dearly. Because of our losses elsewhere that were caused by the migration, in addition to pressure from the Tau and Tyranids we have never been able to muster enough strength to take it back, but the Tarot suggests that a change may come soon," at this point the Inquisitor handed Jarr a file. Opening it, Jarr saw that it contained a single sheet of paper on which an image was printed. It looked like the photograph had been taken casually; showing a group of figures clustered together informally, many of who had the look of a rogue trader's entourage. The face of one of the figures had been ringed and a portion of the paper was dedicated to an enhanced view of this face.

"Providing that this individual is eliminated, yes?"

"Quite correct. He has a small following on Crassus Minor, but the tarot suggests that his power is about to grow significantly and unless he can be taken out of the picture then the world may be lost to us forever."

"If you want the planet back I would have expected you to be asking me to target the orks chieftain and get the greenskins to fight amongst themselves."

"That option has been considered, the Tarot suggests that such a course of action would ultimately benefit the tau. This individual is the one you must kill if we are to ever recover the world."

"And how am I to locate the target inquisitor? A planet is a large place for one individual to hide and this file tells me nothing regarding that."

"Yes of course," the inquisitor said, "I will allow my associate Cubrim to enlighten you in that matter."

"Thank you my lord," the savant said softly, bowing his head before he stood up and crossed the room to a holo viewer that, with a wireless transmission from one of his many augmentations, he activated.

"Eldar technology?" Jarr asked when he saw the image that appeared floating in the centre of the room.

"Indeed," Cubrim said, "several items of xenotech were catalogued during the time that Crassus Minor was under our control and it has always been the belief of this Ordos that a webway portal was present on the planet, though its location was never discovered."

“Obviously,” Jarr interrupted, “if it had been found it would have been destroyed to stop the Eldar using it to launch an invasion via their network of passageways through the warp.”

“Indeed,” Cubrim said once more, “Our readings of the Imperial tarot have frequently produces results that suggest the influence of both the Eldar and the warp, suggesting to us that the target may be located near to the webway gate. It also points us towards a location somewhere between an abandoned metropolis and a thriving city. We believe that this tells us that the webway gate is located between the abandoned city that served as the planetary capital under Imperial rule and the city to the south of it which intelligence suggests is being used as the centre of power for the local Ork warlord. You will be inserted in this area and will be required to locate the webway gate.”

“How?” Jarr asked, “If no-one found the gate while we held the world, what hope do I have of finding it by myself?”

“Cubrim, give it to him,” inquisitor Rell ordered. Cubrim bowed to his master again and shut off the holo viewer. At the same time inquisitor Rell picked up a hand held logic engine from his desk and depressed several keys in rapid succession.

One of the ‘mirrors’ suddenly vanished to reveal, as Jar had deduced upon entering the room, that there was a small alcove behind it. Cubrim approached the alcove and took a small device from it and then he walked towards Jarr with the device held out in front of him.

Jarr set the file down on a golden plate on the desk in front of him and with a sudden flash it was incinerated, then reached out to take the device that Cubrim was offering him.

“Eldar technology again?” he asked rhetorically. The device in his hand had the look of a talisman that had been carved from bone and was beset with crystals. Of course he knew that the device had not been carved at all, it had been grown. A length of something that was not quite chain suggested that he was supposed to wear this talisman around his neck.

“One of several that my Ordos has come into possession of,” inquisitor Rell told him, “and since we actually obtained this one openly rather than as a prize of war the Eldar were good enough to configure this one for general human use. It will alert you to the presence of a webway.”

“How?”

“We don’t know,” inquisitor Rell admitted, “it has never been tried, but the Eldar merchant still deals with us, so any failure will be dealt with suitable.”

Jarr didn’t like the sound of this, entrusting a covert mission to an untried piece of alien technology, but an assignment was an assignment. He rarely got to choose whom he killed.

“I take it that transport has already been arranged?” Jarr said as he stood up to leave.

“It has.”

“Good, then I can leave immediately.”

“One more thing assassin,” the Inquisitor spoke as Jarr got up to leave and the assassin stopped, “I am not the only one to have taken readings on this matter and it may be that some of my... colleagues...” the Inquisitor paused as he said the word ‘colleagues’ as if to suggest that he did not trust his fellow members of the Imperium’s shadowy secret police force, “may have also despatched personnel to Crassus Minor. Be aware that you may have to del with them also.”

“As allies?”

“Perhaps, or possibly targets.”

Hazug Throatlitter of the Blood Axe clan awoke to the sound of battle. He actually found this comforting and for a moment he just lay still, listening as the fighting went on. Then he rolled over, broke wind, wafted his sheet to allow the smell to escape and closed his eyes again. The noise of combat continued and Hazug decided that he wasn’t going to be able to sleep in after all. He reached over the side of the bed to where he kept a selection of weapons to hand. He felt the grip of his pistol, but kept his hand moving. Next his hand passed over a large knife, followed by the shaft of a stick grenade. Then he found what he was looking for. Suitably armed, Hazug got out of bed and, barefooted, he walked slowly downstairs, following the sound. Gripping the knob of the kitchen door in his free hand, Hazug through open the door and burst into the kitchen.

Sophie, Hazug’s young human assistant lay face down on the floor, screaming, while the dirt encrusted form of his Gretchin, Ratish Brownskin sat on top of her, in each hand he held some of her long hair which he was pulling as hard as he could. But Ratish was also screaming in pain as Rhia, another young human woman who had come into Hazug’s service recently was positioned behind him pulling his ears in a similar fashion to the way in which he was pulling Sophie’s hair. All three faced away from Hazug and appeared unaware of his entrance.

“Let go!” Sophie yelled as Ratish twisted the hair he gripped in his hands.

“Er first!” Ratish replied.

“No chance!” Rhia shouted and she tugged on his ears, as if trying to pull them apart.

Hazug couldn't wait any longer.

"Be quiet da lot of ya!" he yelled and he used he weapon.

All three of his servants turned around, Ratish and Rhia both relaxing their grips at the same time just as the water Hazug kept by his bedside just in case he woke up thirsty left the jug and flew through the air towards them. All three now screamed as the cold water landed on them.

There were more screams as the now thoroughly soaked trio all collapsed in a heap in front of Hazug.

"Wot da bleedin' 'ell is ya playin' at?" he shouted, "Ya woke me up with all da racket!"

"I was making you some breakfast," Sophie said as she wiped her hand across her face, "but he tried to steal it," and she pointed at Ratish who was staring at the gaps in the layer of dirt that covered his skin where the thrown water had washed some of it away.

"That's right," Rhia added as she pulled her matted hair out of her face.

"Was not stealin'!" Ratish suddenly protested, "Ya said it was master's breakfast, so Ratish was goin' to take it to master cos Ratish is master's best servant."

"You are not!" Sophie replied and she reached out and slapped Ratish.

"Ow!" Master, da git just 'it Ratish," the Gretchin protested as he rubbed his head where Sophie had just struck him. Then he stopped when he realised that he was wiping away more of his precious layer of dirt.

"Yeah, she did," said Hazug, uncaring. However, there had been mention of a meal prepared for him and he looked around for it.

"So where's da grub den?" he asked when there was no sign of it.

"You're standing in it," Rhia answered, pointing at the mashed up fungus that was on the floor beneath Hazug's feet. Hazug bent down and used his finger to pick up a blob of it before putting it into his mouth.

"Not bad," he said, nodding, "Now get us some more while Ratish cleans up dis mess."

Hazug sat down at the table and waited for his breakfast while Rhia and Sophie rushed to prepare it and Ratish crouched down where Hazug had been stood and began to scoop up the remains of his original meal in his hands. The Gretchin looked around for something into which he could deposit the picked up food, but finding nothing instead opted to stuff it into his mouth and eat it himself. Normally for a Gretchin to eat before his Ork master would result in the Gretchin himself becoming the Ork's meal, but since Hazug had instructed Ratish to pick up the spilled food he let it pass. Besides, he thought to himself, he had gotten used to having a Gretchin servant and it saved him the trouble of having to find another.

There was a clump as Sophie put a plate of food on the table in front of Hazug, followed by another as Rhia set down a jug of water to go with it. Almost simultaneously there was a belching sound from Ratish and he called out.

"Ratish is finished master."

Hazug didn't reply, instead he just picked up and handful of food and went to put it in his mouth. The explosion made him stop and turn towards the window.

Drazzok Headbanger of the Snake Bite clan was woken up when he fell out of bed. For a moment he just lay still before sitting up to stretch and yawn. It was then that he noticed something odd. His bed was directly above him and the various charms and pendants he wore were all dangling towards it. There was no doubt about it, he had fallen upwards and was sat upside down on the ceiling.

Most orks would consider this strange, however as a weirdboy, one of the psychic shamans of the Ork species, Drazzok had to accept a certain degree of random telekinetic activity as a fact of life. Fortunately his home was mounted atop a tall copper pole that helped to dissipate the energy that flowed through him. Getting onto his hands and knees, Drazzok crawled across the ceiling towards the centre of his hut where the pole ran from floor to the ceiling. As he reached out for the pole, intending to discharge the psychic energy he had obviously built up while asleep, his brain suddenly began to recall a word he rarely used. The word was one that he had normally only heard mekboys, the engineering caste of the orks, use. It was something they considered important when dealing with flying machines and the custom-built energy weapons designed to lift enemy vehicles of the ground and hurl them across the battlefield. It would be much easier to remember the word if Drazzok actually ever paid any attention to mekboys, but as a Snake Bite he had a dislike for technology. Then, right as his outstretched finger was about to make contact with the pole he remembered the word.

Gravity.

Before Drazzok could pull back his finger there was a sudden 'crack' as the energy within him leapt towards the copper pole. Gravity now regained its hold over Drazzok and he plummeted to the floor of his hut.

"Soddit!" Drazzok yelled as he fell and landed in a heap where the copper pole came through his floor.

The weirdboy picked himself up, steadying himself on the pole. And then he stopped to consider what had just happened to him. Random telekinetic bursts were commonplace when weirdboys slept, their beds were rarely properly earthed and they would be separated from the copper staffs they used to dissipate the Orkish psychic field before too much energy could build up within them as had just happened. However,

these bursts were normally limited to small objects suddenly hurtling across the room rather than the weirdboy himself suddenly crashing into the ceiling overhead. Such a powerful incidence of telekinesis could only take place if there was a large number of other greenskins nearby and they would have to be orks too, the Gretchin who brought food to the weirdboys couldn't generate enough power for this. Sane orks typically avoided the weirdhuts for just that reason; of course, insane orks had no such survival instinct. Drazzok took two steps towards where his staff leant by his bed before he again began to feel himself getting lighter and he grasped the pole behind him before he could take off again. He looked down at the floor, where he saw that the layer of dirt that coated it was thick enough to obscure the mesh built into it that would carry his power into the central pole he now hung onto.

Drazzok took a few deep breaths and then leapt towards his staff. The brief separation from the copper pole was enough to lift him off the floor once more and he slammed into the ceiling.

"Dammit!" he cried out as his head hit the ceiling first. This time Drazzok stood up and walked across the ceiling, rather than crawling and he moved towards his staff until he could reach out and grab it. Then he pushed the tip of the staff down against the floor, where it pierced the layer of dirt and made contact with the conducting mesh beneath it. Then he remembered about gravity again.

"Soddit!"

Drazzok used his staff to steady himself as he got up again, pressing down with it to make sure that he didn't take off again, he was about to go outside and didn't like the idea of just floating up into the sky until he was out of range of whatever was causing this trouble for him. Stepping out of his hut, Drazzok leant over the edge of his balcony and looked down to the ground below. There, staring back up at him was a group of orks.

The group was large and even though he wore nothing on his feet, Drazzok would have had trouble in counting them all even though they were all stood still. The most striking thing about the orks below was that the clothing they wore was a variety of different colours. Typically orks marked their clothing with a colour that reflected their clan and they typically lived and fought in groups from the same clan, therefore it was normal for them all to wear clothing of similar colours. Below him, Drazzok could clearly see the colours of several different clans mixed together. It was just as Drazzok had suspected; these were madboys.

To many species, it appeared that all orks were insane, but in truth orks saw their actions as perfectly reasonable and rational and believed their actions to be a natural part of the universe around them.

Madboys however, either through accident of birth or injury no longer had the link that 'normal' orks felt to that universe and were completely unpredictable. One common side effect of their madness was that they were more sensitive to the gestalt psychic field generated by their species and they were drawn towards the weirdboys who focused this power.

Of all of the orks below him, one in particular stood out to Drazzok. Larger than any of the others, he was clearly a nob, one of the leaders of the Ork species. Like many nob, he showed the scars of a life of battle; most significantly a black patch covered one of his eyes. Over his shoulder a large, expensive looking weapon was slung. Madnobs were unusual, orks became nob when they had taken part in enough combat for them to build up significant additional muscle mass and since madboys were quite likely to go wandering up to an enemy heavy weapons position and ask them to keep the noise down while they had a quick nap, most of them died long before they were able to achieve this growth.

The continued presence of any large group of orks could cause problems for a weirdboy, mainly that the increased strength of the psychic field could overwhelm him and cause his head to explode. Therefore, Drazzok was not keen for the madboys to stay near him. His first thought was to resort to violence, it was a tried and tested traditional method and Snake Bites were sticklers for tradition. But just as he was about to go and fetch his bucket from inside his hut he suddenly remembered the random telekinetic bursts that the madboys were causing him and pondered on what may happen if the contents of the bucket came flying back up at him rather than covering the madboys below in a rather unpleasant foul smelling mess. Then another idea hit him; he would use diplomacy instead. It was a radical idea granted, but it might just work. It often seemed to for Hazug, who had worked with so often recently, even though he was a git loving Blood Axe.

"Sod off!" Drazzok bellowed at the crowd beneath him, "Go bother one of da others!" and he waved his arm at the other weirdhuts mounted on their own energy dissipating copper poles.

"Dey sent us 'ere," the nob shouted back, "Dey said dat Drazzok was da best weirdboy dare was and dat dey didn't deserve us 'angin' about 'em."

Drazzok frowned, clearly the other weirdboys had decided that having a crowd of unstable orks around him would make his head far more likely to explode than theirs and that would then mean that his hut would become vacant. As the largest of the weird huts, any of the other weird boys happily kill him for it, even f it did still have a large dent in its supporting copper pole from where a buggy had crashed into it. Still frowning, Drazzok looked towards the nearest of the other weird huts.

“Oi Luggnort!” he bellowed, “Wot is ya playin’ at sendin’ dese nutters over ‘ere? Does ya reckon dat ya is goin’ to get me ‘ut dat easy?”

A grinning weirdboy appeared at the window of the hut Drazzok faced.

“I don’t know wots ya is talkin’ about,” Luggnort shouted back, “Dey just wanted to know who da best of us weirdboys is and ya is always sayin’ dat its you, so I sent ‘em to ya.”

Drazzok considered actually trying to turn Luggnort’s plan against him by firing a nice big blast of psychic energy at him right now, but he quickly realised that it would be pointless, both his own and Luggnort’s huts would drain away the power of the bolt before it could harm Luggnort. Of course, he could always have the madboys build a nice big fire at the base of Luggnort’s pole and burn him alive, but before he could think about this further there was the sound of an explosion from Git Town.



## 2

Dariel Thayne cursed his bad luck. He had been running late from the moment that he woke up and discovered that his alarm clock had ceased working and allowed him to sleep far too long. Throughout breakfast all he could think about was how difficult it was going to be to replace the device, there was little technology in the human quarter of the city, known to the orks as Git Town and what was available was expensive. Then to top it off just as he had been about to leave for work his young son had spilt his breakfast all over Dariel, forcing him to change his clothing.

So now he was going to be very late for work. In his two years as the chief constable of what passed for a law enforcement body in Git Town he had never wasted an opportunity to champion the benefits of punctuality to his men. He knew that they would have gotten on without him of course, they were reliable enough that he didn't have to watch them constantly to make sure that they did their job and didn't abuse their power. About now he expected them to be loading up the handful of vehicles his constabulary had available to it ready to undertake the regular morning sweep of the human quarter. These patrols had become more important recently, for many years the existence of the human constabulary had been unknown to the ruling orks who only ventured into the area when extremely bored. But recently, while responding to a reported explosion Dariel and his men had come face to face with a force of orks who had been in the area for some other reason and had been fired on by a human who had somehow obtained a stockpile of anti tank missiles and energy rifles; military specification weapons that Dariel's men could only dream of possessing. The orks had left without firing on the constabulary, but they had taken word of its existence, along with the weapons to the other orks. So now that they knew that an organised armed force existed here more of them had been coming looking for trouble many more times than normal. Though the orks did not care if humans killed any of their number, the reverse did not apply and Dariel had issued orders for his men to withdraw if they saw any signs of trouble.

Dariel quickened his pace as he approached the final turning to his headquarters where that he expected his men would be about to leave without him. Dashing around the corner, he saw that the gates to the courtyard where the patrol vehicles were stored were still closed, indicating that they had not left yet. Good, he thought to himself, I'm just in time after all.

Then the explosion knocked him backwards off his feet.

Stunned by the blast, Dariel landed on his side and rolled across the ground, the noise of the explosion making his ears ring. It didn't take long for him to recover his senses however and Dariel picked himself up and looked towards where his headquarters had been. Now what was left of the building was ablaze and a thick cloud of smoke was forming above it. The gates to the courtyard had been propelled across the street and smashed against the building opposite. Attracted by the sound, people were starting to emerge from other buildings to see what was happening and already Dariel could hear those with property near to the burning police headquarters calling for water to be brought to help contain the fire before it could spread to other buildings.

Had Dariel Thayne woken up and left home on time this morning, he would have been inside that building when it exploded, so before rushing to help put out the fire he considered what good luck he had this morning.

Standing on his balcony still, Drazzok watched the cloud of smoke forming following the blast.

"Wot's 'e lookin' at?" one of the madboys standing beneath Drazzok asked the nob who led them.

"Dunno," the nob replied before taking a deep breath and yelling to Drazzok, "Wotcha lookin' at master?" Being called 'master' suddenly made Drazzok forget just how annoyed he had been at the gathering of madboys below him, after all no Ork ever turned down the chance to boss someone about, even if they were lacking the common sense that even Gretchin and humans possessed. In fact especially if they lacked any common sense, since you could often get them to do things that they wouldn't if they had any.

"Hazug will 'ave 'eard dat bang," Drazzok replied, still keeping his eyes trained on the cloud and there were murmurs from the madboys before the nob spoke again.

"Who's Hazug?" he shouted.

"Someone wot is far too smart for 'is own good. Whenever anythin' odd 'appens, 'e goes runnin' off to find out why and den 'e normally drags me into it an' all."

Suddenly, before the madboys could enquire any further, Drazzok began to descend the ladder from his hut.

"Come on den," he said as he made his way downwards, "if ya is goin' to 'ang about den ya can make ya selves useful and take me to see Hazug."

"Ya 'eard da master lads," the nob yelled, "let's clear da way for 'im."

As soon as Drazzok reached the base of the ladder and planted his staff into the dirt the madboys began to move ahead of him.

“Clear da way!”

“Make room!”

“Da mighty Drazzok is ‘ere!”

Drazzok just stood and watched the madboys as they moved away from him, apparently oblivious to the fact that he wasn’t following them.

“Oi!” Drazzok suddenly shouted at the madboys, causing them to grind to a halt and turn around to face him.

“Wot is it master?” the nob ask.

“Hazug lives dat way,” Drazzok replied, pointing in the opposite direction to the one the madboys had been heading in.

“Ya ‘eard ‘im lads!” the nob bellowed, “Clear dat way instead!”

Rhia and Sophie were quickly able to gather up food and drink for a short journey into Git Town and were already waiting in the truck when Hazug and Ratish entered the garage laden with weapons.

“I thought we were just going to see what happened. Will we need those?” Sophie asked as Hazug placed a pair of human manufactured laser weapons along with bandoliers of extra ammunition in the back of the truck.

“Dunno, dey is just in case,” Hazug answered before adding, “So don’t touch ‘em till I says so, “as he batted Rhia’s hand away from the weapon nearest to her and covered them both up with a sheet. Then he laid his own much larger any bulkier weapon on top of them. While he did this Ratish dragged an even bigger belt fed weapon onto the truck and fixed it in place to the vehicle’s roll cage where it could fire all around.

“Ratish as go da big shoota on da truk master,” the Gretchin said proudly and to emphasise his point he pulled back the bolt and readied the gun to fire.

“Right den,” Hazug said as he clambered into the driver’s seat and started up the truck’s engine, “we is all ready for off. Someone get da door.”

Sophie leapt down from the back of the truck and dashed towards the garage door. A crude electric motor was connected to the door and when Sophie pressed her foot down on a pedal beside it there was a groaning sound as the garage door began to rise up.

Hazug watched as the door opened wider, waiting for there to be enough room for him to drive his truck through. But before this happened, Hazug saw that the way out was blocked by a mob of orks. Standing at the front of this mob was the weirdboy Drazzok and another large Ork with an eye patch who brandished a large gun.

“Stop right dare Hazug,” Drazzok said seriously, “where d’ya reckon ya is goin’?”

“Didn’t ya ‘ear da blast?” Hazug asked from the driver’s seat.

“Of course I ‘eard it,” Drazzok replied, “and I knew dat ya would go rushin’ off to find out wot was goin’ on, so I came ‘ear to stop ya before ya could get me in more trouble.”

Hazug frowned before reaching for his money pouch.

“I’ll pay ya a tooth to come as well,” he said, holding out the cash.

Drazzok’s expression changed to a smile at the thought of getting paid and he walked towards the truck, climbed into the empty seat next to Hazug and took the tooth from him.

“Well wot is ya waitin’ for den?” he asked.

“Well I thought dat we should shift ya lads out of da way rather dan squash ‘em,” Hazug replied.

“Don’t mind dem,” Drazzok said, “Dey is mad.”

Hazug wasn’t so sure about just running over an entire mob of orks. The orks themselves didn’t worry him, but their weaponry could damage the tyres of his truck and he didn’t have any spares.

“Sophie get back in da truk,” Hazug told his servant and then he turned to Drazzok, “Get as many of ya lads on board as’ll fit, da rest can wait ‘ere till we gets back.”

“Come on lads,” Drazzok shouted towards the madboys, “get on da truk, da rest of ya stays ‘ere and looks after da ‘ouse.”

As one, the mob of madboys rushed at the vehicle as it stood idling in the garage and clambered aboard.

Having been at the front of the group, the nob got there first and he shoved Ratish away from the gun mount, lining the sights up with his eye patch. Sophie noticed this as she was buffeted by the other madboys climbing up.

“Shouldn’t you aim with the other eye?” she asked.

“Yeah, I s’pose so,” the nob replied and he reached for a pouch on a cord around his neck, “dis is me good eye and I is savin’ it for a special occasion,” he added, waving the pouch.

Ratish was not happy about being displaced.

“Master, ‘e pushed Ratish,” the Gretchin complained to Hazug as more orks continued to push him around as they boarded the vehicle.

Hazug was about to reply when he realised he still didn’t have a clue who the large Ork shifting the automatic weapon’s stock from one shoulder to another actually was.

“Who is dat nob anyway?” he asked Drazzok.

“Ow should I know?” Drazzok replied, “‘E just showed up dis mornin’ and knocked me out of bed.”

Hazug turned around to face his new gunner.

“Wot’s ya name den?” he asked.

“Thuggrim,” the nob replied without looking away from the gun and Hazug turned his gaze back to the front of the truck. Satisfied that the way ahead was clear and with his truck now filled with orks, Hazug put his foot down on the accelerator and sped off towards Git Town.

Dariel Thayne sat down on a low wall, out of breath. Opposite him, the fire in the police headquarters continued to burn, but the local people had made sure that any debris that came loose was extinguished quickly before it could cause the fire to spread beyond the headquarters. Before the orks had conquered Crassus Minor the city had possessed a dedicated fire fighting service and Thayne still had a vague memory from his early childhood of their massive vehicles racing through the streets with sirens blaring to take specialised equipment to extinguish burning buildings and rescue anyone unlucky enough to be trapped inside. But like so many things the Ork invasion had changed all of that. While the orks had been willing to tolerate a subservient human population in this particular city, as well as scattered about the continent, they had taken most of the technology for themselves and the fire department’s bright red vehicles had been amongst some of the first vehicles to be taken. Apparently the Ork species had a particular attraction for vehicles of that colour.

It was only then that it struck Thayne that most of his force would have been inside the building when the explosion occurred and it was inevitable that all them were now dead. Even if the explosion had not killed them, the smoke and flames would have ended their lives by now.

“Chief, are you alright?” someone asked and Thayne looked up to see a man looking down at him wearing the badge of one of his department.

“Throne, Jaris!” Thayne exclaimed as he got rapidly to his feet, “How did you survive?” The man’s clothing showed no signs of damage from the fire at all.

“Night shift sir,” Jaris replied, “I’d just got home when I heard the explosion and I rushed right back. How many others got out?”

“None, I’d have been in there myself if I hadn’t been running late this morning.”

“Then I guess we’re both lucky,” Jaris said, “So what happened?”

“I don’t know. I came round the corner just as the morning patrol was due to leave when the explosion happened.”

“Could it have been a fault with one of the vehicles?”

The vehicles operated by the police had not been in very good condition. Kept hidden from the orks for thirty years, they had been maintained using scavenged second hand and improvised replacement parts that would have never been approved by the Adeptus Mechanicus had they still been around, so the possibility of one of them exploding with a full fuel tank and carrying several hundred rounds of projectile ammunition wasn’t hard to imagine. But the fuel and ammunition carried by each vehicle would have been insufficient to destroy even the other vehicles parked in the courtyard, let alone take out the entire headquarters building as well.

“No,” Thayne said, “The blast was far too big,” and then an unpleasant thought hit him, “I think it was a bomb.”

“A bomb? So you think the orks did this?”

Thayne paused for a moment as he considered whether the orks would use a bomb to wipe out his force.

“No,” he answered finally, “I don’t think it was the orks. Whoever planted the bomb had to have access to our headquarters, or maybe one of our vehicles and if the orks knew where we were based then they would have just come storming in and shot the place up. No, someone human did this.”

“But who chief?”

“If I knew that, I’d be off round to deal with them now. All I can say is that I think that we need to find out who else wasn’t in there when the place blew and find out what gear we’ve still got left, because I think that whoever did this is planning something else that they didn’t want us interfering with.”

Before either of the law men could say anything more there was the sound of an engine, a low pitched rumble that grew louder as the vehicle closed and there was another sound accompanying it.

“Orks!”

The warning cry was repeated and people fled as the crudely built truck appeared and drove at speed towards the remains of the police headquarters.

“Scatter!” Thayne shouted, before he grabbed Jaris and pulled him behind the wall on which he had been sat. Panic-stricken humans fled as the alien vehicle came closer and peering out from behind the wall, Thayne saw that it was crammed full of Orks and though it was hard for him to tell at this distance, he thought that he recognised the driver.

“So it was the orks,” Jaris said, “They must have used a missile and now they’ve come to finish the job.”

“No,” Thayne told him, “there was no missile, it was a bomb and I don’t think they’re here to kill anyone. In fact I’ve got a feeling that they’re here to investigate what’s going on.”

The Ork truck screeched to a halt in the street outside the destroyed police headquarters and immediately orks began to leap down. Then the sound of the engine stopped and Thayne and Jaris could hear the orks yelling at one another in their crude language. But there was something odd about them, even though neither of the human law men understood the Ork tongue it was obvious that what they were yelling did not appear to have anything to do with getting themselves organised, if anything they seemed to be arguing.

“I said dat I got down first!” one of the madboys shouted, pounding his chest.

“Ya got to be kiddin’!” another shouted, “It was me wot was first!” and he jumped up and down as if this would prove him right.

“Never mind first,” a third madboy called out as he carefully climbed down from the back of the truck, “I did it best cause I didn’t make as much noise as any of ya.”

“So wot?”

“So it means dat no one ‘eard me.”

“But ya just shouted at us while ya did it.”

Hazug couldn’t stand any more of this.

“Be quiet!” he bellowed and to reinforce his order he leapt down from the driver’s seat, grabbed hold of the nearest madboy, lifted him off the ground one-handed and butted him in the face. Following this he dropped the Ork and grabbed the next two nearest and slammed them together.

“Now anyone else got anythin’ to say important enough to get shot over?” he added. A nearby madboy drew in breath as if to speak and in one swift motion, Hazug plucked his pistol from his belt and pointed it straight at the madboy’s head. Immediately the madboy shut his mouth tight, gulped and shook his head slowly.

Behind Hazug, Drazzok and Thuggrim had dismounted from the truck and walked over to him, closely followed by Ratish, Rhia and Sophie.

“Dat was just wot I was goin’ to say to ‘em,” Thuggrim said and he unslung his rifle as they all stared at the burning building in front of them.

“Hazug?” came a voice from behind the group. It was a human voice rather than the much deeper tones of an Ork and Hazug looked over his shoulder to see that a pair of humans was climbing over a low wall that they had been hiding behind. As they did, several of the madboys began to rush towards them with their weapons raised and the humans both lifted their arms to show that they held no weapons, though each had both a pistol and a club hanging from their belt.

“Old on a mo!” Hazug ordered and the madboys halted, though they kept their pistols trained on the pair.

“I knows ya,” Hazug said, this time using the human language, Gothic, vaguely remembering that the lead human did not speak Orkish.

“Yes, we’ve met once before, I’m Dariel Thayne.”

The name meant little to Hazug, though it did jog a memory for him.

“Ya is da leader of da cons, const...”

“Constabulary,” Sophie said.

“Dat’s right, da constabulary. Ya keeps order around ‘ere.”

“Yes, that’s right,” Dariel answered and, followed by Jaris, he slowly lowered his arms to his sides. This prompted more of the madboys, including Thuggrim, to raise their guns, but a wave from Hazug calmed them. Then Hazug pointed towards the burning building behind him.

“So explodin’ buildin’s is keepin’ order den is it?” Hazug asked.

“It was a bomb, I think someone wanted to wipe out my force.”

“Who?” Hazug asked.

“I don’t know,” Thayne answered and, after a brief pause, he added, “But I think that they’ll try and pick off the few of us who weren’t inside next, I need to warn them quickly.”

Something about the explosion seemed wrong to Hazug. For all of his life the humans here had possessed only a handful of weapons and none of them had been particularly powerful. But now some of them had apparently gained access to enough explosives to destroy a large building and not long before he had stumbled across a stockpile of heavy weapons concealed in a residence here in Git Town. He had been able to convince Kromag that the find was a one off, in part by bribing him with a share of the missiles to

stop him from sending a force of orks into Git Town to search for any more and kill any humans that got in the way of the force. But if there were more weapons hidden here then it spelt trouble for everyone.

"I'll 'elp ya," Hazug said to Thayne, "Ya better go warn ya other lads now. I'll get someone 'ere who can tell us wot 'appened properly."

"Thank you, I don't have the manpower to investigate this by myself," Thayne responded and he turned to leave and as he did he spoke to Jaris, "Stay here with them," he said, "I think you'll be safe enough if just try not to get the way."

As Hazug and Thayne spoke Drazzok became impatient. He didn't speak the human language, so the nature of the conversation between Hazug and the human standing before him was a mystery to him. As a Snake Bite, the most traditional of the Ork clans, Drazzok didn't really approve of talking to humans anyway. He could just about accept Rhia and Sophie because they were Hazug's property, but this human did not appear to be properly domesticated. He made his way closer to Sophie and leant down so that he could speak directly into her ear.

"Wot's 'appenin'?" he demanded. In this situation a human would have whispered the question, but Drazzok, like all orks who weren't Blood Axes did not do quiet and Sophie jumped at the sudden sound directed straight into her ear. She quickly regained her composure enough to answer the weirdboy's question.

"Hazug's offering to help Officer Thayne find out who caused the explosion that destroyed his police station," she whispered back in Orkish.

"Ah crap," Drazzok exclaimed, remembering that this was exactly the sort of trouble that he had wanted to avoid by stopping Hazug from coming here in the first place. Suddenly Hazug began to speak in Orkish once more.

"Ratish, I got a job for ya," he said and his Gretchin servant pushed between Rhia and Sophie to stand beside his master.

"Ratish is 'ere master," he said, looking up at Hazug.

"Good, I wants ya to and find Batrug. Tell 'im dat I needs 'im to come 'ere and find out wot sort of bomb did dis," and he pointed towards the destroyed police station. Ratish grinned and he began to run back towards the Ork regions of the city, "Ang on a mo," Hazug called after the Gretchin, "E'll want payin', so ya 'ad better take some money to give 'im," and Hazug tossed two teeth from his money pouch towards Ratish, who failed to catch either of them.

"Ratish got 'em master," Ratish shouted as he picked up the teeth from the street, "Ratish'll be back real soon with da mek," and he ran off as fast as he could manage.

"Did 'e just send dat grot to get Mek Batrug?" Drazzok asked Thuggrim.

"Sounded like it," the madnob replied.

"Ah crap," Drazzok repeated, considering how much trouble that particular mekboy could cause him.

With Ratish gone for specialist technical help and the human Thayne gone to warn his surviving followers, Hazug turned his attention to what needed doing here. He considered what Mek Batrug would want to do when he got here and Hazug came to the conclusion that he would want to be able to inspect as much of the wreckage as he could. Admittedly the mekboy would probably take anything he thought looked interesting for himself, but he could be relied on to at least tell Hazug if it was important to finding out what happened here.

"We needs to protect da area until da mek get's 'ere," Hazug ordered and then he turned to Thuggrim, "Ave ya lads surround da wreckage and keep everyone away from it," he ordered. At first Thuggrim just looked at Drazzok, after all Hazug was not his superior.

"Ya 'eard 'im," Drazzok told him, now resigned to the fact that he was up to his neck in this, "Get ya lads to surround da wreckage."

"Right boss," Thuggrim said and then he shouted to the other madboys, "Drazzok reckons dat da wreckage may try and get away, we needs to surround it and stop it from running' past us!"

The madboys began to disperse, forming a loose perimeter around the former police headquarters as it continued to burn. Including Thuggrim, only ten madboys had been able to fit in Hazug's truck and even if they had been in full possession of their mental faculties Hazug doubted that there were enough of them to adequately seal off the area he wanted them to, but this was what he had so it would just have to do until mek Batrug could arrive and decide what to do.

Hazug and Drazzok stood in front of the police station, watching the madboys deploy down the alleyways to either side and loop round behind it, while Sophie remained close by to Hazug as usually. Rhia however, stood further back, remaining by Hazug's truck.

Jaris walked over to her calmly and spoke quietly to here.

"Could I have a quick word with you?" he asked.

"Sure, what is it?" Rhia replied.

“Not here, somewhere more private,” and Jaris beckoned to Rhia to follow him. Rhia followed Jaris as he turned and walked away from the burning police station now surrounded by orks. He led her into an alleyway further down the street, out of sight of the others.

“Well?” he said, stopping and turning around as soon as he was sure that he would not be seen or heard by Hazug.

“Well what?” Rhia replied.

“What’s happening?” Jaris asked her, folding his arms.

“Well we’re waiting for an Ork engineeer that Hazug knows to... Aak!”

Jaris suddenly reached out and grasped Rhia by her throat and pushed her up against the wall of the alleyway. Then he stepped forwards so that he was face to face with her.

“You know what I mean,” he hissed at her, “When are we getting those fething missiles?”

“Hazug doesn’t have them all,” Rhia gasped, reaching up for her throat and trying to pry Jaris’s hand away.

“But he has some of them, when can we get them?”

“He keeps them locked up,” Rhia replied, “the lasguns too. He only lets us have access to them when he wants us too. Let me go. Please.”

Jaris released his grip on Rhia and stepped away.

“You accepted this assignment,” Jaris snapped, “we can make do without the lasguns if we have to, but without the missiles we’ve nothing to take out the orks’ heavy armour.”

“I’ll find a way to get them,” Rhia protested, “He’ll just have to be patient.”

“After thirty years of waiting, ‘patient’ isn’t a word that he understands any more,” Jaris said, “especially not now that he’s got his reinforcements from the Astartes. Word is that there’s more support coming in soon too.”

“Well why can’t they bring more missiles in then?”

“It’s not an army,” Jaris told her, “The rumour is that there’s some sort of special agent being sent to finish off what we’re starting here. That’s why the Governor had me plant the bombs here this morning, we need to make sure that Chief Thayne and his second rate posse don’t get the way out of some stupid sense of loyalty to the xenos.”

“You planted the bomb?” Rhia asked, astonished, “How many people did you kill?”

“They were traitors,” Jaris told her sternly.

“But they’re human, I didn’t sign up to kill humans. Just orks.”

“They worked for the orks, not directly maybe, but they did nothing to disrupt their operations here while doing all they could to disrupt ours. Anyway, what about the inhabitants of that farm you took that Ork to? Who do you think killed them?”

“I thought it was the orks,” Rhia said.

“No, they were supplying the orks with food. It was us that killed them because they refused to supply us. Keep that in mind when you decide whether or not you’re going to hurry up and find a way to get our missiles back. Use your signal light when the coast is clear, we’ve got someone watching the building who’ll see you.”

With that Jaris walked away, heading straight back towards Hazug’s truck, leaving Rhia standing at the entrance to the alleyway, wondering what she had got herself into with her assignment.

## 3

Dariel Thayne rushed up the stairs of the apartment building. They creaked as he ran up them as fast as he could from the lack of regular maintenance over the past three decades, but they held together. The apartment he wanted was on the third floor, one of his officers, a man named Edris, lived there with his wife and family and Thayne hoped that he was in time to warn him about the attack on the police station. He had already reached two other officers and after having them send their families to stay elsewhere he had ordered them to make their way to the station. It may have been destroyed, but given that it was surrounded by armed orks it was probably the safest place for them to meet.

Thayne stopped suddenly when he reached the third floor. Ahead of him he saw the door to Edris's apartment wide open. From the looks of it, it had been forced open by a strong blow to the lock.

"Edris?" Thayne called out, sliding his sidearm from its holster and chambering a round, "Edris are you there?"

Thayne paused for moment, but there was no reply, only silence. Cautiously and with his weapon raised, he entered the apartment.

He found Edris's wife first. She was lying face down just beyond the door in the long, narrow hall and, even before Thayne crouched down to make sure, it was obvious that she was dead. Blood was seeping from her nose and mouth, forming a pool on the floor beside her head. As he pressed his fingers against her neck to check for a pulse, he noticed that her skin was still warm to the touch however, so she had not been dead for long.

Standing up, Thayne caught sight of what was inside the nearest bedroom. It had been the room occupied by Edris's children and it seemed that they had died in their beds, though given the amount of damage to the bodies Thayne couldn't be too sure of how many there were. Feeling his stomach churn at the carnage, Thayne backed away without going into the room.

It was then that a sound caught Thayne's attention; there was someone moving around in the living room at the far end of the hall.

"Edris?" Thayne called out again, though given what he had seen so far, he thought it unlikely that his officer was still alive. Of course this meant that whoever was moving around was likely to be the killer and the killer was clearly a very dangerous individual.

"I'm armed," Thayne said as he crept towards the living room, stabilising his grip on his gun with his free hand and looked directly down it's sights.

Suddenly there was the sound of footsteps and a massive figure covered in a dirty grey cloak came charging out of the living room straight towards Thayne. At first Thayne thought that it was an Ork, larger than the general rank and file orks, but not quite large enough to be one of their leaders just yet. But most orks gave off a powerful and distinctive smell that came from them having little regard for hygiene and there was no such smell emanating from this figure. As the figure ran, Thayne also noticed that the cloak did cover its hands and he could see that they had a human appearance, just larger than usual. In one of these hands, the figure held a blade that was covered in the blood of the Edris family.

Normally Thayne liked his officers to give a warning before they opened fire, if only because it meant that hard to replace ammunition may be conserved, but in this case Thayne didn't hesitate. He fired a single round into the figure as it came at him with the knife raised. The shot struck the figure in the shoulder, Thayne saw the fabric of the cloak ripple and split as the round cut through it into the flesh beneath. But as far as he could tell, his opponent didn't notice that he had just been shot. He didn't even cry out in pain, instead he just kept on coming towards Thayne.

Thayne fired again, this time instead of a single round he fired repeatedly, aiming for the centre of his target. Each time his fired, the round struck the charging figure and Thayne saw not only the cloak rip, but also what appeared to be blood erupt from the wound beneath, staining the cloak that covered the figure. But dis-concertedly, the figure remained silent, not one single scream was emitted as the projectiles struck their target.

Taking a step backwards, Thayne lost his balance and fell to the floor. He kept his grip on his weapon, accidentally discharging a round upwards into the ceiling as he fell and rather than attempt to get back to his feet, Thayne instead aimed and fired at the figure again, a single shot coming from the pistol before its slide locked open to indicate that it was empty. This time the round caught Thayne's assailant in the leg, about where he assumed its knee to be and this time it caused him to topple forwards towards Thayne. Seeing his chance, Thayne scabbled towards the doorway out of the apartment, leaving the empty pistol on the floor. He slammed his body to the side of the door as soon as he was outside of the door and drew his baton as he heard the giant figure inside getting back up again.

He swung the baton as the figure appeared in the doorway, its massive bulk forcing it to bend over to fit through the wooden frame. By pausing to bend down the figure had given Thayne an easy target and the upward swing of his baton brought it into contact with the giant's head as it was lowered. His opponent's head jerked back from the impact and smashed into the door frame that he had tried to get under.

Though disorientated by the blow from the baton followed by the impact with the door frame, the figure still did not fall, instead stepping forwards onto the landing. Seeking to turn the tables on his attacker, Thayne dived at him, ramming his shoulder into the figure's side. The impact failed to knock the massive figure over, instead causing Thayne to land in a heap on the floor, but it forced him sideways into the banister rail around the stairs.

The ancient wood of the banister could not support the figure's enormous weight and it splintered under the impact. With nothing to help him keep his balance, the giant now fell from the landing down the stairwell. Gasping for breath, Thayne used the wall to help him get back to his feet before crossing the landing where his assailant had fallen and looked over the edge down the stairwell.

Thayne had expected to see the massive, cloaked figure lying dead at the bottom of the staircase, but instead there were only the broken remains of the banister rail. Of Thayne's assailant, there was no sign at all.

Thayne now returned to the apartment where the Edris family had died. His gun still lay on the floor of the hall and he bent down to retrieve it. He ejected the empty magazine, putting it in his pocket for refilling later and then inserted a fresh one. As the pistol's slide went forwards and chambered a round, Thayne looked up and saw a mark on the wall that he was certain had not been there when he had first made his way into the apartment. It was a patch of bright red liquid that was slowly running down the wall. Thayne stepped forwards for a closer look.

Could this be blood? Thayne thought to himself. It certainly appeared to have come from the giant when he attacked Thayne, probably when he shot him in the leg, but its colour was wrong for human blood, instead of a deep crimson it was a much brighter red. Thayne reached into his trouser pocket and produced a clean white handkerchief, which he dabbed into the liquid. Perhaps someone else could help him figure out what this stuff was.

Suddenly, Thayne realised that he hadn't actually seen the body of constable Edris himself. Though it seemed unlikely that he could have survived the slaughter of his family by the giant that paid little attention to being repeatedly shot, Thayne had to find out for sure. Since the giant had come from the living room, that was where he now headed.

Edris was lying in the middle of the room and it appeared that his killer had gutted him; his entrails lay in a heap beside his corpse and a final look of terror was frozen onto his lifeless face. Thayne didn't bother checking for a pulse; even if he had found Edris before he had died there was no way that he could have lived with such a wound.

Thayne caught sight of a wooden box sat on a high shelf and instantly recognised it. The box was where Edris kept his gun; he placed it on the top shelf to keep it out of his children's reach. Thayne walked over to the shelf and reached up for the box. He was relieved to find that it felt heavy in his hand as he lifted it down, indicating that the firearm was still inside. He opened the box and saw that the gun, as well as a bag filled with extra ammunition, was indeed still inside it. Unlike the semi-automatic pistol that Thayne carried, Edris's gun used a revolving cylinder to align five powerful rounds with the firing pin and barrel. Possessing much greater stopping power than Thayne's gun, he had once seen Edris stop an Ork with a single shot to the chest with the weapon. The memory of his own weapon's inability to stop the mysterious cloaked and hooded giant still fresh in his mind, Thayne carefully loaded five rounds from the bag into the cylinder before tucking the gun into the back of his belt and putting the bag of spare ammunition into his pocket. Then he put the empty box back on the shelf, exactly where the late constable Edris had kept it while he was alive. Knowing that his remaining officers were definitely in danger, Thayne left the apartment and made his way towards the home of the next officer he thought might still be alive. He knew that he was leaving an entire family of corpses behind him, but for now his priority was to try and prevent any more killings.

"Translation complete lord," the flight officer said to Octus Saval, indicating that his vessel had successfully completed its exit from the immaterium. Ahead of the three mile long vessel lay the world of Crassus Minor, once an outlying colony of the Imperium, now a nest of xenos. Octus had been here several times before, twice before the Ork invasion and four times after. When the planet had still been part of the Imperium, Octus had found that visits here were not even remotely profitable, while entries for the world in his ship's logic engines indicated that it had many mineral riches the planets governor offered little of any worth to Octus. It was only after the orks had taken the world that Octus had turned a profit here. His particular Rogue Trader's charter allowed him to trade with xenos providing he stayed within certain rules, so he couldn't supply them weapons or war materiel for example, but he could exchange the teeth pulled from dead orks on the battlefield for raw mineral ore that his ship could refine on its return trip to Imperial



controlled space. He had made a handsome profit doing that the first three times he had tried it, but unfortunately the handful of Blood Axes that there had been in the system had either been wiped out or moved on, so when he tried the voyage for a fourth time two years ago his ship had been fired on as it tried to enter orbit in spite of broadcasting its intention to trade goods instead of gunfire.

Of course his visits here had been noted by the damnable agents of His Most Imperial Majesty's Holy Inquisition and he had been informed by that agency that unless he wanted his charter suspending while his trading with xenos species was investigated to make sure that there were no violations, in other words summarily revoked, he would be required to come here again on their business. Octus had known better than to ask if he would be paid for this trip.

"And what of our passenger?" he asked out loud to no one in particular.

"I believe he was already aboard his vessel before we began our translation to real space lord," another of the bridge officers answered. Octus had seen the man on the bridge daily for many years, but he couldn't think of the man's name. Then again, he thought to himself, he didn't really care anyway.

"Double check with the torpedo deck," Octus ordered and the man activated the ship's intercom to contact the forward weapons control room that lay more than two miles from the bridge.

"Torpedo deck confirms drop ship is manned and ready lord."

Octus strode across the bridge and plucked a key on the end of a length of chain from within his jacket. He climbed the stairs to the command pulpit and inserted the key into one of the panels there and turned it.

"Confirm that the torpedo deck weapons control panel is live," he ordered and the crewman spoke into the communicator once more.

"Torpedo deck confirms their control panel is now live lord."

"Fire."

Jarr was pressed back into his acceleration couch by the sudden force as his craft was launched from the rogue trader's vessel. Designed to be fired from a torpedo tube instead of taking off from a more conventional launch bay, his craft would now coast through the system towards Crasis Minor. Its minimal energy signature would mean that even if the orks were able to detect it on whatever crude devices the xenos used for that purpose they would most likely mistake it for a piece of fast moving debris such as an asteroid or fragment of wreckage. In either case, at only twenty-five metres long, it would be too small for them to bother with.

There was a brief delay between the launch and the engaging of the craft's artificial gravity field and Jarr felt himself become weightless before the automatic system was activated. With little room to move about in, Jarr now faced the long wait for his craft to reach its destination where the machine spirit that guided it would adjust course into Crasis Minor's atmosphere and fly over its pre-programmed target zone. The craft would not land, however. The discovery of it while on the ground could compromise his mission, so instead Jarr would bail out at high altitude and allowed the craft to crash into the ocean and sink beyond trace. As far as the locals would know, it would be just another meteorite impact.

Or at least that was the theory.

## 4

Hazug looked again at the growing group of humans standing further along the road. There were about a dozen of them now, the human Jaris had met the first of them to arrive and each new arrival in turn then made their way to join them. As far as Hazug could tell, most of the humans were what they termed 'male', being larger and more muscular and all of them were armed with a pistol holstered at their waist or shoulder. Hazug guessed that these were the survivors of the group led by the man Thayne, who had still not returned.

Hazug then turned his attention back to the police station that was still alight. He was beginning to wonder if there would be anything left of the burning building when he finally heard the deep rumble of an engine that powered a large vehicle and he looked around to see Ratish waving at him from an open topped wheeled vehicle being driven towards him by mek Batrug. Towards the rear of the vehicle, Hazug could see numerous other Gretchin clinging on.

Mek Batrug had worked for Hazug on several occasions, providing him with technical advice and supplying him with the best Ork technology that Hazug could afford to pay for up front and it looked like the mekboy as going to come through for him again.

"Ratish got da mekboy master!" Ratish shouted gleefully as he jumped down from the vehicle when mek Batrug parked it beside Hazug's own truck. Unfortunately, had the Gretchin paid more attention to his jumping than his boasting he probably wouldn't have landed on his face.

"Aw!" he cried as he bit down on his tongue.

Hazug ignored Ratish picking himself up, rubbing his tongue as he did so, while Rhia and Sophie both smirked at his misfortune. Drazzok, on the other hand, laughed out loud.

"Stupid grot," the weirdboy added, always happy to get entertainment from the misfortune of others, especially if it looked painful.

"What can ya do about dis?" Hazug asked mek Batrug as the mekboy disembarked.

"Ya grot filled me in," Batrug replied, "so I borrowed some special kit for putting out fires," then he walked towards the back of his vehicle, "Right ya grots!" he shouted at his staff, "unload dis stuff and get it set up!" The Gretchin, hurried along by swings of mek Batrug's fists when they got too close to him or weren't fast enough to move away from him, immediately began to unload the vehicle.

Though Hazug was not a mechaniak himself, he had seen enough force field emitters in his time to know one when he saw one and the Gretchin were unloading four of them.

"Wot d'ya need a force field generator for?" Hazug asked.

"Force field?" scoffed Drazzok, "I always knew ya was a wazzok Batrug, we want's da fire puttin' out, not protectin' from gettin' shot at."

"Dis is a special force field," mek Batrug explained as his Gretchin set up the four emitters to form a square around the burning police headquarters, "It ain't strong enough to keep out bullets, it just keeps out da air. Without da air da fire gets put out. Dis is goin' to be put at da landin' strip to stop all da fuel fires dare. Now get out me way while I plug dem emitters into da wagon for power. When I tells ya to, 'ave ya grot throw dat switch over dare," and mek Batrug indicated a massive lever that was mounted on the dashboard of the vehicle he had driven here before grabbing the ends of some cables attached further back on the vehicle and dragging them towards the equipment being set up by his servants.

Hazug watched while Batrug connected all of the force field generators to the cables he carried and then saw him turn and wave.

"Ratish," Hazug said, "throw da switch."

"Yesh marshter," Ratish, who had been waiting beside the switch, said and he pulled on the lever with both hands. Ratish cried out in pain once more as there was a shower of sparks and a flash of light as the lever completed the circuit to power the force field. This was followed by a soft hum that grew in volume as the emitters charged up. Another flash of light followed, this time around the burning building as the emitters activated and formed a bubble of energy around it. Mek Batrug now came rushing back to the vehicle.

"Gotta adjust da size of da force field," he said, "its too big as it is," then he reached towards a dial on the dashboard and began to turn it slowly.

The plume of smoke that had been rising over the burning building was suddenly cut off as the particles of ash were trapped within the force field and as mek Batrug carefully reduced the size of the bubble of energy, it could be seen that it was rapidly filling up with the smoke.

"Look at the flames!" Sophie shouted, pointing towards the windows of the building where the fire had been clearly visible. Now, cut off from the outside air and choked by the smoke that the fire itself had created, the flames were reducing in size. Then, in less than a minute, they disappeared entirely.

"See! Job's a good 'un!" mek Batrug yelled.

Hazug had to admit that the machinery brought by mek Batrug had done the job he said that it would. The fire was out.

"Nice one Batrug," Hazug told the mekboy as he walked back towards the Blood Axe.

"Pah!" Drazzok exclaimed, "Puttin' out fires is grot's work."

"Grot's with water can put a fire out for ya," Batrug said in response to Drazzok's insult, "but dey can't do it without an 'ole bunch of 'em chuckin' water and sand over everythin' in sight and let's see ya figure out wot started it after dat."

Drazzok just grunted in response, knowing that the mekboy was right but unwilling to admit it.

"So wot 'appened den Batrug?" Hazug asked.

"Ow should I know?" Batrug replied, "I ain't been in dare yet, I gotta figure out where da fire started first, den I'll figure out wot started it."

Standing in the street behind the ruined police station, Nomgrim had taken his job of guarding the burning building seriously and was now trying to figure out what to do about the fact that the flames had disappeared. The best he could come up with so far was that if anyone asked where the flames had gone, he would simply tell them that they hadn't gone past him.

Suddenly he became aware that he was being watched and he spun around to face whoever it was. At first he saw no one, but then he glanced downwards and saw a very short human staring at him in silence. This particular human had a rounder face than the other Nomgrim had seen today and was sucking on something that was on the end of a short stick. Nomgrim guessed that this must be whatever humans had instead of Gretchin; perhaps it had come to try and put out the fire. Of course, the fire was out now so there was no clear reason why the human was still here.

"Wot d'ya want?" Nomgrim asked, but the human remained silent and just stared Nomgrim in the eyes.

"I don't want nothin'," came a cry from beside Nomgrim.

"I wasn't talkin' to ya Wakgrak," Nomgrim shouted back without breaking eye contact from the human, "I was talkin' to dis git 'ere."

"Wot git?" Wakgrak asked as he walked over to stand beside Nomgrim, "Oh. Wot's 'e lookin' at?" and Wakgrak now joined his fellow madboy staring the human in the eyes.

"I dunno," Nomgrim replied, "I tried askin' 'im but 'e didn't say anythin'."

The two madboys and the human child now just stood there in silence staring at one another.

"Nomgrim! Wakgrak! Wotcha doin'?" Thuggrim's voice bellowed from behind them.

"Nothin' boss," Nomgrim responded, still not taking his eyes off the child.

"Well ya both look like ya is up to somethin' standin' like dat," Thuggrim said, striding up to the pair and standing directly between them. "Wot's goin' on 'ere den?" he added when he saw the child.

"Dunno boss," Wakgrak answered.

"I reckon it's a git grot boss," Nomgrim added, all the while staring the child in the eyes as it looked back at him.

"Wot's it doin' 'ere?" Thuggrim asked, his speech slower than before, as he too began to stare at the child.

"Dunno, 'e wouldn't say," Nomgrim answered, "I tried askin'."

"Wotcha want?" Thuggrim shouted at the child, but he didn't flinch. As with the two smaller madboys, it did not occur to Thuggrim that the child did not understand the Ork language.

"Waaagh!" Thuggrim bellowed, leaning towards the child. Again the child just stared at the orks.

"Wot do we do now boss?" Wakgrak asked.

"Stay calm lads," Thuggrim said calmly, "We is bigger dan 'im, we can 'andle dis."

"'Andle wot boss?" asked Nomgrim, "'E ain't doin' ought but standin' dare."

"I know dat lad, but 'e's starin' real 'ard and I intend to show dat I is 'arder."

Thuggrim now just stared at the child just as the two smaller orks had been doing when he approached them and the child continued to stare back. The, for just a moment it removed what it was sucking from his mouth, revealing a brightly coloured ball fixed to the end of the stick, glanced at that and then put it back in mouth and stared at the orks once more.

"Soddit. I though we 'ad 'im dare lads," Thuggrim said, then a thought hit him and he added, "Nomgrim, go get da rest of da lads. We'll show dis git grot who stares best around 'ere."

Accompanied by the last of his constables that had been away from the police headquarters when it was destroyed, Dariel Thayne ran towards the clustered group of survivors.

"That's everyone," Thayne said, bending over and gasping for breath when he reached the group.

"Is it true about Edris? And Pace and Kove too?" Jaris asked him, "Dale said you found him..."

"Their families too," Thayne replied, nodding his head, "I don't know if it was the same man killed them all, but I ran into him at Edris's place."

"You saw him?" enquired Jaris, sounding surprised.

Still somewhat out of breath, Thayne nodded again.

“He’s a freak. A fething giant that doesn’t seem to notice when someone shoots him. I only escaped because he’s too big to get through a door properly and he fell down three flights of stairs.”

“So he’s dead then,” another constable said.

Thayne shook his head.

“I don’t know how, but the bastard managed to walk away. I don’t have a clue where he’s got to now.”

“Out of my way,” the massive cloaked figure said as he pushed aside the guard and limped past him into the building.

“Caradian,” another giant humanoid said to the newcomer as he lowered the hood from his cloak to reveal his shaven head, “your target is dead.”

Unlike Caradian who wore a simple nondescript cloak, the man already in the chamber was almost entirely covered in thick plates of armour that left only his shaven head exposed. The plates of his armour were clearly designed to be used as a single suit, with flexible joints connecting the various pieces together to allow the wearer to move about. Though the man’s head was uncovered by the armoured suit, there was provision for a helmet to be attached using the same style of connection as was implemented at the other flexible joints. The armoured suit lacked any form of markings, but were all painted a uniform dull red colour.

“He is my lord chaplain,” Caradian answered, bowing his head in the presence of his superior.

“You are injured,” the chaplain noted when he saw the damage to Caradian’s cloak.

“Another man disturbed me lord chaplain, he was armed with a pistol. My injuries are not severe. I returned here directly to report instead of waiting at the rendezvous.”

“This other man is dead also, yes?”

“I regret not lord chaplain. I was hampered by the close confines of the building interior and he was able to...”

Before Caradian could continue the chaplain stepped forwards swiftly and slapped him.

“Fool,” the chaplain snapped at Caradian, “You left a witness and if he had a weapon then he was probably another member of the constabulary. The plan was for them all to die this morning.”

“What is this? Have some of the traitors survived?” came a voice from behind Caradian as Venris Highbalt, former Imperial governor of the planet entered the room flanked by a pair of his bodyguards and trailed by an assistant.

“It seems that one of them is alive.”

Highbalt sat down.

“Well that’s not too bad,” he said, “hopefully my man Jaris will find him and finish him off for us. Then without anyone else to maintain order that damned trader’s association will be begging my men to do it for them. Then we’ll be able to strike at the greenskins more easily.”

“Be careful Highbalt,” the chaplain began.

“That’s Governor Highbalt chaplain Krixus,” interrupted Highbalt.

“Be careful, Highbalt,” chaplain Krixus repeated, emphasising the former governor’s name, “you have still not recovered the arms you need to fight the orks of this city.”

“Bah!” Highbalt snorted, waving his hand in a dismissive manner, “I wouldn’t wager on the orks around here besting your men in battle in this environment, even with their armoured forces.”

“Remember Highbalt, my men will not be available to you for the battle you are planning. We are here to do what is needed to complete your ascendancy to power on this world. It is your men’s job to keep the orks distracted while we do that. For that you will need those missiles.”

“I have an agent in place now Krixus.”

“I know all about your agent. I met her remember? How long has she been in place now? A month? I would start looking for another way to get your weapons back if I were you and I’d start right now as well.”

Highbalt’s face fell, as an Imperial governor it was rare for him to meet anyone who had any authority over him and after his fall from power anyone who had spoken to him in the way the chaplain just had would have been put to death immediately. But Highbalt knew that the marines were his only hope of gaining even more power than he had ever possessed and they were beyond his authority. For now at least, but he considered how he could make the marine pay for his insolence later.

It was at this point that more massive cloaked figures began to file into the room and one by one they lowered the hoods of their cloaks to reveal their shaven heads.

“Ah,” Highbalt said, “I take it that the rest of the constabulary have met their ends?”

The row of figures remained silent, not even looking at the former Imperial governor, instead facing chaplain Krixus.

“Well sergeant Idrim?” Krixus said, “Are your targets dead?”

“Xerxan and Los succeeded lord chaplain,” the sergeant said, “but the other targets were not at the locations we had been given. It appears that they had been warned and fled before we got there.”

“Warned? Not possible,” Highbalt yelled, slamming his fist down on the table in front of him.

“How many escaped?” Krixus asked, ignoring the outburst from Highbalt.

“Fourteen my lord,” Idrim replied.

“So if we assume that the man who injured Caradian was also one of the constables, then there could be fifteen of them left,” Krixus said before turning towards Highbalt, “Can your man handle that many?”

“I very much doubt it,” Highbalt replied, “and anyway its your men’s failure, they should finish the job you gave them.”

“Our targets were warned Highbalt,” chaplain Krixus responded angrily, “how exactly can that have happened if your man hadn’t failed to kill everyone in the headquarters with his explosives like you tasked him to?”

Highbalt knew that the chaplain was right, someone had to have escaped the bomb in order to warn the remaining members for the constabulary that they were under attack. The failure had begun with Jaris.

“You are an exception, however,” Krixus said, staring at Caradian, “You fled when you should have killed the man that discovered you. If you had then perhaps fewer would have been warned in time to escape us,” and with that Krixus drew his sidearm and placed the muzzle beneath Caradian’s chin before pulling the trigger.

The bolt pistol let out a mighty boom as first the bolt round was accelerated down the barrel by the cartridge’s propellant charge and then as its own rocket motor ignited as it reached the muzzle. Almost immediately the round punched its ways through Caradian’s flesh and then through his skull at the roof of his mouth before entering his brain. It was then that the mass reactive fuse was triggered and the round detonated, sending ting fragments of metal slicing through Caradian’s brain and cracking his head wide open.

Not one of the assembled squad uttered a sound as their former companion was decapitated for his failure, but the combination of the loud noise and the rather messy way in which Krixus had chosen to execute Caradian made Venris Highbalt and his staff flinch and gasp.

“Reclaim your armour,” Krixus said to the remainder of the squad, “you are dismissed.”

## 5

Mek Batrug made it quite clear before he began his search of the wreckage that anything he found in there belonged to him to offset the cost of borrowing the force field system from his neighbour and now Hazug and Drazzok stood by Hazug's truck watching as the mekboy and his Gretchin servants scoured the area for any indication what caused the explosion. Behind them Hazug's servants all sat in the truck itself, Hazug had noticed that Rhia kept glancing towards the group of humans led by the man Thayne at the end of the street, but he thought nothing of it. Hazug only took an interest in them when Thayne left them to speak with him.

"This is all that is left," Thayne told Hazug, "sixteen of us with side arms only and no transport."

"Well at least ya got Batrug figurin' out wot 'appened 'ere," Hazug said to Thayne in Gothic, "den ya can get to work puttin' ya mob back together."

Thayne suddenly remembered the handkerchief.

"About what happened here," he said, taking the handkerchief from his pocket, "I shot whoever killed my man Edris and I think that this is his blood. But it doesn't look like any blood I've ever seen," and he held out the handkerchief, displaying the bright red stain where he had wiped it against the liquid on the wall, "Whoever it was, they were huge and they survived being shot and a fall from three floors up."

Hazug took the handkerchief and stared at it. He had seen plenty of blood in his life, orks, other greenskins, humans and a variety of other aliens, but he had never seen any that as this bright before.

"Wot d'ya reckon to dis Drazzok," Hazug said, passing the handkerchief towards the weirdboy. At more than thirty years old, Drazzok was one of the oldest orks on the planet and had seen a great deal, "Thayne 'ere says dat its blood from somethin' big dat don't die when ya shoot it."

Drazzok looked at the bloodstain and a frown appeared on his face.

"Ya do dis every time don't ya," he said to Hazug, "Ya gets me in trouble."

"So ya know wot it is den?"

"Its blood alright," Drazzok said, "its from one of dem beaky gits, da big lads in da 'ard armour."

Hazug knew exactly what Drazzok was talking about, every Ork knew of the Imperium's elite space marines, though only a few ever saw one. Fewer still survived an encounter with them.

"What did he say?" Thayne asked when Hazug pulled the bloodstained handkerchief away from the weirdboy.

"If wot 'e says is right den it means dat we is in trouble," Hazug replied, "It means dat we is in a lot of trouble."

"Do you think he's right?"

Hazug paused. Drazzok had been around far longer than he had, but it would be foolish to base a strategy purely on his initial impression from seeing nothing more than a small patch of blood on a piece of cloth.

Though the description given by Thayne of a massive individual who was difficult to kill with close range gunfire certain matched what Hazug knew of space marines.

"Found it!"

The shout came from the walled courtyard beside the police station and mek Batrug came striding out of the shattered gateway holding something in his hand.

"Dis is da trigger for da bomb," he said, holding the device up for Hazug to see, "I reckon dat it was stuck to da fuel tank of one of da wagons wot was kept back dare and wired into da startin' mechanism so dat it blew up as soon as da engine was turned on. Would 'ave made a nice big fireball dat would 'ave burnt up da other wagons and da buildin' too."

"Somebody got to ya wagons," Hazug repeated to Thayne in Gothic so that the law man could understand.

"That doesn't really help us too much," said Thayne, "We keep the courtyard locked at night, but that wouldn't stop someone from getting over the wall using the darkness for cover. Can your friend tell us any more?"

"Ang on, I'll ask," Hazug said before turning to mek Batrug and switching back to the Ork language, "D'ya know anythin' else?" he asked.

"Only dat dis is a dead good bomb," the mekboy answered, "I reckon dat da 'splosive bit was real small, cos otherwise da gits would 'ave seen it."

"Could da humans 'ave made dis 'splosive demselves?" Hazug asked.

"Nah," Batrug replied, "ya needs special machinery to make 'splosives like dis and dare ain't none of dat 'ere in Git Town. So either it was one of our lads wot made it or..."

"Or dare's someone bringin' stuff in from another planet," Hazug interrupted and he threw a glance at Drazzok.

"Told ya," the weirdboy said grinning, his 'told you so' face, "Dare's beakies about," using the Orkish slang term for space marines that came from the distinctive pointed faceplates on some types of marine helmets.

"I needs to 'ang to dis," Hazug told Thayne, reverting to Gothic once more and he tucked the handkerchief into his own pocket, "Now wot was ya sayin' about ya lads earlier?"

"Well what you see is all that's left," Thayne replied, "I had almost fifty officers and three vehicles. We had mainly small arms, but it was enough to keep things under control. Now we've barely got a pistol each."

Hazug considered this for a moment, he doubted that whoever had destroyed the police station intended to do nothing more than cause trouble in Git Town, especially if space marines really were responsible for the explosion. So that meant that it would probably be a good idea if Thayne's force had better weaponry available to them.

"Come 'ere," Hazug told Thayne and he beckoned the law man to follow him to the rear of his truck. Once there, Hazug reached into the vehicle and picked up the pair of lasguns that still rested there. Cradling the weapons in one arm, Hazug removed some of the spare energy cells from the bandoliers wrapped around each weapon so that there was just one in each, plus the cells actually loaded in the weapons.

"Take dese," Hazug said, handing the lasguns to Thayne, "I've just given ya one spare battery for each cos I know dey is worth a lot of money. I 'ear dey recharge demselves if ya put 'em in da light or somewhere warm so ya shouldn't need any more for dese two zappas."

Thayne took the lasguns, slinging them over his shoulder. He didn't really know what to say, the two weapons represented a significant boost for his force, aside from the machine guns that had been mounted on the now destroyed vehicles they offered greater firepower than anything else that they had ever possessed. He would, of course, have preferred to have more spare ammunition for the guns, but Hazug was right about them being self recharging and also about their value. A handful of them, apparently sold to a local trader by Hazug himself, were being to power vital equipment in the hospital that had previously been out of service for lack of a power source since the Ork invasion.

Hazug was about to put the energy cells back in his truck when mek Batrug called out to him.

"'Ang on a mo Hazug," he shouted and he made his way to the vehicle that he had arrived in, "ya goin' to need a couple of dem."

The mekboy returned clutching something long and thin that was wrapped in a dirty blanket.

"I got ya choppa workin'," mek Batrug said, smiling and he removed the blanket, throwing it over his shoulder.

The weapon that mek Batrug held out towards Hazug had a long, thin blade mounted at the end of a pole about the same height as Thayne. Hazug had taken the weapon from an alien leader that he had fought in an underground complex hidden on a continent across the ocean from here. Another one of the aliens had referred to it as a warscythe. The weapon had proved to possess unnatural cutting capabilities, slicing through even the toughest of armour effortlessly. But when Hazug had destroyed the alien complex with a bomb far more powerful than the one that had destroyed the police station this morning, it had the effect of not only shutting down the entire army of metallic alien warriors, but it also stopped the warscythe from cutting through anything so easily.

"Give us one of dem batteries," mek Batrug said and Hazug handed him one of the spare lasgun energy cells.

Hazug now noticed that mek Batrug had added some parts to the warscythe. A long cable trailed a short distance from near the bladed head of the weapon down its handle to a socket that was firmly clamped around it. There was a 'click' as the mekboy inserted the energy cell into the socket.

"'Ere ya go," mek Batrug said, passing the warscythe to Hazug, "Ya press da button below da battery to turn da choppa on," and he pointed at a bright red button mounted next to the socket, "Only use when ya really need it though, cos it'll really run down da battery if ya keep it on all da time."

"'E's stuffed it up!" Drazzok suddenly shouted, "Wot good is a choppa dat runs out of ammo?"

Hazug took the warscythe from mek Batrug and felt the weight of it. It was a heavy weapon, but it didn't feel any different to when he had first taken it as a trophy. He pressed the button to activate the blade and there was a soft hum as it charged up. Then Hazug swung the weapon in an arc, with the blade pointing towards the ground and watched with glee as it cut a deep groove in the surface of the road without his noticing any resistance.

Hazug held the weapon vertically again and turned off the blade.

"It'll do," he said, staring at the blade, "Job's a good 'un."

"Well if dare's nought else I is goin' to gather up wotever scrap I can find," mek Batrug said to Hazug and he paused until Hazug nodded in agreement at which point he turned and walked back to the remains of the police station and began yelling at his Gretchin, telling them to start gathering up anything that looked useful.

Hazug turned back to Thayne who was still beside him.

"I is goin' to go and see if I can find someone to tell us wot dat stuff on ya rag is," he said, "Batrug is stayin' put with 'is grots while he loots everythin' 'e can. I'll be back later when I finds out anythin' more. Go tell ya

lads to get back to work,” then, as Thayne returned to his men, Hazug spoke to Drazzok, “Right, let’s be getting’ out of ‘ere.”

“At last,” Drazzok replied and he began to climb back into Hazug’s truck, “Dare is too many gits around ‘ere,” then he remembered that the truck had been full on the journey here, but that it certainly was not now, “Ang on a mo, “the weirdboy said slowly, “where’s Thuggrim and ‘is lads got to?”

“What’s going on chief?” one of Thayne’s men asked when he returned to the group of survivors standing at the end of the street.

“The orks are leaving,” Thayne replied, “that enginseer of theirs has confirmed that someone planted a bomb on one of ours vehicles.”

“Do the orks have any idea who did it?” Jaris asked.

“No, but whoever it is, the Ork leader, Hazug, is worried about them. That’s why he’s given us these,” and Thayne took the pair of lasguns from over his shoulder. He passed one weapon to two his men, along with a spare energy cell each. “Take these,” he said, “I want you two to go the market and keep an eye on things there. Make sure people know that we’re still around. Everyone else with me, we’re going to go and see the trader’s association to find out what they can offer us.”

“Ya sure dat it was Hazug?” Warboss Kazkal Kromag asked the human who stood nervously before him in his throne room. The man had worked for the Ork chieftain for some time now, though exactly how long it had been the Ork neither knew nor cared. All that mattered was that he did his job and knew his place. So when he came to the warboss and told him that he had seen the last Blood Axe on the planet, one of the warboss’s inner circle poking about at the scene of a large explosion in Git Town, Kazkal wanted to know more about what was going on in his capital city.

“I’m sure lord,” the human replied in good Orkish, “he had his female servants with him,” the man used the human word ‘female’ since there was no equivalent in Orkish, but Kazkal knew what he meant.

“Well Skargak?” Kazkal asked, now looking at another of his inner circle. This Ork was large, even for a nob, though he was still smaller than warboss Kromag himself. Had he been any larger then it would be inevitable that the pair would fight one another for command, but for now the black-clad Goff was used by the Bad Moon as an enforcer who kept violence in the city to an acceptable level.

“Me lads said dey saw ‘im drivin’ into Git Town boss,” Skargak answered, “and dey said dat ‘e was with dat Snake Bite weirdo and Thuggrim da Mad.”

“Thuggrim? Da one wot keeps ‘is eye in bag?” warboss Kromag exclaimed, “Wot’s Hazug doin’ with dat nutter?”

“Dunno boss,” Skargak answered, shrugging, “But me lads said dat ‘e was on da gun when Hazug drove past ‘em and dare was a bunch of other madboys sat in da back of ‘is truck.”

“Hmm,” the warboss said, leaning back in his throne and rubbing his china s he thought, “maybe madboys is da only ones who’d go into Git Town with ‘im.”

There was murmuring from the assembled orks, complementing their leader’s great wisdom and denouncing Hazug as little better than a madboy himself.

“Shut up!” Kromag bellowed and the assembled orks ceased their chattering immediately. The handful of humans present, even though most were used to their employer’s sudden outbursts, all jumped with shock at the unexpected noise.

“Right den Skargak,” the warboss said, more calmly now, “I wants ya to Hazug’s place and wait for ‘im dare. When ‘e gets back bring ‘im ‘ere, I wants to know wot ‘e’s up to dis time.”

“Right boss,” Skargak replied and he turned and barged his way through the other assembled orks and out of the throne room.

Jarr opened his eyes suddenly as his vessel sounded an alarm. Swiftly, he checked all of the displays for the reason for the sound. No faults were being reported and there were no Ork vessels near enough for him to be under attack. Then he looked at the navigation panel and saw that the vessel was approaching the atmosphere of Crassus Minor. Jarr checked his harness to make sure that it was secure and then leant back in his seat.

The small craft began to shake violently as it entered the atmosphere and the friction from the air as the craft flew through it in a ballistic trajectory began to heat it up. Much of this heat was kept out by the structure of the craft, but still the cabin in which Jarr sat heated up noticeably.

Suddenly another alarm sounded and Jarr braced himself.

Moments later the chair in which Jarr sat dropped through the cabin floor and the Imperial assassin found himself propelled out of the dimly lit cabin and into the bright sunshine outside. Seconds later the chair fell away and Jarr was in free-fall.



He straightened out his legs, keeping them together, pressed his arms against his sides and let himself fall towards the ground. Inside his facemask a display activated and his altitude was shown to him clearly and he watched as the numbers decreased rapidly as he grew closer and closer to the ground.

When the display showed that his altitude was ten thousand metres, Jarr braced himself again and then when his altitude reached two thousand metres he felt a sudden strong tug upwards as his parawing deployed from the pack on his back. He reached out as the control handles of the parawing folded out beneath him and after checking that the device had deployed correctly, he began to pilot the lightweight flying apparatus towards a suitable landing site. For a brief moment he looked to his left and saw the fiery trail of the spacecraft that had brought him here as it continued to fall towards its destruction in the ocean. Then Jarr turned his attention to finding a suitable landing site. He wanted to avoid any settlements, but fortunately for him, it appeared that there were none in his immediate vicinity anyway. But then he caught sight of a small cluster of buildings. Jarr guessed that this was some sort of farmstead.

This could be good news, he could easily overpower the small number of inhabitants that such a place was likely to have and then use the buildings as shelter for himself. As the parawing continued its gentle descent, Jarr steered it towards the farm.

As he came lower, Jarr saw that the buildings appeared to be of human construction rather than Ork built. This was unfortunate, Jarr was quite prepared to kill anyone, human or xenos, whose death would advance his mission, but the death of an innocent human who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time was not something he wanted to be responsible for. Imperial assassins were trained killers, not murderers after all.

The parawing landed in a field next to the farm buildings and Jarr rapidly detached himself and his equipment pack from it. His rifle had been dismantled for the drop and rather than waste time reassembling it, he dropped his pack, drew his sidearm and dashed towards the nearest building with it raised in front of him.

Now that he was on the ground, Jarr could see that the farm buildings were in a poor state of repair. This was good news; it made any current inhabitation less likely. Less likely did not mean impossible however and Jarr paused when he reached the farm's perimeter wall and took cover behind the simple stone barrier. "West."

Jarr stopped suddenly at the sound. The voice had been clear in his head, but he not determine the direction from which it came.

"Look to the west."

Jarr turned full circle, sweeping his pistol around as he searched for the source of the voice. Then he remembered the talisman that inquisitor Rell had given him. A great deal of Eldar technology worked by psychic means and it appeared that the talisman worked that way also. He reached for the talisman that hung around his neck and held it in his hand, staring at it.

"The gateway is to the west," the mysterious voice in his head said and behind his mask, Jarr smiled.

It actually works, he thought to himself before he tucked the talisman back in his webbing and got back to the task of searching the farm.

He crept along the length of the wall until he reached the point where it drew closest to one of the buildings. He leapt over the wall and ran for the building. At this distance Jarr began to get the impression that the damage to the building had been inflicted recently rather than as a result of long-term neglect. In addition to broken and missing windows, the walls were marked by clusters of small holes that were the distinctive calling card of someone using a projectile weapon to shoot in shorts bursts of automatic fire. Initially Jarr believed this to be the work of orks, but when he burst through the doorway he discovered something that challenged this belief.

Had Jarr not been masked, then he probably would have smelt the bodies he found, but as it was his sense of smell was limited. They had been dead for some time and decomposition was advanced. Had they been killed by orks; then the greenskins would likely have eaten the bodies afterwards. Even if the orks did not decide to consume them themselves, then any one of the other smaller subspecies would have found the dead humans a tempting meal. While humans looked on the consumption other sentient creatures, even those of other species, with disgust, most varieties of greenskins took a more pragmatic view and rarely let good meat go to waste.

Keeping his pistol at the ready, Jarr made his way through the farm. He found no more bodies, apparently the occupants had either gathered together themselves, or they had been brought together by force before they were killed, but he did find something else that was significant. Beside the bodies was a footprint in what had once been a pool of blood. The print came from a boot that had seen better days, its tread was severely worn, but the pattern was familiar to Jarr, he had seen such tracks many times. Every time he had been deployed near anyone who was supplied by the Adeptus Munitorum in fact. The boots were standard issue to all of the Imperium's fighting forces.

The inhabitants of this farm had been killed by other humans.

Satisfied that the area was secure, Jarr holstered his pistol and went to retrieve both his equipment pack and the now useless parawing. From the pack he removed a folding shovel and began to dig in the ground behind the farm. The purpose of his digging was two fold, firstly he needed to dispose of the parawing before someone found it and secondly he would give the people who died here a proper burial.

## 6

The painboy's face fell when he saw Hazug standing in his waiting room.

"Sod off git lover!" he yelled and he slammed his surgery door shut.

Hazug strode to the door and banged on it with his fist.

"I just want ya to take a look at somethin'," he shouted through the door.

"Ya just wanted dok Brok to look at somethin' an' all," the painboy shouted back through the door, "and it got 'im killed."

It was widely known amongst the local painboys that dok Brok had been hired by Hazug to study the corpse of an Ork that had attacked him to try and discover why he been so difficult to kill.

"Dat was different," Hazug said, his voice not as loud as before, but still loud enough for the painboy to hear him on the other side of the door.

"Ow was it different?"

"Dat was an entire body, dis is just a bit of blood. 'Ow can a bit of blood kill ya?"

"D'ya want a list? Cos I knows lots of ways."

"I just wants to know wot da blood came from."

"Dare'll be blood comin' from me if I ain't careful. More dan I can spare."

Hazug knew that he was getting nowhere fast like this and he decided to gamble on deception. The painboy may not have been sufficiently intimidated by Hazug's own superior size, but there was an Ork that was big enough to intimidate every other greenskin on the planet, even if that particular knew nothing about what was going on.

"Fine den," Hazug called through the door, "I'll go and tell da boss dat ya refused to 'elp 'im."

The door to the surgery suddenly opened a crack and Hazug saw the painboy peering at him through the gap.

"Da boss?" he repeated, "Dat would be Kazkal Kromag right?"

"Ya know another boss?"

"Wot about Fangpulla? Don't 'e normally do dis sort of stuff for Kromag?"

Hazug had to think fast, Fangpulla was the most senior painboy in the tribe and he served as the personal physician to the warboss as well as advising him on all matters regarding health and the medical sciences.

"Da boss wants a second opinion," Hazug answered, remembering that he had heard the term used among painboys on occasion.

"Well why didn't ya say so earlier den?" the painboy said, opening the door fully and beckoning to Hazug to come into his surgery. Hazug grinned as he walked through the door, not so much in gratitude but rather because he had correctly guessed that the painboy was more afraid of what warboss Kazkal Kromag would do to an Ork that displeased him than anything that some other mystery individual may do to him instead.

"Let's see dis blood den," the painboy said to Hazug and he held out the handkerchief.

"Is dis it?" the painboy exclaimed as he stared at the dried blood stain on the fabric in front of him, "It ain't even fresh."

"Dat's all I got," Hazug answered him.

The painboy just grunted and took the handkerchief and its bloodstain from Hazug. The he sat down and rummaged through a drawer before pulling out a magnifying glass.

"Hmmm, "the painboy said, "dis ain't from anythin' Orky."

"I'd already guessed dat," Hazug replied, "I needs to know wot it is from, not wot it ain't from."

The painboy lowered the magnifying glass and gave out a shout.

"Grot! Fetch us me blood book!"

The Gretchin who had greeted Hazug when he first entered the painboy's place of business came dashing in through the door surgery door and headed for a shelf that held what passed for books in Ork society, crude collections of paper loosely bound together with string and brought one that was about as thick as Hazug's fist to where the painboy sat. There was a 'clump' as the Gretchin dropped the book onto the table in front of his master. Hazug saw that the cover sheet of the book simply read 'DA BIG BOOK OF BLOOD SPOTS' in the Orkish pictographic alphabet.

"Now sod off back to da waitin' room," the painboy told his servant and the smaller greenskin dashed back out of the room before his master decided that it would be better to give him instructions by means of a smack or smacks around the head.

"Hmmm," the painboy said once more and he began to flip through the book. On each page there were row after row of blood stains and under each one was a label to indicate what sort of creature had produced it, along with notes about the properties of the blood. The painboy stopped turning the pages when he reached one that had the heading 'GITS AND DA LIKE' and he began to move back and forth between the

bloodstained handkerchief and the marks on the pages of the book, looking at them through his magnifying glass.

Looking over the shoulder of the painboy, Hazug saw that there were blood sample, not only from humans on this page, but also from the various subtypes of human that existed, from the diminutive stunts to the massive ogryns that for some reason that orks had never figured out followed the orders of the much smaller humans.

“Got it,” he said with a smile and he put down the magnifying glass and instead held up the book and the handkerchief along side each other so that Hazug could see that he was holding the sample Hazug had given him next to a particular stain in the book. Three words stood out from the label for this particular sample.

‘MARINE, WELL ‘ARD.’

“I reckon dat ya got yaself blood from a beaky,” the painboy told Hazug, “I’ll ‘ave to run some more tests to be sure about it, but dat’s wot it looks like off da top of me ‘ead.”

Hazug took a pair of teeth from his money pouch and put them on the table.

“Run ya tests,” he said, “and don’t tell no-one wot ya ‘ave found ‘ere. Alright?”

“Wot about da boss?”

“I’ll tell ‘im,” Hazug lied, the last thing he needed now was for warboss Kromag to suspect that a force of marines was present on the planet. He would probably tear all of Git Town apart to try and get them to do battle with him, a marine’s helmet was one of the most highly sought after trophies in Ork society, especially if it still contained the head of its original wearer.

“So I can just leave dat with ya den can I?” Hazug asked the painboy who was now carefully scraping at the bloodstain on the handkerchief.

“Aye, I’ll get da tests done and send da grot to ya with da results when dey is done. Deal?”

“Deal,” Hazug agreed and he left the surgery.

Outside in the street, Hazug’s servants, Drazzok and the madboys all stared at him as he left the painboy’s building.

“Well wot did ‘e say den?” Drazzok asked while Hazug got back into the truck.

“Da dok reckons dat its one of dem space marines alright,” Hazug said.

“Told ya,” Drazzok said smugly, a large grin on his face, “I knows blood from a beaky when I sees it.”

Hazug didn’t reply, instead he just started up the truck, slamming his fist down on the dashboard to encourage the engine to turn over when it failed to start first time.

Hazug drove his truck back home where the madboys who had been unable to fit on board his truck that morning were still waiting for Drazzok’s return. They rushed to towards the vehicle and crouched down beside it, forming an improvised staircase beside Drazzok’s seat.

“Well I is off den,” the weirdboy said as he descended the living staircase, “ya’ve ‘ad ya tooth’s worth from me today.”

Thuggrim and the madboys aboard the truck all disembarked and formed up around Drazzok.

“Make way!” Thuggrim yelled as he began to walk ahead of Drazzok down the street with the entire mob of madboys close behind him, “Da great Drazzok is comin’ through!”

“Oi!” Drazzok shouted to Thuggrim and his troops, “I live dataway,” and he pointed in the opposite direction. Thuggrim forced his way through the cluster of orks behind him, slapping any who did not move quick enough.

“Dis way?” Thuggrim said, pointing in the same direction as Drazzok had just done and the weirdboy nodded.

“Right den. Make way! Da great Drazzok is comin’ through!”

Drazzok turned back towards Hazug for a moment.

“Dey is way too loud,” he said, “and dey make me fall out of bed, but dey do ‘ave dare uses,” and he followed madboys towards his hut.

Following Drazzok’s departure, Hazug looked up at the sun. While Sophie and more recently, Rhia, had taught him the way humans measured the passage of time using small mechanical devices and he had even been able to procure several such devices, he still defaulted to the traditional Ork method of telling the time. The sun had passed its highest point in the sky for this time of year and had begun its passage back towards the horizon where it would set, so Hazug knew that it was past noon.

“Right,” he said, turning to his servants who still sat in the rear of the truck, “I wants Ratish to open up da garage door so I can put da truck away and den I is goin’ to pack up me weapons,” then he pointed towards Rhia and Sophie, “When I is done, I expects ya both to ‘ave got us somethin’ to eat. Goddit?”

All three of his servants indicated to that they understood.

“Well wot ya waitin’ for?” Hazug asked, “Get movin’.”

Ratish, Rhia and Sophie disembarked immediately and went inside the house. Meanwhile, Hazug sat and waited in the truck until there was the sound of the garage door motor running and the door opened to reveal Ratish standing by the control pedal. Hazug drove his truck into the garage and turned off the engine. While Ratish closed the garage door behind him, Hazug got out of the truck and retrieved his weapons from the rear of the vehicle.

“Ratish carry master’s stuff for ‘im?” Ratish asked, holding out his arms.

“Nah,” Hazug replied, he had only just got the warscythe back and he didn’t want to risk the Gretchin dropping the large alien weapon and breaking it, “just get da doors for us and den get da big shoota off da truckk.”

“Yes master,” Ratish said, grinning and he opened the door to the kitchen and held it for Hazug as the Ork carried his weaponry through. He walked past Rhia and Sophie as they worked in the kitchen to prepare his meal and then went upstairs.

Hazug’s home had been intended for a large number of orks to occupy. However, the previous inhabitants had been killed during an attack launched by Kazkal Kromag on an underling who Hazug had discovered was intending to usurp him. As a reward and not least because few orks wanted to live so close to Git Town, Hazug had been given the entire building for himself and his servants. Hazug had of course claimed the room that had been occupied by the nob that lead the previous occupants for his own. That nob had been a member of the Bad Moon clan, like warboss Kromag himself and the late occupant had left behind an armoured room adjacent to the room Hazug now slept in that he had used to store his wealth. While richer than many orks, Hazug did not have enough money, either as teeth or other negotiable commodities, for him to require such a vault; he did have a significant stockpile of arms that he felt better to be kept locked away when he wasn’t using it. So now the vault had become Hazug’s armoury. Hazug leant his rifle and warscythe next to the massive metal door and fumbled in his pocket for the key before unlocking the door.

Inside, stacks of metal crates, each of which carried human markings, dominated the armoury. These represented Hazug’s share of the arms stockpile that he and the mutant Evil Sun Ork Two Heads Smasha Butt Face had seized during the winter months. Hazug ignored the crates, instead placing his rifle and the warscythe on gaps on the shelves that lined the room and putting the energy cells that he had retained from the lasguns he had given away along side the warscythe. The he heard the sound of Ratish dragging the large automatic weapon that Hazug usually mounted on his truck up the stairs. He went to meet the Gretchin and reached out for the weapon.

“Give dat ‘ere,” he said and as he took the gun from his servant there was aloud banging on the front door, “and go see who dat is,” he ordered.

Obediently, Ratish ran down the stairs to the front door.

“Master says Ratish is to answer it git!” he shouted at Rhia as she appeared at the kitchen door, also moving towards the front door and she went back into the kitchen without a word.

Ratish pulled open the front door and looked into the street outside, then he tilted his head back and looked upward into the faces of the pair of black clad Goff nobs standing there.

“Wot d’ya want?” he asked.

“Hazug!” one of the nobs bellowed, leaning over Ratish to shout directly into the house, “We knows ya is in dare, we was watchin’ from down da street.”

“Who is it?” Hazug shouted back down the stairs.

“Goffs master,” Ratish called out.

“Out of da way grot,” the other nob said and he kicked the Gretchin aside and strode into the hallway. He stopped suddenly when Hazug appeared on the stairs, pistol in hand, pointing his gun at the nob’s head.

“Dat’s my grot,” he said calmly, “so ‘ow about ya explain why ya is ‘ere kickin’ it without my permission before ya is feeling da breeze from da ‘ole I is goin’ to put ya face.”

“Da boss sent us for ya Hazug,” the first nob said, staying just outside the door, “e wants to speak to ya right away.”

Hazug tucked his pistol into his belt and walked own the stairs to face the nob in his hallway.

“Ya better lead da way den,” he said, then he turned his head towards the kitchen and shouted to Rhia and Sophie, “I is off to see da boss and I is takin’ Ratish an all. Make sure me food is ready when I gets back,” then he strode out of the front door into the street.

“How long do you think he’ll be?” Rhia asked Sophie as the pair worked on the meal they had been commanded to prepare.

“I don’t know,” Sophie answered, “but they’re walking, so probably a couple of hours at least.”

“Okay then,” Rhia said, “I’ll be back in a moment,” and she left the kitchen.

Rhia went directly upstairs to her room and pulled a bag from beneath the bed. She rummaged inside it and pulled out a small metal tube. Then she took the tube to a window located at the back of the house and

pointed the tube towards Git Town. Rhia depressed a small stud on the side of the tube and the end directed out of the window glowed red. She repeated this twice more and then just looked out of the window. From a building in Git Town she saw what she was looking for, another red light flashing three times. Rhia smiled and returned to her room where she put away the signalling device and pushed her bag back underneath her bed.

Next Rhia went back downstairs, but rather than return to the kitchen she continued down the stairs that led to the cellar. Down there she sought out the thick wooden doorway that had been placed across an access point to the network of Gretchin-dug tunnels that ran beneath the city. At the doorway she pulled back the bolt that locked the door shut before she returned to the kitchen.

At the fortress of warboss Kazkal Kromag, Hazug was lead directly in to see the tribe's chieftain himself. There was nothing new about this, Hazug had become one of the warboss's inner circle of advisors in recent months, but the Blood Axe was all too aware of how quickly things could change for the worse if he did anything to upset Kazkal. As usually the warboss was not alone, a group of Ork nobs, all of whom Hazug had seen here before, were clustered around him waiting for instructions.

"So wot's goin' on den Hazug?" warboss Kromag asked before his human servant had even had the chance to announce the arrival of Hazug and his Goff escort.

"Wot d'ya mean boss?" Hazug asked.

"I mean why is ya goin' rushin' into Git Town with a bunch of madboys? And wot was all dat racket dis morning?"

"I went to see wot all da noise was about boss, Drazzok and da madboys just tagged along cause dey was outside me 'ome when I was leavin'."

"So wot was all da noise about den?" Kromag asked.

"It was a bomb boss," Hazug admitted, he didn't want warboss Kromag to get the impression that Git Town was out of control, but he had to find out what had happened eventually, especially if someone intended to move against him as well.

"I though ya told me dat dare was a bunch of gits wot is supposed to 'andle all of dis demselves," Kromag said, remembering what he had been told about the human constabulary by Hazug himself.

"Dare is boss, but dey was da ones wot someone tried to blow up, I was givin' 'em a hand in findin' out who did it."

The assembled orks muttered amongst themselves, Hazug heard enough to know that they were unconcerned; as far as they were concerned it was a human matter, not an Ork one.

"I reckon dat it was da same bunch wot brought dem missiles into da city," Hazug added and the orks all suddenly took notice.

"Let's kill 'em all boss," one of the nobs sudden shouted out and several of the other nodded in agreement.

"Dare's no need for dat," Hazug responded quickly before warboss Kromag could have to opportunity to give such an order, "da humans don't like whoever it is wots done dis, we just need to make sure dat dey can take care of it demselves."

"So 'ow does we do dat den?" another nob called out.

"For starters we tells all da lads goin' into Git Town lookin' for a fight to knock it off," Hazug said and there were snorts of derision, but warboss Kromag held up his hand for quiet.

"Shut up!" he bellowed when the orks didn't get the hint and there was silence, "Why in da name of Gork'n'Mork should I tell lads dat dey ain't allowed to fight?" he asked Hazug.

The question was a good one, orks lived to fight and ordering them not to attack someone was something not to be done lightly.

"Because dey is workin' for ya," Hazug said.

"Wot?" warboss Kromag said, taken aback, "I ain't 'ired no gits to keep order."

"No but ya 'ave let 'em sort it out for demselves," Hazug pointed out, "and from wot I've 'eard dey 'ave been keepin' an eye out for da humans wot want us gone."

The throne room was quiet as warboss Kromag thought about what Hazug had just said. Then he did something he rarely ever did, he sought advice from a human.

"Is dis true?" he asked, turning towards the human servant standing beside his throne, a thin man who kept track of the warboss's appointments.

"Yes lord," the man replied timidly, "the constabulary have arrested members of the underground on many occasions, the trader's association demands it of them."

"And why do dey do dat den?" the warboss now enquired of the human.

"Because many of them remember the times before the invasion and they think that orks treat us better than the Imperium ever did."

Warboss Kromag was puzzled at this. He had never really given any thought to how humans were treated under his regime and while deep down he had the same like for the willingness of humans to provide large,

organised armies for orks to fight against face to face rather than running away and hiding like tau or Eldar were likely to do, he was no Blood Axe and had no intention of dealing with humans on an equal basis. Then Hazug had a thought.

“Technically boss,” he said, “every human on da planet wot ain't carryin' someone's mark belongs to ya, so anyone wot kills one without askin' ya first is stealin' ya property.”

Kazkal Kromag sat up straight at this suggestion and every Ork held his breath. The warboss was a Bad Moon, the richest of all the clans because of the increased rate at which they grew and shed their teeth and suggesting that someone was trying to take any of their wealth away from them was a good way to provoke a response.

“Stealin'? Dey is stealin' from me?” the warboss shouted and Hazug feared that he was about to fly into a rage, “I ain't 'avin' no-one stealin' from me,” and then he shifted his gaze towards the crowd of Ork nob before, “All of ya get out of 'ere now!” he shouted, “Tell al da lads ya can find dat anyone wot kills a git wot ain't askin' for it gets treated like any other thief I catches in me vault.”

“Wot? Da spikey thingy?” one of the nob asked nervously.

“Aye,” warboss Kromag replied, “da spikey thingy and da thing wot as da grippas on it an' all. Now go!”

The Ork nob turned and left and Hazug turned to follow them.

“Not you Hazug lad,” Kazkal Kromag told him, “I wants ya and ya grot to stay 'ere and tell me about all dese gits wot I own and 'ow much I lost when someone blew up dat mob dis mornin'.”



The meal had been ready for some time and Sophie just sat in the kitchen waiting for Hazug to return. She wasn't sure where Rhia was at that moment either, something had seemed strange about her behaviour ever since they had been to the site of the bombing earlier that day, but had refused to discuss it when Sophie had asked her while they cooked.

Glancing out of the window, Sophie saw that the sky was starting to darken as the sun grew close to the horizon and she stood up.

"Rhia!" she called out, "I'm going for a bath," and she went upstairs.

Orks rarely had any use for indoor plumbing and the room that Hazug had allowed Sophie to convert into a bathroom when he got the house had previously been just another room where a small group of orks had slept. Now it contained a metal trough that had been used for feeding squigs that now served as a bathtub and two large containers that were kept full of water. From each of these containers a pipe extend over the bathtub that had a tap to control the flow of water, while beneath one of the containers there was a wood burning stove that allowed the water inside it to be heated up. Sophie had of course insisted on a being allowed to fit a bolt to the inside of the bathroom door. When they had all lived in a single room Sophie had erected a curtain around her while she bathed, but it had taken some explaining to Hazug that he should not just brush it aside and dip his drinking cup into her bath and of course Ratish would frequently just rip away the curtain just because he knew it angered her. Here at least she could have some privacy. Sophie first lit the stove before going to her room to fetch her towels and then she returned to the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

In the cellar beneath the house, Rhia sat waiting impatiently. Suddenly there came a sound from the tunnel beyond the door she had unlocked and it was followed by the creaking of the hinges as the door opened.

"I was starting to wonder if you were coming at all," she said to Jaris as he entered the cellar, followed by three other men. All of them carried shotguns and wore armoured vests with faded Imperial markings.

"Would you believe me if I said we got lost?" Jaris asked with a smile, "Now show us where the weapons are."

"Right this way," Rhia said, walking towards the stairs, "That collaborator Sophie's just gone for a bath, so if you can all keep quiet we can do this without having to deal with her."

"So where's the Ork gone anyway?" Jaris asked quietly as Rhia led him and his men upstairs to Hazug's room.

"The warboss's palace I think, another pair of orks came for him," Rhia answered.

"Well let's hope they have a nice long chat," Jaris said, "because I don't fancy having to fight him on his home turf."

"Don't worry, he walked anyway so it'll be some time before he's back I'm sure," Rhia reassured Jaris as they got to Hazug's room, "here we are, the weapons are in there," and she pointed to the heavy metal door of Hazug's personal armoury.

"Is this a fething joke?" one of the other men exclaimed.

"Quiet Hobbs," Jaris hissed, "The other one's still here remember, we don't need her raising the alarm or we'll be arse deep in greenskins."

"Sorry," Hobbs replied, "but look at that door, we'd need a las cutter or phase field generator to get through it and I don't happen to have one in the pocket of these trousers. Do you?"

"No, but that's why I brought a locksmith," Jaris replied, "Isn't that right Droyle?" and he looked to another of the men he had brought with him.

The man Droyle smiled and nodded.

"Let me see it," he said and he slung his shotgun over his shoulder and crouched down in front of the lock. While Droyle studied the mechanism that was holding shut the armoured door, Jaris turned to Rhia once more.

"So is there anything else around here that we could use?" he asked.

"No, Hazug keeps all the weapons from the cache in there, those that he's still got anyway," Rhia told him, then she suddenly remembered something, "Hang on," she said, "Hazug got Sophie an auto pistol, an Imperial made one. I think that she keeps it in her room somewhere."

"Right Hobbs," Jaris said, "Rhia's going to show you which room to search and I want you to find that gun. Do you think you can manage that without a las cutter in your trousers?"

"Show me the way," Hobbs said and he followed Rhia to Sophie's room.

While the pair was gone, Droyle stood up.

"It's no good," he said, "it's these Ork locks, there's something about them that stops you picking them with anything smaller than a crowbar. We're not getting through this door anytime soon."



"Shit," Jaris exclaimed and then remembered that Sophie was still in the house. But when there was no indication that she had overheard them he continued, "So what do you suggest we do then, because I don't fancy going back and telling him that we've failed him."

"What about the walls?" the final member of Jaris's team suggested, "maybe the greenskin's stupid enough that they aren't reinforced. We could just smash through."

"Try it," Jaris told him and the man drew a knife, stepped forwards and began to use the tip of the blade to dig away at the wall separating the armoury from Hazug's bedroom.

"What's going on?" Rhia asked, returning alone.

"We can't get through the door," Jaris told her, "so we're seeing if we can make our own."

"Well that's not going to work," Rhia replied, "if you'd bothered to ask me I could have told you that the entire armoury's lined with steel. I've seen inside it remember?"

"She's right boss," the man digging at the wall said, "there's a metal plate behind this, look," and he pointed to where his digging had exposed the inner metal wall of the armoury.

Sophie wrapped her towel around herself and picked up her discarded clothes, she had tried just sitting back and relaxing in the bath for a while, but whatever Rhia was doing apparently involved a lot of stomping up and down, so Sophie decided that she was done for now.

Leaving the bathroom, Sophie paused for a moment. She was certain that she had just heard something from her room, but Ratish was out so she was sure that she had imagined it. Then, when she opened the door to her room she saw Hobbs lying on the floor and reaching under her bed.

She screamed.

"Oh feth," Hobbs shouted and he reached for the shotgun that he had left on Sophie's bed.

Sophie turned to run and she came face to face with Rhia.

"Rhia, there's a man in my room, we have to get of here," she said in a panic. Then she saw the other three men standing behind Rhia, all of them holding shotguns of their own, "What are you doing here?" she said, recognising Jaris from the bomb site.

"Reclaiming what's ours," he replied as Hobbs stepped out of Sophie's room and pressed the muzzle of his shotgun against her spine.

"Just do as they say Sophie and you'll be just fine," Rhia reassured Sophie, who looked close to tears.

"You, you're with them?" Sophie stammered when she realised that Rhia showed no signs of being in distress in spite of the armed strangers in their home.

"Of course I am, they sent me here to get our weapons back," Rhia said, "now be a good girl and you'll live to tell Hazug how you let us take them."

"Did you find the gun?" Jaris asked Hobbs.

"Sure, under the bed," Hobbs answered, "I was just checking to see if there was any more ammo with it."

"Give the gun to Rhia then, she can keep an eye on her friend here. We've got a vault to break into."

Together with warboss Kromag, Hazug leant over a map of the city.

The portion of the map devoted Git Town had initially been labelled simply with the phrase "ERE BE GITS", but with Hazug's assistance details such as the marketplace where human met to trade goods were being filled in.

"So Hazug," warboss Kromag said, standing up straight, "Ow do all dese farms bein' burnt affect me den?" Hazug was unsure what Kazkal was talking about.

"Wot farms boss?" he asked.

"I keep 'earin' from da other Bad Moons wot travel about dat loads of da farms wot give 'em food in exchange for not bein' killed 'ave been burnt down and da gits wot ran 'em is dead anyway. Me Bad Moons is well angry at dis, dey reckon dat dare is wildboys out dare wot we ain't found yet."

Something about burned farms struck a chord with Hazug, but he couldn't quite place it.

"Hazug? Is ya listenin' to me? I said dat git farms is bein' burned down with da gits still in 'em."

"I 'eard boss," Hazug said, "Its just dat I got a feelin' dat dare's somethin' important about dese farms bein' burned down."

"Important? Its just wild boys me lad, normally dare's just a few and da gits drive 'em off and den da traders find 'em and bring 'em back to civilisation. But dare's a lot of 'em about at da mo and dey is killin' da gits. My gits."

Then Hazug remembered it, a conversation he overheard between Sophie and an elderly human they had found in a desert outpost over the ocean. Sophie had lived on one of the farms when she had been younger and one of the other humans there had been killed, but not by the feral orks who roamed the wilderness before they were either caught by a patrol or wandered into a civilised settlement by themselves, but by other humans. In particular the humans of the same resistance that had probably planted the bomb that morning. He also remembered being at a farm that had been destroyed, one where Rhia had taken him

when they first met. She told him that she had lived there and seen Gretchin digging at some nearby ruins from her window. But Hazug had observed that the ruins were out of sight of the farm, she could only have known about them if she, or someone known to her had been moving covertly around the area, someone with a reason to destroy a farm that refused to aide them. Someone like members of the resistance.

"I gotta go," he said, moving quickly towards the door.

Which meant that Rhia was part of the resistance and Sophie was at home alone with her.

"Go? Where?" warboss Kromag asked, unused to people suddenly running out on him when he hadn't threatened them first.

"Ome boss," Hazug shouted back as he disappeared out of the map room, "I reckon somethin's wrong."

"Can Ratish go too lord?" Ratish asked meekly from the corner of the room from where he had been watching the two orks talking.

"Does I look like I cares?" warboss Kromag responded and after shaking his head, Ratish ran off after Hazug.

Sophie lay on her bed. Rhia had bound her wrists and ankles with strips of animal hide that Hazug kept lying around to keep her immobilised. Her arms were bound behind her back, which meant that she was lying on top of them uncomfortably, but she didn't struggle. She was all too aware that she was clad only in a towel that was all too likely to fall away if she moved about too much.

"What are you going to do with me?" she said, looking directly at Rhia who had occupied the seat opposite to the bed.

"Nothing providing you behave," Rhia answered, "we just want our weapons back, then we'll leave. Now keep quiet or I'll have to gag you."

At that moment Jaris entered the room.

"Get up," he said, looking down at Sophie.

"I can't," she answered, "she tied me up," and she nodded towards Rhia.

Jaris turned towards Rhia also.

"Free her ankles and pick her up," he ordered her, "you're taking her with you."

"But you said you'd leave me here," Sophie protested when Rhia approached her.

"I also said I'd gag you if you didn't keep quiet," Rhia said, slicing through the strips that bound Sophie's ankles with a knife. Then she looked at Jaris, "what about you, aren't you coming with us?"

"No, we can't get into the vault, so I'm going to wait here for the Ork to get home and tell him that if he wants his precious slave back then he's going to have to open it for me and give us back our property."

"He won't give you anything," Sophie told him as Rhia dragged her to her feet, "he'll kill you. He'll rip your..." before Sophie could finish the threat Rhia forced a rag into her mouth and tied it in place.

"Oh I doubt it," Jaris replied, "the Blood Axe will want to keep its precious human pet safe, so it'll do exactly what we want while we've got you."

Hazug ran through the streets of the city towards his home.

"Move!" he yelled at anyone who got in his way and those who failed to move as instructed got pushed out the way. Hazug wasn't stopping for anything, not even for Ratish who found that he was lagging further and further behind his master.

"Wait! Ratish can't keep up!" the Gretchin called out, but the large Ork ignored his diminutive servant and continued to run homewards as fast as he could.

In his impatience to enter the building, Hazug almost broke down his front door.

"Sophie? Where is ya?" he bellowed from the hallway and he paused to listen for a reply, breathing heavily from the exertion of running across the city.

When no reply came Hazug knew that something was wrong, Sophie never left the house without telling him first and she always took care not to be out after dark without him.

Briefly Hazug checked both the kitchen and the room that Sophie referred to as a 'lounge' in Gothic, there being no equivalent in the Ork language, but it was clear that Sophie was not downstairs. Instead, Hazug drew his pistol and cautiously he made his way up the stairs.

"Sophie?" he asked again as he pushed open the door to her room, there was a chance, however unlikely, that she was sleeping and had not heard him.

With the door open, Hazug saw that not only was Sophie not in her room, but also he saw that her belongings were scattered about instead of packed away neatly as she usually kept them. Then Hazug heard a movement coming from his room and keeping his pistol at the ready he crept towards it.

Moving swiftly, Hazug burst into his room and looked around, letting his pistol follow his view until he found himself looking at a human sitting in a chair against the far wall.

"Good evening," the man said.

Hazug recognised the intruder straight away, it was Jaris, one of Dariel Thayne's soldiers.

“Wotcha doin’ ‘ere?” Hazug asked in Gothic, he guessed that the man had something to do with neither Sophie nor Rhia being present, but he had to be sure that Thayne hadn’t sent him before he took any action.

“I’ve come to reclaim what you took from us,” Jaris said.

Hazug didn’t answer him; instead he just kept his pistol trained on the human.

“I want our weapons, the lasguns and the missiles you stole from our stash,” Jaris continued.

“So ya is part of da mob wot don’t want us ‘ere den,” Hazug said, again using the human’s own language, guessing that the man would not understand Orkish, “and wot planted dat bomb.”

“Part of the bomb plot? I’m the one who planted it. Now back to why I’m here, I expect you’ve noticed that your slaves are missing.”

“Ya mean ya took ‘em,” Hazug interrupted, “only I reckon dat Rhia didn’t take much forcin’, she’s one of ya too isn’t she?”

Jaris grinned, Rhia’s assignment here was over anyway and she couldn’t come back now that Sophie had witnessed her helping Jaris and his men, so there seemed little point in denying what the Ork already knew.

“Yes, she’s been quite useful to us in letting us in through that nice little underground doorway of yours,”

Jaris told Hazug, standing up and walking towards the large Ork, “But the other one, Sophie I think she’s called, seemed rather distressed to be taken away by my men. So if you want her back then you’ll have to open up that vault and then we can swap our weapons for your slave.”

Again Hazug said nothing; instead he just kept his gun pointed at Jaris.

“Come on now,” the man said, “surely you can see reason here, you want Sophie back and we want our weapons back. So be a good little Ork and open up this vault.”

As a Blood Axe, Hazug had a history of employing negotiation and diplomacy instead of always relying on brute force, a trait of his clan that Jaris was counting on to blackmail him into agreeing to the exchange. But critically, Jaris had overlooked the fact that Hazug was still an Ork and even Blood Axes would only rely on negotiation so far. Anyone, whether greenskin or alien, or thought that a Blood Axe would allow himself to submit to extortion had made a terrible mistake.

A fatal mistake.

Hazug dropped his pistol and lunged at Jaris, letting out a roar as he did so. He grasped the surprised human by his throat and lifted him up off the floor. Then, still holding Jaris in the air, he spun around and slammed the man’s body against the armoured door of the armoury and tightened his grip.

“We’ll kill her,” Jaris croaked as he struggled for breath. Hazug’s grip tightened, but significantly he did not dig his fingertips into Jaris’s throat, so the man could still just about breathe.

Hazug roared again and pulled Jaris away from the door, only to slam him back against it once more. The back of Jaris’s skull hit the metal door hard and the blow stunned him. Then Hazug leant in towards Jaris and head butted him. There was a crunch as the impact of Hazug’s forehead shattered Jaris’s nose and blood spurted from the wound. Hazug let go of Jaris and the human fell limply to the floor. By now Jaris had realised his mistake and he looked for his shotgun. There it was, still next the chair he had been sat in when Hazug had entered the room and Jaris began to scabble towards it.

But Hazug wasn’t finished with Jaris yet and the Ork reached down and grabbed the injured man by his collar and lifted him up again. Holding Jaris in one hand, Hazug produced the key to the armoury and unlocked the door.

“‘Ere ya go,” he said, pulling Jaris closer to him so that they pair were face to face, “da door is open,” and he threw the man to the floor so that his head lay in the doorway.

There was a look of horror on Jaris’s face as Hazug slammed the door shut the first time and as the door closed he just had time to consider how Sophie had warned him that this would happen and perhaps he should have listened to her. When Hazug opened the door again and slammed it for a second time, Jaris was already dead.



Sophie's captors had hooded her before they took her into the tunnels that ran beneath the Ork city and someone, Rhia she guessed, had practically dragged her through the maze-like network of underground passageways. Unable to see, it was only the change in the way the tunnel floor felt beneath her bare feet when it stopped being bare earth and instead became brick and concrete that told her they had reached the point where the tunnels dug by Gretchin met up with the passageways that had made up the sewer system beneath the city before the orks invaded, but that now only existed under Git Town.

This confused Sophie, Hazug's house was very close to Git Town, in fact warboss Kazkal Kromag had only given him the building because no other orks in his inner circle wanted to live so close to so many humans, but it took some time for her captors to get her there. That could only mean one thing, rather than heading straight for Git Town, they had taken her around its edge, taking her near to the river that connected the city with the ocean.

"There are steps here," Rhia said to Sophie suddenly, but not in time for her to avoid banging a toe against a hard stone step in front of her. Sophie cried out in pain, but the combination of the gag and hood muffled her cry.

"Keep her quiet," Hobbs hissed to Rhia, there could be people about, "Thayne's men."

Rhia pressed Sophie's own gun against her ribs.

"Attract attention and you'll be the first to die," she said, "understand?"

Unable to speak, Sophie just nodded and Rhia continued to drag her up the steps. At the top of the steps the tunnel ended and the group stepped into the open air. The coolness of the night shocked Sophie, who had only the towel around her to keep her warm and she flinched.

"Keep moving," Rhia snapped, "we're not there yet."

The way in which Sophie's captors moved above ground changed dramatically, instead of keeping a steady walking pace they changed to sudden bursts of speed separated by pauses, calls of "It's clear," and "Move now," indicating to her that they were checking to see whether they were being observed before advancing further towards wherever it was that they were taking her.

"Who goes?" a voice called out from somewhere ahead.

"Friends," Droyle replied.

"Password," the voice called out.

"Bolter," Droyle answered.

"Advance friends," the mystery voice responded and Sophie was dragged onwards again, "I thought you bringing back the missiles," the voice added, this time from much closer and Sophie guessed that her captor's had now reached the sentry's location.

"Change of plan," Droyle answered him, "Jaris is bringing them later."

Sophie felt the ground beneath her slope downwards as Rhia continued to drag her forwards and the air changed again, indicating that she was being taken into another tunnel.

But there was something familiar about this place, the ground beneath her feet was smooth unlike either the Gretchin tunnels or the abandoned sewers and even under her hood, Sophie could hear the faint sound of dripping water. The last time that Sophie had been in a place like this it had been a road tunnel underneath the river as it passed through the abandoned Imperial capital city to the north of here where she had lived with the Death Skulls who had owned her before Hazug. When the orks had taken over this city they had dismantled all of the bridges and used the material for more war machines, but it appeared that there was also a tunnel that they had never known about, one that the resistance was now using to get across the river to the part of the city where no-one else ever went.

The cold night air hit Sophie again when they reached the far end of the tunnel and emerged back above ground. From there she was dragged through the streets of the supposedly abandoned region to the west of the river.

"There are more steps here now," Rhia said to her captive, this time giving her enough warning to avoid hurting herself.

Sophie was lead into a building at the top of the steps and as soon as they were inside she could hear the sound of people talking. There was nothing specific and nothing addressed to her, instead it was the sound of many different conversations taking place as she was lead through the building.

"Is he in?" she heard Droyle ask when there was a brief pause in her being dragged onwards.

"Yes and he's expecting you, you're late," another voice said and Sophie felt Rhia pull her forwards again.

"Ah mister Droyle," a voice called out over the ambient noise, "How nice of you to finally join us again.

Perhaps you can tell me where mister Jaris has got to and who you've brought to me instead of the weapons I asked you to retrieve."

"The weapons were in a locked vault your excellency," Droyle replied, "This girl works for the Ork who had taken them. Jaris stayed behind to tell it that it had to give them back if it wants her back alive."

"Let me see her," the man who Droyle had addressed spoke and Rhia pulled the hood away from Sophie's head.

The room to which she had been brought was lit by several electrical lights hung around the walls and Sophie blinked as she got used to the relative brightness of them after being under the under for so long. Ahead of her, Sophie saw a white haired man sitting at a table and from the way that other stood around him, including some with the look of bodyguards, she guessed that he was in charge here.

"Well you are a pretty thing aren't you," the white haired man said, staring at Sophie and she became very aware of the fact that she wore nothing but a towel.

There was the sound of heavy footfalls from behind Sophie and the white haired man looked past her and spoke again.

"Ah Krixus, look what my men have brought me," he said, pointing at Sophie.

"Not the weapons they were sent for apparently," a deep voice replied, "your man Jaris has failed us again. Perhaps that is why he fears to appear before me."

"Nonsense," the white haired man said as if insulted by the accusation levelled against Jaris, "he has stayed behind to tell the Ork that we will only let its pet go if it does what we want."

It was at this point that the owner of the deep voice walked in front of Sophie and she saw in amazement why his footfalls were so heavy. The man was a giant, at least eight feet tall and he wore an armoured suit that covered him from the neck down that had a pistol as massive as any she had seen an Ork carry holstered at his waist.

"Then Jaris is a fool Highbalt," Krixus said, halting beside the white haired man and turning to stare at Sophie. Krixus's face betrayed no emotion and his eyes looked at Sophie as though they could see right through her.

Highbalt on the other hand looked confused.

"How so chaplain?" he asked, finally taking his leering gaze away from Sophie.

"The Ork will kill him," Krixus answered, unlike Highbalt, he kept his attention focused on Sophie, "the creatures have no sentimentality for you to exploit."

"I disagree," Rhia suddenly said and there were looks of horror on the faces of some of those present. Even Rhia herself looked taken aback by what she had said. Clearly this Krixus was someone not to be challenged.

"Then you are a fool too," Krixus said, "and since you have betrayed the Ork then it will kill you also at the first opportunity."

"Well if she's not going to be any use to us we may as well kill her now," Highbalt said and he waved to one of his guards. The man raised his gun.

"Wait," Krixus called out, before the man could fire, "we need someone expendable to complete our task. She will do."

"Yes of course," Highbalt said and he waved at his guard again, this time for him to lower his weapon, "Take her away," he commanded, "use one of the rooms on the third floor, that way she won't be able to hurt herself before we need her."

Rhia and Hobbs began to drag Sophie out of the room and as they did so Highbalt leant towards Krixus and she thought she heard him say, "I'm surprised to hear you speak of betrayal so negatively given your history Astartes."

The building to which Sophie had been taken had clearly been a hospital prior to the arrival of the orks and the third floor had been dedicated to keeping the mentally ill securely locked away. Rhia and Hobbs shoved Sophie into a room which had every surface covered in a thick padding. Before they locked her in, Rhia released the bonds on Sophie's wrists and tossed a blanket onto the floor.

"Sleep tight," she said as Sophie used her freed hands to pull out her gag and then the door was shut.

Alone in the darkened room, Sophie picked up the blanket and wrapped it around her self. Then she collected the fragments of animal hide that had been used to bind and gag her. She took them all to a corner where she sat down and tied the fragments together to form one long strip that she then wrapped around her body just beneath her arm pits. Then she tied it in place so that it held her towel against her. With what little 'clothing' she wore now more secure, Sophie curled up into a ball in her corner and wept.

When Ratish got home he too shouted out as soon as he entered the hallway.

"Master! Master where is ya! Ratish is 'ere!" he yelled and he began to search the building for Hazug. He found him in the armoury, loading rifle ammunition into a bag.

"Master da gits is both gone!" Ratish said with glee as he rushed up to Hazug, jumping over the headless corpse of Jaris on the way, "Master wot's wrong?" he added when Hazug said nothing to him in return.

Hazug looked down at Ratish.

“Go get ya gun grot, we is goin’ for a walk,” he said.

“Where to master?”

“Wherever ‘is mates took Sophie,” Hazug answered, pointing down at Jaris’s body.

“Master killed da git?” Ratish asked.

“E was askin’ for it,” Hazug replied, “now get ya gun or stay ‘ere and clean dat up.”

Ratish ran downstairs to the cupboard like space beneath the staircase where he lived and frantically rooted through his meagre belongings until he found his pistol and the bag of spare ammunition that Hazug allowed him to keep.

“Ratish get ‘is gun master,” Ratish said to Hazug as the Ork descended the stairs cradling his rifle and with a look of fury on his face.

“Good, follow me den,” he said as he walked past Ratish and then went down the next set of stairs into the cellar.

“Dey must ‘ave used da tunnels,” Hazug explained to Ratish as the Gretchin followed behind him, “dare ain’t no other way dat a bunch of armed humans could get through da city streets without bein’ shot and dey ‘ad to take Sophie away without bein’ spotted an’ all,” and Hazug picked up a pair of lanterns from a table beside the door that lead to the Gretchin tunnel network beyond. He passed one to Ratish and kept the other for himself, “Gis a light,” he said to Ratish who promptly tucked his gun into his belt and got out a flint with which he lit both lanterns.

“Good,” Hazug said, “now lets go get Sophie back.”

“Wot about da other git?” Ratish asked, “Ain’t we getting’ it back too?”

“Rhia ‘elpin’ dem wot is causin’ all dis, we don’t want ‘er back.”

“Ratish don’t want any gits back,” Ratish muttered as he followed Hazug into the tunnels, but his Ork master ignored him.

The trail left by Sophie and her abductors through the Gretchin built tunnels was easy to follow, the bare dirt floor and moist air preserved footprints for long periods and when all of the tracks in question were human, they were especially easy to pick out against the older Gretchin tracks present.

As Hazug had expected there were tracks running in two directions, the older one was made up entirely of humans wearing combat boots that lead towards the way into Hazug’s cellar, while the ones on top of these, indicating that they were fresher, also included a set in smaller shoes and one that was barefoot.

Hazug guessed that the barefoot one was Sophie.

“Which way is we ‘eadin’?” Hazug asked Ratish. Orks did not often use the tunnel network; it was instead a means for Gretchin to be able to move rapidly about the city to run errands for their masters without getting squashed. As such, Hazug did not know exactly where this tunnel lead as it twisted and turned.

“Towards da river master,” Ratish told him.

“Wot, not into Git Town?”

“No master, Git Town is very close to da door and da tunnels change to dem stone git ones with da water down da middle of ‘em. We is goin’ along da edge of Git Town.”

“Ow far can we keep goin’ dis way den?” Hazug now asked.

“All da way to da river master,” Ratish told him, “Gretchin tried diggin’ further but got washed away.”

As the tunnel drew closer to the river it became wetter and water could be seen dripping form the tunnel roof as it seeped in form the river. It became harder to pick out individual tracks here, any footprint that was made swiftly filled with water and identifying marks were washed away. But it was still possible to follow the trail of the group that had stolen Sophie form him and Hazug continued to follow it.

As Hazug followed the trail as it turned off down a side tunnel, he saw that the construction style change up ahead. Instead of bare dirt, all of the surfaces were lined with equally sized rectangular stones that fitted neatly together. Hazug recognised this immediately as being built by humans.

“Well ‘ere we are den,” he said, “we is under Git Town now.”

As Ratish had told Hazug, the human made tunnels all featured a shallow channel of water that ran down their centres. Of course no track could be left in this channel, but fortunately members of the group repeatedly stepped outside of the channel onto the stone walkways to either side of it and so there was still a trail for Hazug to follow. A trail that led to a staircase built into a tunnel wall.

“Get ready grot,” Hazug said and he put his lantern down on the stone walkway and brought his rifle up to his shoulder. Copying his master, Ratish also set down his lantern and drew his gun.

“Go!” Hazug shouted and he ran up the stairs, keeping his weapon at the ready as he did so. Behind him Ratish followed closely, also pointing his gun ahead of him.

The stairs ended when they reached the surface and as Hazug emerged form the hole in the ground he halted and crouched down. Then, still keeping low he turned around full circle, looking for any sign of Sophie or her kidnapers. Though he did not crouch down, Ratish copied Hazug in turning around and looking in all directions, even though he had no idea what it was that he was supposed to be looking for.

Seeing nothing, Hazug instead looked down at the ground around him. There he saw paving stones and concrete, but no tracks of any sort. The trail had ended.

“Master, wot now?” Ratish asked, tugging at Hazug’s jacket, but Hazug said nothing, “Master?” Ratish repeated and Hazug turned to look at him.

“We go ‘omen grot,” he said solemnly, “I can’t find no trail ‘ere. Sophie’s gone,” and he headed back down the stairs into the tunnel below. Ratish grinned and then followed him.

## 9

Jarr moved cautiously through the darkness of the forest, his facemask amplifying the ambient light to a level that allowed him to see as clearly as if it were daylight. The assassin had unpacked his rifle and held it to his shoulder as he moved. Normally he would carefully select a firing location and use his custom built weapon to strike down a distant target with a single shot, but for now he was prepared to fire off one or two shots at any targets at short range that happened to present themselves to him.

“Straight ahead,” the voice in his head told him.

Jarr kept moving until he reached the edge of the forest. Ahead of him he saw an expanse of grassy hills that separated this forest from another one and between two of these hills, just outside of the next area of woodland, he saw that a large area had been excavated and at the bottom of the massive pit that had been dug a curved structure that resembled a flattened section of the tusk from some mighty beast stuck up from the ground.

“Behold,” the voice said to him, “the webway gate.”

Jarr smiled to himself, now all he had to do was select a suitable firing location and wait for his target to arrive.

The house was quiet when Hazug awoke and for a moment he tried to figure out why. The sun was coming up and his servants should have been trying to inflict physical injury on one another by now, or at least arguing over who was most valuable to him, but instead there was only quiet. Then it hit him, two of his servants had gone. One a traitor, the other one stolen from him by other humans. Across the room, Hazug saw the dark stain on the floor by the armoured door of his armoury that was all that remained to indicate that he had extracted his revenge on one of those humans who thought that they could steal from or blackmail him.

Hazug yawned and stretched out his arms as he sat up. Standing up, he picked up his pistol and blade from the table beside his bed, tucked them into his belt and went downstairs for breakfast. In the kitchen he found Ratish using a small wooden hammer to flatten out a squig that wouldn't keep still.

“Ratish is nearly done master,” the Gretchin said with a smile. Then he realised that while he had turned to greet his master the meal he had been preparing had escaped under the counter he was working at.

“Urry up grot,” Hazug said when he sat at the kitchen table, “I wants me breakfast sometime before lunchtime.”

The squig was still twitching when Ratish placed it in front of Hazug and only its own body heat prevented Hazug from classifying it as cold. But it was perfectly edible and Hazug picked up the squig and took a bite out of it, thinking to himself that perhaps he had allowed Sophie to spoil him with her cooking since he had agreed to let her work for him.

“Is da gits really gone for ever master?” Ratish said while he watched his master eat, the Gretchin's eyes open wide in excitement. If Hazug's human servants were not coming back then it meant that he would be the only one working for Hazug. It would mean that he had won.

“Next time I sees Rhia I is killin' 'er,” Hazug said solemnly, “and I doubt dat da other humans is givin' back Sophie.”

Ratish's smile widened.

“Master not need gits,” he said, “Ratish is better dan dey was.”

A knock at the front door interrupted before Hazug could respond.

“Go get dat,” he commanded and Ratish ran off to see who was there.

Hazug took another bite of the now dead squig and felt its bones crunching between his teeth. Then he heard Ratish shouting at whoever had knocked on the door.

“Sod off!” he shouted, “master don't want no gits 'ere.”

“We need to speak with your master,” another voice called out. Though it was in Orkish, the accent as well as Ratish's cry suggested that it was a human. Hazug put down his breakfast and got to his feet before going out into the hallway, where he saw Ratish trying to push the front door closed against Thayne and two other men trying to keep it open.

“Dey won't go away,” Ratish said as he leant on the inside of the door.

“Let 'em in Ratish,” Hazug said.

“Yes master,” Ratish answered and he let go of the door, allowing the three men to enter the house.

As well as Thayne there was another man who Hazug recognised, though he did not know his name. The man wore a jacket that was similar to ones Hazug had provided for Rhia and Sophie to mark his ownership of them. This one proclaimed the man as the property of warboss Kazkal Kromag and Hazug realised that he had seen the an around the warboss's palace. The third man, however, was unknown to Hazug.



“Follow me,” Hazug told the men and he headed for the room he now knew as the lounge, “Ratish, bring us somethin’ to eat and drink,” he ordered.

Hazug sat down and waited for the three humans to do the same.

“I’m told that you speak Gothic,” the third man said after he had sat down. The man was older than either of the other two and the clothing he wore suggested that he was one of the wealthier residents of Git Town, there being not a single patched or otherwise repaired hole visible on them.

“I know ya language,” Hazug said, “I’ve done business with ya Rogue Traders.”

“Excellent,” the man said, “that will make things much easier.”

At that moment they were interrupted by Ratish entering the room with a tray that held a jug of water, three cups and a plate of something called ‘biscuits’ that Sophie had baked and had not yet been eaten. Hazug noticed that there were just enough cups for the humans only.

“Ya ain’t pissed in dat jug ‘ave ya?” he asked Ratish in Orkish and the warboss’s servant looked at the jug, horrified.

“Of course not master, Ratish brink good water for da gits,” Ratish replied.

“Good,” said Hazug, “den bring it ‘ere so I can ‘ave da first swig of it.”

Ratish halted and then he let go of the tray, dropping everything on it to the floor.

“Oops master, Ratish bring new tray,” the Gretchin said before rushing out of the room.

“And den clean up dis piss before I rubs ya face in it!” Hazug shouted after him. Then he turned towards his guests, “So wotcha want?” he asked.

“I’ve lost another man since yesterday,” Thayne said, “Jaris didn’t turn up this morning, he was the man you met yesterday. I think that the resistance murdered him.”

“I killed him,” Hazug replied without any emotion, “‘e was da one wot planted da bomb.”

The three men all looked at one another. Before they could take this in fully Ratish reappeared with his tray, this time there were four cups and he put the tray down on the table in the middle of the room. Then he pulled a cloth from his belt and began to clean up the mess he had made with the first tray.

“How do you know?” Thayne asked, worried about the apparently summary execution of Jaris.

“‘E came ‘ere last night tryin’ to get da rokkits and zappas back wot I took from ‘is mob in da winter,” Hazug told him, “Rhia was workin’ with ‘em an all, I reckon she let ‘im in.”

“So the resistance has taken back the lasguns?” the older man enquired.

“I still got ‘em,” Hazug said, “dey took Sophie and tried to make me swap da guns for ‘er. Dat’s when I killed Jaris.”

“What about your servant?” Thayne asked, “Won’t they kill her?”

“Maybe, but I is goin’ to kill all of dem too when I finds ‘em.”

“I am sorry for your loss mister, err, mister Hazug,” the older man said, “but I am afraid that we need your help further.”

“Like I said before, wotcha want?” Hazug replied.

“We need more guns,” Thayne said abruptly, pouring himself a cup of water and taking a drink. From his reaction Hazug could tell that this time Ratish indeed brought water, “I’ve barely enough sidearms for my men and only the two lasguns you gave us yesterday.”

“So ya wants me to give ya some of mine den. Is dat it?”

“Not give exactly,” the older man said, “my name is Atellus Grayl and I represent the Traders’ Association.”

“Wots dat den?” Hazug asked.

“We are the government of the human population,” Atellus answered him, “we provide the funding for the constabulary and we are willing to pay for whatever weapons you can provide us with. We have only limited access to Ork currency, but we are willing to negotiate in good faith.”

“Da last human wot came ‘ere to ‘negotiate’ got ‘is ‘ead caught in an ‘eavy door.” Hazug said.

“Indeed,” Atellus said, unsure of the meaning of Hazug’s statement, “but nevertheless, we need more arms and you are the only one who can supply us.”

“Not any more I can’t,” Hazug replied.

“So you don’t have any more left?” Thayne asked, “I didn’t realise that the two you gave us were your last ones.”

“Oh I got more, but da boss won’t want me just ‘andin’ ‘em out to ya. Ya is better goin’ and talkin’ to ‘im. ‘E got a share of da guns an all and ‘e ain’t used or sold any of ‘em yet and ‘e’s started takin’ and interest in wot ya is doin’.”

The three men all looked at one another.

“Is he about attack us?” Thayne asked, well aware that his force had no hope of holding out against even a moderately sized force of orks long enough for the humans of the city to be able to flee to the relative safety of the wilderness.

“Nah, but since last night ‘e’s decided dat ya all belongs to ‘im and ‘e wants to know wot ‘e’s got.”

“We belong to him?” Atellus repeated, “But he’s never bothered about us before.”

“Yeah but dat was before ya needed ‘im to stop any bored lads goin’ into Git Town and lookin’ for a fight. So last night I told ‘im dat ya all really belonged to ‘im so ‘e’d tell da lads to stop takin’ wot’s ‘is.”

“So there’ll be no more raids then?” Thayne asked, clearly pleased at the prospect of not having to worry about any more such attacks.

“Not from lads wot knows wots good for ‘em,” Hazug told him, “and not so long as ya all do wot da boss tells ya. But ya might still get some runt brains tryin’ somethin’.”

“So what exactly does the warlord want us to do,” Atellus asked, looking uncertain about being under the command of an Ork.”

“Perhaps ya ought to go and ask ‘im ya self,” Hazug said, “In fact, I’ll take ya to see ‘im now.”

## 10

From his concealed position Jarr watched the entrance to the Eldar webway, the ancient network of stabilised pathways through warp space that connected many planets as well as the massive Eldar spacecraft known as craftworlds. He lay still, with his rifle lined up on the structure of the gateway itself. He had been in this position throughout the night and, with the assistance of the feeding and waste management systems of his suit he could hold it for several days yet. All he needed was for his target to make its presence known to him.

Then he spotted a disturbance in the reline near to the excavation in which the portal sat and he adjusted his mask so that its optics focused on the motion in the undergrowth there.

Yes, there it was, something moving out of the trees. Jarr was astonished when he saw the figure that came out of the forest. It was not his target; it was a space marine.

Jarr had encountered members of the Adeptus Astartes on several occasions and though he could recognise the livery of many different chapters of the genetically altered super soldiers, he could make out no markings to identify this one. Inquisitor Rell had told him there could be other Imperial forces at work here, could another inquisitor have requested the deployment of marines?

Jarr lined his rifle up on the marine as he watched it move closer to the webway gate, using the superior magnification of his scope to attempt to gain more information. The marine wore an older pattern of armour; mark five perhaps from the somewhat ad hoc appearance of it, as if it had been put together out of spares. This meant that pieces of the armour were likely to be more than ten thousand years old. The Emperor himself still walked amongst men when that suit had first been built. So either he was from a chapter that had suffered enough losses that they had not yet fully re-equipped with later marks, or possibly he had earned the honour of wearing armour that had been owned by a great hero of his chapter. The colour of the armour did not help, many chapters painted their armour red, some times simply to dare an opponent to strike at them as they refused to conceal themselves, but without a visible badge he could not narrow it down. For some reason the marine wore neither his helmet nor the backpack that contained the primary power source for his armour. Jarr had often seen marines remove their helmets outside of battle and they were also known to remove the backpack and rely on their own great strength to lift the weight of the armour, but this seemed like an odd place to do either. Did he not realise that this was hostile territory? There was a 'snap' from behind Jarr as someone stood on a twig and it broke and Jarr realised his error. By focusing on the mysterious figure ahead of him he had completely ignored his surroundings and now someone was approaching from behind him.

Swiftly, he rolled over onto his back and pointed his rifle back into the woods. There, directly ahead of him now he saw another space marine. Unlike the one he had been watching this one wore an entire suit of powered armour and from the menacing grill of the horned helmet and the ornate arms of the backpack that led to two of its cooling vents he knew that this was no Imperial warrior. If it had ever served the God-Emperor then he had betrayed his oath ten thousand years ago when fully half of the Space Marine legions turned their backs on mankind and instead followed the renegade warmaster Horus in the service of the dark powers of the warp.

Without thinking about it, Jarr fired from the hip. The armour piercing round of his weapon struck the traitor marine in the chest and tore through his armour as if it were no tougher than the flesh beneath it.

An amplified scream came from the grill on the front of the traitor's helmet as he lost a heart and a lung, his superhuman healing abilities sealing the wound behind the bullet. The delay this caused him was all that Jarr needed to get to his feet and begin to run.

From the noise behind him, Jarr guessed that he was being followed by at least three traitor marines, possibly including the one that he had injured. Ahead of him he saw a gully that he had crossed on his way to the webway the previous night and he knew that there was a river at the bottom of it.

There was a thunderclap as one of Jarr's pursuers fired his bolter and the miniature rocket propelled projectile exploded when it struck a tree inches from his head. Jarr didn't dare try turning around to return fire. Though he was confident that any shot he would fire would reduce the effectiveness of his pursuers, the actual act of turning around would make him an easy target for the well-trained traitor marines. He had to reach the gully.

Another clap of thunder told Jarr that he had been right not to stop as the ground immediately behind him exploded and he felt the impact of flying debris on the backs of his legs. Then he saw the gully he was heading for in front of him and Jarr leapt through the air toward it. As he did so, there was the roar of a bolter firing a four shot burst and Jarr felt the searing pain as one of the rounds detonated next to him and tore open his suit and his flesh beneath it.

Rather than give into the pain, Jarr waited until he had landed in the gully and triggered his suit's medical systems to inject him with an agent to prevent infection and another drug to speed up the clotting process. He refrained from using a painkiller just yet; it would slow down his reactions.

Lying on the sloping gully wall, with the river behind him, Jarr brought his rifle back to his shoulder and took aim. Through his scope he saw the traitor marine he had already shot and with a quickly fired second shot he took out the traitor's other heart. Knowing that he was dead, Jarr didn't watch the man fall, instead he lined his rifle up on the next traitor marine and fired again. This time there was not the sound of his shot striking metal as the bullet instead passed through one of the lenses of the traitor's helmet and ripped through his brain.

The remaining traitors went to ground, firing bursts of bolter rounds from cover. Something small flew through the air from the traitors' position and landed between them and Jarr and there was a fizzing sound as the air filled with smoke.

Jarr allowed himself a smile. Though they thought that they were preventing him from making use of his rifle's advanced targeting system, the traitors were instead allowing him to escape. Jarr slid back down the sloping gully wall and into the river, switching on his mask's oxygen supply. Then he proceeded to swim away unnoticed by his enemies.

"He is gone sergeant," the call came through Idrim's micro vox headset while he stood beside the webway gate, "there is a blood trail leading to the river, but no sign of a body."

"Continue your search," Idrim answered, "we must confirm the agent's death," and he broke the link.

Idrim then lifted his hand and waved towards the forest that he had emerged from. There was more movement in the undergrowth and Chaplain Krixus now also appeared.

"The assassin has been driven of my lord," Idrim said as the chaplain approached him, "we are no longer being observed."

"Is he dead?" Krixus asked.

"Unknown, my men are searching the area now."

"Order them to stop, we will not be here much longer," and Krixus withdrew a device that looked to be a blend of flesh and metal from a belt pouch and pressed it against the webway gate.

"The message is sent," he said, returning the device to his belt and the two traitor marines stepped away from the immediate vicinity of the webway gate.

They did not have to wait long before a brilliant globe of light appeared beneath the arc of the webway gate. The globe expanded and changed from a single white light to a myriad of tiny lights of differing colours. From within this mass of lights, a figure stepped.

Like those who had signalled him here, this was another traitor marine, but unlike them his armour was a rich blue instead of crimson and he wore a white robe over it. His helmet lacked horns and instead was fitted with a tall flat crest.

"Nillotep of the Thousand Suns," the newcomer spoke, looking towards the two traitor marines who stood nearby.

"Chaplain Krixus of the Word Bearers," Krixus responded, "and this is my sergeant, Idrim. Welcome to Crassus Minor."

"I accept your welcome Word Bearer," Nillotep said and the pair reached out and grasped one another's hands in comradeship, "together we will change the face of this world."

Warboss Kazkal Kromag sat up straight in his throne, looking down at the four figures standing before him. Of the four only the largest, the Blood Axe Hazug Throatlitter did not appear at all concerned. His Gretchin servant was, quite naturally, cowering behind his master, while the pair of humans could not keep still, instead they continuously fidgeted like orks impatient for battle and glanced repeatedly at the other assembled greenskins. This actually impressed Kazkal, it meant that the humans knew that they were in the presence of their betters and they knew their place.

Many of the orks in the room were also looking at the humans in an unusual way. Hazug had simply turned up at the palace with them as well as one of Kazkal's servants and said that they had come here to see the warboss himself. It was not the first time that Hazug had brought humans to the palace; he had occasionally brought his own servants with him, though there was talk that he no longer had either of them.

"So wot do dese gits do den Hazug?" he said, looking at the Blood Axe nob.

"Da bigger one is da boss of dare fightin' lads."

"Da con, cons," Kazkal said as he tried to pronounce the human word.

"Constabulary boss," Hazug corrected him.

"I knows dat."

"Yeah, well dis one is da boss of it."

"Right and wot about da other one?"

“E’s got somethin’ to do with da human merchants boss and ‘is lot pays for da other one and ‘is lads to keep da peace.”

“Right and why is dey ‘ere exactly?”

Hazug leant over to the two humans and spoke to them in Gothic.

“E wants to know wot ya wants from ‘im,” he said.

“Guns,” said Thayne, “and transport would be useful too.”

“Dey lost most of dare shootas and all dare buggies when da bomb went off boss,” Hazug told Kazkal, switching back to Orkish so that the warboss would understand him, “dey wants new ones.”

There was laughter from some of the orks, the idea of providing weapons and vehicles to humans went against most greenskin tradition, except for Blood Axes of course, but the other clans never really trusted them either. Hazug watched his back here.

“So wot does I get in return for shootas and buggies den?” Kazkal asked.

“Dey’ll pay ya boss, just like da farmers pays da tradin’ convoys for protectin’ ‘em from wildboys, only dey’ll do da protectin’ all by demselves.”

Once again, Hazug had struck a chord with the Bad Moon warboss. As wealthy as he was, he could not pass up the opportunity to make himself richer.

“Ow much is we talkin’ about ‘ere?”

Hazug leant towards the humans again.

“E wants to know ‘ow much ya’ll pay ‘im,” he translated, “E’s expectin’ a regular payment.”

Thayne and Atellus looked at each other.

“Well like I said we don’t get a great deal of Ork currency,” Atellus said.

“Ow much?”

“Maybe four or five teeth per day.”

Hazug knew that this would not be enough to convince warboss Kromag to arm the constabulary, so something other than cash would have to be used. But what would Kazkal take? Then Hazug remembered that the constabulary had until now used projectile weapons to arm its men.

“Where did ya get da ammo for ya shootas before?” he asked the two men.

“We have several gunsmiths,” Atellus answered, “they can manufacture a few weapons and a some ammunition whenever we can get the materials. But we just don’t have the resources to rearm the constabulary any time soon.”

“So ya just need enough parts and den ya can make all da shootas and ammo ya wants?”

“Small arms yes,” Thayne replied, “but nothing especially powerful, our people don’t have the skills or equipment for military grade work.”

“Dat’ll do I ‘ope,” Hazug said and then he turned back to face warboss Kromag, “Ow’s about ammo boss?” he said.

“Ammo?” Kazkal repeated, “Wot d’ya mean ammo?”

“Da humans can make bullets for ya,” Hazug explained, “dey ‘as been doin’ it for dare own shootas and if ya gives ‘em da bits den dey can make it for ya lads instead.”

“Hmmm,” Kazkal said, rubbing his chin as he considered the offer. Ork mekboys could produce excellent ammunition, custom designed to meet the exact needs of their customers. But their time was valuable and as such mekboy made ammunition was expensive. Therefore, Gretchin were entrusted to manufacture most of the ammunition used by orks and the orks’ smaller cousin species could churn out vast quantities of simple solid rounds every day. The streets of the city swarmed with Gretchin selling bullets they had made to earn a few teeth. The drawback was that what the Gretchin offered in quantity was often lost in quality and the cunning creatures would cut corners wherever they could resulting in ammunition that did not perform as well as the orks would have liked. The orks did not hold this against the Gretchin; after all they were too small to be taken seriously. It was also common for orks armies to enslave humans for war production during an invasion, but such production crews had less regard for the quality of their produce than Gretchin had. But this offer from the humans was something different altogether; it was more like the deals that some Ork warlords made with outlying colonies to not attack in exchange for weaponry. As such there was plenty of precedent in Ork society that would allow Kazkal Kromag to make a deal without appearing to be as bad as a git loving Blood Axe like Hazug. The warboss realised that he was being offered a steady supply of high quality ammunition. Not as good as a mekboy’s custom job perhaps, but better than Gretchin made rounds.

“Right den,” Kazkal said, “I’ll take five ‘undred bullets per day. In return I’ll lend da gits twenty of dem zappas wot ya brought me, but I ain’t got any git buggies so dey’ll ‘ave to find some by demselves. Goddit?” “Goddit boss,” Hazug replied and then he leant over to tell the humans what they had just got themselves into.

Jarr dragged himself from the river and tore his mask from his face, breathing in great gulps of fresh air. He put a hand to the wound on his side and when he pulled it away he saw that it was covered in his blood, the medication that he had used to assist clotting clearly had failed to do its job properly, so he administered a second dose and, now that he was out of combat, he also allowed himself the luxury of a painkiller. But he knew that these were just temporary measures and so, picking up his rifle from where it lay beside him, he got to his feet and began to make his way back to the farm where he had made camp and he could find the bulk of his medical supplies.

## 11

Venris Highbalt rushed through the corridors of the former hospital that now served as his headquarters followed by a pair of his personal guards. The news had reached him that the Word Bearers had returned with the man needed to complete his ascension to power and that he was now in this very building. Highbalt was in a hurry to meet him.

"Make way," he shouted at the marine sentry, "I must be allowed through," but the warrior just stared at him and continued to block the doorway with his massive frame.

"I said stand aside," Highbalt repeated, staring up into the faceplate of the Word Bearer's helmet, "I must be allowed through," but still the sentry blocked his way.

"Krixus," Highbalt shouted past the sentry, "It's me, tell your man to get out of my way."

"Let him pass," Krixus ordered from beyond the doorway and the sentry stood aside, "but his men remain where they are."

"Your men need to learn some respect for their betters Krixus," Highbalt said, angry at the refusal of the sentry to let him pass.

"My men do have respect for their betters," Krixus responded, staring down at Highbalt.

"Where is the sorcerer?" Highbalt asked, sensibly letting the chaplain's insult pass.

"I am here," Nillotep spoke from the shadows and he stepped into the part of the room illuminated through the window.

"Welcome to my world," Highbalt said to the Thousand Son and he reached out offer the marine librarian his hand. Nillotep kept his hands at his sides.

"This world belongs to the gods of chaos," Nillotep said, like Krixus typically did, the Thousand Son kept all hint of emotion out of his voice, "it is not yours to welcome me to."

"Yes of course," Highbalt replied and he lowered his hand. In years gone by had had men skinned alive for speaking to him in the manner that he had just been addressed, but he knew that giving such an order against the traitor marines would be a stupid idea. Besides causing them to turn on Highbalt's men and of course, Highbalt himself, he needed their capabilities. At least he needed them for now anyway.

"So when can we proceed?" Highbalt asked.

"I am told that your force have lost the weapons provided to them," Nillotep said and he looked at Krixus when he said this.

"Ah, yes. Our missiles and lasguns were taken by the orks, though my men are still well supplied with small arms and we greatly outnumber the local constabulary," Highbalt replied, trying to put a positive spin on the matter.

"The local constabulary is irrelevant governor," Krixus said, "you know this. Only the Ork armoured forces and aircraft are significant and thanks to your men's repeated failures you lack the capability to destroy them."

"I would hardly call the constabulary irrelevant," Highbalt protested, "with them still in place the task of inciting a mass uprising against the orks will be a lot harder."

Krixus snorted.

"I never had high hopes of the masses following you of their own free will anyway," he said, "but we needed enough to keep the orks heavy units busy while we carry out the ritual. You have been told that the effects will be highly visible during it and without a serious distraction my squad will not be able to hold off the orks long enough for it to be completed."

"Can nothing be done to sped up this ritual of yours?" Highbalt asked, turning to Nillotep.

"Nothing comes form nothing in this universe governor," the Thousand Son replied, "what we will do here will change this world irrevocably. Do you perhaps think that the powers of the warp are mere playthings to make your existence easier? I have spent ten millennia studying the Eldar webway and only after all this time do I now believe that I can separate one of their portals from the passageways beyond. Compared to that, the few hours I want your men to distract the orks for are nothing."

Rhia rummaged through some boxes looking for fresh clothing, what she had been wearing when she arrived her had been functional enough while playing the part of a servant girl to an Ork, but a revolutionary needed something hardier. Unfortunately the markings on the boxes regarding the sizes of the clothing they contained referred only to their original contents thirty years earlier and now the contents were entirely randomised. Undaunted she selected another box that was at the top of a stack and stood on another box so that she could reach it and take it down. Behind the box was a small vent leading through the wall into another room beyond it. Through the vent she could hear voices.

Voices that she recognised.

"An attack on the airfield?" she heard Governor Venris Highbalt say.

“That is correct governor,” Krixus confirmed, “apart from my men and your own personal guards we send your entire force to attack the Ork airfield and also the Gargants that are under construction.”

“The Gargants?” Highbalt said in amazement at the suggestion that his meagre force should attack the pair of gigantic walking war machines that the orks were building to the south of their city, “But they are nowhere near being completed. They have neither functioning engines nor weapons, they are no threat to our plan.”

“No governor,” Nillotep interrupted, “but they are something that the orks can be counted on to defend, drawing their forces to the south while we carry out the ritual to the north.”

“But they have only small arms,” Highbalt protested, “The orks will wipe them out entirely.”

“Do their lives really mean so much to you now that you stand on the brink of immortality?” Krixus asked him.

“No, of course not,” Highbalt admitted, “I suppose they would have died afterwards anyway. In fact I’m probably doing them a favour getting them shot by orks instead of devoured by daemons.”

At that moment there was a crashing sound and the attention of everyone in the room was drawn to a tiny vent in the corner.

“A spy!” Highbalt yelled.

Rhia picked herself up as quickly as she could and scabbled towards the doorway, after what she had just heard she could think of nothing but escape. She tugged on the door handle, but after the door opened only partially it stuck.

“Feth no!” she shouted, fearing that the door was jammed. Then she looked down and saw that the reason it was not opening was that there was a jacket wedged beneath it from the box that she had just spilled. Rhia closed the door and pulled the jacket away before she opened the door again. Where upon she found herself face to face with a pair of governor Highbalt’s personal bodyguards.

The two men grabbed Rhia and before she could say anything, one of them clamped his hand tightly over her mouth.

“I’d stop struggling if I were you,” the bodyguard whispered into her ear, “his excellency didn’t say anything about how many fingers you had to have when you were brought before him.”

The threat of violence did not scare Rhia as much as the thought of going with the two men and she continued to struggle.

“Hay you, get over here and help us!” the other bodyguard shouted down the corridor and a third member of governor Highbalt’s bodyguard joined the two currently holding Rhia, grabbing her legs and lifting her off the floor entirely.

The three men carried her through the corridors of the hospital to the room still guarded by one of the marines under Krixus’s command where she was taken into the presence of governor Highbalt, chaplain Krixus and the newly arrived marine librarian.

“So its you,” Highbalt said staring at Rhia, “my you are a disappointment. Well I suppose you’ve figured out that our marine friends here aren’t from the Imperium and your false Emperor at all and I that means that we’re just going to have to kill you.”

Rhia tried to scream as she felt a knife against her throat, but the guard’s hand remained clamped over her mouth.

“Wait,” Nillotep interrupted and the guard withdrew his blade.

“What is it?” Highbalt said, “Surely you aren’t suggesting that we let her go.”

“Of course not governor,” Nillotep replied, “but it doesn’t hurt to have a spare sacrifice for the ritual. Put her with the other one we were going to use. She’ll still die, but this way she’ll serve a greater purpose. Our purpose.”

“Yes very good,” Highbalt said before turning to his guards, “restrain her and put her with her collaborator friend. And be sure to keep everyone away from her.”

With nothing else to do while she was locked in, Sophie spent much of her time dozing. But she opened her eyes suddenly when she heard the screaming from the corridor outside her cell. She stood up as the noise grew louder and she recognised Rhia’s voice yelling abuse at someone. There was the sound of the door to Sophie’s cell being unlocked, but rather than seeing Rhia at the door as Sophie had expected she saw that it had instead been opened by one of the other members of the resistance.

“You can’t do this!” she heard Rhia shouting clearly and as the man who had opened the door stepped aside Sophie watched another pair of men move into the doorway.

Between them they held Rhia horizontally as if they were holding a plank of wood on which they lay and Sophie could see that the woman who had help kidnap her was now wrapped in a straight cape and that the men carrying her were holding handles attached to its sides. With her arms pinned to her sides and her legs



pressed together Rhia could not fight off or escape the men carrying her, but she was still struggling nevertheless.

“Ready?” one of the men carrying Rhia asked the other, to which he nodded to indicate that he was.

“Right then. Now,” the man said and between them, the two men tossed Rhia into the cell and Sophie watched as she landed on the padded floor. Then the men stepped back away from the door and it was slammed shut once more.

“Oh throne Sophie,” Rhia said as she lay helpless on the floor, twisting her head around to look at Sophie, “help me get out of this.”

“No,” Sophie answered coldly.

“You don’t understand,” Rhia shouted, “they’re going to kill us both. We’re going to be sacrificed, the governor and the marines aren’t planning to bring the Imperium back here they’re all some sort of cultists. If you don’t help me we’re both dead. Now untie me.”

“You’re wrong,” Sophie replied.

“No I’m not, they really are cultists. They put me here to stop me warning everyone else.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Sophie said, “I meant you’re wrong about them killing us. They won’t be killing either of us.”

“They will, we’re to be sacrificed, I already told you.”

“They won’t kill either of us,” Sophie repeated, “because Hazug’s going to rescue me first and when he does he’s going to kill you.”

Hazug cleared Rhia’s room first, gathering up the few possession she had left behind and stuffing them all into a sack, then he moved on to Sophie’s room. He had rarely paid any attention to what Sophie owned, so long as it was out of the way he hadn’t really cared. There were spare clothes of course, though more than an Ork would keep, humans seeming to need to change far more often and also the strange smelling powders and liquids she used to clean herself daily instead of just waiting for dirt to build up and then getting rid of it with one severe drenching. Hazug also noticed a strange construction in the corner of the room that he found familiar. He had seen such objects before when he had had dealings with humans from the Imperium; it was a totem of some sort dedicated to their God-Emperor. Hazug had even paid tribute himself once or twice at a larger public totem dedicated to him, orks had their own gods Gork and Mork of course, but some of them still occasionally found time to make an offering to the god that provided so many armies for them to fight.

Beside the altar was a brush that Hazug remembered having seen Sophie use to tidy her hair, brushing it repeatedly with long, careful strokes. Picking up the brush, he was about to make it the first thing in the sack he had brought into the room for Sophie’s belongings when he remembered something.

Orks were naturally hairless and so those that desired hair, typically plumes or crests on their heads or occasionally beards, would instead purchase hair squigs. These were tiny blood sucking creatures that grew great lengths of hair. By allowing them to attach themselves to Ork’s flesh while they continuously fed on tiny amounts of blood that they sucked from the wound an Ork could appear to have hair of his own. But Hazug knew that humans were different and apart from those few who for some reason wore artificially woven hair that never quite matched their own colour so that they could amuse their fellows, humans sprouted their own hair. Looking carefully at the brush, Hazug saw several long strands of hair that were definitely the same colour as Sophie’s. He had a piece of her still; he knew how he could get her back. Taking the brush and the hair trapped between the bristles with him, Hazug ran down to his truck and sped off in the direction of the weirdhuts.

He braked sharply when he reached the weirdhuts, leapt down from the truck and rushed towards the nearest one, Drazzok’s. Beneath the hut, at the base of the pole, Hazug saw that some of the weirdboys were still sat waiting on orders from Drazzok and that Thuggrim da Mad was still amongst them. Though the group was significantly smaller than the previous day, the remainder of the unstable orks having found something else that caught their attention or just wandered off.

“Is ‘e in?” Hazug asked, pointing upwards towards the hut at the top of the pole.

“Da great Drazzok is in residence,” one of the weirdboys said, leaping to his feet as he did so.

“Good,” Hazug said, then he began to climb the ladder up to the hut, “Drazzok!” he shouted on his way up, “I needs to talk to ya!”

Drazzok appeared on the balcony of his hut and looked over the edge at Hazug as he continued his ascent.

“Wotcha doin’ ‘ere?” Drazzok asked as he watched Hazug clamber from the ladder onto the balcony.

“Sophie’s gone,” Hazug, said, “dat Rhia and some other humans nicked ‘er from me.”

“So wot?” Drazzok asked.

Hazug pulled Sophie’s hairbrush from a pouch on his belt.

“Dis is ‘ers,” he said, “plus it’s got some of ‘er ‘air on it. Humans grow dare own ‘air so I figured dat ya could do dat thing where ya find someone by ‘oldin’ somethin’ wot’s dares,” and he held out the brush.

“Wot ‘ave I told ya about lost property?” Drazzok said without taking the brush, “I don’t do lost property.”

“Dis ain’t lost property,” Hazug said and he held the brush closer to Drazzok.

“Sophie’s a git,” Drazzok said, “and technically she belongs to ya even if ya does treat ‘er like she don’t. Dat mean dat she’s property. And ya ‘ave lost ‘er, so she’s lost property and I don’t ‘elp find lost property.”

Hazug just stared at Drazzok.

“Look,” Drazzok continued, “I would ‘elp ya, but she’s da thin end of da choppa. If I ‘elps ya den sooner or later I’m goin’ to ‘ave every lad around askin’ me to ‘elp find ‘is lucky dung ‘eap wot just got cleared away by grots. Before ya know it, dat choppa’s in right up to da shaft and I is da one getting’ shafted.”

“So who ya goin’ to get to make ya soup now den?” Hazug asked. Drazzok had previously expressed a fondness for Sophie’s cooking that Hazug had kept to himself and Hazug had often sent a bowl of soup to the weirdboy as a sort of bribe for just in case he ever needed to request something special. Now he intended to use Drazzok’s rather un-Snake Bite-like opinion of human cuisine against him.

Drazzok frowned and stared straight at Hazug.

“Bah!” the weirdboy said suddenly and he snatched the brush away from Hazug’s grip, “I’ll do it den, but dis is just because ya let dat git act like ya don’t own ‘er. I ain’t lookin’ for dung.”

Drazzok began to clamber onto the upper rungs of his ladder and hurled his staff to the ground below.

“Pick dat up would ya,” he shouted down to the madboys waiting there and then with the brush still in his hand he began to carefully descend the ladder with Hazug following close behind him.

At the base of the ladder Drazzok beckoned for the madboy holding his staff to return it before he risked letting go of the copper ladder. Satisfied that he was sufficiently earthed he then stepped away and began to study the brush and hairs caught on it.

“Dis should be easy,” he told Hazug when the Blood Axe also steeped down from the ladder, “Cause ya brought me a bit of ‘er instead of just somethin’ wot she owned dare’s already a bit of a link dare,” and he carefully pulled a single long strand of hair away from the brush. He handed the brush back to Hazug and looked down at the ground around his feet, “Ere we go,” he said, picking up a tiny piece of wood from the ground and he tied one end of the hair around it, “dis’ll make da end easier to see.” Having put the hairbrush back into his pouch, Hazug then watched as Drazzok dragged the hair through his mouth, coating it with a thin layer of saliva, then he held the hair out in front of him from both ends, vertically with the piece of the wood at the bottom. Drazzok let go of the piece of wood and let the hair hang loose before lifting his staff up off the ground, instead channelling the power that could not naturally dissipate through his feet into the saliva coated hair and Hazug grinned as it swung upwards until it stuck out straight, the piece of wood tied to the end indeed making this easy to see and pointed towards the river.

“Dat do ya?” Drazzok asked, “She’s dare.”

“Behold!” Thuggrim shouted from behind Hazug, “Da great Drazzok ‘as done it again.”

“Dat’s right,” Drazzok added, “and I ain’t even asked to be paid for it either,” and he looked Hazug in the eyes.

Hazug pulled a pair of teeth from his money pouch and held them up for Drazzok to see.

“Is she alive den?” he asked, “Dat Jaris said dat dey was goin’ to kill ‘er.”

“It’s a faint trace, so she’s either sick or far away, but dis wouldn’t work if she was dead,” Drazzok told him, tucking his staff under his arm so that he could take the money Hazug was offering him, “so she’s alive alright.”

Enough of the madboys had wandered off that the remainder could easily fit into Hazug’s truck when he drove back to his house with Drazzok in the seat beside him, still clutching the length of Sophie’s hair that was Hazug’s best hope of getting back his servant. They stopped at Hazug’s home just long enough to load up the truck with Hazug’s weaponry, ammunition, provisions for a day’s journey and of course Ratish. The Gretchin had no desire to see Sophie back, but he wasn’t about to let his master go into battle without him.

“Ain’t ya watchin’ da ‘air? Ya is goin’ da wrong way,” Drazzok said as Hazug turned a corner while the hair remained pointing down the street they had been driving along.

“We is probably goin’ up against loads of humans,” Hazug said, “and we don’t know ‘ow many dare or wot guns dey got.”

“So wot?” Thuggrim asked from behind Hazug, “Da great Drazzok can kill ‘em all.”

“Yeah, well obviously I could,” Drazzok said in a tone that indicated that he would rather not try taking on an entire human army single handed, “but I reckon dat we should leave it up to Hazug since its ‘is git we is getting’ back.”

“So wot is we doin’ den?” Thuggrim asked.

“We needs more lads and more shootas,” Hazug said, “and I knows where we can get ‘em.”

## 12

Rhia still twisted in the straight cape, even though it had been designed precisely to stop someone from being able to just wriggle their way out of it.

"For the Emperor's sake Sophie, you have to help me out of this. Highbalt's going to unleash a horde of daemons on this planet, I heard him talking about it with those marines or whoever they really are. They're going to let most of the resistance die by sending them to attack the orks' airbase just to distract them. People are going to die, don't you get that?"

"People have already died," Sophie responded, "Your resistance killed my father and all those constables this morning. Weren't they people too?"

"I had nothing to do with any of that, honest."

"Honest!" Sophie shouted, "What would you know about honest? You lied to me and you lied to Hazug. When he kills you I hope he lets me watch."

The argument was interrupted by the sound of the cell door being unlocked and a group of the governor's personal guards entered the room.

"Pick her up, we'll have to carry her," the leader ordered his men, pointing at Rhia and a pair of them went over to Rhia and grabbed hold of the sides of Rhia's straight cape and lifted her up between them. While they did this, another of the guards walked over to Sophie and grabbed hold of her arm.

"Right, cuff her and let's go," the leader said to his men and Sophie had her arms pulled behind her back and manacled together.

"What do you want?" Sophie pleaded.

"I told you, "Rhia said, "their going to kill us."

"No need to worry about that," the leader said looking at Rhia, "we're just taking you for a little drive, that's all," and he walked out of the cell, followed by his men as they dragged Rhia and Sophie after him.

Hazug could hear the sound of hammering coming from inside the building he now stood outside, his truck parked opposite to it. Raising a fist, Hazug pounded on the door.

"Two Heads where is ya?" he shouted, "Its me, Hazug!"

Hazug waited for someone to come and answer the door, but there was no response, instead just the continued sound of hammering, so Hazug pounded on the door again.

"Two Heads!" he shouted again, still striking the door with his fist, "Open da door!"

This time there was another sound in addition to the hammering as a bolt was pulled back from inside the door and it opened just enough for and Ork to peer out from inside the building.

"Wotcha Morfang," Hazug said, recognising the Ork who stared at him.

There was the sudden sound of something heavy falling over and breaking and Morfang winced before replying to Hazug.

"Wotcha want?" he asked.

"I needs to speak to Two Heads," Hazug said, trying to look past Morfang into the garage, "Is 'e in?"

"Ang on a mo, I'll just get 'im for ya," Morfang answered and his face disappeared from the gap, "Boss! Dat Blood Axe is 'ere for ya!" Hazug heard him yell.

"Ang on mo," a shout came from further inside the building. It had a strange echoing sound to it.

"Dat's wot I already told 'im," Morfang said before his face appeared once more, "Da boss'll be right 'ere," he told Hazug.

Hazug just nodded and a moment later a hand dragged Morfang away from the door and instead Two Heads peered through the gap. Or at least he tried to.

Two Heads Smasha Butt Face of the Evil Suns clan was a mutant; whatever had corrupted the pod in which he had grown before digging his way out had caused him to sprout a second head. This had brought with it some benefits, it had caused other orks to try and pick on him which resulted in him fighting even more than most orks and after winning so many fights so quickly he had built up enough muscle mass to make him qualify as a nob before his tenth year and secondly he grew teeth twice as fast as other Evil Suns, faster even than Bad Moon orks did and this had made him rather wealthy. Wealthy enough to be able to afford to own and run his own battlegagon. But it had also brought a major drawback, the two separate heads each had their own brain and there were times when they disagreed about a course of action, being an Ork this could easily lead to one head attacking the other. Hazug hoped that today the heads would be in a good mood with one another.

Two Heads struggled to see through the gap, both heads wanted to look at Hazug, but there was room enough for only one. No matter how Two Heads positioned himself one head wound up with its face pressed against either the inside of the door or the wall beside it.

“Do dis Two Heads,” Hazug said, growing tired of waiting for his friend to sort himself out and Hazug lent his head sideways. Two Heads followed Hazug’s suggestion and both heads promptly appeared in the gap, both sideways and one above the other.

“Nice one,” one of Two Heads said, “dat’s better.”

“Yeah much better,” the other head added. Then both heads spoke together, “So wotcha want?”

“Can I come in?” Hazug asked, “It’d be easier dan standin’ like dis.”

“Ang on,” Two Heads answered, one head speaking while the other looked behind the door, “I just gotta move some stuff out da way of da door.”

Two Heads closed the door and Hazug then heard a massive crash from just inside it before it was opened again, this time wide enough for Hazug to be able to enter. Two heads waved at Hazug to signal that he should come inside and Hazug entered the garage where he got a good look at what all the noise had been about.

The large red painted half tracked armoured fighting vehicle that was Two Heads’ prize possession was currently standing on four piles of wooden blocks, its wheels and tracks having been removed.

“Wot ‘appened to ya wagon?” Hazug asked, looking at the vehicle.

“Varlug ‘appened,” one of Two Heads replied and the other one just frowned.

“Who’s Varlug?” Hazug asked.

“A new lad wot wanted to join me mob,” Two Heads said, his other face’s frown deepening, “‘e said dat ‘e could drive really good like, but on ‘is first go ‘e drove into a pile of rocks and buggered up all da wheels. Now I needs to replace ‘em all.”

“Sounds expensive,” Hazug said.

Both of Two Heads nodded.

“It is,” one of him answered, “but Varlug’s payin’ for da new ‘uns. I took all ‘is teeth to pay for ‘em, “ then the other head interrupted with, “Well actually I took ‘is ‘ead off with me choppa, but I ‘ung on to it so dat I could pull out da teeth later.”

“Good thinkin’,” Hazug said and both of Two Heads grinned and nodded again, “so ‘ow long before ya is ready to roll den?”

“Not long, it don’t even need a mekboy,” Two Heads said, “Why, who d’ya want killin’?”

“Whoever’s got Sophie.”

Both of Two Heads just stared at Hazug for a moment before one of him spoke.

“D’ya reckon dat it was da Death Skulls?” he said.

The Death Skulls clan were scavengers who looted abandoned places for anything they thought they could either use or sell and were also infamous for stealing anything left unguarded and not nailed down. If something was nailed down it was only safe until another Death Skull stole the nails. More significantly, Sophie had previously served a Death Skulls nob before his death at the hands of the tau and when Hazug first took Sophie in himself he had been aware of the possibility that another member of that clan could come looking for her.

“Nah, it was other humans wot took ‘em. Dat Rhia’s one of ‘em too.”

This surprised Two Heads and it showed on his faces.

“Ya wants to kill gits?” one of him responded after a brief pause while this sank in.

“Dey is da ones wot shot dat rokkit at ya wagon last winter,” Hazug said, “dey reckoned dat dey could make me swap da rokkits wot I got for Sophie. Da one wot said dat is about an ‘ead shorter now, just like Varlug.”

“Dare’ll be loot yeah?” Two heads asked.

“Possibly,” Hazug answered, “but I’ll give ya five teeth anyways if ya can ‘elp.”

“Done,” Two Heads both said simultaneously and then he turned around to face where his troops were now rolling a large wheel towards the battlegagon, “Get a move on lads!” he yelled, “We is movin’ out as soon as wot we can, dare’s killin’ to be done.”

There was a cheer from the Evil Suns and several of them waved weapons in the air at the news. Then they returned to the task of repairing the battlegagon and it looked to Hazug as though they were moving faster than before.

“See,” Two Heads said, “dey’ll be done real quick like.”

Good to his word, Two Heads’ troops soon had the battlegagon ready to move and from their position across the street, Hazug and his passengers heard the sound of the vehicle’s powerful engine starting up and then watched as one of Two Heads’ orks appeared to open the main door and allow the vehicle to drive out onto the street. The battlegagon turned and pulled up next to Hazug’s truck and Two Heads promptly appeared from a hatch in the battlegagon’s turret and leaned over towards Hazug.

“So wot’s da plan den?” the two-headed Ork asked.

“Just follow us,” Hazug said, “Draxok is leadin’ us to Sophie.”

Familiar with Drazzok's abilities as a psychic tracker, Two Heads just nodded his heads and ducked back down inside the battlewagon and pulled the hatch shut behind him.

"Is we goin' now den?" Drazzok asked.

"We is," Hazug replied.

"Good, den ya git's dat way," and Drazzok pointed a finger in the direction that the hair was stretched out in. Grinning, Hazug put his foot down on the truck's accelerator pedal and sped off.

In side the battlewagon its driver watched as the truck grew smaller as it got further away.

"Wot ya waitin' for lad?" one of Two Heads asked, then both just yelled, "After 'im!"

The battlewagon could not normally match the speed of Hazug's truck, but in the confines of the city streets there were no open stretches of road on which Hazug could get his vehicle up to its top speed in any case and Two Heads' driver was easily able to match the truck's pace. This was also in part due to the rules of Ork driving which were much like the rules for all Ork civilisation. There were few, but bigger was always to be assumed to be better, even if it wasn't. This meant that while there were other vehicles around that would not automatically move aside for Hazug's truck to pass as pedestrians were forced to do, they could generally be counted on to get out of the way of the battlewagon. Only one Ork buggy driver tried his luck in getting out of a side street before the armoured vehicle had sped past first and his vehicle was sent spinning into a bar whose patrons then proceeded to beat him severely for his carelessness.

"Da 'air ain't pointin' dis way," Drazzok pointed out as Hazug took another turn, "Ya is goin' da wrong way again, ain't we got enough lads with Two Heads' mob?"

"Sure we 'ave," Hazug said, "but da only thing dat way now is da grot shanties and da humans ain't goin' to be 'idin' Sophie dare."

"So where is we goin'?" Drazzok asked.

"Dey must 'ave taken 'er across da river," Hazug said, "so unless ya wants to swim across it, I reckons dats we needs to go 'ire a boat to get us across dare an' all."

Even during the daylight hours the street outside the hospital turned resistance headquarters was mostly empty. The humans who had lived here before the invasion had mainly been supporters of the despised Imperial governor and when the humans across the river had risen up in support of the invading greenskins they had either fled or been slain. During her time serving the Death Skulls, other humans had told Sophie of bodies hanging from lamp posts after so many of the local defence forces were called away to resist the orks that the remainder had been overwhelmed. The only sound now was the steady thrumming of the engines of a column of vehicles that was parked immediately outside.

The column was made up of an assortment of vehicles. Most of them were wheeled, but at the rear of the column was a single tracked vehicle that mounted a small turret, while another tracked and armoured vehicle of a different design headed the column. Also near to the head of the column Sophie saw Venris Highbalt standing beside a vehicle that appeared to be in better condition than most of the others and then she saw a man opening the vehicle's door for the man to get inside. Apparently he had reserved the vehicle one for his own transport.

Sophie shivered as the governor's men took her and Rhia towards the column. Without the blanket she again had only her towel to protect her against the cool springtime air, but at least now she was not so afraid that it could come undone at any moment. Rhia meanwhile, still struggled against the men carrying her, yelling abuse at them. For their part, the men carrying Rhia ignored her protests, not even threatening her to keep quiet. Instead they just joked between themselves about how heavy she supposedly was and whether she had considered going on a diet.

"We'll put her in this one," the leader of the guards said to the man holding onto Sophie's arm and he pointed at the nearest vehicle. Like most of them its was a vehicle that resembled Hazug's truck in its basic design, but rather than being crudely built and with a simple roll cage this one looked much better designed and had its rear area cover by a rigid roof. The dull green paintwork suggested that it was a military vehicle. Obediently the guard pulled Sophie towards the back of the truck and looked inside.

"Company for you lads," he said to the men already sat inside and then he climbed up into the vehicle himself, dragging Sophie along with him. There was jeering form the men in the vehicle as Sophie was pushed onto on of the bench seats.

"Is she yours then Riggs?" the man sat opposite Sophie asked the guard who had brought her here, "Or do we all get a go?" and there was more jeering. Sophie flinched as the man reached out his hand towards her.

"She is not to be damaged," came a voice from outside the vehicle and all of the men in sat in the truck with Sophie turned to see a pair of the traitor Astartes standing there. Even though it was stationary, the truck lurched as the two armoured warriors climbed aboard, the vehicle's suspension straining to withstand their massive weight. The marines walked down the length of the truck's rear compartment.

“Move,” one of them said coldly, addressing the soldiers sitting at nearest to the front of the vehicle and on each side the soldiers sat there slid further along to make room for the marines in turn pushing Sophie, who sat at the rear, even closer to the opening at the back.

There was more movement outside the truck and Sophie looked out just in time to see another of the governor’s men lift up the truck’s tailgate and slam it shut. The man then walked out of sight before banging his fist on the side of the truck. The pitch of the engine changed and with another lurch, the vehicle was set into motion.

Finding transport to take them across the river was proving troublesome. There were many vessels docked at the time, but still Hazug couldn’t find one to take his group where he wanted to go. The problem lay with Two Heads’ battlewagon, the powerful fighting vehicle was heavy, far too heavy in fact for many of the smaller vessels that normally ran cargo and passengers up and down the river and the larger ocean going boats had no interest in carrying such a small group and were thus demanding ridiculously large fees. As it happened the solution was provided by an old foe.

During the winter a renegade Ork painboy had sought to seize power by means of an army of cyborks that he had brought to the city in barges. Led by Hazug, a force of orks loyal to warboss Kromag had successfully destroyed all but one of those barges, sending the cyborks and dreadnoughts that they carried to the bottom of the river, but the barge captained by the painboy himself and carrying two especially large dreadnoughts had sailed further upstream to the Gretchin shanty town where he had beached his vessel, offloaded his force and then abandoned it.

Hazug had always assumed that the local Gretchin would have ripped what was left of the barge apart, kept what they wanted and sold everything else. But as it happened the Gretchin who had discovered the wrecked and empty barge had instead decide to repair it.

“I thought dat da idea was dat we got across da river and den da gits tried to kill us all,” Drazzok said, staring at the barge, “not for us all to drown on da way dare. Some ‘ow I doubts dat even da madboys will get on dat.”

“Da boat is good masters,” one of the Gretchin crew assured the orks, but none of the larger greenskins looked convinced, “very good boat.”

“Good boat, good boat,” several other Gretchin repeated as they jumped up and down on top of the deck to prove their point.

Hazug walked closer to the boat as it bobbed up and down in its mooring. He frowned as he looked at the forward section of the barge where the hull had torn open when the vessel had been run aground. The wood there looked in worse condition than the timbers that had been used to originally build the barge.

“I don’t see dat we got any choice,” Hazug said returning to the other orks, “we’ll just ‘ave to chance it.”

“Not with my wagon ya ain’t,” one of Two Heads said while the other head just shook from side to side slowly.

“Don’t worry,” Hazug responded, “I got an idea.”

## 13

“So dis is ya idea den is it?” Drazzok asked while the orks stood watching the crane lift Hazug’s truck off the dockside. The Gretchin had moved the barge further along the dockside to where the use of the massive cargo handling cranes that dated back to before the Ork invasion were located and one of them was now in the process of loading Hazug’s vehicle onto the barge.

“Just watch,” Hazug said as his vehicle was deposited on the deck of the barge and the orks all watched the Gretchin crew as they removed the chains that had supported the truck and waved to the human crane operator for him to lift the crane clear.

“Dare,” Hazug said, “did ya see it?”

The other orks stood in silence and just looked at one another, shaking their heads.

“Perhaps its invisible,” a madboy commented.

“If its invisible,” another madboy said thoughtfully, den it could be all around us and we wouldn’t know it.

“We is surrounded!” a third yelled and the madboys all drew their weapons and began to turn around looking for a non-existent enemy.

“Its nought invisible,” Hazug shouted, then in a lower tone of voice he explained himself, “When da truk was put on da deck it was still chained to da crane, if da boat ‘ad sunk under it, da crane would ‘ave ‘eld it up. Da same goes for da battlewagon, we watch to see if da boat sinks while da grots is undoin’ da chains. If it starts to go down we lifts da wagon back up and den sends a grot down to stick another chain to me truk. Goddit?”

There was muttering from the orks, many of who didn’t really understand, but by tradition were willing to go along with what the larger nob was saying, even if he was a Blood Axe. By the time that the battlewagon was being hoisted into position, a large crowd of orks had gathered to watch. They stood in near silence as the heavy vehicle was gently lowered onto the deck of the barge behind Hazug’s truck and they stared intently at it as the barge began to sink lower in the water under its weight. Then their eyes widened in anticipation as the Gretchin crew released the chains securing the battlewagon and they were lifted clear. Throughout the crow there followed a mass of groans and jeers as the apparently unstable barge remained afloat instead of disintegrating as the assembled crowd had hoped would happen. Teeth were exchanged as wagers on whether or not the barge would sink were settled.

“Now we go aboard da boat too master?” Ratish asked, tugging at Hazug’s leg.

“Don’t be bloody daft ya grot,” Hazug said, “I ain’t getting’ on dat boat. Let dat other grots take da wagons across. I is ‘irin’ a decent boat for us.”

The boat that Hazug found to carry the warband across the river was captained by an Ork who happened to have won several teeth when the Gretchin’s barge failed to sink, so he was in a good mood when negotiating a price and gave Hazug a good deal.

“Ya already made me more dan da trip’s worth after all,” the Ork said.

The Ork’s boat got the warband across the river much faster than the barge that carried their vehicles and along with Two Heads, Hazug set about selecting a suitable point on the disused dockside for the Gretchin to dock their barge. Lacking the cranes that had been used to load the vehicles onto the barge, a location was instead found where the barge could be moored pointing inwards and when the Gretchin successfully brought their vessel to a halt several sturdy looking girders that the Gretchin had to hand were laid out from the deck to the dockside forming a ramp to allow the vehicles to be driven straight off the barge.

With his truck being located at the front of the barge, Hazug tested the ramp first, to be followed by the battlewagon. Two Heads was unwilling to trust this bit of driving to a less experienced Ork, so instead he drove it from the barge himself. Unusually for an Ork, especially a speed loving Evil Sun, he carefully followed the directions given to him by Gorrid. Gorrid had been the youngest member of Two Heads mob when Hazug had first met him during their fight against a tau warband and their human assassins who had sought to kill warboss Kromag, but by way of being the only one of Two Heads’ mob to have survived that fight he was now the mutant Ork’s most experienced soldier, even if he had lost his left leg to an energy blast from an assassin’s weapon and due to a shortage of replacements had it replaced with a right one.

“Where to now den?” Hazug asked Drazzok when the weirdboy settled in beside him.

“Dat way,” Drazzok replied, stretching out the hand that still clutched Sophie’s hair.

“Right dens lads,” Hazug said, his voice raised so that all of the madboys in the back of the truck and especially Thuggrim who had positioned himself on the gun again could hear him, “we is in enemy territory now, so keep an eye for humans. But don’t shoot ‘em until I says so, ya might ‘it Sophie by mistake.”

“D’ya want me to use me good eye den?” Thuggrim said, his hand taking hold of the pouch around his neck.

“I don’t reckon dat dat is called for,” Hazug said and he began to drive in the direction that Drazzok was still waving in impatiently.

Jarr was dying. He knew it.

The bolter round that struck him had caused enough damage to end his life; though not rapid via organ failure instead he was bleeding internally. The medicines that he had available would allow him to stave off death for a few days yet, but the more he moved the faster his rate of blood loss would be. He had known from the moment that he took this mission that returning to the Imperium would be unlikely, a retrieval ship would have difficulty in penetrating the Ork fleet in orbit, but now it appeared that he would die before even setting eyes on his target, former Imperial governor Venris Highbalt.

He had successfully evaded any search that the traitor marines had carried out after his escape at the river and returned to the abandoned farm that was now serving as his camp, but they were probably still looking for him, it would be unlike such professional troop to give up so soon. With his original firing position now compromised Jarr was reluctant to seek out another so soon. He would wait until nightfall and then make his way back towards the webway gate. Until then, he would rest.

The abandoned region across the river reminded Hazug of the old human capital where he had fought against the tau the previous year. Unlike in either the area occupied by the orks or Git Town the buildings had been left to decay and the truck frequently lurched as Hazug drove over small pieces of debris scattered in the roads.

"Go left 'ere, I think," Drazzok said, then he corrected himself, "No 'ang on a mo, go straight on."

Hazug slowed the truck.

"Well wot is it?" he asked, "Left or straight on?"

"I don't know, dis 'air's on da fritz."

"Try holdin' it out more," the madboy sat immediately behind Drazzok suggested, "ya might get more signal bars."

Hazug and Drazzok both turned to face the madboy.

"Wot da bleedin' 'ell is ya on about?" Drazzok said, "Wot's signal bars?"

"Dunno," the madboy said, not happy at being asked to explain himself, "Its just somethin' I 'eard a mekboy talkin' about when he was makin' somethin' talk to someone wot wasn't dare."

"Bad mistake lad," Hazug said as Drazzok scowled at the madboy.

"A mekboy?" he said, "Is ya sayin' dat I should act like a mekboy?"

"Really bad mistake lad," Hazug added.

"Ow!" the madboy yelled, lifting his hands to shield his head as Drazzok punched him.

"Best get to da back of da truck lad," Hazug suggested and he madboy obediently got up and moved out of Drazzok's reach.

"So wot way den?" Hazug asked.

Drazzok looked over his shoulder to see where the madboy who had spoken up was now sat. Seeing that he was right at the back of the truck and not looking in his direction, Drazzok leant over and held the length of hair out of the truck.

"Straight on," he said and Hazug accelerated, continuing along the abandoned street.

"Wait no," Drazzok said suddenly, prodding Hazug in his side, "she's off to da left after all."

"Make ya mind up Drazzok," Hazug replied, "just tell me wot way I needs to drive."

"Stop a mo," Drazzok told him, "I wants to take a look at dis while we is stopped," and Hazug braked sharply. From the rear of the truck came a squeal as an unsecured madboy landed on top of Ratish.

"Ya ain't just squashed me grot 'ave ya?" Hazug asked, turning to look at his passengers.

"Ratish is fine master," Ratish said, crawling out from beneath the Ork who was also picking himself up off the vehicle's floor.

"Well dat's good," Hazug said.

"Master really think so?" Ratish said, staring straight at Hazug.

"Sure I does," Hazug answered him, "I is already missin' a servant without loosin' ya as well. Who else would clean me 'ouse?" then he turned back to Drazzok who was holding up the length of hair and staring intently at it.

At that moment a shout came from behind the truck.

"Wot's appenin'?" Two Heads shouted, "Why does we keep stoppin'?"

"Just checkin' directions," Hazug shouted back before speaking to Drazzok, "So 'ave ya figured it out yet den?" he asked.

"Dis is well weird," Drazzok said, "Watch da 'air."

Hazug looked at the length of hair, his attention being drawn towards the tiny piece of wood that Drazzok had tied to the end to make it more visible. It appeared that the piece of wood and thus the hair itself was moving back and forth.

"Wot does it mean when its movin' about like dat?" Hazug asked.



“Well if ya git was right in front of us, it would mean dat she was walkin’ about, but she clearly ain’t dat close to us. For da ‘air to be movin’ about like it is means dat she must be movin’ pretty quick.”  
“Den dey got wagons,” Hazug said, “and dey got Sophie in one of ‘em.”

Sophie wasn’t cold any more. The heat given off by the truck’s engine coupled with the body heat of the squad of soldiers pressed inside had warmed the air in the truck nicely.

The truck bounced as it drove over something on the ground.

“Get off me,” Sophie snapped at the guard at next to her when he placed his hand on her shoulder and the pair of marines at the opposite end of the vehicle’s interior both looked in her direction.

“Hey, I’m just making sure you don’t fall out girly, the boss wouldn’t like that,” the guard answered her and the marines looked away. Strangely, Sophie found the presence of the marines comforting. Their enormous size and the design of their armour gave them a frightening appearance, but as far as Sophie could tell they were not going to let her come to any harm. The other soldiers were the former governor’s men and from the tales that she had heard they would be unlikely to treat her well if left to their own urges.

Sophie glanced out of the rear of the truck towards the vehicle immediately behind. She noticed that the city had now given way to open ground on which there were nothing but ruins and wild plant growth poking through rubble. Clearly she was being taken out of the city. But where to?

For a moment she thought she heard a woman scream and she wondered which vehicle Rhia had been placed in, forgetting briefly that the other woman had turned out not to be her friend and had been partially responsible for her ending up in this predicament.

“Hazug, where are you?” she whispered to herself.

Further ahead in the column, former Imperial governor Venris Highbalt sipped at his drink. His own vehicle rocked slightly as it moved, but its superior suspension kept it relatively steady. The interior of the vehicle was also superior to the others available to his force, he had been sure to divert enough resources from his resistance towards keeping him comfortable. He was not alone in the rear of the vehicle, both chaplain Krixus and Nillotep sat with him.

“A good vintage,” he said as he took a sip of his drink, part of keeping him comfortable all these years had been preserving his wine cellar since the invasion. Even after three decades he still had a large reserve left to him, “are you sure that you won’t join me Krixus? Nillotep?”

Krixus remained silent, just shaking his head slowly.

“I will refrain,” Nillotep said.

“Ah yes, you probably need to keep a clear head for the ritual yes?” Highbalt commented, taking another sip.

“I doubt that you have enough to affect me,” Nillotep replied, “we Astartes can process such simple toxins with far greater efficiency than you are capable of.”

“And here I was thinking that you couldn’t hold your drink,” Venris said, grinning and he gulped down the remainder of the contents of the glass.

“So tell me more about this ritual Nillotep,” Highbalt said to the Thousand Son sorcerer.

“Like most great works it is elegant in its simplicity,” Nillotep began, “when the Eldar created their networks of passageways through the warp they thought that they had located their gateways beyond the use of the denizens of that blessed realm. They were wrong.”

“Yes, yes I know this bit,” Highbalt said, pouring himself another drink, “I want to know how it works.”

“Beware governor,” Krixus interrupted, “it is not your place to make demands of us.”

“Without me your patron would have had no reason to send you to my world,” Highbalt aid, glaring at the chaplain, “and as the one chosen to be blessed in ascension you would do well to remember that,” and he looked back at Nillotep, “Do go on,” he said.

“The gateway is an anchor,” Nillotep continued, “it binds the webway beyond to the portal between dimensions itself. By presenting the sacrifice in the appropriate manner, the release of its soul into the portal while the gateway is active will break the chain that binds the portal to the webway and open it up to the immaterium itself.”

“And our patron will be able to come through will he?”

“He will come through before that Highbalt. The suffering of the sacrifice will act as a beacon to attract him and he will be able to manifest in this world via your devotion to him.”

“And that is when he will reward me yes?” Highbalt said excitedly, “I will become immortal?”

“Your soul will become one with our lord and then he will channel his power through the still living sacrifice to allow his brethren to come here also,” Nillotep answered and Krixus smiled.

“Something amuses you chaplain?” Highbalt asked him.

“I merely await your transformation with great enthusiasm governor,” Krixus replied, not looking directly at the man.

“As do I governor,” Nillotep added, “As do I.”

## 14

“Look at da ‘air,” Drazzok said and Hazug glanced across from the road ahead of him to study the hair that Drazzok was using to guide them. While eh watched he saw the hair gradually turn aside.

“Dat prove’s it den,” Hazug said, “dey is definitely on da move,” and he stopped his truck.

“Wot is ya doin’?” Drazzok asked him as he clambered down from his seat, leaving the engine running, “ya’ll never catch ‘em on foot, or is dey not da only mad ones around ‘ere?” and he waved in the direction of the madboys sat behind him.

“I is just goin’ to let Two Heads wot’s goin’ on,” Hazug answered, I’ll be back in a mo. Nobody move.”

Drazzok watched Hazug run towards the battlewagon waving for it to stop. There was a screech of brakes and the armoured vehicle halted in front of Hazug. The Drazzok noticed what the madboys were doing, or rather how they were not doing anything at all, each of them was completely motionless and it appeared that they were even holding their breaths.

“Wot is ya doin’?” Drazzok asked the nearest madboy.

“Not movin’,” the madboy said, doing his best to speak without moving his lips or jaw.

Drazzok just shook his head and focused on Hazug again, wondering if he would return before any of the madboys passed out.

“Wot is it now?” Two Heads yelled at Hazug through one of the openings provided for the occupants to see and, more importantly to the orks shoot out of.

“Dem humans wot’s got Sophie ‘ave got a bunch of wagons an’ all,” Hazug said when he reached the slit that both of Two Heads were looking through, “I may ‘ave to go a bit faster, just do ya best to follow us. Goddit?”

Both of Two Heads nodded.

“Don’t worry Hazug,” one of him said while the other continued to nod, “we’ll keep up.”

Satisfied, Hazug dashed back to his truck and clambered back into the driver’s seat, a sound like a collective expelling of air from the lungs of an entire mob attracted his attention for a moment and he looked behind him to see the madboys now all gasping for breath. Not bothering to ask what they had been doing while he had been gone, Hazug instead grabbed hold of the steering wheel, put the truck into gear and set off once more.

The empty streets on this side of the river did not limit the speed of Hazug’s truck in the same way that the crowded ones occupied by the orks did and the limiting factor had instead been Hazug’s wish to make sure that the more powerful battlewagon could keep up with him. The last thing he wanted was to find himself driving up to a camp full of human troops without the back up of Two Heads and his armoured vehicle. But now Hazug was more concerned about letting the humans who had taken Sophie from him get too far ahead of him. The further away they were, the less likely it became that he would get his servant back. Now though, Hazug put his foot down on the accelerator and let the truck race through the empty city streets. The lightweight vehicle bounced and lurched violently as Hazug took one corner after another at high speed and with his free hand Drazzok grasped the truck tightly.

“Ya know Hazug,” Drazzok said watching the buildings pass by in a flash, “if ya crash and get us all killed, I ain’t ‘elpin’ ya again,” but Hazug ignored him.

Moving at speed, the dense network of empty streets soon gave way to more open terrain where the wilderness had begun to encroach on the city and the decay of the remaining buildings was more noticeable.

“Is we still ‘eadin’ in da right direction?” Hazug said to Drazzok, unwilling to take his eyes off the road.

“Ya is goin’ da right way alright,” Drazzok said, “da ‘air ain’t twitchin’ no more, so maybe dey’ve stopped now.”

“Either dat or we is followin’ right behind ‘em,” Hazug suggested, “either way I reckon dat we should be seein’ ‘em soon enough.”

As Hazug sped onwards the ruined city gave way to open wilderness and the length of air guiding the warband towards Sophie began to swing back and forth once more.

“I reckon dey is followin’ da road,” Hazug said, nodding towards the dirt track that lay ahead of the truck and that wound its way through the hills and plains beyond the city, “Dat’s good for us.”

“Ow come?” Drazzok asked, pursuit not being his string point in spite of his excellent ability to point the way.

“Co we can do dis instead,” Hazug replied and he turned the truck’s steering wheel sharply, taking the vehicle off the road in the direction pointed to by the piece of Sophie’s hair instead, the rugged wheels kicking up a cloud of dirt behind it, “while dey is goin’ back and forth all da time, we can just go in a straight line. Dat way we’ll get to ‘em sooner.”

“Well at least Two Heads will be able to follow us,” Drazzok commented, looking at the cloud behind them, but Hazug didn’t reply.

The truck slowed down when it was forced to do so by the terrain, which in this area meant the hills that the humans were most likely steering around by following the road. It was at the peak of one such hill that Hazug suddenly stopped the truck. He looked back over his shoulder behind the truck and reversed a short distance back down the hill.

“Wotcha doin’?” Drazzok asked when Hazug then turned off the engine and jumped down from the truck. “Wasn’t ya watchin’?” he shouted as he raced on foot now towards the top of the hill and lay down on the ground looking over it.

“I was watchin’ da ‘air,” Drazzok said as he too disembarked from the truck and followed Hazug up the hill. Behind him in turn Ratish and the madboys also disembarked and followed him.

“Get down,” Hazug said when Drazzok reached him, “dey’ll se ya.”

Drazzok did as Hazug had instructed, as did the madboys even though they were still far enough down the hill as to be invisible to anyone looking from the other side. Lying on the ground beside Hazug, Drazzok noticed that he was looking through the lens of an alien device he had obtained the previous year, given to him by Ratish who had taken it from an Ork killed by tau invaders. Drazzok had seen Hazug use the alien device enough to know that it gave him the ability to see great distances in great detail even in near darkness. Drazzok turned his head to look at whatever had caught Hazug’s attention and there in the valley below he saw it. A line of human built vehicles driving along the dirt track road. Drazzok held up the length of hair and saw that it pointed directly at the convoy.

“Dat’s dem,” he said he, “Ya git is down dare.”

Behind them, Ratish let out a disappointed sigh.

“Soddit,” the Gretchin muttered.

“Get ready to charge lads,” Thuggrim said loudly and to emphasis his point he pulled back the bolt of his rifle to chamber a round, the round that had already been chambered ejecting as he did so, “Oh soddit,” he said, standing up and looking around on the ground, “Did anyone see where dat bullet went?” and immediately all of the madboys got onto their hands and knees and began searching for the missing bullet. Hazug returned the alien viewing device to his belt pouch and pointed towards the top of the next hill along. “Dat’s where we needs to get to,” he said to Drazzok, “when dey goes behind it we needs to drive straight to da top and den charge down da other side at ‘em. Dat way we’ll ‘ave ‘em caught between dat ‘ill and dem buildin’s over dare,” and Hazug moved his finger to point towards the dark outline of what looked like the remains of a human farm that had been severely damaged and empty for some time.

“Wot just us against all of dem gits?” Drazzok asked, “In case ya didn’t notice dare was a couple of tanks in dat lot of wagons and dat little rokkit launcher on ya shoota ‘as only got one shot before ya needs to stop and reload it.”

“We’ll wait ‘ere for Two Heads,” Hazug replied, “den we’ll rush to dat next ‘ill and down it together.”

“Won’t we just leave Two Heads’ wagon behind again?”

“We needs to Drazzok.”

”Ow come?”

“Because we needs to drive alongside da humans without shootin’ at ‘em so we can finds out wot wagon dey got Sophie in usin’ dat bit of ‘air ya is still ‘oldin’ on to. Den Two Heads can come up behind us and shoot up da other wagons wot we ‘as just driven past.”

“So wot does we do when we finds da wagon with ya git inside it?” Drazzok asked, “I don’t reckon dat dey is just goin’ to pull over and stop.”

“Of course dey won’t,” Hazug answered, “But we got a plank in da truck wot we can tie one end of to da chassis. Den, when we is alongside da wagon wot Sophie’s inside, we can board ‘em and take ‘er back from ‘em,” and Hazug grinned. Drazzok, on the other hand, didn’t.

A cheer suddenly went up form the madboys, not because of Hazug’s plan, which they dad not been paying any attention to, but instead because they had found his missing bullet.

“Da ‘ead’s missin’,” Hazug pointed out as Thuggrim held up the bullet case to him while he walked back towards the truck, “and I’ll bet all da power’s dropped out an all.”

Thuggrim’s face fell as he took a look inside the empty brass tube.

“Soddin’ grot built crap,” he said in disgust and he threw the case that his orks had all spent time searching for over his shoulder.

The deep rumbling of a powerful engine heralded the arrival of Two Heads’ battlewagon and the large vehicle pulled up beside Hazug’s truck. A doorway opened in the side and Two Heads himself jumped down, followed by more of his orks.

“Wots up Hazug?” he asked, “Ow come ya’ve stopped ‘ere?”

”Take a look over da ‘ill,” Hazug answered, jabbing his thumb in the direction of the hilltop behind him, “But keep low cos dare’s loads of humans over dare.”

The reaction of the orks was instant and easy to see. Two Heads himself broke into a pair of large grins and paced up to the top of the hill while the other Evil Suns instead remained where they were and checked that their weapons were ready for battle.

“Aw, dey is way off,” one of Two Heads complained when he returned.

“I knows dat,” Hazug told him, “I ‘ad to stop ‘ere and wait for ya to catch up. But I reckon dat we can catch up with dem just over dat next ‘ill and get ‘em between us and wots left of da buildin’s further on.”

Should be a good scrap,” one of Two Heads said to Hazug and the other one instead faced the dismounted Evil Suns and shouted out, “Dey got loads of wagons lads!” and the Evil Suns, both those within the battlewagon and outside gave out a cheer. One of them raised his rifle into the air and fired off a celebratory burst of gunfire.

“Shut ‘im up!” Hazug shouted, pointing at the shooting Ork, “Da humans’ll ‘ear da shootin’.”

Gorrid stepped forwards from behind the Ork and punched him.

“Ah, wot d’ya do dat for?” the Ork asked, rubbing the side of his face where Gorrid had hit him. He was one of the younger members of Two Heads’ force, having been taken on to replace one of the orks killed the last time that Two Heads had gone into battle with Hazug.

“Cos ya got a squig brain in ya ‘ead Pogrut, when we works with Hazug we keeps quiet until ‘e says so,”

Gorrid said and Hazug smiled, impressed at how the Evil Sun had learned how Hazug wanted things done even though it was not in his clan’s nature.

“But sneakin’ about bein’ all quiet like is for git lovin’ Blood Axes,” Pogrut complained. Then he remembered that Hazug was standing right in front of him and he noticed that the other Evil Suns orks had all taken one or two steps away from him, clearing a path between him and Hazug.

Pogrut turned and ran off down the hill.

“Dat lad can sure move,” Hazug said to Two Heads, watching the Ork getting further and further away, “even without a wagon to ride in.”

“Yeah ‘e’s fast all right,” one of two Heads said, then the other added, “But ‘e ain’t workin’ out so I reckon dat I’ll ‘ave to let ‘im go.”

“I reckon ‘e’s already gone boss,” one of the Evil Suns commented, “or at least ‘e nearly ‘as.”

Chaplain Krixus placed his hand to the vox unit in his ear that provided him with a link to all of the other Word Bearers in the convoy.

“Can you confirm that Jerile?” he said and then he paused as the marine replied.

“What is it chaplain?” Highbalt asked him.

“One of my men towards the rear of the column reports hearing gunfire governor,” Krixus told him, “a single automatic burst from behind us.”

“I didn’t hear anything, are we under attack?” Highbalt said his voice becoming somewhat more stressful than usual and he turned around, looking out of the windows of his personal transport. He had always sought to keep away from battle and had always let others take the risks of combat in his place. He had happily sent many men to their deaths rather than risk his own and he was loath to be put in danger now that his moment of glory seemed to be at hand. Of course he was in the presence of two of the most deadly warriors that the galaxy had ever seen, but accidents could always happen when the shooting began.

“No governor we are not under attack,” Krixus replied, “and it is not surprising that it you heard nothing, my men’s hearing is beyond anything your men possess.”

“Then what’s going on?” Highbalt asked, his voice still showing signs of nervousness, “You said it was a burst, automatic firearms are military weapons, it seem unlikely that any farmers left out here would have them. Is it that assassin?”

“There are no farmers left here governor. You informed me of that yourself,” Krixus said, making it sound like an accusation, “and the assassin was a sharpshooter. He would not use an automatic weapon.”

“Then who is it?” Highbalt demanded.

“Orks,” Nillotep said without any trace of emotion, “the planet is infested with them after all.”

“Orks?” Highbalt repeated, “Then we must send men to engage them, they must not be allowed to harm me.”

“Be calm governor,” Krixus told the man, “I doubt that it is a large force, or we would have been aware of them long before now. I am certain that we can withstand a small raid and in any event what reason would they have to approach us?”

“Yes of course,” Highbalt said, restoring some composure to his voice, “its just that after so long of leading an underground war I am unused to facing the greenskins from a position of strength.”

“Indeed,” Krixus said, well aware of how Venris Highbalt had let his men do everything necessary to run the fighting here while he just sat in his bunker sipping wine and wondering how such a worthless little man had risen to a position of power.

Another example of the False Emperor's weakness, he thought to himself and Nillotep grinned as he psychically picked up on the thought.

"So den Hazug," Two Heads began as he and Hazug watched the column of human vehicles disappear behind the hill and the other orks clambered back into their vehicles, "ow d'ya want to 'andle dis den?" "Dead easy," answered Hazug, "I'll go first and 'ead towards da humans. Drazzok'll tell me where dey is keepin' Sophie and dat's where I'll 'ead. I needs ya and ya lads to keep da rest away from us. Just watch where we is 'eadin' and don't shoot dat wagon cause ya may 'it Sophie."

"Gotcha," Two Heads said before he too joined his orks in the battlewagon.

Hazug took his seat in his truck and attempted to start it but the engine failed to start. Having seen Hazug have trouble starting the truck before, Drazzok slammed his staff against the dashboard in front of him.

"Try it now," the weirdboy said.

"Nice one," Hazug said and he attempted to start the engine again, once more without success.

From behind the truck there was a deep rumble as the battlewagon's engine started on the first attempt.

"Wot's goin' on?" one of Two Heads shouted from a hatchway.

"Da engine won't start," Hazug shouted back.

"Its dat bloody Batrug's doin'!" Drazzok added, "'E's da one wot built dis crap."

"Ya probably just need a push," Two Heads shouted at them, "'Ang on and we'll get ya to da top of da 'ill, den try startin' it again on da way down," and he disappeared inside his own vehicle, slamming the hatch shut behind him.

"Ya 'eard 'im lads," Hazug said to his passengers as he took off the hand brake, "'Ang on."

The truck lurched as Two Heads battlewagon was driven into the back of it. Unusually for orks, the contact was made not as an attack, but merely to assist Hazug so the battlewagon kept its speed low as it pushed the truck up to the top of the hill and then over it.

As soon as it began to roll down the hill the truck began to pull ahead of the battlewagon and Hazug attempted to start the engine once more. This time he was rewarded with a roar as the engine started up and Hazug slammed the truck into gear. He raised his fist in gratitude towards the battlewagon.

"Nice one!" he shouted and he pressed his foot down on the accelerator as hard as he could, once again sending mud flying up from beneath the wheels as the vehicle accelerated. Behind the truck, the larger battlewagon also began to accelerate, but the gap between the two vehicles grew.

The truck lurched again when it reached the bottom of the hill and Hazug began to drive up the next one.

"Get ready lads," he said, "no shootin' at any wagons until we knows dat Sophie ain't in 'em and be ready with dat plank."

At the top of the hill the human vehicles came into view below the orks. The road turned away from the hill and because the humans were following it the orks were now directly behind the column.

"'Ere we go lads!" Hazug shouted, "Waaagh!" and he sped towards the humans in front of him as the madboys repeated his war cry.

## 15

The Chimera armoured infantry fighting vehicle was older than most of the soldiers sat inside it and it had seen better days. Its main armaments had long since ceased to function and now the pintle mounted heavy machine-gun was its only means of attack. But even given its current state, the vehicle's commander was not overly concerned when he spotted the Ork truck approaching from behind.

"Contact to rear," he shouted over the noise of the vehicle's engine before he activated his radio, "Leader this is thirteen, single contact to rear."

In the car near to the head of the column Venris Highbalt sat upright when he heard the call.

"What's happening?" he demanded, but instead of answering him Krixus just held up the palm of his hand.

"Thirteen from leader, repeat message."

"Leader from thirteen, single enemy contact to rear."

Krixus was puzzled.

"I hear no gunfire, column confirm target identity."

The vehicle immediately in front of the chimera in the column was an open topped flat bed truck. Amongst the passengers was a pair of Krixus's marines who he had spread around the convoy because their single rhino armoured personnel carrier had lacked enough room for all of them. At the request for target confirmation, both of the marines got up and, steadying themselves on the open frame over their transports cargo area they looked behind the column.

"Chaplain this is Yistral," one of the marines responded, "Target confirmed, single light Ork vehicle. Perhaps a dozen occupants, one weapon observed but no fire yet."

"What are you waiting for Krixus?" Highbalt snapped, "We must halt the column and engage the orks."

"There is no need for that governor," Krixus answered him, "there is only a single light vehicle, the vehicles to the rear can easily destroy it before it threatens us here without us needing to waste time by breaking up our formation," then he activated his vox unit again, "All vehicles stay in formation and stand to, fire on the orks as the present themselves," then he terminated the link, "You see governor, that is all we need to do."

Hazug's truck was almost level with the chimera at the rear of the column when heard Thuggrim open fire with the trucks only weapon. There was a burst of fire that was unusually short for an Ork gunner followed by the sound of empty cases bouncing across the floor of the truck. A yelp from one of the madboys suggesting that at least one hot case had landed on top of somebody.

"Cut it out with da big shoota!" Hazug shouted, "If Sophie's in dat wagon ya might 'it 'er."

"I wasn't shootin' at da wagon," Thuggrim protested, "I was shootin' at dat git wot was getting' dare own big shoota ready."

Hazug looked towards the armoured vehicle he was closing on and he saw that there was no the body of a human slumped in the hatchway located on the vehicle's small turret where a weapon similar, but smaller to the one on his vehicle was mounted. As he watched an arm appeared through the hatchway and dragged the body back down inside the vehicle. A moment later another human began to climb up to the weapon.

"Do it again!" Hazug shouted, pointing at the man now getting the weapon ready to fire and Thuggrim sprayed bullets at the turret once more, hitting the human squarely in the chest with the large calibre rounds. This man's body remained slumped over the heavy gun and instead of the other occupants of the vehicle attempting to take it over they threw open the much larger hatch behind the turret, where Hazug knew the internal seating for the troops the vehicle carried to be located. Several humans then appeared in the hatchway armed with an assortment of automatic rifles and shotguns, which they aimed at Hazug's truck.

Hazug adjusted the pressure of his foot on the accelerator pedal so that the truck drew level with the armoured transport as buckshot and solid rounds bounced off the truck. He didn't want to risk overtaking the vehicle, even though he doubted that the main turret mounted cannon was not functional since the humans had not attempted to use it, there was another gun mounted on the front of the hull that may still be operational and Hazug wanted to keep out of its fire arc.

"Keep down lads," Hazug said, as he himself ducked down lower for better protection. His truck was proof against the puny weapons the humans were using, but their projectiles could still injury or even kill an exposed Ork.

"Waaagh!"

Hazug heard the war cry come from immediately behind him and he risked a quick glimpse over his shoulder. In the rear of the truck he saw that one of the madboys had lowered the boarding plank towards the chimera alongside them.

"Not now ya loony!" Hazug shouted at the madboy, but it was too late. The Ork let go of the rope holding up the plank and it dropped onto the chimera's side, its tip landing on the exposed track of the armoured

vehicle. Immediately the madboy began to run along the plank between the tow vehicles with his weapons held high, still screaming. The humans firing from the top of their transport shifted their aim towards the Ork attempting to board them and a volley of bullets and shot sent the unfortunately greenskin tumbling to the ground below. A second madboy suddenly leapt for the plank and attempt to make the crossing to the chimera but, before he too could be shot down by the human warriors, the chimera's track which had been digging into the end of the plank from the moment it dropped onto them ripped it clear of Hazug's truck and both the plank and madboy fell. There was a loud scream and Hazug felt his truck lurch as the Ork was pulled beneath its rear wheels.

"Ratish think we ran 'im over master!" Ratish shouted, looking at the Ork's broken body on the ground behind them as the vehicles continued to move forwards at speed. Hazug didn't answer, he knew that he'd run over the madboy, but it was the madboy's own fault for using the boarding plank too soon. What was a problem was that now the plank was gone for good.

"Ratish!" Hazug shouted, "Grab a bomb from me bag and see if ya can get inside dat wagon."

"Yes master," Ratish replied with a grin and he began to rummage through the bag of Hazug's personal gear in the back of the truck. Finding a stick grenade, Ratish's grin grew bigger and he moved to the side of the truck nearest to the chimera.

"Gis it 'ere, I'll lob it," a madboy said and he snatched the grenade from the Gretchin and hurled it at the chimera. It sailed through the air and dropped through the large open hatchway into the chimera's troop compartment.

"Ya did it!" Thuggrim yelled, "Nice one lad!"

"Yeah," Drazzok added, "now we just gotta 'ope one of da gits pulls out da pin so it'll go off," and he reached out with his staff and struck the madboy over the head.

"Get another bomb!" Hazug shouted at Ratish and the Gretchin scabbled back across the truck to search for a second grenade.

Before he could find one there was a massive 'boom' and smoke billowed from the chimera beside Hazug's truck. Its occupants ceased firing and the vehicle fell back. Then, following a second detonation the chimera flew apart in flames.

"See, dey did pull out da pin!" the madboy who had thrown the grenade shouted, pointing at the burning wreckage.

"Or more likely it was dem!" Drazzok shouted back at the Ork and pointed behind the truck to where Two Heads' battlewagon could be seen racing down the hill at top speed, smoke still coming from the barrel of its main cannon and Two Heads himself waving from an open hatchway.

"Can ya tell where Sophie is yet?" Hazug asked and Drazzok held up the length of hair again.

"I don't reckon its dis next one," Drazzok replied, then he added, "Oh crap."

"Wot?" Hazug asked, then he too added "Oh crap," as he looked at the next human vehicle in the convoy. Unlike the chimera this was just a lightweight open topped transport, remarkably similar to Hazug's own truck. But in the rear of this vehicle a pair of giant space marines stood bringing their weapons to bear on the orks.

Hazug had never seen space marine before and though he knew them to be giants compared to ordinary humans, these were not what he was expecting. The deep red armour that covered them completely had an unusual appearance, instead of the crisp lines Hazug had expected these two warriors were protected by suits that appeared to have been repeatedly embellished with details such as horned helmets and power backpacks that looked to have been stretched, bringing their cooling exhausts further from the marines' bodies than was generally shown in Orkish drawings of Imperial marines. But whatever peculiarities there may have been about these marines they were still dangerous foes.

The marines maintained their balance in their vehicle without needing to keep hold of the cage above the, this left them each with both hands free to support their bulky weapons. Hazug swerved as both marines fired simultaneously, their four round bursts passing by the truck harmlessly.

"Shoot 'em!" Drazzok shouted at Thuggrim, "Da git we is after ain't on dis truck."

Thuggrim lowered the angle of the belt fed gun he was manning and sprayed the rear area of the human truck ahead of him with automatic fire. The bodies of the human occupants jerked wildly as the massive bullets tore through them, rupturing organs and shattering bones. But the two marines did not even flinch, the thick ceramite armour plating that covered their entire bodies held firm against the relatively soft projectiles which just bounced off them, some subsequently hitting their more fragile human companions. Hazug swerved again as Thuggrim stopped firing in order to load a fresh belt of ammunition into the gun. At the same time, there was a whistling sound followed by an explosion to the side of the column of vehicles as Two Heads' battlewagon fired its main gun once more but failed to hit its target.

Hazug chanced a glance behind his truck and saw that the battlewagon was closing on the column. While it lacked the top speed of Hazug's truck, Two Heads made sure that the red paint of his vehicle was always kept in good condition. Even a non-Evil Sun like Hazug knew that 'red ones go faster' and the paint job that



Two Heads maintained gave his battlewagon a better top speed than the human vehicles it was now pursuing.

Several of the madboys began to fire at the marines on the truck in front of them, but just like the rounds from the truck's own gun, their pistol rounds were deflected harmlessly away by the marines' power armour. In return, the marines targeted the truck with short bursts once more and one of the madboys who had risen to fire at them was struck, the explosive projectile taking his arm off messily. The wounded Ork toppled from the truck and fell to the ground. Hazug didn't bother slowing down to try and help him, if he was already dead there was nothing that could be done for him and if not then he would just have to walk it off. There was another rattle of automatic fire, this time from behind the truck and as Hazug risked another glance over his shoulder he saw the battlewagon now drawing level with him. The marines on the truck now turned their attention towards the much larger threat and Hazug saw his chance. He sped up alongside the human vehicle until he was personally alongside its driver, then he reached down to his belt and yanked out his pistol.

Hazug reached out his arm and used the butt of his pistol to smash the window of the human vehicle's cab and roared at the driver who, with his eyes wide opens in terror swerved away from Hazug's truck and out of Hazug's reach. Hazug matched the manoeuvre and reached out towards the human driver again. The last thing that the man saw was Hazug's pistol pointing directly at him before the Ork nob snatched the trigger back and blew most of his head off.

The result was immediate, moving at high speed and without its driver, the truck moved out of control and flipped over, sending the pair of marines it carried flying through the air.

"Get 'em Gorrid!" Two Heads shouted when he saw the armoured warriors land in front of his vehicle and Gorrid steered the battlewagon directly at them. Briefly disorientated by being thrown from the truck, neither of the marines were quick enough to avoid the oncoming vehicle and it drove over them both, crushing them beneath its massive weight.

## 16

“Thirteen are you there? Thirteen can you hear me?” Krixus signalled over the vox network, but there was no reply until another vehicle responded in place of the one he had been trying to reach.

“This is eleven sir,” a human voice said, its tone indicating fear, “twelve and thirteen are both down. The orks have been joined by a second vehicle, a tank this time. We are firing on them but we don’t have the weapons to destroy something that big. What should we do?”

“A tank?” Highbalt exclaimed when he heard the report, “Krixus, get your men to do something, send your rhino after them.”

“Calm yourself governor,” Nillotep cautioned him, “the chaplain is well aware of what he needs to do.” Krixus paid no attention to what either of his companions in the vehicle had said; instead he set his vox to broadcast to the entire column.

“Maintain formation,” he ordered, “all Word Bearers stand by to engage an armoured target. You have permission to use grenades.”

“You see,” Nillotep said, “he knows exactly what to do.”

Sophie had heard the approach of the first Ork vehicle before the shooting had started and had attempted to look and see who was approaching, hoping that it would be Hazug, but her captors had simply pushed her back onto the bench. At first the soldiers around her appeared calm enough, obviously not believing that they were under significant attack, but when the first vehicle exploded their demeanour changed to one of concern and one of them took a look at their attackers for himself.

“It’s a tank!” he cried out, “The greenskins have a fething tank!”

Remaining in her seat, Sophie also looked out of the back of the truck just in time to catch a glimpse of green and grey painted Ork vehicle swerve out from behind the column and she saw who was driving it.

“It Hazug!” she called out, “He’s come to rescue me.”

A few moments later another vehicle at the back of the column spun out of control and turned over, at which point the marines sat at the front of the truck’s cargo area both stood up and moved towards the back, readying their weapons.

The next vehicle in front of Hazug’s truck was another open topped vehicle like the last one, but unlike that vehicle this one was occupied only by ordinary human troops who opened fire as soon as Hazug’s truck came into view.

“Eads down again lads,” Hazug said, ducking down again as bullets bounced off the truck, then he added, “Ya can ‘ave a go at ‘em if ya want Thuggrim, I don’t sees Sophie dare,” and there was the sound of gunfire as Thuggrim opened fire.

Hazug didn’t bother to assess the damage inflicted by Thuggrim’s shooting, instead he accelerated, overtaking the open topped truck and moving further along the column of human vehicles in his search for Sophie.

Unlike the last two vehicles, the next one had its rear are covered and only a handful of the passengers could fire at Hazug’s truck from the opening at the back. Hazug threw a glance at Drazzok.

“Not dis one,” the weirdboy said, holding up Sophie’s hair so that Hazug could see that it still pointed ahead, though it was now diagonal, suggesting that Sophie was close.

Hazug kept up the truck’s speed and passed the human vehicle. The gunfire from its passengers ceased as his truck began to overtake it and left the line of fire allowed by the covered rear area they occupied.

“Dis one!” Drazzok shouted as Hazug’s truck approached the next human vehicle, another one with a covered rear area, “She’s ‘ere!”

Hazug looked towards the hair and saw that it pointed directly at the rear of the vehicle immediately ahead of them.

“Never mind da ‘air!” Drazzok shouted, “Dare she is!” and he pointed at the human vehicle.

“Hazug!” Sophie yelled from the human vehicle as he looked towards her, then she was pulled away from the opening by one of the human troops also aboard.

An explosion from behind Hazug caught his attention for a moment as Two Heads’ battlewagon destroyed one of the vehicles that he had driven past and when he turned back towards the truck that held Sophie she had disappeared from view. Instead another pair of space marines in their curiously distorted armour stood in the opening aiming their weapons.

“Old ya fire!” Hazug shouted before any of his passengers could shoot at the marines, “Ya’ll ‘it Sophie,” then he swerved sharply to avoid the short bursts of gunfire from the marines.

There was an almighty crash from behind the truck and one of the madboys gave out a shout.

“E got da git wagon,” the madboy shouted, pointing to where the battlewagon had just rammed the human vehicle immediately behind them, smashing it to pieces. Now both Ork vehicles were trailing the vehicle that held Sophie.

“Sophie’s in dare!” Hazug bellowed as loud as he could towards Two Heads and he waved at the human vehicle, “Don’t shoot it wotever ya do,” in response both of Two Heads just nodded and Hazug saw him ordering his gunners to hold their fire.

Unlike the orks, the marines did not withhold their fire and another burst was directed at Hazug’s truck, punching several holes in its bodywork and forcing Thuggrim to duck away from the gun, but otherwise inflicting no damage. Hazug increased his speed slightly and pulled alongside the truck.

“Wot ya doin’?” Drazzok asked, “Ya git’s in dis one.”

Dem marines can’t shoot at us ‘ere,” Hazug explained, “and I needs time to figure out ‘ow we is goin’ to stop dat wagon.”

Hazug was correct about the marines being unable to target his truck when it was level with their own vehicle and instead they were now focusing on the battlewagon that still trailed them. One of the marines continued to shoot at the battlewagon with his bolter. The explosive tipped rounds were unable to anything more than scratch the paintwork of the heavily armoured Ork vehicle, but they did force the exposed gunners and Two Heads to retreat back inside. While the first marine provided this covering gunfire, his companion slung his bolter and reached down to his belt where he kept his grenades and pulled one free. With a flick of his thumb, he released the safety pin and then he hurled it towards the battlewagon. As the explosive flew through the air tiny fins popped out of its sides and instead of tumbling, it flipped around and followed a neat curve, the same face pointing in the direction of its travel continuously. The grenade landed directly on the frontal armour plate of the battlewagon and the shaped explosive charge it held, perfectly aligned by the grenade’s stabilising fins detonated.

The sound of the explosion echoed through the inside of the battlewagon and most of its occupants flinched at the sound. Two Heads however, was not easily unnerved.

“Ha! Ya’ll need to do better dan dat,” he shouted through one of the battlewagons vision slits and he waved a fist at the marines.

Almost as if he had heard and understood Two Heads, the marine drew another anti-armour grenade from his belt and removed the pin. He paused for a moment while he judged the correct angle and distance required before throwing the grenade at the battlewagon. Once again, the grenade righted itself mid flight and struck the battlewagon. But this time, instead of hitting the heavy armour plating at the front of the battlewagon, it struck to the side, hitting one of the massive forward wheels.

The explosion shredded the tyre and as the side of the battlewagon dropped the exposed metal wheel rim dug into the ground and bent the axle, sending the heavy vehicle into a spin.

Hazug’s passengers watched in disbelief as the battlewagon was forced to a halt.

“We ‘as to stop dis wagon now,” Hazug said, “before we gets too far away from Two Heads and ‘is lads.”

“So ‘ow d’ya suggest we does dat den?” Drazzok asked.

Hazug looked over at the human vehicle that he was driving along side. Still unable to shoot at him, the only fire that Hazug’s truck was taking came from the vehicle immediately ahead of it in the column. It seemed that this vehicle contained no marines and the handful of humans firing from the opening at the back of the vehicle were unable to properly aim their weapons while it was on the move so they presented little threat. Hazug noticed that the cab of the human vehicle was open at its sides and he had an idea.

“Ratish, get up ‘ere,” he said without looking away from the human vehicle, “and bring ya slugga.”

Ratish scrambled towards his master, clutching his pistol in one hand.

“Ratish is ‘ere master,” the Gretchin said from right behind Hazug.

“Right, I wants ya to ‘ang on to da side of me truk and I’ll smash it into da human wagon. When I does, I wants ya to jump on ‘em and stop dare wagon. Goddit?”

“Ratish understands master,” Ratish replied and he climbed past Hazug to stand on the running board to his side, his pistol still held in one hand and his other holding onto the roll cage of the truck, “Ready master,” he added.

Hazug steered towards the human truck, but its driver swerved away. However, the manoeuvre took both vehicles off the remains of the road and across open country. The human vehicle was not as well built for this type of terrain as Hazug’s was and it began to lose speed. Hazug steered again and his truck lurched as it slammed into the human vehicle. Ratish saw his chance and leapt onto side of the human vehicle, grabbing holding of a mirror that stuck out of the truck’s side when he landed. Immediately, Hazug steered away once more, keeping the human vehicle beside him.

Meanwhile Ratish levelled his pistol at the truck’s driver, but as he was about to pull the trigger the driver swung his arm out and knocked the gun from Ratish’s grasp and it fell to the ground. Unconcerned about the loss of his weapon, Ratish pulled himself towards the driver, screaming. He grabbed hold of the driver and pulled himself closer so that he stared him straight in the face, as the driver stared at him with fear,

Ratish opened his mouth wide and bit down on the flesh of the human's face. The human cried out in pain and instinctively took his hands off the steering wheel and attempted to pull the Gretchin off him. His passenger, seeing that the truck was now out of control reached for the steering wheel rather than help the driver, but while he was able to prevent the truck from taking a dangerous path he could not keep up its speed and when the struggling driver took his feet away from the pedals the truck began to lose speed even more rapidly. Then the driver accidentally struck his passenger as he continued to try and get Ratish away from him, causing him to turn the steering wheel far too sharply and on the uneven ground the truck rolled over.

In the back of the tumbling vehicle there were screams from all but the two marines who fell from the rear opening onto the ground behind the truck. With her arms bound behind her back, Sophie could not even try to control her falling and she screamed when her left shoulder was rammed into the floor of the truck and she felt a tremendous pain as her arm shifted backwards. When the truck finally came to a halt on its side, the pain was still there and Sophie was unable to move it.

As soon as the truck began to tumble Hazug slammed his foot down on the brake pedal and brought his own truck to a halt as quickly as he could then he grabbed his warscythe and leapt down to the ground, followed close behind by Drazzok. Hazug lifted his rifle to his shoulder and began to advance on the wrecked human vehicle. Between him and the truck the two marines who had fallen were getting back to their feet and there was a burst of gunfire from behind Hazug as Thuggrim opened fire with the truck's gun, aiming a sustained burst towards the large armoured figures. But though Thuggrim's aim was good and the weapon powerful, none of the rounds were able to penetrate the marines' thick armour and instead they just jerked under the impact of the barrage of gunfire.

But the distraction that this provided was enough for Hazug to be able to close the gap between him and the marines and before they could bring their bolters to bear on him, Hazug flicked the activation switch of his warscythe and swung it towards the nearest marine. Initially Hazug thought that his strike had missed his opponent, but he was pleased to see that instead the blade of the alien weapon cut through the marine's thick armour just as easily as it moved through the air and it struck him beneath one of his arms and sliced diagonally upwards until it emerged from the opposite shoulder and split him in two.

The remaining marines slammed into Hazug, having cast aside his bolter, the marine was now instead reaching for the pistol and blade at his belt. Hazug attempted to throw off the marine, but the combination of his own weight combined with that of his power armour made him too heavy, but Hazug was able to knock the marine's blade out of his grip. Realising that the warscythe was too long and cumbersome for use while wrestling with the marine, Hazug deactivated and let go of the alien weapon and instead he began to grapple for his opponent's pistol. As strong as Hazug was, the genetically enhanced space marine was stronger and slowly but surely the muzzle of the pistol that he held moved closer to Hazug's face. Salvation came from behind Hazug, though he was oblivious to its approach. Drazzok ran up to where Hazug and the marine fought and raised his staff up above his head.

"Waaagh!" Drazzok yelled the traditional Ork war cry as he brought the tip of his staff down on the back of the marine's neck. Channelling his amassed psychic power through the staff, it punched through the joint between the marine's helmet and back plate into his throat and there was the smell of burning meat as Drazzok's energies cooked the marine's flesh inside his armour and he went limp before falling to the ground.

Hazug picked himself up and retrieved his warscythe.

"Nice one," he said to Drazzok as the weirdboy pulled his staff free of the dead marine at his feet.

"Sometime I wonders 'ow ya youngsters ever get by without me," Drazzok replied.

"Behold the great warrior Drazzok," Thuggrim called out as he led the madboys to where he and Hazug stood, "conqueror of beakies."

Before anyone else could speak there was a high-pitched shriek from the wrecked truck and Hazug set off running towards it.

"Sophie!" he shouted as he ran, "Sophie, is ya dare?"

From inside the truck Hazug could hear groaning, but above that he suddenly heard Sophie's voice call out.

"I'm in here," she shouted, "help me."

Hazug ran faster towards the truck and he saw Ratish crawling out of the cab, his face smeared with blood. Hazug ignored his Gretchin servant and instead headed straight for the opening at the back of the truck. As he got there a man was attempting crawl out of the back of the vehicle and Hazug brought the shaft of his warscythe down on his neck, snapping it. Hazug clambered into the back of the truck and saw a man at his feet struggling to draw a pistol from a holster under his arm. Hazug stamped his foot down on the man's chest and there was a cracking sound as his ribs gave way and he lay still, blood pouring from his mouth. "Hazug I'm here," he heard Sophie cry out and Hazug looked deeper into the truck where he saw Sophie lying on what had been the side, but was now the floor of the rear compartment. Ignoring the other human troops who lay in the back of the truck, Hazug walked towards Sophie, treading on some humans as he

went. When he reached Sophie, Hazug saw that she was bound with her arms manacled behind her back. He reached down and wrapped an arm around Sophie and helped her up and led her from the truck, standing on human troops once more as he went before activating his warscythe again.

“Old still,” Hazug told Sophie and he carefully used the tip of the warscythe’s blade to cut through her manacles. Immediately Sophie took hold of her injured arm and tried to support it.

There was the sound of footfalls and Hazug saw Drazzok and the madboys approaching. Additionally, further behind them, Two Heads and his orks had disembarked from their damaged battlewagon and were heading his way.

“Wot now master?” came a voice from behind him and Hazug turned to see Ratish wiping the blood from his face, taking some of the grime beneath it off as well. Apparently the blood was not the Gretchin’s.

“We move away from ‘ere,” Hazug answered and with his servants he headed back towards Drazzok and the madboys.

“Ya know,” Drazzok said to Sophie, “ya is lucky ya ain’t bald,” and he reached out and rubbed the top of her head, smiling.

## 17

“It seems that the orks have broken off their attack,” Krixus said as he received another report, “their battlewagon has been disabled and the occupants of the other vehicle have stopped to pick over the wreckage of unit nine.”

“Nine?” Highbalt said, “Doesn’t that one contain one of our sacrifices?”

“It did yes,” Krixus answered, “but we still have the other one in unit six.”

“So we can just get out of here then,” Highbalt said hopefully.

“We cannot take the risk of the Orks disrupting our ceremony,” Nillotep replied, “We should destroy them first.”

“Agreed,” Krixus added, then he activated his vox once more, “Units seven and eight halt and dismount for battle. Unit six I want you stop long enough for your marines to dismount to join seven and eight, then return to the convoy.”

The sound of groaning could still be heard coming from the human truck and Hazug turned to the madboys around him.

“Anyone got some decent beer?” he asked and the madboys began checking their flasks.

“Is dis good enough?” one of them asked, handing a clay flask to Hazug. The Blood Axe nob took the flask, removed the cork and sniffed the contents. It smelled strong which was just what he wanted.

“Should do just fine lad,” he said and he took a tooth from his money pouch, “Ere’s a tooth for it and da flask, “Now I needs a rag,” he added.

“Ratish find one ‘ere master,” Ratish said and he grabbed hold of Sophie’s towel.

“Hey get off!” Sophie yelled at the Gretchin and slapped him before he could pull the towel from around her.

“Ow, da git ‘it Ratish,” Ratish protested, but Hazug ignored him as another of the madboys handed him a tattered rag that he had been keeping for some unknown reason.

Hazug stuffed the rag into the open flask and tipped it upside down, allowing the beer to soak the rag. Then he held it out towards Drazzok.

“Give us a spark would ya,” he said and the weirdboy held a fingertip near to the rag. There was a sharp ‘crack’ as a tiny green spark jumped from his fingertip to the rag and it burst into flames. Acting quickly, Hazug hurled the flask into the back of the overturned human truck and the groans became screams as the vehicle caught fire with the humans still inside.

“D’ya think me beer’ll be alright in dare?” the madboy who had given Hazug the flask asked, staring at the burning vehicle, but the others paid him no attention.

The sharp ‘crack’ of a rifle shot suddenly caught the attention of the entire group and they turned to see a force of humans advancing towards them on foot. Towering over them at the head of the force were the unmistakable forms of four space marines.

“Wot now den?” Drazzok asked as another shot rang out.

“Leg it,” Hazug said and he began to run back towards his truck. It took just a moment for the rest of the group to follow him.

The shooting had intensified by the time that Hazug reached his truck, but it seemed that the humans were still too far away for their shots to be too accurate on the move. However, there was a much deeper booming sound as one of the marines paused to fire his bolter and one of the madboys following Hazug fell dead.

“Leave ‘im,” Thuggrim said to another madboy who had stopped to pick over the dead madboy’s body, “keep movin’.”

Meanwhile, Hazug had pulled his rifle from the back of his truck and he lifted it to his shoulder. He pushed the selector lever mounted on the side of the gun from its current semi automatic position, through fully automatic and into the ‘turbo dakka’ position. Then he snatched back on the trigger. There was a brief but loud roaring as the rifle rapidly emptied its magazine and Hazug was pleased to see several of the pursuing human troops fall, though all of the marines continued on unharmed.

“Keep goin’,” Hazug said as the other reached his truck, “we needs to get to da battlewagon, Two Heads can ‘elp us sort dis lot out.”

Jarr opened his eyes slowly and he checked the device that he had been using to monitor his condition. For now it appeared that the medication was keeping the bleeding under control, but he doubted that his condition would remain stable for much longer. Then his attention turned towards the noise that had awoken him. It was the unmistakable sound of gunfire.

Using his rifle for support, Jarr got to his feet and made his way to the window and looked outside just in time to see a mixed force of traitor Astartes and humans running past the burning remains of an upturned

truck. Ahead of them, apparently fleeing was a group of greenskins. Mostly they were orks, but Jarr saw that there was also a pair of Gretchin among them. Then he corrected himself, one of the smaller figures was most definitely human and he activated the optics in his mask for a better view. Yes, there was definitely a young woman accompanying the Ork and she did not appear to be a prisoner. Jarr also saw that three of the orks were larger than the others, two were obviously members of the leadership caste known as nobs, while the third had the appearance of one of their shamans.

Who these orks and their mysterious human companion were was unimportant to Jarr, but what did matter to him was that this situation gave him the opportunity to take out some more of the traitor marines on the planet. He retreated away from the window and dragged a simple wooden chair into the centre of the room. Then he rested his rifle on the back of the chair for extra support, knelt down and took aim out of the window.

“Wot about da big shoota?” Thuggrim asked as he ran past the truck.

“Forget it,” Hazug replied, “we needs to keep movin’ and get to Two Heads’ lads.”

Hazug reloaded his rifle on the move and paused briefly to turn around and fire another rapid burst at his pursuers. This time he concentrated the burst on one of the marines, but to no effect, the armoured giant continued to run towards him. The four marines were now clearly out in front of the other human troops and they were beginning to take the chance of hitting the orks with short bursts from their bolters. So far though the orks were avoiding getting hit. Hazug was about to turn around and keep running when a plume of blood erupted from the side of one of the marines’ heads as an armour-piercing projectile shot straight through him and he collapsed to the ground in a heap.

Immediately the other three marines halted and all turned to face the direction from which they had just been attacked, but before they could try and return fire another of them dropped to the ground with a hole punched through the chest plate of his armour.

“Hazug, what’s happening?” Sophie asked, having noticed that Hazug had stopped running with the rest of the group and turned around herself.

“Dunno,” he responded, turning around and starting to run once more, “Everyone just keep on movin’.”

The battlewagon was not far ahead now and several of the Evil Suns were visible inspecting the damage inflicted by the marines.

“Two Heads!” Hazug shouted, “Dare is loads of humans comin’ after us. Let ‘em ‘ave it!”

The Evil Suns took notice immediately and Two Heads himself appeared from out of the battlewagon. Most of his troops formed up in front of the armoured vehicle with their rifles at the ready, while others clambered about inside to take up positions on its undamaged weaponry.

“Get inside da battlewagon,” Hazug said to Sophie as they reached Two Heads and his troops while, followed by Ratish, Drazzok and the madboys he turned around to face the pursuing humans.

There was just one marine leading them now, the other lying in a heap just behind the rest of the charging humans and as the orks watched the final armoured giant also dropped to the ground as another of the mysterious shots blew most of his head off.

“Let rip!” both of Two Heads bellowed and all of the orks opened fire simultaneously. The small arms of the orks alone would have been deadly enough to the humans caught in the open like this, but backed up by the heavy automatic weapons and cannon of the battlewagon they did not stand a chance and many of them fell dead before they could even attempt to seek cover or flee.

The barrage of Ork gunfire slackened off as the orks found their rifles empty and had to pause to reload them, but the battlewagon continued to fire.

“Ang on a mo!” Hazug shouted and he held up his hand for the Ork gunners to cease firing.

“E told ya to stop shootin’,” one of Two Heads added when one of the gunners continued to fire his automatic weapon at the fleeing humans.

There was no just a single human left, running as fast as he could away from the orks and it appeared that he had dropped whatever weapon he had earlier been carrying. Then, just like the marines before him, he fell to the ground as a mysterious hole was punched through his body.

“So wot now den?” one of Two Heads asked while both of him looked at Hazug.

“Well I don’t know about any of da rest of ya,” Hazug began, “but I reckon dat dem marines was killed by someone shootin’ from dat farm over dare,” and he pointed towards the ruined buildings nearby, “and I wants to find out who it was.”

Jarr slumped back down to the floor after he shot the final soldier. The regular human troops were of little consequence, but at least he had killed another four of the traitor Astartes present. Of course he had no idea how many of them were actually on the planet, but he doubted it was a large force or they would have been waging open warfare against the orks and that certainly wasn’t happening.

While he had lined up his first shot, Jar had caught sight of a convoy of human vehicles that appeared to be headed by a rhino headed in the direction of the Eldar webway gate. The presence of such a large force and one that included traitor marines, suggested the presence of the governor himself and Jarr resolved to follow the convoy to the gate. Not immediately of course, he needed more rest yet and beside the convoy would likely be on full alert following their skirmish with the orks. No, he decided, he would wait for sunset and then make his way back to the gateway under cover of darkness.

Leaving a pair of Two Heads' Evil Suns to watch over the two vehicles, Hazug, Two Heads and Thuggrim lead the remaining orks towards the farm.

"Keep down lads," Hazug cautioned them as he guided the warband along a river bank that he hoped would conceal them from being observed too easily from the farmhouse, "Ya don't want to get ya 'ead shot off an all."

There was a squelching sound as several of the madboys took this mean that they should throw themselves into the mud by the river. This was then followed by more squelching and muffled grunts as Drazzok decided that the prone madboys made an excellent bridge across the mud.

"I'll say dis for ya lads Thuggrim," the weird boy said as he forced the face of a madboy down into the mud, "dey is committed."

"They need to be," Sophie commented as she stepped carefully around the orks in the mud. The orks just looked at her, "Sorry," she said, "human joke."

"Git jokes is stupid," Ratish said, leaping from Ork to Ork, "just like gits. Whoa!" and he cried out as one of the madboys he was attempting to use as a bridge got up out the mud just as he was trying to jump onto him, causing him to fall face first in the mud himself.

"Right, 'ere looks good," Hazug said coming to a halt and he rummaged through his belongings for the tau viewing device. Lifting it to his eye, he used it to observe the farmhouse, "Yeah dis is good, dare ain't no one lookin' at us from 'ere," and he put the tau device away again, "Now everyone do wot I does."

"Wot sneak about with gits?" a madboy asked, then he added "Ow!" as Drazzok hit him around his head.

"Shut up and watch squig brain," the weirdboy snapped.

Moving quickly, Hazug scaled the sloping edge of the riverbank and dashed towards the farmhouse, stopping only when he reached the building and pressed himself against its wall. For a moment no one did anything while Hazug just waited by the farmhouse.

"Well I'm not staying here all day," Sophie said suddenly and she too clambered up the riverbank and ran towards Hazug as fast as she could. Not to be outdone by the human, Ratish followed close behind her.

"Right lads, ya seen 'ow its done, even gits and grots can do it" one of Two Heads said to his troops and then he too ran towards Hazug as the other head just shouted, "Move."

The Evil Suns followed close behind their leader, leaving just Drazzok and the madboys by the riverbank.

"Well?" Drazzok said to the madboys, "Ain't one of ya goin' to 'elp ya elder and better up dare den?"

The madboys promptly surged towards Drazzok and lifted him up on their shoulders.

"Soddit," he called out as they then hurled him up to the top of the slope and he landed in a heap. Then, grumbling, he picked himself up and walked rather than ran towards where Hazug waited.

"Ya can make a bit more noise if ya wants to Drazzok," Hazug said to the weirdboy, "after all I is sure dat everyone inside dis 'ere buildin' as dare fingers in dare ears."

"Sod off, I don't care, us Snake Bites don't do quiet."

"I know dat," Hazug replied, "I seen ya eat."

Drazzok just scowled.

By the riverbank the madboys now prepared to move, but unfortunately they had all pick this moment to insist on being polite and letting someone else go first.

"I'll go after ya 'as gone."

"No, I'll let ya be da next one."

"Oh no, I insists."

"Is dey ever comin'?" one of Two Heads asked as they awaited the madboys.

"Dis'll shift 'em," Hazug said and he pulled a grenade from his pack. Leaving the pin in place, he then hurled the grenade towards the river and it disappeared down the bank.

The madboys suddenly came rushing over the bank and ran towards the rest of the warband.

"We is under attack," Thuggrim said, "dare's someone lobbin' bombs at us."

"Never mind dat," Hazug said, "ya just needs to keep followin' where I goes," then he looked around, "Ang on a mo," he said, "we is one short 'ere, who's missin'?"

"Dat would be Krognort," Thuggrim said, "I shoved 'im on da bomb to save da rest of us. 'E'll be with us after it's gone off."

"It ain't goin' to go off," Hazug said, "I never pulled out da pin," then he turned to Ratish, "go get me bomb back grot and bring da madboy back with ya an all."



“Yes master,” Ratish replied and he ran back to the riverbank where he saw Krognort lying in the mud.

“As da bomb gone off yet?” the madboy asked when he saw Ratish looking down at him, “I ‘ad me fingers in me ears so I never ‘eard anythin’.”

“It ain’t goin’ to go off, da pins still in it and master wants Ratish to bring it back,” Ratish said to the madboy as he slid down the side of the riverbank. The madboy pulled himself up out of the mud and Ratish was able to retrieve the grenade before he headed back to Hazug with it, followed closely by Krognort.

When Hazug saw them running from the riverbank, he began to make his way along the farmhouse wall towards the nearest opening followed by the rest of the warband. Pausing briefly at the doorway he passed his rifle and warscythe to Ratish.

“Ere ya go grot,” he said, “keep ‘old of dese while I goes inside,” and then he drew his pistol and blade from his belt, preferring these shorter and more easily handled weapons over the harder hitting ones.

“Ya seen ‘im lads,” one of Two Heads said to his orks, “get ya choppas at da ready,” and the Evil Suns slung their rifles and also drew their blades. Being armed mainly with pistols anyway, the madboys had no need to swap weapons and Thuggrim kept hold of his rifle anyway.

“What about me?” Sophie asked Hazug, “I don’t have a weapon.”

“Stay behind me with Ratish,” Hazug told her and Sophie and Ratish both looked at one another and frowned. But before either of them could protest Hazug moved quickly through the doorway into the farmhouse and the warband pushed them both in behind him as they followed.

Jarr heard the noise outside the farmhouse, the crude bellowing common to Ork speech. He remained motionless and continued to listen as the voices grew louder, but as far as he could tell the greenskins remained outside of the farm buildings. Then he heard the heavy sound of Ork footfalls as they stormed into the building’s ground floor. It was possible that they were not aware that he was here and they were just seeking shelter, in which case it may be possible for him to remain concealed here until they left, but there was the distinct possibility that they intended to remain here all night in which case he would be unable to leave for the gateway without risking detection. There was only one other option left to him, he would have to kill them all.

Jarr’s rifle was a custom built masterpiece, designed specifically around his own body. But it was far too long and cumbersome to be effective inside the farmhouse. Fortunately his temple had also seen fit to provide him with a sidearm that was as deadly at close quarters as his rifle was at long range and he drew it from his holster and got back to his feet.

## 18

“Shush,” Hazug said. Ratish and Sophie were quiet enough, as were Two Heads and Gorrid and for the moment at least so was Drazzok despite his earlier insistence that he did not do things quietly, but all of the other orks were making far too much noise walking over the bare wooden floors for his liking. The madboys halted instantly and all began to repeat the sound to one another, making yet more noise as they tried to be the one to call for quiet the loudest.

“Thuggrim,” Hazug whispered, “keep ya lads ‘ere, everyone else follow me. Quietly.”

“Wot was dat?” Thuggrim said loudly over the sound of his madboys ‘shushing’ one another, “I didn’t ‘ear ya.”

“E said stay ‘ere,” Drazzok shouted and he hit Thuggrim with his staff before turning to Hazug and with a smile on his face he whispered, “See, ya just needs to know ‘ow to ask ‘em to be quiet.”

“Den I reckon dat ya ought to stay ‘ere an all Drazzok,” Hazug whispered back and Drazzok nodded his head in agreement.

Hazug crept into the next room and was relieved to hear that the portion of the warband still following him was not making much noise. Hopefully, he thought, the racket that the madboys are making will distract anyone in here.

The room Hazug had just entered was little more than a short, narrow corridor that lead to another room at the end. But about half way along it there was a staircase that lead upwards to another floor. He beckoned to Two Heads and the Evil Sun nob moved closer to him.

“Take ya lads straight through dare,” Hazug whispered, “check out everthin’ down ‘ere, I’ll take Sophie and Ratish upstairs.”

“Just ya git and grot?” one of Two Heads asked, before the other one added, “Ya may as well go alone.”

Hazug thought for a moment then whispered to Two Heads again.

“Den give us Gorrid,” he said, “I knows dat ‘e can move about quietly,” and both of Two Heads nodded and waved to Gorrid, indicating that he should follow Hazug up the stairs.

Jarr heard the sound of the staircase creaking as something heavy made its way up them. But what he really noticed as what he could not hear, unlike before there were no heavy footfalls that typically indicated the approach of orks. This suggested that it was either a Gretchin or a human coming upstairs towards him. After all, he had seen one of each in the company of the group he had observed earlier. Whichever it was the first kill should be an easy one. Jarr moved as quietly as he could out of the room onto the landing, ready to meet whoever was coming up the stairs and he raised his pistol.

As Hazug neared the top of the stairs he heard something, for a moment he thought that it was just the sound of one of those who were following behind him, but then he realised that it had come from up ahead. He held up his hand for everyone following him to stop and he waited, listening.

Then he noticed something, one of the floorboards on the landing at the top of the stairs was loose and he could see the end of it quivering as someone made their way along the floor carefully, as though they were trying to approach him without attracting attention.

Not good enough, he thought to himself. Carefully he positioned himself so that he could reach the landing in a single step and paused, watching the floorboard quiver. Then, in one rapid motion, he stepped onto the landing and spun around to face whoever was there.

The sudden appearance of the massive Ork startled Jarr, he had been expecting a much smaller target and had aligned his pistol lower in anticipation. Of course it was his own fault, had he not been wearing his mask then he probably would have smelt the approach of the Ork, but it was too late to do anything about that now. Instead he raised his pistol.

In the moment’s delay that his surprise appearance bought him, Hazug swung out the hand in which he held his pistol, knocking the weapon out of his opponent’s hand. Hazug guessed that he was fighting a human, the size and proportions appeared to be correct for one, but he had never encountered one who was such an expert fighter before. Most would have tried to either retrieve their lost weapon or reach for another, this man certainly had a narrow fighting blade strapped to his leg. But instead he gracefully moved aside and delivered a blow to the back of Hazug’s hand that made him too drop his pistol to the floor where, thanks to the unreliability of most Ork firearms, it discharged and sent a bullet into a far wall.

The man then leapt backwards and only then did he draw his blade in a motion that was as smooth and effortless appearing as all of his others.

Having come here out of curiosity instead of a specific intention to do battle, Hazug saw his chance.

“Wait!” he called out in Gothic and he lowered his blade to his side. Behind him, Gorrid, Ratish and Sophie suddenly appeared on the landing also and he shouted to them, “Old it,” he said. Then he turned back to the human who faced him from across the landing, “I didn’t come ‘ere to fight ya,” he said in Gothic once more.

Jarr stared at the group before him, a more motley assortment of opponents he had never encountered, a pair of orks, a Gretchin and a young woman who appeared to be wearing only a towel. Then he felt a twinge from his side, it seemed that the medication he had taken was starting to wear off. For the moment at least he decided that perhaps it would be better to talk to the Ork. Still holding his fighting knife at the ready, Jarr lifted up his mask and immediately the putrid smell of the orks filled his nostrils.

“You speak Gothic?” he said.

“Aye,” Hazug replied, “I learned it from some of ya trader’s wot used to come ‘ere years ago.”

Jarr made the connection immediately. Octus Saval, the Rogue Trader who had been contracted to deliver hi to this world had visited it before and he must have dealt with the Ork before him. Perhaps, Jarr thought, I can persuade him to deal with me also. The alternative was to fight and he could already hear the sound of more orks starting to rush up the stairs, attracted no doubt by the gunshot. Then he suddenly passed out.

When Jarr opened his eyes he found himself in the bedroom where he had set up his camp and surprisingly all of his weapons were present. He had no idea how long he had been unconscious, but the sun was beginning to set in the sky outside the window. He would need to be leaving for the webway gate soon if he was to complete his mission. There was a sound from the doorway and Jarr looked over to see the young woman enter the room. Instead of the towel she been wrapped in the last time he saw her, she now wore a shirt and trousers that looked too large for her.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Sophie said to Jarr, indicating her clothes, “but Hazug found these in your pack and thought I’d be better off wearing them than the towel.”

“They’re not mine anyway,” Jarr said, sitting up on the bed, “I found them here, they must have belonged to the people who owned this place,” then he remembered what had happened before he passed out and how the young woman in front of him apparently worked for the orks on this planet, “So who are you anyway? And who’s Hazug?”

“My name’s Sophie and Hazug is the Ork I work for, the large one you saw on the landing. What about you? You obviously aren’t from around here.”

“So you do work for the aliens,” Jarr said, avoiding answering Sophie’s question, “Why?”

An elderly man named Castus she and Hazug had encountered in the desert on another continent had asked Sophie that question the previous year and it demonstrated further that this man was not from this planet.

“Because the orks treat us better than the man who ran this world for the Imperium ever did,” she answered as she sat down on a chair by the bed, “the man whose soldiers kidnapped me.”

“Governor Venris Highbalt,” Jarr interrupted, “I came here to kill him.”

Sophie was visibly surprised at this, Castus had suggested that the actions of governor Highbalt while in office had not been consistent with the standards expected of him by the Imperium, but she did not see why the Imperium would take an interest in him now when they did nothing while he was killing his own people.

“Why would you want him dead?” she asked.

“What I want is irrelevant,” Jarr replied, “I’ve been ordered to kill him because the Inquisition has intelligence that he’s about to gain an inordinate amount of power that will make him a threat.”

Sophie suddenly remembered what Rhia had been saying while they were both held captive, about how the former governor and the giant soldiers now working for him were planning something terrible for this world, something that was going to cause the deaths of a lot of people.

“We have to tell Hazug,” she said.

Venris Highbalt had not seen the Eldar webway portal in person before. Until recently he had never even suspected that the ancient mechanism even existed on his world. Of course, had he know about while he ruled this world he would have destroyed it to prevent the decadent witches of that ancient species coming here and he reflected on how it was in fact a good thing that he had not known about the gateway given that was shortly to become the means by which he would reclaim not only his rightful place as ruler here, but also give him the power to reach out and claim more worlds for himself.

His attention was suddenly drawn towards the sound of screaming from one of the trucks parked around the area. Turning to face the source of the sound he saw a pair of his men lifting one of his former agents, Rhia out of the back of the vehicle as she desperately struggled in a vain attempt to get free. Venris Highbalt grinned; he had always enjoyed watching the terror in his captives’ faces when they were being taken to their deaths. Whether Rhia knew how painful and drawn out hers was going to be, the former governor had no idea, but he was going to enjoy watching it happen non-the less.

“Bring her here,” a deep voice called out from by the webway portal and Venris turned once again to see the massive bulk of Nillotep the Thousand Sun sorcerer now standing beside the base of the Eldar structure with a long and narrow knife in his hand. Obediently, the two soldiers carried Rhia towards her fate.

The soldiers set Rhia down on the ground at Nillotep’s feet and as they stepped back away from the marine he brought the knife down. Rhia screamed again, expected the blade to be plunged into her body, but instead Nillotep moved his knife along the length of her body and sliced open the straight cape without once piercing her skin. With her bonds now released, Rhia made an attempt to run. But before she could even get to her feet she was seized by Nillotep and pushed against the webway gate.

“Bind her,” Nillotep said to one of the Word Bearer marines who stood nearby and the second armoured warrior stepped forwards with a set of manacles that he used to secure Rhia’s arms around the webway gate so that she stood facing the structure. As the Word Bearer stepped away, Nillotep swung his knife again and cut down the length of Rhia’s shirt to expose her back. Only after this did he use the knife on Rhia herself.

She screamed as the point of the blade was pulled slowly down her back by Nillotep as he chanted in a language that she couldn’t understand, one that sounded like no human should be able to form the words of. The knife did not go deep however; instead it just scrapped at Rhia’s flesh deep enough for the blade to come away covered in her blood. Nillotep then pressed the tip of the knife against the webway gate to which Rhia was bound and scrapped it across it, still chanting in the inhuman tongue and forming narrow grooves in the bone like material that became filled with the blood that now ran off the blade. When the blood ceased to flow from the blade, Nillotep dragged it over Rhia’s flesh once more before returning to the webway gate and etching more bizarre shapes on it in blood.

“So this will sever the gate from the passages beyond it then?” Highbalt asked Krixus as the Word Bearer stood beside the man.

“No,” Krixus answered, “the pain that Nillotep inflicts on the sacrifice serves to attract our patron to this place. When he arrives he will devour the woman’s soul and use that energy to break the link between the gateway and what lies beyond it.”

Highbalt grinned. Soon, he thought, he would be given more power than the administration of the false Emperor had ever given to him.

“In the meantime governor,” Krixus continued, “you must deploy your men around us.”

“Why?” Highbalt asked the traitor marine, “why not use your own men?”

“Because I have only eleven warriors left governor and Nillotep requires our presence here for his ritual to allow our patron access to this dimension. The orks we encountered earlier are likely to still be in the area, so we must take precautions against them stumbling onto our location and disrupting the ritual. Not to mention the Imperial agent my men engaged, we never found a body so must assume that he is still a threat to us, more so than an Ork warband even.”

Highbalt nodded in agreement.

“Of course you’re right,” he said and he beckoned to one of his men, “Captain come here,” he called out to the man, “I have orders for you.”

Sophie helped Jarr down the stairs to where the Ork warband was. The Imperial assassin had never been this close to orks before now and he was unsure of how they would react. The one that seemed to be their leader, the one that Sophie had referred to as Hazug, was obviously of the Blood Axe clan, that element of Ork society the would co-operate with humanity if it served a common purpose or, more often, if they were being paid to do so, so he was fairly sure that he would listen. But the other orks remained an unknown factor to him. Most of them, including a large mutant creature with two heads, wore clothing adorned with the colour red, suggesting that they were part of the cult of speed while the remainder wore a motley collection of mismatched colours giving Jarr no clue to how they thought.

“Is ‘e urt bad?” Hazug asked Sophie in Orkish as she assisted Jarr to sit down.

“I don’t know,” she answered, so Hazug looked at Jarr instead.

“Is ya ‘urt bad?” he asked in Gothic.

“I’m bleeding internally,” the assassin answered, “I can control it for a time, but I’ll not last much more than a day or two at the most without proper medical attention.”

“Sophie says ya needs to tell us somethin’,” Hazug said to Jarr, “Somethin’ about da human wot took ‘er causin’ trouble for us.”

“The former governor is central to events unfolding here,” Jarr replied, “I don’t know what they are, but they will bring him a great deal of power if he isn’t killed.”

“Rhia said something similar,” Sophie added, also speaking in Gothic so that Jarr could understand what she was saying, “she said that the governor was a cultist and he was going to use an attack on the airbase to distract you while he sacrificed us.”

“That fits with the traitor marines I saw,” Jarr commented, “they must be here to help with whatever ritual is being planned.”

“Rhia didn’t mention where dis ritual was goin’ to be did she?” Hazug asked Sophie.

“No she didn’t,” answered Sophie, shaking her head, “I don’t know if she knew or not.”

“Den we should ‘ead back to da city den,” Hazug said, “we needs to warn warboss Kromag about da attack on da airbase. If dey needs to do dat as a distraction den dis ritual must be obvious enough for us to se it when its ‘appenin’.”

“I think I may know,” Jarr said, interrupting, “my information points towards an Eldar webway gate being important. I was there earlier.”

“Den ya can take us dare again,” Hazug said.

“Yes I can,” Jarr agreed, “and I think we should go there as soon as possible.”

Hazug turned to the other orks who had been sat listening, even though none of them had understood anything said, though several of the madboys had leant closer just in case that helped.

“Da human wot took Sophie is plannin’ somethin’ big,” Hazug explained, “and dis human is goin’ to take us to where it’s ‘appenin’ so we can stop ‘im.”

“I don’t know about dis Hazug,” one of Two Heads said, “Sophie’s one thing cause she belongs to ya, but we don’t know dis other git. Who is ‘e?”

Hazug turned to Jarr.

“Who are ya anyway?” he said.

“Jarr, of the Vindicare temple of the Officio Assassinorum.”

“Is name is Jarr,” Hazug repeated in Orkish, “and ‘e’s ‘ere to kill da git wot we is goin’ after. Da humans sent ‘im all da way ‘ere to get dis other one.”

“Why would anyone be sent anywhere just to kill one git?” one of the Evil Suns asked.

“Because dat git is important,” Drazzok said suddenly and everyone present looked towards him, “Hazug ain’t da only one to know about gits ya know,” the weirdboy continued, “and I ‘ave seen ‘em send someone to kill someone dats real special, more dan one Waaagh ‘as come to a sudden ‘alt because of dat.”

“Exactly,” Hazug said, somewhat surprised at Drazzok’s intervention, “so does anyone ‘ere reckon dat we should let some human wot reckons ‘e is so important keep wanderin’ about? Or should we kill ‘im?”

“Kill ‘im!” the orks shouted back almost as one and they waved their weapons in the air as they did so. Then they cried out a single word.

“Waaagh!”

Hazug turned to Jarr and in gothic he spoke to the man.

“I reckon dey’ll ‘elp,” he said.

## 19

Droyle looked up at the darkening sky. His orders, like those of the other unit commanders was to gain access to the orks' airbase after dark and cause as much damage as they could before falling back to the south, hopefully enticing the orks to pursue them while governor Highbalt and his personal guard, along with the marine contingent that had joined them carried out whatever the secret operation to the north was. Droyle grinned, he had spent his entire life hearing of how good life was for loyal citizens under Highbalt's rule before the orks came and destroyed everything, now he was about to take part in the operation that would set everything back how it was supposed to be.

"Now?" a voice asked from behind him.

"No, not yet," he replied, adjusting the position of the rifle slung over his shoulder, "we need to wait for night to fall properly to cover our advance."

"Ere," Hazug said to Sophie, handing her the tau viewing device, "I wants ya to take dis."

"Won't I need a gun too?" Sophie asked, taking the device.

"Nah," Hazug told her, "ya won't be doin' any fightin' tonight if I can 'elps it."

"You can't leave me here Hazug," Sophie protested, "I want to help you."

"Ya will, by usin' dat viewin' thingy to watch wot's goin' on. Dat Imperial killer bloke is goin' to need someone else to 'elp 'im keep an eye out for dat Highbalt and ya is da only one 'ere wot knows wot 'e looks like. So when 'e leads us to da pansies' gateway ya is goin' to stay back with 'im and Thuggrim while dey uses dare snazzy shootas to keep everyone else's 'eads down while da rest of us get stuck in. Goddit?" Sophie nodded and slipped the tau device into her pocket. This was not the first time that Hazug had ordered her to stay away from the fighting and every time it happened she feared that Hazug would not return.

"Da lads is ready Hazug," Two Heads said from behind Hazug, "We've got all da ammo and bombs wot we can carry. I don't like leavin' da battlegwagon unguarded, but none of da lads want to be left out of dis fight seein' as 'ow we'll be goin' up against beakies."

"Good," Hazug said to the Evil Sun, "But dare's somethin' we got to do first, we'll needs Drazzok for it."

"Drazzok?" one of Two Heads said, "Wot do we need da weirdo for?"

"We needs to warn warboss Kromag about da attack on da airbase wot Sophie said is goin' to 'appen and we can't spare any of da lads to send someone to tell so we needs to send da message another way."

There was a strange smell coming from the braziers that the Word Bearers had set up according to instructions from Nillotep Highbalt decided, an unpleasant odour to be sure, but not so unpleasant as to make him want to back out of the ceremony that was to grant him power. His own men were gone now, positioned in groups all around to prevent the orks from stumbling onto this place and ruining everything at the last minute. His immediate security now came from the Word Bearers who had now formed a circle around the Eldar webway while Nillotep continued to chant and scrape his knife across Rhia's back. The woman who had until recently been his loyal servant was now covered in lacerations. On its own, each of these was just a shallow graze that was calculated to be just deep enough to draw a small amount of blood, but together they had turned her back into a mass of bloody wounds. Nillotep had cleverly ensured that Rhia had remained conscious throughout the ritual, her screams of pain acting to draw in the being that Highbalt and the assembled marines were serving.

Suddenly, Highbalt heard his name being called out.

"Governor Highbalt, you are needed now," Krixus called from beside Nillotep and Highbalt entered the circle of marines.

"Yes?" he asked, "What is it?"

"You are the vessel," Nillotep said, looking down at Highbalt. The sorcerer's face was hidden behind the faceplate of his crested helmet, but from what Highbalt knew of the marine, his face would be displaying no more emotion than the helmet, "Do you consent to be the instrument of our patron's manifestation and power?" Nillotep continued.

"I will," Highbalt answered. Soon, he thought, the power promised to him would at last be his.

"Then step forwards and be marked as such," Nillotep told him and Highbalt stepped closer. Nillotep reached out and tore Highbalt's shirt from him, exposing his flabby torso. The sorcerer dragged his knife blade down one of Rhia's arms, drawing more blood. Nillotep then jerked the knife towards Highbalt, flicking blood from the blade onto his skin, he repeated the motion several times until no more blood flew, all the while chanting in the strange language he apparently need for the ritual.

“The vessel is marked,” Nillotep announced, “let our praise now bring forth our patron,” and with that all of the marines began to chant. The sound they produced was less like words, even in some alien tongue, than it was a continuous droning that came from them all while Nillotep continued to bleed Rhia dry.

Luggnort used his staff to move a Gretchin out of his way as he made his way back towards his hut. The creatures had been late with the weirdboys’ evening meals and all of the weirdboys were taking their frustrations out on the smaller creature, at least one of who had been eaten in addition to the food he had brought with him. Luggnort was the last of the weirdboys to finish eating, deliberately taking his time so that the Gretchin would have to wait for him.

Luggnort suddenly stopped still as he got a strange feeling in his head, as if someone was pushing on his brain from inside his nose and from somewhere he was sure that he could hear the sound of a group of orks chanting and stomping their feet as though they were deliberately trying to increase the strength of the psychic field that weirdboys like him drew on when using their powers.

“Ah crap, not now,” he said, his eyes beginning to glow, “Damn ya ‘ide Drazzok, ya is doin’ dis on purpose,” and he vomited over the nearest Gretchin.

“Wot’s up with ya master?” another Gretchin asked as the one Luggnort had just vomited over ran off looking for something to clean it off before it ate away his skin, “Is ya sick?”

“No I ain’t sick,” Luggnort snapping, lashing out at the Gretchin with his fist, “Its dat bleedin’ Drazzok sendin’ me a message when ‘e knows it makes me sick.”

“We’ll ‘elp ya back to ya ‘ut master,” the Gretchin said and he offered a hand to the weirdboy.

“Never mind me ‘ut,” Luggnort replied, “I got to go see da boss, ‘e’ll kill me if ‘e finds out dat I got dis message and didn’t give it to ‘im.”

The warband moved on foot through the woods, following Jarr towards the Eldar webway gate. Well aware that there could be sentries posted, Hazug had the madboys stay at the rear just in case they were unable to refrain from making a lot of noise. He was glad of this when Jarr sudden held up his hand in a way that Hazug understood to be a human signal to halt.

“Wot is it?” Hazug asked the assassin.

“Four men ahead,” Jarr replied, keeping his voice low, “two in the centre and one more off to each side.”

“I don’t see ‘em,” Hazug replied looking into the darkness ahead and he began to rummage through his pockets for the tau viewing device before remembering that he had given it to Sophie who was now at the back with Thuggrim and his madboys.

“The centre two are there,” Jarr said, pointing directly ahead, “and the others are there and there. I think the centre two are bait and the others there to give covering fire and to warn Highbalt of an attack.”

“Den we take dem two out first,” Hazug said and he turned and handed his rifle to Two Heads, “‘Ere,” he said, “kop ‘old of dis while we goes and sorts out some gits would ya,” and then he unslung the warscythe from his back. While he did this, Jarr also discarded his rifle, wrapping it in a cover that he produced and rolled from a belt pouch and placing it carefully flat on the ground, then he drew his own knife.

“I’ll take the one over there,” Jarr said indicating the location where one of the individual sentries was located.

“Right den, I’ll go da other way,” Hazug said, agreeing, then he turned to Two Heads, “Stay ‘ere,” he said, “and keep everyone quiet,” and both of Two Heads just nodded.

Both Jarr and Hazug now made their way through the undergrowth, carefully avoiding stepping on anything that would alert the sentries to their approach. They moved outwards at first, putting some distance between themselves and the outlying sentries that were their targets and then began to make their way around behind them.

Jarr was the first to reach his target, with the aid of his mask he could see far more clearly in the gloom of the woods that Hazug could and he was soon staring at the back of the sentry. The unsuspecting man was crouched down and leaning against the trunk of a large tree, in his lap he cradled an automatic rifle with an extra magazine of ammunition taped to the one loaded into it.

Silently, he moved towards the man, holding his knife out pointing ahead of him. This wasn’t Jarr’s preferred method of killing, but he was more than capable of doing it this way. With one swift movement, Jarr reached around the man and clamped his free hand over his mouth and pulled the man back towards him. At the same time he thrust the knife in through the man’s ribs and twisted it, opening the wound further to prevent it closing as he withdrew the blade. Then he lowered the man down to the ground and let go of his grip. Jarr could see that the man was trying to call out to warn his comrades, but with the hole in his chest preventing him from drawing in breath properly, all he could manage was a faint gurgling before he died. Jarr stayed low, waiting to see if any of the other sentries had noticed the death of this man, but he could see that they were all still exactly where they had been earlier, oblivious to what had just transpired. More significantly, he could see that Hazug was now creeping up on the other lone sentry.

The second lone sentry also used a tree to support himself, but unlike the one killed by Jarr, the man stood with his back to the trunk. Hazug kept his approach downwind from the sentry, he knew that the human sense of smell was often good enough to pick out the approach of orks even when they did not use their traditional method of approach and charge at them screaming as loudly as they could. This path brought Hazug up behind the man, with the tree trunk between them. Hazug thought about moving around the tree trunk to decapitate the man, but then he decided against getting so close. Inside he activated the energy blade of his warscythe and pointed it directly at the tree between him and the sentry. Without moving his feet, Hazug thrust the warscythe forwards, with its blade pointing directly ahead of him.

The strange alien weapon sliced through the thick hardwood tree trunk without effort and emerged where the sentry's spine rested against it. The weapon passed through the man's chest just as easily as through the tree behind him, cutting through his spine, heart and lungs and he died instantly and silently. Hazug stepped forwards and took hold of the man's corpse before withdrawing the warscythe and deactivating it. Then he lowered the dead man's body to the ground. He was about to move off when he caught sight of one of the weapons he carried, it looked identical to the compact automatic that he had bought for Sophie and had been taken when she was kidnapped. Hazug bent down and ripped the belt that held both the weapon and extra ammunition from around the dead man's waist before tossing it over his shoulder. Then he looked around to try and see where Jarr had gotten. Hazug saw that the human had killed the other lone sentry and was now making his way towards the remaining pair. Treading carefully, Hazug began to make his way towards them also.

Jarr stopped when Hazug approached him and the assassin looked around to make sure that his was his Ork ally and not another previously unseen sentry closing in. Hazug grinned when he saw Jarr looking at him and he pointed towards one of the remaining sentries.

"I'll take dat one," he whispered and Jarr nodded in agreement before turning around once more and making his way towards the other man.

Jarr moved faster than Hazug again and it was not long before he was right behind his target without the man being aware that he was in any danger at all. Jarr held out his knife but refrained from striking the man down until Hazug was in position to simultaneously take out the other sentry.

Hazug's strike came sudden, taking advantage of his greater height; the Ork nob was able to swing his warscythe out in front of him at the level of his chosen sentry's neck. Even without activating the energy field of the alien weapon, its blade cut right through the man's neck and severed his head from his shoulders with a single blow.

Before the second man could react to the death of his comrade Jarr also struck from behind, angling his knife upwards and plunging it into the back of his neck and severing his spinal column before the blade went into his brain, another instant kill.

Now both Ork and human looked around, keeping their weapons at the ready just in case more human guards lurked unseen. Then, satisfied that the way ahead was now clear the pair rejoined the rest of the warband.

Jarr remained at the front of the group when they reached it, while Hazug made his way further back until he encountered Sophie and the madboys, where Drazzok also stood.

"Ere ya go," Hazug said, handing the auto pistol to Sophie, "dis ought to make up for loosin' da other one," and Sophie smiled as she took the weapon from him.

"So da gits is dead den is dey?" Drazzok asked.

"Yeah dey is dead," Hazug answered with a grin, "I is silent and deadly."

"Well like I said," Drazzok replied, "I don't do silent, but deadly I can do," and there was the sound of escaping bodily gases.

Sophie clamped her hands over her nose and mouth.

"Throne, that's disgusting," she said, her voice muffled slightly behind her hands, "I think I can taste it."

From his vantage point Droyle looked at the airbase perimeter ahead of him, something just didn't look right. The resistance had often scouted out the airbase and made many notes regarding the behaviour of the greenskins based there. For some reason there were fewer signs of movement than normal, especially around the cluster of buildings where the aircrew were know to congregate in the evenings.

"Surely its dark enough now," the man beside him said, "if we don't attack soon the orks won't commit their forces before the governor makes his move."

Droyle didn't like this. He knew that something was going on at the airbase, but could risk delaying the operation.

"Very well," he said, "tell everyone to move in."

The first men to the airbase fence could hear the sound of an engine from somewhere, the deep rumbling of a ground vehicle instead of the more high pitch tone of a jet or rotorcraft, but they ignored this as the cut through the fence and then moved through the gap and took up a position against a crude Ork structure



immediately inside the fence. They waited as more units breached the fence at different location before they ran around to approach the main hangars.

And were promptly all killed by gunfire from the battlewagon positioned behind the building.

The supposedly stealthy attack suddenly degenerated into a noisy rout. All over the airbase, mechanised Ork units raced towards the lightly armed humans attacking the airbase and the night was filled with the noise and flashes of heavy weapons fire. Some of the orks didn't even bother to shoot, instead steering their vehicles towards the humans and grinding them into the ground beneath their wheels and tracks. The screams of the dying joined the sound of engines and gunfire.

Fully a third of the attacking humans were killed before they made it back to the gaps they had cut in the fence and made their way back through them. But any hopes the humans may have had that the fence would slow down the pursuing orks was in vain, the heavy Ork vehicles simply ran over their own wire fence and crushed it, allowing the lighter trucks buggies and bikes to pass through behind them unimpeded. The humans continued to flee into the night, followed by and then overtaken by the orks who showed no mercy.

Droyle made it to the nearest tree line and lent up against a thick tree, gasping for breath. Hopefully, he thought, the orks would be unable to pursue him through this terrain.

The he heard the sound of an engine as an Ork vehicle halted nearby and he risked a look around the tree to see what it was. The vehicle was one of the larger armoured Ork fighting vehicles and he felt relieved that it was far too large to move quickly through the dense vegetation around him. He ducked back behind the tree as the orks inside the vehicle caught sight of him and opened fire, then he ran deeper into the woods.

When he stopped for breath he realised that he was being followed, he could hear the sound of something breathing heavily behind him. Perhaps another escaping resistance fighter, he thought to himself and he risked calling out into the darkness.

"Hello? Who is it?"

No one called back in reply, but there was the sound of undergrowth being disturbed by movement and Droyle turned towards the source of the sound just in time to see the round, red shape of the attack squig that leapt at him.

Outside the woods the orks from the battlewagon heard the sound of Droyle's dying screams and the group's leader held up an hourglass through which sand was running.

"See, Mister Gobby got da git before da sand ran out, now pay up," he said and teeth were exchanged as a result of the wager.

## 20

The droning sound from the marines continued and Venris Highbalt was starting to get impatient. Krixus had promised him immortality was to be his reward for serving their patron and Highbalt was in a hurry to receive his just rewards.

“Our patron draws near,” Nillotep called out “let the vessel step forwards and be made ready.”

Smiling, Highbalt took a step closer to the sorcerer.

“Activate the portal,” Nillotep commanded and Krixus placed the strange device that was neither wholly machine nor living tissue against the gateway to the Eldar webway. There was a sudden pulse of light in the darkness of the night as the gateway activated and the glowing sphere that formed there illuminated the area around the gateway.

In a place far away and yet very close by something stirred. Its name had been called out across the boundaries of reality and summoned it to this place. It wrapped itself around one of the pathways that stretched through its home, the narrow conduits that were shielded against its kind. Sometimes it smelt souls within those conduits, but they were always beyond reach and it was enraged at being unable to devour them. The conduit had been opened to what lay beyond but the entity could not reach the portal created to the other realm and make use of it. But it could sense something else occurring also, preparations were being made to provide it with the means to manifest itself directly and so the entity waited.

“Is the vessel ready?” Nillotep asked and Highbalt was unsure if he was supposed to answer.

“The vessel is ready,” Krixus answered.

“Then let its death provide the way for our patron to be brought before us,” Nillotep said.

“What?” Highbalt exclaimed, no one had said anything to him about his dying here, he had been promised immortality and he turned to run.

Krixus reached out an arm and caught hold of Highbalt as he attempted to escape.

“You can’t do this!” Highbalt yelled as Krixus dragged him towards Nillotep, “I was promised life eternal for our patron.”

“Our patron will take your body,” Krixus said, “and will dwell in it for eternity.”

“No!” Highbalt shouted, “Guards, save me! Shoot the marines!” but his guards were out of earshot, he had sent them all away to watch for the orks.

“I call to our patron Kas’Shes’Tck’Aztal to take the vessel we offer,” Nillotep said and he raised his knife above his head.

“No!” Highbalt called out one last time before the blade was brought down and plunged into his chest. As his life left him, Highbalt had time to reflect on what had brought him here, “My dreams of conquest,” he gasped with remorse over what he never achieved and as he fell to the floor he was certain that he heard the sound of Rhia laughing at him.

“The vessel is offered,” Nillotep said, “our patron comes.”

The entity saw a disturbance in the tides of its realm near to the portal that indicated the energy of a soul passing from the other realm into this one. But instead of being cast adrift the soul remained where it was and it torment radiated around. Only part of the soul had left the dying body, while another part remained held within it by dark magics, joining the two realms together for as long as the magic held. Here was the breach that the entity required, beyond that was a host body provided by its worshippers that would allow it to manifest itself and the daemon Kas’Shes’Tck’Aztal moved eagerly towards it.

The warband drew near to the edge of the woods when they saw the light from ahead that illuminated their target area.

“Whoa dat was weird,” Drazzok said, stopping suddenly and placing a hand to his forehead, “like I just ate somethin’ well cold.”

“Was it nice?” a madboy asked and Drazzok picked up a rock and threw it at him.

“Wot’s up Drazzok?” Hazug asked.

“Dunno,” the weirdboy answered, “I just got dis feelin’ like somethin’ ‘appened dat ain’t natural.”

“Well dat Eldar gate thingy’s been switched on, maybe dats it.”

“Maybe, but it felt like somethin’ was getting’ closer.”

Hazug turned to Jarr who had laid down at the edge of the trees and was looking down at the area around the now active webway portal.

“I don’t see Highbalt,” the assassin said, or any of the ordinary soldiers, just the traitor Astartes.”

Hazug looked at the area himself, even without magnification he could make out several transport vehicles scattered about and the marines standing in a circle around the portal itself.

"Sophie and Thuggrim get up 'ere," Hazug ordered and the pair made their way to the front of the warband where Hazug stood beside Jarr who was lifting his rifle into position, "Right I wants ya both to stay 'ere," Hazug told them, "Sophie, keep a look out for dis Highbalt bloke and call out if ya see 'im," then he turned to Thuggrim, "and I wants ya to use dat snazzgun ya got to 'elp pick off anyone wot looks like dey is causin' us trouble."

Thuggrim nodded.

"Dis sounds like a job for me good eye," he said and he reached for the pouch around his neck.

"You've got to be kidding," Sophie said as the madnob opened up the pouch and removed its contents, then she opened her mouth in surprise as he pulled out a small metal sphere with a glass lens attached to it. Then he lifted his eye patch to reveal a metal socket in place of his missing eye, into which he pushed the metal sphere.

"It's a bionic eye," Sophie exclaimed.

"Of course it is," Thuggrim replied as his artificial eye powered up, "keepin' a real eye in dat pouch would be stupid. I is mad, not stupid," and he then lay down next to Jarr and levelled his own custom rifle towards the area around the Eldar webway gate.

"Right den lads," Hazug said to the remaining greenskins, "we got Jarr and Thuggrim coverin' us from 'ere where dey got a good view of wot's 'appenin', so we is goin' to make our way to where da woods go around behind dat big ball of light and charge down dare from behind it and show 'em whose best. Goddit?"

"Goddit," the orks replied in unison.

"Right, den lets go," Hazug said.

As far as Rhia was concerned, Venris Highbalt had got his just deserts and it had lifted her spirits slightly to be able to watch the treacherous old fool's life come to an end. Of course, it didn't really help her in the long run, she was still going to die here, but at least Highbalt had gone first.

The marines had stopped their chanting now and Rhia expected her end to come soon, she was certain that the next knife strike would not be another shallow cut but a killing blow instead. She rested the side of her head against the Eldar webway gate that she was chained to and closed her eyes in anticipation. Then she opened them suddenly once more. She had just seen something move beyond the limits of the area illuminated by the active webway gate. At first she considered the possibility that it was some of Highbalt's men returning, but the marines had had the late governor send them out of earshot to prevent them from hearing his cries for help when they turned on him so that couldn't be it. Then she saw the movement again and this time she made out specific shapes crossing the gap between the edge of the forest and the rim of the excavated crater in which the webway gate stood. They were orks. More than that she made out two very familiar shapes leading the warband towards her, one of them wore dull patterned clothing instead of the bright colours favoured by many orks, while the outline of the second clearly indicated the presence of a second head. Rhia realised that Hazug and Two Heads were going to save her and she laughed again. Her outburst caused one of the traitor marines to turn towards her and he saw that she kept her head facing in a specific direction, which he too now looked in.

"Contact!" the marine yelled as he brought his bolter up to fire on the approaching warband, but before he could fire he fell sideways as a neat hole was punched through one of his shoulder pads. The other marines now turned in the direction their fallen comrade had been facing also, but before they could look into the darkness beyond the gateway there was the sound of gunfire from the forest and not knowing the source of this attack, the marines took cover instead.

"Dey seen us!" one of Two Heads shouted when he heard the sound of Thuggrim's weapon firing.

"Dat dey 'ave," Hazug added, "dis is it lads. Waaagh!"

"Waaagh!" the entire warband released their war cry as one and charged headlong over the edge of the crater towards the marines around the Eldar gateway.

Almost immediately there was the booming sound of bolt guns as the marines in the crater fired on the newly arrived threat, but having been forced to the ground by Thuggrim's covering fire few of them were well placed to shoot at the orks and only a single madboy went down, his body tumbling down alongside his companions as they ran down into the crater, still screaming.

Sergeant Idrim was located between the orks and the glowing sphere of energy that marked the exact location of the Eldar webway gate and he leapt back to his feet as he saw the orks rushing towards him. Casting his bolt gun aside, the ancient warrior instead drew both his pistol and chainsword.

"For the Dark Gods!" he yelled, his voice amplified by his armour and he ran towards the oncoming orks, his chainsword roaring into life as he activated it.

Hazug saw the marine rushing towards the warband and he stopped running and grabbed one of Two Heads' Evil Suns. The Ork was armed with the automatic weapon normally mounted on Hazug's truck, but removed for use in this battle.

"Let 'im 'ave it," Hazug said to the Ork, pointing at the running marine and the Ork levelled the massive gun and fired.

Idrim was caught in the centre of the hail of flying bullet from the weapon, but the rounds merely deflected off his armour. Until that was one round went lower than the rest and passed through the weak point at his knee and Idrim toppled over. He kept hold of his weapons and began to pick himself back up, but before he could get back to his feet the massive shape of Two Heads loomed over him. The Ork nob pressed the muzzle of his rifle against one of the eyepieces of Idrim's helmet.

"Kop dis," both of Two Heads said and he pulled the trigger and sent a burst of gunfire smashing through the lens into Idrim.

"Form a line!" Krixus shouted, even though the vox link in his helmet would have picked up a whisper, "Stay together. Don't let the orks separate us."

Firing short bursts as they moved, the marines fell back away from the orks towards the vehicles parked nearby. Though meant purely for suppression, the explosive bolter rounds cut down three more of the orks of Two Heads' mob but this did nothing to dissuade the rest from continuing towards the marines.

"Yistral, the rhino," Krixus ordered the traitor marine nearest to their armoured vehicle and instead of halting and taking cover with the rest he continued to run towards the rhino's open hatchway.

A burst of gunfire kicking up dirt at Yistral's feet as Thuggrim, guided by Sophie sought to prevent him from bringing the rhino into the fight. Unperturbed, Yistral continued to run and reached out for the edge of the hatchway to pull himself up inside. That was when Jarr put a bullet through his neck and he collapsed.

The orks now reached the webway gate and they split into two groups to run around it. As Hazug ran past he saw Rhia still tied to the structure of the gate.

"Hazug, help me," she pleaded, tugging at the chain that held her in place. But the Ork nob ignored her and she watched as he continued charging headlong towards the marines now behind their improvised defensive line.

As he ran Drazzok felt a strange sensation building the closer he got to the marines and his attention was drawn to a marine that wore armour different to the others. While they wore red armour, his was blue and gold and while some of the other marines had helmets that sprouted horns in a somewhat Orkish manner, his helmet instead had a tall crest protruding from it. But it wasn't the nature of his armour that was calling out to Drazzok; it was the power that he wielded.

"Dey got a weirdboy!" Drazzok shouted as Nillotep raised a hand towards the nearest Ork and Drazzok tried to push him out of the way.

But he was too slow and a blast of light struck the Ork squarely in his chest. Drazzok expected the unfortunate Ork to be incinerate by the psychic attack since that would be the effect of one of his own strikes, but instead the Ork dropped his rifle and collapsed to the ground screaming in agony as his body distorted, new appendages sprouting and thrashing about wildly as Drazzok sensed the energies of the warp flowing through his dying body.

Drazzok swung his staff at what the Ork had become, but the unnatural creature slid across the ground and wrapped a tentacle around the leg of another Ork, dragging him to the ground. A mouth lined with vicious looking fangs opened where there had been only writhing flesh a moment earlier and the grabbed Ork screamed as his leg was bitten through.

Flanked by a pair of the madboys, Drazzok approached the chaos spawn once again. But this time, before he could strike at it there was the roar of gunfire as the Evil Sun with the heavy gun from Hazug's truck opened fire at it, sustaining the burst until the ammunition belt was depleted and his tossed the gun aside. The spawn screeched as round after round tore through it, many of the wounds just closed up again, or instead sprouted new tentacles eyes and mouths, but others remained open and what had been the Ork's internal organs but had now become unidentifiable tissue soaked with warp energy flowed out until the creature's form collapsed in on itself and lay still.

Drazzok looked to the bitten Ork. It was common for orks to survive the loss of a limb, Gorrid had done it, but something in the bite had kept the Ork's wound from clotting before he bled to death and he was now just another corpse to be looted later. Instead Drazzok turned and looked towards the chaos sorcerer.

"Give us a yell," he said to the madboys and obligingly they all shouted out together.

"Waaagh!"

Drazzok lifted his staff from the ground and felt the power being generated by the madboys grow inside him. He held out his hand towards the chaos sorcerer and let go of the energy all at once.

Visually little happened right away and Drazzok was somewhat disappointed, he had wanted a big flash and a bang. Instead what he got was an invisible wall of energy that hurtled towards Nillotep as he stood behind

a human transport vehicle. The blast struck the side of the vehicle and spun it around as if it were made of paper, smashing all of its windows in the process. Standing behind the vehicle, Nillotep was hurled through the air beyond the limit of the area illuminated by the webway gate.

“Ya can all go deal with dem beakies in red,” Drazzok said to the madboys, “dat one is mine,” and he strode off into the darkness after Nillotep.

Another Ork fell to the marine’s gunfire just as the warband got within arm’s reach of the marines’ line, while their own fire had been ineffectual. Rather than attempting to draw his more compact weaponry more suited to hand to hand combat, the marine nearest Hazug swung the butt of his bolter around in an attempt to club him with it, but Hazug had been expecting that and he dodged the strike. His own close combat weapons were also either slung over his back or tucked into his belt and Hazug instead decide to use his own rifle also. He jammed the muzzle into the mass of pipes located on the marine’s chest plate and pulled the trigger. The soft rounds slammed into the ceramite armour plate and knocked the marine backwards, but they did not penetrate the ceramite material and he was uninjured. Before the marine could either get back up or aim his weapon at Hazug, Hazug pointed his rifle at him once more. But this time he placed his hand over the secondary trigger that operated the single anti-tank missile that was mounted beneath its barrel and he snatched back on it. There was a ‘whoosh’ as the rocket ignited and flew towards the marine, from this range Hazug couldn’t miss and the explosive round detonated as it struck the helpless marine, ripping open ceramite and flesh alike. With all of his rifle’s ammunition now expended Hazug tossed it aside and pulled the warscythe from his back.

“Master lookout!” Hazug heard Ratish yell and he stepped aside just in time to dodge the whirring blade of a chainsword before it could cut him in two. He was about to turn around to face his new opponent when the marine staggered in front of him, waving his arms about in an attempt to dislodge Ratish from his back.

“Get down grot,” Hazug said and as his servant leapt from the marine’s back Hazug activated his warscythe and plunged it straight through the marine.

Outnumbering the Word Bearers, the orks were able to attack most of their opponents with two or more of their own number, forcing the marines onto the defensive and giving them little opportunity to attack without leaving themselves vulnerable to a blade in their side.

One Word Bearer however, was an exception to this. Chaplain Krixus met the trio of Evil Suns who charged at him with a single swing of his crozius arcanum, the weapon that was also the symbol of his position.

Even without the crackling energy field of the weapon he would have smashed the skull of the first Ork he struck, but with it activated his swing continued far enough to deliver a lethal blow to a second Ork also.

Only the third one was lucky enough to be able to dive out of the way, his attack spoiled. But before he could get back to his feet Krixus brought his weapon down again onto the Ork’s back and shattered every bone in his chest.

The marines Jerile and Xerxan stood back to back, preventing the orks from getting behind them. They had dropped their bolt guns and drawn their close combat weapons instead. Secure in the knowledge that they could not be outflanked they instead concentrated on blocking and parrying the attacks from their respective fronts, waiting for the orks to tire themselves out.

The other marines began to try and get closer together to copy this, but Jerile and Xerxan had been lucky enough to have been next to each other when the orks reached their defensive line and one of the other marines fell as an Ork got behind him and hacked at the back of his knee with his axe. The injured marine did his best to block the attacks that then rained down on him from two orks in a last desperate attempt to escape his fate. But moments later another blow landed on the vulnerable joint beneath his helmet and ripped open his neck. Instinctively, the marine dropped his weapon and grasped his neck in a vain attempt to stem the bleeding, but this only left him even more vulnerable and two more blows finished the job of decapitating him. A madboy cheered as he held the marines severed head high above his own, moments before Krixus rammed his crozius arcanum into his face.

## 21

“Can’t we do something?” Sophie said in Gothic. She was lay in between Thuggrim and Jarr, all three of them observing the battle going on below using the various optics they had available.

“They’re too close together and moving too fast,” Jarr answered, “I can’t be sure of who I’d hit if I fired into that. If I see Highbalt I’ll take a shot regardless, but until then I’m waiting for a clear target. The only other option would be to actually go down there and join in.”

Sophie deactivated the tau viewing device and stuffed it into a pocket, then she drew the auto pistol and checked that it was loaded.

“Wotcha doin’?” Thuggrim asked as Sophie got up.

“I’m going to help,” she answered him, “Are you coming?”

“Hazug said we was all to wait ‘ere,” Thuggrim said.

“Well I’m going to go and ask if we can go down there and help then.”

“Ang on den,” Thuggrim said, also getting to his feet, “I wants to ask dat too.”

Jarr watched as the woman and the Ork strode across open ground towards the battle below. His speciality was long-range killing, a job best done from back here, but he was adept at close combat too. Jarr sighed and stood up, leaving his rifle on the ground. Then he drew his pistol and sprinted after Sophie and Thuggrim.

Nillotep was surprised at the amount of power that the Ork shaman had been able to put into his attack. If it had been more focused Nillotep would have undoubtedly been killed, but the crude nature of the attack had reduced its effectiveness and his armour had done its job and protected him from the blow.

However, he had lost his staff when he was hurled through the air and as he got to his feet he looked around to try and find it. The staff had landed sooner than he had, travelling only about two thirds of the distance but in the same path.

Before Nillotep could set off to retrieve the staff he saw the unmistakable form of the Ork shaman running headlong towards him beyond it. Nillotep reached for his bolt pistol, only to find that his holster was empty, the gun also having been lost when he was thrown through the air. Rather than waste time looking for the pistol, Nillotep instead decide to try and retrieve his staff and he ran towards it, hoping to reach it before the Ork did.

As he closed on the staff, Nillotep dived through the air, deliberately this time and he reached out for the staff. He had judged his leap perfectly and as he slid to a halt on the ground Nillotep felt his hand wrap around the handle of his staff. But he was too slow and before he could lift either himself or the staff from the ground, Drazzok slammed a foot down on the staff also.

Nillotep let go of the staff and rolled sideways as Drazzok brought his own staff down where the sorcerer had been lay. With a kick of his foot, Nillotep sent Drazzok’s staff from his grip and it flew into the darkness. Then he leapt to his feet.

“Now neither of us is armed greenskin,” Nillotep hissed, but then he realised his mistake, while he used his staff as a method of channelling his psychic powers into an attack, Ork weirdboys more often used theirs to dissipate the energy that they focused safely. Removing the staff from one simply meant that the power had nowhere to go.

Drazzok lunged at Nillotep with his arms outstretched.

“Come ‘ere beaky,” Drazzok snapped and before the sorcerer could react he clamped a hand on each side of Nillotep’s crested helmet. Then he let his power drain away.

Nillotep screamed in agony as Drazzok poured his power directly into his head. The display of his helmet flickered as systems overheated and failed, then his vision turned red as the delicate blood vessels in his eyes burst open shortly before the fluid in his eyeballs began to boil. Only his enhanced physiology prevented Nillotep’s eardrums from bursting and deafening him and instead he heard the sizzling sound of his flesh starting to cook before his agony ended in death.

Drazzok felt the marine go limp and he was unable to support the enormous weight of the massive warrior and his armour. Instead he let go and dropped to the ground along with the dead sorcerer, without his staff the best way to dissipate his power was to press his hands against the ground.

“Drazzok, here take this,” a voice suddenly called out from the darkness and Drazzok looked up to see Sophie coming towards him with his staff. Close behind, Thuggrim and Jarr followed her.

“Nice one,” Drazzok said, reaching out and taking his staff from Sophie and he used the staff to help him stand, “Wotcha doin’ ‘ere though?” his asked.

“We couldn’t do anything form back there,” Sophie said, “so we’ve come down here to help.”

“Den we best get a move on,” Drazzok said.

Hazug sliced another marine in half, just as he was about to do the same thing to Gorrid.

“Watch out lad,” Hazug said while Gorrid picked himself up. A sudden chill went down Hazug’s back and he realised that he was standing right by the energy sphere Eldar webway gate and something looked different about it. The glowing sphere had grown to be bigger than an Ork now and Hazug was certain that he saw something moving in the darkness. Something that had just come from out of the gate. What he definitely saw was his own breath as he exhale, though the weather was not nearly cold enough to cause that. Then a snapping sound from behind Hazug caught his attention and he turned just in time to see Two Heads ripping the head from a marine that had his axe embedded in his neck.

He turned again when he heard the sound of a pistol shot and he saw Ratish roll beneath a human vehicle to escape a marine that wielded a weapon that resembled an ornate club with a glowing end. Hazug decide that this was his next target and he charged.

Meanwhile Jerile and Xerxan were beginning to see their opponents movements become slower as they began to tire themselves out and Jerile chanced a lunge forwards that sliced the arm from a madboy. The Ork screamed and staggered back from the combat, clamping a hand over the bloody stump of his limb. But the reduction in the number of their opponents was short lived as Two Heads charged into them.

Approaching from the side the large Ork did not lash out, instead he just use his own weight that was roughly equal to a marine in his armour to bash the two marines apart. The orks surrounding them then all piled in, instead of attacking with their weapons they grabbed hold of the marines’ arms, keeping their weapons pointed away from the orks.

With great effort, Jerile pulled his arm loose from the grip that an Ork had on it and he brought the pistol he held in that hand around to point at the Ork holding the other one. But the shot that rang out did not come from his pistol, instead it came from Jarr’s and the powerful round split Jerile’s chest plate open before it destroyed one of his hearts. A moment later Jarr followed up the shot with a second one and Jerile died as his secondary heart failed also.

Xerxan lived only a short while longer, unable to shake either arm loose, he was helpless when Two Heads picked himself up and rushed back to where the orks held the marine down. Two Heads lifted his boot and stamped down on Xerxan’s exposed neck, his head jerked backwards suddenly and there a ‘snap’ as his neck broke from the blow.

Krixus turned just in time to see the last of his marines die at the hands of the orks, ignoring the Gretchin that had just fled beneath the vehicle now at his back. Amongst the greenskins he caught sight of the shaman that he had last seen running into the darkness after Nillotep and he concluded that the Thousand Son sorcerer must also be dead. That left just him facing the entire warband. Even worse he saw the unmistakable form of the agent of the Officio Assassinorum fighting along side the aliens. Krixus knew that his enemies would charge him imminently and he drew his bolt pistol and prepared to meet them head on. There was the sound of a gunshot from below and Krixus felt the pain as a bullet penetrated the weak point at his ankle. No longer able to support his own weight, his leg gave way and Krixus dropped to his knees, letting go of his bolt pistol and using that hand to grab hold of the vehicle beside him to prevent himself from falling all the way to the ground.

It was obviously the Gretchin that had shot him and Krixus caught sight of the creature as it retreated back beneath the vehicle. The chaplain reached out swiftly and grabbed hold of Ratish’s leg before he could get away and dragged him out from beneath the vehicle. Ratish squealed as he looked up at Krixus and behind his mask the chaplain grinned as he raised his crozius arcanum up above his head ready to deliver a killing blow.

Krixus swung his arm down, aiming to strike Ratish’s head with his powerful weapon. But there was something wrong, part way through the swing, Krixus realised that he was no longer holding the crozius arcanum. Then he corrected himself, he had not lost his weapon, but part of his arm and he saw that the limb had been neatly severed midway between wrist and elbow. Already his enhanced metabolism was sealing the wound. He had no idea what sort of weapon could inflict such an injury with so little effort that he did not even notice when it occurred.

Krixus looked up and he saw Hazug standing over him with his warscythe held in front of him.

“Dat grot,” Hazug said in gothic, “is mine,” and he rammed the warscythe’s blade into Krixus’s chest.

Hazug pulled the weapon free immediately and Krixus slumped at his feet. The dying marine turned his head slightly and before his life finally slipped away he spoke.

“My lord,” he gasped, “I am your loyal apostle,” and then the dark gods he sold his soul to so long ago finally got what they had paid for.

“Wot was dat about?” one of Two Heads asked Hazug as he walked over to him.

“I reckon dat ‘e was admitin’ dat I was better dan ‘im,” Hazug replied.

“Well dat was obvious,” Two Heads said back, his heads nodding up and down alternately, “ya is an Ork for starters.”

“Actually,” Venris Highbalt said in fluent Orkish, “I rather think that he was talking to me.”



## 22

Jarr was the first to react to the sudden appearance of his target and he fired shot after shot into the governor.

"You're too late foolish mortal, the vessel is already dead," a voice replied from the mouth of Venris Highbalt, but it was less human than its first statement, as if changes were taking place inside it that were affecting how it forced air through its throat to communicate and as Jarr watched the bullets he had just fired dropped out of the wounds they had inflicted. Instead of blood, a strange blue fluid seeped from the wounds briefly before solidifying and forming a glistening, spiky shell over them.

"Get 'im," Thuggrim shouted and the entire warband raised whatever guns they held and opened fire. Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal, the thing that had been Venris just laughed and leapt through the air, clearing several vehicles and landing next to a madboy that he promptly ripped in two with his bare hands. A second Ork stepped forwards and swung his axe at the daemon, slicing clean through its arm. Almost immediately another arm sprouted from the blue oozing stump, one that looked far more muscular than Highbalt's original limb and ending in a clawed hand with talons that looked deadly sharp. The daemon demonstrated just how sharp its claws were by lashing out and slicing through the axe blade that had taken the human looking arm.

Drazzok unleashed a bolt of green energy at the creature and it shrieked before leaping clear of the lightning bolts that came from the weirdboy's fingertips.

"Watch out lads!" Two Heads shouted, "Don't be where dat thing lands."

Hazug watched the path that Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal was taking through the air and held his arm out to Ratish.

"Gis a bomb," he said, "I saw ya put one in ya bag earlier."

The Gretchin reached into his bag and handed an explosive to his master.

"Ere ya go master," he said and Hazug snatched it from him without a word. Hazug pulled the pin from the grenade and observed the daemon's path again. It was now on its descent, following a curve downwards towards a point clear of any of the warband and Hazug hurled the grenade at that spot. Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal landed at almost the same time as the grenade and it detonated before he could leap away again.

The blast of the grenade threw shrapnel, dirt and flesh in all directions. Surprisingly, there was no sound from the daemon thing as it was consumed in the blast and as the cloud of debris produced by the explosion clear the ground was littered with the broken fragments of what had been the host body.

"Ya got it master," Ratish said, leaping up and down.

"I don't think so grot," Hazug replied as he saw blue crystalline growths sprout from where pieces of the body had landed and travel across the ground to link p with one another. At the point where they joined the crystal growths grew up out of the ground and began to form a body, vaguely humanoid in form it was larger than even the Ork nob present and wings unfolded from its back.

Its true form unveiled, Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal spread out its arms and released an almighty shriek that made Sophie shut her eyes tight and clamp her hands over her ears, not caring that she dropped her gun to the ground.

Again it was Jarr that reacted first. The assassin had reloaded his weapon, but instead of inserting another standard magazine of armour piercing rounds, he had reached to a spot on his thigh where several more specialised projectiles were located and placed one of them into the chamber of his gun. He fired the gun, aiming for the centre of the daemon's body, but the creature moved unnaturally swiftly and the round instead just clipped the thing's shoulder. The bullet was designed to defeat personal energy shields and was made using rare materials that disrupted the focused energy patterns used in such devices. It had a similar effect on the field of mystical energy that allowed the daemon to maintain its form and where the bullet passed through it, the crystalline flesh blackened and shattered, leaving a deep gouge through Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal's shoulder and a hole in its wing.

Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal screamed and unleashed a blast of its own, sending a beam of brilliant white light towards the assassin. But before his attack could find its target, Drazzok countered with a lightning bolt of his own and from where the two forces met there was a massive explosion that sent everyone diving for cover.

As Hazug rolled over on the ground and grabbed hold of his warscythe he heard the rattle of gunfire coming from the few remaining orks and he looked towards the daemon to see what effect it was having. The monstrous creature stood in the path of the barrage, bullets blasting fragments of crystal away from its body, in unlike the injury inflicted by Jarr's shot, these wounds were healing instantly with new growths of crystal sealing them.

"Jarr, ya got any more of dem bullets like dat one ya just used?" Hazug shouted to the assassin.

"No," he replied, firing another magazine of standard ammunition at the daemon as he did so, "I just had the one."

“Wot was it anyway?” Hazug asked.

“A round designed for penetrating force fields.”

A thought occurred to Hazug, his warscythe, alien weapon recovered from one of the guardians of an underground city, had demonstrated an exceptional ability to slice through both living tissue and non-living materials. Perhaps it would be just as effective against whatever this creature is made of, he thought to himself.

“Cover me!” Hazug shouted and he leapt to his feet and ran directly towards the towering form of Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal.

The daemon paid no attention to Hazug as he ran towards it; it was more interested in the hail of gunfire being directed at it. Though the bullets were tiny and, with the exception of the single field shattering round that had struck its shoulder, lacking the ability to do great harm on their own, the sheer quantity was starting to become an issue as Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal was compelled to devote an ever greater amount of effort into maintaining its form in this realm. A force with superior marksmanship to orks would have likely forced it to retreat back into the warp by now. So it was only at the last moment that Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal actually reacted to Hazug's charge.

At the moment Hazug thrust the tip of his warscythe towards Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal's body the daemon leapt into the air once more and the alien weapon instead struck the daemon's thigh. Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal let out a howl of both pain and rage as its leg was cut from its body, the unnatural cutting ability of the alien weapon proving itself against his crystalline structure. As happened with the wound from the shield piercing bullet fire by Jarr, the stump of the daemon's leg did not sprout any replacement crystal growth; instead it blackened and remained proof of the lost limb. Meanwhile the leg itself dropped to the ground and melted away, a foul smelling blue liquid being the only evidence that it had existed and that too disappeared moments later, evaporating into the air.

Thrown off balance, Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal came crashing back down to the ground near the still active Eldar webway gate. The daemon looked towards the portal that lead back to its own realm and saw Rhia still chained to the arch like structure of bone that actually created the portal itself and it saw the pattern created by the many injuries that had been inflicted upon her by his servants in this place. She had been anointed by them to allow him to disconnect the portal from the webway and bring his daemonkin to this world in uncountable numbers. All it had to do was kill her and focus her soul into the sphere of light.

The daemon could of course incinerate her with blast of pure warp energy, but that would prevent him from harnessing her departing soul. No, to summon his kin he had to kill her with his own hands. Raising itself up as best as it could, Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal began to crawl towards Rhia, who screamed as she saw it coming towards her. The gunfire continued to drain its power, but it still had more than enough to kill the anointed one and then it could draw on all the power it needed from what would be a wide open doorway to the warp right next to it.

Hazug ran towards the crawling daemon. It was obviously heading for Rhia, though Hazug had no idea why. Her life meant nothing to him of course, but his instincts told him that the daemon would only focus on her if it gave it some advantage, so therefore Hazug wanted it kept away from her. It was obvious to Hazug that even running as fast as he could, he would not reach the daemon before it reached Rhia. So, acting quickly, he depressed the switch that activated his warscythe and held it in one hand over his shoulder. Then with all of his might he hurled the weapon as a feral Ork would hurl a spear towards the daemon and he watched it fly through the air.

The warscythe embedded itself in the daemon's back, right between where its wings met its shoulders and sliced straight through its body. The daemon let out another howl as it collapsed to the ground, the warscythe digging in and impaling it on the spot. The alien weapon deactivated only when pressed from the daemonkin flesh on it switched the activation button, suddenly losing the ability to dig itself any deeper into the ground. Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal thrashed about in rage, desperately reaching towards Rhia in an attempt to end her life, but she remained just out of reach.

As the daemon continued to thrash around and scream the warband approached it slowly. The thing was clearly dying, the spot on its back where the warscythe had gone through and pinned it to the ground was already black and the discolouration was spreading over the rest of its body. Kas'Shes'Tck'Aztal's screams became quieter and more high-pitched as its entire body turned black. It suddenly became silent and lay still, the only movement being some random twitching of its remaining limbs. Hazug reached out and pulled his warscythe from the daemon's back with both hands, then he reactivated the alien weapon and cut the daemon's head from its shoulders.

A sudden rush of air marked the death of the daemon as its body imploded with a flash as it was drawn back into the warp and Hazug was almost knocked off his feet. He used the warscythe to steady himself and looked around.

“Hazug?”

The voice was Rhia's.

“Hazug, I’m sorry. Please help me.”

Hazug ignored her and walked back to where the rest of the warband stood.

“Ya is goin’ to need more lads again,” he said to Two Heads, noting that only four of his Evil Suns had survived the battle.

“Yeah and me battlewagon’s all bust up like every other time I does somethin’ for ya,” one of Two Heads replied before the other one continued, “But just take a look at all dis loot,” and he waved around the battlefield. Scattered about were several human vehicles, all intact apart from the one that Drazzok had destroyed with his psychic blast and in addition there were the bodies of the marines to provide trophies for the survivors.

“Dat wagon alone it worth it,” Two Heads added excitedly, pointing towards the armoured vehicle that had a dead marine lying by one of it’s hatchways, a rhino the humans called them, “it’ll ‘elp get me own wagon’ ome without ‘avin’ to pay someone to come out for it and its even already painted red!”

While Two Heads had been discussing the prospects for looting with Hazug, Jarr had gone to the gateway and he used his knife to prise the strange device that was stuck to the structure away from it and the sphere of light promptly vanished as the gateway was deactivated. He let to device drop to the ground and the stamped on it as hard as he could until he heard a reassuring crunch as it was smashed.

“What about her?” Jarr then called out towards Hazug, indicating Rhia.

“Wot about ‘er?” Hazug replied in gothic.

“Well are we just going to leave her here?”

Hazug strode back towards the gateway and stood beside Jarr, looking down at Rhia. All it would take was a single blow from his warscythe to pay her back for betraying him. Though of course without her betraying him whatever the marines had been up to here would have succeeded and Hazug doubted that that would have been a good thing. A single blow could shatter the chain that bound her, or it could deliver the punishment that Hazug had promised.

He raised the warscythe and swung it down.

## EPILOGUE

Hazug watched as the boxlike human shuttle craft touched down in the field, its pilot keeping the engines running just in case he had to lift off suddenly. It had taken some persuading, along with surrendering much of Hazug's share of the loot from the battle with the marines to get warboss Kazkal Kromag to order the orbiting starships to hold their fire long enough for the human vessel lurking at the outskirts of the system to come here long enough to retrieve Jarr. The human assassin's injuries were too severe to be treated by the doctors of Git Town and the only way he could survive was to be evacuated off world. As it was the man had only remained conscious just long enough to be able to signal his ship after being told that he could. So now Hazug stood here surrounded by humans, most of them from Thayne's constabulary who had driven them here in a vehicle sold to them by Hazug that morning, waiting to ensure that the shuttle arrived and departed according to plan.

The rear ramp of the shuttle dropped open and a human stepped down it.

"Hurry up," the man called out, "the captain doesn't want us kept here any longer than necessary," and four of Thayne's men rushed towards the open hatchway carrying the assassin on a stretcher between them. With Jarr loaded aboard and the rear ramp sealed again, the shuttle pilot took off straight away and Hazug watched as it rapidly gained altitude and eventually disappeared from sight.

"Archon," the voice of his reptilian bodyguard hissed and Shraycht opened his eyes.

"What is it now?" he asked.

"He has returned lord."

Shraycht sat up and swung his legs over the side of his bed, "Allow him in," he ordered as he got to his feet. The room was carefully lit, the entire ceiling being a massive lighting panel that cast its light straight down without and nearly eliminate all shadow. Certainly leaving too little for beings such as the one now wanting an audience from entering by any means other than the guarded doorway.

"Well," Shraycht said as his guest entered, "what did you find?" The newcomer was similar in build to Shraycht, taller and thinner than humans, but while the archon's flesh was deathly pale his guest's was near black, with mysterious runic patterns shifting across it.

"Pain," the mandrake replied, "and souls for the taking."

"How many souls?" Shraycht asked.

"Millions," the mandrake answered and Shraycht began to laugh.