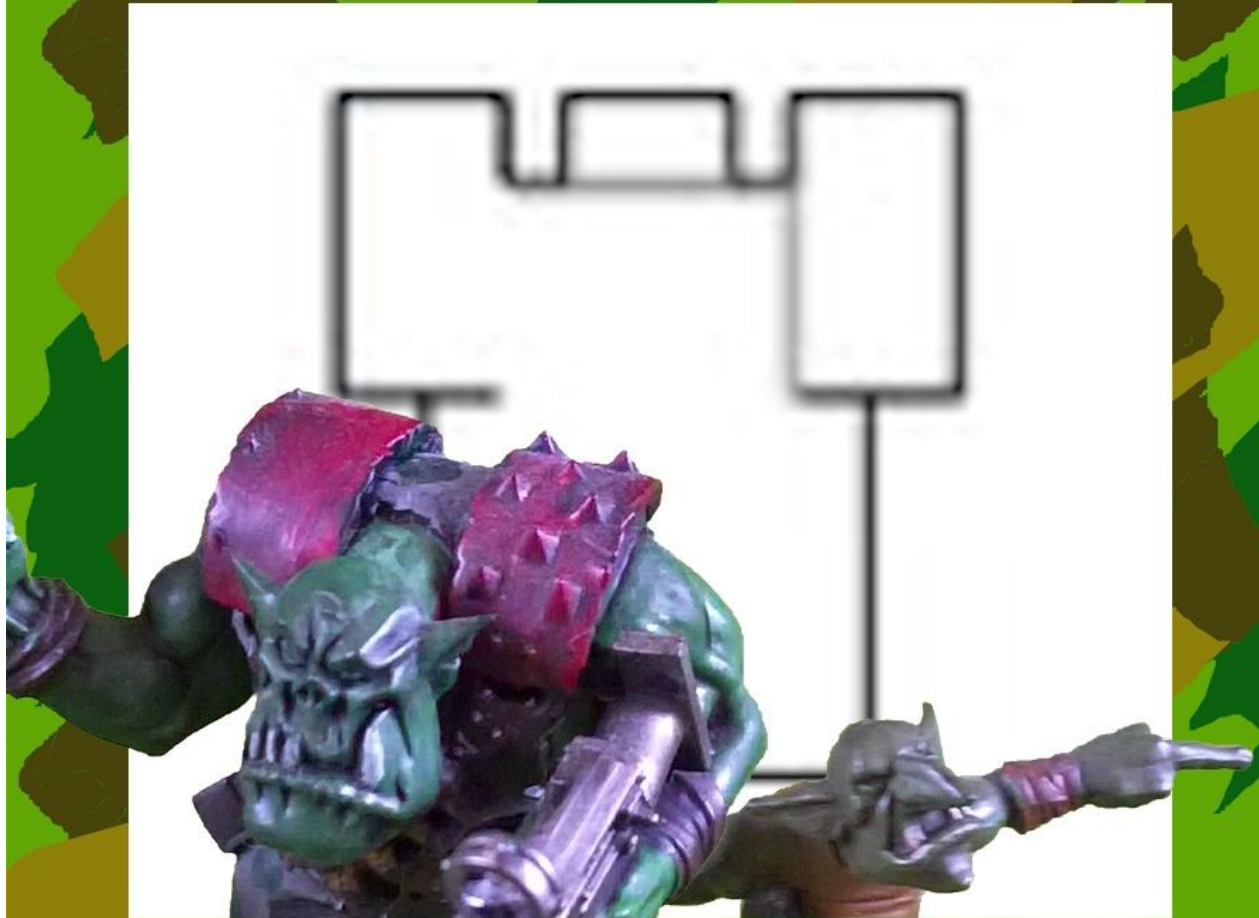


WHO KILLED DA DEAD LAD?



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

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

WAAAGH!

Who Killed Da Dead Lad?

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

Hazug Throatlitter, last of the Blood Axe clan in the tribe is summoned by his warboss and ordered to investigate the death of an Ork. All signs point towards an alien presence on the planet, but where exactly and why are they here? Hazug and a hired band of troops find themselves facing the alien threat alone in their quest to discover who killed da dead lad.

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

There was a whistling from above as another shell passed overhead towards the advancing greenskin horde. Hazug Throatlitter of the Blood Axe clan looked upwards towards the source of the sound, but the explosive round was too far up for him to make out which meant that the round was intended for the main body of the Ork force rather than his own squad and Hazug turned his gaze back towards his own troops. Like him, the orks that he commanded wore clothing that had more in common with their human foes than with other Ork clans, dull colours and patterned to break up their outlines rather than bright jackets proclaiming their location for everyone in the galaxy with a gun to be able to pick them out before they got to within chopping distance.

This wasn't a full-scale invasion by any means, just a friendly raid. A single cruiser had brought the orks, all twelve thousand of them, here and deposited them on the planet's surface while it continued to blast away at the orbital defences. The warband now had just a few days in which to run amok, kill and steal all that they could, before returning back home. Fortunately for the raiding force, humans always fought back when their worlds were attacked, unlike some species that didn't have any sense of fun and would instead dodge and run from battle and they had been quick to bring out their forces to face the orks.

The human front line was not far away now and Hazug's commando squad was ready, guns were loaded and blades sharpened. They were the only Blood Axes in the tribe and Hazug was now certain that they would be fighting hand-to-hand with the humans before any of the other clans. Even the Evil Suns were far behind them, their war buggies and trucks bogged down in the mud of the battlefield while Hazug and his boys had crept up on the human defensive positions, staying in cover as far as they could. Being the first into combat had two advantages, firstly and of primary importance to orks, was the fact that it meant that there were more enemies to fight with rather than having to make do with whatever scatter survivors had escaped the orks who had been there first and secondly it meant that you got first pick of the loot afterwards.

"Stay down," he ordered and then slowly he lifted his head above the rocks that were the last large obstacles between the orks and the humans. Hazug estimated there were at least thirty humans in the trenches ahead, he could just about make out the helmets they wore to protect their fragile heads, they were positioned ready to fire with rifles lifted to their shoulders but they had no heavy weapons deployed.

"Right lads," he spoke, "on my command. One. Two. Waaagh!"

As one the commando squad leapt from behind the rocks and ran towards the human trench, their weapons held aloft and screaming in unison.

"Waaagh!"

The Ork charge was met by well disciplined weapons fire from the entrenched human troops, flashes of light and sharp cracks filled the air as they fired their energy weapons towards the running greenskins. Hazug himself felt a stinging sensation in his shoulder as one of the rather weak energy blasts struck him, ignoring the irritation he continued to run towards the humans, firing his pistol at them in disgust.

Above the yelling and the gunfire from the humans Hazug became aware of another sound, a high-pitched whistling growing in volume coming from the sky. He also saw that the humans had now ceased firing at him and ducked down into their trench for cover.

"Lobbas! Dive!" he yelled as he realised that mortar shells were about to start landing amongst his troops, it appeared that the humans had called in fire support.

The commandos scattered and sought what cover they could find before the explosive projectiles began to land. There was a quick succession of explosions as the mortar rounds detonated on impact and sent mud and body parts flying in all directions as the commandos cried out in pain. Hazug lay flat on his stomach with the mud beneath him adding to that which he had already smeared across his face to help conceal his advance as the barrage continued and debris landed on his back.

When the last of the mortar rounds had detonated Hazug raised his head and called out to his men.

"Alright lads?"

Hazug awaited an answer, but there was no response.

"Lads? Is any of ya alright?" he repeated, but again there was nothing in reply.

"Anybody?"

Slowly Hazug got to his knees and looked around him. They were all dead; his entire Blood Axe commando force had been wiped out before they even got within arms reach of the humans. Here and there he saw something recognisable, a hand and ear or a weapon. But most of the area was covered in random pieces of smouldering flesh, the smell of which was filling Hazug's nostrils and made him feel hungry.

Then he heard a groan and he looked around to see one of his troops getting to his feet. Ahead of them the humans were getting back into position in their trench, but for now they were vulnerable.

“Come on lad!” Hazug yelled at the Ork, “Get up and let’s get stuck in.”

The other Ork smiled at Hazug and after getting to his feet retrieved his gun and blade. Hazug then turned towards the human lines and ran towards it.

“Waaagh!” he bellowed at the top of his voice and from behind him he heard the other Blood Axe echoing his war cry.

Hazug leapt down into the human trench just and landing right on top of one of the soldiers as he attempted to get into position. Hazug heard the crack of bone as the human’s neck snapped, but he gave it no thought, instead he pointed his gun along the trench and fired off three shots in rapid succession, placing two into the chest of another human and missing with the third.

There was a sound from behind Hazug and he turned to see that the other Blood Axe had just jumped down into the trench with him. Turning around saved Hazug’s life, a blast of laser energy that would have struck his head instead flashed past him, barely singeing his skin.

Hazug roared as he turned around again and he hurled his blade along the length of the trench into the human soldier who had just shot at him. The weapon struck the man in the throat and he fell dead to the ground.

Hazug now sprinted along the trench, firing his pistol as he did so, he didn’t bother aiming for specific targets, he just fired randomly. He plucked his blade from the corpse of the human he had almost decapitated and looked up just in time to see a human lunge at him with a bayonet. Hazug swung his own blade up, knocking the human’s strike aside and then lifted his pistol up and pressed it against the human. He grinned as he snatched back on the trigger and was disappointed when the only sound was a ‘click’ as the firing pin fell on an empty chamber. Without pausing to think, Hazug opened his mouth wide and bent down over the human, biting into his neck and ripping out a chunk of flesh.

The human dropped his weapon and clutched at his throat, trying to scream as blood flowed from the gaping wound. As he slumped to the ground the human looked up at Hazug right as the Ork swung his blade down onto his head.

“Dat’s it lad,” Hazug said as he tucked his blade back into his belt, but there was no response.

Hazug turned around and looked down the trench, there he saw the other Ork lying on the ground where he had first landed in the trench, a large burn mark evident on his chest. Apparently the laser blast that had narrowly missed Hazug had instead struck the other Ork and killed him.

Hazug Throatlitter found himself the last Blood Axe left in the tribe.

1

It was still early in the morning and sunlight was just beginning to shine through gaps in the shutters into the room when Hazug was woken up by the sound of the first rock striking them. Ignoring it he rolled over, grunted and tried to get back to sleep. The second rock hit a few seconds later, followed rapidly by a third. But it was the fourth rock, the one that smashed through the wooden shutters where they had begun to rot and came to a stop in the middle of the room that convinced him to get up and do something about the unwelcome disturbance.

It was actually rather uncommon for anyone to come calling for Hazug at any time of the day. As the only remaining member of the Blood Axe clan, a clan with a well deserved reputation for dealing with humans on equal terms when it suited them, on the entire planet he was not popular by any stretch of even an orks rather limited imagination.

"Can't an Ork get any sleep?" Hazug said to himself as he got up, stretched out his arms and yawned. Looking around the dimly lit room he tried to find something suitable to throw back at whoever it was that was disturbing him. First he considered just throwing the rock on the floor back at whoever was outside pelting his shutters with rubble, but he didn't want to use anything that could then just be sent straight back at him. As the next rock bounced off the outside of the shutters Hazug considered the bucket in the corner but dismissed it for having been emptied into the cess pit behind the building the previous evening and he never filled it before breakfast.

As he considered the likely effects on his home of using one of the grenades he kept on top of his cupboard there was the sound of something much softer than a rock hitting the shutters, accompanied by a sudden cry of "Ow!"

Reacting swiftly Hazug picked up his slug pistol and pointed it at the hole in the shutters as a small green arm reached through and dragged its tiny owner high enough to scabble through after it, landing on the floor with another cry of "Ow," followed by a "Don't shoot!" as it stared at the gun pointing straight at it.

Orks were merely the largest of several different breeds of greenskins, while the creature now sat on his floor was a snotling, the smallest and least intelligent breed.

"Wotcha want?" Hazug bellowed, his gun still pointing at the trembling snotling.

"Not me. Dem."

"Who?"

"Dem outside. Dey chucked me up to getcha."

"Who are dey?"

"Erm."

"How many?"

"Erm."

Interrogating the snotling was a waste of time and Hazug decided that he would just have to go and take a look outside himself.

The snotling rolled out of the way as Hazug strode across the room, pushed open the shutters and stood on his balcony looking down into the street, gun still in hand and blinked as the light from the morning sun hit his face. There down below, among the handful of runts out on early morning errands stood a pair of large orks looking back up at him, one of who still held a rock in his hand. Slightly smaller than Hazug they were just about large enough to be considered Nobs and their black clothing suggested they were members of the Goffs clan. Infamous for their preference for fighting hand to hand, they were not orks to be trifled with.

"Wot are ya throwin' rocks and snots at this time of day for?" he shouted at the pair.

"Hazug, da warboss wants ya," one yelled in response.

"Wot for?"

"Didn't say," replied the other, "E just said dat 'e wants ya now. So get a move on."

Hazug didn't like the sound of this. The warboss in question was the local chieftain, biggest and toughest greenskin on the planet. He had ascended to power three years earlier when he correctly deduced that his predecessor was unable to beat him in personal combat while he slept. A summons from him meant trouble for someone and a Blood Axe like Hazug was unlikely to be very well received at the best of times.

"Stay put den, I'll be right down."

Hazug tucked his gun into his belt and went back inside for his choppa and some grenades, it certainly wouldn't do to meet the chieftain without a full weapons load and he wanted to make a good impression. Or least have the best chance of fighting his way out of the fort if it came to that. Letting the snotling out of his room as he left, Hazug went down to meet the Goffs. Breakfast would just have to wait.

The Goffs had no transport of their own so the three orks had to walk through the streets of the city to the warboss's residence. This early on in the day there were few other orks on the streets, most of those that

Hazug saw were lying were they had fallen, unconscious mainly, following whatever activities they had been involved in the previous night. There were however a larger number of Gretchin and Snotlings already up and about. Some were running errands for their Ork masters, with tasks to be completed before their employers awoke. Others were simply scavenging whatever refuse had been discarded in the streets, looking for anything that they could use, eat, spend or sell. By the time the streets became full of orks they would be as clean and tidy as greenskin settlements ever got, if there had ever been a time when things were any different the orks neither knew nor cared.

The warboss lived in a heavily fortified building at the centre of the Ork city. It was a massive structure originally constructed by the humans who had lived here since before the orks arrived and its straight lines and regular corners were in stark contrast to the somewhat cruder greenskin constructed buildings that made up much of the rest of the city. The two-headed symbol of their emperor was still visible where the original builders had carved it above the main doors, though now there was an Ork's skull mounted between the heads; the skull in question had belonged to the warboss's predecessor. Inside, the buildings original decoration was now unrecognisable however. Human looters had removed the paintings and tapestries that had once hung on the walls before the orks had even had the chance to destroy them. Now the only decorations were various weapons and crude drawings of the warboss's many battles intended to impress into visitors the strength and wealth of the warboss as they were lead to him.

At some point in the past the room that the Goffs led Hazug to had been used by humans for social gatherings and consisted of a large open chamber with a balcony running around its entire outer edge. Now though the only gatherings that took place here were when the warboss summoned someone to meet with him, or they actually felt brave enough to call on him uninvited. The skulls of numerous visitors who had not fared well during an audience decorated the room, especially near to the warboss's massive throne where he had chosen to display the skulls of his predecessors associates who had required a little more persuasion to acknowledge his position of warboss than Kazkal Kromag was willing to give and Hazug placed his hand on his pistol, just in case it was needed to prevent him from becoming part of the décor. Warboss Kazkal Kromag of the Bad Moon clan himself was eating breakfast when the two Goffs he had sent brought Hazug into the audience chamber. Orks increased in size as they won more battles and an Ork who had won as many as Kazkal Kromag was huge, even sat down he was as tall as Hazug, who being a nob was larger than typical orks and humans himself. As a further display of his wealth human servants rather than the Gretchin more commonly seen in Ork service were waiting on Kazkal. Humans were more capable but more expensive than runts to employ, mainly due to the ridiculously long time it took for them to reproduce that limited their numbers. Hazug knew more than most orks about human reproduction but still only a little, it had something to do with the human version of a snotling dropping out of a fat human, but beyond that it was a mystery. The food had obviously been prepared by humans also, it was laid out in neat lines with decorative plants on top that were cast aside rather than eaten. As far as Hazug was concerned anything more lavish than taking a fresh squig, inserting a stick into its bottom and holding it over a flame until it stopped kicking was 'foreign muck' and bad for his digestion.

"Hazug Throatlitter of the Blood Axe clan my lord," proclaimed a human servant in the Ork tongue.

"Wot?" replied Kazkal who appeared more interested in his food.

"Your eight o'clock lord."

"Ah yeah, da sneaky git lover."

Hazug knew he wasn't popular, Blood Axes had a history of trading peacefully at times with what passed for human, or gits as they were known in polite company, civilisation and Hazug himself had spent enough time among them to learn some of their speech and customs.

Kazkal picked up a plate of food and held it out towards Hazug.

"Squig on a stick?" the warboss asked, spitting out tiny pieces of meat as he did.

Hazug was surprised. While they were wealthy, Bad Moons weren't known for sharing and warboss Kazkal was no exception. But at least it was real food and it would be impolite and thus likely fatal to refuse the offer. Ignoring the partially chewed bits of meat that had just been spat on him, Hazug reached out for the plate.

"Nice one," he said and took the biggest squig. Kazkal muttered something about 'greedy git lover nickin' da big one', but Hazug didn't notice as he bit down on the squig.

"So," said Hazug as he chewed on the freshly roasted squig and tried to figure out what the human cook had filled it with, "why d'ya want to see me?"

Kazkal got up, towering over Hazug and beckoned him to follow him into a side chamber. Hazug pulled the remains of the squig from the stick with his teeth before following Kazkal. He dropped the stick to the floor as they entered the smaller room where Hazug saw the body of an Ork lay on a table.

"E's dead," Kazkal said, "me lads found some grots pullin' 'is teef out by the river. Somebody killed 'im."

Hazug was puzzled, orks died violently every day and it was the natural way of things.

"So what? A mob of grots can take down a lad."

"It wasn't the grots Hazug, look at his chest."

Hazug stepped closer to the corpse and looked at the place where the warboss pointed. There he saw the unmistakable burn mark left by an energy weapon. Orks only used large scale energy weapons that would reduce a human or Ork to a pile of dust if they struck them, not the hand held types used by many aliens and grots were too stupid to figure out how to fire anything more than the most basic of small arms.

Hazug leant for a closer look.

"I knew it," Kazkal said, "I told everyone dat ya would start thinkin' as soon as you saw dat burn. All you do is think and wot I need now is a thinker."

"Why?"

"A question, see more thinkin. We're getting ready for Waaagh, we've a pair of Gargants bein' built and I don't want no aliens turnin' up payin' us a visit before we is ready to visit dem first."

Now it made sense, the warboss was concerned about alien spies and Hazug possessed a reputation as an Ork who not only knew more about aliens than any other greenskin on the planet, but also as one who was annoyingly inquisitive. Since his commandos had been wiped out he'd had little to do but poke about in other orks business.

Hazug studied the corpse more closely. All of its teeth were missing, presumably taken by the grots to spend before the Ork patrol drove them off. There were traces of blue dye behind the ears too; this was significant, it singled the body out as likely being one of the Death Skulls who frequently painted themselves that unnatural colour. Probably he had been in the grot shanties looking for interesting scrap when he ran into trouble. Which meant that whatever killed him could still be lurking there.

"I need to see da place where 'e was found."

"I'll 'ave the lads wot found 'im take ya. And take dis."

One of the warboss's human servants had appeared from behind Kazkal with a small bag.

"Fifty teeth," Kazkal said, "five for ya, da rest for, for... Wot are dey for?" he asked the human.

"Expenses lord," the human replied, bowing his head in obedience.

"Yeah 'spenses. Costs and da like for stuff wot ya 'as to buy."

Hazug grinned as he took the money, noticing that Kazkal had neglected to ask for him to get any receipts for his expenses.

The majority of Gretchin in the city lived apart from their Ork masters, building homes for themselves in vacant areas from whatever building materials they could scavenge or steal. Just as Ork buildings were cruder than human structures, so the dwellings built by the Gretchin were cruder still. Scraps of metal, wood and cloth made up walls and roofs held together by too few nails for a strong join, or in some cases the components were simply heaped on top of one another until the building inevitably collapsed. There were several such shanty towns scattered about the city, but the one by the river was by far the largest given its easy access to water.

Most of the Gretchin Hazug saw in the shanty town that was squeezed between the river, the docks and the human inhabited area known as Git Town to the north of the city hid when they saw him coming with the Ork patrol. The area wasn't heavily policed by the orks and the sight of a full nob leading a mob of boys was cause for panic among the smaller greenskins.

The Ork patrol took Hazug down to the edge of the river itself and as dozens of terrified Gretchin as well as the other orks watched he crouched down and began to study the area. The river here was wide and deep, the water flowing slowly southwards towards the ocean. There had been great metal bridges across the river here when the orks had invaded and the remains of one could be seen protruding from the surface of the water nearby. Of course the orks had wanted the metal and ripped apart the bridges even though that meant cutting off the portion of the city on the other bank from this one unless you had access to a boat. Now no one lived on the other side of the river, at least not anyone that the orks cared about.

Hazug could see where the body of the Ork has been dragged from the river to a point where the Gretchin had been able to gather round and search it clear of the water.

"Wot 'appened to da grots?" Hazug asked the other orks while he crouched down the study the area.

"Dey is scared of us," one of them replied proudly.

"No, I mean da grots wot found da body."

"Erm, dunno."

"Find 'em," Hazug ordered as he stood up, "I wants to know wot else dey found."

The orks spread out and began kicking in the walls and doors of the flimsy shelters in which the local Gretchin lived, demanding information and giving out beatings as they felt it necessary or entertaining. Being natural cowards it didn't take long for the Gretchin Hazug wanted to be identified by their neighbours and seven quivering Gretchin were lined up before him, none of them taller than Hazug's waist.

"Tell me about da body." Hazug said as he looked along the line.

"Wot body?" replied one of the Gretchin, "we ain't seen no body."

Hazug drew his pistol and shot the Gretchin in the head. Its skull split open and blood and brain were sprayed over the Gretchin either side of him.

"Da body wot got dragged from da river and left dese marks in da mud," Hazug said, pointing toward the tracks by the river and waving his pistol up and down the line of witnesses.

"Oh dat body," said another Gretchin whose skin was covered in muck over the sound of emptying bowels, "E woz already dead, we didn't 'urt 'im. 'onest boss."

"I know dat, but wot did you pinch before da warboss's boys found ya lootin'?"

"Erm, nothin'."

Hazug raised his pistol again and there was the sound of empty bowels trying to empty again.

"We found some scrap, dat's all," the dirt encrusted Gretchin burst out, "Its rubbish, not even metal."

"Ave ya still got it?" Hazug asked and the dirt-encrusted Gretchin nodded his head up and down rapidly.

"Show me."

"Dis way boss," the Gretchin said, waving Hazug towards the shelter that he had been dragged from.

Watched by the other orks, Hazug followed the Gretchin and waited while he rummaged through the contents of his home until he found what he was looking for.

"Ere ya go boss," the Gretchin said, handing Hazug what he had found.

The object found by the Gretchin was about the right size to be held in one hand by a human or normal sized Ork, so it felt small in Hazug's larger hand. It was made of a grey material that Hazug had heard humans refer to with the word 'plas-tik', at one end was a curved glass disc and at the other a soft rubber tube. Hazug had seen similar devices in battle, with aliens holding the rubber end to their eyes so they could see better or further. Holding it to his eye Hazug at first thought that this example was broken, all he could see was blackness. But then he felt a raised part of the casing give way slightly and he realised it was a button.

Pressing the button caused an image to appear, but it wasn't what was in front of Hazug at that moment rather it was a picture of the entire city taken from a distance. Git Town appeared in the foreground so it had been taken from the north. Hazug considered how the device had ended up here for the Death Skull to find. Then, as he saw a log floating down the river from the north he realised the truth. The Death Skull had floated down the river with the device in a pouch, he hadn't been anywhere near the Gretchin shanty town at all when he died.

"Ere, take dis," Hazug said to the Gretchin who had given him the device as he took one of the teeth given to him by Kazkal from their bag and, stuffing the alien device into his bag, he began to walk back towards the centre of the city.

"Is ya mad?" asked one of the orks as they followed Hazug, "Payin' a tooth for dat crap?"

"Nah," replied Hazug, "Warboss Kazkal gave me thirty of 'em to cover costs."

"Da old git city?" exclaimed Warboss Kazkal Kromag when Hazug told him where he intended to go. The human city to the north used to be the planet's primary settlement until the orks invaded and an asteroid full of assorted greenskins had crashed into it. Aside from any taken there by the Death Skulls as servants, no humans were supposed to be left living there any more.

"Dare's Death Skulls up dare," Hazug replied, "Dey is lootin' the ruins."

"I know wot dey is doin' dare, but why by Gork n' Mork d'ya want to go dare?"

"Cause dat's where I reckon dat da Ork died. Den 'e fell in da river and floated down 'ere where da grots found 'im and dragged 'im out."

Warboss Kazkal didn't look convinced as he leant back in his throne.

"Fine," he said after a lengthy pause, "but ya ain't takin' any of me lads with ya. Get some others."

"It'll cost and I'd like to take a mek and a weirdo up dare too."

Kazkal grumbled something about 'not made of teeth' but he beckoned one of his servants to bring some more cash.

"Ere's another fifty. Now d'ya want anything else?"

"Yeah, dare is one small thing and it won't cost a tooth either."

2

Hazug initially considered just joining one of the trading caravans that frequently travelled between here and the abandoned human city. Once there he could just hire what troops he needed, either from the caravan's guards or the Death Skulls themselves. But then he decided against this idea. The caravans were too irregular in both their timing and their routes to guarantee getting him to the city any time soon. No, what he needed to do was find an Ork who could get him to the city quickly and in complete safety. Plus it had to be someone that would follow him.

It was about lunchtime by the time Hazug reached the brew hut where he thought that he could find the Ork that he needed. It was a nondescript building with little decoration that could be damaged when the inevitable violence resulting from mixing orks with alcohol began. As was common in such places, Gretchin scurried between tables taking orders and delivering food and drink and there were probably more of them out of sight actually preparing it all. The owner of the bar was a large Bad Moon, not uncommon for a commercial establishment. He wasn't big enough to be considered a nob yet, but he wasn't very far off and running a place like this probably gave him plenty of opportunities for combat when it came to closing time and the settling of bar tabs.

Hazug saw that his assumption that the Ork he needed to speak with would be here was correct, the nob Two Heads Smasha Butt Face of the Evil Suns clan was sat at the bar arguing over which of him was going to pay for the next round of drinks. Hazug put his bag on the bar and sat down next to him.

Two Heads was a mutant, whatever spore he had grown from had been damaged in some way that had caused he to develop a second head while he was still growing in his pod. What was more, rather than merely being some cosmetic deformity, the second head was fully formed with eyes, ears, nose, mouth and, most significantly, a second brain that was fully independent of the other. This abnormality had caused him to be picked on a lot as a youngster, but being a true Ork he had just resorted to violence until he was treated with more respect. Of course winning so many fights had triggered a great deal of muscle growth and he had become a nob before he was even ten years old. Another consequence of having a second head and the one that matter the most to Two Heads was that having two heads meant that he also had twice as many teeth as other orks, making him very wealthy. Of course there were occasions when the two brains didn't agree on something and watching Two Heads fighting himself was supposedly a sight not to be forgotten easily. In spite of his wealth and undoubted fighting prowess, his deformity meant that the Evil Sun remained something of an outcast with little influence. Hazug hoped that this would make him more receptive to an offer of employment from a Blood Axe.

"Ello Two Heads," Hazug said to the Evil Sun, unsure of which head he should look at he shifted his gaze back and forth between them.

"Sod off git lover," Two Heads said in stereo, the plumes of hair from the squigs he had applied to his heads quivering as he spoke.

Hazug just grinned and held up a tooth and waved it where both of Two Heads could see it clearly.

"Can I buy you a pair of drinks perhaps?" he asked and a pair of grins emerged on Two Heads faces.

"Oi grot," Hazug said to the Gretchin serving behind the bar, "a beer for me and another two for 'im," and he slapped the tooth down on the bar. The Gretchin took the money and poured the two nobs their drinks.

As Two Heads slurped on his fungus beers, the heads alternating between drinking and breathing so that there was a constant flow of both beer and air into him Hazug explained to him how he wanted to travel north as far as the ruins of the old human city and for that he needed the services of a Nob who had access to transport and orks warriors for protection.

"So," one of Two Heads said as the other continued drinking, "ya gets me, me lads and me jalopy. But wot does I get in return?"

"Da Warboss 'as given me sixty teeth to spend and I'll give ya thirty. Sound good?"

Two Heads both paused at the mention of such a significant cash payment.

"In advance?" one head asked.

"When we leave."

As Two Heads considered the offer Hazug noticed that a young Ork was approaching them from behind Two Heads, the older orks sat at the table where the younger one had also been sat were sniggering.

The young Ork reached out a hand and tapped Two Heads on his back.

"'Ere," the youngster said as Two Heads turned to face him, "why d'ya 'ave two 'eads?"

Two Heads roared with rage and grabbed his rifle from where it lay propped up against the bar. There was the sound of bone and cartilage cracking as he swung it around and smashed the butt end into the unfortunate young Ork's face, breaking his nose. The orks at the table erupted with laughter as their comrade staggered back clutching at his face, blood pouring from behind his hands. Two Heads turned to face Hazug once more.

"Alright I'm in," he said, "but ya got to promise ya'll tell me why ya is carryin' that severed 'ead around with ya in a bag."

"So we can ask if anyone saw 'im."

"Ah, makes sense, I think."

Neither of them noticed them noticed the grime encrusted Gretchin watching them through a window.

The human ran for her life because she knew the offworlders would kill her if they found her. The sun was high in the sky, but from what she had seen her pursuers could see just as well at night as they could during the day and she did not want to still be within the city when darkness fell. Like the other humans in the city she had served the orks who plundered the ruins. She had been born after the orks had arrived here and had known no other rulers. Then the man had come from another world with tales of a glorious empire that would free them from the orks. His stories had sounding so convincing at first, with tales of fantastic technologies and of lives of greater purpose than sifting through the remains of a fallen government, but when some of the others began to ask why they should be ruled by anyone on another planet he got angry. He claimed that this world was the property of his empire and that it would be a privilege for the humans to be allowed to live in it and share in its glorious destiny. When the objectors continued to question why they should follow him, the man had the soldiers he brought with him kill them, bolts of lightning erupting from their weapons.

That was when she began to run; she hadn't really cared where she ran to at first, she just tried to keep the sounds of gunfire behind her. She had seen others run too, many of them friends she had known for many years and she saw the soldiers follow and kill them when they caught up with them. Even those that begged for mercy and pleaded for another chance to join the offworlders' cause were slaughtered. She kept running when the orks discovered the presence of the offworlders and she heard the sounds of the fighting between her Ork masters and these newcomers. She had almost died herself when she finally encountered a force of orks, not because they had tried to kill her, but because they were so enthusiastic to enter combat that they had not even noticed her standing in front of their vehicles and almost ran her over as they raced to join in the growing battle.

A battle that it seemed her masters had lost.

Leaving Two Heads enjoying his drinks and agreeing to meet him and his boys later Hazug made his way to one of the areas of the city filled with the workshops of the meks. The workshop districts were all noisy, with the sounds of cutting, hammering and the odd explosion filling the air as the mekboys built and tested their latest creations. Hazug stopped when he saw a sign that read:

MEK BATRUG
CONSTRUCTION, REPAIR AND ADVICE.
CASH ONLY.

Hazug took three teeth from the pouch Warboss Kazkal had given him and entered the workshop, cautiously looking out for anything dangerous. Immediately inside the door was a large stack of explosives, with detonators already attached, beyond that were the various projects that the mek was working on, either because he was being paid to do so or because he had just developed the urge to try something new as meks were apt to do quite often.

He ignored the various Gretchin assistants employed by the mek to fetch and carry and made for the back of the workshop where he could see the mek himself welding armour plates to a wheeled chassis. As far as Hazug could tell this particular mek had not yet begun to replace any parts of his body with custom bionic 'improvements'. He had once fought alongside a mek who needed to have his brain wound up with a key at the most inconvenient times, such as when he was involved in a battle. Hazug held out the hand containing the teeth with it open and let the mek see his money.

"Gets ya a days work," the mek said, "but da parts is extra."

"Just information for now," Hazug told him as he gave the teeth to the mek. Then he took the device that the Gretchin had taken from the dead Ork and passed it to the mek also, "What d'ya make of dis den?" he asked.

"Digital camera," replied Mek Batrug, holding the device to his eye and pressing the button Hazug had pressed earlier, "built in play-back, wide angle zoom and at least twelve million pixels resolution. Might be able to do video, but I'd need a bit longer to figure dat out."

Hazug looked at the mek somewhat blankly.

"Me no speako meko," he said slowly and shaking his head as he did so, then at a more normal speed he added, "so stop usin' fancy words and just tell me where something like dat comes from."

"It's alien, not proper Orky technology. No mek made dis, could be gits but dat's not for certain. Too many straight lines for pointy eared pansie Eldar though."

This made sense to Hazug, the dead Ork had found or stolen the device and its original owners had killed him to try and get it back. He put his hand back into the money pouch and counted out another three teeth. "Me and some lads are 'eadin' to where the gits had their city before da rok 'it it. I wants ya to come with us to check out wot else might be dare. We'll go get a weirdo to go with us too, if its hummies dey could 'ave some of dare own with 'em."

Mek Batrug grabbed the teeth and shouted at his servants.

"We is closin' up, bugga off 'ome da lot of ya."

The Gretchin dropped their tools where they were and all ran from the workshop with looks of glee on their faces at the unexpected time off. Meanwhile, the mek picked up a bag of tools and wrapped a length of chain around his waist.

"Lets go den," he said and the two orks walked out into the street. As they left the workshop Mek Batrug carefully set the anti theft explosives behind them.

"Bleedin' grots keep tryin' to nick stuff at night," he complained, "considered gettin' a guard squig, but 'splosives is cheaper."

Hazug had seen the amount of explosives that Mek Batrug had used in his anti-theft device and was about ask how much it would cost to replace a workshop that had just been explosively propelled so high into the air that it might well hit one of the kill cruisers berthed in orbit above the planet, but thought better of it.

"I'll drive," Mek Batrug told Hazug as he took the lock off the small buggy parked outside the workshop and sat in the driver's seat. Then he passed a long metal bar to Hazug, "'Ere's da brake. When I say 'brake' ya stick it in da ground and 'old on tight to slow us down and if I says we is ridin' past Mek Fratdak do us a favour and 'it 'im real 'ard like with it. 'E keeps on nickin' me customers."

As it turned out Mek Batrug wasn't a big believer in slowing down and the only use that the brake got was to strike at Mek Fratdak as he dived out of the way when Mek Batrug attempted to run him down. The sound of the bar hitting the bionic implants on Mek Fratdak's head produced a pleasing 'clang' sound and caused sparks to fly and flames to erupt from behind his ears.

"Dat's for bein' a thief ya grot lickin' sod!" Mek Batrug yelled as he and Hazug sped away from the dazed and staggering Mek Fratdak as his Gretchin assistants tried frantically to extinguish the fire on his head before their employer suffered too much damage, "Dat'll teach 'im," he added.

The weirdboy huts were visible from a significant distance; they were small dwellings of a typically basic Orkish design, but were raised far above the ground on thick copper poles to dissipate the psychic energies that tended to gather around the weirdboys themselves.

"Brake!" Mek Batrug shouted suddenly as the buggy approached the weird huts.

As Mek Batrug took the buggy out of gear Hazug stuck the bar into the dirt and allowed the drag to reduce the buggy's speed, but the rate of deceleration was not quite quick enough to prevent it crashing into the copper support of the nearest weird hut. Both Hazug and Mek Batrug were carried forwards as the buggy stopped suddenly and also struck the pole. As they untangled themselves a voice came from above them. "Who's dat crashin' into me 'ut?" demanded the weirdboy whose home they had just rammed as his head appeared over the edge of the hut above Hazug and Mek Batrug, "Ya knocked me off me bloomin' chair ya sods!"

The weirdboy began to climb down the ladder from the hut, still ranting about the damage done to the support for his home and the disrespect shown by so many orks for their elders. By the time he reached the ground Hazug and Mek Batrug had got back to their feet and were ready to greet him. The weirdboy possessed the same dishevelled appearance as most of his kind, his clothing didn't look like it fit quite right and he was adorned with bells, trinkets and talismans gathered over many years, this particular weirdboy was old, clearly well into his thirties. Hazug recognised symbols used by orks, humans and Eldar among them.

"Well," said the weirdboy as he stuck his metal staff into the ground to earth the psychic energies that flowed through him, "ya made me climb all da way down 'ere so now ya can at least tell me wot's goin' on dat needs ya to be tearin' about in one of dese things like dat," and he gave the buggy a kick, causing a piece to drop off and roll across the ground.

Hazug got out some more money.

"'Ere's two teeth," he said, "for the damage and I'll give ya two more if ya come with us."

The weirdboy snatched the teeth from Hazug and leant closer, staring straight at him.

"Go where den?" the weirdboy asked.

"North, to da ruined git city. Probably take two or three days."

"Make it three teeth, but dat wazzok dare," at which point the weirdboy jabbed at Mek Batrug with a finger, "doesn't get to drive nothin'."

"Deal weirdboy."

"Let me just get da rest of me bells den," the weirdboy said, turning back towards the ladder up to his home, "and ya can call me Drazzok."

Having experienced the mekboy's driving abilities, Hazug fully agreed with Drazzok's complete refusal to ride in any vehicle driven by Mek Batrug, though he did not say so out loud. He didn't want the mek leaving now that he had already paid him six teeth. Instead he used the weirdboy's condition to justify to Batrug why they had to walk the rest of the way to meet up with Two Heads. Unwilling to just abandon the vehicle where anyone could steal it, the mek locked his mangled buggy to the pole of Drazzok's house before the trio set off walking to the garage where Two Heads and his troops both lived and stored their battlewagon. Walking the streets of the Ork city with the weirdboy at least got other greenskins out of their path. The bells that Drazzok wore gave ample warning to those around them that his presence could make their heads explode if they weren't careful. Reactions varied from subtle changes of direction to screams of terror before running the other way as fast as possible.

When they reached Two Heads home they found that the two-headed Ork was getting impatient.

"Wot took ya?" he both demanded.

"Traffic accident," replied Hazug.

"Yeah," added Drazzok, staring at Mek Batrug, "dare is some wazzoks wot shouldn't be allowed to drive. I 'ope dat none of your lads is like dat."

Mek Batrug frowned and looked to be about to respond when the other Two Heads spoke.

"And wot's up with dis? We caught 'im creepin' about the place looking for ya Hazug," he said holding up a Gretchin that was covered in dirt. Hazug recognised it as the one he had paid for the alien device.

"Ratish wants to help," the Gretchin called out as it hung upside down in mid air.

"Who?" asked Hazug.

"Me, Ratish Brownskin master. Please let Ratish help."

Hazug had never bothered with a Gretchin assistant before. The creatures were drawn towards orks both for protection and because they shared the same greenskin attitudes that bigger was better and that might made right, so they automatically saw the larger and stronger orks as their superiors.

"Put him down Two Heads," Hazug said.

Two Heads released his grip and Ratish fell to the floor, landing head first and rolling towards Hazug.

"Ooh thank you master," Ratish said as he rushed the rest of the way to Hazug and hugged his leg, "Ratish knew you would let me help."

"I 'aven't said yes yet grot."

"Ooh please say yes master," the Gretchin pleaded as he tightened his hold on Hazug's leg.

"Geddof!" Hazug yelled as he pulled the enthusiastic Gretchin from his leg before he lost all feeling in it,

"Alright den, ya can come. But ya 'ad better behave and I ain't payin' ya."

"Ooh thank you, thank you master," and Ratish scampered into Two Heads' waiting battlewagon.

"Shall we go?" said Hazug and he followed Ratish towards the battlewagon. The armoured vehicle was typical of Ork transports, with a heavy half tracked chassis and an armoured hull constructed from randomly shaped sheets of metal and assembled to appear as aggressive as possible. This particular vehicle was armed with three turret-mounted weapons, an enclosed heavy cannon plus two pairs of twin linked automatic weapons and to improve its speed it had been painted bright red.

Rather than getting straight into the vehicle, Mek Batrug removed the chain from his waist and tied it to the back of the battlewagon so that it ran from the chassis to the ground.

"Best to keep dat weirdo grounded," he stated as some of Two Head's boys took an interest in his unauthorised modification to their transport, "I've seen 'em pop sometimes and it's really messy," the Evil Suns nodded at this, all to aware of the hazards associated with travelling with ungrounded Ork psykers.

The vehicle was spacious inside and even with the large number of storage crates stacked inside it had enough room for it to be able to carry almost two dozen boys plus the driver and three gunners but Two Heads had only fourteen under his command in total so there was more than enough room for the four additional passengers. Hazug expected the driver to start the engine up before everyone was even inside, but he didn't even attempt to do so even when all the passengers had taken seats and the guns were crewed.

"What are we waitin' for?" Hazug asked Two Heads who was now sat opposite him.

Two Heads reached out his hand.

"Money first, den we drive."

Hazug opened the money pouch and counted out the agreed thirty teeth, taking care to prevent any of the other greenskins from seeing exactly how much was left. Two Heads took the cash and then banged his fist on the side of the battlewagon.

"Lets roll," he both ordered and with a roar, a splutter and several coughs the battlewagon's engine came to life.

"Ere we go!" the driver shouted as he put his foot down on the accelerator pedal as hard as he could and the vehicle lurched forwards and out of the garage.

"Ere we go! 'Ere we go! 'Ere we go!" the Evil Suns orks chanted.

Two Heads' driver was moderately more competent than Mek Batrug at operating a motor vehicle. Added to that the sight of a large armoured vehicle mounting two automatic weapons and a heavy cannon was intimidating enough to convince other roads users to get out of the way. Orks had a simple rule concerning right of way, the biggest vehicle wins and the battlewagon was the biggest vehicle on the roads that afternoon.

Travelling north the orks' route took them through Git Town, a large sign that read

YA IS NOW ENTERIN' GIT TOWN

indicated their entry into that area. Beneath the official notice a greenskin had scrawled 'Fire at will' and another had written 'Which one's Will?' under that. Most of the humans left on the planet lived here, though there also some scattered bands of them on remote farms or places where orks had seen fit to take them as servants. The humans that lived here at the time of the Ork invasion had not put up a fight when the orks arrived, indeed as far as the orks could tell they had killed their own leaders before the orks could. The first Ork troops entering into the area had discovered the bodies of local soldiers hanging from the street lights and since the remaining humans rapidly showed themselves to be willing to work for the orks without them having to shoot or beat a few as an example first, the greenskins had let them be and moved on to where there had still been fun to be had fighting. Now the remaining humans didn't seem to find living under Ork rule any worse than the previous regime and even though there were random killings of humans by bored Ork mobs the humans here knew that the orks wouldn't punish them if they then killed those orks while still in Git Town. But if the human Imperium was finally about to try and take the world back from the orks then Warlord Kromag would likely order Git Town and its inhabitants burnt to the ground to stop them changing sides again. Even if that meant he had to find some new servants.

Even without the sign, the change in building style made it obvious that the battlewagon had entered the human area. The buildings here were better built than Ork structures and most of them had been here longer than the orks had. After decades of Ork rule, however, there were some signs of decay where windows had been boarded up and the street lights last used for lynching soldiers had been ripped out by looters for their metal.

Beyond Git Town was the northern fort that held an Ork garrison several thousand strong, another human built fortress that the greenskins had been able to take over unopposed thanks to the local uprising and convert it for their own needs. Numerous heavy guns pointed out of the fortress in all directions, ready to defend against attack. The occupants of the fortress ignored the battlewagon as it drove past. They didn't care who left the city, or where they were going. They were there only to keep an eye on who was coming into it.

Beyond the fortress there was wilderness, a mix of hillsides and woodland and the battlewagon kicked up a cloud of dust as it travelled over the crumbling remains of the ancient human road. Out here were a handful of scattered settlements, both greenskin and human and a few bands of feral orks that had yet to find their way to civilisation, but nowhere that could be reasonably considered safe territory.

Hazug and his team were now on their own.



Rather than join in the typical crude banter and boasts between the other orks Mek Batrug used the journey to study the camera more closely and by the time the orks stopped to set up camp for the night he had figured out how to gain access to all of the images stored inside. With a few instructions from the mek, Hazug was able to see the entire set of pictures contained within the camera. There were about a dozen images in total all of them showing the Ork city from a distance and taken from the north. From that angle of course the airfield and Gargants to the south were at least partially obscured in all of the images, but their existence could still be discerned. Hazug had hoped that at least one of the images would give some more information about whoever had owned the camera, but in this he was disappointed.

He put the camera away when Ratish had his supper ready and Two Heads' boys had unloaded the fungus beer from the battlegon. A sound from overhead was ignored by most of the orks as they settled down to eat around the camp fire, but Hazug looked up in time to see a shooting star pass overhead, thinking nothing of it he returned to his meal but he dropped his plate and stood up quickly when from the corner of his eye he noticed the shooting star stop suddenly, then loose altitude over the ruined city where they were heading and disappear.

"We are definitely goin' to da right place," he said as he picked his food up from the ground and got back to eating it. The other orks who had drawn weapons as soon as Hazug had jumped up also returned to their meals with little more than a few whispered comments about Blood Axes being jumpier than Gretchin. A watch was set, with pairs of Two Heads' boys standing guard in shifts while the rest of the greenskins slept. But even though he was asleep it was Ratish with his sharper Gretchin senses that heard the noise first.

"Master, master wake up," he yelled as he shook Hazug awake. Hazug sat upright suddenly and threw Ratish away from him.

"Wot's goin' on?" he demanded when he saw the two sentries with their weapons raised, both looking into a nearby tree line.

"Da grot said 'e 'eard somethin'," one of them responded, "but dare's nought out dare."

Two Heads' orks were all awake now and the boys formed a rough line with their guns at the ready all pointing into the trees.

"Maybe not," said Hazug, "but den again maybe we just don't see it."

Aside from the sounds that could be expected from a wood at night none of the greenskins could hear anything.

"Sod dis. Let rip!" both of Two Heads bellowed suddenly, raising his rifle and opening fire. Immediately, his boys all followed his example. The otherwise tranquil night was ripped apart by the thunder of more than a dozen automatic weapons being fired at random into the darkness. Even Hazug joined in, firing round after round from his pistol randomly into the woods in front of him. Only Ratish, ho had no gun and Drazzok who had still been asleep did not take part in the barrage which, even without the use of the heavier weapons, mounted on the battlegon were still able to tear up the trees and undergrowth as multiple projectiles smashed through them. It ended only when the armed orks found themselves all holding empty weapons, there was a lot of fumbling as they changed magazines, with some cursing thrown in when the inevitable jams occurred. After which the orks once again stood in a line staring into the night at the ruined tree line waiting for another order to fire.

The gunfire had been enough to wake Drazzok from his deep sleep and the weirdboy strode up behind Hazug, the jingling of his bells and totems giving away his approach.

"Wot's 'appenin'?" the weirdboy demanded as he came to a halt and instinctively pushed his staff into the ground to ground himself.

"Shh," Hazug replied, holding up his hand towards the weirdboy.

"Bah!" Drazzok explained, "If ya is goin' to shush me den I'm back off to bed," and he returned to his spot by the fire, leaving the remaining greenskins staring into the darkness.

Even the typical sounds of woodland at night were absent now, the gunfire having scared off every nearby animal. So even the slightest sound of movement would have been audible to the greenskins, especially Ratish.

"Did we get em?" one of Two Heads' boys said, "Shall we let rip again?"

"Must 'ave got 'em, nothin' could survive dat lot," another added.

"Shut it," Two Heads ordered and then, while that first head smiled, the other added, "let's send in da grot to take a look."

Ratish gulped.

"Me master?" he asked looking at Hazug.

"You see another grot around 'ere?" one of Two Heads responded while the other just grinned.

An old pistol was found for Ratish and Hazug ordered his new servant to take a look in the undergrowth. The Gretchin took both the weapon and a burning torch and while the larger orks looked on with their weapons still at the ready he advanced nervously towards the trees, pausing nervously as he reached the edge of the woods.

Ratish turned around.

"I can't see nought master," he said.

"Get in da woods grot!" Two Heads shouted and Ratish cautiously advanced until only the dim glow of his torch could be seen through the woods.

"Dare's nothin' 'ere master," he called from within the darkness, "but its all dark and creepy, can I come out now?"

"Well?" one of Two Heads asked Hazug while the other continued to stare into the night, aiming his rifle at nothing in particular.

"Aye grot," Hazug called out, "ya can come back 'ere now."

Ratish exited the woods quicker than he had entered them, continuing to move as quickly as he could until he had passed the line of orks who were just now beginning to lower their weapons. As he returned to the camp the orks settled back down with most complaining about having their sleep disturbed by a worthless Gretchin none of them observed the three figures watching them through light amplifying optics who had fallen further back into the trees when the orks had woken up. Not even Hazug, who was still looking into the trees when the rest of the orks had gone back to their improvised beds.

"Nothin' dare master," Ratish said to him from further back in the camp.

"Perhaps," Hazug replied, but he made sure his pistol was within easy reach when he went back to bed.

She crept back into the silent Death Skull camp under the limited cover of darkness, the ability of these off-world soldiers to be able see just as well at night as during the day scared her, but at least any of the other humans brought here by the orks who had joined them wouldn't be able to see her as easily.

There were no orks left, they had all gone off to fight and abandoned their supplies. They left no weapons of course, no Ork would enter battle without every weapon he could carry and in any case weapons seemed to have done the orks no good even though they were all far more familiar with their use than she was. But she knew that there would still be food and water here and she hadn't had anything to eat or drink in more than a day.

She could tell that some of the offworlders had been through here before her; even she could tell that not all of the footprints had been made by the greenskin made footwear worn by orks and their servants. They had moved through the camp, probably looking for anyone not yet caught up by the fighting, but they too had left the supplies where they were. They probably didn't find Ork food very palatable.

She found the food stores easily and gobbled down several handfuls of dried mushrooms, then she shook one water bottle after another until she found one that still had liquid left in it. She opened the bottle and tipped it up, pouring the contents down her throat, gulping it down. Thankfully it was water rather than one of the vile concoctions that the orks brewed from fermented fungus juices, she knew from experience that she would be sick if she tried to drink any of that. Her immediate need for food and water satisfied she gathered up some more provisions in a bag and crawled under an abandoned cart where she fell into a deep sleep.

"Oi grot! Where's Hazug?" Two Heads asked Ratish the next morning as his boys loaded up the battlewagon, "We's almost ready to shift."

"Da master has gone in da woods."

Two Heads paused.

"Yeah, spent ages in dare meself. Somethin' wrong with dat squig stew last night."

"No sire, the master told Ratish he wanted to take another look about in da light."

Two Heads took a deep breath and yelled into the woods, "Oi Hazug! We is ready for off, get a move on or ya is walkin'!"

Hazug heard the shout while he studied the ground in the woods. The torrent of gunfire the previous night had scattered pieces of wood and other vegetation all around and the flying debris had churned up and covered much of the ground.

But it was still plain to see that there had indeed been something there last night, heavy footfalls had created deep impressions in the ground that, even though they were now no longer clear enough to identify what had made them, were still visible to the naked eye in the morning daylight. What Hazug couldn't fathom out was why the imprints in the ground didn't seem to come from or go anywhere; instead they just simply stopped.

"Hazug!" both of Two Heads shouted and Hazug got up to return to the battlewagon.

Moments later Hazug appeared, pistol in hand but lowered.

"I fink dare was somethin' in dare last night," he said to Two Heads as he reached him, "better let da lads know to expect trouble and keep da big guns ready."

"We is always ready," Two Heads said as he raised his weapon and pointed it at the tree line.

"Dey is gone now Two 'Eads, but I fink dey is probably still watchin' us from somewhere. I need to talk to the weirdo."

"Ow are ya at lookin' for stuff?" Hazug asked Drazzok.

"I don't do lost property, dat's grot work."

"I'm finking more like following trails and finding dem wot's 'idin'."

"Cost yer another tooth," and Drazzok held out his hand, "cross me palm with enamel."

Grumbling, Hazug produced another tooth and gave it to the weirdboy.

Drazzok put his payment away and got out a small pouch which he tipped up and emptied the contents into his other hand. It was full of the bones of small animals threaded together on a length of copper wire.

"Normally I needs somethin' dat belongs to dem wot I is lookin' for, but dis time I'll 'ave to do it a bit different. Now get everyone in a circle about me," he said, "Or dis ain't goin' to work."

With a few shouted orders from both Hazug and Two Heads the other greenskins formed up in a circle with Drazzok at its centre just as the weirdboy had requested. At first he just stood there with his eyes closed letting the bones sway in the breeze, then he dropped his copper staff and cried out.

"By Gork and Mork show us da way!" and he began to hop from one foot to the other, repeating his chant and throwing in random wailing and waving of his arms for good measure. Several of the orks began to feel their hair squigs stand on end and there was the gentle sound of some nervous flatulence. Weirdboys could be somewhat explosive even when they weren't actually deliberately trying to channel the energy of the Ork psychic field through themselves. A ritual like this only made an accidental detonation more likely and though all orks liked a good explosion, especially if it involved someone that they didn't like, they weren't so eager to be a central part of it.

"Dat way!" Drazzok yelled as he suddenly stopped his chanting and dance and pointed his staff in the direction of the ruined city, "but closer dan da ruins. Dare's a small mob movin' away from us."

"Are dey gits?" one of Two Heads asked as the other tries to lean closer to the weirdboy.

"Dunno, but dey is definitely not greenskins, dat's for sure."

"I reckon dat dey wants to tell others about us," said Mek Batrug, "but dey don't wanna break radio silence." Hazug frowned and the other greenskins all looked confused.

"What did I say about usin' posh words rather than talkin' so I knows wot ya is goin' on about?" Hazug replied.

"Dey 'ave machines for talkin' over a distance," the mek explained, "but dey don't know dat we don't have somethin' similar that would tell us where dey are if dey use it."

Hazug knew that Ork spacecraft and aircraft normally featured such machines because there was no other way of staying in contact with a warboss, but the idea of using one on the ground rather than just sending a Gretchin with a written message or using prearranged signals offended his Orkish sense of right and wrong. Even the idea of using weirdboys to send psychic messages to one another made him feel uneasy, you never knew what they were really saying to each other after all and he knew of at least one Ork nob whose message of 'If you send me another mob then I'll take that hill' was turned into 'Warboss you're a grot faced pansy' with fatal results for the nob in question when the warboss did indeed personally lead another mob of orks over to him. The thought that other machines could intercept these messages did give him the beginnings of an idea however.

"How fast are dey movin'?" Hazug asked.

"Yeah," added Two Heads, seeing where Hazug was going with this, "can we catch 'em in da wagon before dey gets to da city?"

"Dey is movin' quickly, I think dey 'ave a wagon of dare own," Drazzok answered.

This puzzled Hazug, apart from the Eldar he knew of no aliens that produced vehicles that could move silently and none of the greenskins had heard any sounds of engines the previous night. Then he considered another possibility.

"Nah," he said to himself as he dismissed the idea, "dey is far too stuck up to come 'ere," then he turned towards Two Heads, "we should get movin', we needs to be at da city by the time it gets dark."

"Why?"

"Cause I fink dey'll attack den and I want to join up with da Death Skulls before dat 'appens."

"Right lads," Two Heads shouted, "mount up. We is off and I want everyone with guns ready."

The greenskins all climbed back into the battlegon, the driver not waiting for them all to be onboard before starting up the engine this time. Rather than sit inside the orks, aside from Drazzok and Mek Batrug stood at the sides, poking their weapons through the slits provided for firing from inside. Hazug took a rifle from one of the crew so that he too could take up such a position.

"Just borrowin' it," he reassured the Ork, "you'll get back later."

"Lets roll," two Heads ordered the driver and the vehicle accelerated away leaving a cloud of dust in its wake and causing the orks standing up to have to grab onto anything they could to remain upright.

Having the orks all positioned at firing points with weapons at the ready proved to be a problem. Having been warned to expect trouble the orks were jumpy and even more trigger happy than orks normally are and the rough ride caused many negligent discharges of the orks' weapons which then provoked the other orks to fire their weapons also, just in case there was something out there to hit. Hazug would have normally been concerned at either giving away their position, but he knew that their enemies already knew they were coming. But still he thought it might be a wise idea to preserve at least some of their ammunition for when they encountered a real target.

"Let's give some of da lads a rest," he suggested, "if half of 'em sit down den dey can't be shootin' at nothin' all day."

"I 'it dat rock!" protested one of the orks who had earlier fired a burst of gunfire into a large rock and cracked it as the battlewagon had driven past. Two Heads wasn't impressed at this comment and punched the Ork in the back of the head.

"E can be in the first half to rest," Two Heads said as the Ork he had just struck collapsed unconscious to the floor of the battlewagon, then he picked out five others to sit down rather than stand at a firing point, "and you too," he said to Hazug, "I'll keep an eye on the rest of 'em."

Hazug staggered across the inside of the battlewagon as it pitched and rolled on its journey across the countryside and sat next to Mek Batrug.

"Dese signal machines," he said to the mek as he sat down, "can you make us somethin' that'll let us know wot is bein' said with 'em?"

Mek Batrug thought about this for a moment.

"Yeah," he began, "but I ain't got no bits for one even if you 'ad paid for 'em."

"But if da Deaf Skulls 'ave 'em you can make one?"

"Yeah, no problem. But it would be better to just nick one from someone whose already got one, its just another one of da signalling machines."

Hazug, considered this. With a force of Blood Axes he could probably sneak into an enemy camp and steal a chair that someone was still sitting on without them noticing, but the Evil Suns tended to be somewhat conspicuous given their habit of painting absolutely everything bright red. Instead he would have to hope that they could take one as the spoils of battle quick enough to make a difference if he wanted to listen in on what the other side was saying. His thoughts were unfortunately interrupted by the sound of a small greenskin vomiting.

"Sorry master, Ratish get wagon sick."

Ratish at least had enough sense to find a cloth and clean up his mess without needing to be beaten around the head by one of the orks to convince him to do so first.

He may just be worth keeping around, Hazug thought to himself.

As the journey continued there was a growing number of complaints from the orks on watch that those resting weren't doing any work and while morale was maintained by Two Heads by smacking any Ork who complained while within reach the two nobs decided that it would be a good idea to take a break for something to eat and then swap shifts.

Once again Ratish prepared his food and it was suitably bland, a squig flattened with a rock then thrown into the battlewagon's engine long enough for the flesh to turn from red to brown. Meanwhile Hazug stared in the direction of the ruined city, which was now just visible on the horizon. Even from this distance he could make out the plumes of smoke from Death Skull campfires.

"We should go straight to the nearest one," he said to Two Heads who came joined him while they both ate lunch, "otherwise we might not get dare before dark."

"Yeah," agreed Two Heads, "at least the smoke gives us somethin' to aim for."

For the next leg of the journey Hazug took charge of the boys at the firing points and picking one facing forwards he was able to make sure that the driver kept the battlewagon heading in the correct direction. Ratish found himself an empty ammunition crate to stand on so that he could see out of the same firing point that Hazug was stood at.

"Are we dare yet master?"

"No."

"How long till we get dare master?"

"Dusk."

"Wot's dusk master?"

"When it gets dark."

"When will get dark master?"

Hazug kicked the crate out from under Ratish who fell and rolled to the back of the battlewagon's interior, much to the amusement of the other orks who roared with laughter. Even the usually miserable Drazzok managed a grin that in turn induced a random telekinetic surge that hurled a loose bolt across the inside of the battlewagon. Ratish took the hint and stayed at the back of the battlewagon, where he got wagon sick again but his time into the empty crate.

As the battlewagon neared the nearest Death Skull camp Hazug began to feel that something wasn't right. The plume of smoke didn't appear thick enough for a burning bonfire and as the light began to fade it became increasingly difficult to pick out the smoke against the darkening sky. More significantly the sky was getting darker uniformly, rather than patches remaining lighter where the campfires should have illuminated them.

"Where to now boss?" the driver of the battlewagon asked as he finally lost sight of the smoke.

Two Heads moved to stand next to Hazug.

"Yeah where to now?" one of him repeated.

"Just keep goin' straight on, if we stop 'ere we're stuck out in da open."

"Just like a Blood Axe, always wantin' to 'ide," commented one of the orks, who added "wot seems pretty smart to me," when he found Hazug's gun was pressed against his nose.

4

The sun was just disappearing over the horizon when the battlewagon reached the southern edge of the city, the regular shapes of its buildings standing out against the skyline. The driver had held a reasonably straight course and the orks were within sight of one of the Death Skull camps. It was dark, the fire was not lit and none of the vehicles appeared to be running.

"Right, stop now," said Hazug to the driver and then turned to face the other orks, "We walk from 'ere. Choppas only, I don't want anyone shootin' each other in da dark."

"Ya 'eard 'im lads," Two Heads shouted, "Put away dem shootas and lets see dem choppas."

None of the orks complained about having to keep their guns slung, they had an instinctive desire to get up close to an enemy in any case and using their one handed blades and axes let them carry burning torches in the other to see better.

"Ang on you lot, I wants ya to stay where ya is," Two Heads said to the driver and gunners as they began to climb out of their seats, "I wants ya ready to move if I says so."

"Ratish stay in the wagon too master?"

Hazug didn't really care what Ratish did, the Gretchin wouldn't be much use if there was any trouble and there were enough orks to search the immediate area.

"Yes grot, ya can stay 'ere out of da way."

The first Ork to get out of the battlewagon lit his torch from the heat of the exhaust pipe and held it out so that each of the others could light their torches from his as they exited the vehicle and with torches raised the orks ran towards the silent camp. Their torches forming a line of glowing flames that bobbed up and down in the darkness as they moved.

"Dare's no-one 'ere boss," one the orks said as they all stood around the scorched pile of wood that had been the fire at the centre of the Death Skulls camp. Around them were abandoned carts and trucks, one of which had clearly been looted for some of the supplies it contained. Water flasks and food packets were scattered around the open back ramp. Tents and other improvised shelters were all empty, their occupants long gone, while around the edges of the camp were piles of scrap metal and random pieces of technology plundered from the remains of the city. Hazug almost noticed that there was a significant amount human built furniture scattered about the camp, apparently the Death Skulls had preferred to use decades old furniture looted from the city rather than build their own.

"Yeah, dey is all gone," another Ork added.

"I sees dat," one of Two Heads responded as the other just frowned, "anyone anything to say that ain't bleedin' obvious?"

The Ork soldiers looked at one another and then shook their heads.

"Keep lookin'" Hazug ordered, "We needs to know where dey went and grab anything that looks useful while ya is at it."

The orks did not need any further encouragement to begin looting the camp, the idea of 'finders keepers' was far too ingrained in greenskin culture. Mek Batrug headed directly for the piles of scrap, while the boys instead headed for the shelters and trucks that looked like they may contain valuables left behind by the Death Skulls when they left. To maximise the speed of the search the battlewagon crew was summoned to join the others, only Ratish remained in the battlewagon, unwilling to wander about in the dark where it appeared hardened Ork fighters had met their deaths, along with Drazzok who refused to do any searching even with the promise of a share of the loot.

"Dat counts as lost property," he said, "I already said I don't do lost property," and he instead closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Gorrid was the youngest of Two Heads' boys and he was proud to have been allowed to join his battlewagon-riding mob at an age when most were lucky to be able to rid in any sort of vehicle, let alone one as powerful as Two Heads'. This was his first time out of the city since he had first entered it as a newly born Ork half a year earlier. Aware that there were not only two nobs, but also a mek boy watching him he was eager to make a good impression and he got his chance when he decided to see if there was anything worth taking from a cart near the centre of the camp.

The cart itself held little of interest, it appeared to be used to store the blue paint that meant so much to Death Skulls orks, but before he could move onto another potential source of loot he heard something move underneath it. He jumped off the cart and bent down to take a look, it was too dark underneath the cart to see anything so he lowered his torch to let the flame illuminate the ground beneath it. As he stared under cart he saw a trembling human staring back at him.

"Git!" Gorrid yelled, as he took a step backwards so to enable him to kick the cart over.

The human uttered a high pitch scream as the cart was tipped over and Gorrid raised his blade to strike a killing blow.

"Stop ya squig brain," Hazug yelled as he barged into Gorrid to spoil his strike, knocking him to the ground before he could bring down his axe and kill the human.

"Watcha think you is doin'?" Two Heads bellowed at Hazug as Gorrid was getting back to his feet, "its just a git."

The simple garment that the human wore left most of its arms exposed and a tattoo was visible near its left shoulder. The design was of an Ork skull in blue ink, the symbol of the Death Skulls clan. Clearly they had wanted to mark their ownership of this human. The ink appeared faded, suggesting that the tattoo had been applied some time ago, when the human was even smaller than it was now and that it had spread out as the human grew larger.

"Look at da tattoo. It belonged to da Deaf Skulls," Hazug said, "we should 'ang on to it just in case."

Hazug studied the human as the other orks surrounded it. It was producing a strange sound that Hazug knew had something to do with displeasure and tears were coming from its eyes though it wasn't making any movements that would suggest there was anything caught in them. By human standards it was of only modest size, a little larger than most Gretchin but nowhere near the size Hazug would expect of a human fighter. Two round growths stuck out from the front of its chest, the shape just visible through its clothing and its hair was long, common features in many of the smaller humans that Hazug had seen before. Like most humans, its hair appeared to be growing directly from its scalp rather than having being applied using hair squigs as an Ork would do, or an artificial woven object as Hazug had once witnessed on an older human which appeared to be worn purely for the purpose of amusing its underlings. He believed that humans used the words 'female' or 'woman' to describe members of their species that were like this. These were often quite small and Hazug believed that this particular human was fully grown. The distinction between these females and the larger 'males' who made up the majority of humanities fighting forces was lost on even a Blood Axe like Hazug who had encountered undomesticated humans far more than most greenskins ever would, though he did know that humans considered all orks to be male.

"Lets stick it in da back of da wagon," one of Two Heads suggested before the other added, "Yeah, we ain't done searchin' yet."

The human didn't resist as a pair of Two Heads' orks lifted her to her feet and bound her wrists tightly behind her back, after this they tied her ankles together. Satisfied that her limbs were securely bound the two orks began to drag her towards the battlewagon, the only protest that the human gave out was a scream as its hair was grabbed.

"I'll take it," Hazug said, returning his blade to its scabbard and wrapping arm about the woman's waist before he effortlessly lifted her over his shoulder, "Ratish!" he yelled as he returned to the battlewagon with his captive, "Got a job for ya." He placed the woman in a seat by the open door at the side of the battlewagon and wrapped rope around her waist to secure her to it.

"Just watch dis," he told Ratish, "but don't touch it, I needs it to answer some question yet," then he turned to the woman tied to the seat and put some of his language skills into practice.

"What are you called?" he asked slowly in the human language.

"So... Sophie."

"Don't do anything So-sophie, I will be back soon. Understand?"

"Yes sir and its just Sophie," Sophie replied in the Ork language.

That should make things easier if I'm not the only one who can talk to it, Hazug thought to himself as he returned to join the other orks in the search of the camp leaving Sophie being watched by Ratish.

Tied to the chair inside the battlewagon, Sophie looked at Ratish sat on the other side of the interior compartment. His finger was inserted in his nose, wriggling around. Even though he was the smallest of the greenskins that had found her, he was the one that worried her most. Though they could be violent and cruel at times, orks considered themselves better than humans and attacking an unarmed one was not considered challenging enough to be worth the effort unless they were very bored. Many Gretchin, on the other hand, saw the humans on the planet as competitors for their masters' affection and would often attack out of sheer spite. Sophie hoped that the order given by Hazug to watch her would keep her safe from Ratish. The Ork sitting at the back of the compartment had closed his eyes and was beginning to snore.

Ratish removed his finger from his nose and stared at what was stuck to the end of it. After a few moments of careful study he rolled it between his thumb and forefinger before flicking it towards Sophie, missing her by a fraction.

"Hey, stop it," she said, using the Ork language once again as she squirmed against the ropes tying her to the chair, "you were told not to touch me."

"I'm not touchin' ya," Ratish replied as he stuck his finger back up his nose to search for more ammunition.

"I'll scream and then you'll be in trouble," Sophie warned him.

Ratish paused in his search while he thought about this.

"Screamin' is doin' somethin' and ya was told to do nothin'," he told her eventually and produced more mucus from his nostril. Sophie took as deep breath a breath as the rope around her would allow and as Ratish flicked another sticky ball towards her she screamed as loud as she could manage.

Outside in the camp the orks stopped their searching when they heard the noise coming from the battlewagon, but it was cut short abruptly so they ignored it and got back to the task at hand. Only Hazug paused a little longer, staring back at the battlewagon before he shook his head and turned away again. Meanwhile inside the battlewagon Ratish still sat opposite Sophie, now giggling at the green ooze dribbling down her face over the rag that Drazzok had pushed into her mouth and tied in place when her screaming had interrupted his nap.

"Don't know where ya came from ya bleedin' git," Drazzok said as he went back to his seat, "but that'll stop ya from disturbin' me bleedin' sleep again," and with a blast of flatulence from each end as he sat down he fell asleep and began snoring once more.

The search of the camp revealed little more, the orks were able to find only a small quantity of cash, trinkets and ammunition for their weapons, nothing to give any indication of what had happened to the Death Skulls. Only Mek Batrug, who had restricted his searching to the piles of scrap gathered by the Death Skulls seemed happy with the return on his effort.

The orks, apart from Drazzok who was still asleep in the battlewagon and no one could be bothered waking up, gathered in the centre of camp where they relit the fire. Hazug took Two Heads off to one side to talk to him.

"I don't fink anything happened 'ere," he said, "Dare's no damage to da camp and all of da weapons is gone. Da Death Skulls went off somewhere, but den dey never came back again. I don't fink we'll be needin' dat 'ead after all."

Two Heads considered this for a moment; he couldn't find anything wrong with Hazug's explanation.

"Where'd they go?" one of him asked, "Yeah, where?" added the other.

"Dunno, but the git might. Da Death Skulls brought it 'ere with 'em so it could 'ave been 'ere when dey left. Get da lads away from the fire and keep an eye out while go talk to the git. No torches."

Some of the Evil Suns resented being ordered away from the camp fire they had relit and Two Heads had to bang some skulls together to get the order carried out while Hazug returned to the battlewagon, taking some food and a water flask with him. As he neared the open doorway he heard three things. First was a snort, then the sound of someone spitting. Nothing unusual about those, there were two greenskins inside after all and none of the Orkinoid species were shy about expelling bodily fluids. But the third sound was more unusual; it was a sort of muffled cry that suggested that someone inside the battlewagon was being prevented from calling out. The battlewagon was outside the area illuminated by the campfire and Hazug knew that it was possible someone could have crept into it while most of the orks were occupied with the search and then he remembered the scream. Drawing his blade he ran the final few paces to the battlewagon and entered it ready for a fight. What he saw inside was Drazzok still sound asleep in his seat, Ratish giggling as though he had just seen someone he didn't like get hurt and Sophie now gagged and squirming with globs of spit and mucus on her face and in her hair. Hazug was furious.

"Watcha fink ya's doin'?" he yelled, dropping the food and his blade as before lifting Ratish off his seat.

"Ratish didn't touch it master, da weirdo gagged it when it screamed," the Gretchin protested as his legs kicked randomly in the air.

"I said just watch it grot, now get out while I talks to it," and Hazug hurled the Gretchin out through the open door.

Picking up his blade Hazug cut through the rope tying Sophie to the chair and that binding her wrists. As soon as her hands were free she pulled the gag from her mouth and used her sleeves to wipe her face and hair.

"'Ere," said Hazug, picking up the food package, "eat dis and 'ere's somethin' to drink," and he gave her the flask from his belt.

"Thank you sire," Sophie replied as she took the food and water and tucked in. She felt the rope around her ankles fall as Hazug sliced it away.

Hazug returned his blade to its scabbard and sat down opposite Sophie.

"I'm a Blood Axe," he said to her, "d'ya know wot dat means?"

Sophie swallowed the mouthful of food she was eating.

"It means you're an Ork that likes humans."

"Squig crap, likin' you humans 'as nothin' to do with it. All orks like da idea of humans when dey wants someone to do some fightin' against. Wot it means is dat I know dat you humans sometimes 'as stuff we can get without killin' ya for it first. We is still better than ya."

Sophie nodded, "I see," and drank some more of the water.

"Ya belonged to da Death Skulls didn't ya?" Hazug asked.

"Yes, ever since I was very little, to an Ork called Akrad. He was in charge of this camp."

"And wot I think ya 'as is information. Tell me where dis Akrad and all da other Death Skull boys went."

"Some of the humans that served the orks were visited by another human who told us he came from another world."

"Da Imperium?"

"He talked about an empire, he said that it owned this planet and that it was coming to take it. He wanted to get us to help them and in return we would be allowed to live in and work for his empire, that things would be better that way."

"So why didn't ya join 'im?"

"Some asked questions that he wouldn't answer like why should we risk dying for an empire that had never done anything for us but he just kept telling them that his way was for the best and when they tried to leave his meetings the others who came with him killed them before they could warn the orks. I was lucky enough to escape in the panic and make it back here."

"Wot about dese other others?"

"Soldiers, they wore armour made of thick plates and hid their faces and they carried guns that shot light rather than bullets like Ork guns. I know there was a large battle because I heard the sounds of fighting." Hazug had the answers he wanted, there were aliens in the city and they had probably killed the Ork found in the river. But this meant that all the Death Skulls were dead and fewer than twenty orks were left facing a force strong enough to destroy many times that number.

"Ah crap," he said to no one in particular.

Before he could think of anything further to ask Sophie he was interrupted by Drazzok who awoke and sat up suddenly.

"Dey's 'ere!" he said.

Leaving Sophie alone in the back of the battlewagon Hazug and Drazzok rushed to meet up with the other orks, Drazzok's bells and trinkets jingling loudly in the otherwise quiet night.

"Wot's 'appenin' master?" Ratish asked as the pair ran past him.

"Just stay dare," Hazug replied.

Two Heads had positioned his orks along a low rise just beyond the limit of the light cast by the fire.

"Drazzok says dare is aliens about," Hazug said.

"Well we ain't seen anything."

"Just keep watchin' da camp, I fink dey'll 'ead for da fire."

"Why?"

"Cause dat's where dey fink we will be. Den we ambush 'em."

"Just like a Blood Axe," one of Two Heads boys commented, "let's just go down dare and 'it 'em."

"Shut ya gob," Two Heads ordered, "or I'll be the one doin' some 'ittin' right 'ere," and with that his boys became silent.

"Dis better work," the other Two Heads whispered to Hazug, "cause me lads is getting' impatient."

"Trust me," Hazug replied, also in a whisper, "dare's somethin' out dare alright, we just ain't seen it yet."

Moments later there was a noise from the camp as something was knocked over. All of the orks stared ahead of them, searching for an enemy. Hazug thought he caught just a brief glimpse of something moving near the fire, but he couldn't see anything clearly enough to attack. Whatever was now moving about the camp was somehow able to hide it self from being seen.

Then an idea hit him; he pulled one of his grenades from his belt and removed the pin. Judging the distance carefully he hurled the grenade into the fire.

Seconds later the grenade detonated and burning wood and ashes were scattered around the camp. The flames and debris in the air suddenly revealed three large and vaguely humanoid shapes that sparkled as their stealth technology struggled to adapt and conceal them amongst the spreading flames and debris. The blast from the grenade knocked the figure nearest to the fire to the ground, while the others staggered away from the explosion, stunned briefly. Even when they were revealed by the blast, Hazug was unable to identify his enemies, all he could tell was that they were wearing heavily armoured suits and carrying bulky weapons in one hand. But identification of the enemy could wait; what was more important was that there was now something here for the orks to fight.

With targets revealed the orks opened fire without an order, spraying bullets across the campsite. One of their targets was struck repeatedly, sparks flying as bullets were deflected off its armoured suit before several lucky shots found weak spots and the alien fell to the ground and died without a cry, blood pouring from a the holes punched through its armour.

Recovering from the shock of the grenade detonation, a second figure turned and fired in the direction of the orks, guided by the noise and flashes from the muzzles of the orks' firearms. Rapid pulses of light illuminated the night as their energy heated up the air as they passed through it and the shots tore into two of Two Heads boys who had made the mistake of standing on top of the rise that gave the rest cover. They

both died screaming as the energy bolts seared their clothing and the flesh beneath it. The alien weapons were clearly able to penetrate the lightweight armoured jackets worn by the orks without trouble.

Undisturbed by the deaths of their comrades the rest of the orks continued shooting as the two surviving targets moved rapidly away from the centre of the camp. Passing into the darkness they both disappeared again and the orks stopped firing when they realised that they could see nothing to shoot at. Desperately they began to search for their targets.

"Where are dey?" Hazug yelled as he looked around for a target, "Drazzok, find 'em quick."

Drazzok lifted his staff from the ground, closed his eyes and reached out with his free hand, but before the weirdboy could attempt to divine their enemy's position one of them gave his position away by firing his energy weapon again, the muzzle flash and stream of energy bolts lighting up the darkness and another of the orks was hit and fell.

"Over dare!" both of Two Heads yelled simultaneously as he spun around and emptied his rifle towards the alien.

The remaining orks all turned to face the direction of the attack and as their attacker vanished back into the darkness they fired at random but hit nothing. A further burst of fire came from behind the orks, killing two more of them, but before the orks could turn around to face this latest attack the alien's technology had allowed it to disappear once more.

"Scatter!" Hazug yelled, "Stop bunchin' up like a mob of grots!"

"Dat way!" Drazzok yelled, pointing into the darkness and the orks poured fire into the night. There were sparks as some of the bullets hit armour plate and bounced off but the target escaped injury.

Inside the battlewagon Sophie could hear the sounds of battle. She pulled her legs up against her chest, closed her eyes and put her hands over her ears to try and block them out without success. She heard screams as orks died and feared that soon the offworlders would come for her and kill her just as they had killed everyone else. She opened her eyes again and saw the gun. It was an old pistol lying on the chair where Ratish had sat, typical of the cast off weapons that orks gave to their smaller cousins. She picked it up.

Outside another Ork died as a burst of energy bolts ripped through his head and chest, but this time his killer had miscalculated how quickly the orks would be able to react and was not able to move aside quickly enough to avoid the return fire and it too fell, critically injured, as the air about it was filled with bullets. One of the orks ran forwards, screaming and finished it off with a swing of his axe that split open the armoured suit as the alien tried unsuccessfully to raise its weapon and defend itself from the Ork standing over it. For a moment there was silence as the orks searched for their final assailant, but it was holding its fire and they could not find it.

A crackling sound attracted Hazug's attention and for a brief moment he saw the shape of the target sparkling in the darkness before it disappeared again.

"We 'urt it," he called out, "it can't stay hidden. Look for it sparklin'."

The orks looked around them, watching for the tell tale sparkling of a failing electronic camouflage system. Whenever one of the orks thought he saw it he would yell and open fire, prompting the other to shoot in the same direction whether or not they could see anything themselves.

Hazug's pistol was empty and the magazine was stuck and as he tried to force it loose by banging it on a rock he didn't notice the air sparkling behind him.

Sophie looked out of the battlewagon into the night. She could make out the shapes of several orks lying dead on the ground, but most of them appeared to still be standing. She watched as one of the largest orks, the one who had stopped the others from killing her and spoken to her, the one the others called Hazug, hitting his gun against a rock. Then she noticed something strange, the air between her and Hazug shimmered and for a moment she saw the shape of one of the off world soldiers. She raised the gun and took aim, but the shape had vanished.

Hazug hit his pistol against the rock again but the magazine was stuck fast so he threw it to the ground in disgust. Instead he gripped the blade tightly and looked for something to hit with it.

There it was again Sophie saw, the shape appeared between her and Hazug but closer to Hazug this time, it was slowly getting closer to him. At the same time it raised its weapon Sophie raised hers. The gun trembled in her hands; despite having served orks for so long she had never actually fired a gun before and the weapon felt heavy and clumsy. The sparkling shape was very close to Hazug now and the large weapon it carried beneath one arm was now pointing at the base of his neck.

Then her gun went off. The noise was loud and Sophie almost dropped the weapon in surprise. Wherever her shot actually went, she couldn't tell, but it definitely didn't hit her intended target.

Hazug spun around as he heard the sound of the shot and found himself face to face with the last of the alien soldiers, its weapon was pointing straight at his face. Rather than try and push the alien's weapon aside Hazug struck, head butting the alien before it could fire. Fortunately his skull was thick enough to withstand the impact with the alien's armoured helmet and it was the alien who staggered back from the

blow. Hazug swung his blade and it made contact with the alien's neck. The blade kept moving across and the alien's head fell from its shoulders to the ground, followed closely by its lifeless body.

For a few moments the orks just stood still, looking around themselves. The grenade explosion had illuminated only three figures, but that was no guarantee that there were not more aliens around.

"Drazzok," Hazug spoke, "can ya sense any more of 'em?"

The weirdboy closed his eyes for a moment then answered.

"If dare was any more dey've sodded off," he said.

Hazug relaxed at this, then he saw Sophie standing in the doorway of the battlewagon still holding the pistol that had been given to Ratish the previous night. He strode up to Sophie and took the gun away from her.

"Watch where ya's pointin' dat," he said and then he added, "and well done ya long 'aired git. Now get back in da wagon until I says otherwise."

While Two Heads remaining boys attended to picking over the bodies of the fallen orks and pulling out their teeth Hazug, Two Heads, Drazzok and Mek Batrug took a look at the bodies of their assailants. They were clad in armoured powered exoskeletons that covered their entire bodies and featured a built in multi-barrelled weapons system. Hazug could see that they walked on cloven hoofs rather than on feet like an Ork or human. One their backs were mounted anti-gravity propulsion systems.

"Maybe dey ain't too stuck up to come 'ere after all," Hazug said out loud.

"Who's dat den?" asked Drazzok as he came over for a closer look, pushing younger orks out of his way.

Hazug bent crouched down and removed the helmet from one of the powered suits, revealed a blue-grey head with a flat noseless face.

"Da Tau," he said.

5

"Report!" O'Levath ordered as he stood up rapidly, "What's going on out there?"

The tau technical staff all stopped what they were doing and looked towards the tau sat at the communications panel as he frantically attempted to regain contact with the stealth suit team that had just been attacked at the Ork camp.

"Apologies Shas'o," the communications specialist replied, "but the transmissions from Ui'Jorvora's suit became intermittent before we lost them completely. I cannot tell if he still lives."

"What about the others? There were three specialists in that team, have we lost them all?"

"It appears so Shas'o, the orks have killed them all."

"Impossible!" O'Levath yelled, slamming his fist down on his panel.

"Is there a problem Shas'o?" came a calm sounding voice from the entrance to the control centre and O'Levath turned to see a figure in flowing robes rather than the utilitarian coveralls worn by his soldiers and base technicians entering the room. Behind the figure a pair of his fire warriors followed as an honour guard.

"Honoured ethereal," he said, stepping towards the newcomer and bowing his head in respect for the member of the tau caste that held the others in its sway, "I was not aware you were here."

"I arrived on tonight's supply ship, I wanted to see the operation for myself. Now what appears to be the problem Shas'o?"

More likely you don't trust me to run this operation and wanted to make sure we were following your orders to the letter, thought O'Levath.

"A small group of orks was detected approaching a day ago. I ordered the stealth team that discovered them to attack, but we have now lost contact with them all. I cannot understand how such crude creatures could have overcome our elite troops and technology."

The ethereal sat down in the chair located in the centre of the room where O'Levath had previously sat. The fire caste leader looked uncomfortable as he saw the ethereal taking his position of command.

"Our empire has encountered orks that are capable of employing unconventional tactics before, they are not a species to be underestimated Shas'o," she said.

"Of course Aun' Verai. I apologise for my failing."

"You have not failed me, at least not yet. What do you believe we are facing?"

O'Levath turned away from the ethereal now sitting in his chair and tapped some of the keys on the panel in front of him, causing images of Hazug's Ork force to be displayed on the control centre's main screen.

"We first became aware of these creatures last night when they made camp between this city and their own," he began, "Our information suggests that there were eighteen orks including two of their leadership caste plus one of the smaller Gretchin slaves. They were travelling in one of their armoured vehicles. We have confirmed that the stealth team killed five of the orks before we lost contact."

"And do we know why the orks are here?"

"No honoured ethereal, they could just be seeking to scavenge from these ruins like the others were."

"Or they could have been sent to investigate the disappearance of the orks your troops killed here,"

Aun'Verai responded.

"Yes honoured ethereal."

"Are we in position to implement our primary plan yet Shas'o?"

"No honoured ethereal, the humans provided to us for questioning did not have the knowledge we require. It seems that that information is known only to the greenskins themselves."

"Then Shas'o, I suggest that when you send another force to destroy these orks you should tell them bring at least one back alive. For the greater good," and she stood up to leave.

"Yes honoured ethereal, for the greater good."

Leaving the control centre Aun'Verai encountered a human in the corridor outside. He was dressed in a similar fashion to the tau technicians who maintained the base.

"Ah Mr Ryton," Aun'Verai said, "It would seem that your mission cannot begin just yet, I hope that the wait is not too disturbing to you."

"Of course not," Ryton responded fluently in the language of the tau, "though I must admit that having reviewed the information we have gathered since arriving here I do not see why I cannot just navigate the tunnels beneath the Ork city myself, I am more than capable."

"Your enthusiasm does you credit, but is misplaced my friend. To wander the tunnels randomly increases the likelihood of discovery. If you are caught in the tunnels by the greenskins you will never reach their leader, you must know the fastest route in advance. You must remain patient for now, for the greater good."

Ryton bowed, "For the greater good," he repeated, sounding less than convinced.

Ignoring the tone of Ryton's reply, Aun'Verai continued on her way to her quarters.

"Tau?" Drazzok said in amazement, "Just when I was 'opin' it was goin' to be gits."

There were murmurs of agreement from the other orks. Fighting humans meant fighting against armies that had the good manners to confront you with a large force equipped with lots of big, loud guns and plenty of vehicles to be looted afterwards. Tau, on the other hand, meant fighting against an army that would do whatever it took to avoid the hand-to-hand combat in which orks excelled. The quality of loot offered by tau was also considered inferior to that available from the human Imperium, tau vehicles tended to float in the air and were difficult to rebuild for use by orks, whereas humans used proper drive methods like tracks and wheels for most of their vehicles. Some mekboys from the Death Skulls clan even made a living entirely out of repairing and customising looted human vehicles to meet an Ork's particular needs.

"Ratish," Hazug called out.

"Yes master," the Gretchin replied, rushing to Hazug's side at the mention of his name.

"Go get da human from da wagon," Hazug ordered him, "I wants 'er to take a look at dese bodies."

"Yes master, Ratish do it now," and Ratish ran off towards the battlewagon.

"Wot d'ya expect da git to tell us den?" one of Two Heads asked Hazug.

"She's already seen da tau wot killed da other human wot was workin' for da Death Skulls. I wants to know if dese is dem."

Suddenly there was a scream from the direction of the battlewagon, much like the one that had been suddenly cut off before the tau attacked and the orks turned around to look towards it.

"Get off me!" Sophie yelled as Ratish dragged her out of the battlewagon, keeping a tight grip on a handful of her hair.

"Master wants ya git!" Ratish shouted as he continued to drag her towards the orks.

"I'm coming," protested Sophie, "There's no need to pull me."

"Ratish, let go of 'er," Hazug shouted, then he added, "Get over 'ere Sophie, I wants ya to take a look at dis."

"These aren't the ones," Sophie said as she was shown the bodies of the tau, at first she flinched when she saw the damage done to them, but she soon recovered enough to speak, "the soldiers I saw didn't wear such heavy armour and they carried their weapons like you do, with both hands, they weren't built into them. Plus there were a lot more of them, twenty at least."

"Den we ain't leavin'," Hazug said, "ow much ammo 'ave we got left?"

"Not much for da shootas," Two Heads told him, "plenty for da bigger stuff but dat's fitted to da wagon."

"I can make us more," Mek Batrug offered.

"Nah," replied Hazug, "I wants you to get to work with da scrap, see if dare's da parts to build us somethin' to 'elp find da tau." Then he turned to Sophie, "Where did ya 'ear da fightin'?"

Sophie pointed into the city, "That way," she said.

"Den dat's where we can find more ammo, we'll take da wagon in for a look."

Mek Batrug was given some time to search through the scrap gathered by the Death Skulls and Hazug ordered Ratish to help load it into the battlewagon.

"Master wants my help, not yours," Ratish told Sophie as he dragged a box of electronics to the battlewagon, clearly relishing that he had been entrusted with a task while she was being ignored by the orks for now.

Inside the battlewagon Hazug and the other orks watched Mek Batrug at work, he had taken parts of the communications systems from the tau battlesuits and was combining them with bits taken from the Death Skulls' scrap piles.

"A radio direction finda," he called it when Hazug asked and before Hazug could remind him about using technical terminology he added, "it points da way to where dey is using dare talkin' machines."

"You needs all dese parts for dat?" Hazug asked, indicating the boxes stacked on some of the chairs.

"Nah, most is for somethin' else."

"Wot?"

But before Mek Batrug could reply Ratish brought the last of the boxes aboard.

"All done master. We go now?"

Hazug was about to tell two Heads to give the order to leave but then noticed that Sophie wasn't in the battlewagon yet.

"Where's Sophie?" he asked.

"We not needs it master," Ratish snapped, "leave it behind."

Hazug didn't respond to Ratish's suggestion, instead he stood in the doorway of the battlewagon and looked out at Sophie.

"If ya's comin' ya better get in now," he told her and she dashed inside. As she sat down next to Hazug she spotted Ratish sat opposite her, scowling. She stuck her tongue out at him and there were sniggers from some of the orks.

"Let's roll!" Two Heads yelled at the driver and the battlewagon set off once more. Like most Ork vehicles, the battlewagon lacked headlights and the Ork driver drove it into the city at a speed that required he make many sharp manoeuvres at the last minute to avoid obstacles.

"Look for any signs of da Death Skulls," Hazug told the gunners who, with their heads exposed in the open topped turrets were the only ones with a clear view all around the vehicle.

The Devilfish transport touched down just long enough for the tau pathfinder reconnaissance troops it carried to disembark. The squad wore much lighter armour than the stealth team that had last been heard from here, with unpowered contoured plates covering their chests and heads. As the troop carrier lifted off again, kicking up dirt as its engines rotated around, the pathfinders paused to allow the optics mounted in their helmets adjusted to the level of light available. Then, with his troops' vision suitably enhanced, the Shas'ui in charge of the squad signalled his men to spread out in response to a simple wave of his hand. The pathfinders sprinted towards the centre of the camp, where the remnants of the campfire still smouldered after having been scattered over a wide area. One of them suddenly halted, holding a hand up with his fingers spread to indicate that he found something.

"What is it Shas'la?" the Shas'ui stated as the rest of the squad halted, crouched down and brought their weapons to their shoulders, ready to fire at a moments notice.

"I have located one of the stealth team Shas'ui," the pathfinder replied, "he is dead."

The Shas'ui ran to where the pathfinder had found the body, where he came to a sudden halt when he saw what had happened to the stealth team member, barely resisting the sudden urge to vomit in his helmet.

The suit was pitted from multiple impacts from fragments of shrapnel and fast moving projectiles, but it was not this damage that unnerved the Shas'ui, the helmet of the stealth suit had been cleaved off, seemingly with a single blow from a heavy bladed weapon and it had taken the unfortunate tau's head off along with it. "Find the others," the Shas'ui shouted, even though the communication system between his squad members would just as easily have picked up and transmitted a whisper, "quickly."

The other two stealth suits were not difficult to find; clearly the orks had made no effort to conceal them, one of the tau had been killed by concentrated projectile weapons fire, while the other had suffered a mixture of wounds. The Shas'ui was in a way comforted to see that their bodies were at least intact. Then something on one of the battlesuits caught the attention of one of the tau pathfinders.

"Shas'ui, look," he said, squatting down beside one of the corpses and placing his hand on its armoured suit where it had suffered damage, "something has been taken."

The Shas'ui looked for himself at where the pathfinder indicated. Just as he had said, part of the armoured suit had been removed, presumably after the occupant was killed. The Shas'ui knew that the missing component was part of the suit's communication system.

"Check the others," the Shas'ui ordered, "see if anything has been removed from their suits also. The spread out and try and find if any missing parts are still here."

"I think you should look at this Shas'ui," another pathfinder said, "these are not the tracks of an Ork."

O'Levath was still in the control centre when the pathfinders reported in, his duty shift was over but he could not bring himself to leave his post until the fate of his stealth team had been determined. The news that the pathfinders brought him was not good.

"The orks are gone sir," reported the pathfinders' Shas'ui squad leader told him, "and we have found he remains of the stealth team. Their battlesuits are incomplete Shas'O, it appears that the orks have removed some pieces."

"In which direction did they go?" O'Levath asked.

"North, into the city and Shas'o..."

"Yes?"

"There is a human with them, we have found tracks."

O'Levath thought for a moment. It was known that many of the humans who lived on this world before the orks had invaded were forced to come here as labourers. They had accepted governance by the orks and were used by some orks as servants; that was the key of the tau strategy here.

"It is irrelevant," he told the Shas'ui, "you are to locate the orks and destroy them."

The battle site was not difficult to spot, there were several wrecked Ork vehicles and damaged equipment scattered over the ground near what had once been a park on the outskirts of the city where the once carefully maintained lawns and hedges had long since become overgrown. Hazug took the remainder of Two Heads' boys not needed to crew the battlewagon and left Two Heads with the others in the battlewagon with its engine still running. Both Sophie and Ratish asked to go with Hazug but he declined their offers.

"Ya don't know wot to look for," he told them, then he spoke to Two Heads, "While we is searchin' just drive around, keep an eye out for anythin' comin'."

After the search party left the battlewagon the driver revved the engine and drove off as Hazug had requested, the roving battlewagon would not be as vulnerable than if it was stationary if they were attacked again. The orks were mainly interested in ammunition for their rifles which they put into sacks, but some reacted with glee when they found heavier weapons that were still functional and had ammunition for them. "Hey look," yelled one as he waved a tube-like weapon with a fat red projectile mounted at the end, "a rokkit launcha."

"Watch where ya is pointin' dat thing Krumbak," another of the orks called out as Krumbak swung the powerful weapon around.

"Shut it Slugrippa, you is just jealous of me new gun," Krumbak replied.

"I'll show ya jealous," and Slugrippa drew his blade.

"Shut ya gobs da pair of ya and get back to work," Hazug yelled. Then he heard something, it was the sound of an engine, but not the low rumble with the added random creaking of the battlewagon, this was a high pitched regular whine more like an aircraft engine, "Does anyone 'ear dat?"

The orks stopped going through the abandoned equipment and looked around.

"Dare!" one of the orks yelled, pointing to the south, "Incomin'!"

Over the ruined builds Hazug made out the unmistakable shape of an airborne tau troop carrier, the noise it produced came from the engines mounted in rotating pods on each side of the wedge shaped hull.

"Use da rokkit!" Hazug shouted and Krumbak aimed the weapon he had just found. He fell backwards from the recoil as the heavy projectile streaked skywards, missing the tau vehicle by a wide margin. He didn't get a second shot, before he could load another projectile pulses of light erupted from beneath the nose of the vehicle and tore into Krumbak.

The other orks sprayed bullets into the air as the troop carrier passed over them but they bounced off harmlessly. The carrier reduced its altitude as it turned and rather than making another run over the orks it lowered its rear door and Hazug counted six lightly armoured tau warriors leaping out. The tau formed a line to the side of their vehicle behind a low wall and fired their weapons, their short carbines were combined with compact grenade launchers that launched grenades that rather than using an explosive charge to spread shrapnel instead worked by emitting a burst of light and sound that disorientated the orks they landed near to. The noise from the vehicle increased as it gained altitude again and moved away.

"Where's 'e goin'?" Slugrippa shouted over the noise as the vehicle passed overhead.

"Never mind dat," Hazug shouted back, "just watch wot dem tau is doin'."

The orks took cover and return fire sporadically, Krumbak's scavenged anti tank weapon lay in the open and none of the orks could reach it. Without the penetrating power of that weapon, Hazug knew that they could not destroy the armoured tau vehicle. There was another burst of fire from the vehicle and another Ork died as the pulses of light blasted through the already destroyed truck he was using for cover. Hazug fired a burst from his rifle and was pleased to see a tau fall clutching its stomach and then he ducked as the vehicle fired in his direction, having pinpointed him from his weapon's muzzle flash. There was an explosion as an Ork threw a grenade at the tau, but it fell short. However it did produce a cloud of debris that obstructed the tau's vision. Slugrippa leapt from his hiding place and ran towards the tau, his axe held above his head.

"Waaagh!"

But before he reached the tau the cloud cleared and a well-placed shot from one of them struck him in the centre of his chest and his war cry was cut short as he died instantly.

Now only three orks remained facing the five tau soldiers and their armoured vehicle. Hazug could see both of the other orks taking cover behind a wrecked Ork vehicle.

"Stay down lads!" he yelled and then he looked around for anything that might help. As he looked in the direction of the tau he noticed that there was a fuel can leaning against the wall that they were using for cover. He fired at the canister and was pleased to see a stream of fuel come pouring out of the bullet holes, then he picked up an empty magazine from by his feet and pushed a rag into it. Next he removed a match from a pouch and struck it against the ruined building he was next to and lit the rag. He hurled the magazine and its burning contents towards the leaking fuel and it landing very close to the puddle.

"Get ready lads! I'm comin' over dare to ya."

There was a 'whoosh' as the growing puddle reached the burning rag, followed by an explosion as the flames travelled along the stream of leaking liquid and ignited what remained in the can, creating a ball of flame and sending fragments flying in all directions.

Hazug took advantage of the distraction caused by the blast and ran towards the other two orks, grabbing the rocket launcher and ammunition pouch as he did so. He dived the last part of the way and rolled behind the wrecked vehicle.

"Ya got two of 'em!" one of the orks shouted with glee as he peered around the wreck to see two tau corpses burning.

As Hazug got back to his feet following his dive, he noticed a bright green dot on the front of Slugrippa's red jacket. Then looking towards the tau, he noticed that wherever the air was filled with dust or smoke there was a thin green beam of light that stretched from the dot on Slugrippa's chest to one of the tau's weapons. The sound of the tau vehicle filled the air once more as it circled round for another pass, but rather than firing the nose mounted cannon again, this time a missile dropped from beneath the vehicle and, with a roar, its engine ignited. At first Hazug was confused as the missile had not been launched directly towards them, but then it performed a sharp turn in mid air and moved directly towards the orks. Or, more accurately, directly towards Slugrippa and green dot on his chest.

"Down lad!" Hazug, bellowed and he dragged the Ork down behind their cover.

"Wotcha doin'?" Slugrippa shouted as he was pulled backwards.

Hazug didn't answer, instead he just grinned as he saw that the green beam now passed straight over the orks and was instead projecting a dot on the remains of a wall behind them. Moments later the missile launched by the tau vehicle flew overhead, following the path of the beam until it struck the wall precisely where the dot was. The shaped charge warhead that the missile carried detonated on impact and blasted a hole the size of Hazug's head through the wall. Then there was a groaning sound as the already weakened wall finally lost the ability to remain upright and collapsed, producing a billowing cloud of dust as it fell apart. "Dat could 'ave been you lad," Hazug said to Slugrippa as he released his grip.

The remaining tau fired another volley of grenades at the orks and moved away from the fire, abandoning their fallen comrades, meanwhile the troop carrier, which had taken no more damage than some scorching of its paintwork now reversed away from the orks, spraying fire from its cannon. Hazug bobbed his head to get a look for himself. The three surviving tau had taken up a position slightly closer to the orks than they had been, using the rubble of a building for cover. Looking inside the ammunition pouch he found two rockets left. He fitted one to front of the launcher and took aim in the direction of the tau soldiers. He fired the rocket not at any of the tau themselves, but rather at the building they were next to. The detonation of the warhead brought down the already unstable structure and buried the tau.

"Now for dat wagon," Hazug said as he loaded the final rocket. There was a burst of fire from the Tau vehicle that caused Hazug to duck when he first attempted to take aim, but it did not spoil his second attempt. That was spoiled when he discovered that the warhead was a dud.

"Ah crap," he said as the rocket bounced off its target without leaving a mark.

Before Hazug could come up with another idea the three orks all spun around as they heard the sound of a large gun firing and a massive hole was blown in a nearby wall. Through the hole Two Heads' battlewagon drove at full speed directly towards the tau vehicle. The cannon gunner was having great difficulty reloading as the vehicle bounced across the uneven terrain, but both of the automatic weapons were firing straight ahead.

Inside his cockpit, the tau pilot was aware of the many projectiles bouncing off his vehicle but they did not concern him. The fact that a large Ork tank appeared to be about to ram him was another matter entirely however. He needed to evade the battlewagon and the easiest way was to go straight up so that the orks would pass beneath him, he rotated the pods and increased the power to his engines and felt his vehicle gain altitude. His instruments indicated that he was up high enough for the Ork vehicle to pass underneath, which it promptly did. But it did so with its weapons still firing. The armour beneath the Tau vehicle was much thinner than that at the front and sides and some of the Ork bullets pierced it. One of them entered the cockpit and after ricocheting off the inside of the armoured vision port it hit the pilot in head and he slumped forwards, dead onto the controls.

Outside the orks watched as the Tau vehicle's movement became erratic and it plunged nose first into the ground. Its engines were still running and the intakes sucked in dirt and gravel from the ground, which shredded the delicate components inside.

"Hit da deck!" Hazug shouted right before the tau vehicle exploded in a ball of flame, "Is ya alright lads?" Hazug asked as pieces of the tau vehicle landed all around them.

Before the surviving orks could answer Hazug, the battlewagon turned and skidded to a halt and Two Heads leaned out of it.

"Well watcha waitin' for? Get in and lets roll."

Hazug and the other two orks with him picked up the sacks they had filled with ammunition and ran to the battlewagon.

"Is master alright?" Ratish asked eagerly as they entered.

"I is fine," Hazug replied as he slumped back into his chair, "now lets find somewhere to 'ide."

"Ang on a mo," said Drazzok as the battlewagon moved off, "where's da other boys?"

"Dead," replied Hazug.

“So shouldn’t we stop for their teeth?” Drazzok asked and the other orks inside the vehicle all stared at Hazug.

The battlewagon screeched to a halt as the driver slammed on the brakes. The door was opened and Ratish thrown out with an axe and a sack.

“Quickly ya stupid grot, get dare ‘eads,” Hazug ordered, “and don’t forget to check dare pockets for change an all!”



O'Levath was asleep in his quarters when the communications officer woke him to deliver the report; the squad of pathfinders that he had ordered to engage the orks had been lost. This time it was not only the squad itself but their Devilish troop carrier also.

"There is nothing here about Ork casualties," O'Levath said as he reviewed the data slate he had just been handed.

"We were unable to confirm any," the officer said, "we believe that one of them may have been killed in the skirmish, but the feed was not as detailed as that from our battlesuits."

"One?" O'Levath replied, his voice raised in anger, "We lost an entire squad of our warriors and a Devilfish and all we managed to do was kill one Ork?"

"Shas'o..."

"Never mind, you are dismissed. Now get out."

O'Levath hurled the data slate across his room in a rage as soon as the other tau left. Three days earlier he had personally taken part in the destruction of an Ork force many times larger than this one without any of them escaping to warn the main body of their population and suffered minimal losses in the process, but his victory was now being soured by the repeated failure to destroy this small band of the savages. He blamed the ethereal, she had forced him to adopt Ryton's plan and while he had been allowed to deploy his entire cadre against the orks in the ruins when they had first arrived it was now considered 'too risky', her words not his, to do so again. The ever-shifting positions of the Ork vessels in orbit made large scale troop movements detectable. Even the orca transport ship that had delivered the tau ethereal and the latest supply run could not take off again without risking detection now that the Ork vessels had by chance taken up positions above the city, even though O'Levath doubted their ability to detect any movement on the ground from space even he, a Shas'O, highest rank attainable of the fire caste, was bound by Aun'Verai's orders. Damn the ethereals and their insistence on subterfuge rather than honest strength of arms. Perhaps his old friend O'Shovah, the legendary commander Farsight had been correct when he turned his back on the tau Empire when he had found himself free of the constant supervision of the ethereals. O'Levath suspected that his previous friendship with the infamous renegade was another reason why he was being kept under such close observation by the tau's ethereal caste. He had been here for time now without them watching his every move after all.

Suddenly something occurred to O'Levath and he turned back to his computer terminal, opening the file that contained the full report concerning the lost stealth team from earlier that night. He went through it carefully, line by line and highlighted the points he felt most important. The report clearly indicated that the components removed from the dead tau's battlesuits were all part of the communications systems. O'Levath couldn't see how this could possibly be a coincidence, the orks had a particular interest in the tau's radio communications. What it was he could not fathom right now, but whatever it was it couldn't be good.

O'Levath activated his personal communication unit.

"Control centre," spoke a voice through the unit's speaker.

"This is O'Levath," he said, "I want a complete black out on all wireless transmissions from this base until further notice and I mean all, there are to be absolutely no exceptions."

"Look, over dare," one of Two Heads said and he pointed out of one of the battlewagon's firing points, "Is dat wot ya is lookin' for?" the other asked Hazug.

"Could be," Hazug replied as he stared at the massive opening in the side of the building beneath a faded sign. It looked large enough to have been designed specifically to allow the entry of vehicles, "Ave ya lad take us in and we'll see if we can 'ole up 'ere for a while."

"Ya 'eard 'im lad," Two Heads told the driver, "go dat way."

The driver of the battlewagon turned sharply towards the entrance and drove through it. As soon as the battlewagon passed the threshold of the building there was a lurch as it encountered a ramp that lead down beneath the structure.

The basement parking facility was just what Hazug wanted, it was far enough away from the impact site to have survived the landing of the Ork asteroid during the invasion and was large enough for the battlewagon to enter and manoeuvre in. There were no vehicles left in it, only a few pieces of rusting metal that had not been removed by the Death Skulls who had been looting the city for years now.

"We'll set up camp 'ere," Hazug told the others, "we can stay 'idden till we know were da tau is," then he lifted both Ratish and Sophie out of their seats, "and you two make yourselves useful and make us some supper. No fire though, it'll 'ave to be cold."

"Wot about askin' da weirdboy?" one of the orks asked, "Can't 'e tell us where da tau is?"

"No I cannot," Drazzok replied, prodding the Ork who asked the question with his staff, "I can only follow 'em from somewhere I know dey've been. I can't see where dey've come from."

The driver of the battlewagon stopped the vehicle and Two Heads and his surviving boys spread out to survey the parking area, noting all the exits points. Drazzok occupied himself by watching Ratish and Sophie preparing the orks' meal and telling them they were doing everything wrong. This left Hazug alone in the battlewagon with Mek Batrug who was still busy combining bits of metals in ways that meant nothing to the Blood Axe.

"Ow's it goin'?" he asked the mek.

"Da receiver's done, but wherever da tau are dey ain't talking with dare machines."

"Wot 'appens when dey start talkin' again?"

"Da machine I built tells us wot way dey are. Den we either go that way until we find 'em, or go somewhere else and wait till we pick up another signal. Den the two directions tell us exactly where da Tau are 'idin'. For dat we'll need a map though."

"Wot for?"

"When da detector tells us which way da tau are we draw a line on da map, den we draw another from da second place and da tau are where da lines cross."

"Wot if da lines don't cross?"

"Den da detector 'as detected messages from two different places. It can't tell us if da signals is comin' from dat tau base ya wants to find or from some other tau with messagin' machines of dare own."

Hazug could see that this could be a problem; he wanted to find the tau base, not another patrol that would further whittle down the orks' numbers. Normally battles of attrition worked in favour of Ork armies, but Hazug had started this with fewer than twenty lads and a significant number were already dead. This meant the survivors would all get a bigger cut of the loot, but it made further battles more difficult.

Hazug decided to question what the mek was working on now.

"So watcha doin' now?"

"Buildin' a custom force field for da battlewagon. Da tau could 'ave some real big guns dat'll smash it to pieces if we ain't careful. Dis'll stop dat bein' so easy for 'em."

Hazug left the confines of the battlewagon to find that Two Heads' boys had finished their survey and were dividing up the large bowl of chopped squig meat and mushrooms that had been prepared for them. When they saw Hazug both Ratish and Sophie raced to be the one who gave him his dinner. Ratish won by shoving Sophie out of the way so she gave her bowl to Two Heads instead.

"Nice one git," one of him said as the other gulped down the meal.

Taking his meal with him, Hazug explored the basement area for himself and he found exactly what he was looking for. Beside a doorway that gave access to a stairwell that had collapsed long ago was a map of the city as it had been before the orks invaded. There were notes with arrows indicating points that would be of interest to the humans before that time, but although Hazug could understand human speech he could not read their writing. The map was beneath a transparent cover, the latches holding the cover in place had corroded and Hazug could not release them. However the corrosion that had sealed the cover in place had also weakened the latches themselves and Hazug instead removed the cover by simply ripping it away from the wall. The map fell to the floor and Hazug picked it up.

"I know ya is both dare," he said as he stood up again, "I'm a Blood Axe, its wot we do."

"Not my fault master! It was followin' ya without been asked too," Ratish replied, "I wanted to protect ya from it."

"I didn't mean any harm," Sophie protested, "anyway what could I do?"

"Yeah Ratish, wot could she do?"

Ratish tried to think of an answer, he had just suggested that an Ork nob was at risk from an unarmed human that was perhaps only a tenth of his weight. Ratish decided that grovelling was the best course of action and he dropped to his knees.

"Ratish is sorry master, so sorry. Ratish didn't want to insult master, but Ratish just wants to 'elp master."

"Sod off grot, get back to da camp now."

"Yes master, Ratish go now," and the Gretchin ran off in the direction of the Ork camp.

Hazug opened out the map on the ground and took a stick of charcoal from his pocket.

"I can't read human writin'," he told Sophie, "so I needs ya to take a look at dis 'ere map and tell me were we is."

Sophie crouched by Hazug's side and looked at the map.

"There," she said pointing towards an arrow that was labelled 'YOU ARE HERE' in the human language, "that's what the labels says."

Hazug marked the end of the arrow with a cross and then picked the map up again and rolled it up.

"Good," Hazug said as he tucked the rolled up map under his arm, "Now I want to take a look at where we are. Is ya comin'?"

"Where to?"

"Back to da camp of course," he said.

In his quarters Kyle Ryton, formerly Major Ryton of the intelligence division of the fifty third Juronian Rifle Regiment of the imperial guard had also been passed word of the tau's latest defeat at the hands of the band of orks and he was not pleased.

"What is it Mr Ryton?" Aun'Verai asked when she answered her communication unit.

"O'Levath has failed again, he has lost another squad of troops and the orks are still roaming the city around us. He even lost a devilfish this time."

"I see and what do you suggest?"

"Let me go to the Ork city now, we know the ways into the Ork tunnels and I can find my way into the warboss's fortress myself."

"We have been over this before Mr Ryton, without an exact route through the tunnels there is too much chance of discovery. This mission is too important to take such chances, there are over thirty million orks on this world and unless we can reduce their numbers greatly we cannot..."

"Ethereal..."

"Honoured ethereal."

"Of course I apologise. Honoured ethereal, I planned and carried out many covert infiltration missions when I was in the imperial guard and I was certified as an expert in both armed and unarmed combat. A few stupid Gretchin in a tunnel..."

"Mr Ryton I am well aware of your history. That is why I supported your plan over the opinions of many of the fire caste when you first presented it. But you should remember that you are not in the imperial guard any more, you work for us now and you will do as you are told. For the greater good," and Aun'Verai broke the link.

Ryton was furious, O'Levath's soldiers couldn't even deal with a single mob of orks that he'd known about for an entire day now and the ethereal wouldn't listen to reason.

"That bitch is going to finish us," he said to his assistant, one of the few humans on this world he had been able to recruit to the tau cause.

"I thought you said the ethereals governed with benevolence and wisdom," the assistant replied, quoting from one of Ryton's recruitment speeches.

"Govern yes, but they aren't military tacticians. They have some sort of hold over all of the other castes, but I still haven't figured out what it is; the others just follow them for some reason. I planned this entire operation and now after months of lobbying to get this project approved by the ethereals I'm being ordered around by someone with no combat experience whatsoever," he responded as he poured himself an alcoholic drink and then downed it in one.

The other human considered Ryton's last comment.

"Their commander is a tactician isn't he? And I saw him fighting against the orks who brought me here. He defeated them easily but you don't seem to think much of him either."

"The tau rely far too much on their technology for my liking, before I left the imperial guard I fought alongside real soldiers who knew that an army is made of men, not machines. I've fought against orks several times, all you need to do is show them something shiny and they'll all charge straight at it. Then you hit them on their flanks, they have no tactical ability at all."

"You sound like you regret changing sides."

"Have I ever told you about the priests, the commissars and the inquisition? I regret nothing, now leave."

"Yes sir, for the greater good," Ryton's assistant spoke, adding to traditional tau phrase to his statement. "Whatever."

The assistant left and Ryton began to study the map of the Ork city on his wall, paying particular attention to the areas inhabited by the smaller Gretchin. He took a box from his desk and opened it, inside was a bulky pistol and the cylindrical energy cell, both with their original imperial markings defaced. He had gone to considerable trouble to obtain this weapon and if he couldn't use it on the orks then he considered that he might just have to find an alternative target. He could think of two of them off the top of his head. Then he poured himself another drink.

"For the greater good my arse," he said to himself.

O'Levath couldn't get back to sleep after hearing about the latest defeat, not only did he have an ethereal breathing down his neck but he had been made aware by the communications staff that the human who had come up with the plan he had been forced to adopt was trying to undermine him. Instead he studied the resources he had remaining to him. His pathfinders and stealth team were lost along with an armoured personnel carrier and its pilot. Yes, they had killed almost half of the Ork warband in the process but there were many millions more orks on the planet while he now had less than a single cadre remaining and only

five battlesuits including his own. He wasn't willing to throw away the lives of any more of his men in more failed ambushes, but the orks could not be permitted to continue to roam the city until they discovered the tau base. He could request reinforcements from the tau fleet hidden in the debris cloud at the edge of the system at any time, but that would mean breaking the communications blackout to arrange another drop and then waiting for the Ork vessels in orbit to be in the right places to allow a ship to slip through undetected. That could take days and O'Levath didn't think he had that long.

Of course he still had plenty of drones and they were expendable, but their artificial intelligence controllers lacked the imagination and adaptability of real soldiers and maintaining a direct command link to them would mean broadcasting the wireless signals that the orks seemed to be interested in intercepting. There was a knock at his door.

"Enter."

Aun'Verai entered the room and sat down, her bodyguards remained positioned at the doorway.

"I am not disturbing you I hope Shas'o," she said in her usual calm voice.

"Of course not honoured ethereal, I couldn't sleep, I was studying our situation. How may I help you?"

"I have just tried to contact our fleet, but the control room staff tell me that you have ordered a complete communications black out."

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because I think that the orks are trying to intercept our communications, they salvaged parts from our stealth team."

"But I have an urgent requirement to make contact with our fleet."

"May I ask what for honoured ethereal?"

"I am growing concerned about Mr Ryton."

"In what way?"

"He is becoming impatient and impatient people make rash decisions."

"My experience of humans is that they commonly behave in such a manner honoured ethereal."

"Maybe so Shas'o, but I believe that his behaviour goes beyond what is normal for humans, he could threaten our mission. I had hoped to request a replacement."

"He put a great deal of effort into planning our mission honoured ethereal and he is eager to see it through."

"But he is not willing to wait until we have all the information that we need, this system is important to us Shas'o but Mr Ryton sees only the glory of victory."

"So what do you want me to do about it? Ryton is not under my command and I will not allow you to break radio silence until we have dealt with the orks in this city. In any case I have been evaluating how long it would take to get another ship here and I do not expect it to be possible for the foreseeable future, the movements of the Ork ships in orbit suggest that they will remain overhead for some time yet."

Aun'Verai was clearly disturbed by this information, while O'Levath found her discomfort pleasing

"Then find a reason to keep him away from any transport," Aun'Verai said, "he must not be allowed to make his own way to the Ork city until I allow it."

"Simple, will there be anything else honoured ethereal?"

"Yes Shas'o. Hurry."

"Hurry?"

"Get us the information we need, then we can send Mr Ryton on his final mission."

"His final mission?"

"Yes, his survival will not serve the greater good. I trust you can arrange for that Shas'o."

"Of course, for the greater good honoured ethereal."

"For the greater good Shas'o."

Aun'Verai got up and left O'Levath's quarters.

Well, thought O'Levath, things may just be looking up. He made note to step up the monitoring of the humans on the base, deactivated his computer terminal and returned to bed; sleep wasn't so difficult to achieve any more. By the time he awoke he had an idea.

It was still dark when the doorway of the tau base opened and the first squad of tau troops emerged. They moved southwards, pausing when they came to the first cover available, then the squad leader raised his hand to signal back to the base. On his signal another squad appeared, followed by two walking machines that stood twice the height of the tau. On their shoulders they carried pairs of long barrelled heavy weapons, while their arms mounted smaller weaponry. A third squad of tau infantry emerged from the base and moved up behind the first two. The walking machines continued to move south while the infantry squads moved around them providing cover. Apart from the sounds of footfalls and the motors in the walking machines' legs this was done in complete silence, the soldiers did not speak with each other or send any

messages to the base. The first of these was down entirely to the soldiers' professionalism over any instructions they had received, however their orders were quite specific on the last part.

While the tau troops departed, their commander was reviewing his personnel files. His men were soldiers, not assassins, but in Ryton's case O'Levath was quite sure that he would be able to find one he could trust to make sure that the human's mission to the Ork city would be a one way trip. He briefly considered killing Ryton himself, but it would look suspicious if he was to leave the base and the human had to die before he returned. No, O'Levath would need the services of an otherwise anonymous Shas'la soldier for this assignment.



When morning came Hazug decided that he wanted to get a look at the city and assess their situation therefore, followed by Ratish and Sophie, he located an intact stairwell and made his way up to the roof. Holding the map out in front him, Hazug tried to match it up with what he could see of the city. Many buildings had been reduced to rubble by the shock wave that occurred when the piloted asteroid that the invading orks had used as a landing craft had struck it, but many more had survived relatively intact, with the more heavily damaged sections of the city being those immediately surrounding the asteroid itself. Much of the asteroid was still visible, both the rocky mass of the asteroid itself and also what remained of the modifications that had been made by the orks themselves that were necessary to transform it into a partially viable spacecraft.

“Ere, grab dis someone,” Hazug said holding out the map behind him without looking. Both Ratish and Sophie reached out to take the map, but Ratish was slightly quicker and he snatched it away from Hazug’s grip before Sophie could get hold of it herself.

Acting as though she wasn’t bothered, Sophie folded her arms and stood beside Hazug who had removed the tau viewing device and a sheet of paper from his bag. The paper had been marked on each side with Ork glyphs by Mek Batrug providing Hazug with instructions on how to access the device functions that the mekboy had figured out so far.

Holding the device up to his eye Hazug looked out over the abandoned city. The device gave Hazug the ability to zoom his view in and out, but even with the instructions provided by mek Batrug he had trouble finding a level of magnification that he liked.

“What can you see?” Sophie asked him as he continued to sweep the device about, searching the city from their vantage point on the roof.

“Nought interestin’,” Hazug replied. He had hoped to see some sign of the tau, but even from here the only none human structure that he could see was the crashed asteroid poking up on the horizon. Wherever the tau had established their headquarters they had hidden it well.

Then for a moment, Hazug caught a glimpse of movement; something slipped across a street between two intact buildings and then quickly disappeared before Hazug could get a good look at it. He manipulated the viewing devices controls again, trying to get a better look, but whatever had moved was no longer there.

“Well I reckon dat its breakfast time,” Hazug said as he put the viewing device and instructions away and took the map back from Ratish, “so we’ll go back to camp and ya can both tell me why I ain’t got anythin’ to eat yet.”

“So wot ‘appens today boss?” one of the Evil Suns orks asked Two Heads as they were eating breakfast.

“Good question,” Two Heads responded and he turned to Hazug who had just returned from his wandering with his servants, “Ya is payin, so wot are we doin’ today?”

“Waitin’,” Hazug told him, “until we know where da tau is ‘idin’ we ‘ave to ‘ide too.”

“Den we smack ‘em?” another Ork asked, Hazug knew this one to be called Kutbit and he was one of those who had been with him when they fought against the tau patrol with the troop carrier the previous night.

“Dat’s right Kutbit, den we smack da tau.”

There was a cheer from the orks.

“In da mean time lads,” Two Heads added, “I’m sendin’ some of ya out to get us more supplies, but you ‘eard wot Hazug said about us ‘idin’, so you’ll ‘ave to keep ya ‘eads down.”

“Which means,” interrupted Hazug, “dat you’ll ‘ave to leave those fancy red jackets ‘ere.”

“Aw boss,” one of the orks complained. Red was an important colour to orks and even more so to those of the Evil Suns clan like Two Heads and his boys. Only the youngest or poorest Evil Sun, who couldn’t afford the higher cost of red clothing and dye would wear anything else. Hazug reached out and hit the Ork.

“Right Skarit,” Two Heads said to the Ork who had just complained, “you ‘as just volunteered, Gutnak you go with ‘im. We wants food, water and anythin’ else that looks like we can use it.”

Still complaining, the two orks removed their red jackets and emptied their backpacks to provide room for whatever they found. Then taking just a rifle and hand weapon each they made their way out of the car park.

As the pair made their way through the deserted human city, they saw only occasional signs of the Death Skulls that had made their livings scavenging the ruins and even the body of a human who had been shot in the back by tau weaponry. Of what they had been asked to find they could only locate small furry animals that were a common sight in human areas. They were difficult to catch however, because they combined speed with agility and a habit of running into drains when chased. The two orks instead had to try driving the creatures towards each other before hitting them with their rifle butts.

"Bleedin' Blood Axe git lover," Skarit said as he clubbed another rat and scooped its body up into his backpack, "just cos 'e doesn't wear red 'ave we got to go without it too?"

"E said it was so we wouldn't be seen by da tau."

"Wot's wrong with getting' seen, 'ow else do we kill 'em?"

"Ow should I know," Gutnak said as he grabbed hold of a rat just as it was about to escape through a hole in a wall and bashed its head against the structure, "Dare's another one for da sack," he added. Then, as the pair rounded a corner, both of the orks of the orks suddenly stopped and stared straight ahead of them. "Core!" Skarit exclaimed, while Gutnak just dashed forwards. There, in the middle of the street ahead lay an Ork battlegwagon. Then Skarit added, "Ang on Gutnak, wait for us," and he too ran towards their find. The battlegwagon had been facing the orks when they first saw it and from their angle there had been no obvious signs of damage. It was only as they got closer to it that they saw the great hole torn through it. On one side, where it faced a side street was a single small hole, about the size of an Ork's head, whereas on the side opposite a massive gap had been ripped in the vehicle's armour plating. The edges of this hole were bent outwards, indicating that whatever had caused the damage made the small hole as it entered the vehicle before creating the larger hole on its way out. Fragments from the battlegwagon could be seen embedded in the wall of the building next to it.

"Let's take a look inside," Gutnak suggested as he clambered up through the larger exit hole, then cursing as he placed his hand on the sharp edge of the gap.

Inside the battlegwagon, Gutnak just stopped and stared around him while Skarit followed him through the hole. Whatever had come through the entry hole had clearly struck something volatile on its way through the Ork vehicle, because the inside of the battlegwagon was entirely burnt out. Vague shapes that may have once been the battlegwagon's crew or passengers could be made out approximately, but it was impossible to tell exactly where their remains ended and the scorched vehicle interior began.

"Don't waste ya time," Skarit said as he saw Gutnak try to prise open a skull to see if there were any teeth left in it, "dey'll be all burned up like da rest of 'em is."

"Ain't no 'arm in checkin'," Gutnak replied before commenting, "I don't supposed dat da mek could fix dis up could 'e?"

"Well it is still in one piece mainly," Skarit said, looking around the battlegwagon's interior for himself, "so it probably just needs a couple of parts."

"And all da burned bits sweepin' out," Gutnak suggested.

"Well obviously dat'll 'ave to be done," Skarit replied, "but dat's grots work."

The two orks nodded in agreement when they heard a strange humming sound coming from around a corner ahead of them.

"Get down," Gurnak told Skarit and the two orks quickly took cover, staring out of one of the battlegwagon's vision slits.

The sound became louder and a disc like object appeared floating around the round a corner. Neither of the orks had seen anything like the object before, it hovered in the air producing only the faint hum that had given away its presence and grew louder when it moved, whatever force was keeping it aloft occasionally kicking up dirt from the ground beneath it. The mysterious disc was the same colour as the tau vehicle that the orks had destroyed the night before and it appeared to mount a pair of short-barrelled weapons beneath it.

Skarit took aim with his rifle.

"Don't know wot it is," he said, "but it looks da same as tau stuff."

"Wait," said Gutnak, "it 'asn't seen us."

Skarit lowered his weapon, grumbling as he did so. The two orks watched as the floating disk moved away and Gutnak began to get up.

"Where is ya goin'?" Skarit asked.

"I'm goin' to follow dat floatin' thingy. Hazug wants to know where dare base is and dat may be goin' dare."

Skarit got up also and as the tau disc disappeared around another corner the orks jumped out of the wrecked battlegwagon and ran after it. As they reached the corner Skarit grabbed Gutnak to hold him back before they went around it.

"If ya wants us to start actin' like Blood Axe wazzoks, we may as well do it proper like," Skarit said as he took a quick look around the corner, "it stopped again, I fink it's lookin' for somethin'."

"Yeah, us. Lucky we saw it first. Now come on let's keep after it."

The disc continued to move in the same way, turning a corner and then pausing for a few moments before moving on. Meanwhile the two orks followed at a distance, taking a quick look around corners to see if the disc was there and moving after it only when they heard the humming sound of its engines increase to indicate that it was moving again. In this manner they covered a large distance until they encountered a second floating disc.

"Ow many of dose bleedin' things are dare?" Skarit said as they watched the two discs floating side by side, then added "get back!" as one of the two discs began to move in their direction.

"Its comin' we need to hide.

"Where?"

The two orks looked around for somewhere to conceal themselves before the tau disc reached the corner and saw them.

"Up dare," Skarit said, pointing at a point immediately above their heads, one storey up on the building they were stood beside there was a window which had long since lost the pain of glass that had at one time held, "Give us a leg up Gutnak."

Gutnak helped Skarit to reach up to the window and pull himself in, then Skarit reached down and pulled up his companion. The two orks stood inside the ruined room, which appeared to have once been a human residence. They heard the familiar humming sound of the tau disc as it came around the corner and they saw the tip of the antenna located on top of the disc outside the window as the disc came to a halt again. Gutnak edged towards the window and took a quick look outside; there was just the one disc outside, below the level of the window but close to it.

"I've 'ad enough of dis crap," Skarit said, "Let's take da thing out."

"Wot if da other one 'ears and comes to 'elp dis one?"

Skarit slung his rifle and drew his blade, "It won't if I do da Orky way," he said, grinning.

Moving carefully Skarit climbing into the window and judged the distance to the disc carefully, then with his blade still in his hand and, suppressing the urge to yell out a war cry as he did so, he leapt onto the disc and grabbed its antenna to steady himself. The tone of the humming from the disc changed suddenly as its engine tried to maintain its altitude with the sudden addition of the weight of the adult Ork now clinging to the top of it and it wobbled as it began to sink towards the ground. With a sharp 'snap' the antenna broke from the tau disc causing Skarit to lose his balance and he toppled from the disc. He rolled as he hit the ground and looked up to see the disc aiming the two guns mounted beneath it directly at him. There was a flash of light as the weapons discharged but the pulses went wide owing to the simultaneous impact of Gutnak who had copied Skarit's leap from the window onto the disc. Without the antenna to hold onto he just feel straight off again, but as the disc turned to face this new threat Skarit was able to get back to his feet and swing his blade. There were sparks and a high-pitched screech as the weapon's edge was drawn across one of the disc's weapons. The disc move backwards at it turned to face Skarit once more, but now Gutnak had got back to his feet and the disc was now facing two adult orks with weapons in hand.

The disc fired, but the weapon Skarit had struck failed to function and only the other one fired. Skarit grunted as the bolt of energy clipped his arm. A human would have most likely screamed and dropped to the ground clutching at the wound, but Skarit was an Ork and an Ork wasn't going to be slowed down by anything that hadn't even managed to strike the bone or take off a limb. Instead like a true Ork he went on the attack once more. He swung his weapon again, this time in an upwards arc that brought it up from beneath the disc and struck the central column that was located there, the other weapon fell away as its mounting was completely severed. Skarit's blade did not stop moving there however and it smashed into the electronics on the underside of the disc. There were more sparks, accompanied by a flame as the blade struck home before the disc fell to the ground with a clatter and then it was silent.

Skarit dashed to the corner and looked around it, the second disc was nowhere to be seen.

"See I told ya," he said to Gutnak, "it worked just fine by doin' it the Orky way. Now just never tell anyone we 'id and jumped out like Blood Axes."

The two orks now took a closer look at the disc.

"Okay we got it, but wot do we do with it now den Skarit?"

"We was told to gather anythin' that could be useful and I'll bet me entire mouth dat da mek boy can find a use for dis. Now pick up the bits that dropped off it while I get the big bit on its side."

"Why on its side?" Gutnak asked as Skarit lifted one side of the disabled disc so he could stand it on its rim.

"Well it's shaped like a wheel ain't it? I wants to roll it of course, I ain't bleedin' carryin' it."

To the south of the city the tau force had reached its destination. Ahead of them lay only the road that led to the Ork capital, the route taken by the Ork warband now at large in the city behind them.

The two massive battlesuits turned back towards the city and steadied themselves, ready to fire either their massive shoulder mounted rail guns or the secondary missile systems mounted in their arms immediately should a target appear, while the three shas'uis dispersed their men and had them dig in. There was a thick layer of dirt on the ground here that the tau could dig into without specialist machinery. When the defensive positions were dug, each soldier unpacked a square of a silver coloured synthetic fabric that they then joined together with those of other members of their squads to form larger sheets. The sheets were propped up over the freshly dug firing positions and connected to a power source, at which point the silver colour of the fabric changed to instead project an image of undisturbed earth. When the tau took up positions in the

trenches beneath the sheets they became completely invisible from the air. One of the squads expanded their trench, digging deeper until there was enough room to allow the battlesuits to join them and the entire force was then concealed.

"Wot's it doin' now?" demanded Hazug as the device constructed by Mek Batrug to determine the location of the tau from their communications indicated yet another source of a signal. The device had been behaving oddly all day, the dial mounted on top of it spinning around as it registered one signal after another, each time from a different direction. The signals were always short, far too short to be anybody holding a real conversation. At first this hadn't bothered anyone, Ork technology was notoriously quirky at the best of times and Mek Batrug himself had initially put these signals down to "teethin' problems," and sought to adjust the machine, but it continued to register transmissions from many different places. "I reckon dat da tau 'ave sent out machines to look for us," said Mek Batrug as the device pointed in yet another direction, "and dey are all talking to each other. Machines can talk real quick like to other machines."

Hazug didn't like the sound of this; as much as he hated the idea of machines carrying messages from one living thing to another the idea that they could just start having entire conversations on their own was even worse.

"So your machine's no good den? We can't tell when its da tau base doin da talking."

"Da signals from da tau base will be stronger, cause dey will 'ave a bigger talkin' machine and da tau themselves will take longer to talk to each other. I need to add some more bits so we can see 'ow strong da signal is," and with that Mek Batrug began to sort through the remaining parts he had recovered from the Death Skull camp.

One of Two Heads' orks came running up to Hazug.

"Two Heads wants ya," he said, "We've spotted somethin' outside."

Hazug followed the Ork back to where Two Heads and the rest of his boys still in the car park were looking out of a narrow window. Two Heads and his boys had constructed a raised platform from a plank laid out between two empty crates from the battlewagon to raise them up high enough to see out of it. Hazug stood next to Two Heads as the Ork who had brought him clambered on to the platform after him and Hazug felt the platform wobble slightly under the combined weight of all the orks. Though the window was high up in the wall it was at ground level on the outside of the building and it offered a wide view of the street outside. "Wot da bleedin' 'ell is dat?" Two Heads asked, indicating the disc like object hovering in the middle of the street.

"Dunno for certain," replied Hazug, "but I reckon dat I may 'ave seen one of 'em when I was up on da roof before breakfast and da colour makes it look like somethin' belongin' to da tau. Da mek boy says dare could be tau machines all over da city talkin' to one another real fast and dis could be one of dem."

"Can we shoot it den boss?" an Ork enquired, lifting his rifle to his shoulder and pointing it at the floating disc.

Hazug thought about this for a moment.

"Nah better not lad, when da tau notice its gone dey may come looking for it and if dese things really are talkin' all da time den da tau know exactly were it is right now," and with a look of disappointment on his face, the Ork lowered his weapon.

"So wot do we do?" Two Heads asked, "Follow it?"

Hazug paused for thought again; if they followed the alien machine then it could lead the orks to the tau base. But if there really were more of these discs floating around the city it was possible that one of them could see the orks before they found the base and in any case they were two boys short while Skarit and Gutnak were still out foraging.

"Nah," he said, "we just let go for now. We'll wait for da other lads to get back and see wot Mek Batrug can come up with to sort out who's talkin' to who out dare. Keep an eye out for more though and let me know which way dey go when ya see 'em."

Hazug was about to climb down from the platform when the plank creaked.

"Does dat sound good to ya?" one of Two Heads asked and the other head shook from side to side just as the plank split and then snapped. The orks collapsed in a heap on the floor, cursing one another as they landed on top of each other. Threats and promises of revenge were issued by most. As he got back to his feet and dusted himself off Hazug heard the sound of cackling laughter from the direction of the battlewagon where Drazzok was finding the site of the orks untangling themselves hilarious. He was still laughing as Hazug walked past him to speak with Mek Batrug.

"We just saw a tau machine outside, it was just floatin' about out dare. Don't think it saw us though."

Mek Batrug didn't look up from his work when he responded.

"Might be useful to 'ave one to study, den maybe I could figure out where dese things 'ave been to. They probably keep dat information inside 'em. But gettin' at it'll take time."

“Finish wot ya doin’ first mek, den we’ll see about getting’ ya somethin’ new to play with.”
Hazug turnaround to see that Two Heads and his boys had succeeded in separating themselves and were looking for materials to help with rebuilding the platform so that the watch he had requested could be maintained.



O'Levath was disappointed at the information coming back from the drones he had deployed to search the city. The base was still maintaining a communications blackout, but he had allowed the drones to communicate using coded burst transmissions that he was confident would be unintelligible to the orks if they were listening in as he suspected they were attempting to do. Sitting at his command station he looked through the logs of messages sent in by the drones. He noticed that one of them had stopped reporting in. "Why has this drone not reported in again?" he demanded indicating the drone he was interested in, "What was its last transmission?"

A technician accessed the detailed logs from his station.

"Shas'o, it appears that the drone sent an unscheduled transmission, during which it reported being struck by a heavy object from above immediately before it stopped transmitting. There is nothing in the video signal to indicate what the object was. It could have been rubble, many of the buildings that remain are unstable and the drone's engines could have triggered a collapse. Should I order other drones to investigate?"

"No, I do not want radio silence broken with a transmission from here. You're probably right; the buildings have not been maintained. Its nothing to worry about."

"More problems commander?" Ryton said as he entered the control centre.

"Not at all, its just that I won't be prompted into taking action that could put us at risk before I have all of the pertinent information. Now why are you here?"

"I was just down by the vehicle hangar and I was denied access by the security drone."

"So?"

"So why was I denied access? My role in our mission demands that I have access to transport."

"Not yet it doesn't Mr Ryton. You will be provided with transport to take you to the Ork city only when Aun'Verai says so and not before. Until then you have no reason to be anywhere near the vehicle hangar. Given that there are orks wandering the city I have decided to step up security, which means restricting access to all base entrances to only those who absolutely have to be near them, which as I have already said does not include you or any of the few humans out of the many you promised us for that matter. Now we are busy here Ryton and since this room another place that your mission does not require you to be in, it would be better if you left us to get on with our work."

Ryton turned and stormed out of the control centre, almost barging into Aun'Verai herself on her way into the command centre as he did so. The pair of fire warriors acting as her honour guard raised their weapons instinctively to protect her, lowering them again when Aun'Verai waved for them to stand down and Ryton continued on his way without speaking to the ethereal.

"Honoured ethereal, it appears your warning about Ryton's behaviour were timely indeed. He has just attempted to access the vehicle hangar," O'Levath said without bothering to make sure that Ryton was out of earshot first.

"Indeed Shas'o, now what is our situation? Have you made much progress in locating the orks?"

"No honoured ethereal. I have deployed most of our drones to conduct a search of the city but they have seen no sign of the orks or their vehicle."

"Could they have left the city perhaps?"

"I doubt it. If they were to leave they would most likely travel to the south and return to the city I believe that they originally came from, to prevent that possibility I have deployed three units of fire warriors plus both our broadside battlesuits there to intercept them should they try. They have been ordered to inform us if they see anything, but so far they have stuck to the communications blackout I have imposed."

"Why have you deployed such a force? What part of my instructions to restrict troop movements to prevent detection did you not understand?"

"As I said honoured ethereal I ordered to deployment of just three squads and a pair of broadside battlesuits under cover of darkness and I issued orders for them to conceal themselves against airborne detection when they reached their destination. They have been in position for several hours now and are fully concealed. The Ork spacecraft have not reacted, if they had seen the force they would have attacked by now. I therefore conclude that the only orks that know we are here are those that we now have trapped in the city."

"Even so Shas'o you took a risk, you have too few troops to resist a large scale Ork assault on the city and now you have split those you have. What if the orks in the city attack us here?"

"Firstly honoured ethereal, I would have brought more troops to this world had you not forbidden me from doing so. Secondly the division of our forces should not concern you, we face fewer than twenty of the greenskins and they possess only a single vehicle. The broadside suits can deal with the vehicle if they try to leave the city and we still have many fire warriors here should the orks happen to stumble across us, but

they do not appear to even be trying to find us. From the information sent back by the drones I believe they have gone to ground. I know this is abnormal behaviour for them, but as you yourself pointed out some of their species do possess a modicum of tactical capability.”

“If they are not trying to find us, then why are they still in the city Shas'o?”

“The orks we last encountered here were engaged in scavenging the ruins. This is not uncommon behaviour for orks and I believe that this group also came here to engage in this activity. They will fight us if we encounter them honoured ethereal, but I am confident that they will make no effort to locate us here.”

“Very well Shas'o, you may continue with this strategy. But remember, it would be most useful if you could capture one of the orks alive. For the greater good.”

”For the greater good.”

“Ere,” said Mek Batrug pointing to a new feature he had attached to the radio direction finder, “I’ve added a dial to da detector to tell us ‘ow strong da signals are. Dis mark ‘ere shows ‘ow strong all dose signals we bin getting’ all day was so unless its stronger dan dat we can ignore it.”

Hazug looked at the modified detector, the direction dial continued to spin and point in different directions as the small tau machines the orks had been watching as they made their way through the city continued to send out their signals. The new dial barely flickered however, Mek Batrug had placed a red mark on this dial at the level the strongest signal so far had reached and none of those currently being detected were coming close to that. Hazug also noticed that mek Batrug appeared to have added more than just the one dial to his machine; clearly his instinct to tinker with machinery had got the better of him.

Before Hazug could enquire about any of the other new features there was a yell from the Ork on watch.

“Dey’s back! Skarit and Gutnak is back with one of dose floatin’ things.”

“Guns ready lads,” Two Heads ordered, “it must ‘ave followed ‘em back ‘ere.”

As the orks rushed to prepare their weapons the sentry spoke again.

“Nah boss, dey is pushin’ it, it looks bust.”

Hazug and Two Heads rushed to look for themselves. Outside they saw the two orks that Two Heads had ordered to go out scavenging returning to the car park, Skarit had one of the tau discs on its side and was rolling it along as if it were a wheel. A poorly balanced wheel with more weights to one side than the other perhaps, but a wheel never the less and the two orks were able to maintain a good speed. Gutnak was moving ahead of Skarit and Hazug was pleased to see that he paused at junctions and looked around them before moving on.

“Look at da way dey is runnin’,” one of Two Heads said, “Yeah, ya is a bad influence on me lads Hazug,” the other one added.

“We’d better get ‘em inside quick and somebody get da mekboy” Hazug said as he left the window and ran to the entrance to the car park, “Come on lads,” he shouted to the two orks, “dare’s no more of ‘em about, get in ‘ere quick!”

Gutnak picked up his pace to run back into the car park, but Skarit was already moving as fast as he could as he guided his prize back to the camp.

Anxious, Hazug kept watch as Skarit approached, but no more of the tau discs appeared as Skarit reached the car park entrance and the two orks ducked back out of sight.

“Where’d ya get dat thing?” Two Heads demanded.

“We saw it while we was out huntin’ for stuff, dare’s loads of ‘em just floatin’ about,” Skarit replied, “we saw it, but it didn’t see us so we clobbered it real quick and real quiet. You said to bring back anything dat could be useful and we thought dat dis could be useful.”

“Get it over ‘ere quick lads,” Mek Batrug shouted, “and lets get it open.”

Skarit wheeled the disc over to Mek Batrug who was already rummaging through his bag of tools for something suitable to allow him to gain access to the disc’s inner workings. He had just settled for the largest hammer he could use with one hand and a sharpened metal rod when Skarit reached him and he let the disc fall to the floor with a clatter. Mek Batrug looked at the disc, which had landed right side up.

“Ere,” he said to Skarit, “are dese your boot prints on top?”

“Is too,” Skarit replied pointing at Gutnak who had just brought the parts that had been knocked off the disc over for Mek Batrug.

“Right,” said Mek Batrug, “lets get dis thing open,” and he began to look for edges in the discs casing that suggested a way in. Each time he found a likely spot he placed the sharpened rod against it and struck the rear of the rod with his hammer as hard as he could. Each time he failed to open the disc he yelled out a curse.

Leaving the mek to his work, Skarit and Gutnak took their backpacks to Sophie.

“Ere you go git,” Gutnak said as he tipped his backpack up, followed by Skarit doing the same thing, “best get us some dinner ready.”

Sophie jumped back and screamed as the pile of dead rats landed at her feet.

"Wot's da problem?" Drazzok asked as another of his naps was interrupted, "You gits take dose critters to every planet ya go to. I've seen 'em loads of places, don't ya eat 'em?"

"No we do not," Sophie protested, "they're vermin."

"Look who's talkin'. Now don't wake me again until dinner's ready."

Elsewhere in the car park Two Heads was discussing their strategy with Hazug.

"So 'ow long do we go on waitin'?" Two Heads asked, "My lads won't wait forever and neither will I. We ain't Blood Axes. Thirty teeth or no thirty teeth."

"If da tau were near 'ere we'd 'ave seen 'em by now, so we 'ave to look somewhere else. Even if Batrug's machine finds somethin' we'll 'ave to go somewhere else to find out exactly where da tau is. But 'dose flyin' disc things are a problem. We need to move without da tau seein' us and I think we can do dat if we walk just by lookin' around corners first, but we'll probably need da wagon and we can't 'ide it if one of dem discs shows up and sees us."

Two Heads both nodded in agreement.

"Me lads wouldn't stand for leavin' da wagon anyway, we is Evil Suns. Ain't dare no other places like dis one to park it? Den we can look near dat place for da tau."

"Maybe dare are, lets go ask."

"Ask who?"

"Er name's Sophie."

"Aw not da git," Two Heads protested while Hazug moved towards their new human companion, "I ain't no Blood Axe, dis is embarassin'."

"Just think of da money."

"Yeah, da money, da money is good," one of Two Heads replied, then the other added, "Plus da killin' of da tau is good an all."

"Dat too."

Sophie was trying to prepare a meal while at the same time handling the dead rats as little as possible when Hazug and Two Heads loomed over her.

"Come 'ere," Hazug told her, "we 'ave some questions for ya."

The two Ork nobbs took Sophie to where the radio direction finder had been set up with the map alongside it. Ratish was watching the machine.

"Ratish find nothing yet master, but Ratish is tryin' 'ard master."

Hazug pulled Ratish away from the machine.

"Go make da dinner Ratish, we 'as to look at da map."

As Ratish scampered away Hazug pointed at the location on the map he had previously marked with a cross to indicate the location of the car park.

"I know we is 'ere," he said to Sophie, "but we needs to know if dare are any other places like dis shown on dis map. Are dare any?"

Sophie studied the map; apart from Hazug's cross the car park they were in was marked with the silhouette of a human transport vehicle. At the bottom of the map a list of symbols indicated that this represented a public parking facility. Looking over the map again, Sophie saw that there were many such symbols shown. "Yes," she said, "there are lots, look wherever this symbol appears," and she pointed to the map's key, then she remembered some of the car parks in Git Town, "but it doesn't say if they are covered like this one, or if they're just open spaces."

"Hmm," Hazug said, rubbing his head, "we needs to find one wot we can 'ide in, an open space ain't no good to us."

"Well it's a start," Two Heads said, "We can send a couple of me boys out to take a look at one of dose places and if its any good we can make a break for it."

O'Levath went over the reports from the returning drones and as he had expected he found that the drone that had stopped reporting in had also failed to return to base as it had been programmed to do. Also as the initial reports that the drones had transmitted indicated, none of them had found any signs of where the orks were located. Alone in a tactical briefing chamber he activated a holographic representation of the city around him and plotted the paths of the drones, including the missing one. It was then that he saw something odd, on its return journey one of the drones had passed the location where the missing drone had last reported in, but nowhere in the list of reports did any of the drones indicate that they had encountered a non-functional drone. He activated the communicator and pressed the button to put him in touch with the control centre.

"I need the full video logs from drone vesa vesa seven, transfer them to the tactical suite."

"Yes Shas'o."

O'Levath's terminal indicated that the file he had requested had been transferred from the central computer. He opened it and accessed the footage recorded at point where the downed drone should have been

visible. The file clearly showed that the street was empty and there was no sign of either the missing drone or of any rubble from a building collapse.

"Well," O'Levath said to himself, "I may not know where the orks are now, but at least I know where they have been."

The orks had clearly ambushed the drone from a concealed location, which meant that they must have been inside the building next to where the drone had been, most likely on an upper storey. O'Levath activated the communicator again.

"Yes, what is it?" asked Aun'Verai.

Following a brief conversation with his superior, O'Levath put in a call to Ryton.

"I'm rather busy commander," the human said.

Leaving the comm channel open, O'Levath called up a report from his computer terminal.

"Really? Computer use is monitored Mr Ryton and the screen I am looking at suggests that you have spent most of the day playing computer games and accessing image files of females indulging in acts of..."

"Alright commander, just skip to the point. Unless you actually want to discuss why I've nothing to do that will further our mission here right now."

"I need your services as a translator Mr Ryton. I must question your recruits, but I don't speak your language and they haven't learnt any of ours yet."

O'Levath soon found himself facing the humans who had been recruited by Ryton. There were four of them, four out of the more than twenty who had been working for the orks looting the city. Ryton's assurance that the entire human population would be willing to co-operate had proven false, but even these four could have the information he now needed. The physical structure of humans was similar to that of the tau and O'Levath could see that there were two males and two females, all were adult though they looked younger than Ryton. Of Ryton himself there was no sign. O'Levath was about to send a fire warrior to bring Ryton before him when the human entered the room and sat down.

"I didn't keep you waiting too long I hope commander," he said while he thought 'I hope I bloody well did.'

"Of course not Mr Ryton," O'Levath actually thinking 'you know you did and you did it on purpose,' "May we begin?"

"Of course commander."

"Thank you, please translate for me," then O'Levath faced the other humans.

"I know you have working for the orks in this city for some time," he began, then pausing for Ryton to translate his speech into the human tongue, Gothic. "This hologram shows the city in which we are located, we have been searching it for a party of the creatures that arrived yesterday. We have found no sign of their presence but we believe that they destroyed a drone here this afternoon."

At this point O'Levath noticed that the humans appeared to find what he was saying amusing. He looked at Ryton.

"Is there a problem commander? Or shall we continue?" Ryton asked, wondering if maybe O'Levath had figured out that he had just called him an idiot that couldn't find a party of the loudest creatures in the galaxy in a deserted city.

"We will continue Mr Ryton, please translate my words carefully. I believe that the orks are concealing themselves in some of the buildings that remain intact. This means that they must be concealed in one with enough room for their vehicle. I want any information you may have regarding suitable locations for this, primarily near to the point I indicated earlier but also other places they make their way to."

O'Levath waited for Ryton to finish repeating his words in Gothic.

The four humans across the table began to speak to Ryton in their own language, but O'Levath noticed that none of them were pointing at the holographic map at all. In fact their body language did not appeal normal to him at all, even for aliens.

"Well Mr Ryton?"

"They say that they did not explore the buildings while they worked for the orks, but that they know there are many large chambers within the remaining buildings that could hide a vehicle."

"Do they say where?"

Ryton spoke to the other humans again and they responded in the same manner again.

"Only that they are spread across the city."

"I see. Thank you Mr Ryton, please tell them that they may go."

Ryton spoke to the other humans and they all left the room.

"Will there be anything else commander?"

"No thank you Mr Ryton, you may leave now also."

Ryton followed the other humans out of the room and when the door closed behind him O'Levath spoke.

"Did you get all of that honoured ethereal?"

"Yes, I heard it all Shas'o," Aun'Verai responded via the communicator that had been left active during the entire meeting, "now I will be with you shortly and we can discuss what the other humans really told Mr

Ryton. For the greater good.”

”Thank you honoured ethereal. For the greater good.”

Aun`Verai made her way straight to the tactical suite where O`Levath still had the holographic display turned on.

”Honoured ethereal,” O`Levath greeted Aun`Verai, “enlighten me please.”

”Ryton specifically told the humans not to point at the map, he wanted them to respond to him alone.”

”That much I was able to deduce Aun. But what did the humans tell him that he did not tell me?”

”Quite a lot Shas`o. Apparently the orks you exterminated made great use of parking structures in the city as temporary holding areas for scavenged junk. They discovered many large caches of vehicles in them when they first began to search the city and it made sense for them to sort what they found in the large spaces away from the prying eyes of rival scavengers. Only when they began scavenging in the outer areas of the city did they move their camps to outside the city. The humans also indicated that they often guided the orks towards these places, because they were signposted in ways that the humans could read but that the orks did not understand.”

”We have seen many signposts across the city honoured ethereal, if we instruct the drones to follow them then we can concentrate the search in these areas.”

”And what do you propose to do when you find the orks Shas`o? Yesterday you planned to attack dismounted orks using our gun drones, but their vehicle is too powerful for any of our drone mounted weapons to destroy.”

”I will send out drone equipped with marker lights honoured ethereal. I will instruct them to target whatever building the orks are concealing themselves in and then use our skyray to launch a missile strike at them.” Aun`Verai paused as she took in the plan.

”This will likely kill all of the orks Shas`o and we need one alive.”

”I disagree honoured ethereal, orks are hardy creatures and I believe that one of them will likely survive long enough for us to extract it from the rubble. It will certainly be easier than attempting to force one to surrender voluntarily.”

”Very well Shas`o, continue with your plan. For the greater good.”

”For the greater good.”

”Damn it!” Ryton yelled in Gothic when his assistant reported that the tau were preparing to launch missiles, “That bastard Levath knows how to find the car parks. He’s going to blow the fething things up with the orks inside.”

”Didn’t you tell him what we said?” his assistant asked.

”No I bloody well did not, the less he knows the better. This is my mission not his and so long as that ethereal thinks that he is competent she’ll never let me finish it off the way it should be done. The tau actually think that they can get an Ork to tell them how to find their way through those tunnels.”

”I have never known an Ork to cooperate with anyone other than another Ork. They only tolerated us so long as we worked for them. Though a Gretchin may be threatened into talking.”

”Exactly, even if they don’t wipe out all of those greenskins they’ll just be left with a prisoner that isn’t afraid of dying anyway,” then what his assistant had just said sank in, “Hang on what did you just say about Gretchin?”

”They are cowards sir, they often do things only because they are afraid of the orks who order them around. I have also seen Gretchin be threatened by humans on occasion.”

”And the tunnels are full of Gretchin anyway. All I need to do is put a gun to the head of one and it’ll tell me everything, yes?”

The assistant thought.

”Probably yes.”

Ryton poured a pair of drinks and gave one to his assistant.

”Then here’s to commander Levath’s plan and lets hope he kills every last one of those bloody orks. For the greater fething good.”

Ratish opened just one eye at first. He could make out the shapes of the pair of Evil Suns standing watch by the windows and they both had their backs to him. Opening his other eye too, the Gretchin got to his feet slowly, looking around at the other orks to make sure that they were sound asleep as he did so. A sudden snort from Drazzok attracted his attention and Ratish froze until he was sure that the weirdboy was still asleep. Then he pulled the tiny dagger from his belt and crept towards his target.

Sophie had set her bed up next to Hazug, using a blanket that had previously belonged to one of the orks killed by the tau. Ever since they had found her cowering beneath the wagon, Ratish thought, she had been open in her attempts to usurp him as Hazug’s favourite servant. Now though, Ratish was going to settle the issue once and for all.

Ratish felt a tug at his ankle and he looked down to see a piece of string caught there. He reached down and brushed it away before continuing on his way towards the sleeping Sophie. Reaching her, he straddled her motionless form and brought his knife to her throat.

Sophie opened her eyes as Ratish's knife touched her skin, but before she could cry out for help, the Gretchin pushed his other hand over her mouth.

"Master needs me git," he whispered, "ya ain't goin' to cause me no trouble."

Then he heard the click and felt the gun against his head.

"I reckoned dat ya'd try somethin' like dis," Hazug said from his adjacent bed, "so I tied dat trip wire ya pulled on to me blanket when ya wasn't lookin'."

"Master not need da git," Ratish replied, "Ratish just saving master da trouble of killin' it. Make ya git for breakfast."

"Unless ya can read human writin' den I do need 'er still," Hazug said, keeping his pistol pointing at Ratish, "so if anythin' 'appens to 'er while she's sleepin' I is goin' to see to it dat da same thing 'appens to ya. Now go back to bed before I start askin' wot it is dat ya can do for me dat I can't do for meself."

Ratish tucked his knife back in his belt, pulled his hand from over Sophie's mouth and skulked back to his own bed.

"He...he was going to kill me," Sophie spluttered.

"Yeah," Hazug replied, "it 'appens."

He kept his pistol trained on the Gretchin until he lay down again, then he went back to sleep again.

Sophie however, remained wide-awake.

O'Levath stood in the doorway of the vehicle hangar as the markerlight drones moved into the city at first light. Behind him, still in the hangar were the bulk of his cadre's armoured vehicles. O'Levath hated being unable to use them, the rail guns mounted on the two Hammerhead gunships could make short work of even the most heavily armoured of vehicles, but at the same time they would be too easy to detect in flight. Even at night, only the lighter Devilfish troop transports were stealthy enough to risk using and secrecy remained vital.

The destruction of the orks would instead be undertaken using the skyray air defence missile tank had been moved out of the hangar and was being given a full payload of missiles specially configured for surface to surface strikes rather than the usual surface to air payload, camouflage netting had been hastily thrown over the hull of the vehicle to conceal it, though O'Levath doubted that the Ork spacecraft in orbit would notice it while parked even if they did have any optical sensors pointing this way. There were far fewer markerlight drones than gun drones, but this was not like yesterday's blanket search of the city, Aun'Verai had provided a list of human words likely to refer to vehicle parking structures which the base technicians had programmed these into the drones to be used in today's search so that they could just follow the remaining human street signs to their targets.

One of the tau soldiers who had been seeing to the loading of the missiles onto the Sky Ray's launch rails ran over and stood at attention and lowered his head in respect for the commander.

"The missiles are loaded Shas'o, we are ready to fire on your command."

"Excellent Shas'la, I shall be in the control centre. For the greater good."

"For the greater good Shas'o."



For the Orks, daybreak meant the dispatch of a pair of Two Heads' boys, Gorrid and another Ork, Harnod this time, to survey a new campsite. Aware of the danger of tau machines patrolling the city they kept their rifles at the ready, though they moved quickly through the deserted streets and had not given up their red jackets. By having Sophie point out the likely locations of more of the parking structures, Hazug had been able to give the two orks a rough route to follow and orders to return as soon as a suitable location was found.

The first location given to the orks turned out to be an open area without any cover, however the second was a multi-storey structure that was still sound and the orks returned to their comrades with the news.

"Da thing's huge!" Harnod proclaimed excitedly, "It could hold at least an 'undred wagons."

"Just so long as it can keep ours out of sight," Two Heads replied before Hazug butted in.

"What about da tau? Did ya see 'em?"

"Nah," Gorrid answered, "didn't seem da tau or any of dem discs."

"Right lads," Two Heads yelled, "we got somewhere else to be, lets get goin'."

The battlegwagon had been loaded up while Gorrid and Harnod had been scouting, so the orks were ready to leave straight away. But as the orks themselves began to board their vehicle Hazug spoke up.

"We 'ad better walk," he said.

"Wot for?" Two Heads asked as his boys looked on confused, "I though we was movin' da wagon."

"We are, but we better 'ave the lads on foot to keep an eye out for da tau."

"But we didn't see any of 'em," Gorrid protested.

"Which don't mean dey weren't just out of sight. Drazzok and Batrug can operate some of da guns, so den we just needs a driver. Everyone else runs."

There was discontent among Two Heads' boys, but Two Heads himself called for quiet, "Shut it lads. Skarit you is drivin' with da mek and da weirdo on da 'eavy shootas. Everyone else is getting some exercise, oh and Gorrid..."

"Yes boss?"

Two Heads pointed towards Ratish and Sophie.

"Find some guns for dem two layabouts."

"Don't forget grot," Hazug reminded Ratish as he gave the Gretchin the gun found for him, "if Sophie is accidentally shot, den dare's goin' to be another accident."

Drazzok looked uncomfortable as he wriggled his way into the gunner's seat that wasn't quite large enough for him.

"Sure ya knows wot to do?" Skarit asked from the drivers seat, followed by a cry of "Ow!" as Drazzok kicked him in the back of the head.

"Of course I knows wot to do," snapped Drazzok, "I've bin doin' dis since before ya crawled out of ya pod. Now keep ya eyes on da road, if ya crash it'll be you I shoots."

Hazug lead the way out of the car park, he knew that his Blood Axe instincts made him the best choice to be at the front. Behind him came the battlegwagon itself with Ratish and Sophie running alongside it, the pistols found for them were too large for them to keep at the ready all the time and they concentrated more on keeping up with the battlegwagon than watching for any sign of the tau. Finally, behind the battlegwagon came Two Heads and his remaining boys. Hazug dashed from corner to corner and after checking that there were no signs of the tau or their machines he would beckon the battlegwagon to follow to his position and dash on to the next corner.

The multi-storey car park was not very far, but the manner in which the orks moved meant it took until the sun was high in the sky for them to reach it. When they did both Ratish and Sophie were both out of breath.

"Ha," Kutbit said, "grots and gits, just the same."

"Are not!" both Ratish and Sophie replied simultaneously.

Hazug decided to take their weapons before they could try and shoot one another.

"Stop messin' about. Ratish get us somethin' to eat and you watch dat detector for Mek Batrug," he ordered then Two Heads spoke to him.

"I'll send a couple of da lads out for a look around. Kutbit, Gutnak its your turn, see wot ya can find out dare. Be back before its dark."

Hazug watched impressed as the two orks left the car park and did a fair impression of the way he had moved from corner to corner, trying to stay out of sight.

"Dey is catchin' on," he said to himself, but decided against mentioning it to any of the Evil Suns in case it offended them.

The remaining orks set about exploring the multi-storey structure. Like their previous hiding place the Death Skulls had looted it long ago, but there were more of the maps showing the city as it had been when the

humans ruled the planet, which the orks collected for their own use. Structurally the building was still in excellent condition, humans built their buildings to last for centuries with only the most basic maintenance and in the handful of decades since the orks arrived here it had only just started to decay. It bore no signs of having been damaged by fighting and all of the levels up to the roof were accessible by the ramps that went from floor to floor. It was from up on the roof that Gorrid spotted something.

"I think its da tau," he said, "more of dem floatin' discs, but dese look different."

Hazug, Two Heads and Mek Batrug went up to the roof with Gorrid and looked out over the city.

"Dare!" Gorrid shouted and he pointed towards an area of open ground where another of the tau discs could be seen moving towards their location. As Gorrid had said this particular disc was different to those that the orks had seen the previous day, rather than mounting a pair of the light carbines carried by some tau infantry this one had a single multi-barrelled weapon that looked more like the gun carried by the troop carrier the orks had encountered. Beside this was a long thin box that didn't look like any weapon Hazug recognised. Though it was difficult to tell at this distance this particular disc looked larger too.

"Its comin dis way," Mek Batrug commented.

"Looks like," Hazug responded.

"Best get da lads ready," added Two Heads and he went to get the other orks ready for combat, "come on Gorrid."

Hazug and Mek Batrug watched the disc move closer for a while longer before they too went back down to where the battlewagon was parked. The battlewagon was still parked centrally on the ground floor, but Two Heads had moved his boys to the side of the building that the tau drone was approaching where there was a row of narrow windows.

"Don't shoot it just yet," Hazug said when the drone drifted into view, "it may not see us."

The orks peered out from their hiding place and watched the drone hovering in front of them.

"As it seen us?" Skarit whispered.

"If it 'ad why ain't it shootin at us?" Gorrid added.

"Do we shoot it den?" Two Heads asked.

Hazug stared at the drone; it just hovered in the air before them, motionless. Hazug turn towards Two Heads and as he did so he noticed a narrow beam of green light picked out by the dust kicked up by the orks in the car park. He looked along the path of the beam and saw that it ran from the hovering tau drone to the battlewagon.

"It's seen us!" he shouted and he raised his gun to fire. A couple of the orks were able to get off shots, but they failed to hit their target and the tau drone backed away firing its weapon. The incoming fire came in short bursts, aimed as if to keep the orks, heads low rather actually hit them. Hazug saw that the beam of light was still running towards the battlewagon where it projected a dot onto its side and he realised that something else was going on. He had seen a dot like that before, just before the tau troop carrier launched a missile attack.

"Everyone in da wagon!" he shouted, "Incomin'!"

"Fire now!" O'Levath ordered as a markerlight drone reported that it had located and acquired a target lock on the Ork vehicle, "Full salvo!"

Outside the tau base the turret of the skyray swivelled around and there was a succession of whooshes as the six missiles it carried shot into the sky, followed by thunderclaps as they punched their way through the sound barrier.

Watching the missiles fly away from the base on his monitor, O'Levath leant back in his chair and smiled.

"Should I order our fire warriors to move out Shas'o?" one of the command centre staff asked.

"Not yet," O'Levath answered him, "let's wait and see if the drone says there's anything left for them to recover first."

"Right lets get out of 'ere!" Two Heads yelled when the last of the orks climbed aboard the battlewagon and slammed the door shut behind him as Gorrid, who had become the driver purely by being the first to get to the seat, started up the engine and it rumbled into life.

"No!" Hazug responded, "Go up and get to da roof. Batrug is dat force field ready?"

Mek Batrug pulled a lever located on top of his new modification to the battlewagon; there was a flash of light from outside the vehicle, followed by an intermittent crackling sound.

"Up and runnin'," Mek Batrug said, "jobs a good 'un."

The battlewagon lurched forwards and the driver headed for the ramp between levels.

"Get someone one dose shootas," Hazug shouted as the battlewagon swerved sharply to get onto the ramp.

"Vombak, Harnod, you 'eard 'im," Two Heads yelled and the two orks he named clambered into the gunners chairs for the automatic weapons mountings. The battlewagon swerved again to access the next ramp and

Hazug caught a glimpse of the tau drone through one of its view ports. The drone was increasing its altitude to follow the battlewagon up to the roof. There was the rattle of gunfire as Vombak also caught sight of the drone and fired at, but the violent manoeuvring of the battlewagon combined with the typical poor Ork marksmanship sent the burst wide by a large margin.

Sunlight burst into the interior of the battlewagon through the view ports as it reached the roof, there then followed a sudden lurch as Gorrid slammed on the brakes.

"Now wot?" he asked.

Vombak and Harnod fired at the drone again, but they both failed to hit it.

"Stop shootin' at da disc," Hazug shouted, "it can move out of da way too quick for ya to 'it it," then he opened the battlewagon's top hatch and stuck his head out. He looked into the sky past the tau drone and saw exactly what he expected, several dark specs surrounded by the fiery bloom of an engine flame.

"Rokkits!" he shouted, pointing them out to the gunners, "Shoot 'em down quick!" and he ducked back inside the battlewagon, pulling the hatch closed behind him, "Everybody 'ang on to somethin' dis could be close."

There was the sound of gunfire again as the Ork gunners took aim and fired at the incoming missiles, the hail of bullets flew past the hovering drone and towards the deadly weapons it was guiding towards the Ork vehicle. One of the missiles was hit and it dropped from the sky and exploded as it struck the first building in its path. A second missile was struck by the orks' fire and this one veered skywards harmlessly as its guidance system was destroyed. The third missile got through the defensive gunfire and headed straight for the battlewagon. There was a thunderclap and a blast of heat as the missile detonated, but beyond making the battlewagon shake it did no further damage as it detonated too early when it hit Mek Batrug's force field. Rather than filling the interior of the vehicle with molten metal, the contents of the warhead spread harmlessly over the sparkling energy barrier.

"Told ya!" Mek Batrug yelled with glee, "Job's a good 'un!"

The fourth missile was hit by the orks' fire as it drew close to the car park and it as it lost altitude like the first one it ploughed into the floor below and blew up sending rubble flying in all directions. The blast and the shrapnel smashed into the stationary tau drone causing it to spin and lose the lock on the battlewagon. Instead the markerlight now pointed into the car park building where the missile had just detonated and the final two missiles flew into the gaping hole that had been opened up.

There was a double 'whump' as both of the tau missiles detonated inside the car park and then for a moment there was silence. This was followed by a soft groaning sound. The soft groaning became louder and was then followed by a series of snapping sounds as the structure of the car park failed.

"'Ere we go," Hazug said and followed it with, "get down lads!" to the two orks in the gunners' positions, "Everyone 'ang on to somethin'."

While Vombad and Harnod were climbing down from their seats the battlewagon lurched suddenly as the damage inflicted on the car park by the tau missiles caused the top level to collapse beneath the battlewagon. The weight of the falling debris combined with the battlewagon triggered a chain reaction of collapsing levels and as one level after another gave way beneath the battlewagon its occupants were thrown around inside.

Ratish and Sophie both reacted by screaming, the orks however just let out shorter cries of pain as they were hurled against each other and the interior of the battlewagon. Hazug heard a snapping sound and though he was relieved that the lack of pain meant he had not just been seriously injured he knew that someone else had not been so lucky. Repeated flashes of light from outside the battlewagon marked the successive impacts of rubble from the collapsing car park against the recently installed force field. The engine stalled as the battlewagon continued to fall and, deprived of its power source, the force field failed too. Now the falling rubble struck the battlewagon itself. Then, with one final sudden lurch the battlewagon stopped falling and lay battered amongst the ruins of the car park.

The battlewagon had come to a stop the right way up, but at an angle and as the occupants recovered from the drop they had to hang on anything available in order to stand.

"Alright lads?" Two Heads asked and there were murmurs from around the interior as the orks began to indicate that they had survived. Hazug saw that neither Ratish nor Sophie replied to Two Heads' query, but though clearly dazed they both appeared uninjured.

Harnod and Vombad hadn't been so lucky however. Harnod's head hung at an unnatural angle and Hazug quickly realised that the snapping sound he had heard during the drop had been the unfortunate Harnod's neck breaking. Vombad lay at the rear of the battlewagon, unable to reach anything to hang onto in time he had been thrown against some of the equipment stored there and impaled on wood from a crate that broke under the force of the impact of his flying body. Sophie moved her arm over Vombad's corpse and when she saw the blood covering her hand she let out another scream. At least she's wide awake now, thought Hazug.

Drazzok was the next to speak as he struck Gorrid with his staff, "Ya as bad dat bloody mek ya stupid bloody yoof, ya can't drive either."

"Dat wasn't drivin'," Gorrid protested, "dat was fallin'."

"Looks like we got two dead," Hazug said to Two Heads, "da gunners didn't get down and 'ang on in time."

Mek Batrug looked out of a view port, "We ain't buried," he said, "but dare's rocks all around da wagon."

"Look at dat," Skarit said as he also took a look outside, "dat disc 'as crashed too."

All of the orks looked to where Skarit indicated and they saw that the tau machine had indeed crashed, more of the debris from the collapsing building had brought it down. Smoke was clear visible escaping from its damaged casing and it was motionless.

"Everybody out," Two Heads ordered, "we is a sittin' target 'ere."

Ratish was first to try a hatchway, "It stuck master," he exclaimed as he continued trying to push the hatchway open. Sophie and Drazzok attempted to open the other side hatch and the main rear hatch, but both reported them jammed.

"It's da rocks," Mek Batrug said.

"We'll go out dare den," Two Heads said pointing to the roof hatchway.

The roof hatchway was much smaller than any of the other hatches and the occupants of the battlewagon could only exit the vehicle one at a time. Two Heads was first, followed by Hazug. They both crouched on the rubble looking out for any signs of a follow up attack by the tau while the others followed them out. The air around was thick with dust, which Hazug thought at least offered cover while the party exited the battlewagon. Hazug frowned as Sophie and Ratish began arguing as she left the battlewagon before him, clutching a bag of food in one hand.

"Stop doing that, he's looking up my dress while I'm climbing!" she protested.

"Am not master, Ratish not want see up git's dress, dare's nothing interesting to see," then Sophie kicked Ratish's nose knockin' him down from the ladder behind her, "Ow!" the Gretchin cried out as he rolled across the battlewagon's floor.

Mek Batrug climbed out of the battlewagon after Sophie and he set to work inspecting the damage to the vehicle. There were numerous bangs as the mekboy employed the time-honoured method of kicking a vehicle to determine its functionality, accompanied by several sharp intakes of breath and shakes of his head.

Drazzok's exit from the battlewagon was heralded by a stream of complaints about the quality of battlewagons built nowadays, "Dey is crap," he proclaimed, "I rode one dat could fall off a buildin', get buried, catch fire and ya could still drive it away."

"Why would you want to drive it while its on fire?" Sophie asked as she helped the Ork weirdboy down from the battlewagon roof and was rewarded with a light slap.

"Don't be so bloody disrespectful ya git," he responded and Ratish who had just followed Drazzok through the hatch laughed then ducked the rock Sophie threw at him.

"Stop messin' about or I'll shoot da pair of ya," Hazug shouted.

Last out of the hatch were Gorrid and Skarit who brought with them as much spare ammunition and water as they could get to fit through it.

"Right, now wot?" Two Heads asked.

"We get under cover," Hazug said, "and wait for Kutbit and Gutnak to get back. 'Opefully da mek can get da wagon runnin' again before da tau turn up."

Mek Batrug had completed his assessment of the battlewagon and came over to the two nobbs to make his report.

"Da tracks 'ave been thrown," he said.

"Well dat's not too bad," Two Heads replied.

"And da big shootas' barrels are all bent."

"We don't need dem to drive."

"Da exhaust is split."

"Just a bit of pipe."

"Da gears is shot, dares leaks in da fuel and oil tanks, da front axle is split and da frame is bent so da back hatch won't open without bein' 'ammered back into shape."

"Sounds simple, so 'ow long to fix it?" Two Heads asked.

"'Alf a day plus time to find da parts. But I don't think we'll find another of dose little ornament things dat ya 'ad on da dashboard, yours is bust."

"Ah crap," Two Heads both said as he hung his heads and his shoulders slumped.

10

Kutbit and Gutnak travelled as far as the next parking structure that they had had pointed out to them on the old human maps and verified that it was suitable to conceal the battlewagon before they began to scavenge for more supplies. They had seen no signs of either the tau or their hovering drones so far and they had become relaxed in their movement when the first object flew rapidly overhead, a trail of fire following it.

"Wot was dat?" Gutnak said as the second tau missile passed over them, followed swiftly by four more. All moved overhead silently, the sound of their passing coming a moment later.

"Looked like rokkits," Kutbit responded, "and dey looked like dey was 'eadin' for da camp."

Before the two orks could decide on a course of action they heard a dull thump, followed by several more in rapid succession as the missiles detonated. A much louder crashing sound came next.

"Let's get up high and see wot's goin' on," Kutbit suggested. The orks found a building with an intact staircase and climbed to the top of a four-storey building. From a window on the uppermost floor they looked in the direction that the missiles had gone and saw only a massive cloud of dust where the multi-storey car park that was their camp had once stood while a second building closer to them was now burning.

"Da camp!" Gutnak exclaimed, "Da tau blew up da camp, now wot do we do?"

For a time neither Ork spoke, instead just watching as the dust cloud over the ruined car park began to settle.

"We better go take a look," Gutnak said, "maybe dey got out of dare before it blew up."

"Where's the feed?" O'Levath demanded, "How much damage did we do?" with six surface to surface missiles launched, he was positive that the Ork vehicle would by now be nothing more than a pile of scrap metal, but he needed to be certain of this before dispatching his troops to see their were any survivors that could be taken prisoner.

A technician studied his control panel, checking the drone's signal for the requested data.

"The signal has been cut Shas'o," he said, "but I have confirmed successful detonations of four out of the six missiles fired."

"What about the other two?"

"It appears they were shot down by the orks, one detonated early while one did not detonate at all."

"Show me the last images from the drone," O'Levath ordered and the technician transferred the requested file to the control centre's main screen. It clearly showed the Ork battlewagon still intact on the roof of the car park structure, but starting to drop through a hole that was opening up beneath it.

"The building has collapsed," stated O'Levath, "send the fire warriors to investigate. Remind them to bring any survivors back here for interrogation."

As the technician issued the order given O'Levath contacted Aun'Verai.

"The Ork camp has been demolished honoured ethereal, we are sending in fire warriors to investigate further."

"Excellent commander, keep me informed. For the greater good."

"For the greater good."

In the tau vehicle hangar the call came through at last.

"Target at bearing one four two, distance four point two thousand. Recovery of survivors essential, repeat essential."

In the backs of the two Devilfish, the tau troops cheered as they felt their vehicles take off and begin to move. Each of the transport was only filled to half its capacity, but having to remain sat in them ready to depart at a moments notice had been frustrating to their passengers.

"You'll learn eventually," Ui'Kera had told his fire warriors, "most of my time at war I've spent waiting for permission to do something. Just make the most of what you actually get to do because you never know if it'll be the last thing you do."

Unfortunately for Ui'Kera, he had never learned anything about not tempting fate.

Gutnak and Kutbit ran through the streets of the city, ignoring the possibility that there could be tau units at large. When they reached the site of the former camp they saw the severely damaged battlewagon on top of the rubble that was all that remained of the original structure. Smoke still billowed from the adjacent building damaged when the car park had collapsed, forming a dark cloud in the sky above.

"It's all wrecked!" Gutnak proclaimed as he surveyed the area.

"Let's take a closer look," Kutbit said as he began to clamber over the wreckage towards the battlewagon and Gutnak followed him.

"Sniff dat," Gutnak commented as they got closer, "da fuel's leakin' out."

"Ello?" said Kutbit, "Anybody inside?" but there was no response.

The two orks reached the battlewagon and, seeing that all of the main hatches were blocked, they climbed up onto its roof.

"Harnod and Vombak is in 'ere," Kutbit said when he stuck his head through the open top hatch, "I think dey is dead."

"Better ask 'em just to be sure."

"Is ya both dead?" Kutbit shouted into the battlewagon.

There was silence.

"Dey ain't answerin'," Kutbit said, "Dey must be dead."

"Wot about da others?" Gutnak asked.

"Dey is not in 'ere, dey must 'ave got out."

"So where is dey now?"

"Over 'ere," came the sound of both of Two Heads yelling simultaneously. Gutnak and Kutbit looked in the direction of the shout and saw their squad leader standing in the doorway of an adjacent building, "get movin' da pair of ya."

Gutnak and Kutbit rapidly climbed off the battlewagon's roof and ran over the rubble and along the street to the doorway.

"Get inside quick," Two Heads told them, "da tau could be 'ere any time."

Inside the building Two Heads lead Gutnak and Kutbit up to a room on the top floor where they saw that while the two dead orks in the battlewagon had been the only casualties of the missile attack there were a number of scrapes and bruises visible on most of the survivors. Ratish in particular appeared to have taken a severe blow to his nose. The rest of the party had unloaded only a handful of the supplies that had been contained within their transport, mainly water and ammunition, but some of them had managed to bring enough food for them all to have a very small meal. Mek Batrug had his bag of tools plus one of the carbines that had been mounted beneath the tau drone captured the previous day that he had opened up and was modifying.

"Wot 'appened boss?" asked Gutnak.

"Da tau used one of dem floatin' discs to guide rokkits at us," Two Heads replied, "den da buildin' fell down. Now we is waitin' to see wot da tau do."

"Wot about getting' da wagon fixed boss?"

"We do it tomorrow lad, da mek is building 'imself a big welda to 'elp 'im do da repairs."

"Shut it," interrupted Hazug, "I 'ear somethin'."

Everyone was suddenly quiet and listened for whatever Hazug had heard, it was a sound that Hazug had last heard on their first night in the city, the high-pitched whining sound produced by the engines of a tau armoured personnel carrier.

"Da tau is comin'," he whispered as the sound grew louder. Hazug realised that there was something different about the sound from the last time he heard it, a sort of echo and he peered out of a window to investigate further.

The reason for the difference was plain to see, it wasn't an echo but a second vehicle behind the first.

Unlike the lone vehicle encountered that first night which had approached by moving over the buildings of the city these two were at a lower altitude, keeping below the height of the surrounding buildings and following the paths of the city streets.

So they can't be seen from outside the city, Hazug thought to himself admiring the tactic.

"Guns ready lads," Two Heads said and all of the orks picked up rifles, even Mek Batrug chose to arm himself with a weapon that had belonged to one of the dead orks. Drazzok however just kept hold of his staff.

"Old ya fire till I says and keep back form da windows," Hazug ordered as the orks began to take up positions at the windows overlooking the approach of the tau. Obediently they all moved further back and waited.

Standing well away from the window, Hazug watched as the pair of tau vehicles set down on the far side of the battlewagon from the orks' position, the blast from their engines licking up dust all around as they did so. Hatches at the sides and rear opened and half a dozen tau soldiers emerged from each of the transports.

Ui'Kera was the first tau to get out of his devilfish troop carrier, followed rapidly by his five Shas'la fire warriors. Looking towards the other devilfish he saw that Ui'Drasha's squad had deployed moments behind his and that both squads of fire warriors were now deployed in a line between the two devilfish with their pulse rifles trained on the partially buried Ork vehicle.

“La’Kor, La’Vast, move in,” he ordered and two of his troops left the formation and advanced keeping their weapons aimed at the battlewagon.

“Yes shas’ui,” the two fire warriors responded in unison as they began to move forwards.

Upon reaching the vehicle the two fire warriors ducked below the level of its vision ports and pressed themselves against its armoured hull. La’Kor raised himself up quickly and looked in through one of the slits in the vehicle’s side.

“I see bodies inside the vehicle Shas’ui, at least two of them but there is no sign of any movement,” he reported.

“Proceed with caution,” Ui’Kera ordered and the two fire warriors first checked the side and rear hatchways to the battlewagon, then on finding these jammed helped each other onto the vehicle’s roof.

“We have an open hatch Shas’ui, I am proceeding inside,” La’Kor told his squad leader.

The standard tau pulse rifle was a long weapon and not really suited to fighting within the confines of a vehicle such as the Ork battlewagon, so La’Kor first moved all around the open rooftop hatch with the muzzle of his weapon pointing inside checking for targets. Finding nothing he first stuck his head through the hatch then climbed down the ladder to the interior. Once inside he held his rifle at his hip and slowly swung it around as he turned full circle to search for the orks, as he did so La’Vast followed him down the ladder.

They saw that there were indeed just the two orks they had seen from the outside in the battlewagon and that neither of them were moving. One of them had been impaled through the chest while the other had clearly suffered a broken neck and both were obviously dead.

“There is nothing further to report,” La’Kor radioed to Ui’Kera, “there are just the two Ork corpses here, the rest are gone. We are exiting the vehicle now.”

As the tau left the battlewagon the two squad leaders conferred.

“There must have been more orks inside the vehicle,” said Ui’Kera, “where would they go?”

“Perhaps to seek the means to repair it,” replied Ui’Drasha, “which means that they could return to it at any time. We must maintain a watch on it.”

“Agreed, I shall remain here with my squad, take yours back to base and report to the Shas’o and aun. We will require explosives to put the Ork vehicle beyond use. For the greater good.”

“For the greater good,” replied Ui’Drasha and then he addressed his squad, “Embark the devilfish Shas’la, we are returning to base.”

While his counterpart’s troops boarded their transport Ui’Kera deployed his to cover the approaches to the battlewagon. There were three such routes so Ui’Kera placed a pair of his troops, including himself, on each route while he left his devilfish by the Ork vehicle.

“Run engines on minimum,” he ordered the pilot, “that will keep the noise down. Engage full power on my order. For the greater good”

“Yes shas’ui, for the greater good.”

There was a brief roaring as Ui’Drasha’s devilfish took off, which then faded as it flew back along the route the tau had come from. Hunched up in doorways for cover, Ui’Kera’s squad watched and waited for the orks to return to the battlewagon. They were of course completely unaware that the orks had been watching them since they had disembarked from their troop carriers.

“Wot’s ‘appenin’?” Kutbit said softly, aware that if he made too much noise either Two Heads or Hazug would probably hit him.

“I think dey is goin’,” Hazug replied before correcting himself, “No wait only ‘alf of dem is goin’, da other ‘alf is stayin’ behind.”

“Ow many is dat?” asked Skarit.

“Six,” said Hazug.

Skarit looked around and tried to count how many orks were hiding in the room. He had got as far as three when Kutbit spoke again.

“Is dat all? Dare is more of us, lets go smack ‘em,” he said.

“Dey got one of dem flyin’ wagons too,” Hazug told him.

“Ah crap, we ain’t got no rokkits,” said Kutbit.

Then Hazug grinned.

“Wot is it?” Two Heads asked.

“We can still take out dat tau wagon.”

“Ow?”

Hazug just turned around and stared, Two Heads looked in the same direction as Hazug and broke into two grins himself.

“Yeah,” he said, “dat could just work and I think we’ve enough lads left to get it done.”

Two Heads' remaining boys also turned to look in the same direction as their leader, followed by Mek Batrug and the room was suddenly full of grinning orks.

"Wot ya all starin' at?" Drazzok demanded as he looked into the faces of all of the other orks.

"Grab 'is staff," said Two Heads.

"Oi geddofff!" Drazzok snapped as Gorrid and Gutnak wrestled his staff away from him. He started shaking even as Hazug and Two Heads lifted him up onto their shoulders.

"Form a line lads," Two Heads said as he and Hazug carried Drazzok nearer to the window, "shootas ready."

Knowing that combat was imminent the orks needed no further encouragement and they lined up just behind the two nobbs holding the struggling weirdboy.

"You too Ratish," Hazug told the Gretchin, "get behind us."

"Can I do anything?" Sophie asked.

"Not dis time," Hazug told her as he struggled to keep a tight hold on Drazzok.

"Yeah, but out git," Ratish added and he pulled a face at her.

"No, wait a mo," Hazug added, "Sophie pick up dat staff and 'ang to it. When we drops Drazzok get it to 'im quick."

Sophie picked up the staff and she saw that Drazzok's eyes were now starting to glow and he was shaking even more.

"What happening?" she asked, but no one answered her question.

"Point 'im da right way," Hazug said to Two Heads.

"I knows wot to do," one of Two Heads replied as the two nobbs pointed Drazzok directly towards the grounded tau transport vehicle, before the other added, "We done dis before an' all ya know."

"Now?" Skarit said anxiously as the room began to vibrate and small objects began to fly about randomly.

"Not yet lad," Two Heads told him, "we ain't got 'im aimed properly yet."

Hazug saw that Drazzok was now pointing straight at the tau vehicle.

"Now!" he yelled and all of the greenskins in the room let out a loud cry.

"Waaagh!"

They continued their cry as they all raised their weapons and opened fire on the tau soldiers. The light from Drazzok's eyes grew brighter and another source of light began to build in his mouth. This too got brighter and then Drazzok began to scream. The light emitted from Drazzok swirled in front of his face and joined together near the end of his nose. Then he vomited a bolt of green lightning.

11

The tau heard the Ork war cry moments before they came under fire and Ui’Kera quickly identified the source.

“Over there!” he shouted to his troops and he pointed towards the building in which the orks were located, “Top floor! Pilot, power up now!”

The tau moved quickly, but one of them was cut down by gunfire before he could even get to his feet. As they repositioned themselves they saw that there was a brilliant light shining from the window that was the source of the Ork gunfire.

“What is it?” one of the tau said.

“Never mind what it is,” replied Ui’Kera, “just open fire.”

That was when the lightning storm began.

The bolts of energy reached out from the top floor of the building and out to the devilfish troop carrier.

Lightning bolts spread out from the initial point of impact and danced across its hull, inside the pilot

attempted to maintain control as the cockpit was filled with warning sirens and lights on the control panel.

The engines screamed as the power being fed to them fluctuated beyond the control of the pilot despite the best efforts of the pilot. Then the devilfish exploded.

The tau soldiers were quick to react to the attack and almost as one they swung around to face the source

“Withdraw!” Ui’Kera ordered when he saw the armoured vehicle disappear in a ball of flame that also engulfed two of his fire warriors who had been too close to the explosion.

When they saw the tau vehicle explode, Hazug and Two Heads dropped Drazzok to the floor.

“Give us me staff,” he cried as he picked himself up and Sophie gave him the copper staff that allowed him to drain away the psychic energies that had built up within him.

“Quick, after ‘em lads!” two Heads shouted when he saw that the surviving tau were running away.

The orks, apart from Drazzok who was still recovering from the psychic blast and Mek Batrug who stayed at the window shooting at the fleeing tau, ran down the stairs and into the street. When they emerged the tau had a considerable head start on them, but spurred on by Two Heads, who raised his axe into the air and let out a double yell of “Waaagh!” they sprinted after their targets.

One of the fleeing tau turned back towards the orks and took aim with his weapon. The burst of energy bolts passed close by Two Heads, but the Evil Sun continued running regardless. In turn the tau who had just fired fell, hit in the leg by Mek Batrug’s fire, he rolled and tried to bring his pulse rifle up again to defend himself but his decision to stop and shoot at the orks rather than continue to flee had allowed his pursuers to close the gap between them and they were already on him. The tau blocked Gorrid’s first swing of his rifle butt, but he left himself open to Kutbit who switched to his axe instead and brought it down on the tau’s arm and snapped it. The tau screamed as Gorrid also discarded his rifle in favour of his axe and the two orks both rained blows down upon the alien warrior as he lay defenceless beneath them. Even after he was dead the pair continued hacking at his corpse, fully dismembering it.

Armed with his pistol, Hazug fired on the move but hit nothing. When it was empty he cast it aside. Ahead of him Ui’Kera stopped running and turned to face the orks chasing him, hoping to buy some time for the last of his men to escape. He dropped to his knees and took aim directly at Hazug and fired. The energy bolt from his weapon whizzed past Hazug’s head and he felt and smelt, the heat of its passing burning his flesh. He leapt at the kneeling tau and knocked his weapon away. He wrapped his arm around the tau’s neck and tightened his grip on the struggling alien until he felt it go limp, then he dropped the corpse to the ground and looked for the last surviving tau.

Two Heads was ahead of him and was almost upon the fleeing alien, as Hazug watched Two Heads dropped his rifle, reached out his arm and grabbed the tau by the back of his neck and lifted him into the air. The Evil Sun turned the tau soldier around to face him; disappointed that the alien’s enclosed helmet prevented him from seeing the expression on his face.

“Kop dis!” one of Two Heads shouted right before he head butted the tau. There was a cracking sound as some of the tau’s helmet mounted electronics broke under the impact, “And kop dis too!” the other head yelled before it delivered another strike.

Then with a roar of joy he plunged his axe blade into the alien’s stomach, it twitched as its insides dropped out through the gaping wound and when Two Heads released his grip it fell to ground already dead.

With the tau dealt with orks gathered around Hazug.

“Anybody see any more?” Two Heads said.

“Nah,” Hazug responded, “we got ‘em all, but we can’t stay ‘ere too long. Dem other tau are probably comin’ back.”

Ui'Drasha and his fire warriors snapped to attention and lowered their heads when O'Levath entered the room.

"Report shas'ui," O'Levath said calmly.

"Yes Shas'o. We located the Ork vehicle at the expected location; it contained a pair of the creatures, both dead. The building in which the vehicle had been hiding had collapsed completely, there was nothing left of it but rubble."

"Only two?"

"Yes Shas'o."

"Was there any sign of what happened the others at all?"

"None Shas'o, we could not tell if they survived the attack on their vehicle, or if they had not even been inside at the time of the missile strike."

"Is it possible that they were buried under the rubble of building?"

"Possible O'Levath, but we saw no signs of that either."

"The vehicle was destroyed though?"

"No Shas'o. It was damaged, but intact. Ui'Kera and his fire warriors remained behind to guard it against the return of the remaining greenskins while we returned here."

O'Levath was not happy about this at all. The failure to return with a prisoner would be more troubling for Ryton than himself, but it still reflected badly on him. Still, at least he could destroy the Ork vehicle if he moved quickly enough.

"Take engineers with you and return to the Ork vehicle," O'Levath ordered, "destroy it with explosives. For the greater good."

"For the greater good," the fire warriors all repeated in unison before Ui'Drasha led them away.

"Wot do ya mean fix it now?" Mek Batrug said in disbelief at the suggestion he should repair the battlewagon so they could leave, "da big ends gone and we've got no parts."

"We just wrecked a tau battlewagon. Can't ya get some parts from dat?" Hazug asked.

Mek Batrug took a look out of the window at the smouldering wreckage of the tau vehicle.

"Maybe some," he said cautiously, "but we'd still need new fuel and oil to get our wagon runnin' again."

"Don't worry about dat, I know where to get it. Plus some more parts maybe," Hazug reassured him.

The orks looked puzzled at this confident statement.

"Where?" Two Heads both asked.

"Da deaf skull camp we came through. Dare was loads of stuff we left behind; I'll take a couple of boys and Ratish. Den we can bring back wotever we can carry or see one of dose trucks will still run."

Mek Batrug smiled at the thought of them bringing another vehicle.

"Easier to fix one wagon with bits from another," he said.

"Den it's settled," Two Heads said, "take Skarit and Gorrid with ya. I'll keep an eye on things 'ere."

"What about me?" Sophie asked as she saw Hazug gathering his things to leave, noting that he had specifically mentioned taking Ratish with him.

"Ya will just slow us down," he told her, "and ya can't carry as much us orks."

"But your taking him," she said pointing at Ratish.

"Grots are good at scavenging and dat's wot we're doin'. Ya just 'as to stay 'ere and 'elp da mek if 'e asks for it."

Ryton was preparing to go to bed when there was a knock at his door.

"Enter."

He smiled as one of the humans he had been able to recruit from among the servants of the orks, this one an attractive young woman, entered the room.

"Ah, Diona isn't it?" Ryton said, smiling.

"Yes Mr Ryton," Diona replied.

"What may I do for you?"

Initially he hoped that she may have come offer herself to him, but instead she had come to bring him news.

"Some of the tau soldiers have returned, we saw them reporting to their commander."

"Only some?"

"Yes, half of them I think. Just one vehicle."

Ryton sat down and activated his computer.

"Yes," he said, "their report has just been logged. Well well, it seems our illustrious commander Levath just launched a full salvo of missiles and managed to kill exactly two orks. He didn't even manage to destroy their vehicle either, he's going to send the soldiers back out in the morning to blow it up."

"What happened to the other soldiers?"

"Apparently they've stayed behind to guard the Ork vehicle. This is very annoying."

"Why?"

"Because there's still a bunch of orks running around the city causing mayhem and we are no closer to either obtaining the information that ethereal wants before she'll let me leave here or wiping out the orks so that she'll be forced to let me go. Until that happens I'm stuck here and cut out of the loop it would seem."

Ryton closed the file and shut down his computer.

"Thank you for bringing this to my attention," he said, "will there be anything else?"

"Yes, well I was wondering..." and Ryton noticed that Diona had begun to undo her overalls.

Perhaps being stuck here does have its good points, Ryton thought to himself.

Ratish struggled to keep up with the orks as they ran to the abandoned Death Skulls' camp, only the fact that Hazug had the larger greenskins alternating between moving and watching for any sign of further tau activity prevented him from being left behind. Even so, by the time the party reached the campsite he was out of breath. While Ratish crouched down trying to get his breath back Hazug issued instructions to the orks.

"Right lads, we'll start by looking for fuel and oil. Dat should be easy enough, den we'll look for anythin' wot looks like it came off a wagon. Skarit I want ya to check to see if any of dese trucks are still workin'."

The other two orks nodded and the group split up to search the camp. There were many fuel and oil containers scattered about, but the Death Skulls had not sorted them by their contents or whether they were empty so it was necessary to open each one and check the contents.

While the search was going on Skarit moved from one vehicle to another and attempted to get them started. It was a laborious task, the Death Skulls had taken all of the battle ready vehicles with them to fight the tau and only those awaiting repair had been left behind. Fortunately Skarit and Gorrid were both Evil Suns and any Evil Sun could carry out minor repairs to vehicles without needing to run off and fetch and pay, a mekboy to do it for him. So both of them were well able to assess which vehicles were most likely to be useable. Hazug let them get on with it.

One of the vehicles sprang into life, its engine spluttered but kept running when Skarit pulled the starter lever, but when he tried to make it move nothing happened. He was about to move onto another vehicle when he saw what the problem was.

"As anyone seen a spare wheel?" he asked when he saw that the rear of the truck had been raised up so that a damaged wheel could be removed. The Death Skulls had clearly left before they had chance to replace it.

"Elp 'im look Ratish," Hazug told the Gretchin, who promptly stopped tipping over fuel cans and instead began to check the other abandoned vehicles for wheels that matched those on the one with the working engine.

By the time Skarit and Ratish had found a suitable wheel and fitted it to the truck Hazug and Gorrid had loaded it with the fuel and oil they needed. In addition, Gorrid had identified several parts that had come from vehicles and loaded them also.

"Right lads. Lets get back, its getting dark and da mek's waitin' on dese bits. Skarit, you found da truk so you're drivin'."

The old Death Skulls vehicle shuddered as it began to move; clearly the previous owners hadn't taken a great deal of care of it even before the wheel needed replacing.

"Was dis really da only one dat worked?" Hazug said as he began to think that some his teeth were starting to be shaken loose by the ride that unusually rough even for an Ork vehicle.

"Dare was a couple I didn't look at," replied Skarit, "we could always go back and check 'em."

"Nah, we need to get back quick, just warn me if dare is any bumps comin' up."

Just as Hazug finished the sentence the truck lurched violently as it went over a decades old pothole in the road.

"Dat was one just dare boss," Skarit said.

"Comin' up means before dey 'appen, now just get us back to da others."

Skarit promptly failed to warn his passengers of another pothole and there were curses hurled in his direction, plus a cry of pain from Ratish.

"Ratish bite by tongue baster," he said as he wiped blood away from his mouth.

The journey back to rendezvous with the rest of the party was delayed by the setting of the sun, like most Ork vehicles the truck lacked any form of lights and it also lacked the weight and armour that allowed the battlegon to smash through smaller obstacles so Skarit was compelled to slow down, much to the annoyance of Hazug.

"I though you Evil Suns was fast," he said.

"Its da truk," complained Skarit, "da death skulls didn't even paint it red. 'Ow am I supposed to go fast in dis wreck?"

Hazug had to admit that the Evil Sun had a point. It was a scientific fact that 'reds ones go faster,' which was exactly why the speed freaks of the Evil Suns decorated everything in that sacred colour. The first thing that Hazug caught sight of back at the ruined car park was a light coming from beneath the damaged battlewagon, though there was no sign of any movement.

"Where is everybody?" he said as Skarit brought the truck to a halt and the passengers disembarked as rapidly as they could from the uncomfortable vehicle.

"Over 'ere," came a voice from the darkness, it was one of Two Heads.

"Over where boss?" Gorrid asked.

"We is under da wagon," Two Heads replied, "look at da front."

Moving closer, Hazug saw that the members of the group that had stayed with the battlewagon had cleared rubble out from beneath it to form a space into which they had all gone. This not only gave Mek Batrug access to the underside of the battlewagon where much of the damage was to be found but also kept them out of sight, except of course for the highly visible light given off by his newly constructed welding torch.

Leaving the recovered supplies in the truck, Hazug's group also crawled underneath the larger vehicle where he saw that scrap taken from the wrecked tau vehicle had been used to prop up the surrounding rubble and prevent the hole from falling in and crushing everyone beneath the weight of the battlewagon.

"Did ya get wot we need?" Mek Batrug asked.

"Think so," Hazug told him, "fuel and oil was easy and Gorrid found some parts. Plus dare's wotever's on da truck. Now 'ow long till da wagon's fixed?"

"Jobs almost a good 'un for driven it away if ya got us da fuel, be done before sun up. But da guns'll take longer and da shield is a right off. No way I can get dat workin' again."

Hazug was satisfied with this.

"Just get us movin'," he said, "we'll find somewhere else for you to fix da guns."

Mek Batrug was as good as his word and although Two Heads and his surviving lads were greatly concerned at the amount of red paint that had been lost when the car park collapsed the battlewagon's engine was fixed and refuelled before the sun was up. After everybody had vacated the hole beneath the battlewagon, Gutnak climbed into the driver's seat and nervously started the engine.

The orks let out a cheer as the engine roared into life and then another as the armoured vehicle moved forwards over the rubble, sending small pieces of stone flying beneath its wheels and tracks. Carefully he drove the battlewagon off the pile of rubble and positioned it next to the truck.

"See I told ya, jobs a good 'un!" shouted Mek Batrug, digging his elbow into Two Heads as he did.

"I suppose," one of Two Heads glumly.

"Well wot's wrong with it den?" the mekboy asked.

"It just ain't da same with me noddin' grot," Two Heads answered with the same head as the other one shook slowly.

"Where to then?" Gorrid asked from inside the battlewagon.

"Wot about da next one of dese parkin' places?" Two Heads suggested to Hazug.

"Nah, da tau know about 'em, we need somewhere else to hide while Batrug fixes wot's left to fix."

Hazug opened out one of the old human maps that had been collected and called Sophie over.

"Can ya see anywhere good to 'ide dat isn't one of dese parkin places?" he asked.

Sophie looked at the map.

"Here," she said pointing to a broad blue line that ran across the map, "the river."

"We wants to 'ide, not drown git," Two Heads commented.

"There's a tunnel, I've been through it before so I know it's still intact."

"Den dat's where we is 'eadin for," Hazug said, "and we'll take da truck as well as de battlewagon."

Hazug began to fold up the map again, but then he paused and drew a straight line across it, starting at their current location.

"Wot's dat for?" Two Heads asked.

"Da missiles came from dat way and I'll bet dey came from da tau base. Now we just needs one more line to find it."

With two vehicles to run, the orks moved out into the darkness with the newly scavenged truck in front of the more heavily armoured battlewagon as Hazug felt that it would be better to have the open topped vehicle forwards with Kutbit driving and Hazug himself standing up in the back keeping a look out as best he could. Besides Hazug, Sophie and Ratish also travelled in the truck. Hazug made Sophie sit beside Kutbit so that she could direct him as best she could towards the tunnel, while Ratish simply did not want to let her appear to be of more use to Hazug than he was.

The entrance to the tunnel would have been visible from a considerable distance had it been daylight, but in the darkness of the unlit city ruins the two orks vehicles were almost on top of it before Sophie pointed it out.

"There, that's the one," she said, "The Death Skulls used it all the time to cross the river."

"Stop 'ere den Kutbit," Hazug told his driver who dutifully brought the vehicle to a halt. Behind him Hazug heard the brakes of the battlegon squealing as its driver slowed down rapidly. For a moment Hazug expected the battlegon to plough right into the much lighter truck, but it stopped with room to spare. As Hazug leapt down from the back of the truck Two Heads was emerging from the battlegon accompanied by Skarit, Gutnak and Mek Batrug.

"Why is we stoppin'?" Two Heads asked, "I thought we was goin' in da tunnel."

"We is," Hazug responded, "but I want to take a look in it before we go bargin' in dare with da wagons. Is ya comin' too?" and he drew his pistol.

The other orks readied their weapons as they joined Hazug in advancing towards the gaping hole that was the tunnel entrance. The tunnel itself was very large, big enough to take six battlegons side by side, though despite having been built to last for centuries the presence of the river directly overhead had taken its toll over the years since its makers had stopped maintaining it and even standing at the entrance Hazug could feel that the air within was damp as moisture began to seep in through from the river.

"Dis won't last much longer," Mek Batrug commented, "dose Death Skulls should 'ave brought in some grots to keep it dry."

"Ow long till it falls in?" Two Heads asked.

"A few seasons yet. Unless da next winter's bad, in which case it'll probably fall in den."

"So we'll be fine stayin' in 'ere for a day or two den?" Hazug said.

"Oh yeah," Mek Batrug reassured the two nobs, but then there was a sound from within the tunnel and the orks caught a glimpse of something moving inside.

"Go get da other lads and a torch," Two Heads ordered Skarit as the orks aimed their weapons into the tunnel.

As Skarit ran back to the parked Ork vehicles the nobs and mekboy heard the sound again.

"Dare's somethin' alive in dare," Hazug said.

"Yeah but wot?" Mek Batrug asked.

"I don't care," said one of Two Heads, then the other one added, "let's just lob dis in and kill it," and he held up a grenade.

"Ya can't do dat," Mek Batrug said, his eyes wide, "didn't ya 'ear wot I said about da state of da tunnel. Lob dat thing in dare and ya'll bring da roof down."

Two Heads returned the grenade to his belt.

"Well it was worth suggestin'," the head that had made the suggestion said quietly.

"Yeah if ya wants to kill us," the other head retorted.

As it appeared that Two Heads was about begin brawling with himself the remainder of his Ork boys arrived along with Ratish and Sophie who were both carrying torches and Drazzok who was channelling energy to produce a glowing light in the air in front of him.

"Can ya send dat light in dare?" Hazug asked him, indicating the way into the tunnel.

"Nah, just near me 'ead. Good for readin' at night."

"Den we'll 'ave to go in dare ourselves den," Hazug said and he began to advance into the tunnel, "bring dose torches."

Ratish and Sophie both followed behind Hazug and the rest of the orks, who had no intention of being outdone by either a Gretchin or a human moved in also. Drazzok, who had not lived to reach his thirties by taking risks still hung back behind the others however.

With the illumination being brought into the tunnel the party could see that it was by no means empty, at some point during their fight with the tau some of the Death Skull had retreated here and the tau had not removed their bodies. There were more bodies than any of the orks were willing to count, some out in the open others slumped next to pillars or improvised barricades made from various containers. The sounds that they had heard from the tunnel entrance appeared to be coming from where they could make out a large concentration of Ork bodies.

"Give dat 'ere," Hazug said as he snatched the torch away from Ratish and he threw it towards the source of the sound.

The creature he illuminated was roughly spherical and bright red in colour; it possessed two stubby legs and an equally stubby tail. Its mouth appeared far too large for creature of its size and was filled with large, pointed teeth. It was standing on one of the Ork corpses, tearing at its flesh with its teeth and claws.

"Attack squig!" Hazug shouted as the startled creature abandoned its meal and turned towards him, let out a roar and charged straight at him.

Sophie dropped her torch and both she and Ratish covered their ears as the orks opened fire in unison at the charging animal. The attack squig bounded over the bodies it had been feeding on and straight into the barrage of small arms fire. With such a clear target at short range not even orks could fail to hit the squig and it roared with pain now as bullets tore into it. Blood sprayed from the squig's wounds as it fell to the

floor of the tunnel and died but the orks, who were not taking any chances continued to shoot it until they had emptied their weapons.

"Dis is where 'e died," Hazug said as he stared at the corpses of the death skulls that surrounded him.

"Who died?" asked Sophie as she picked up the torch again.

"Dare was an Ork dragged from da river in our city," Hazug told her.

"By Ratish and me mates, we found 'im," Ratish said proudly.

"Da tau killed 'im and 'e fell in da river and floated all da way down it. 'E must 'ave been in da battle 'ere. 'E was shot just outside somewhere."

For a few moments the entire party stood in silence looking at the evidence of the fighting all around them, while there were many Ork corpses there was no evidence that they had been able to inflict any casualties on the tau at all. It was Two Heads who ended the silence.

"Right lads, Skarit and Gorrid bring da wagons in 'ere, da rest us should see wot da Deaf Skulls 'ave left us."

The orks stowed their weapons and immediately began to search the bodies of the Death Skulls in the tunnel.

"Dey been left in too long, dey is all rotted," Kutbit complained as he opened the mouth of one of the bodies to discover that its teeth had begun to rot since the Ork died, "all dese teeth is worthless."

"Forget da teeth den," Hazug said, "just look for wot gear they 'ad."

Mainly the Death Skulls had just been armed with pistols and rifles like the party already possessed, but this at least meant that there was ammunition for them to plunder. However, Ratish looked in the containers rather than on the bodies and he discovered something larger.

"Look master," he said excitedly as he removed the heavy weapon from a crate, "Ratish find a big shoota!"

The weapon was as long as Ratish was tall and it resembled one of the automatic weapons mounted on the battlewagon, though it had only one barrel instead of two.

"Is dare any ammo for it?" Two Heads asked Ratish, who looked in the crate again.

"Not in 'ere," he said, with his head still inside the crate.

At this point Skarit and Gorrid returned with the two Ork vehicles and disembarked.

"Look in da boxes," Two Heads ordered them, "dare could be guns and ammo in 'em."

As the orks continued to search the bodies and containers there was a sudden 'pop' and they all suddenly stopped and searched for its source.

"Is someone shootin' at us?" Gorrid said.

"Dat was too quiet," Mek Batrug told him, "if it wos gunfire it was far away."

'Pop.'

"Dare it was again," Kutbit said, "Dare must be someone shootin' at us," and he took a step.

'Pop.'

"Stay still," Two Heads told him, "wait till we see where dese shots is comin' from."

The entire party stood still and in silence as they hunted for the source of the sounds.

"Dare's nothin' 'ere," said Kutbit and he turned back to the crate he was searching.

'Pop.'

"Wot are ya standin' on Kutbit?" Hazug asked, striding towards the Ork.

Kutbit looked down, beneath him were flat, shiny sheets that had come from inside the container he had been searching. Hazug picked up one of the sheets as the other also came over to investigate. It was made of more of the plas-tik material humans and tau used so much of. One side was smooth, while the other was covered in small bubbles in a regular pattern. Hazug squeezed one of the bubbles and there was another 'pop' as it burst.

"Its dis stuff," Hazug said as he squeezed another bubble.

'Pop.'

He squeezed some more.

'Pop, pop, pop.'

"Wot..."

'Pop.'

"...is..."

'Pop.'

"...dis?" he asked Mek Batrug, who had also picked up a sheet.

'Pop.'

"Dunno," he replied as he squeezed a bubble for himself.

'Pop.'

"Stop 'oggin' it," Two Heads said as he too picked a sheet and began to burst bubbles.

Suddenly there was a rush of orks as the rest of the warband hurried to grab a sheet of the material before there were none left and soon the tunnel was filled with the sound of popping plastic bubbles as the entire party found themselves unable to continue with the search until every last bubble was burst.

“Well,” said Hazug when Drazzok burst the last of the bubbles by bringing his staff down on it and the first light of the morning sun began to seep into the tunnel, “dat wos time well spent. So ‘ave we found ought useful den?”

As it happened the Death Skulls had left them quite a haul of equipment. Aside from the extra ammunition for their pistols and rifles, there were also several belts of ammunition for the larger automatic weapons like the ones mounted on the battlewagon and the one that Ratish discovered. Unsurprisingly there were no explosives.

If the Death Skulls had had any of those they probably would have used them and collapsed the tunnel, Hazug thought to himself.

12

Aun'Verai looked at the latest report as she sat alone in her quarters.

"Has this information been verified?" she asked the tau who had informed her of the report's addition to the computer network.

"It has honoured ethereal, the fire warriors sent out to destroy the Ork vehicle returned only after they conducted a full search of the immediate area. The devilfish was obliterated and all six of the fire warriors who remained to guard the Ork vehicle were brutally killed."

"Thank you, I will deal with this. For the greater good," and Aun'Verai deactivated the communication signal before the other tau could respond. Then she called the control centre.

"Yes honoured ethereal?" O'Levath said when he saw her face appear on his screen.

"I must speak with you Shas'o," she said.

"Yes what is it?"

"In my quarters Shas'o, this is a matter best discussed privately."

"Very well honoured ethereal, I shall come to you immediately. For the greater good."

"For the greater good."

O'Levath did as he said and in a few minutes he knocked at the door to Aun'Verai's quarters.

"Enter Shas'o."

"I am here honoured ethereal, though I fail to see..."

"Failure is becoming a habit for you Shas'o."

"What?"

"I said failure is becoming a habit for you Shas'o."

"Yes I know what you said, but I don't see why you are saying it."

Aun'Verai indicated the report that was still shown on her computer screen.

"You have failed in every attempt to eliminate the orks. Not only that but this particular group of orks has wiped out every member of the fire caste that they have come across so far. What is more, despite the fact that you have deployed a large number of our troops to the south of the city it now appears that more orks have made their way into the city without detection."

"I see no mention of reinforcements honoured ethereal."

"Then read the reports of your own soldiers Shas'o. The party you sent out this morning reported that there were tracks from two different vehicles at the scene of your latest debacle. Where did this second vehicle come from Shas'o?"

"I believe that the orks may have scavenged the vehicle from within the city honoured ethereal. There are no more orks here than there were yesterday."

"You believe? Do you have proof?"

"No honoured ethereal, I do not. Only my instinct."

"Instincts that apparently have done you no good so far Shas'o. Now what are you planning to reverse this pattern of failure?"

"I shall continue to use our drones to search the city honoured ethereal. In spite of what you say, I regard the missile attack having been successful. It proved that we can inflict casualties on the orks without exposing our soldiers to risk. I am augmenting the markerlight equipped heavy drones with our gun drones also so that we may monitor a larger area of the city."

"Very well Shas'o I will permit you to proceed for now, but I am being to see the advantages of simply sending Mr Ryton into the Ork city regardless of whether you can obtain the information that I have been waiting for. For the greater good."

Aun'Verai saw that O'Levath was clearly uncomfortable with the idea that he could be side stepped entirely. Perhaps Mr Ryton is not the only one who seeks personal glory here, she thought to herself. If not for the biological imperative for the other castes to be subservient to the ethereal caste, Aun'Verai would not put it past the fire caste commander to disobey her directly.

"For the greater good honoured ethereal," O'Levath said before leaving Aun'Verai's quarters.

O'Levath was furious. Who did that ethereal think she was? 'Permitting' him to continue with his plan, when operations conducted from this base clearly fell within the purview of the fire caste to which he belonged yet his actions were being dictated by the ethereal whose orders he was incapable of disobeying. To make matters worse she was now suggesting that the fire caste would be ignored entirely and the human Ryton, whose ridiculous plan had landed him in this unenviable situation in the first place, would be turned loose instead.

He returned to the control centre, where other members of his caste were monitoring the signals being sent back by the drones that had already been sent out into the city on his orders.

"Report Shas'la," he ordered as he took his position in the centre of the room.

"No sightings of the orks yet Shas'o, but the drones have only just begun to reach the regions of the city that still have such structures intact."

O'Levath studied the progress of the drones for himself, his agitation obvious to the other tau in the control centre who whispered comments to each other about what may have transpired between their commander and the ethereal in her quarters.

Unlike O'Levath, Ryton was currently feeling much happier than he had been the night before. In addition to spending the night in the highly pleasurable company of Diona he was beginning to read rumours on the tau's messaging system that O'Levath had been summoned to meet with Aun'Verai and that the two had not seen eye to eye on the current situation, though he was still somewhat surprised when she appeared at his door.

"Am I disturbing you Mr Ryton? Either of you?" she asked looking at the shape of Diona still sleeping in Ryton's bed.

"Not at all honoured ethereal, please sit down."

"Thank you Mr Ryton."

"So what may I do for you, I take it that you are here to discuss more than my sleeping arrangements."

"Those are your own business within your caste Mr Ryton, I am here to discuss your offer to enter the tunnels that run beneath the Ork city without a predetermined route to their chieftain's residence."

"Well I had originally been planning to navigate by instinct, using an inertial positioning device to tell me how far I needed to go and in what direction."

"You seem to be suggesting that you having now altered this plan somewhat."

"Oh I still intend to begin my movement through the tunnels in that way, but one of my recruits has informed me that it should be possible to get one of the Gretchin who use the tunnels to tell me where I need to go. Apparently they will respond well to threats of force. So now I'm planning to simply stick a gun to the head of the first Gretchin I can grab hold of and tell him to take to the fortress."

"I was not aware that you understood the language of the greenskins Mr Ryton."

"I don't but all of my recruits do, they have lived and worked with them for most of their lives after all, so I can just take some of them with me. That way I'll also have back up if I do happen to run into any trouble down there. I'll need your permission for them to draw weapons from the armoury though and they will need some training in their use. The orks never officially forbade them to possess guns, but an armed human was likely to be shot on sight by the orks just for the fun of it so most of them didn't bother."

"I see. Very well, I will speak to the shas'ui in charge of the armoury and make the arrangements for the recruits to be given the training you require. He should contact you later today Mr Ryton. For the greater good."

Aun'Verai got up to leave.

"Of course honoured ethereal," Ryton said, "for the greater good," and this time he felt like he actually meant it.

Ryton watched the ethereal and her guards leave, then he heard a voice from the direction of his bed.

"Kyle what's going on?"

Ryton walked over to Diona and kissed her forehead.

"I think that the ethereal has finally figured that Levath isn't up to the job she gave him," Ryton said, unable to completely hide his pleasure at the thought of O'Levath's troubles.

"Wot do ya mean it won't work down 'ere?" Hazug asked when Mek Batrug informed him and Two Heads of the limitations of his communication-detecting machine.

"Its da amount of water and rock above us," Mek Batrug told him, "it blocks da signals so we can't pick 'em up even if dey are talking to each other. Not unless we go to da ends of da tunnel where da signal rays can still reach."

"Nah, da tau will see us too easy," said Hazug, "and we've run out of 'idin' places to move to."

"Den wot do we do? Do we get to stand and fight now like proper orks?" asked Two Heads.

"No," said Hazug, but he had to pause to consider an alternative course of action, "We'll 'ave to split up," he decided, "most of us will stay down 'ere with da wagons, but some of us will walk to one of da buildings near da ends of dis tunnel we're in and take da detector machine with us."

"So who goes dare and who stays put 'ere?" Two Heads asked.

"You stay 'ere with your lads," Hazug told him, "and I'll take everyone else and da machine to somewhere wot Mek Batrug says is somewhere dat we can use it properly," then he turned to Mek Batrug, "Ow long till ya 'ave fixed da guns on da battlewagon?"

"I just needs to take da bent barrels off and weld new ones on, den da jobs a good un."

Hazug decided that he would also take the heavy weapon that Ratish had found the previous night, much to the distress of Two Heads boys who had been going to mount it on the truck. Hazug pointed out why that wasn't going to happen.

"Well firstly there ain't enough of you lads left to drive both wagons and shoot dat many guns and secondly Ratish is workin' for me, so dat gun's mine. If ya really wants to try pinchin' from me den go ahead and try it."

The Ork boys discussed this amongst themselves very briefly before reaching a decision.

"We thinks ya should take da big shoots," the other orks encouraged Gorrid to tell Hazug.

Standing at the tunnel entrance Hazug and the group going with him looked at the building on the opposite side of the street.

"Well it looks sound enough and da signals should reach da machine just fine in dare," Mek Batrug said.

"Right, when I say so we leg for da door and den go up to da top floor," said Hazug, then he quickly checked for any signs of the tau, "Now!"

Hazug was the first to the door and he just smashed his way through it before making his way up the stairs.

When they reached the top floor Mek Batrug set up his detector and confirmed the suitability of the location.

"We is pickin' up da signals from da discs," he said, "so if dat base starts doin' any talkin' we should pick it up easy."

"Great," said Hazug as he stared out of the window, from this vantage he had a clear view across the river and as far as what had once been the centre of the human city, but that was now crushed beneath the asteroid landing ship. Something just didn't feel right to him, his instincts were telling him that something he was looking at out there was significant. He opened out the map on which he had noted the path taken by the tau missiles and held it up against the window. He studied the path of the line and compared it with the view out of the window, in his mind he saw the line drawn across the landscape outside running from the direction of the destroyed parking structure and across the river towards the city centre. Or rather what had been the city centre because he found himself staring directly at the asteroid.

"Batrug, I don't think we'll be needin' dat detector after all," he said.

"Why not?"

"Because I think dat I know exactly where da tau 'ave been 'idin' all along."

"Where?" mek Batrug asked, getting to his feet and staring out of the window with Hazug.

"Dare," Hazug said, pointing, "in da rok."

13

The tau shas'ui in charge of maintaining the base armoury contacted Ryton just as Aun'Verai had assured him that he would after she had left his quarters to arrange to train and arm his recruits and soon after that they were all gathered together in the armoury to be issued their weapons. The guns laid out before them were all of imperial manufacture, some of the many that the tau had captured or bought over the centuries. Ryton had hoped for laser weapons, but when he saw the weapons laid out ready he saw that the tau armourer had instead chosen to issue each human with a compact automatic weapon and a shotgun. "Shas'ui I had hoped to issue las weaponry, why were these weapons selected?" Ryton asked the armourer.

"Apart from your plasma weapon these are the only human weapons we brought with us here. We assumed that any humans you recruited would be more familiar with projectile weapons rather than the more advanced technology of laser weaponry. But there are extra pulse weapons available from our fire warriors' stores if you would rather use them."

"No thank you shas'ui, we have only limited time available to us and pulse weapons need far more training to use properly."

"We also have grenades available," the armourer offered.

"Definitely not," Ryton answered, "small arms will suffice."

It was decided that there was no need for training in maintaining the weapons for now and instead the recruits were taken to the firing range and shown how to operate their guns. Ryton stood back and watched as they fired at targets projected on a wall, observing the scores they obtained. Diona's in particular were appalling, she found it almost impossible to hit an Ork sized target that wasn't so close that it would be able to split her wide open with a swing of one the crude bladed weapons most of them carried.

Her talents obviously lie elsewhere, he thought.

Ryton's assistant, a man named Quint was another matter entirely however. He was older than the others, probably about Ryton's age and been born before the orks had invaded this world. He had been the first to agree to join with Ryton and the tau.

"My father was an enforcer for the planetary government," he explained when quizzed about his proficiency, "and he taught me how to shoot before the orks arrived. After that I kept a gun hidden and I've been taking pot shots at the greenskins for years."

"Excellent," said Ryton, realising why Quint had been so easy to recruit.

"Did you see?" Diona shouted from behind Ryton, surprising him, "I hit them! I can do this."

"Yes so I see, very good," Ryton replied as he reached out his hand to stop pointing her still loaded gun straight at him and noticed that she had in fact scored only a handful of hits, "though I would much rather not risk loosing you in combat my dear."

Diona embraced Ryton, prompting smiles from the other humans and also the fire caste tau present.

"Ya is goin in dare alone?" Two Heads asked as he watched Hazug preparing to leave. Hazug had returned to the tunnel to inform the orks there of his theory and to let them know that he was going to travel to the asteroid for a closer look.

"I needs to sneak about," he said, "and I can do that better alone. I ain't goin' inside it even if da tau is dare. I just want to know if dey are dare and wot da best way to get to 'em is.

"And ya ain't takin' no more stuff dan dat?"

Hazug had filled a pair of flasks with water and packed one of the human maps and as many pistol magazines as his belt pouches would hold. Aside from that he was just holding his normal blade and pistol.

"I ain't plannin' on doin' much fightin'. If da tau sees me I'm just goin' to leg it back 'ere."

"Just like a Blood Axe," Kutbit commented, "real orks wouldn't be talkin' about runnin' away."

Hazug ignored this jibe and instead spoke to Two Heads again.

"I'll try and be back by nightfall, but if I ain't don't go chargin' about without knowin' wot's goin' on," and with that Hazug sprinted out of the end of tunnel and towards the asteroid.

Just as he had told Two Heads, Hazug was able to move quite swiftly through the empty streets of the city, occasionally taking cover when he heard the distinctive sound of the engines of the tau drones that were also moving through the city in their hunt for the orks. As he travelled he saw that the state of the building deteriorated the closer he got to the asteroid at the centre of the city. Even though the asteroid had successfully decelerated prior to landing, the blast from its engines and the force of the impact had caused considerable damage to the surrounding area. As the condition of the buildings deteriorated so did the rate at which Hazug could move. The streets were increasing blocked by rubble that Hazug was compelled to climb over. After almost two hours of travel he reached a point where the buildings had been completely destroyed.

Hazug kept low at the perimeter of the region that was filled with nothing but rubble, aware that the tau could be watching. The ground ahead appeared deceptively flat, but Hazug knew that in reality it was uneven and treacherous. He would have to move carefully both to avoid detection and also to avoid being injured should the ground give way beneath his feet, there was a significant chance that there would be room buried beneath rubble that could give way when he put his weight on it.

Hazug took the map from his pouch and opened it out. He was able to deduce his position from the route he followed since leaving the tunnel and by studying the buildings that were still standing around the edge of the destroyed area he began to sketch out its perimeter on the map. Then he estimated the distance to the asteroid itself and also marked this on the map. Hazug took a drink from one of the flasks and then poured some of the remaining water into the dust at his feet. Crouching down he used his fingers to mix the water into the dust, forming a grey paste that he spread across his face and over the exposed skin of his hands and arms. Then he gathered up drier dust and began to throw it over himself where some of it collected in the recesses of his clothing and equipment. Thus camouflaged, he moved further onwards cautiously. Hazug kept as low as he could as he made his way towards the asteroid, wherever possible he kept larger pieces of rubble between himself and the asteroid just in case the tau were maintaining lookouts over the area since it was what he would do in a similar situation. Every now and again he would stop and take a look around him. Roadways could still just about be made out amongst the chaos of the rubble, but Hazug avoided them just in case the tau had any patrols moving around out here.

Closer in to the asteroid he noticed that there was something concealed beneath sheeting not far from it. Something large with a shape far more regular than anything built by orks. Hazug decided to head for this concealed object on the basis that whatever it was the tau didn't want anyone else to see it. Approaching closer he saw that someone had cleared a great deal of the area immediately surrounding the asteroid of rubble and it was in this area of level ground that the concealed object sat. The sheeting that covered the object were held down with ropes fixed to the ground. Even though it was covered, from this distance Hazug could make out the distinctive shape of tau engine pods on either side and he knew that he was looking at a spaceship. It was far too small to have carried all of the tau equipment that they had seen so far, so Hazug did not believe that the tau were using at there base, but they were unlikely to be far away. Hazug approached closer to the spaceship, going as far as the edge of the cleared area, believing that there could be tau inside. No noise came from the spaceship, so Hazug knew that its engines weren't running at present, but he remained cautious. He waited where he was for some time, carefully studying the spaceship for any signs of activity, but he saw none, then as the sheets covering it flapped in the wind he noticed that there were windows at the end closest to him and through those he saw that the inside of the spaceship was dark. He took a quick glance around the clearing and seeing no signs of tau activity at all, Hazug sprinted right up to the hull of the spaceship. He placed a hand against one of the engine pods and found it cold to the touch, meaning that it had been here for some time. He remembered the shooting star he saw on the journey to this city, the shooting star that had changed direction over the city and he realised that this spaceship had been that shooting star. The thought occurred to him that the tau might be using this landed spacecraft as their base of operations on the planet.

Still keeping low, Hazug ran along the length of the tau spaceship and stopped when he reached the other end. Here he found a large open ramp that lead inside, confirming that this was not their base. A quick glimpse confirmed that the inside of the tau vessel was in darkness and that the tau armoured troop carriers that the orks had previously encountered would not fit within it. Hazug looked past the spaceship towards the asteroid that no towered over him and he saw a second tau vehicle concealed in the same way as the spaceship positioned at what had once been a junction in a human built road. This one was much smaller, however, about the same size as the troop carriers and was only partially covered. This particular vehicle had a hull the same shape as the troop carriers but featured a turret at its rear with a pair of wings mounted to it; beneath each of the wings were three missiles. Hazug could see a pair of tau stood near this vehicle talking to each other. Even from this distance Hazug could hear the sound of the other vehicles engines running.

But it was what lay behind the missile carrying tau vehicle that Hazug saw what he was looking for, jutting out of the side of the Ork asteroid he could see the tau base of operations. A large set of doors was wide open and Hazug could see a room beyond them that housed more tau vehicles. Hazug saw more of the troop carriers plus some smaller open topped vehicles and a pair of vehicles that mounted large turret mounted guns, but nothing like the missile launcher that was set up outside. To one side there was a second set of doors only slightly smaller, but these were shut and there was no indication what lay beyond them.

"Gotcha ya grey sods," he said to himself.

Hazug took a good look all around him, searching for the best way for the orks to approach the tau base without the missile launching vehicle firing on them first. He could see that the tau had not only cleared an

area of rubble around their base, but also one of the roads that lead to the parts of the city that were still standing, but any vehicle moving down that road would be in the line of fire for the tau missiles. Hazug felt the ground beneath him shift slightly and he jumped backwards expecting the ground beneath him to collapse and swallow him up. Instead when he looked down, rather than a hole he saw a corroded metal disc embedded within the ground. He pushed at it with his foot and felt it move as he pressed down on it. Looking at it more carefully, Hazug saw that it was marked with human writing and that it fit within a metal ring that appeared to be part of the ground beneath him, there was a narrow crack around the edge of the disc. Hazug pushed the tip of his blade into the crack and prised the disc out of its frame. Beneath it was a dark hole.

Hazug looked into the hole and saw that there were handholds embedded into the side of the hole that lead down into the darkness. Here was a way to approach the tau base unseen; Hazug knew that most humans maintained tunnels beneath their settlements, much like the Gretchin did beneath those of the orks, though few of the human tunnels seemed to be used for movement. The problem was the size of the entrance, Hazug could just about get his head into the hole so there was no chance that an ordinary Ork could climb through, let alone nobbs like Hazug and Two Heads. However, a Gretchin like Ratish would be able to fit through it easily. Hazug took his head out of the hole and looked in the direction of the other tau vehicle again; beneath it he could see another metal hatchway in the ground.

Hazug smiled, as he formulated a plan that would get the orks to the tau base without being destroyed by the tau missiles first.

Then, after taking one last look around Hazug began to make his way back across the rubble towards the Ork camp. With the sun still not at its highest point in the sky Hazug was confident he'd be back there before Two Heads decided to go on a rampage.

"So we is supposed to trust a grot to take out a wagon?" Two Heads said in disbelief as Hazug began explaining his plan to everyone else.

"Ratish can do it master," Ratish said.

"Yes Ratish I know you can, anyone can place a bomm," Hazug said while wiping some more of the dust away from his face, "da 'ard part is wot comes next. When dat tau wagon blows up da tau will know dey is under attack and either come out of dat base shootin' or slam da door shut to keep us out. Either way we 'ave to do dis da Orky way."

"We charge right in dare and kill 'em all!" Gorrid exclaimed excitedly, waving his gun in the air.

"Exactly," said Hazug, "I didn't see any other tau wagons with guns dat looked like dey could take out da battlegon, but da door looked like it wos tough enough to stop our cannon."

"So 'ow do we make sure da door stays open?" Two Heads asked.

"By crashin' da truk into it. We stick a cannon shell to da front so dat it'll blow up when it hits da doors and we fill it with everythin' 'splosive we can."

"Wot if da doors is open anyway?" Two Heads asked.

"Den we can either just stop da truck, or send it inside da base and blow it up inside."

The orks all grinned at the thought of the explosion that was likely from a truck sized bomb going off, but then a thought occurred to Kutbit. Initially he kept it to himself, but then his brain insisted that he share it with the other orks.

"Ang on a mo," he began, "'ow do we get da truk next to da doors in da first place? Won't da tau just shoot it up first?"

"Somebody 'as to drive it," Hazug admitted. The other orks were not impressed with this suggestion, "Not all da way though, just far enough to get it pointin' da right way, den jam da controls and jump off."

The orks still appeared unsure, but then Mek Batrug spoke up.

"Should work," he said, "I've built bomms dat wos steered by grots."

Now the orks were satisfied, after all as far as they were concerned anything that a Gretchin could do, an Ork would be far better at doing. They were bigger after all. None of them considered the fact that the Gretchin used to control precision-guided weapons were killed when those weapons detonated.

"And wot do we do when we is inside da tau base?" Two Heads asked.

"Ain't it obvious?" replied Hazug, "We wreck da place."

The orks all cheered and then let out a loud cry.

"Waaagh!"

As the other orks celebrated Hazug spoke with Mek Batrug.

"So 'ow long is it goin' to take ya to build us a bomm to take out da tau rokkit wagon and get da truk ready?"

Mek Batrug thought for a while.

"Da bomm's easy, but da truk will take longer. About 'alf a day to rig da steering and get da shell mounted."

"Dat'll do," Hazug reassured him, "we've only seen dem tau discs movin' round da city durin' da day so I wants to do dis at night."

As Mek Batrug got to work and the other orks began to prepare their weapons and ammunition Hazug noticed Sophie lurking near to him.

"Watcha want?" he said to her.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Well ya could get some food ready, I ain't eaten anythin' since breakfast."

Sophie's face fell.

"I meant during the attack."

"Nothin'."

"But I want to help, the tau killed everyone I knew."

"Well ya can't, orks is da best fighters dare is. It's why da universe makes us. Gits 'ave good armies which is wot makes it fun to attack 'em and dose marine gits is good fighters on dare own too, but I can see dat ya ain't no fighter so I just wants ya to stay 'ere out of da way."

Sophie just stared back at him.

"Oh alright den," Hazug said, "ya can come with us, but ya 'as to stay put in da battlegwagon where its safer. You gits get 'urt too easy when da bullets start flyin'. In da mean time ya can look after Drazzok."

At the mention of his name Drazzok, who had been dozing again while Hazug had been explaining his plan for the attack on the tau base, woke up.

"Wot did I miss?" he said.

"'Ere you go," Hazug said to Sophie, "its your job to tell 'im wot we is goin' to do and den don't forget da grub."

Now that they knew the location of the tau base the orks had no further use for Mek Batrug's radio direction finder, so the entire party spent the night in the tunnel.

Mek Batrug himself set to work on the anti-tank bomb and the modifications to the truck the next morning and had completed the work by lunchtime. Two Heads and his orks were then keen to launch the attack immediately.

"Why wait?" said Two Heads, "We got wot we need."

"We needs it to be dark, dat way dem floaty discs won't be able to warn da tau we is comin'."

The orks nevertheless remained impatient to leave, their instincts told them that battle was coming and they were genetically predisposed to be eager for it to begin. When Hazug saw that the sun was at last beginning to disappear behind the buildings he went to Two Heads.

"Right," he said, "lets move out."

Two Heads turned to face his lads and cried out.

"Waaagh!"

Joining in with a shout of 'waaagh' of their own the other orks swiftly picked up their weapons and clambered aboard the two vehicles. Skarit had been selected to drive the modified truck, while everyone else rode in the battlegwagon, which, due to the lack of enough orks to fully crew it, Two Heads himself drove.

With the battlegwagon taking the lead position this time, Hazug used the map he had marked up to guide Two Heads through the darkening city streets to the beginning of the pathway that the tau had cleared through the rubble to their base.

"Stop 'ere," Hazug told Two Heads before the battlegwagon rounded the final corner that would bring it onto the pathway and into full view of the tau missile launcher. The Hazug turned to Ratish.

"Ratish, grab da bomm and come with me."

Hazug got out of the battlegwagon and looked around on the ground until he saw one of the circular hatchways in the road located at another junction. Behind him, Ratish also disembarked from the battlegwagon with a pistol, a knife and a torch tucked into his belt and the large flat explosive device that Mek Batrug had built from parts of the tau drone to destroy the tau vehicle carried over his head.

"Right Ratish," Hazug said as he prised open the hatchway, "get down dare, den make ya way towards da tau base. When ya 'ear da engines ya is directly under da tau wagon and ya should climb up and plant da bomm. Den run for it."

"Yes master, Ratish know wot to do, da mek told me," and with that the Gretchin clambered down the opened hole with the bomb into the darkness below. Hazug heard a squelching sound.

"Is ya alright Ratish?"

"Yes master, Ratish is okay, its just full of water down 'ere."

In the darkness of the tunnel beneath the city Ratish put down the bomb and lit up the torch then, dragging the bomb behind him, he set off wading in the direction that Hazug had indicated. As a Gretchin he was used to such places, his kind built similar tunnels beneath Ork settlements that allowed them to move

around out of sight of their Ork masters, reducing the risk that they may be randomly killed while going about their, or their masters' business. The human built tunnels were different though, like everything the humans built these tunnels were full of straight lines and regular curves rather than the random edges common to most greenskin construction from hand weapons to starships. This at least made it easy for Ratish to find his way towards the tau base, there was a single tunnel that took a nearly straight path all the way beneath the cleared pathway and while he passed frequent junctions Ratish went straight on past them all. Of more interest to Ratish were the hatches back to the surface, each one at one of the tunnel junctions and marked by handholds that made climbing up to them easy. As he encountered each hatchway Ratish left the bomb and the torch in the tunnel, taking care to leave the torch where it would not roll into the water and climbed up to the hatch and listened for the sound of the tau engines. When he heard nothing, he climbed back down and made his way further onwards to the next such hatchway.

It was at the eighth hatchway that Ratish heard the sound he wanted to hear, the high pitched whining sound that he had come to associate with a tau vehicle with its engines idling, it was stationary but powered up. Ratish pushed up on the hatchway and felt it move. He pushed it harder and as it got clear of the rim he slid it to one side and found himself looking at the underside of the tau vehicle. He climbed back down the ladder and retrieved the bomb, then he climbed back up the ladder and crawled out of the hatch.

The underside of the tau vehicle was close to the ground, so Ratish had to stay low as he dragged the bomb through the hatch behind him. Lying on his back he used both hands to lift the bomb over him so that it rested against the tau vehicle, then he pressed the button Mek Batrug had told him would set the bomb and keep it in place.

Suddenly the bomb became weightless as it clamped itself to the vehicle above and Ratish's keen Gretchin hearing picked out a fizzing sound in addition to the whining sound of the vehicle's engines. This was a sound that Ratish knew; it was the sound of a burning fuse.

He scabbled back into the hole and descended to the tunnel as quickly as he could, then after picking up his torch he did what Gretchin do best. He ran.

14

Inside the tau skyray, the pilot was bored. He had spent his entire shift sat in the cockpit waiting for an order to open fire that had never come. It seemed that orks were keeping well out of sight and according to base rumour this was causing a great deal of tension between the base's senior staff, each of whom believed themselves to be the best qualified to deal with the situation.

Then he heard the sound. It was a simple 'clank', that seemed to be coming from the vehicle's rear compartment. He knew that he should report it in of course and have a technician brought out to investigate it. But his boredom got the better of him and he undid his harness, climbed out his seat and left the cockpit to investigate the sound himself, but he could see no sign of anything out of the ordinary. He opened the nearest of the side hatches and looked outside. Immediately below he saw a circular piece of metal that had not been there earlier. The tau recognised it as one of the manhole covers that were located at the junctions in the city. Junctions like the one he was positioned at. He jumped down from the skyray and bent down to look underneath the vehicle, there he saw two things. Firstly he saw that the manhole cover now resting on the ground next to him had been removed from the manhole underneath his vehicle and secondly he saw that there was something stuck under his vehicle that was emitting a soft fizzing sound, that barely audible over the sound of his vehicle's engines. From the shape of it there was only one thing that it could be. A bomb and the fizzing sound told the tau that it was about to detonate.

He stood up quickly and turned to run and as he did so he took a deep breath so as to shout out a warning but he never got the chance.

The detonation of the bomb cut the skyray in half and created a fireball that lit up the night. The shock wave lifted the tau pilot up off the ground and carried him through the air. As he flew through the air the shrapnel also propelled by the blast struck his helpless body repeatedly and he was ripped to shreds.

Underground, Ratish felt the tunnel shake from the blast when the bomb went off above him. He was aware of heat and light coming from behind him as part of the fireball came down the manhole into the tunnel.

Ratish took a deep breath and dived into the water that came up past his knees. His torch went out as soon as it was submerged and in the darkness he heard the roaring of the blast as it travelled down the tunnel muffled by the water over him.

When the sound ceased Ratish stood up and took another breath. Without the torch the tunnel was in near complete darkness, with only limited light entering through the open manholes where Hazug had prised one open and the one that had been beneath the tau vehicle. The extinguished torch was soaked and useless, attempting to relight it would just be a waste of time, but Ratish kept hold of it just in case. It would make a useful club if he needed it.

Ratish knew he had a choice of which direction he could go in, initially he considered continuing with going back in the direction of where he had first entered the tunnel. But then he realised that as soon as the tau vehicle had exploded the orks would begin their charge towards the base. If he wanted to get back to Hazug he would have to go back in that direction.

"Ratish see master soon," he said to himself as he began to wade towards the tau base.

The orks had waited eagerly for Ratish to destroy the tau vehicle. The Ork vehicles were still out of view of the tau base, so the first they knew of his success was when the sky lit up and the fireball grew so large that they could see it over the intervening buildings. The initial detonation of the bomb was followed almost immediately as the warheads and fuel carried by the missiles it was armed with cooked off in the flames.

"Dat's it lads," yelled Two Heads from his drivers seat, "lets roll!"

The two Ork vehicles accelerated rapidly with their engines roaring and turned the corner onto the passageway cleared by the tau through the rubble. Ironically the tau vehicles would have had no trouble at all negotiated the rubble with their hovering designs, while it benefited the orks perfectly. From this point they could see the damage that Ratish had caused with the bomb. There was nothing left of the tau vehicle, what had not been destroyed by the bomb going off had been ripped apart by the secondary detonations of the missiles it carried. Now there was just burning wreckage spread over a wide area. The battlegon remained in front of the modified truck to protect it from any weapons fire from the tau. Kutbit and Gutnak who were in the gunner's seats for the battlegon's automatic weapons opened fire as soon as they saw the entrance to the tau base was still wide open. The light cast out from the interior of the tau base made it an easy target, even for questionable marksmen such as orks and even though the distance was great Hazug could see the handful of tau in the vehicle hangar beyond the doors taking cover as bullets were sprayed about randomly by the orks. Their lack of armour and weapons suggested to him that they were workers rather than soldiers. The rattle of the automatic weapons was joined by an even louder booming as

Gorrid fired the battlewagon's main cannon, not at the hangar being targeted by the other Ork gunners, but instead towards the unmoving tau spaceship beneath its camouflage.

The shell struck one nearest of the engine pods and detonated on impact. The initial explosion of the shell was followed moments later by a much bigger blast that tore the engine pod away from the hull of the spaceship.

"Nice work lad," Hazug shouted as he observed the tau spaceship begin to burn, "now dey can't use it to run away."

From beside him Hazug heard more weapons fire and he saw that Mek Batrug had pointed the recently scavenged automatic weapon through a forward facing vision slit and was joining Gutnak and Kutbit in firing into the tau hangar.

A klaxon blared out from within the tau base and the doors to the hangar began to slide closer together.

"Da doors is closing!" Two Heads yelled and he swerved violently so that Skarit could drive past in the truck. As the battlewagon moved out of the way Skarit saw the large doors to the tau base closing. He increased the speed of the truck as much as he could and aimed it towards the doors. As soon as he was sure that the truck was pointing in the right direction Skarit pulled the lever Mek Batrug had installed to jam the acceleration and steering. Then he leapt from the fast moving truck. He hit the ground hard and heard the unmistakable sound of a bone breaking as his arm struck a piece of debris from the destroyed tau vehicle. With the damaged limb hanging by his side he looked up to watch the truck as it continued on its way towards the doors, only to it also strike debris from the vehicle and flip over. The truck spun as it rolled landing side on to the doors rather than pointing at them, but it continued rolling towards them. There was a dull 'clang' as the doors closed, followed by a crash as the rolling truck struck them. But there was no explosion.

"Wot 'appened?" Two Heads yelled inside the battlewagon as he slammed on its brakes to allow Skarit to climb aboard. Seeing his injury Sophie rushed to assist him put a splint on his arm.

"Da shell wos on da front," Mek Batrug reminded Two Heads, "it wos supposed to blow up first, den da rest of da stuff on da truck would go up."

"So wot now?" Hazug asked.

"I know," said Gorrid and he fired a shell into the wreckage of the truck.

Another large explosion lit up the night as the explosive shell detonated amongst the ammunition and fuel that the orks had loaded into the back of the truck and inside the battlewagon were the sounds of tiny pieces of shrapnel bouncing off its armoured hull.

"Is da door open?" Hazug asked.

"It is," Two Heads replied when the smoke cleared enough to allow him to see the gaping hole that had been blown in the armoured doors and he pushed his foot down hard on the battlewagon's accelerator pedal.

The engine roared and Skarit and Sophie were thrown to the floor as the battlewagon moved off as fast as Two Heads could get it to go. From Two Heads' position in the driving seat he saw the hole in the doors growing in size as he drove towards it.

"Is dat 'ole big enough?" Drazzok said.

"We is about to find out," Two Heads replied as the battlewagon crashed through what was left of the truck and into the hole.

The battlewagon lurched as it clipped the edge of the hole and there was the sound of grinding metal as it kept on moving.

"We is through!" Two Heads yelled when the battlewagon cleared the hole and the orks found themselves inside the tau base.

The room they had broken into was large and well lit. When the orks had first converted the asteroid into a space craft they had just roughly tunnelled their way through it and sealed fissures as needed, however the tau had created a more regular shaped chamber more in keeping with their design style and covered the bare rock with metal and concrete and painted it in a similar style to their vehicles.

There were few tau in the chamber, most of them technicians maintaining the various vehicles parked there. But there were also a handful of soldiers armed with the standard long tau pulse rifles who fired their weapons at the Ork vehicle as it made its entrance while the technicians fled.

The energy pulses from the tau weapons impacted harmlessly on the armoured hull of the battlewagon and served only to attract the attention of the Ork gunners. Gutnak and Kutbit opened fire simultaneously, spraying bullets all around the vehicle hangar. Most either struck nothing, embedding themselves in the walls, or struck the armoured tau vehicles parked in the hangar and ricocheted off. But some found their mark successfully and two tau soldiers fell dead while a third screamed and clutched at his stomach in an attempt to stop the flow of blood pouring from him. The remaining tau soldiers took this as their signal to withdraw. One of them slung his rifle and went to assist his injured comrade, only for them both to be hit by the continuing torrent of gunfire from the battlewagon and killed outright.

The surviving tau soldiers reached the doorway that lead deeper in to the base and as the last of them past through it the door slammed shut.

"Nail da wagons!" Two Heads both shouted at Gorrid and the young Ork loaded another shell into the vehicle's main cannon.

The gun boomed as Gorrid fired the shell at the nearest of the tau vehicles, one of the two that mounted a large weapon in a turret on top. The round struck the tau tank at the base of it turret, which span around when the shell detonated and flew off, bouncing off the wall behind the vehicle before dropping to the floor. "Nice one lad!" one of Two Heads shouted as the tau tank burned, "Now lets see if ya can do it again!" Outside of the battlewagon a klaxon began to sound and blasts of vapour were directed at the burning tank from pipes running across the ceiling.

O'Levath had been on his way back to his quarters, annoyed after another day of searching for the orks without results, when the klaxon began to sound and he turned and ran back to the control centre.

"What's going on Shas'la?" he asked as he rushed into the room and took his chair.

"The orks are attacking us Shas'o, two vehicles at least. We are sealing the hangar doors."

"Why hasn't the skyray fired on them?"

"It has been destroyed, their vehicles began their assault shortly after it exploded."

"Destroyed? How?"

"Unknown, Shas'o. The vehicle simply exploded before the orks attacked."

"That is no coincidence, the orks must have destroyed it somehow."

"What of our drones?"

"Non-functional, they have not long returned from searching the city and are still being recharged."

There was the sound of an explosion.

"What was that?" O'Levath demanded.

"The hangar doors are breached Shas'o, one of the Ork vehicles crashed into them and exploded," the tau paused, then added, "The orks are inside the base Shas'o, the hangar sentries are under fire and taking casualties."

"Tell them to withdraw," O'Levath ordered, "and seal the hangar. Alert all remaining fire warriors, tell them to protect the inner hangar door and get Ui'Yenvil and Ui'Auronsa to the armoury."

As the tau began to pass O'Levath's instructions on to the relevant tau, Aun'Verai entered the control centre flanked by her guards.

"Explain the alarm Shas'o," she said calmly.

"The orks have attacked us honoured ethereal, they have penetrated the outer hangar doors and entered the base. I am withdrawing our personnel and will seal it off."

"Then what Shas'o? Do you not believe that the orks will attempt to move deeper into the base?"

"I do, but my fire warriors lack the weaponry to destroy their vehicle, I will not throw away their lives in such a futile gesture."

"Nor should you Shas'o, but what do you intend to do to combat the greenskins?"

"I am deploying my fire warriors to guard against the orks breaking out of the hangar, their vehicle is too big to drive any further into the base and I have summon my crisis team. They will deal with the Ork vehicle if the orks do not come to us first."

"Very well Shas'o, you may continue. For the greater good."

O'Levath didn't reply to the ethereal, instead turning his attention to the information presented to him by the base's security systems, in particular the surveillance camera feed from the hangar which showed the Ork battlewagon driving in a circular pattern while its occupants fired randomly into the tau vehicles parked there and also into the large rack of immobile drones, destroying them while they could not defend themselves.

Then one of the other tau spoke up.

"Shas'o, the armoury reports that the crisis team has arrived and are being prepared."

"Excellent," O'Levath said, "then this won't last much longer."

"I don't believe it!" Ryton exclaimed when he re-entered his quarters after finally managing to get a passing tau to stop long enough to tell him why the base's alarm was sounding, "Those fething orks have actually managed to get in here. They're running all over the base now."

"So what will happen now?" Diona asked as she began to hurriedly put her clothes back on.

"Oh I'd say that O'Levath and his soldiers should able to deal them quite easily now they are out in the open, but I think it would be rather prudent if we took a few precautions to defend ourselves. I'm not altogether certain that O'Levath will choose to put his fire warriors between the orks and us."

Ryton activated his communicator and called the other humans.

"Head for the armoury," he told them, "we may need to put your training into action sooner than I thought," then he cut off the communication and spoke to Diona, "Come with me, but stay behind me," he told her as he unpacked the plasma pistol from his desk and loaded it.

The armoury was a hive of activity when Ryton and Diona arrived. Quint was already there, while the other two humans, Thaddius and Ophilia, arrived only moments later. The armoury staff were busy issuing weapons to the tau fire warriors who when they left were all heading straight towards the hangar and the orks while two other tau were being assisted into massive powered armour.

"I cannot afford the time to assist you," the shas'ui in charge told Ryton, "just have your people take what they want and log it out," and the tau handed Ryton an access key for one of the arms lockers.

The locker contained the weapons that Ryton's recruits had already practised with; one of the tau armourers had cleaned them and returned them to the locker after the training session was completed. The weapons were in racks at the top of the locker, while a separate cupboard at the bottom held box after box of ammunition. Not wanted to waste the limited amount of ammunition he had for the powerful plasma weapon, Ryton took an automatic pistol for himself and one for each of the other humans, then he also handed a shotgun to Thaddius. Finally he opened the ammunition cupboard and grabbed a handful of clips for his automatic pistol and loaded it.

"Take as much as you can carry," he said, "we may not get the chance to come back."

"Where are we going?" Ophilia asked as they filled their pockets with ammunition.

"To my quarters, we can monitor what's going on from my terminal there."

Without stopping to formally log out the weapons as the shas'ui had requested, Ryton lead his followers back to his quarters.

Two Heads finally grew board of driving in a circle while his boys shot the battlewagon's guns at targets that weren't firing back. The only tau left in the hangar were dead, the tau vehicles were now wrecked and the rows of floating disks in a massive wall mounted rack had remained motionless as they were ripped apart by bullets and cannon shells.

"Dat's enough lads," he said as he brought the battlewagon to a halt and he got out of the driving seat. The other orks followed suit, ceasing fire and climbing down from their gunner's positions.

"So wot now?" Two Heads asked Hazug.

"We get out," Hazug said, "dare are more tau left yet, we saw 'em leggin' it. We needs to take out dat door dey ran through."

There was a tapping at the rear hatch to the battlewagon and the orks quickly turned in that direction and raised their weapons. They lowered them when they heard a familiar voice from outside.

"Ratish blew up da tau wagon master. Can Ratish come in now?"

The hatch opened, but before Ratish could climb into the battlewagon the orks came rushing out. Behind them Sophie began to disembark only for Hazug to stop her.

"I said ya stays 'ere out of da way," he said, "dis is for us wot's green to do."

Smoke from the destroyed vehicles still lingered in the air and some of the gas used to suppress the resulting fires had yet to disperse as the orks looked around.

Standing alone in the hatchway, Sophie watched as the others all ran to the doorway through which the tau had fled.

Mek Batrug banged his fist against the door and listened to the sound it made.

"It's a thick'un," he said, "good bit of armour plate dat is. A stikkbomm won't do it."

"Wot will?" Hazug asked.

"Ow about da kannon?" added Two Heads.

"Dare's no shells left boss," Gorrid said.

"Den wot 'ave we got?" Two Heads said.

"Me," answered Drazzok, "get behind me and get ready."

The other greenskins positioned themselves behind Drazzok who was looking straight at the armoured door and breathing deeply, his eyes closed.

"Is 'e sleepin again?" Kutbit whispered.

"No I isn't, now shut up till its time."

Drazzok lifted his staff over his head, preventing his collected psychic energy from draining away and continued to breath deeply. Then he opened his eyes suddenly and let out a loud "Waaagh!"

The other joined in the cry and a for a split second Drazzok glowed like a brilliant flame then the light that was surrounding his body shot forwards in an intense beam that blasted its way into the door.

In the control centre that tau watched as the orks studied the armoured door that led out of the hangar and also the image of the fire warriors deploying in the corridor on the other side of the door.

"What are the orks doing now?" one of the tau said as he watched them moving away from the door while a particularly savage looking Ork stepped forwards and raised its staff into the air. There was no sound being fed to the control centre from the surveillance cameras but the tau could tell that the orks were screaming and a glowing light began to form around the Ork nearest to the door.

"Perhaps they think they can get through the door just by shouting at it," another of the tau commented, then O'Levath spoke.

"Get the warriors away from there!" he shouted, "The orks are about to blow the door!"

But before any of the other tau controllers could react the surveillance display showed the door exploded outwards from the hangar.

The blast of energy struck the door with such force that it was ripped away from the wall and sent flying down the corridor behind it. Some of the tau fire warriors who had been waiting with their weapons trained on the door for the orks to force it open just stared as it came hurtling towards them, while those further away had more chance to react and attempted to withdraw.

Some of the tau soldiers were able to cry out in pain as the heavy door struck them and carried on moving down the corridor, while others were simply thrown aside without making a sound. Behind the door came the blast released by Drazzok, a white-hot bolt of psychic power channelled from the gestalt field that surrounded all members of the Orkoid species. The tau that were not killed by the crushing weight of the door were instead roasted by the heat of the blast.

When the orks rushed through the deformed and smoking doorway they saw only the bodies of the tau before them.

Like the hangar, the corridor beyond the gaping hole was clearly not part of the original Ork modifications to the asteroid, its lines were neat and regular and the wall was covered in flat panels that had the look of having been mass produced to be identical. To an Ork this was dull and lacked character.

"Oi Drazzok," said Kutbit, "could ya not 'ave left some of 'em for us?"

"Dare's plenty more where dey came from lads," said Hazug and followed it up with a "Waaagh!" as he charged down the corridor to find more tau. Behind him the others also yelled as they ran.

The single tau from the squad guarding the hangar door who had not been in the corridor had considered himself lucky when the door flew past the corner ahead of him and crashed into the wall at the end of the access corridor followed by the energy blast that scorched and cracked it, but his luck ran out when Hazug reached the junction. Before the tau could raise his rifle or signal for help the monstrous Ork in front of him was able to fire two shots into his chest. The tau's body armour was able to absorb the force of the shots, even at this close range, but the shock of the bullet impacts made the tau stagger backwards. Stepping forwards Hazug swung his blade and knocked the tau's rifle away. As the weapon clattered down the corridor the tau soldier tried to follow and retrieve it, but Hazug swung the blade once more and brought it down on his enemy. The strength behind the blow was enough to split the tau's armour wide open and after that the torso of the tau himself and he died with a gurgle as his lungs filled with his own blood.

"See lads, its just like I told ya, dare's still plenty more of 'em!"

The orks cheered and moved on.

After the corner there was a short length of corridor before a junction that led off to both the left and right. Hazug slowed down as he approached the junction, meaning to take a look around it before moving on. But as he drew close a pair of tau appeared and fired down the corridor. The short pulse of energy flashed past him as he dived to the floor, then there was the chatter of projectile weapon fire as the other orks returned fire. In addition to the sound of the rifles that Two Heads and his boys carried there was the lower pitched sound of the scavenged heavy weapon that Mek Batrug had commandeered for the fight. Hazug himself fired his pistol and watched the tau ducked back around the junction corner, one of them bleeding from a gunshot wound.

Reaching to his belt, Two Heads unhooked a grenade and pulled out the pin.

"Stikkbomm!" he yelled as he threw the crude explosive down the corridor. The orks all ducked as it bounced around the corner, to be followed by a dull 'thump' as it detonated. Skarit was first to his feet and ran to the junction.

"Old on lad," shouted Hazug as the Ork reached the end of the corridor, but he was too late.

Skarit saw the two tau that fired on the orks lying dead on the floor immediately in front of him, their bodies filled with shrapnel from the grenade, but further ahead was another tau partially concealed behind a desk. Skarit tried to raise his rifle but the injury to his arm slowed him down and before he could fire the tau let off a burst from his own weapon and the shots tore into Skarit's head and chest.

Hazug was next to the corner and rather than rushing around it he leant around and fired his pistol repeatedly. The tau was not hit, but Hazug's shots forced him to duck back behind his cover while the other orks jumped over Skarit's body and charged towards him. Mek Batrug fired again, aimed at the desk and he was pleased to see the hidden tau fall as the heavy rounds pierced both his cover and his armour easily.

“Ow do ya dat den?” Mek Batrug yelled as the tau died.

Beyond the desk the corridor opened out into a large chamber with a high ceiling filled with crates and drums and the orks split up as they began to search it for any more tau hiding there.

As they searched there was a sudden crunch and a shout of “Over ‘ere,” as Drazzok discovered a tau cowering towards the far end of the room near the large sealed doors that Hazug had seen from outside the base earlier and brought his staff down on the aliens head. By the time the other orks got to Drazzok he had already beaten the alien to death.

“Any more of ‘em?” Hazug said.

The orks glanced at one another and shook their heads.

“Den lets try da other way next.”

O’Levath slumped back in his chair as he watched the camera feed that showed the live images of the orks slaughtering his troops and the unfortunate stores officer who had tried to hide.

“Where is that crisis team?” he demanded as he brought his hand down on the control panel in front of him forcefully.

“Signal from them now Shas’o, they are approaching the stores and ready to engage the orks.”

“This should be over soon then. I see no need to order any more fire warriors into harms way, have them hold back while the shas’uis deal with the orks.”

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As the orks left the storage area and ran back down the corridor they heard the sound of heavy footfalls coming from ahead. Very heavy footfalls.

"Kans!" Mek Batrug shouted as the forms of two huge armoured bipedal figures appeared in front of them and he fired another burst from his heavy weapon.

As large as Warboss Kazkal Kromag himself, the mechanical monstrosities each mounted a multi-barrelled weapon beneath one arm and a more boxlike weapon beneath the other.

The mekboy's shots were aimed well and all raced towards the nearest tau battlesuit, but before they could strike it their momentum was absorbed by a shield of energy that flashed under the repeated impacts.

In retaliation the lead suit raised its arm and volley of energy bolts flew from its multi-barrelled weapon back towards the orks. Fortunately for the orks the battlesuit had hurried his shots and they did no more than graze any of them.

"Get back lads!" Hazug shouted as he began to run back to the storage room they had just left.

The orks split up as they re-entered the room and took up positions behind the crates nearest the doorway. Before the battlesuits even entered the room one of them let off a powerful energy bolt from the box like weapon that blasted a crate to smithereens and scattered smouldering pieces of wood around the immediate area.

"Let rip!" Two Heads shouted as the lead battlesuit moved into view. Framed neatly as it stood in the doorway it was an easy target and the orks poured shot after shot into it. The shield flashed again and again as it soaked up the incoming fire, but the quantity of hits started to tell and more of them got through and struck the armoured suit itself. As Mek Batrug finished off the belt of ammunition he was feeding through his weapon a shower of sparks erupted from the neck of the battlesuit and it slumped to the floor, twitching as its pilot attempted to regain control.

The pilot of the second battlesuit did not repeat the mistake of making himself such an easy target. Instead he leapt over the damaged battlesuit and engaged his anti-gravitic propulsion unit to carry him into the air of the storage room. The orks fired at him as he passed over them, but without the heavy fire of Mek Batrug the few shots that would have struck the battlesuit were instead blocked by its shield.

"Grab it!" Hazug shouted as the battlesuit landed and crushed another crate.

Gorrid leapt at the battlesuit and attempted to grab hold of one of its arms, but it batted him aside. Two Heads had better luck however and as the battlesuit tried to bring its weapon to bear on Gorrid its pilot found that the larger Ork was holding back the arm on which it was mounted. The pilot felt an impact as Gutnak joined Two Heads in grabbing onto the battlesuit by jumping onto its back. Desperate to shake off the orks, the tau tried to spin his battlesuit around, but both Two Heads and Gutnak had tight holds. Worse for the tau, Hazug was now close enough to grab the battlesuit's other arm. Now both of its weapons were beyond use as the arms on which they were mounted were held pointing away from any of the orks. Instead the tau pilot attempted to use his anti-gravitic propulsion unit once more, but the additional weight of the orks prevented the battlesuit from getting more than a few inches off the ground. As the battlesuit hovered unsteadily it was rocked by the impact of Drazzok as he dived for the battlesuit's legs and it fell to the floor.

"I got it," Drazzok shouted as he wrapped his arms around the battlesuit's legs, "so wot now?"

"Just 'ang onto it," Mek Batrug said as he rushed over with his bag of tools.

"I'm 'angin', I'm 'angin', just 'urry up and do wotever ya is goin' to do."

Mek Batrug searched through his tools and selected one with a sharp point.

"Now let's see 'ow dis opens," he said and he began to search for a seam in the battlesuit as it continued to struggle against the orks holding it down.

He found it under an arm and pushed the tool into it as hard as could. There followed a hissing sound as the armour's seal was broken and Mek Batrug yelled, "Dat's it!" and pulled the chest panel away from the battlesuit. Inside the battlesuit, its pilot gasped as he armour was ripped open and he found himself staring straight into the face of Mek Batrug. He reached for a pistol that was holstered at his waist, but before he could draw it Mek Batrug struck again. The tau screamed as the mekboy raised the sharpened tool and used it to stab the tau in the neck. There was a jet of blood when Mek Batrug pulled the tool free and the tau just had time to grasp at his throat before he died.

"Lookout master!"

Hazug looked up when he heard Ratish yell, just in time to see the other battlesuit bring its powerful beam weapon to bear.

"Down lads!" he shouted and the orks all ducked behind crates. But rather than the expected bolt of energy that could blast through cover as though it were not there, there was merely a brief fizzle and a pop as the damaged weapon failed to fire.

Hazug leapt top his feet and over the crates in front of him, followed swiftly by Two Heads. The two Ork nobbs began to rain blows down on the tau battlesuit, knocking it back to the floor but otherwise doing little more than cosmetic damage.

"Da openin's under da arms!" Mek Batrug shouted and Hazug stepped back from the tau to gain the distance necessary to be able to plunge his blade into the seam in the battlesuit's armour. Almost immediately the suit went limp and immobile and when Hazug pulled back his blade it was covered with the blood of the tau warrior.

O'Levath stared at the display in disbelief as his elite crisis team died.

"What are your orders Shas'o?" a controller asked, but O'Levath remained silent.

"Shas'o?"

"Deploy our remaining fire warriors," O'Levath said when he finally broke his silence, "and summon our troops from the south, they are needed here."

Then he turned to Aun'Verai who had remained in the control centre observing the battle raging within the base.

"Honoured ethereal, you should leave."

"Leave?"

"Yes, the orks have broken through our defences and will soon enter the inner areas of this facility. You would be safer if you left and joined up with our forces that are returning from outside the city."

"Shas'o if I were to be seen fleeing from savages it would set a poor example for your warriors. I have faith in their ability to protect and will remain here. Now attend to your duties, for the greater good."

"Of course honoured ethereal, for the greater good."

They abandoned Gorrid in the storage area, he had been knocked unconscious when the battlesuit had struck him and when the others could not rouse him they were unwilling to miss out on the chance of further combat by waiting for him to wake up. Moving swiftly past the junction where Skarit's body still lay the orks came to two sets of doors, one just big enough for Hazug and Two Heads to pass through, the other much larger.

"Da kans must 'ave come from in dare," Hazug said indicating the larger set of doors. Beside it was a button that he promptly pressed. There was a soft chime as the doors slid open and the orks quickly raised their weapons and pointed them through the doorway, but there was nothing there. The chamber beyond the doors was small and empty, with a simple control panel on one wall. Clearly it was an elevator for accessing different levels of the tau base, Hazug had seen such things on Ork and human spacecraft, though in general orks preferred ladders, stairs or ramps.

"We can use dis to go up," Mek Batrug said and he began to step into the elevator, but Hazug stopped him.

"Da tau could be waitin' at da other end," he said, "and dare's no cover in dare. Let's find us another way." A suitable alternative was found through the smaller set of doors, a staircase that lead upwards to an empty landing.

"See," Hazug said, "dis is better," and the orks began to climb the stairs.

Warned by the control centre staff that the orks were climbing the stairs towards them, a pair of tau tried to head them off. But as they dashed through the door at the top of the stairwell they discovered that the orks were already almost to the landing. Without a single word of command being required the orks attacked the startled tau, in the confines of the stairwell the orks couldn't miss and the tau both crumpled and fell down the stairs when their armour proved inadequate to stop all of the gunfire directed towards them.

The orks began congratulating themselves, but Hazug signalled for quiet and moved closer to the door on the landing. There was a small window on it and he took a brief glance through it, then ducked back away from the door quickly as a burst of tau gunfire blasted through the glass from the other side.

"Is dare more out dare den?" Kutbit asked.

"Well who else do ya think just shot at us?" Hazug said to him and he took a grenade from his belt, "Last one," he said as he pulled out the pin and then threw it through the hole that had been shot in the door.

The orks ducked as the blast from the grenade destroyed what was left of the door, leaving only a smoking hole in the wall. Beyond they saw that passages lead off not only straight ahead, but also to each side of the door.

"Which way?" Two Heads asked.

"Dat way," Mek Batrug said, pointing to one of the side passages.

"Why dat way?" Hazug enquired.

"Listen," replied Mek Batrug and Hazug listened. He heard a faint rhythmic thumping sound.

"Wot's dat sound?" he said.

"Machines, blowin' 'em up should cause da tau some trouble."

Leading the way, Hazug and Two Heads suddenly stopped when they came to a part of the tau base that was radically different to what they had encountered so far.

There had been a great rip in the centre of the asteroid when the orks had modified it for their own use and this gap now lay before the warband. Across the gap, the tau had installed a bridge to cover the gap between the corridors on opposite sides. Looking over the sides of the bridge Hazug could just about make out the remnants of several similar, if cruder, constructions put in place by the orks for the same purpose in the areas that they had tunnelled through.

"Wot is we waitin' for?" Two Heads said, "Let's keep movin'," and followed by Kutbit he began to run across the bridge towards the other side.

"Down!" Hazug suddenly yelled when he spotted the crates stacked neatly at the far end of the bridge and the charging Evil Suns ducked just before the energy bolts flew from behind the crates.

Kutbit rolled as he landed and he had to reach out and grab part of the safety rail fitted by the tau that had built the bridge to stop him from falling into the blackness below. As it was he was left dangling from the bridge.

"Ang on lad," Two Heads said as he crawled across the bridge while more energy bolts flashed through the air above him to help the Ork climb back up.

Hazug fired his pistol back at the tau soldiers, but from this distance his shots failed to find their targets. There was the clatter of automatic weapons fire as Mek Batrug fired his more powerful weapon at the tau also.

The crates giving shelter to the tau could not withstand the impact of the more powerful rounds fired at them by Mek Batrug and as one of them crates broke up under the weight of fire the body of a tau soldier fell from behind it and toppled without a sound over the edge of the bridge into the depths below.

Hazug reached out and grabbed the rifle dropped by Kutbit when he had ducked for cover and brought it to his shoulder. Snatching the trigger repeatedly, Hazug fired a string of short bursts towards the tau and grinned as another of them fell from the bridge. This time, the alien had not been killed by the gunfire and his screams echoed as he plummeted to his death somewhere below.

Still using the crates for cover, the remaining tau soldiers fired another volley of energy bolts towards the orks and in response Mek Batrug shredded more of their improvised barricade with his automatic weapon.

"I needs me shoota back," Kutbit gasped as Two Heads dragged him back onto the bridge.

"Ere ya go lad," Hazug said, returning the rifle to the Ork, "I reckon dat it needs reloadin' though."

Kutbit took the weapon offered to him and rummaged through his belt for another magazine.

"So what now Hazug?" Two Heads asked as another volley of tau weapons fire passed over the prone orks.

"We needs to be closer to 'em," Hazug said, then he looked towards Drazzok, "Ow is ya at teleportin'?"

"Dem or us?" the weirdboy asked.

"Us."

"If I tries getting' us further up da bridge we may wind up missin' it," Drazzok explained, "and den we'd all wind up fallin'."

"Wot about past 'em? In da passage behind 'em?" Hazug asked.

Drazzok grinned.

"Get ready," he said and closed his eyes tightly.

There was a slight vibration as the weirdboy sought to bend space around the orks, but aside from that nothing happened.

"Soddit!" Drazzok yelled, "It's dis bridge, its made of metal and it drainin' me power away too quick."

"Right den," Hazug said, "new plan," and he looked back towards the tau as Two Heads shot at them once more.

"Do dat again Two Heads," Hazug said and Two Heads fired another burst and Hazug saw the tau duck behind their barricade. Hazug fired a pair of shots into the air and smiled as he watched the tau take cover again, "Right lads," he began, "I needs ya to keep shootin' without a break. Do it in turns so dat dare's someone else shootin' while ya reloads. Shoot over 'em though, not at 'em."

"Why's dat?" one of Two Heads asked as they both looked at Hazug with puzzled expressions.

"Yeah, ain't da idea of shootin' dat ya wants to point da guns at wot ya is shootin' at?" Drazzok said sarcastically.

"Every time we shoots, da tau stop and 'ide," Hazug said, "so while dey is 'idin', me and Drazzok is goin' to run right up to 'em."

"Is we?" Drazzok said, "Dat's nice of me."

"I got it," one of Two Heads said as the other nodded, "I'll start, den Kutbit, den Batrug."

"Just use ya slugga pistol Batrug," Hazug said, "don't waste da bullets for da big shoota."

Mek Batrug pulled his pistol from his belt, "Gotcha," he said.

"What about Ratish master?" Ratish asked eagerly, "Go with master, yes?"

"Better ya stay 'ere grot," Hazug said, "kop 'old some spare mags for da others and dish 'em out as quick as ya can. Goddit?"

Ratish nodded and took several magazines of ammunition from the orks getting ready to provide the distraction for Hazug's charge.

"Now!" Hazug shouted and dragging Drazzok to his feet as well he took off running down the bridge as Two Heads began to fire into the air at random.

Just as Hazug had expected, the tau reacted to the sound of gunfire by ducking behind the crates once again as he and Drazzok ran through the open. There was a slight pause in the gunfire as Two Heads' weapon emptied, but before the tau could open fire again Kutbit started up.

The remaining four tau soldiers, noticing that none of the shots the orks were now firing appeared to be directed at them at all, sudden changed their behaviour and all of them suddenly appeared from behind the crates, using the barricade to support their long rifles as they aimed straight at the charging Hazug and Drazzok.

But it was too late for them, the two running Orks were nearly upon them already and Hazug snapped off two quick shots that pierced the faceplate of one of the tau and he fell dead. Shocked by the speed with which Hazug had reacted caused the three surviving tau to pause for just long enough for him and Drazzok to leap up onto the barricade of crates.

"Take dat!" Drazzok shouted as he swung his staff and sent a screaming tau over the edge of the bridge. Hazug leapt down from the crate just as quickly as he had leapt onto it, knocking a tau soldier backwards as he landed on him. The alien tried to lift his weapon, but its bulky form was pinned between him and Hazug. Instead the Blood Axe pushed his pistol under the tau's chin and pulled the trigger. The tau's head jerked as the projectile exited and struck the inside of the helmet beyond before bouncing back into the dead soldier's skull once more.

The final tau had swung his rifle around to take aim at Hazug when an arm reached around his throat and tightened around him. Opening his mouth wide, Drazzok brought his head down and took a bite out of the tau's neck.

The tau's scream attracted Hazug's attention and he spun around and drove his blade into his stomach, angling it upwards so that it cut through his heart. As the lifeless tau went limp in Drazzok's grip he ripped a chunk of flesh free before spitting it out onto the bridge.

"Ow'd it taste?" Hazug said.

"Needs salt," Drazzok answered.

O'Levath grew more frustrated as the orks brushed aside his troops and pushed deeper into the base.

"Where are our fire warriors?" he demanded.

"Getting into position Shas'o, but the orks are moving away from most of them."

"They are advancing on our generators and machine shop, is there anybody in place to stop them?"

"I regret not Shas'o, but that area of the base is protected by a security door that we can seal..."

"The orks have already penetrated two security doors and the level of damage they caused when they did so would be catastrophic in that area. No, the door must remain open."

Then O'Levath continued to watch the images provided by the bases security monitors as the orks continued on their way.

The orks followed the sound of machinery through the tau base. No tau soldiers appeared to stop them and they saw only a handful of tau workers who turned to flee before the orks cut them down mercilessly.

Eventually they reached a heavy looking bright red door at the end of a corridor from behind which the noise of machinery was coming. Before the orks could go through the door Hazug told them to stop.

"'Ere Batrug, wot do ya think is behind dare?" he asked, unable to read the tau lettering that was neatly stencilled onto the door itself.

Mek Batrug paused to listen and then smelt the air.

"Probably da power generator for da base."

"So wot if we blow it up?"

"Depends, could just shut down all da tau machines, or it could blow up da entire rok."

Hazug thought for a moment, he didn't like the idea of the asteroid exploding while he was inside.

"Right lads, choppas only," he said before he burst through the door.

The room beyond held a control desk that ran for much of the length of the wall opposite, above it was a window that gave a view of the tau generators in the room beyond. A door at the far end of the wall lead through to the generators, but it was closed. The handful of tau engineers working there scattered in terror as the huge Ork stormed in, followed by another equally large Ork with two heads and then several other smaller orks that were still larger than they were.

One of the tau began shouting into a microphone before Two Heads suck his axe between the alien's shoulder blades. Others tried to flee, but if they were to escape they could only go through the doorway that the orks had just stormed through rather than into the generator room. So in their efforts to escape the tau just ran straight into them. As instructed the orks ignored their guns and used only their close combat weapons, which they swung enthusiastically and cut down the tau as they tried to escape.

"Cor!" Mek Batrug exclaimed loudly, "Just take a look at all dese gubbins!" and he ran towards the nearest piece of tau technology and began to prise it open.

"So wot now?" Two Heads asked as he wiped blood from his axe.

"Batrug shuts it all down," Hazug said, then he turned to the mekboy, "ow long will it take?"

"Could be a while, dare's a lot of levers 'ere," Mek Batrug said, looking up as he pulled something from the machine that had interested him and stuffed it into his bag.

"Right get to it, we'll watch da door."

"Where are those fire warriors?"

"Almost there Shas'o, estimate three minutes to contact."

O'Levath stood up and began to walk out of the control centre.

"Where are you going Shas'o?" Aun'Verai asked.

O'Levath ignored the ethereal, but turned to one of the controllers.

"Tell the armoury to prepare my armour," he said, "I will be with them shortly. I'm going to deal with this myself."

As he left the room Aun'Verai made her way to the commander's chair and sat in it.

"Put me through to Mr Ryton," she said.

"Right we're leaving," Ryton said when he shut off the communicator.

"Aren't we going to fight the orks?" Diona asked.

"No, we need to get out of here before they find us."

Ryton led the way towards the vehicle hangar, the training of his recruits had not included tactical movement skills and without the access to the security camera feeds he had in his quarters he didn't trust them not to blunder around a corner and run right into the orks.

"The orks did this?" Thaddius said when the group reached the top of the stairwell and discovered the remains of the tau soldiers who had attempted to halt the Ork advance there, "I thought tau technology was supposed to superior."

"It is," Ryton told him, "but being primitive doesn't stop a weapon being deadly."

Then all the lights went out.

"We'll take the stairs," Ryton said.

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"Dat's got it, job's a good 'un," yelled Mek Batrug as he found the necessary control to safely shut down the generators, then followed it up with, "ah crap," as the lights went out in the room and the corridor outside, plunged the orks into pitch blackness.

Fortunately the blackness did not last long and some of the lights came back on again moments later and provided dim illumination.

"Oi Batrug why are dose lights still on?" Hazug asked.

"Dey must 'ave an emergency power source built into 'em, probably won't last long. All the big stuff should 'ave shut down though."

"Right, let's get movin' den."

"Wot about da controls?" Mek Batrug asked.

"Wot do ya mean?"

"Well if we leave da tau can just go in dare and turn da generators back on."

"Can't ya break 'em?"

"Yeah, cause I can."

"Den break 'em and try not to blow us all up while ya do it."

Mek Batrug grinned and aimed his gun at the control panel. He squeezed the trigger and swung the gun from side to side, sending heavy bullets into the control panel.

"Dat should do it," he said as the last rounds from the belt were expended.

"I could 'ave done dat myself," Two Heads commented.

The sound of footfalls alerted the orks to the approach of more tau and weapon flashes briefly lit up the darkened corridor as they fired a rapid volley towards the orks.

"Let's move," Hazug yelled as the orks returned fire, forcing the tau to seek cover behind a corner.

Rather than charge the tau Hazug lead the orks in a different direction, as the tau attempted to follow they were driven back by more gunfire.

"So where is we goin' anyway?" Drazzok asked as Hazug continued to lead the orks through the darkened base, turning corners apparently at random.

"I is lookin' for da tau boss," Hazug replied as he fired two shots into a tau unlucky to have come walking into view at that moment, "den I kill 'im and we can finish da rest of 'em while they don't know wot to do.

Now come on and someone keep an eye out behind us."

"Why?" asked Two Heads.

"Because I think dare's been tau followin' us since we turned out da lights."

O'Levath was most of the way to the armoury when the base's power failed. He stopped in the passageway for a few seconds until the emergency lighting batteries kicked in and proceeded on his way. Upon reaching the armoury he found that all of the lights were still out and the staff were using hand held lanterns for illumination.

"Shas'o what is happening?" the shas'ui armourer said when his superior entered.

"The orks located the power generators and it would appear that they have been able to shut them down. Why are the emergency lights not working?"

"It appears that the earth caste failed to install any emergency batteries in here Shas'o."

O'Levath cursed under his breath, how could the fire caste act for the greater good when they received such poor support from the workers of the earth caste?

"Have you heard from the control centre?"

"No Shas'o, nothing since the power was lost."

"Is my armour prepared?"

"It is only partially charged Shas'o, but the systems have passed all checks."

"It will have to do; I am not planning on a prolonged engagement. Assist me shas'ui."

The shas'ui summoned his two subordinates and they helped their commander to climb into his personal battlesuit that knelt in the centre of the armoury. As the chest plate was sealed over him, O'Levath took note of the readouts in front him. As the armourer had informed him the energy reserves were low, less than a third of total capacity, but the suit's weapons and targeting systems were all active.

The armourers all stood back as the battlesuit powered up and got to its feet. Thus prepared for combat Shas'O T'au Levath went looking for his enemies.

Alone, Sophie sat in the battlewagon waiting for Hazug to return. She heart rose whenever she heard the distinctive sound of Ork weapons fire that indicated the orks were still alive, but the periods of silence between them were agony. Then all the lights went out and she rushed to the open hatchway and looked

out into the vehicle hangar. Unlike the rest of the base the emergency lighting in the hangar had failed as a result of the damage caused by the orks' forced entry and shooting spree. However the massive chamber was not in total darkness, even though it was night time outside some light still spilled in through the gaping hole blown in the doors, added to which there were still some small fires within the hangar where its fire suppression system had failed to extinguish them fully and the flames were still flickering. Now eerie shadows were cast on the hangar walls by their light. Sophie retreated back into the now familiar surroundings of the battlewagon and continued to wait. Then she heard footsteps.

Excited, she looked through one of the vision slits that offered a view of the doorway that Drazzok had blasted open, but rather than the returning orks as she hoped to she instead saw that a group of armed humans had just entered the hangar. She knew these people, some more than others, but she recalled them. Four of them had worked for orks just like she had and she remembered meeting them all at one time or another. But her hope that some of the friends she knew might still be alive and helping to fight the tau were dashed when she recognised the final member of this group. He had told her his name was Kyle Ryton and he had come to this world on behalf of the tau empire and when most of the humans he spoke refused to support him, he had the tau soldiers kill them.

Sophie wished that the orks had left here a weapon so that she could attack Ryton and his followers and for a brief moment she even considered the possibility of using some of the battlewagon's weaponry. But she swiftly realised that her inexperience would likely get her killed, which was exactly why Hazug had left her here in the first place. So instead she stood peering out of the battlewagon and watched quietly as the group of humans went to an undamaged area of the hangar where something large was concealed beneath a sheet.

"Well at least this seems to have escaped undamaged," she heard Ryton say as he pulled back the sheet to reveal an open topped human built vehicle, "everyone get in." She had seen many vehicles similar to this one, but they had all been wrecks that the orks cut up for their metal whereas this particular one looked almost new. The humans all climbed into the vehicle and Ryton started its engine.

"Right," he said to his passengers, "this should get us to the Ork city in just over a day. Then we get to finish what we've started."

Ryton revved the vehicle's engine before driving it through the hole left behind by the exploding Ork truck.

The hardwired night vision equipment in O'Levath's battlesuit gave him perfect vision in the poorly lit rooms and corridors of the base as he hunted for the greenskin invaders. Unfortunately the battlesuit's audio receptors did not give him the necessary level of hearing that would have let him determine the precise direction of the sounds of gunfire and dying he kept picking up and each time he located an area where the orks had been they had already moved on. Without the co-ordination provided by the control centre's communications the tau were proving to be easy pickings and he saw no indication that his fire warriors had killed any more of the invading greenskins. Suddenly his communications system came to life.

"O'Levath can you hear me?"

"Honoured ethereal? The base lights are still out, surely power has not been restored?"

"Regrettably not Shas'o, the earth caste informs me that it will take quite some time to repair the damage done by the orks to the machinery."

"Then how are you communicating with me?"

"One of your staff has been able to set up a portable field radio transmitter. It is not as efficient as our regular network, but it is functional. Where are you Shas'o?"

O'Levath checked his surroundings.

"I am to the north of the barracks honoured ethereal, the orks have been here but they have left."

"I know Shas'o, I have spoken with some of your fire warriors who have been following the orks at a distance since they cut the power."

"Where are they now?"

"East of you. Their movements have been random, but if they continue on their current path they will reach the control centre shortly."

"You should leave."

"We have spoken of this before Shas'o and I will not flee. In any case the random movement of the orks makes no one place safer than any other. But hurry Shas'o, for the greater good."

"Yes honoured ethereal, for the greater good."

Aware of the limitations to his battlesuit's power reserves O'Levath activated the anti gravity propulsion and made for the control centre as fast as he could.

Two more tau died. They died quickly; they had been using hand held lights to illuminate their path that had given the orks advance warning of their approach when the projected beam poked around the corner before they themselves appeared. Hazug whispered to the other orks to remain where they were as he crept

forwards to the corner that the tau lights were shining around. When the tau came around the corner Hazug lived up to his name and slit the throat of one, then as the other turned to run he shot the alien in the back of the head, the alien's helmet splitting open as the bullet pierced first it, then its wearer's skull. The he beckoned the orks to advance.

Hazug decided to continue straight on and soon alien voices could be heard coming from a room ahead and flickering lights coming from inside suggested that the occupants were using hand held lights to improve the lighting here also.

Hazug was about to have the orks stop once more so that he could scout ahead when a tau soldier stepped from the room with his weapon ready and fired. The energy bolt struck Two Heads in the shoulder and he roared with pain, but his Orkish resilience kept him standing while the wound was cauterised by the heat of the shot itself.

Mek Batrug was the quickest to react and his heavy weapon almost cut the tau warrior in half. Knowing that stealth was now irrelevant, Hazug raised his blade and yelled.

"Waaagh!"

The orks charged forwards, copying the war cry and the next tau to appear at the doorway was shot by Hazug before he had a chance to fire. Another tau died when Hazug, charging through the doorway, was confronted by one of them standing just inside the room. This one wore no armour and as Hazug appeared it reached for a pistol lying on the top of a control panel nearby. Without pausing, Hazug just swung his pistol arm upwards and lifted the tau up off the floor with the force of the blow. A snapping sound confirmed that he had broken the alien's neck. Even with the limited light coming from the emergency lights and the tau's hand held lamps, Hazug could tell that this room was important. There were control panels everywhere and in the centre of the room a chair was positioned on a dais with more control panels around it. Unlike many of the rooms the orks had cleared most of the tau in this room were armed, though not all of them wore the armour that he had come to expect of tau soldiers. Like the alien that Hazug had killed upon entering the room, these un-armoured tau carried only pistols, but they still fought when the orks stormed the room. The armoured tau moved to place themselves between the orks and the occupant of the central chair. As they did so Hazug knew exactly where he wanted to get.

There was the rattle of gunfire as the orks began firing as soon as any of them saw a target to shoot at. The tau were slow to respond, the armoured tau appeared more interested in protecting the chair's occupant while the un-armoured ones had first to draw their weapons from holsters and not all of them managed this before the orks gunned them down. By the time the tau began to return fire the orks were so close that they had discarded their guns and switched to their close combat weapons and the room was filled with screams either from tau as they died or the orks as they celebrated the kill.

Hazug shot one of the armoured tau in the neck as he charged to the centre of the room and was pleased to see him fall. That left just two more. The first used his rifle to parry Hazug's blade, but left himself open to Hazug's pistol placed below his armoured chest plate and fired upwards. Blood splattered onto the ceiling as the bullets exiting through the top of the tau soldier's head. The second tau swung his rifle like a club and caught Hazug across his head. Momentarily stunned, Hazug staggered backwards from the surprise blow and saw the tau take aim. But before the tau could fire he was himself struck on the head as Drazzok swung his staff with enough force to take him off his feet. A pair of shots from Hazug's pistol finished him off.

"Nice one Drazzok," Hazug said, this being as close to 'thank you' as any Ork was ever likely to say.

In front of them the tau sat in the chair stood up. Though much taller than Sophie, this tau's general shape reminded Hazug of her and he determined that this tau was also what could be called 'female'. She carried no gun, but unlike the other unarmed tau that the orks had encountered she did not cower or flee as they approached. Instead she picked up a staff tipped in a long, straight blade and adjusted her posture to receive an attack.

Drazzok struck first, swinging his staff over his head, but the tau blocked his attack easily. While she was distracted however, Hazug went for the easy kill and stuck his pistol to her head. There was a simple 'click' as the firing pin fell on an empty chamber and with a grunt of disgust Hazug threw the empty weapon aside. Before either of the orks could launch another attack the tau twirled in a path further away from Drazzok and struck at Hazug. The blunt end of her staff hit him hard in his stomach, knocking the wind of him for a moment. This was just long enough for her to lunge back towards Drazzok and attempt to impale the weirdboy with the blade at the top of her staff. Drazzok dodged almost as quickly, but he wasn't quite quick enough and rather than stabbing him through the chest that tau instead sliced open his arm. Drazzok cried out as the blade scraped against bone, but instead of backing off he aimed his fist for the tau's face and heard a reassuring crunch when he hit her.

"Aun!" the next nearest tau shouted as he rushed to the aid of the ethereal as she staggered backwards from the force of the blow, only to be cut down by a burst of gunfire from Gutnak.

Drazzok slumped to the floor, clutching at the wound to his arm at the same time as the tau faltered and Hazug stepped into the gap between them, bringing his blade down towards the helpless tau as he did so. But the ethereal recovered from the shock of Drazzok's punch in time to roll out the way and sparks flew as Hazug's blade struck the dais where her head had been a second earlier.

Hazug had become used to fighting the tau over the past couple of day and he had found them to be poor opponents in hand to hand combat, a fatal weakness for them when orks had broken into their base and forced them to fight at close range where orks excelled, but this female tau was different to the others. It appeared to Hazug that she had at least some previous experience in fighting this way. He considered the possibility that it was just natural for female tau to have this skill before recalling that a handful of the regular tau soldiers he had faced so far had also appeared to be female, though their armour made it difficult to tell for certain.

"Behind us!" Kutbit shouted as the two tau that had been trailing the orks made their presence known by firing into the room from the doorway. But with the fighting so close they could do little more than fire suppressing bursts over the heads of the combatants. The orks were under no such compunction however and Mek Batrug held down the trigger of his gun until the entire ammunition belt was expended. As he dropped the empty weapon to his feet the tau at the doorway fell dead.

As Aun'Verai got back to her feet she called out something that the orks couldn't understand and the other surviving tau in the room tried to make their way to her. One of them was killed immediately as he made the mistake of turning his back on Two Heads who promptly decapitated the alien with a single stroke of his axe. Hazug swung his blade again as the female tau was struggling back to her feet, she blocked the attack with her staff but Hazug grinned as he saw and heard it splinter and snap where his blade struck it. A bolt of energy passed in front of Hazug, preventing him from following up his last strike and the tau female moved away from him. She almost fell when her feet struck the body of another tau, but she kept her balance and scooped up the fallen tau's pistol. She raised the weapon but Hazug reached out and pushed her arm upwards, spoiling her aim and causing the shot to go into the ceiling. He gripped her arm and twisted it. The tau screamed in agony as Hazug wrenched her arm out of its socket and she dropped the gun. Hazug staggered momentarily as one of the other tau shot an energy bolt that clipped his leg, but he dismissed the pain and kept his grip on the tau female. Instead he drew back his blade before pushing it forwards with all his might and straight into the body of the tau female.

As Aun'Verai's body dropped to the floor and lay lifeless in an ever-growing pool of her own blood there was an immediate reaction from the remaining tau in the control centre. Where previously they had acted rationally and attempted to support one another where they could, they suddenly began to act as though they had no idea what they should do next, with the result that they all did something different.

Two of the un-armoured tau just dropped to their knees and screamed at the sight of their dead leader, their screams ending abruptly when they joined her in death. One of the armoured warriors actually charged at Hazug, as if in some attempt to seek vengeance, his rifle wielded like a club. Hazug side stepped the tau's charge and with a good hard kick to the tau's knee as he went past, Hazug brought the alien to the floor where he finished him off with a chop of his blade to the back of the alien's neck.

The remaining tau fled in panic, some of them firing wildly without even bothering to look at where their shots were aimed. One of the aliens fell clutching at his chest as an energy bolt fired by one of his own side blasted through his rib cage and roasted his heart. The remaining tau, exposed in their sudden rush to escape were shot down without mercy by the orks.

"Ya see," said Hazug as he retrieved his discarded pistol and slapped in a new magazine, "I knew dey'd fall apart once da boss was dead," but before any of the other orks could respond there was the familiar sound of the thumping footfalls of a tau battlesuit approaching. Gutnak rushed to the doorway to intercept the battlesuit, but as he took aim the battle suit fired a massive volley of energy blasts that sent him spinning before he fell to the floor already dead.

"Its another kan," Two Heads said, "Batrug is dare any more ammo for da big shoota?"

"Nah, we is out," the mek boy replied.

"Den take cover," Two Heads said as he removed his remaining grenades from his belt. Following the example of his leader Kutbit did likewise and before the battlesuit appeared the explosives had been thrown into the corridor outside. Even concealed behind the cover provided by the tau control panels the orks felt the blast as the grenades went off in rapid succession and with their ears still ringing from the noise they peered into the cloud of smoke that now filled the corridor outside. They were just in time to see the tau battlesuit stride into the room. The explosions had battered it, but it was intact and still ready for combat. The battlesuit raised its arms and fired both of its weapons simultaneously, raking the room with energy blasts that kept the orks pinned down behind their cover. As Hazug tried to think of a way to get nearer the battlesuit its attention was suddenly diverted away from him.

O'Levath was horrified when he entered the control centre and saw Aun'Verai lying dead in the centre of the room. In anger he fired wildly, using his battlesuit's advanced targeting systems to allow him to fire all of his weapons at once. His rage was so great that he hardly noticed that he hit nothing and he completely ignored the tiny Gretchin cowering near the doorway, instead piloting his battlesuit further into the focusing on the larger orks. He advanced further into the room, still laying down volley after volley of suppressing fire. Then his battlesuit shook violently as his instruments registered an impact on its back. Sensors warned him that the battlesuit was no longer properly balanced and O'Levath attempted to identify what had attached itself to him as the battlesuit staggered. The battlesuit's head turned as he tried to bring its sensors to bear, but whatever it was kept moving and O'Levath couldn't get a clear image of it.

The battlesuit's weapons fell silent when Ratish leapt from his hiding place behind the machine and jumped up onto its back before climbing up on top of it. He hung on tightly and moved as the head turned so that he stayed behind it out of sight. The battlesuit raised an arm and tried to bring one of its weapons to bear on the Gretchin, but before it could fire Hazug, Two Heads and Kutbit leapt from their hiding places and charged. The battlesuit reacted to the charge and let off a quick burst from its other arm that cut down Kutbit before he had cleared the control panel that he had been hiding behind. But before he could aim at either of the remaining orks charging him or the Gretchin that had disrupted his attack the two large Ork nobs both slammed into the battlesuit and knocked it to the floor.

For a few moments no one in the pile of bodies and armour moved, but O'Levath recovered in time to throw the orks off him and stand up. He pointed his weapons at the Ork that possessed a second head and transferred the power necessary to fire them, but a blow from the other Ork ruined his aim. O'Levath managed to avoid firing his weapons needlessly, but he had still expended more energy and the battlesuit was now indicating that his reserves were below the critical level.

The battlesuit was rocked again as Two Heads got to his feet and dived forwards. The motors of the legs strained to keep the battlesuit upright and O'Levath saw that yet more precious energy was being used up. Shots rang out as Ratish fired his pistol into the battlesuit, but he did nothing more than divert its attention again. But this was enough for Hazug to be able to launch another attack with his blade. He struck at the narrowest part of the body and though the weapon did not penetrate the tick armour plating that protected the pilot it severed wires that had been exposed by the grenade blasts and sparks flew as power lines were short circuited.

O'Levath knew that his battlesuit was done for, its power reserves were almost gone, discharged by a chance short circuit and he had lost control of its legs. If he stayed inside it, the battlesuit would become his tomb. He had only one choice left.

Two Heads intended to strike a killing blow; he had recovered his axe and stood over the floundering tau battlesuit. But as he prepared for the attack he was struck and knocked aside by the front armour plate as it was explosively separated from the battlesuit's chest and flew towards him.

Stunned by the sudden opening of the suit, the greenskins could not react fast enough as the tau pilot was then launched into the air before landing near the doorway. Ratish tried to shoot at the tau, but he kicked out at the Gretchin and knocked the pistol out of his hand while he undid a harness that held a final part of the battlesuit to his back.

O'Levath detached the anti-gravity pack that had helped him eject from the stricken battlesuit and decided that discretion was the better part of valour. The Gretchin near him had ceased attacking him when he had disarmed it with a kick, while his sudden exit from the battlesuit had briefly disorientated the orks and he saw his chance to escape. Without even drawing his sidearm O'Levath ran from the room, on his way to the control centre he had seen nothing but corpses so as far as he knew the fire warriors in the armoury were the last ones left alive on the base.

He heard the sound of the orks running after him and O'Levath picked up his pace. He knew the layout the base by heart and he made less noise as he ran so he should have been easily able to outpace the orks, but years of piloting a battlesuit had allowed his physical fitness to slip from its prime while the orks just left behind the shaman who had suffered an arm wound and were able remain close behind him.

He turned and drew his weapon then fired as an Ork rounded a corner behind him. The shot missed, but the orks all ducked back behind the corner and O'Levath began running again. He heard the sound of projectile weapons fire from behind him as the orks tried firing blindly around the corner, followed by the sound of a renewed pursuit.

"Get back!" Hazug shouted when he saw that the fleeing tau had paused in his escape to fire on them and the greenskins took cover as the energy bolts flew through the air past them. Two Heads then held his rifle around the corner and fired it randomly until the magazine was empty.

"Did I get 'im?" Two Heads then asked as he reloaded his gun while Hazug took a look around the corner.

“Nah ‘e’s legged it again.”

“Bleedin’ pansy.”

“Well let’s get after ‘im den,” said Hazug and then added a shout of, “Oi Drazzok, try and keep up will ya?” to the weirdboy who was still behind the other remaining greenskins. For the first time since Hazug had met him Drazzok was now carrying a gun, a rifle taken from the late Kutbit was slung over his shoulder.

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’,” he replied as the others resumed their pursuit of the tau through the darkened corridors of the base.

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Upon entering the armoury O'Levath found himself staring down the barrels of pulse rifles.

"My apologies Shas'o," the shas'ui armourer said as his men lowered their weapons, "we have lost contact with the control centre and thought you may be an Ork. What happened to your battlesuit?"

"It is lost," O'Levath told the armourer, then he noticed that there were more than just the armoury staff present, "how many are here?" he asked.

"Aside from my staff there are two further Shas'la and four technicians of the earth caste Shas'o. We have heard from no one else since the control centre stopped transmitting."

"I do not believe that there are any other s left alive," O'Levath said. Then he noticed that the locker used for storing human weaponry was open and weapons were missing from it, but he could see that none of the tau carried anything other than their own weaponry. "Did you issue arms to Mr Ryton and his recruits?"

"Yes Shas'o, they took weapons of the types they have been practising with and then left for his quarters."

"I saw no human bodies anywhere, it is possible that they are still alive. There is something to be said for the strength of numbers, we should try and find them, then we will await the return of our remaining warriors."

"Yes Shas'o."

O'Levath claimed a pulse rifle and armoured vest from the armoury stores before he began to lead the way to the barracks.

"Well where is 'e den?" Drazzok asked when he caught up with the group as they were stopped at a junction debating which way to proceed.

"E doesn't know," Two Heads responded, indicating Hazug.

"Will you lot shut up?" Hazug said, then he turned to Ratish, "Wot d'ya 'ear grot?" he asked.

Ratish stood still, using his superior Gretchin sense of hearing to listen for any signs of the tau.

"Dat way master, Ratish hear tau running," and he pointed down a corridor.

"So wot's dat way?" Mek Batrug asked.

"Da tau," said Hazug, "who cares wot else," and he began to head down the corridor, followed by Ratish then the other orks.

"Shas'o we cannot find them," the shas'ui said as the fire warriors finished checking the other humans' quarters while he remained in Ryton's, "they must have left the base."

"Then Aun'Verai must have allowed him to leave for the city of the orks to carry out his plan."

"What shall we do now Shas'o?"

O'Levath stood up.

"We are fire caste. We will fight. It is for the greater good."

"Yes Shas'o, for the greater good," the shas'ui said, grinning.

The two tau were then interrupted by the sound of Ork weapon fire and one of the surviving base technicians burst into the room.

"Its they orks, they've found us."

The two fire caste tau left Ryton's quarters with the earth caste technician to find the other tau all taking cover in a communal area of the barracks. At the far side of the room the orks had likewise taken cover and the two forces were trading small arms fire across the room. Two of the earth caste technicians lay dead between them, killed before they could take cover.

"Report Shas'la," O'Levath said to one of the fire warriors as he and the shas'ui joined the tau firing line.

"The orks surprised us Shas'o and two of the earth caste were killed."

O'Levath fired his rifle at the orks and as he did so he evaluated the situation. There were fewer greenskins than tau, but his people would undoubtedly take further losses if they continued just exchanging fire across the room. The he turned to the shas'ui.

"I will remain here," O'Levath said, "I want you to take two Shas'la and fall back. Then move around and attack the Greenskins from behind. Now hurry."

"Yes Shas'o. For the greater good."

"For the greater good."

The shas'ui beckoned for two of the fire warriors to follow him and together the three tau fell back from the fighting.

The remaining two members of the earth caste exchanged nervous words about why the fire warriors were leaving, but a stern instruction from a Shas'la to remain focused on the orks silenced them.

"Where is dey goin'?" Drazzok said as he noticed three of the tau fall back when he fired another burst towards them.

"Runnin' away da pansies," Mek Batrug responded.

"Or dey is up to somethin'" Hazug added, "but just keep shootin' for now."

As one the orks let off another volley towards the tau, who were responding with only sporadic weapons fire in return.

"I don't like dis," Hazug said, "if dose tau were really runnin' away, why didn't da rest go with 'em?"

"Well if dey didn't run away, where did dey go?" Two Heads asked as he paused shooting to reload.

Hazug thought about what he would do.

"Behind us," he said and turned in time to see the three tau emerge into the corridor behind the greenskins.

A volley from his pistol forced them to take cover, but there were now tau on both sides.

"Ah crap," both of Two Heads said in unison as one head tried to watch each group of tau and he alternated between the directions he fired in. All of the orks could see the desperate nature of their situation, they could hold the tau off for a time, but they would eventually run out of ammunition and then the tau could pick them off easily. Then Drazzok's eyes opened wide.

"Someone's comin'," he said, "an Ork."

Just as Drazzok finished his statement there was a burst of Ork gunfire from beyond the tau that had out flanked the orks and now they found themselves under fire from two sides also. Then there was the sound of something bouncing along the corridor and Hazug though he saw something cylindrical land near the tau.

"Stikkbomm!" he shouted as he realised what it was.

The tau, realising that they had themselves been outflanked, attempted to get as far from the grenade as they could. Unfortunately for them, they were all in the open when it went off. The tau at the far end of the room paused briefly following the explosion, which gave the greenskins the chance to focus their attention in this direction once more.

"Nice one Gorrid," both of Two Heads exclaimed as the young Ork charged out of the smoke in the corridor and dived behind the cover that the Ork nob was using, "Now 'ave ya got any more of dose stikkbomms?" Gorrid removed his backpack and began to rummage through it, emptying rifle magazines onto the floor before he pulled out another grenade.

"Just da one," he said.

"Good enough," said Two Heads as he took the grenade, pulled out the pin and hurled it across the room.

O'Levath was having a hard time formulating a strategy. The outflanking manoeuvre that he had been convinced would finally finish off the greenskins had been spoiled by the unexpected arrival of another Ork and furthermore it appeared to have cost the lives of more than half of his remaining soldiers. With just four other tau and only two them fire warriors still alive retreat seemed like the only remaining option, but as he was about to give the order to withdraw he saw the Ork stick grenade land behind the tau's makeshift barricade.

The blast tore apart both the barricade and most of the tau behind it. O'Levath was luckier, but only slightly. Further away when the grenade detonated fragments tore into his arm and leg. He lay on the floor bleeding from his wounds and heard the sound of the greenskins approaching. He looked for his gun, but it was out of his reach and he was too weak to move.

"Dis one's still alive master," Ratish said when he saw the tau slumped in the corner. Hazug came over for a look.

"'E's da one we was chasin'," he said and then he shot O'Levath in the head, "now lets take a look at wot's in dat room 'e came out of. I reckon 'e's like da tau's warboss or somethin', so dare might be somethin' worth lootin'."

At the suggestion of looting the orks all smiled. They had fought hard and now they were ready to claim whatever was not fixed down. They could return with the proper tools for removing things that were fixed down later on. Following Hazug's suggestion they began by going into the room from which the tau leader had emerged.

The room was mix of sleeping chamber and workspace. Most of the orks immediately began to rip open cupboards and drawers, searching for anything they considered worth stealing while Mek Batrug's attention was attracted by the desktop computer.

Hazug however, did not join in with the others as they ransacked the room just stared at the walls that were lined with maps and images of the Ork city. Someone had made notes on these, highlighting areas that were of specific interest to whoever had occupied the room.

"Dis ain't tau writin'," Hazug said as he looked at the notes, "I think dis is human writin'."

"Right," said Two Heads, "but wot does it say."

"Dunno, I don't read it. I don't even know wot dese notes is pointin' at."

"Dey is ways in master," Ratish said.

"Wot?"

"Ways into our tunnels master, da ones us grots us to get about da city," then Ratish indicated some photographs that had been taken from a distance of Gretchin entering and exiting tunnels, "look dese pictures show us comin' out and goin' back in again."

"So why do they want to get into da grot tunnels?" Mek Batrug said. Hazug ripped the maps from the walls. "Ratish pick up da pictures, we'll 'ave to ask Sophie wot da writin' says."

Hearing the sounds of approaching footfalls once more, Sophie peered out of the battlewagon not knowing whether it would be the orks returning, or more of the enemy. This time she was relieved to see that it was the orks. The first thing that she noticed was that Kutbit and Skarit were missing and she realised quickly that they were probably dead, but her spirits rose when she saw that Hazug had returned safely. The other thing she saw was that the survivors all appeared to be carrying more equipment than they had taken with them. She knew what this meant; the battle was over any the orks were returning with their loot.

Sophie rushed from the battlewagon and embraced Hazug.

"Wotcha doin ya git?" he said as he pulled her away. Then he produced the map he taken from the wall and handed it to her, "If ya wants to be useful ya can tell us wot dis says."

Sophie unfolded the map and looked at the notes that had been written on it.

"I don't know what these arrows are pointing to, it doesn't say," she told Hazug.

"See master it doesn't know," Ratish commented.

"Dey mark where da grots 'ave da ways into dare tunnels under da city," Hazug said to Sophie, ignoring Ratish's jibe, "just tell us wot da writin' says."

"It talks about the warboss's fortress a lot, which entrance is the closest one they know about and which ones appear to be used to move things that may be for the warboss."

Hazug realised what the tau and their human agents had been planning to do.

"Dey is goin' to kill da boss," he said.

The other orks looked puzzled, it was Drazzok that asked the question they were all thinking.

"So wot? Every boss dies and da next one takes over."

"Yeah," replied Hazug, "but normally whoever kills da warboss takes over. But if da warboss is killed by a human den..."

"Den every nob will 'ave a go at bein' da next one," one of Two Heads said interrupting, before the other added, "and den everyone starts fightin' over who gets to be it."

"I don't understand," said Sophie.

"Stupid git," Ratish responded and then he hid behind Hazug as Sophie reached out to hit him.

"Normally a nob kills da warboss and 'e is da new warboss," Hazug explained, "but if a warboss just dies den all da nobs fight over who which of 'em is da biggest and da meanest and gets to be da new warboss and all da orks dat work for 'em fight as well."

"But orks are always fighting each other, I've seen them."

"Yeah but mostly dey just use dare fists and feet cos its just for fun so most of us don't die from it and its just a few of us at a time. But if we is arguin' over a new warboss we'll be usin' wotever weapons we got and all of us will be fightin' sooner or later."

"So a lot more orks will be killed then?"

"Dat's right, loads of 'em and if da ship bosses get in on da fightin' too den dey can flatten 'ole cities. So anyone who wants to attack us 'as an easier time of it after dat cos dare is far fewer of us left to kill 'em. We need to get back to da city quick."

"Doesn't that mean one of you two could the new warboss?" Sophie asked, looking from Hazug to Two Heads and back again.

The greenskins all laughed. Then Drazzok spoke up.

"Only way either of dem is getting' to be da warboss is if dey kill 'im themselves," he said indicating Hazug and Two Heads, "Orks wouldn't follow a Blood Axe git lover or two 'eaded freak any other way."

"But da warboss will be pretty chuffed if we saves 'im," one of Two Heads said as the other scowled at the weirdboy for the insult, "'e'll pay us loads of teeth for dat."

"But 'ow do we know which gits are goin' to try and kill da boss?" Mek Batrug asked, "Dey all look alike."

"Why not just kill 'em all?" Ratish said staring at Sophie, but the orks all ignored him.

"I saw them," Sophie said, "there were five of them and they took a vehicle and left while I was hiding in the battlewagon."

"Den ya can point 'em out to us so we can kill 'em," Two Heads said while the other added, "Gorrid, you is drivin'."

18

Ryton drove the vehicle as fast as he could, but the roads of the city were filled with debris from damaged buildings that the orks had never bothered to clean up so he had to reduce his speed frequently to avoid obstacles. Unlike an Ork vehicle however, his human built vehicle at least possessed headlights that gave him ample warning of such hazards. What he wasn't expecting was the large force of tau he suddenly found blocking his path.

"Don't shoot!" Ryton shouted in the tau language after bringing the vehicle to a sudden halt that caused the other occupants to all grab hold of something to help them stay in their seat, then in gothic he added, "Everyone get their hands in the air where they can see them."

Covered by more than thirty other tau and a pair of battlesuits mounting huge weapons on their shoulders, two of the fire warriors sprinted towards the humans with their weapons raised.

"You are Ryton?" one of the tau asked.

"Yes, I am Ryton. May we lower our hands now please?"

"Yes," and the two tau standing in front of them lowered their weapons at the same time as the humans lowered their hands. The remaining tau however still trained their weapons on the vehicle.

"Who are you and why are you out here?" Ryton asked.

"I am Ui'Naleron," the tau responded, "the Shas'o deployed us south of the city to prevent the orks from withdrawing in that direction. Then a short time ago we were recalled to the base, but we have since lost contact with them. Now what about you?"

"We were at the base when the orks attacked it. Aun'Verai ordered us to travel to the Ork city and shortly after that the base lost power. We don't know anything after that because that's when we left, but there was still fighting going on."

The tau communicated briefly with the rest of his troops and they cleared a way to pass.

"You should keep going," the shas'ui told Ryton, "we will return to base and find out what has happened. For the greater good."

"Whatever," Ryton said and he accelerated through the gap in the tau line.

"What was all that about?" Diona asked when they were clear of the tau.

"Those tau don't know what's happening and were hoping we could fill them in."

"Did you?"

"Actually I didn't know much more than they did. But at least they're happy for us to keep going while they go back to their base."

"Will they stop the orks then?"

"I don't know, it could all be over by the time they get there. But they have more than enough firepower to take out the orks and that tank of theirs if they need to."

"So the orks won't be following us then?" Ophilia asked.

"I doubt it," Ryton told her.

"Then can't we slow down a bit?"

"Actually yes we can," Ryton said as he reduced the speed of the vehicle to a safer rate, "Is that better?" All of the other humans indicated that it was.

The battlewagon started up as Mek Batrug was closing the hatch and the occupants hung on as Gorrid accelerated away in the traditional Evil Suns fashion of totally disregarding whether or not the vehicle's other occupants were prepared.

"It took us a day and an 'alf to get 'ere," Hazug said to Two Heads, "can we get back any quicker dan dat?"

"Easy," Two Heads told him, "we stopped for a night on da way 'ere, but goin' back we'll just keep drivin'. I'll swap with Gorrid if da lad needs a break. We'll be back before it gets dark tomorrow."

Hazug was satisfied with this, but Mek Batrug wasn't.

"Yeah but da engine ain't in such good shape dis time," he said, "I patched it up but it still needs work.

Added to dat da paintwork's all beat up, dis wagon ain't as red as it should be. Even though we ain't as 'eavy as were 'cause of all da lads dat got killed we'll still be goin' back slower dan we came 'ere."

The battlewagon shuddered as Gorrid decided not to go around an obstacle and to just smash through it instead.

"Careful lad," Two Heads yelled at him, "we can't stop for repairs dis time."

"Right boss," and the battlewagon shook as Gorrid swerved violently to avoid the next obstacle in its path.

"Dat's more like it lad," Two Heads said, grinning as he watched Ratish and Sophie trying to get back into their seats after being thrown out of them by Gorrid's sudden manoeuvring.

Suddenly, there was a flash from outside. Followed by a booming sound as something moved past the battlewagon very quickly.

"Its more tau!" Gorrid shouted, "Dey is shootin' at us."

"Well let us know if we is hit lad," Drazzok said sarcastically.

"Dare's no shells left for da kannon, get to da shootas," Two Heads shouted at Hazug and the two nob's rushed to climb into the gunners' seats from the automatic weapons while Gorrid did his best to avoid the tau weapons fire. A loud clang indicated that a projectile had just struck the battlegagon, but it bounced off the thick frontal armour plates harmlessly.

"We is hit Drazzok," Gorrid said.

"Just shut it and keep swervin'," the weirdboy replied.

More used to the battlegagon, Two Heads was first to have his guns ready and he laid down a long burst towards the location of a weapons flash from the tau. As he did so he saw several of them run from behind cover that had proved insufficient to block his shots. He kept firing and saw some of them fall.

"Dat's 'ow da Evil Suns clan does it!" he both shouted. Then he saw the source of the heavy projectiles, a pair of tau battlesuits mounting larger weapons than any they had fought at the tau base. "Oh crap. Oi Hazug, more kans!"

"I see 'em, let rip at da one on da right."

The two nob's each fired at different battlesuits.

"Dat's not da right, dat's left," one of Two Heads yelled at the other.

"Ya can do it yourself den," the other snapped.

"Fine, I will," and Two Heads changed his target.

The concentrated weapons fire found its mark and first one, then the other of the battlesuits shoulder mounted weapons was blasted away. Then the other battlesuit fired again.

Inside the battlegagon the greenskins all covered their heads and Sophie and Ratish both screamed as a projectile punched through the main turret and ripped the heavy cannon away from the roof.

"Dat was brand new," Two Heads complained and then he aimed for the remaining battlesuit.

Gorrid had brought the battlegagon close to the battlesuit and it would have been an easy target, if not for the unstable platform that it provided for shooting. But the amount of shots fired meant that some still found their target and there were sparks as bullets bounced off the battlesuit's armour plating.

Suddenly Hazug was struck by something heavy and as he batted it away he realised that it was one of the tau soldiers. Gorrid had driven the battlegagon straight through a squad of them and some hadn't managed to get out of the way quick enough.

An unexpected volley of missiles launched from the damaged battlesuit struck the side of the battlegagon, but they lacking the power to penetrate its armour they did no real damage.

"Dat'll take off even more paint," Mek Batrug exclaimed as the battlegagon's passengers recovered from the shock of the exploding missiles, "we'll be too slow to go anywhere at dis rate."

The damaged battlesuit tried to get to a better firing position, preferably one that would give it a shot at the battlegagon's much thinner rear armour. But the battlegagon was far quicker and following his success in running over some of the tau infantry Gorrid aimed straight at the lumbering tau war machine.

There was an almighty crash as the battlegagon ploughed into the battlesuit before its pilot could get away and it was thrown into the air over the Ork vehicle, landing behind the battlegagon with yet another crash were it lay still. In the rear compartment the passengers all watched as one of the battlesuit's arms was torn free at its shoulder by the collision and rather than passing all the way over the battlegagon it fell into the compartment through the hole left by the destruction of the main turret.

"Quick," Mek Batrug shouted as they watched sparks coming from the twitching limb, "get rid of it before it explodes!"

Drazzok helped Mek Batrug to lift the arm while Sophie opened one of the hatches. The two orks carried the limb to the opening and threw it out of the battlegagon. Mek Batrug slammed the hatch shut just as the munitions strode in the arm detonated in an explosion that killed several more tau unfortunate enough to have been too close to it.

Seeing the destruction of the other battlesuit, the pilot of the remaining one decided it would be better if he could reach higher ground where the battlegagon couldn't follow and he ceased his attack to reposition himself. When they saw that the battlesuit had ceased fire some of the tau panicked and believing that it was withdrawing from combat they too ran, which brought them out into the open and made them easy prey for Hazug and Two Heads who mowed them down.

"Dis is da life eh Hazug?" Two Heads shouted while he swapped his empty ammunition drum for a full one and racked rounds into his weapon's chambers.

"Just shoot da bleedin' kan!" Hazug replied and the two nob's repeated their strategy of concentrating their fire on the battlesuit.

By this time the surviving battlesuit pilot had been able to climb up a pile of rubble to a ledge that had once been an upper floor of a building that was now in ruins and as it creaked under that weight of the battlesuit he attempted to get a firing solution on the battlegagon. Bullets continued to bounce off his battlesuit as the

battlewagon closed with him, but the pilot held his fire. He had seen rail gun round fails to penetrate the thick frontal armour of the battlewagon already and he wanted to wait for the Ork vehicle to have to swerve away from him and expose its side, or even better the rear, armour. His delay cost him dearly, as the hail of heavy bullets inflicted more damage on what remained of the building than to his battlesuit. The only warning he had came from his fire control system which detected the instability of the ledge he was standing on moments before it gave way and the battlesuit toppled and was brought crashing to the ground. The orks continued to fire into the floundering machine, but could do no further damage. Then what had started with the collapse of the ledge, finished when the rest of the ruined building final came crashing down and buried the battlesuit under tons of rubble.

The destruction of the only effect anti tank weapon they possessed was the final straw for the remaining tau and now they all ran for their lives. Gorrid turned the battlewagon in pursuit before Hazug yelled at him to stop.

"Forget 'em," he said, "dey can't stop us, but goin' after 'em will just waste time we ain't got. Just make for our city, warboss Kazkal can send some one to mop 'em up later."

The battlewagon shook again as Gorrid swerved and brought back on a southwards course towards the Ork city and with no more tau challenging their journey; the orks reached the southern edge of the ruined human city at daybreak.

"Put ya foot down a bit more lad," Two Heads told Gorrid, "but stay away from anythin' dat looks like it could smash up da wagon."

"Right boss," Gorrid replied and the battlewagon's engine roared as he increased its speed.

"Ow far ahead do ya reckon dey is?" Two Heads asked Hazug, who in turn spoke to Sophie.

"When did ya see 'em exactly?"

"It was just after the lights went out in the tau base," she said, "they took a buggy that had been hidden and drove it away."

"A buggy?" repeated Mek Batrug, "Wos it an Ork one?"

"I don't think so. It had wheels like your buggies do but it looked more like some of the old ones in the city. Except that this one looked like it was new, not like any of the ones that the Death Skulls salvaged."

"Dey could be quite far ahead den," said Two Heads, "da gits can build some pretty fast buggies."

"Don't know 'ow dey do it though," added Mek Batrug, "dey 'ardly ever paint 'em red."

Hazug considered what the humans would have to do to gain access to the warboss's fortress.

"Dey can't take da buggy all da way," he said, "if dey try drivin' it past da northern fort dey'll probably get shot at by da guards, 'specially if dey is wavin' guns about. So dey'll 'ave to ditch da buggy and walk da last bit to da tunnels."

"Can ya track 'em on foot?" Drazzok asked, "I ain't been close enough to 'em to sense where dey is."

"We don't need to track 'em. We knows where dey is goin' and she can point 'em out to us," Hazug replied indicating Sophie, "and we better keep someone on da guns just in case we meet up with 'em sooner dan dat."

19

Ahead of the Ork battlewagon, Ryton had stopped his own vehicle to add more fuel from a reserve canister stored in the back of it while the others kept watch for orks.

"What's the hurry?" Diona asked him, noticing that Ryton appeared to be favouring speed over caution when handling the fuel.

"I'm sure I heard gunfire after we passed the tau last night," Ryton told her as he finished filling the vehicle with fuel and threw the empty canister aside, "those orks could be heading this way after us."

"But don't they think that they were just fighting tau?" Ophilia asked, "How would they know about us?"

"The orks had at least one human with them, some of the tau found tracks where the stealth team was ambushed. If its one of your fellow servants of the Death Skulls, then it could have told them about me and my recruitment drive."

"Doesn't matter anyway," interrupted Quint, "if the orks have finished killing all the tau they can find then they'll be eager to get back to their city to start bragging to the others. If they catch up with us we're done for, we can't fight that tank of theirs."

"Exactly, so we need to stay ahead of them until we can safely ditch this vehicle and disappear into the city," Ryton added.

Now it was Thaddius's turn to question Ryton.

"Do you really think we can kill the warboss?"

"Well I can, auto pistols and shotguns may work fine on Gretchin and Ork warriors but my plasma pistol is the only thing that's got a real chance of killing a warboss in just one or two shots," Ryton replied as he climbed back into the vehicle, followed by his recruits.

"How much ammunition do you have for thing anyway?" asked Quint.

"Just the one power pack, they aren't very easy to come by, even in Imperial service. But trust me that's enough. Even if I did have any more the warboss would just rip me apart while I reloaded."

The casual way in which Ryton described the ease with which the warboss could apparently end his life put an end to any more questions from his passengers, so they were silent as Ryton started the engine and began to drive south once more.

Having not slept since the previous night Ryton would have liked to have been able to take a break from driving to rest, but unfortunately he was the only one of the group that knew how to drive. Even Quint had been too young to learn the skill before the orks occupied the world and only a handful of humans now access to motor vehicles, none of whom worked for the orks. The greenskins would have taken any such vehicle from them for their own use. Therefore, Ryton had no choice but to remain in the drivers seat until Thaddius suddenly called out.

"Get us out of sight! Quick!"

Without waiting for an explanation, Ryton swerved the vehicle off the road and stopped behind a rocky outcrop.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Listen," Thaddius said, "they're heading this way," and he jumped down from the vehicle and crept up onto the rocks with his shotgun at the ready.

Ryton and the others followed Thaddius onto the rocks, all of them keeping as low as possible.

"I don't hear anything," Ryton said as he reached Thaddius, but then a deep rumbling sound caught his attention, "What was that?" he asked.

"There they are, just coming into view," Thaddius said, pointing along the road.

There, where the road curved around from behind a wooded hillside a massive beast lumbered into Ryton's view and it uttered its low rumbling call once more. At first the huge four-legged beast reminded Ryton of one of the massive wild reptiles that inhabited many worlds, but as more of it came into view he saw that this was anything but wild. Mounted on the back of the creature was a howdah that was unmistakably of Orkish construction. Inside the howdah, the shapes of numerous orks could be seen and, like almost every Orkish mode of transport, weapons had been mounted wherever there was room for them.

As the creature continued to make its way down the road towards them, a second creature also mounting a crude Ork filled howdah appeared behind it, moving along the road with the shame shambling gait. Finally, behind the second creature a group of orks and Gretchin followed on foot, the orks taking the lead and slapping any Gretchin who dared to catch up with them.

"Never seen squiggoths before?" Thaddius asked in a hushed tone as he saw the expression on Ryton's face as he watched the massive beasts.

"No, never," Ryton replied, shaking his head, "I mean I've heard of them of course, I read dozens of after action reports, but not many of them detailed anything but long range encounters."

"I suppose it's difficult to file a report when you've been eaten," Quint commented sarcastically.

"When do we fire?" Diona asked and she chambered a round in her weapon.

"We don't," Ryton said, pushing down on Diona's gun, "let them keep looking for us further north."

"What makes you think that they're looking for us?" Quint asked.

"What else would a warband of that size be doing out here?" Ryton said, "They're probably going to hook up with the lot that O'Levath was chasing around for the past few days."

"Actually it looks like a simple trading caravan," Quint said, "They're probably heading up to the city to try and trade with the Death Skulls. Food and weapons for scrap normally."

"He's right," Ophilia chimed in and she pointed towards one of the orks following on foot. The Ork had a pole fixed to its back on which were mounted several personal totems of various sizes and colours, "I'd know that banner anywhere. They are traders."

"I keep forgetting that orks do anything but fight," Ryton said, "but I suppose you're the one's who've lived with them."

"Oh, they would probably fight the Death Skulls as well," Thaddius replied, "hagglng is a contact sport for orks."

The humans watched as the Ork caravan made its way past them.

"Come on," Ryton said, getting up and heading back to the vehicle, "let's get moving; I want to keep ahead of that battlewagon."

The other got up and followed Ryton back to their transport and once again Ryton proceeded to drive south.

Gorrid slammed on the battlewagon's breaks without warning anyone else.

"Wotcha think dat ya doin'?" Two Heads bellowed as he picked himself up.

Before he could answer, Gorrid let out a cry of "Ow!" as Drazzok hurled the nearest small object to where he had landed that wasn't fixed down, an empty rifle magazine, at the back of his head.

"Wazzoks shouldn't drive!" the weirdboy bellowed.

"I 'ad to stop!" Gorrid protested, rubbing his head where the magazine had struck it and he pointed through his vision slit at the road ahead.

The other occupants of the battlewagon rushed to take a look outside of the battlewagon for themselves.

There, ahead of the vehicle, a squiggoth of the caravan stared back at them and let out a low rumble.

"Dat's a biggun init?" Drazzok said as he stuck his head out of the hole in the roof where the main turret used to be.

"Just go around 'em," Two Heads said to Gorrid as more of the caravan lumbered into view.

"Wait, 'ang on 'ere a mo," Hazug said and he threw open one of the battlewagon's doors and ran towards the approaching orks.

"Where's he going?" Sophie asked as she watched Hazug run away and she followed him out of the battlewagon.

"Wot d'ya reckon dat dey'll do when a git comes leggin' it towards 'em?" Drazzok asked Two Heads.

"Well dey is probably used to gits from tradin' at dare farms," one of Two Heads answered, "Or," the other one began, "dey could just shoot 'er cause dey don't know 'er."

"Let's watch den," Drazzok said, "I got a tooth dat says dey shoot 'er."

"I'll see dat bet," one of Two Heads answered while the other one looked down to his money pouch as he fished out a tooth.

Drazzok was disappointed as he saw Sophie run up behind Hazug without any of the orks in the caravan bothering, though a handful of the Gretchin behind them began to scowl in her direction.

"Oii!" Hazug yelled up at the howdah of the lead squiggoth, "I is lookin' for humans."

An Ork's face appeared over the edge of the howdah and stared back down at Hazug as he squiggoth continued to make its way along the road.

"Well we is 'eadin' for some of dare farms now," the orks shouted at him, "so ya can follow us if ya wants. But ya do know dat dare's a git right behind ya dogwatch?"

"No," Hazug shouted back at the Ork above him, "I is lookin' for a group of 'em in a buggy. I reckon dat dey is 'eadin' south so dey would 'ave come past ya."

"We ain't seen nothin'," the Ork shouted, "dey ain't come near us and we just come from da south. Ya'll 'ave to look somewhere else instead."

"So what now?" Sophie asked Hazug as the caravan began to make its way around the stationary battlewagon; completely oblivious to the looks she was now getting from the passing Gretchin. One of them produced a catapult from a bag, picked up a stone from the road and took aim at her. Seeing this Hazug raised his pistol.

"Ya'll need a new grot if 'e don't put dat away," he shouted at one of the orks that had just passed by him. Immediately the Ork turned towards the catapult wielding Gretchin, dashed towards him and began to beat him. As Hazug lowered his pistol the Gretchin dropped to the ground where the Ork delivered a couple of good kicks before it returned to its rightful place ahead of the Gretchin.

"Hazug? What do we do now?" Sophie repeated, "Where could they have gone if they didn't come this way?"

"I still reckon dat dey came dis way," Hazug said as, accompanied by Sophie, he began to walk back towards the battlegon, "its just dat dey got by da caravan without bein' seen, dat's all. Dey probably just 'id somewhere until it 'ad gone."

When Hazug and Sophie got back into the battlegon Drazzok did not look happy.

"Come on," Two Heads said, "pay up."

"Bah!" Drazzok said as he produced a tooth from a pouch and held it out towards the Evil Sun nob, who snatched it away from him, "If ya 'adn't stopped dat grot it would've counted!" he snapped at Hazug as he returned to his seat, sat down and crossed his arms, still frowning.

"So wot now den?" one of Two Heads asked Hazug while the other taunted Drazzok with his newly won tooth, "We 'eard wot da caravan nob said, dey weren't 'ere."

"I reckon dey were," Hazug answered, "and dey can't do no damage anywhere else so we may as well keep on goin'."

"Ya 'eard 'im," Two Heads said to Gorrid, "now shift, its my turn to drive."

The next time Ryton stopped was when the fortress to the north of the Ork city came into view and he stopped.

"So," he said, "how will the orks react if we just drive past them?"

"They'll likely shoot at us," Quint said, "The fort is supposed to control who gets into the city and what they bring with them. Anyone who tries to get past without stopping gives them all the excuse they need to start shooting."

"And if we stop?" Ryton asked.

"This vehicle is obviously new," Thaddius replied, "Even orks will be able to spot that. So if we stop they'll want to know where we got it."

"Then we should walk from here," Ryton said, "help me get this vehicle out of sight."

Ryton moved the vehicle to the edge of a nearby wood while his recruits gathered branches and undergrowth to cover it with. As they piled the vegetation on top of the vehicle, Ryton took some sacks from the back of it.

"Give me your weapons," he said, "we'll hide them in these until we've got past the orks. Then gather some wood so we can break up the shape and fill the sacks."

"You want to bluff the orks?" Ophilia asked.

"It should work," said Quint, "they're pretty stupid. Just so long as they don't see the guns they should believe we've been gathering firewood."

"What if they do see the guns?" Diona said

Quint shrugged.

"Depends on what sort of mood they're in, they could ignore them, but they could take them or kill us. But given that we've hidden them, I'd say it was more likely that even orks could figure out that we were trying to sneak the guns past them."

"And if that happens, I'm guessing that they'll kill us," Ryton said.

"Probably, yes," Quint answered.

"Whatever happens I'll need all of you to do all of the talking," Ryton said, "Unfortunately I don't speak a word of Orkish."

Each member of the group placed their weaponry and any advanced devices they were carrying in a sack and then used wood to conceal them. Ryton noticed that Quint still retained a knife on his belt, however.

"Won't the orks question that?" he said pointing at the weapon.

"No, in fact they'd probably ask more questions if none of us had a knife or something like it."

"Okay then, just don't think about using it without my saying so first alright?"

"Whatever you say."

"Right let's go, you first Quint."

With Quint leading the way the group approached the Ork fortress that lay between them and the city. As they drew closer they could make out the shapes of the orks on the walls and the orks soon saw them also. Ryton heard shouting from the fortress walls in a language he couldn't understand, but his recruits didn't seem to be worried so he guessed that this was normal.

"Get ready, here they come," Quint said as a doorway opened up and an open topped Ork vehicle filled with the beasts drove out towards them at speed.

Ryton had heard plenty of tales about orks during his time in the imperial guard and had been in some battles against them, but he had never actually been this close to any living examples himself. The first thing he noticed when the truck came to a sudden halt next to the humans and its occupants all leapt out was the smell of stale sweat and grease that filled his nostrils. Apparently there was very little difference in

how they smelt when alive to when they were dead. His recruits had grown used to the odour during the many years they had lived amongst the greenskins, so Ryton hoped that he wasn't giving himself away with a reaction to it.

As far as the lead Ork could see only Quint was carrying any sort of weapon and decided that this put him in charge of the group.

"Oi git," he snapped in the Ork language, "wotcha doin' out 'ere den?"

"We were collecting firewood for cooking and heating," Quint replied.

"Give us a look den git."

Quint lowered his sack and began to open it, but he stopped still when the orks all suddenly pointed their weapons at him.

"Give it 'ere," the lead Ork said and he snatched the sack away.

Ryton was certain that the Ork was about to open up the sack and reach inside it, or even worse tip the contents out onto the ground. If he did so then he couldn't possibly miss finding the auto pistol it contained. That could spell doom for the group, there was no way they could unpack the rest of their guns in time to defend themselves and the orks would undoubtedly shoot them all where they stood if they decided they wanted to. Fortunately the Ork didn't want to go to the trouble of conducting a proper search and upon taking the sack he shook it, then just peered through the gap at the top where it didn't quite close properly. Then he dropped the sack to the ground.

"Right git, ya can all go," the Ork said, "but I is keepin' dat knife," and he snatched the small bladed weapon from Quint's belt. When the humans didn't move the Ork spoke again.

"Wotcha waitin' for ya gits? Sod off da lot of ya."

Quint picked up his sack and began to walk away and the other humans followed him. Ryton noticed that the orks didn't get back into their vehicle straight away, instead they gathered around the leader and took a look at the knife he had taken. He could hear them talking and laughing, though he had no idea what it was about.

"So," Ryton said to Quint when he thought that the orks were too far away to hear him, "did you know that he would take your knife?"

"It happens a lot," Quint answered him, "the Ork sentries know they can take what they want from passing humans, so they do. I've even heard of them trying it on small groups of orks, but that's far more likely to start a fight. By having the knife on display openly it reduced the odds of the Ork looking in the sacks to see if there was anything better to take inside them instead."

"Good thinking, but I'd appreciate a warning if anything like that is likely to happen again."

"Don't worry, I don't think we'll encounter any more Ork guards until we get inside the warboss's fortress, though we should keep an eye out for any just wandering around looking for trouble."

"What do you suggest we do if that happens?" Ryton asked.

"If there's just a few of them we can probably just shoot our way out. Gunfire doesn't attract much attention around here unless there's a lot of it."

The idea of being a participant in a random gunfight didn't appeal to Ryton who had made a career out of being subtle and inconspicuous.

"I still think we should avoid it if we can," he said.

After passing the Ork fortress and its guards the group entered the human inhabited section of the city as darkness began to fall and Ryton got his first look at how humans lived on this world. The buildings were not in much better condition than those on the outer edges of the former capital where first the orks and then more recently the tau had first landed here. Most of the windows were boarded up and those that weren't had no glass remaining in them. Like in the city to the north there were no street signs or lamp posts, these having either been scavenged by the orks or traded to them by the humans, so the approaching night was plunging the streets into darkness. Even though the buildings were obviously the product of an advanced industrial society the area had a more medieval feel to it, there was neither electricity nor running water available to the residents. Apparently the machinery necessary to provide these had been taken by the orks when they first arrived here for use in making more weapons. This didn't surprise Ryton, he knew from his days in the imperial guard that the orks rarely bothered with such amenities for their own residences so saw no reason to allow humans to keep them. What Ryton was surprised at was the large number of humans he saw still living here, though he noticed that all the ones in the streets seemed to be hurrying to get somewhere.

"Why is everybody in such a rush?" he asked.

"They want to get to shelter before night falls properly," Quint said.

"Why?"

"Because that's when the orks are most likely to come here looking for trouble," Thaddius told him, "they'll have been working or brawling amongst themselves all day and some of them will have drunk enough to think it worth coming here and starting a fight."

Right on cue an Ork vehicle similar to the one that had carried the guards at the fort appeared, full of cheering orks.

"Inside quick!" Quint said and he rushed through an open doorway nearby and the others followed him. There was the sound of gunfire and Ryton took a look outside to see the orks shooting an assortment of pistols and rifles into buildings at random. Apparently not caring about whether or not they had hit anything the orks continued on their journey and disappeared from view. Then, as the sounds of gunfire grew fainter Quint spoke.

"It should be safe now," he said.

"Okay then," Ophilia said, "but can we unpack our weapons now?"

"I think that would probably be a good idea," Ryton said.

It was decided that only the guns that were concealable beneath clothing should be unpacked so Thaddius's shotgun was left in its sack, though the wood packed around it was removed. The group left the empty building with their weapons tucked away and Ryton hoped that the poor lighting would help to hide the bulges where guns were hidden under jackets.

"Just remember we're just another bunch of helpless human workers, so keep these things hidden until I say otherwise, alright?" Ryton said and the others all indicated their agreement.

"Right then, let's go and find these tunnels."

Ryton had Quint and Thaddius lead the way towards the nearest of the Gretchin areas of the city. He didn't know the layout of the city well enough and he had more faith in their abilities to handle trouble than either Diona or Ophilia's.

It was clear to Ryton when they reached the area inhabited by the Gretchin. As run down as the human sector had been it was nothing compared to the simple shelters that were built of whatever scrap the orks left behind. There were sounds of movement coming from within the structures all around them and the group began to suspect that they were being watched.

"Hold on a moment," Ryton said and he took his data pad from a pocket and activated it. He caused a map of the Ork city to appear on the screen and zoomed in to the area where they now stood. "According to this, there's an entrance to the tunnels just ahead, we need to find ourselves a guide."

"I don't think that's going to be a problem," Thaddius said and he pulled his shotgun from the sack as a mob of Gretchin began to form in front of them, then more appeared to their rear.

"Fire!" Ryton shouted, pulling the auto pistol he had as a backup to the plasma weapon he was saving to use against the warboss and he fired a burst of bullets into the crowd of Gretchin ahead of him.

None of the Gretchin had guns themselves and as each of the humans produced a firearm and began shooting the diminutive creatures panicked. A handful still held their ground and pelted the intruders to their neighbourhood with rocks and filth. Standing in the open at close range, even Diona was able to hit some of these with a series of bursts fired from her shoulder using the sliding stock fitted to her weapon.

"We better get after them, if they tell the orks about us we're done for," Ryton said as the surviving Gretchin disappeared into the darkness.

"Unlikely, the orks would just laugh at them for losing a fight to humans," Quint reassured him, "we just need to find one to use a guide."

"Not a problem," said Thaddius and he kicked over a nearby sheet of metal. Underneath was a cowering Gretchin. It's hiding place discovered, it tried to run but its path took it within reach of Ryton who reached out and punched the Gretchin to the ground.

"Stay there," Quint told the Gretchin in the Ork tongue as he aimed his weapon at the creature, then he switched to gothic to speak to Ryton, "Right I think we have his attention."

"Tell him that we want to go the warboss's fortress," Ryton said. Quint translated the statement for the Gretchin, who gave a short response and pointed towards the centre of the Ork city.

"He says it's the big building that way."

Ryton stepped forwards and hit the Gretchin again.

"Tell him we need to get there using the tunnels and that he is going to show us the way."

Quint translated again and got another short response from the Gretchin.

"He wants to know what's in it for him."

"He gets to live."

Quint smiled before he translated this, while the Gretchin's reaction was one of fear. He got to his knees and began babbling and waving his arms about.

"What's he going on about?" Ryton asked.

"He's just begging us not to kill him. I think we can count on him to do what we tell him to."

"Then let's get him to take us to the fortress. Keep an eye on him Quint."

Quint dragged the Gretchin to its feet and it beckoned the humans to follow it to where it said the tunnels were located. Having only just checked the map, Ryton could tell that the Gretchin was being truthful at least for the moment.

After a short walk the Gretchin scampered onto a low rise and opened a crude wooden trapdoor that lay there. He pointed into the hole below and spoke.

"He says this is the way into the tunnels," Quint said.

"How will we be able to see down there?" Ophilia asked.

"I brought these," Ryton told her, taking several small tubes from a pocket and passing one to each of his followers, "just copy me."

He bent the tube he was still holding until there was a snapping sound. Then he shook it until it began to glow, casting a pale blue light around him. The others copied him, activating the chemical lights. The Gretchin saw its chance and ran off into the darkness. There was a boom as Thaddius fired his shotgun after the Gretchin, followed by a squeal as the blast struck the fleeing creature.

"Looks like we'll have to find another guide," Ryton said and then he led his followers into the tunnels below. The standard of construction of the tunnels was similar to that of the Gretchins' above ground structures. Crude supports were positioned at random and the underground passageways looked very much as though they could collapse at any time.

"Is this safe?" Diona asked when she saw a clump of dirt fall from the tunnel ceiling.

"I hope so," Ryton said, "I don't think there's another way into the fortress. Has anybody ever heard of these tunnels falling in?"

"I think parts of them collapse all the time," Quint said, "but its usually just small sections and only when something heavy passes overhead. So its unlikely that we'd all be buried without warning."

"Well there we are then," Ryton said, activating his data slate's inertial navigation function, "now let's get moving."

"Which way?" Thaddius asked, stretching out his arms to indicate that the tunnel split into several different passageways that went off in different directions almost immediately.

"We'll try going straight towards the fortress first," Ryton said, "then if we find ourselves at a dead end we'll double back and try a different route."

"I think we is almost dare," Two Heads shouted from the driver's seat, "I think I see da north fort ahead."

"Yeah, I see it too," Hazug replied from his gunner's position, "and I don't 'ear no shootin' so we may still 'ave time yet."

As the battlegon drew closer to the fort the orks garrisoned there sent out a truckload of troops to intercept it. As the truck approached one of its passengers could be heard yelling for the battlegon to stop and identify itself.

"We ain't got da time to stop and answer questions," Hazug shouted to Two Heads, "just keep goin'."

Two Heads followed Hazug's suggestion to the letter, swerving around the truck as it stopped in their path. Even as the orks from the fort drove after them, yelling for the battlegon to stop he sped towards the city and ignored the insults and threats that they hurled. The truck began to follow the battlegon with its occupants now shooting rather than shouting but, armed only with pistols, the armour of the battlegon was too thick for them to inflict and damage, even from the rear. Hazug watched as Gorrid began to turn his weapons mount to face the pursuing truck.

"Old ya fire lad," Hazug told him as more bullets bounced off the battlegon, "dey can't 'urt us and I ain't explainin' to Warboss Kazkal why we shot up one of 'is trucks for nothin'."

Frustrated at their lack of success in either stopping or destroying the battlegon, the pursuing truck full of orks gave up and with a loud squealing from its brakes its driver stopped and then turned back towards the fort.

"Wot a bunch of bleedin pansies," Two Heads said, turning in his chair to look back into the battlegon's interior, "dey obviously ain't no Evil Suns, we wouldn't 'ave ever given up on a race like dat."

"Never mind da racin'," Drazzok snapped at Two Heads, "just keep at least one of ya 'eads pointing to da front."

"Oh yeah," and Two Heads Turned back to face forwards just in time to see and steer around a ditch ahead of them and there were complaints from the rear of the battlegon as its passengers were thrown about by the sudden manoeuvre.

"Ah shut up ya pansies," commented Two Heads, who promptly swerved once more just to provoke further protests. Then one of Drazzok's charms bounced off one of his heads.

"Stop doin' dat," the weirdboy snapped as he was helped back into his chair by Sophie.

"Da gits would 'ave never been able to drive past dem guards so dey must be walkin' by now," Hazug said, then to Gorrid he added, "Dat means we can get down from 'ere now," and the two orks began to climb back down into the battlegon's interior as it approached git town. Beyond that was the Ork city itself with warboss Kazkal's fortress at its centre.

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"So how close are we now?" Diona asked while Ryton studied his data slate and its inertial navigation software told him how far they had travelled underground.

"Compared to where we entered the tunnel, we are about half way to the fortress," he replied, "but the layout to them is random, so we may have to double back to get there."

"Can't we just grab another Gretchin?" Diona asked.

"Have you seen one since we came down here?" Thaddius added, "They're probably all asleep."

"Maybe not all," said Ryton as he heard a noise from deeper in the tunnel, "now hide. Cover your lights and keep quiet."

The tunnel was plunged into darkness once more as the group tucked their chemical lights under their clothing. Crouching silently in the darkness they heard the sound of footsteps approaching, then they saw a dim light moving towards them.

"There could be squigs down here," Diona whispered, "some of them are dangerous."

"Squigs don't carry torches," Quint pointed out.

"Quiet," Ryton ordered and as the group stared at the light ahead of them a lone Gretchin moved into view holding a torch above his head.

"Who's dare?" the Gretchin called out in the Ork language, "I know dare's someone dare, I 'eard ya talking git talk."

"He's already heard us," Quint whispered to Ryton, "and he knows we're human."

"An intelligent Gretchin, I never expected that," Ryton commented, "Ophilia call him over."

"Over here," Ophilia shouted to the Gretchin, who came closer.

"Where is ya git?"

"Over here."

The Gretchin came closer.

"Get up," Ryton whispered, "let him see you, but keep your gun hidden."

Ophilia stood up, holding her gun behind her back.

"Wotcha doin' down 'ere?" the Gretchin asked as it came closer, "And where is da others?"

"What others?"

"I already said I 'eard ya talkin' dat git talk."

"I was calling for help, I'm lost. There are no others."

"Well dese are grot tunnels. Gits ain't supposed to come down 'ere."

"I chased a squig into a hole, I didn't know it was an entrance to your tunnels. Won't you help me?"

Very good, thought Ryton she's got an answer for everything.

The Gretchin came closer and stopped close to Ophilia.

"Well tell me wotcha got to trade or I'll leave ya 'ere."

"How about your life?" Ophilia said as she pulled her gun from behind her back and pressed it against the Gretchin's head. At this point the other humans all uncovered their lights and emerged from their hiding places with their weapons ready.

"I'll take ya out of da tunnel," the Gretchin said, "just don't 'urt me. Da way out is just behind ya."

"We don't want to go that way," Thaddius told the Gretchin, "we want you to take us to the warboss's fortress."

"But da boss'll kill ya all as soon as 'e sees ya."

"Then what do you have to worry about?" Thaddius said as he too pressed his weapon against the Gretchin.

"Okay I'll take ya, but only if ya promises to let me go after."

Thaddius turned to Ryton.

"I think we've found ourselves a new guide," he said.

"Then tell him to lead the way," Ryton replied.

The Gretchin moved quickly through the tunnels and on several occasions either Quint or Thaddius would have to warn him to slow down as he would come close to leaving the area illuminated by the humans' lights. The party was wary that if the Gretchin was able to escape into the darkness then he would just run off and leave them wandering at random once more. Periodically Ryton checked his data slate's navigation function in an attempt to assess their progress.

"Tell the Gretchin to stop a moment and keep an eye on him," he said and Thaddius ordered their guide to stay where he was.

"So how are we doing?" Ophilia asked Ryton as he studied the data slate.

"We're not moving towards the fortress fast enough," Ryton told his followers, "this Gretchin is leading us round in circles."

"Probably looking for a way to escape," Quint added, "I think we need to be more forceful in our methods."

"You've had more experience than me. What do you suggest?" Ryton asked.

"We shoot him."

"Shoot him?"

"Yes, just in the arm. It won't kill him, but it should convince him to be more cooperative."

"Go ahead then."

The Gretchin curled up into a ball and screamed as Quint raised his gun. Then it screamed again as the single shot he fired hit it just above the elbow.

"Was 'elpin'!" the Gretchin shouted, clutching at the wound, "I was takin' ya where ya wanted to go."

"Not fast enough," Quint told the Gretchin.

"Couldn't remember da way, but remember now. No need to shoot me."

Quint turned to Ryton.

"I think I made our point."

"Then tell him to get going again and remind him that we may shoot him again if he's not fast enough this time."

Git town was in darkness as Two Heads drove through it at speed. Inside the battlewagon Hazug noticed that Sophie had gotten out of her seat when they entered the area and was staring out through one of the vision slits.

"Wotcha lookin' for?" he asked her.

"It's been years since I was last here, the Death Skulls kept me at the ruined city all the time I worked for them. I just thought I might see some place I used to know."

"Its dark, ya'll not be able to see a bloody thing ya stupid git," Drazzok commented.

"I just thought I'd try," Sophie replied before sitting back down again, just in time to avoid falling over when Two Heads turned a corner at a somewhat unsafe speed.

"Who taught ya to drive?" Mek Batrug shouted as he hung on tightly.

"Someone better dan you," Drazzok snapped, "at least 'e ain't crashed into nothin' yet."

The battlewagon swerved again.

"Give 'im time," Mek Batrug muttered, "give 'im time."

Ryton stared at the blocked tunnel ahead of them.

"What do you think you're playing at?" Thaddius yelled at the Gretchin, placing the muzzle of his shotgun beneath the creature's chin, "You were supposed to take us straight to the fortress."

"But da fortress is dis way, look up dare," the Gretchin replied, pointing to a small hole at the top of the pile of rocks and dirt blocking their path.

"That's the way into the fortress?"

"No, crawl through and da tunnel gets big again."

Thaddius translated this for Ryton, who was not impressed.

"Point out to him that we are bigger than him and that we don't intend on crawling through gaps like that. Tell him to find us a better way."

Thaddius relayed this to the Gretchin, which babbled a reply.

"What did he say?" Ryton asked as Thaddius released his grip on the Gretchin.

"Just that it will take longer and we shouldn't shoot him for that."

"Tell him to just get us there as quick as he can."

With the instruction translated by Thaddius, the Gretchin ran back the way they had come to a passageway that lead off at an oblique angle. He beckoned for the humans to follow him and went down the passage.

"Looks like its that way then," Ryton said.

Two Heads was forced to slow down when the battlewagon finally left git town. Though more light spilled from buildings and illuminated the streets much better than the human sector, the streets were also far more crowded with orks and their crude vehicles. Sporadic gunfire could be heard and while at first Hazug feared that it could be signifying the start of a conflict to determine a new warboss, he swiftly realised that it was all just small arms fire as fights began to get out of hand or business owners enforced payment for services rendered. Without the main turret the battlewagon was no longer quite so intimidating to other road users and so they took longer to get out of the way.

"Did we just run someone over?" Sophie said as she heard a scream and a thud followed by a squelch from outside the battlewagon.

"No problem," shouted Two Heads, "it was just a grot. Gorrid can clean it off later."

"Aw boss..." Gorrid began to complain, before remembering that there were no other members of the mob left alive to palm the job off onto.

"I've an idea," Drazzok said and he clambered over the ruined internal mechanism of the main turret and stood so that he was clearly visible from the outside.

"Get out of da bleedin' way or I'll zap da bleedin' lot of ya!" he shouted as loud as he could while he waved his staff in the air.

It took only a few of the nearby orks to turn and look at Drazzok to see that there was a weirdboy in their midst and the panic started immediately thereafter.

"Weirdo!" an Ork screamed as he turned to run, which in turn caused more greenskins to look at Drazzok and realise the danger of being near him before they too fled down side streets and into nearby buildings calling out warnings as they did so.

"Ya ha! I knew dat dat would work," Drazzok said proudly as he hung on to the remains of the turret.

"Again," shouted Two Heads as he drove into the empty space created in front of the battlegon by the fleeing crowd of orks, "keep it up weirdo, we is cruisin' now."

"I'll keep shoutin' if ya keeps ya eyes on da road. All four of 'em!"

"What's that sound?" Ryton asked. For most of the way through the tunnels beneath the Ork city there had been no background noise at all, but now there was a faint rhythmic pounding, interrupted occasionally by muffled roaring.

"We must be near the pits," Quint said.

"The what?"

"The fighting pits," Thaddius explained, "its where the more formal combat between orks takes place. Orks gather there in large numbers to watch and gamble on the outcome. They'll be banging drums and shouting, so that's what the noise probably is. The pits are near the centre of the city so we must be almost to the fortress now."

The Gretchin said something in the Ork language.

"What did he say?" Ryton asked.

"Basically what I just did," Thaddius said, "that we're under the fighting pits and that the fortress is not far off now. He also warned to us to look out for any squigs that may have escaped from the pits."

At the suggestion of there being dangerous animals nearby the humans changed the way they held their weapons so that they could be aimed and fired more quickly.

The pounding continued as they followed the Gretchin through the tunnel beneath the fighting pits and Ryton noticed that loose dirt was being shaken from the tunnel ceiling. Diona squealed as a clump of dirt fell from the ceiling and went down the back of her neck.

"There's no need to panic," Ryton told her, "I don't think the tunnel is in any danger of collapsing just yet."

The sounds from above ground faded as the humans continued following the Gretchin and they left the area of the fighting pits behind. Then the Gretchin stopped, pointed ahead of them and spoke.

"Dat's da fortress door," he said, pointing at a trapdoor in the tunnel ceiling, "it comes out in da basement. Now ya can let me go."

Thaddius translated for Ryton.

"Looks like we're here, what do we do now."

"Well first we get rid of the Gretchin. Quint, shoot him."

Quint brought his weapon up quickly and a cluster of four rounds hit the startled Gretchin in the chest as he fired a short burst.

"What do we do with the body?" Quint asked.

"Leave it," said Ryton, "it's only a Gretchin and no one will find it until its too late in any case."

The group gathered around the trapdoor with their weapons at the ready. Thaddius took the lead and used his shotgun to push open the trapdoor slowly.

Ryton winced as the door creaked open, but then breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it had opened into an empty room that was lit by torches mounted on the walls. He saw that there were fittings for electrical lights, but that the lights themselves had been removed long ago.

"Okay everyone," he said, "this is it. Everyone cover your weapons again, we need to be able to blend in with the staff. Thaddius, do you still have a sack for that shotgun."

"Yes, I have it."

"Good, just drape it over the gun for now; we may need it in a hurry. Right if everybody's ready let's get on with this. Stay behind me and do exactly as I say."

With their weapons concealed the group proceeded to follow Ryton into the warboss's fortress.

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The crowds of greenskins continued to hurriedly clear a path for the battlewagon as Drazzok persisted in loudly announcing his presence at the top of his voice and it was not long before the imposing shape of warboss Kazkal's fortress came into view.

"Park by da front gate," Hazug said to Two Heads, "but stop sooner if da guards look like they is about start shootin'."

As the battlewagon closed on the fortress, the guards near the gate did indeed begin to ready their weapons, though these were small arms only and would not be able to harm the heavily armoured vehicle. Nevertheless, Hazug thought that it would still be a good idea to stop when he saw them taking aim anyway.

"We 'ad better stop for dis lot," he told Two Heads, "we don't want to 'ave to shoot our way in dare."

The battlewagon continued moving at the same speed.

"Ere Two 'Eads, wot ya doin? I said to stop."

"I is trying to stop, da brakes is bust."

"I tried to warn ya," Mek Batrug said, "dose repairs was only a temporary job."

"Ang on!" yelled Two Heads as the Ork guards dived out of the way of the speeding battlewagon and it smashed it's way through the gates.

As debris from the heavy gates flew through the air guards both inside and out were forced to take cover, but even so many were struck and injured. The impact did at least slow down the out of control battlewagon and Two Heads was then able to bring it to a complete stop with the assistance of an inner wall.

"Ah me leg!" Drazzok screamed as a crate came crashing down on his leg.

"See, I told ya," groaned Mek Batrug as he untangled himself from a stack of seats that had come loose, "we just 'ad to give 'im time before 'e crashed."

"Dat was just cos of your dodgy work," Two Heads replied angrily, pulling himself free of the driver's seat.

Hazug kept out of the bickering and checked on Sophie and Ratish, both were dazed by the crash but otherwise uninjured.

"We needs to find da tunnel entrance," Hazug said as he opened the hatch, "Ratish, do ya think ya can find it for us?"

"Yes master, Ratish knows were all da ways into da tunnels are," the Gretchin said, dashing out through the open hatchway, then coming to an abrupt stop and adding, "but dey don't look too 'appy about us bein' 'ere."

As the occupants of the battlewagon began to disembark they saw that some of the guards had come to their senses enough that they were now advancing on them with their weapons drawn.

"Is dis your wagon?" one of them asked Hazug.

"No, its mine," both of Two Heads said simultaneously as he followed Hazug down the ramp with his rifle in his hands and stood close enough to the guard that he had to look down his noses to see him properly, "wot about it?"

The guard gulped.

"It's a very nice one isn't it," he stammered at the larger Ork nob towering over him.

"It wos nicer two days ago," Drazzok commented as he limped out of the hatchway behind Two Heads.

"Weirdo!" one of the guards yelled when he saw Drazzok and there was a clattering as weapons were dropped and the guards disappeared into the night.

"Can ya walk on dat?" Hazug asked Drazzok who had sat down on the ramp and was rubbing his injured leg.

"I'll keep up with ya."

"Right but if ya can't den we'll 'ave to leave ya behind, we needs to move fast," said Hazug, "lead da way grot, Sophie stick behind me."

The humans heard a massive crash as they were about to make their way out of the basement into the kitchens of the fortress.

"Any ideas what that was?" Ophilia whispered.

"Perhaps the tau are attacking," Diona suggested.

"Not a chance," said Ryton, "I don't think there are any tau left on the planet and their fleet is too far away to do anything."

"So what was it then?" Diona asked.

"Probably just some Orkish construction falling apart," Thaddius said, "but if it wakes people up it could mean trouble for us."

"Everyone just keep a sharp eye out," Ryton said, "we need to find that warboss before anyone else finds us."

"So," Quint said to Ryton, "any ideas where we should look?"

"Haven't any of you been here before?"

Ryton's followers all indicated that they had not.

"Great, then we'll just have to find someone who does know their way around."

"You mean someone like that?" Quint said pointing at a male human who could be seen cleaning kitchen utensils beyond the doorway they were about to pass through.

"Exactly," Ryton said, "Quint, Thaddius, this is your show."

The two men burst into the kitchen with their weapons drawn and pointed at the man, who dropped what he was holding in fright. Before he could scream, Quint grabbed him and clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Do as we say, or you're dead," he told the terrified man in gothic, "understand?"

The man nodded.

"He's ready boss," Thaddius called out and the rest of the group followed into the kitchen and Quint removed his hand from over the man's mouth.

"We want the warboss," Ryton said, "tell us where he is. Now"

"He's not here," the man said.

"What do you mean he's not here?" Ryton replied as Quint jabbed his gun between the man's ribs.

"He's gone to watch the fights, but he could be back any time."

"This is better than I hoped for," Ryton said, "we can set an ambush for when the warboss returns rather than having to hunt for him. That's all we need from this man, kill him."

Before the man could protest Thaddius struck him with the butt of his shotgun and he slumped to the ground, bleeding from a gash in his head. Then Quint took a knife from a counter and plunged it into the man's back. The man let out a surprised gasp as he died.

"Was that really necessary?" Ophilia asked.

"He could have raised an alarm," Quint said.

"In the words of the tau, it was for the greater good," Ryton added grinning.

Leaving the body of the servant in the kitchen, Ryton led his followers into the maze of corridors and chambers that made up the fortress. Fortunately for him the orks had left some of the signs that had been erected by the humans who originally occupied the building so Ryton was able to get an idea of the best direction for them to take to get to a central area. They moved slowly and quietly and on occasion they ducked out of the way to avoid the few servants and guards still around.

Signs labelled 'Main Hall' took the party to a large chamber that was split between a large lower section that was filled with crude Ork furniture arranged around a massive throne like chair and an upper balcony that ran around the walls. Staircases at either end of the room linked the two levels.

"This'll do," Ryton said, "we'll hide on the balcony and wait for the warboss to return."

True to his word, Ratish was able to lead Hazug and what remained of the warband directly to the entrance to the Gretchin tunnels in the fortress basement. An entrance that had been left wide open.

"Dey is 'ere all right," Hazug said as he studied the floor of the basement.

"Ow do ya know it wasn't just a grot leavin' da door open?" Two Heads asked him.

"Grots don't wear boots dat leave tracks like dat," Hazug told him, pointing at the muddy footprints that lead towards a set of stairs. At the top of the stairs was a doorway different to the one that they had entered through.

"Looks like dare's another way out of 'ere," Hazug said and he went up the stairs.

The tracks had faded by the time they reached the top of the stairs and Hazug could no longer follow them. But at least he knew which way the humans had left the basement. Grasping the handle of the door at the top of the stairs he gave it a good hard shove and entered the kitchen with his pistol at the ready.

Hazug spun around when he heard Sophie scream behind him and then turned again when he saw her pointing into the kitchen. Then he saw the corpse of one of warboss Kazkal's human servant's lying in a pool of his own blood. The other orks barged past Sophie and rushed into the kitchen to see what the fuss was about.

"E's dead," Gorrid said as he stood over the body, "'e's been stabbed."

"Dat's some nice work dat is lad," Two Heads said, "ya must 'ave painboy skills to spot somethin' like dat," and then he slapped the Ork around the back of the head.

"Aw boss..."

"Don't 'aw boss' me ya squig brain or I'll..."

"Quiet da pair of ya," Hazug snapped, "dese gits is smart. Dey must 'ave guns with 'em to be brave enough to come 'ere and gits prefer to use guns rather dan choppas, but dey was smart enough not to use 'em cos dey knew dat da guards might 'ear 'em."

"But da guards 'ave legged it," Gorrid pointed out.

"Exactly," Hazug answered him, "which means dat we is da only ones left to stop 'em."

"So 'ow do we find 'em if dey is bein' quiet?" Mek Batrug asked.

"We use da knife," Drazzok said and the others all turned to look at him.

Drazzok bent over and plucked the knife out of the body.

"When da other git killed dis one 'e will 'ave left a bit of 'imself behind with da knife," the weirdboy said.

"So 'e's bleedin'?" Gorrid said and he received a slap from Drazzok, followed by another from Two Heads.

"Nah, not a bit of 'is body, a bit of 'is mind," the weirdboy explained, tapping the side of his head as he did so, "and I can follow dat to 'im. 'Ere take me staff," and Drazzok gave his staff to Mek Batrug and clutched the bloody knife in both of his hands. Almost immediately, Drazzok's eyes began to glow. At first the other all stood back, having seen the destruction caused on previous occasions that this had happened. This time however there was no massive discharge of destructive energy, instead the weirdboy began to walk slowly as though in some form of trance towards a door out of the kitchen that opened as he approached it without any of the group laying a hand on it.

"Right lads," Hazug said as Drazzok left the kitchen, "we 'ad best follow 'im den."

"Wot if 'is 'ead explodes?" Gorrid said as the group followed Drazzok through the passageways of the fortress.

"Den at least ya can rest assured dat Hazug is standin' right behind 'im and not you," Two Heads replied. Drazzok himself was oblivious to this, in his mind he saw a trail of light in the air ahead of him that lead from the tip of the knife blade to wherever the servant's killer was currently located. As he progressed the light became steadily brighter, telling him that the group was closing in on its quarry.

"I think dey've stopped," Drazzok said without taking his eyes off the trail, "I can see we is getting' closer to 'im."

A thought suddenly occurred to Hazug.

"Its an ambush," he said, "dey've found somewhere to hide and dey are waitin' for da warboss. Everyone keep dare eyes open."

"What happens if they see us first?" Sophie asked, suddenly aware that she was the only without any sort of weapon, "Will they shoot at us?"

"I don't reckon so," Hazug reassured her, "dat would give away dare location. Unless dey reckon dat we've seen 'em dey will probably stay 'idden."

"But if they think we've seen them?"

"Den dey'll 'ave no choice but to shoot, cos dey know we'll kill 'em if dey don't kill us first."

Drazzok eventually led them into a room that Hazug recognised, it was the audience chamber where he had first met with warboss Kazkal before he was shown the body of the Death Skull dragged from the river. Something about this place made him suspicious.

"Dis would be a good spot for an ambush," he commented, eyeing up the balcony running all around the room.

Suddenly Drazzok stopped. In his mind he could see the psychic trail leading up the stairs to the balcony. Rather than follow the trail he instead turned slowly, keeping the knife pointing straight out in front of him as he studied the path taken by the trail until it abruptly came to an end with a glowing ball in an otherwise darkened alcove. Drazzok drew in a breath and channelled energy into the knife. Carefully, he pulled his hands away from the knife's hilt and under the influence of his powers it remained hovering midway between his hands.

"Wot's 'e doin'?" Two Heads whispered into each of Hazug's ears at once.

Slightly unsettled by the stereo whispering Hazug nevertheless answered honestly.

"I don't know for certain, but I think da weirdo's onto somethin'."

Without warning, Drazzok let his arms fall to his sides and the knife shot out towards where he had been looking.

There was a scream from the alcove on the balcony, followed by a burst of gunfire as a human staggered forwards and squeezed the trigger of his weapon before he fell over the balcony rail.

"Let rip!" both of Two Heads shouted seeing the man fall to his death and with the exception of Hazug all those in the group with guns fired them randomly at the balcony. Sophie on the other hand just sought cover beneath a table.

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From his hiding place Ryton watched as the greenskins entered the room and at first he had hoped that the warboss had arrived. But he knew that Ork chieftains were the largest of their breed, more massive than even the genetically altered space marines of the Imperium who stood eight feet tall in their armour and none of them seemed to fit into this category. Additionally, Ryton noticed that a young human woman accompanied them also. She looked vaguely familiar to him, though he couldn't place exactly where he'd seen her before, but some of the orks he definitely recognised. They had been in some of the surveillance images the tau had obtained during the battles in the ruined city. The two-headed mutant was especially distinctive, his size along with that of another of the orks suggested that they were most likely the veterans known as nob. Then he watched with horror as the savagely dressed Ork shaman killed Quint with what looked like the same knife that had been used to dispatch the servant in the kitchen. He kept low as most of the other greenskins opened fire and was relieved that his remaining followers seemed to have followed suit. Or at least none of them had fallen into the open or cried out if they had been hit.

The barrage of gunfire from the greenskins stopped when they ran out of ammunition and as Ryton watched them reloading he also saw Thaddius step from his hiding place at the top of the main stairs and aim his shotgun at the Ork nob that had just a single head.

"Hazug look out!" Sophie shouted from her hiding place when she saw Thaddius aiming his shotgun.

The bulky weapon boomed as Thaddius fired and struck Hazug in the back and Sophie screamed when she saw the blood splatter from the wounds inflicted.

But Thaddius was too slow to follow up on the shot, which by itself did no more than scrape off some of Hazug's thick Orkish hide and embed metal pellets in his muscle tissue. Though he roared with pain, Hazug turned around swiftly and raised his pistol towards Thaddius.

They both fired simultaneously and Hazug roared again as the second shotgun blast stung his chest.

Thaddius wasn't so fortunate. Hazug's aim was good and his bullet struck Thaddius in the throat where his soft human tissue gave way to the projectile and his vertebrae shattered as it exited his body almost as easily as it had entered after passing straight through. Thaddius let go of his weapon and clutched at his throat, gurgling as he toppled forwards and rolled down the stairs. Blood pumping from his wound he was dead before he reached the bottom. His shotgun clattered down the stairs after him and slid across the floor.

The next attack came from two sides as both Diona and Ophilia opened fire with their automatic weapons simultaneously and the greenskins all followed Sophie's example of seeking cover as they struggled to reload their weapons whilst under fire.

"Is ya alright Hazug?" asked Mek Batrug who was fumbling through pouches to find more ammunition for his pistol.

"Yeah, I is fine," Hazug replied, "I'll walk it off later."

Hazug spotted one of their assailants as Diona broke cover and sprinted towards a pillar at the edge of the balcony. He fired his pistol repeatedly until he heard the click of an empty chamber. This time his aim was not as good and he hit only the wall behind the running female. While he reached for another magazine he heard Gorrid open fire with his rifle at her also, but he hit only the thick stone pillar she was now using for cover.

"I'm out," Gorrid shouted when his rifle stopped firing.

"Same 'ere," Mek Batrug said. He had been unable to find any more bullets and had instead removed a large wrench from his tool bag, intending to use it as a club.

"Dis is my last," Hazug said as he slammed his only remaining magazine into his pistol.

"Mine too," said Two Heads, "'alf full I reckon."

"Ratish still 'as bullets master," the Gretchin said proudly as he fired towards Diona, but then his gun also ran out of ammunition, "oops," he added and ducked again as more bursts of gunfire came from the balcony.

Ophilia now broke cover also and moved to the top of the stairs where Thaddius had died. With her weapon to her shoulder she had a perfect shot into the group and squeezed her trigger to fire another burst. But she was too late; Thaddius's shotgun boomed once more as Sophie grabbed it and fired at Ophilia. The blast just clipped Ophilia at her waist and sent pellets into her abdomen. The impact knocked her aim off and the burst that had been aimed at the greenskins instead went into the ceiling as she fell. She dropped her weapon and lay on the stairs clutching at her wound, screaming. A quick burst from Two Heads silenced her permanently.

Diona fired again, a burst of three rounds catching Two Heads in the shoulder. He dropped his gun and gripped the wound, but aside from that the attack did nothing. Shocked by the lack of any serious effect

from her shots Diona took careful aim for one of Two Heads' heads, but doing so left her exposed and when Hazug fired his pistol his shots punched holes through her chest that killed her instantly.

"Is dat it?" Two Heads said as he picked up his rifle.

"About time," said Gorrid, "too many gits, not enough bullets."

As the orks began to stand up and survey the bodies around them Sophie spoke.

"Where's Ryton?" she asked.

"Ryt-ton?" Hazug repeated slowly.

"He was the man the tau used to recruit humans to their cause. These people all used to work for the Death Skulls, I saw Ryton with them when they left the tau base yesterday."

"Choppas ready lads," Two Heads said, "looks like dare's another git assassin about."

"E's probably up da stairs somewhere near where da other was 'idin'," Hazug said, "Sophie, Ratish, stay 'ere with Drazzok. Call out if ya sees anythin'. Everyone else pick a set of stairs and get up 'em."

Ryton had known that orks were tough, but the extent to which he had just seen them shrug off hits that would have been fatal to humans or tau still shocked him. He still had his plasma pistol in addition to his auto pistol though and providing that he used only one energy charge per Ork he would still have five left for the warboss when he finally arrived while the Gretchin and the woman could be dealt with his other gun. Still hidden he drew the plasma pistol and released the safety, grinning as he heard the soft whine as its capacitors charged up.

He watched as the orks split up, the shaman remaining below while the other each came up a different staircase, surrounding him. Nearest to him was one of the smaller orks, though it was still nearly twice his weight. Ryton observed it carefully as it began to poke its axe blade into any place that looked big enough to hide a human. He briefly checked the positions of the other orks; he wanted to be able to move quickly from his hiding place after he fired to avoid being trapped here. It looked good, they were much further away from him and none of them were looking his way.

Everyone in the room noticed the flash of light from the powerful energy discharge as Ryton fired the plasma pistol at Gorrid. The young Ork screamed and dropped his axe as the plasma bolt struck his thigh and ripped his leg from his body. The intense heat fuse flesh and bone and there was the stench of burning meat as the wound was cauterised by the plasma bolt itself. Only this stopped Gorrid from bleeding to death almost instantly.

Hazug, Two Heads and Mek Batrug all ran towards Ryton as soon as he emerged from the small antechamber in which he had concealed himself holding a weapon in each hand. Ryton was already running himself and he leapt over the prone Gorrid as he made for the stairs. He fired a burst from his auto pistol towards Sophie as she tried to aim the shotgun at him. The burst went wild, but Sophie dropped the gun and hid beneath a table once more, Ratish diving under after her. There was another flash of light, this time from Drazzok as he vanished only to reappear almost instantly with a second flash of light directly in front of Ryton.

Drazzok's sudden teleportation took Ryton by surprise and the brilliant flash of light dazzled him for a moment. Overcoming his surprise and with his vision clearing, he raised both his guns to shoot Drazzok but the weirdboy head butted him just as swiftly causing him to drop his weapons and stagger backwards with blood pouring from his nose. Drazzok raised his staff intending to finish off Ryton with a single stout blow, but the human recovered his senses quickly once more and, using the skills he learned in the imperial guard that he deserted, he struck first with a kick to Drazzok's knee that knocked the weirdboy's leg out from under him. Now it was Drazzok who dropped his weapon, the staff clattering to the floor as he grabbed the balcony railing to try and prevent himself from falling down. As he grabbed at the rail, Ryton grabbed him however and with a single strong shove the assassin pushed the helpless weirdboy over the rail. Drazzok landed with a crash, his weight splitting a table below in two and lay still. Seeing the weirdboy fall Sophie crawled out from under the table and ran to him, placing her hands on his chest and breathing a sigh of relief when she felt that he was still breathing, though unconscious.

"He's still alive," she called out, then she felt a hand on her shoulder.

It hadn't taken Ryton long to retrieve his weapons and he made it down the stairs just as Sophie was checking to see if Drazzok was still alive. He slung the auto pistol over his shoulder and with his hand now free he grabbed the young woman leaning over the Ork.

"Move bitch!" Ryton shouted at her as he dragged Sophie in front of him and put his plasma pistol to her head, so close she could feel the residual heat from the shot that had been fired at Gorrid, "Tell your greenskin friends to keep back or you're dead," he ordered.

Sophie just screamed and tried to break free of Ryton's grip, but he was too strong for her and he just struck her across the head with the butt of his gun.

Dazed, Sophie went limp and Ryton aimed his plasma pistol and fired at Two Heads who had descended the stairs at the far end of the room and was racing towards him, roaring with rage. The plasma bolt missed Two Heads narrowly, but it struck his axe and blasted its blade to pieces.

"Me choppa!" Two Heads yelled as his weapon was destroyed, "I'll 'ave ya for dat!" Then he roared again and continued his charge towards Ryton.

From Ryton's point of view things were now going very badly indeed. He had just wasted one of his precious energy charges and there were still three orks closing on him.

Sod the bloody tau I'm getting out of here, he thought to himself as Sophie began to stir in his arms again.

"Tell your xenos friends to back off and let me go or I'll kill you," he said to her, tightening his grip and he heard Sophie shout at the orks in their crude sounding language. He saw them all stop suddenly and stand still, just staring straight at him.

"Very good, now tell them not to follow us, we're leaving here and I'm taking me with you," Ryton said.

"No," Sophie replied.

"Do it," Ryton ordered, "you told them to stop, now tell them to keep back."

"I didn't tell them to stop," Sophie said, still struggling to get free, "I told them to kill you."

It was then that Ryton heard the sound of breathing behind him and, still holding Sophie tightly, he turned to find himself staring at an Ork larger than any he had seen before, a monster that would tower over even the nobs now behind him and following behind this beast stood a large group of heavily armed orks. Warboss Kazkal Kromag had returned home from his evening's entertainment.

Ryton pushed Sophie aside and aimed the plasma pistol directly at his target, but the warboss was too quick for him and just lashed out with his arm, striking Ryton with such force that he was lifted off the floor and the plasma pistol flew from his grip.

Ryton landed heavily and he felt his leg break as he did. He remembered the auto pistol slung over his shoulder and began to unhook it as warboss Kazkal advanced on him. Ryton fired from point blank range and emptied the magazine into Kazkal, but the enormous Ork didn't even flinch from the attack. Instead he grabbed Ryton's arms and lifted him into the air and then he pulled his arms apart.

Ryton screamed as he felt the increasing tension in his shoulders, then he sagged suddenly as he left arm was ripped free of its socket and hurled across the room by Kazkal. He kept on screaming until the warboss dropped him to the floor again and brought his massive foot down on Ryton's head.

"Wot da bleedin 'ell is goin' on 'ere den?" Kazkal bellowed, "And wot da bleedin 'ell as 'appened to my front door?"

"I can explain everythin' boss," Hazug said.

"Ya 'ad better be able to," the warboss replied.

EPILOGUE

It was starting to rain when Hazug finally got to leave the warboss's fortress. His explanation of how a force of tau had intended to use the human agent Rytan to kill Kazkal Kromag had apparently satisfied Kazkal, or at least the warboss hadn't decided to kill everyone just yet. Drazzok had been carried back to his hut while still unconscious by some of Kazkal's guards, it being thought best to get the weirdboy clear for everybody else before he woke up. The rest of the party had simply been ordered out of the fortress while Hazug told the warboss of what had happened since he had left for the ruined human city to the north.

Standing on the street opposite the fortress were Sophie and Ratish. Each keeping enough distance from the other that they did not appear to be together.

"What did the warboss say?" Sophie asked, getting the question in before Ratish had a chance to speak.

"'E's sending some lads to look for dem tau dat ran off and I reckon dat 'e's goin' to send some kroozers out to raid da tau empire to show 'em wot dey gets for messin' with 'im. Plenty of lads will want to 'ave a go at dat, cos dare's bound to be loads of loot to go around. Mind you, 'e ain't 'appy about 'is door so I think I'd better stay out of 'is way for a bit."

"But you saved his life."

"'E doesn't see it dat way, 'e killed dat Rytan bloke 'imself after all."

"So what now?"

"Wot do ya mean 'wot now'?"

"What do we do now?"

"Dare is no 'we', I is off 'ome. I reckon dat ya should do the same too," and Hazug began to walk away.

"I don't have a home," Sophie shouted after him, "the tau destroyed it."

Hazug stopped and lowered his head. Things were difficult enough being known as an Ork that was willing to deal with humans on equal terms without having one hanging around him all the time. But then again, he thought, it would save him having to do all that annoying cooking and cleaning.

"Alright den," he called back to her, "ya can come with me. I think I've got an 'ammock in a box somewhere ya can use. But ya do wot ya is told and dat tattoo is goin' to 'ave to go."

"Deal," Sophie said gleefully as she sprinted to catch up with Hazug. When she reached out to take his arm, he pulled it away.

"Does master 'ave an 'ammock for Ratish too?" Ratish asked meekly.

"No, but da box for da 'ammock won't 'ave anythin' else in it now."