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ROAD RAGE

AN UFTHAK BLACKHAWK SHORT STORY

MIKE BROOKS

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ROAD RAGE

Mike Brooks

The first indication Ufthak Blackhawk had that something was up was when Nizkwik sailed past him at head height.

‘Someone to see ya, boss!’ the grot wailed, before it collided with a pile of scrap in the corner. Ufthak straightened up from where he had been prodding at his shokk rifle – cautiously, because he wanted to keep all his limbs attached – and turned to face the cave mouth.

Caves. That was part of the problem. Ufthak’s arm of the Tekwaaagh! had landed on this planet in search of interesting gubbinz with which they could make things explode, and had found very little. There weren’t even any impressive, tall buildings: not that the Tekwaaagh! tended to leave much standing in its wake, but tall buildings were useful to take a look around and see what you wanted to stomp flat next. The low, sprawling temple complexes they had seen from orbit turned out to be annoyingly sparse on interesting tek or shiny loot, and somewhat overpopulated with useless frescos and surprisingly lethal traps. Ufthak had resorted to using a cave as his bunker, and newly minted big boss or not, it was hardly the sort of impressive surroundings that would convince the boyz of his right to command.

Especially not, it seemed, the group of orks doing their best to block out the light from the cave mouth. Other species in the galaxy might assume that orks were always threatening, and to be fair, so far as most other species in the galaxy were concerned, that was an accurate assumption. The only reason an ork didn’t want to scrag or blow someone up was if something else was currently a more interesting target.

Ufthak, being an ork himself, was more attuned to the niceties of orkish behaviour and body language. He was a big boss now, after all, one step down from Da Meklord himself. Da Meklord was the warlord of the Tekwaaagh! and possibly the greatest tekni-kal mind the orks had ever produced: at least, that was what he said, and no one seemed very interested in contradicting him. Ufthak now had a goodly chunk of Da Biggest Big Mek’s authority, and most orks knew better than to give him any lip lest he remove said lips for them, possibly along with their head.

Judging from the puffed chests, squared shoulders and bared fangs currently between him and the outside world, this group of orks were in the minority.

‘Wotcha want?’ Ufthak asked lazily. None of them were close to him in size, which surely meant they weren’t going to be foolish enough to challenge him to a fight. It was not always true that the biggest ork would win scraps over rank, but it was as near a certainty as made no difference. That was why any ork boss worth his name would keep an eye on whether any of his underlings were bulking up as their metabolisms went into overdrive to prepare them for a leadership challenge, and dish out a remedial beating before the upstart got, quite literally, too big for his boots.

‘Wot do we want? Oh ho,’ said the ork at the front, with a hollow laugh. Ufthak frowned. Sarcasm was a concept he had only recently discovered himself – since the bigger an ork got, the smarter he got – and he did not appreciate it being used in his presence when he was not quite sure of its target.

‘Dat’s wot I said,’ he declared, folding his arms and glowering. ‘Get on wiv it.’

‘Why? Are ya busy?’ the head ork sneered at him. He wore the yellow and black of a Bad Moon, but the zag-stripes and the goggles on his forehead marked him out as a Speed Freek. ‘‘Cos *we* ain’t busy, an’ dat’s da problem!’

Ufthak shrugged. ‘Yeah, we killed all da skrawnierz an’ dere big monsta-fings. Anuvver win for da boyz ain’t good enuff?’

‘Dat weren’t a win!’ the other ork declared hotly. ‘Dat was barely even a fight!’

The problem was, he had a point. Pointy-eared skrawnierz rarely offered a decent fight in any case: the gits hit you and ran away again, possibly doing backflips at the same time, which was somehow more infuriating than an enemy who ran away without fighting at all. However, at least they could make it interesting, if razor-sharp slicey-discs that took your arm straight off, or screaming at you until your spine froze, counted as ‘interesting’.

The skrawnierz on this planet, however, hadn’t had any of that fancy stuff. They’d mainly had simple guns, a lot of pointy sticks, and giant, scaly monsters, some of which were larger than even the biggest squiggoths Ufthak had ever seen. It had been a bit of a challenge at first, because your basic shoota wasn’t even going to dent one of those behemoths, but if there was one thing the Tekwaaagh! wasn’t short of, it was dakka. As Ufthak had observed, in a fight between dakka and monster, the monsters came off worse.

With their monsters blown up, out, and generally about, the skrawnierz hadn’t stood a chance. There were probably still a few hiding out here and there, but the fighting had finished fairly quickly. That might have suited other species in the galaxy, who had a notion that you should be fighting for a *reason*, or that winning a fight should get you something in particular, but orks didn’t hold with that nonsense. The point of fighting was *to have a fight*. Winning was more of a bonus, providing it didn’t happen too quickly.

‘Da gitz here was weedy,’ Ufthak said. ‘It happens. Da next ones’ll be better.’

‘We don’t believe ya,’ the frontmost ork said bluntly. ‘Ya wouldn’t know a good fight if it walked up an’ slapped ya!’

Ufthak laughed despite himself. ‘Ha! Dat’s a good’un! D’ya know who yer talkin’ to, my lad? I’m Ufthak Blackhawk! Ufthak Gargantsmasha! I took down one of da humie Gargants wiv nuffin’ but me hammer an’ a squig!’ He pointed to where the Snazzhammer was resting in the corner, next to the large, red mound of sleeping flesh that was Princess the squig. Admittedly, Nizkwik the grot had been there as well, but it hadn’t been much help. And yes, Mogrot Redtoof had been with Ufthak too, but Mogrot wasn’t here right now, and what he didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him: which in Mogrot’s case meant he was probably pretty much invulnerable to anything the galaxy could throw at him.

‘Not just a hammer an’ a squig, was it?’ the ork said nastily. ‘Nah, ya had a dragsta too, didn’t ya? A shokkjump dragsta! Or are ya forgettin’ dat part?’

Ufthak blinked, nonplussed. ‘Is dere a reason yer so bovvered about da dragsta?’

The ork’s eyes went so wide Ufthak thought they might pop out of their own accord.

‘It was my zoggin’ dragsta, ya git!’

Ufthak tilted his head to one side and examined the furious Speed Freek. He vaguely remembered clobbering another ork with the Snazzhammer and stealing the shokkjump dragsta he and Mogrot had then used to jump through the Gargant’s force field, but he’d never really thought about it past that. Another ork had something that Ufthak wanted, so he’d taken it. That was how ork society worked.

‘Oi, Nizkwik!’ he bellowed, and was rewarded with a clattering noise as the grot managed to extricate itself from its landing site, where it had remained until now in order to avoid drawing any more unwelcome attention.

‘Yes, boss?’ Nizkwik puffed, hurrying up.

Ufthak pointed at the Speed Freek. ‘D’ya know dat ork?’

Nizkwik squinted, then nodded. ‘Yes, boss, dat’s Riptoof.’

‘Did I nick his dragsta?’

Nizkwik, whose job it had been to shoot the shokk rifle on that very same dragsta prior to Ufthak ripping it off and using it as his personal weapon, and who had stuck around with Ufthak ever since rather than go back to its former boss, nodded again. ‘Yes, boss. An’ a great bit of nickin’ it was too,’ it added loyally.

Ufthak sighed, and glared at Riptoof. ‘So I nicked ya dragsta, used it ta help kill a Gargant, an’ wot? Now ya fink ya gonna start trouble wiv me over it?’

‘Not over dat,’ Riptoof replied, although Ufthak reckoned he was lying. ‘I’m just da one wot’s got da gutz ta come talk to ya. Da boyz ain’t happy. Da Meklord never should’ve made ya big boss. Y’ain’t found us a proppa fight. Ya ain’t got *respekt*.’

Ufthak looked meaningfully at the Snazzhammer. ‘How about I knock yer head in? Would dat get ya *respekt*?’

‘Dere’s only one fink Speed Freeks *respekt*,’ Riptoof retorted, ‘an’ dat’s speed! Yoo an’ me, head-ter-head! Me new ride against da dragsta wot ya nicked!’

‘I ain’t got da dragsta no more,’ Ufthak told him. ‘It sorta fell off da Gargant an’ smashed. I fink,’ he added, ‘I was a bit busy kilin’ da Gargant.’

‘Ain’t my problem,’ Riptoof sneered. ‘If ya want da boyz to follow yer orders, yoo’ll be ready to race when da sun comes up tomorrow.’

There were a few enthusiastic ‘Yeah!’s and ‘You tell ’im!’s from the other Speed Freeks, and then the whole posse turned around and left again.

Ufthak considered it. On the one hand, he could go after them and dish out a beating. Orks understood and respected violence. That should reinforce his right to be in charge.

On the other hand, the Kult of Speed made up a sizeable portion of the force under Ufthak’s command, and Speed Freeks were a bit, well, weird. Just knocking some heads together might look, to them, as though Ufthak was scared of taking up the challenge, and that would never do. Besides which, somewhere in the back of Ufthak’s brain was the notion that he had no intention of stopping at big boss. Da Meklord might have an accident one day, or if no convenient accidents occurred, one might have to be arranged; possibly involving a shokk rifle and the Snazzhammer. Accidents could look very deliberate, sometimes. And if, one way or the other, Da Meklord found himself headin’ off to see Gork and Mork before Ufthak did, it would be very useful if a lot of the Tekwaaagh! was already inclined to follow Ufthak’s orders.

And for that, he needed *respekt*.

‘Nizkwik,’ he said. ‘Go an’ find Da Boffin.’

Some orks might not trust a mekboy who’d replaced his own legs with a gyro-stabilised monowheel, which just showed how lacking in imagination those orks were. Granted, you might not want Da Boffin to improve *you*, but he zoomed around on a single wheel and never fell over, which was a pretty good indication his teknologikal know-wots were up there with the best.

‘Wot’s it yer after?’ Da Boffin asked, buzzing alongside Ufthak as they walked under clear skies and three moons. ‘Straight-line speed? Cornerin’?’

‘Best have some of each,’ Ufthak said. ‘Riptoof didn’t say wot da race is gonna be, an’ if I show up in somefing dat’s great at one, he’ll probably change it to somefing else. Fink he’s a bit kunnin’ like dat.’

‘An’ ya need it by sunrise,’ Da Boffin mused.

‘Dat’s right.’

The mek did the universal sucking-in-of-breath of an expert in his field giving bad news to one less well educated. ‘Gonna be a tall order.’

‘Ya know I’m good for da teef.’

‘Ain’t teef dat’s da problem, it’s da time,’ Da Boffin said. ‘All da teef in the galaxy can’t buy time.’

‘Ain’t sure about dat,’ Ufthak said. ‘Some of dose tinhead gitz seem to be able to make time speed up for dem, or slow down for us, or somefing like dat.’

Da Boffin’s eyes gleamed in the moonlight. ‘*Really?*’

‘Yeah, seen it,’ Ufthak confirmed. ‘Didn’t do ’em much good against da weirdboyz, but it was a fancy trick while it lasted. Fink you was fixin’ a Gargant at dat point.’

Da Boffin scribbled something on a piece of squig hide. ‘Well, dat ain’t gonna help us, ’cos I ain’t got somefing wot can do dat. Yet,’ he added. ‘So it’s just gonna be wot me an’ da spannerz can get togevva by mornin’.’

Ufthak nodded. There was no point offering further bribes, let alone threats. Da Boffin would take this as a challenge, and would do his best to make sure that any vehicle Ufthak drove was as good as possible so that the glory of Ufthak’s win would reflect on him. Besides, insofar as any ork trusted any other ork, Ufthak trusted Da Boffin. He and the painboy Dok Drozfang – who had attached Ufthak’s intact head to his old boss’ intact body, thereby giving Ufthak a head (ha ha) start up the ranks of the Tekwaaagh! – had been around Ufthak since the beginning of his rise to power, and knew a good thing when they saw it.

‘Is it just gonna be yoo?’ Da Boffin asked.

Ufthak had given some thought to this. ‘Nah. Gonna have Mogrot ridin’ wiv me.’

Mogrot Redtoof was the only other ork Ufthak might say he trusted, combining as he did the combat skills of an enraged smasha squig with the intelligence of a concussed snotling. Mogrot was just bright enough to know he had no hope of coming up with decent plans himself, but was willing to fight pretty much anything he was pointed at and strong enough to have a decent shot at killing it, which made him the perfect second-in-command.

‘Dat’s extra weight,’ Da Boffin warned.

‘Let me worry about dat,’ Ufthak said confidently. ‘Mogrot’s worf his weight in... Well, he’s worf his weight, an’ let’s leave it at dat.’

The next day dawned with a brooding mass of rain clouds on the horizon, blowing in from the west towards the Waaagh!’s camp-site, pressed up against a labyrinth of limestone ridges and ravines. To the south, the land spread out a little: the rock formations became more isolated, and were separated by large expanses of scrubby grassland on which the skrawnies’ massive monsters had grazed.

Riptoof was not alone at the improvised starting line, drawn up by the simple expedient of dragging a big stick through the dirt. A whole bevy of Speed Freeks had decided that if there was a race going down then they wanted in on it, and a motley collection of vehicles on two or more wheels were waiting and revving their engines when Ufthak wandered up.

‘Ain’t ya forgotten somefing?’ Riptoof hollered. Ufthak studied the Speed Freek’s new vehicle for a moment before answering. It wasn’t a shokkjump dragsta – shokka tek wasn’t common, after all – but it had a similar sort of build: low-slung and sleek, although with enough clearance to cope with rough ground, and shiny chrome pipes jutting out at all angles.

Flashy, and fast-looking. Well, Ufthak had expected nothing less.

‘Me ride’s just comin’ now,’ Ufthak told Riptoof.

‘I said “when da sun comes up”,’ Riptoof said warningly, pointing to where the top of the local star had already edged above the horizon and was casting long, stretched shadows across the ground. ‘Yer late.’

Ufthak shrugged. ‘If ya fink ya need to leave now in order to beat me, go ahead.’

He’d pitched his voice to carry over the rumble of idling engines, and the assembled Speed Freeks laughed at his bravado. Even Riptoof gave Ufthak a grin, although it was even teef whether he was genuinely amused by the joke, or just thought Ufthak was so overconfident that his victory was assured. He didn’t take Ufthak up on the offer, though. The Kult of Speed wouldn’t have much respect for a Speed Freek who took a head start to win a race.

As for dirty tricks once the race was underway... Well, that was all fair game. But that was why Ufthak was bringing Mogrot along.

A new roar made itself heard above the general din, and Ufthak stepped back as Da Boffin’s latest creation grumbled its way to the starting line with Mogrot Redtoof behind the wheel. The various orks who had gathered to watch clapped and hooted in appreciation, and the Speed Freeks on the line – at least, those who were not already sweating with the effort of not careering off towards the horizon – gave it a once-over as they tried to work out what they were up against.

It was, to all intents and purposes, a truck, mainly because that was all Da Boffin had been able to scrounge up at short notice. However, to consider it just a truck was to consider the Snazzhammer just a hammer: broadly accurate, but lacking an appreciation of nuance that could make the difference between victory and defeat, or indeed life and death. It had chunked-up wheels, on the basis of Da Boffin's logic that 'big wheelz means dey don't have to turn so quick to move you da same distance', which went beyond Ufthak's understanding of mathematics but which he was prepared to take at face value, particularly if the alternative was trying to work it out himself. The engine had been replaced with something far larger and more powerful, and the extra weight at the front end was counterbalanced by a pair of jet engines bolted onto the back 'for when yer goin' straight for a while'. Ufthak wasn't sure where Da Boffin had got them from, or indeed whether a fly boy had woken up this morning to find his prized fighta-bomma missing a few critical parts, but that wasn't important. What was important was winning this race, and Da Boffin had built Ufthak something probably twice as heavy as anything else competing, but with enough muscle to shift a small mountain.

'Move over,' Ufthak grunted to Mogrot, who obliged. It was a bit of a tight squeeze for Ufthak to fit behind the wheel, since he was a lot larger than most orks, but he managed it just as an ork with a slugga and a grot holding a black-and-white flag both climbed onto a solitary rock next to the starting line.

'Alright, listen up!' the ork bellowed. 'Dis is da course for da race!'

Ufthak revved his engine, and it responded with a sound like a war god's coughing fit. He grinned, and looked down the line to where Riptoof sat stony-faced behind the wheel of his own vehicle.

'Yooz gotta go out dat way, past da big bit of rock wot looks like a big bit of rock,' the ork announced, pointing south. 'Ya swing right, past da skrawnies' place we burned a few days back, den into da gullies. Find yer way froo 'em, an' da first one back to camp is da winner!'

Ufthak nodded. That sounded simple enough.

'Ready?'

The grot raised its flag. Two dozen orks hovered their boots over go-pedals, or gripped handlebars.

'STEADY!'

The grot beamed, anticipating its moment of glory, as the ork readied his slugga to fire the starting gun. One biker, unable to take the strain any longer, accelerated away in a spray of dirt. From the looks of it, he wasn't even trying to follow the loosely described course of the race, but simply succumbing to the Speed Freeks' incessant desire to change *there* into *here*.

'GO!'

The flag dropped, mainly because the ork had pulled the trigger on his slugga and shot the grot in the head. The little green body slumped forwards, but no one noticed: partly because it was a grot, and partly because two dozen or so vehicles had slammed pedals, thrust levers or handlebar throttles as far down, up or around as they could go.

The truck jolted beneath Ufthak, and lurched away with enough power for him to think for a moment that the old stitch scars on his neck were going to rip loose and his head would come clean off. He managed to get his body under control after a moment, just as the truck hit the first sizeable bump. It jarred into the air, which was a testament to how fast they were already going, given how much it weighed.

'Arrrgh!'

'Shneerrrrrk!'

Ufthak had expected a bunch of different noises out of the truck, but neither of those shrieks fitted the bill. He stole a look over his shoulder, and saw the small, green-skinned form of Nizkwik and the substantially larger, red-skinned shape of Princess thudding back down onto the truck's flatbed, which would normally be occupied by a mob of boyz ready to leap out and clobber someone. He looked sideways at Mogrot, who had the roll cage in a death grip, and was either grinning manically or losing the battle between his lips and the headwind.

'Wot da zog are dey doin' here?' Ufthak yelled.

'Princess goes everywhere with ya, don't it?' Mogrot managed. 'An' I fort da grot could, y'know, make sure stuff don't fall off. Or make it fall off, if we need to lose some weight.'

Ufthak glanced backwards again. Nizkwik was indeed clutching a blowtorch. He groaned.

'Yoo!' he bellowed at the terrified grot. 'Don't touch *nuffin*' unless I tells ya to, got it?' He risked taking one hand off the wheel to point at Mogrot. 'An' if yoo gets me squig killed...'

He didn't finish the sentence. As well as the Snazzhammer, his fancy beakie-made armour and his shokk rifle, Ufthak had got quite attached to Princess the squig. It was always cheerful, never asked annoying questions, and had already eaten three of Mogrot's hands, which served the dual purpose of keeping Ufthak amused and keeping Dok Drozfang in work transplanting new ones on from 'donors'. Conquering the galaxy just wouldn't be the same if Ufthak didn't have Princess on hand to eat any enemies he'd got bored of.

He forced his attention back to the race. Some of the field had already dropped back or away, plagued by engine trouble, unexpected sabotage, or a lack of sufficient attention span to remember that there was an actual course to follow. However, there were a good dozen vehicles still in the running, one of which was Riptoof's dragsta. The Speed Freek was in the lead, in fact, but three

warbikes were hard on his tail, and a wartrike was keeping pace with them. They'd all had the advantage of acceleration over Ufthak's truck, but the massive, snarling engine was starting to muscle its way back up the field now.

'Use da rokkit! Use da rokkit!' Mogrot yelled excitedly, but Ufthak shook his head.

'Not yet. Might need 'em later, an' we're gonna be turnin' soon...'

Sure enough, the rock spire was looming up, easily as big as a Gargant, the eastern side lit by the slanting rays of the early morning sun, and the west still wreathed in darkness. Ufthak watched the line of its shadow getting closer and closer, judging when he was going to have to put the truck into a skid to take the corner with the least loss of momentum...

A shape appeared on his right, roaring up alongside him. Some git was trying to overtake! Ufthak cast a quick glance at it – a boosta-blasta, complete with burna exhausts – and instantly decided that he was having none of this.

At the speed they were going, small movements had big consequences. Ufthak surreptitiously steered a little to the right, forcing the boosta-blasta a little closer to the rock if it wanted to keep clear of him, then swerved just enough to clip it. The size difference between the two vehicles meant the smaller buggy never had a chance: it careened out of control and went straight into an outcrop, exploding in a shower of parts and flames.

'Dat's wot I'm talkin' about!' Ufthak yelled in glee, and threw the truck into the turn. Riptoof was still ahead of him, but the dragsta's straight-line speed did not translate into being good at cornering. The trike wasn't doing well either, lacking either the stable base of four wheels, or the ability of the bikers to put their knees down. Ufthak's truck, heavy as it was, at least managed to maintain a reasonable amount of traction on the ground, although it came at the expense of some ferocious sideways G-forces which sent Nizkwik and Princess tumbling into the flatbed's side plates.

Ufthak grinned, and jammed the go-pedal down again. The truck's wheels dug into the dirt and it powered out of the skid, cutting into Riptoof's lead.

'Right,' Mogrot puffed, 'now we go past da skrawnierz' place, an'...'

He tailed off, a confused expression spreading over his face. Which, admittedly, was not an unusual occurrence, but this time there was a good reason for it.

'Boss... Were dey dere before?'

Ufthak took a moment to realise what Mogrot was on about. Then, as the burned wreckage of the skrawnierz' camp began to disgorge shape after fast-moving shape, he realised what the potential problem was.

Spikiez.

Skrawnierz were skrawnierz, and they wore all sorts of different colours, presumably to mark out their clans. However, spikiez were a bit different: 'droo-kar-ee' instead of 'ale-dar-ee', or whatever silly names skrawnierz called themselves. Spikiez tended to be pointier, and liked hooks, and hung out with weird, stitched-together creatures which the most experimental painboy might scratch his head at, and used poisons that could make even an ork feel a bit unwell. They loved raiding as much as Freebooterz did, too, although their favourite loot tended to be alive rather than shiny. They still crumpled if you actually managed to hit one, but their amour had a tendency to get caught on your choppa afterwards.

'Nah, dat's new,' Ufthak said, eyeing the approaching swarm. One of their big floaty trucks that often carried a bunch of their boyz, a smaller floaty thing with a big gun, a few zoomy floaty-bikes, and five of those gits what zipped around standing on rokkit packs and thought they were the squiggoth's knees.

'Are we gonna scrag 'em?' Mogrot asked eagerly, producing his slugga and choppa from somewhere.

'I got a race to win,' Ufthak said dubiously, refocusing on Riptoof's dragsta. Of course Mogrot would get distracted, but an ork who wanted to be warboss some day needed to be able to think long term. Win the race, get the Speed Freeks onside, *then* deal with the spikiez: that was the kind of detailed plan that would take Ufthak to the top.

Of course, spikiez basically never did what you wanted them to, and it looked like that state of affairs was going to continue.

'Dey're comin' right for us!' Mogrot announced gleefully, as the dark, sharp shapes began to converge on the race like shards of shadow. 'Looks like dey want a fight!'

Ufthak eyed their nets and hooked chains. 'Wonder if we ruined dere fun when we scragged all da local skrawnierz?' Other species might be baffled by the complicated politics that covered the alliances and enmities between various sorts of skrawnierz, but it seemed simple enough to Ufthak. He was an ork, and he'd happily fight other orks if there was no one else around. Presumably skrawnierz and spikiez were the same.

The spikiez' vehicles closed in, and Ufthak braced himself for the inevitable hail of poisoned pointy bits. However, instead of opening fire, the skimmers weaved their way into and amongst the bikes, buggies and trakks. The largest one veered in front of him, and he looked up to see pale, sharp-featured faces leering down at him.

Then it accelerated away, accompanied by derisive hand gestures.

Ufthak's eyes went wide with rage. Spikiez shooting at him? Fine, it was better than being bored. Spikiez shoving barbs and hooks into him? Whatever, he did the same to them if he got the chance, although the Snazzhammer was not what you might call a precision instrument. But spikiez butting into a race and *showing off*? Not even shooting, like the orks were no threat?

This was intolerable.

He snatched his shokk rifle up one-handed, and took aim – which was against his usual instincts, but he was so offended that he didn't care. Trusting Gork and Mork to sort out who did and did not get hit was all very well most of the time, but this was a zogg-ing insult.

The rifle whined for a moment as its shokk-generator powered up, then the lower right rear side of the spikiez' vehicle disappeared in an angry flash of light. Presumably that did something to their floaty-motors, or possibly the aerodynamics, because the whole thing began to list off to the side.

'Dat's right!' Ufthak yelled at them, as their jeerings were replaced by expressions of chagrin. 'Dis is wot ya get when ya mess wiv us!'

'Boss!'

That was Nizkwik's shout, and the urgency in the grot's voice made Ufthak duck instinctively: just in time, because a blade as long as his forearm slashed through where his neck had been, and buried itself into the seat back.

'Mogrot, take da wheel!' Ufthak bellowed, and made a grab for the pointy-eared git who had swung the blade in question.

The spiky tried to get its weapon free, but the sharp edge was well and truly stuck, and the floating plank-thing it was standing on might have been excellent for zipping around, but didn't give much of a solid base from which to tug loose an embedded blade. It hesitated for a moment too long, unwilling to abandon its weapon, and Ufthak's fist clamped around its throat.

The spiky hissed and lashed out, but although Ufthak wasn't wearing his beakie armour (too much weight, and he hadn't been planning on a proper scrap), it would take more than a thrashing pointy-ear to give him trouble. He clenched his fist until he felt the delicate vertebrae snap, then released his hold. The spiky collapsed bonelessly, and tumbled off its floaty-plank. However, its mates were still around, and they bore down on Ufthak out of the sky like vengeance made flesh.

That suited Ufthak just fine. He grabbed his weapons and clambered through the truk's roll cage onto the flatbed, leaving Mogrot in charge of the driving. Ignoring a fight in favour of a race was a fine plan, but not when the gits wanted to make it *personal*.

Combat had been joined in earnest all around, now: the boyz were having none of the spikiez' attempts to show off, and the spikiez had decided that trying to race against orks without attempting to kill them at the same time was a one-way ticket to getting stomped. Dakkaguns roared, and spiky-rifles spat. Pointy-eared warriors in even pointier armour did backflips off their floating truk to land perfectly on engine blocks and riddle Speed Freeks with envenomed splinters, or fall backwards to go under the wheels with shattered faceplates from a well-aimed wrench.

And four more screaming flying plank-riders bore down on Ufthak.

One of them stitched a line of white-hot pain across his chest with the weapons of its ride, but Ufthak was used to pain. The spiky in question clearly thought it had already made its kill, because it swooped down with a shout of fierce joy to try to take his head off with a single blow, and instead got swatted out of the air by the Snazzhammer. The next one discovered that even an ork found it hard to miss at point-blank range, and collapsed with most of its torso missing as the shokk rifle bored a warp tunnel straight through it. The third pivoted in mid-air, causing Ufthak to miss his first swing at it, and drew back its blade.

'Shneerrrrrk!'

The last plank-rider, swooping in on its own attack run, found its board's momentum suddenly arrested by the jaws and sizeable weight of Princess jumping up to bite it. The rider's own momentum suffered no such arrest, and it was instead catapulted forward to collide with its companion just before the blow landed. Ufthak barked a laugh, then mashed both their heads with the Snazzhammer before they could sort themselves out.

'Wow, look at dis!' Nizkwik shouted, vaulting onto the skyboard Princess had hold of, and pressing things apparently at random.

'Oi!' Ufthak shouted. 'Get off--'

'AAAAaaaahhh...!'

The skyboard's motors went to full, and the entire thing took off again to corkscrew through the air with a new cargo of one terrified grot, and a squig determined not to let go of something which was apparently still putting up a fight.

'Zoggin' grots,' Ufthak groaned. 'You bring me squig back right dis minute!' he bellowed at the sky.

Nizkwik, unsurprisingly, did not immediately return. However, something did heave into view: the mid-sized spikiez skimmer Ufthak had seen before. One of the masked warriors on the back pointed its big gun at him, and Ufthak braced himself. Without his armour, this was *definitely* going to sting...

The big gun did not open fire. Instead, the gunner was dealt a swift blow around the head, and a new shape vaulted into the air. It performed a deft front flip and landed effortlessly on the rear of the truk's flatbed, despite the distance between the two vehicles and the speed at which they were both travelling.

A tall, many-pointed helm, topped with a crest of dark, flowing hair. A long crystalline blade with an ugly, sneering face worked into the hilt, and a pistol glowing with a darkness that seemed to suck light into itself. Various hooks and chains, and the flayed faces of several different species serving as decoration on its many-plated armour: including, Ufthak noticed, at least three orks.

'Da Spikiest of da Spikiez,' he muttered. 'Alright den, my lad, let's see if ya can take a hit.'

He raised the shokk rifle, and fired.

The spiky *wasn't there*.

The shokk rifle's reality-chewing blast crackled through where it had been a moment before, and took out the engine of a squig-buggy bringing up the race's rear. The spiky itself had flowed away with astonishing speed, and was now vaulting off the truck's side with its blade aimed at Ufthak's head.

Ufthak backhanded it out of the air with the fist gripping the Snazzhammer, and the Spikiest Spiky clattered onto the flatbed with, Ufthak liked to imagine, a startled expression behind its obscuring faceplate. However, when he brought the hammerhead down to crush its skull it raised its blade and glanced the blow just far enough off to one side, and vaulted up to its feet before he could try again.

When it attacked this time, it didn't try to be showy.

Ufthak instantly knew that he was in for the fight of his life, so he dropped the shokk rifle and wielded the Snazzhammer in both hands. Mork damn it, but the thing was quick! Its blade flashed out almost faster than he could see, and only instincts and reflexes allowed him to block its strikes. He jerked aside from the muzzle of its pistol and heard a *crump* as one of the truck's side panels disintegrated, then landed a blow in the midsection with the haft of the Snazzhammer and knocked it back a step, but when he activated the weapon's power field and swung the axe head at it, the spiky ducked under the blow. Ufthak's swing took out a grab rail, and he felt ice-sharp pain as his enemy's blade pierced his ribs.

He kicked out, felt his boot connect with something solid, and spun the Snazzhammer as he turned. There was a *clang* as the weapon's head knocked the crystalline blade from the spiky's grip, and Ufthak reached out to grab it by the throat to hold it still for long enough to mash its head in.

The thing about spikiez was that they *always* had another blade somewhere, and this one came up fast enough and sharp enough to take Ufthak's grabbin' hand off halfway down the forearm.

'Argh!' Ufthak yelled, recoiling involuntarily. 'Dat was me favourite ha—'

The spiky raised its blaster, levelling it directly at his face.

And Princess fell out of the sky, with the happy squealing noise of a squig that could see lunch in its immediate future. The spiky's reflexes might have been up to dodging Ufthak's gunfire, but it was not prepared for a ballistic squig which must have weighed as much as it did. Princess took its arm off at the shoulder with one bite, gun and all, leaving nothing but a ragged wound gouting dark blood.

'Whoo!' Nizkwik yelled, zooming overhead. 'Gobbo to da rescue!'

The spiky staggered. Ufthak drew back the Snazzhammer, ready to finish the job...

...and the spiky turned and leaped, recovering its balance and poise immediately despite now lacking an arm. It landed for a moment on top of the truck's roll cage, before vaulting through the air back to its transport.

'Coward!' Ufthak bellowed at it, but his insults fell on deaf ears. The Spikiest Spiky's skimmer accelerated away, swerving into the first of the gullies.

The gullies. They were getting close to the end of the race.

'Follow dat...' Ufthak yelled at Mogrot, pointing with the Snazzhammer at the skimmer, but found himself lacking in terminology. 'Wotever it is, just follow it!'

'Yoo got it, boss!' Mogrot shouted. He might excel in combat, but Mogrot Redtoof was just as happy driving something really fast.

Ufthak took a quick look around while he waited for his arm to stop bleeding. The attrition of combat had taken its toll, and there were only a handful of vehicles left now: one of the warbikes, a megatrakk scrapjet, Ufthak's truck and, still out in front, Riptoof's dragsta. For the spikiez, the plank-riders were all dead, and their floaty-bikes had bought it as well, one way or another. The skimmer-truck was still going, although it was a bit wobbly, and their boss' smaller transport was pulling away ahead. The spikiez might not have even wanted to be a part of the race any longer, but they were now walled in by the sides of the ravine, so they had little choice.

The sides of the ravine...

Ufthak scanned the upcoming terrain, searching for something that would enable him to enact the plan that had just flashed up in his mind. It was only a matter of seconds before he found it: a spur of rock jutting upwards and inwards. He took a moment to judge distances, angles and speed, his brain making connections that it never bothered with when it came to aiming gunfire, and came to his conclusion.

This was going to work. Either that, or it would fail spectacularly, which was nearly as good.

'Steer for dat!' he yelled, pointing at the spur. Mogrot obeyed, without irritating questions like 'Wot's da plan?' or 'Ain't we gonna crash?' Ufthak waited one more second, then used the butt of the Snazzhammer to hit the big red button Da Boffin had installed on the dashboard.

Now the rokkits on the back fired, roaring into life and propelling the truck forward with ludicrous acceleration. Ufthak only just managed to hook the stump of his arm around a bar to prevent himself from being knocked off his feet entirely; Mogrot, flattened in his seat with his arms outstretched holding the wheel in a death grip, just made a wordless noise of jubilation.

They hit the spur of rock.

They went *up* the spur of rock.

They flew *off* the spur of rock, and the tremendous thrust granted to them by Da Boffin's rokkits powered even the truk's impressive bulk into the air, in an almost-graceful forward arc.

However, what went up almost always came down again. In this instance the truk came down right on top of the Spikiest of Spikiez' transport, which, although it was jinking around to evade fire from a pair of dakkaguns, was in no way prepared for a ton or so of high-velocity ork machinery to drop onto it from out of the zogging sky.

CRUNCH.

The jolt was tremendous, but the truk's wheels hadn't stopped turning, and the rokkits hadn't stopped roaring: they were off and away, leaving nothing behind them except what had once been a sleek spikiez skimmer but which was now a pile of wreckage, if a pile could be flat. Ufthak stole a look back and saw the one-armed shape of the spikiez' boss, with a thick tyre track right through where its chest had been.

'Try dodgin' dat, ya git,' Ufthak growled in satisfaction. If the spiky could get up from that, then so far as Ufthak was concerned, it deserved to walk away. 'Mogrot! Shift yerself!'

Mogrot obligingly shuffled back into his original seat, and Ufthak dropped back behind the wheel. He only had the one hand now, of course, which made steering a bit trickier, but it was worth the effort for the expression on Riptoof's face as the rokkit-propelled truk powered past him down the home stretch. Ufthak waved cheerily with his stump, then wrenched on the wheel and brought the truk around just in time to avoid a rocky demise on the gully wall. One final turn, and the beginnings of the camp were looming up, with a crowd of orks eagerly awaiting the participants, and a finishing line consisting of some unlucky grots chained together.

The rokkits began to sputter and die. Ufthak didn't look back. It wouldn't do any good. He just had to hope he had enough of a lead...

Whump!

The truk's front bumper smashed into the finishing line, sending blood and small limbs flying, and prompting a massive cheer from the assembled orks. The cheer only rose in volume when the spikiez' skimmer-truk, apparently unable or unwilling to change direction, zoomed into the camp hot on the tail of Ufthak and Riptoof, and was immediately deluged in eager orks piling aboard it looking for a fight.

'UFT-HAK!'

'UFT-HAK!'

'UFT-HAK!'

Ufthak grinned as the truk rolled to a halt. Riptoof looked like a squig that hadn't been fed for a week, but that particular Speed Freek's opinion was meaningless now: the rest of the camp had seen Ufthak win the race to which he'd been challenged, and he'd brought back a quick scrap for them as a bonus.

'Mogrot,' Ufthak said contentedly. 'I fink fings are lookin' up.'

Mogrot obediently tilted his head skywards.

'Not like dat,' Ufthak sighed. 'I meant—'

'No, boss, yer right!'

Ufthak frowned, then imitated his second-in-command. For a moment he could see nothing other than the incoming thunderheads, still rolling in from the west. Then he saw them: three sleek, dark shapes, diving out of the sky towards the camp.

Flyers. Spikiez flyers, no less.

A wide grin spread across Ufthak's face.

'Gitz incomin'!' he roared, standing up on the truk's seat. 'Get da traktor kannons fired up! Mogrot! Get me armour! Nizkwik! Get *off* dat zoggin' fink, an' tell Dok Drozfang to find me a new hand! Everyone else...'

He pointed at the sky, and every ork face followed his gesture.

'Waaaagh!'

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Brooks is a science fiction and fantasy author who lives in Nottingham, UK. His work for Black Library includes the Horus Heresy Primarchs novel *Alpharius: Head of the Hydra*, the Warhammer 40,000 novels *Rites of Passage* and *Brutal Kunnin*, the Necromunda novel *Road to Redemption* and the novella *Wanted: Dead*, and various short stories.

When not writing, he plays guitar and sings in a punk band, and DJs wherever anyone will tolerate him.

AN EXTRACT FROM 'DAWN OF FIRE: AVENGING SON'

An extract from *Dawn of Fire: Avenging Son*.



'I was there at the Siege of Terra,' Vitrian Messinius would say in his later years.

'I was there...' he would add to himself, his words never meant for ears but his own. 'I was there the day the Imperium died.'

But that was yet to come.

'To the walls! To the walls! The enemy is coming!' Captain Messinius, as he was then, led his Space Marines across the Penitent's Square high up on the Lion's Gate. 'Another attack! Repel them! Send them back to the warp!'

Thousands of red-skinned monsters born of fear and sin scaled the outer ramparts, fury and murder incarnate. The mortals they faced quailed. It took the heart of a Space Marine to stand against them without fear, and the Angels of Death were in short supply.

'Another attack, move, move! To the walls!'

They came in the days after the Avenging Son returned, emerging from nothing, eight legions strong, bringing the bulk of their numbers to bear against the chief entrance to the Imperial Palace. A decapitation strike like no other, and it came perilously close to success.

Messinius' Space Marines ran to the parapet edging the Penitent's Square. On many worlds, the square would have been a plaza fit to adorn the centre of any great city. Not on Terra. On the immensity of the Lion's Gate, it was nothing, one of hundreds of similarly huge spaces. The word 'gate' did not suit the scale of the cityscape. The Lion's Gate's bulk marched up into the sky, step by titanic step, until it rose far higher than the mountains it had supplanted. The gate had been built by the Emperor Himself, they said. Myths detailed the improbable supernatural feats required to raise it. They were lies, all of them, and belittled the true effort needed to build such an edifice. Though the Lion's Gate was made to His design and by His command, the soaring monument had been constructed by mortals, with mortal hands and mortal tools. Messinius wished that had been remembered. For men to build this was far more impressive than any godly act of creation. If men could remember that, he believed, then perhaps they would remember their own strength.

The uncanny may not have built the gate, but it threatened to bring it down. Messinius looked over the rampart lip, down to the lower levels thousands of feet below and the spread of the Anterior Barbican.

Upon the stepped fortifications of the Lion's Gate was armour of every colour and the blood of every loyal primarch. Dozens of regiments stood alongside them. Aircraft filled the sky. Guns boomed from every quarter. In the churning redness on the great roads, processional ways so huge they were akin to prairies cast in rockcrete, were flashes of gold where the Emperor's Custodian Guard battled. The might of the Imperium was gathered there, in the palace where He dwelt.

There seemed moments on that day when it might not be enough.

The outer ramparts were carpeted in red bodies that writhed and heaved, obscuring the great statues adorning the defences and covering over the guns, an invasive cancer consuming reality. The enemy were legion. There were too many foes to defeat by plan and ruse. Only guns, and will, would see the day won, but the defenders were so pitifully few.

Messinius called a wordless halt, clenched fist raised, seeking the best place to deploy his mixed company, veterans all of the Ter-ran Crusade. Gunships and fighters sped overhead, unleashing deadly light and streams of bombs into the packed daemonic masses. There were innumerable cannons crammed onto the gate, and they all fired, rippling the structure with false earthquakes. Soon the many ships and orbital defences of Terra would add their guns, targeting the very world they were meant to guard, but the attack had come so suddenly; as yet they had had no time to react.

The noise was horrendous. Messinius' audio dampers were at maximum and still the roar of ordnance stung his ears. Those humans that survived today would be rendered deaf. But he would have welcomed more guns, and louder still, for all the defensive fury of the assailed palace could not drown out the hideous noise of the daemons – their sighing hisses, a billion serpents strong, and chittering, screaming wails. It was not only heard but sensed within the soul, the realms of spirit and of matter were so intertwined. Messinius' being would be forever stained by it.

Tactical information scrolled down his helmpate, near environs only. He had little strategic overview of the situation. The vox-channels were choked with a hellish screaming that made communication impossible. The noosphere was disrupted by etheric backwash spilling from the immaterial rifts the daemons poured through. Messinius was used to operating on his own. Small-scale,

surgical actions were the way of the Adeptus Astartes, but in a battle of this scale, a lack of central coordination would lead inevitably to defeat. This was not like the first Siege, where his kind had fought in Legions.

He called up a company-wide vox-cast and spoke to his warriors. They were not his Chapter-kin, but they would listen. The primarch himself had commanded that they do so.

‘Reinforce the mortals,’ he said. ‘Their morale is wavering. Position yourselves every fifty yards. Cover the whole of the south-facing front. Let them see you.’ He directed his warriors by chopping at the air with his left hand. His right, bearing an inactive power fist, hung heavily at his side. ‘Assault Squad Antiocles, back forty yards, single firing line. Prepare to engage enemy breakthroughs only on my mark. Devastators, split to demi-squads and take up high ground, sergeant and sub-squad prime’s discretion as to positioning and target. Remember our objective, heavy infliction of casualties. We kill as many as we can, we retreat, then hold at the Penitent’s Arch until further notice. Command squad, with me.’

Command squad was too grand a title for the mismatched crew Messinius had gathered around himself. His own officers were light years away, if they still lived.

‘Doveskamor, Tidominus,’ he said to the two Aurora Marines with him. ‘Take the left.’

‘Yes, captain,’ they voxed, and jogged away, their green armour glinting orange in the hell-light of the invasion.

The rest of his scratch squad was comprised of a communications specialist from the Death Spectres, an Omega Marine with a penchant for plasma weaponry, and a Raptor holding an ancient standard he’d taken from a dusty display.

‘Why did you take that, Brother Kryvesh?’ Messinius asked, as they moved forward.

‘The palace is full of such relics,’ said the Raptor. ‘It seems only right to put them to use. No one else wanted it.’

Messinius stared at him.

‘What? If the gate falls, we’ll have more to worry about than my minor indiscretion. It’ll be good for morale.’

The squads were splitting to join the standard humans. Such was the noise many of the men on the wall had not noticed their arrival, and a ripple of surprise went along the line as they appeared at their sides. Messinius was glad to see they seemed more firm when they turned their eyes back outwards.

‘Anzigus,’ he said to the Death Spectre. ‘Hold back, facilitate communication within the company. Maximum signal gain. This interference will only get worse. See if you can get us patched in to wider theatre command. I’ll take a hardline if you can find one.’

‘Yes, captain,’ said Anzigus. He bowed a helm that was bulbous with additional equipment. He already had the access flap of the bulky vox-unit on his arm open. He withdrew, the aerials on his power plant extending. He headed towards a systems nexus on the far wall of the plaza, where soaring buttresses pushed back against the immense weight bearing down upon them.

Messinius watched him go. He knew next to nothing about Anzigus. He spoke little, and when he did, his voice was funereal. His Chapter was mysterious, but the same lack of familiarity held true for many of these warriors, thrown together by miraculous events. Over their years lost wandering in the warp, Messinius had come to see some as friends as well as comrades, others he hardly knew, and none he knew so well as his own Chapter brothers. But they would stand together. They were Space Marines. They had fought by the returned primarch’s side, and in that they shared a bond. They would not stint in their duty now.

Messinius chose a spot on the wall, directing his other veterans to left and right. Kryvesh he sent to the mortal officer’s side. He looked down again, out past the enemy and over the outer palace. Spires stretched away in every direction. Smoke rose from all over the landscape. Some of it was new, the work of the daemon horde, but Terra had been burning for weeks. The Astronomican had failed. The galaxy was split in two. Behind them in the sky turned the great palace gyre, its deep eye marking out the throne room of the Emperor Himself.

‘Sir!’ A member of the Palatine Guard shouted over the din. He pointed downwards, to the left. Messinius followed his wavering finger. Three hundred feet below, daemons were climbing. They came upwards in a triangle tipped by a brute with a double rack of horns. It clambered hand over hand, far faster than should be possible, flying upwards, as if it touched the side of the towering gate only as a concession to reality. A Space Marine with claw locks could not have climbed that fast.

‘Soldiers of the Imperium! The enemy is upon us!’

He looked to the mortals. Their faces were blanched with fear. Their weapons shook. Their bravery was commendable nonetheless. Not one of them attempted to run, though a wave of terror preceded the unnatural things clambering up towards them.

‘We shall not turn away from our duty, no matter how fearful the foe, or how dire our fates may be,’ he said. ‘Behind us is the Sanctum of the Emperor Himself. As He has watched over you, now it is your turn to stand in guardianship over Him.’

The creatures were drawing closer. Through a sliding, magnified window on his display, Messinius looked into the yellow and cunning eyes of their leader. A long tongue lolled permanently from the thing’s mouth, licking at the wall, tasting the terror of the beings it protected.

Boltgun actions clicked. His men leaned over the parapet, towering over the mortals as the Lion’s Gate towered over the Ultimate Wall. A wealth of targeting data was exchanged, warrior to warrior, as each chose a unique mark. No bolt would be wasted in the opening fusillade. They could hear the creatures’ individual shrieks and growls, all wordless, but their meaning was clear: blood, blood, blood. Blood and skulls.

Messinius sneered at them. He ignited his power fist with a swift jerk. He always preferred the visceral thrill of manual activation.

Motors came to full life. Lightning crackled around it. He aimed downwards with his bolt pistol. A reticule danced over diabolical faces, each a copy of all the others. These things were not real. They were not alive. They were projections of a false god. The Librarian Atramo had named them maladies. A spiritual sickness wearing ersatz flesh.

He reminded himself to be wary. Contempt was as thick as any armour, but these things were deadly, for all their unreality.

He knew. He had fought the Neverborn many times before.

‘While He lives,’ Messinius shouted, boosting his voxmitter gain to maximal, ‘we stand!’

‘For He of Terra!’ the humans shouted, their battle cry loud enough to be heard over the booming of guns.

‘For He of Terra,’ said Messinius. ‘Fire!’ he shouted.

The Space Marines fired first. Boltguns spoke, spitting spikes of rocket flare into the foe. Bolts slammed into daemon bodies, bursting them apart. Black viscera exploded away. Black ichor showered those coming after. The daemons’ false souls screamed back whence they came, though their bones and offal tumbled down like those of any truly living foe.

Las-beams speared next, and the space between the wall top and the scaling party filled with violence. The daemons were unnaturally resilient, protected from death by the energies of the warp, and though many were felled, others weathered the fire, and clambered up still, unharmed and uncaring of their dead. Messinius no longer needed his helm’s magnification to see into the daemon champion’s eyes. It stared at him, its smile a promise of death. The terror that preceded them was replaced by the urge to violence, and that gripped them all, foe and friend. The baseline humans began to lose their discipline. A man turned and shot his comrade, and was shot down in turn. Kryvesh banged the foot of his borrowed banner and called them back into line. Elsewhere, his warriors sang; not their Chapter warsongs, but battle hymns known to all. Wavering human voices joined them. The feelings of violence abated, just enough.

Then the things were over the parapet and on them. Messinius saw Tidominus carried down by a group of daemons, his unit signum replaced by a mortis rune in his helm. The enemy champion was racing at him. Messinius emptied his bolt pistol into its face, blowing half of it away into a fine mist of daemonichor. Still it leapt, hurling itself twenty feet over the parapet. Messinius fell back, keeping the creature in sight, targeting skating over his helmpate as the machine-spirit tried to maintain a target lock. Threat indicators trilled, shifting up their priority spectrum.

The daemon held up its enormous gnarled hands. Smoke whirled in the space between, coalescing into a two-handed sword almost as tall as Messinius. By the time its hoofed feet cracked the paving slabs of the square, the creature’s weapon was solid. Vapour streaming from its ruined face, it pointed the broadsword at Messinius and hissed a wordless challenge.

‘Accepted,’ said Messinius, and moved in to attack.

The creature was fast, and punishingly strong. Messinius parried its first strike with an outward push of his palm, fingers spread. Energy crackled. The boom generated by the meeting of human technology and the sorceries of the warp was loud enough to out-compete the guns, but though the impact sent pain lancing up Messinius’ arm, the daemon was not staggered, and pressed in a follow-up attack, swinging the massive sword around its head as if it weighed nothing.

Messinius countered more aggressively this time, punching in to the strike. Another thunderous detonation. Disruption fields shattered matter, but the daemon was not wholly real, and the effect upon it was lesser than it would be upon a natural foe. Nevertheless, this time it was thrown backwards by the blow. Smoke poured from the edge of its blade. It licked black blood from its arm and snarled. Messinius was ready when it leapt: opening his fist, ignoring the sword as it clashed against his pauldron and sheared off a peeling of ceramite, he grabbed the beast about its middle.

The Bloodletters of Khorne were rangy things, all bone and ropey muscle, no space within them for organs. The false god of war had no need for them to eat or breathe, or to give the semblance of being able to do so. They were made only to kill, and to strike fear in the hearts of those they faced. Their waists were solid, and slender, and easily encompassed by Messinius’ power fist. It squirmed in his grip, throwing Messinius’ arm about. Servo motors in his joints locked, supplementary muscle fibres strained, but the White Consul stood firm.

‘Tell your master he is not welcome on Terra,’ he said. His words were calm, a deliberate defiance of the waves of rage pulsing off the daemon.

He closed his hand.

The daemon’s midriff exploded. The top half fell down, still hissing and thrashing. Its sword clanged off the paving and broke into shards, brittle now it was separated from its wielder. They were pieces of the same thing, sword and beast. Apart, the weapon could not survive long.

Messinius cast down the lower portion of the daemon. There were dozens of the things atop the wall, battling with his warriors and the human soldiery. In the second he paused he saw Doveskamor hacked down as he stood over the body of his brother, pieces of armour bouncing across the ground. He saw a group of Palatine Sentinels corner a daemon with their bayonets. He saw a dozen humans cut down by eldritch swords.

Where the humans kept their distance, their ranged weapons took a toll upon the Neverborn. Where the daemons got among them, they triumphed more often than not, even against his Space Marines. Support fire rained down sporadically from above, its usefulness restricted by the difficulty of picking targets from the swirling melee. At the western edge of the line, the heavy weapons were

more telling, knocking daemons off the wall before they crested the parapet and preventing them from circling around the back of the Imperial forces. Only his equipment allowed Messinius to see this. Without the helm feeds of his warriors and the limited access he had to the Lion Gate's auspectoria, he would have been blind, lost in the immediate clash of arms and sprays of blood. He would have remained where he was, fighting. He would not have seen that there were more groups of daemons pouring upwards. He would not have given his order, and then he would have died.

'Squad Antiocles, engage,' he said. He smashed a charging daemon into fragments, yanked another back the instant before it gutted a mortal soldier, and stamped its skull flat, while switching again to his company vox-net. 'All units, fall back to the Penitent's Arch. Take the mortals with you.'

His assault squad fell from the sky on burning jets, kicking daemons down and shooting them with their plasma and bolt pistols. A roar of promethium from a flamer blasted three bloodletters to ash.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius commanded, his words beating time with his blows. 'Assault Squad Antiocles to cover. Devastators maintain overhead fire.'

Squad Antiocles drove the enemy back. Tactical Space Marines were retreating from the parapet, dragging human soldiers with them. An Ultramarine walked backwards past him, firing his bolter one-handed, a wounded member of the Palatine Guard draped over his right shoulder.

'Fall back! Fall back!' Messinius roared. He grabbed a human by the arm and yanked him hard away from the monster trying to slay him, almost throwing him across the square. He pivoted and punched, slamming the man's opponent in the face with a crackling bang that catapulted its broken corpse over the wall edge. 'Fall back!'

Mortal soldiers broke and ran while Squad Antiocles held off the foe. Telling to begin with, in moments the assault squad's momentum was broken, and again more bloodletters were leaping over the edge of the rampart. The Space Marines fired in retreat, covering each other in pairs as they crossed the square diagonally to the Penitent's Arch. The mortals were getting the idea, running between the Adeptus Astartes and mostly staying out of their fire corridor. With the fight now concentrated around Squad Antiocles, the Devastators were more effective, blasting down the daemons before they could bring their weight of numbers to bear upon Antiocles. Sporadic bursts of fire from the retreating Tactical Marines added to the effect, and for a short period the number of daemons entering the square did not increase.

Messinius tarried a moment, rounding up more of the humans who were either too embattled or deaf to his orders to get out. He reached three still firing over the parapet's edge and pulled them away. A daemon reared over the parapet and he crushed its skull, but a second leapt up and cleaved hard into his fist, and power fled the weapon. Messinius pumped three bolts into its neck, decapitating it. He moved back.

His power fist was ruined. The daemon's cut had sliced right through the ceramite, breaking the power field generator and most of the weapon's strength-boosting apparatus, making it a dead weight. He said a quick thanks to the machine's departed spirit and smashed the top of his bolt pistol against the quick seal release, at the same time disengaging the power feeds by way of neural link. The clamps holding the power fist to his upper arm came loose and it slid to the floor with a clang, leaving his right arm clad in his standard ceramite gauntlet. A century together. A fine weapon. He had no time to mourn it.

'Fall back!' he shouted. 'Fall back to the Penitent's Arch!'

He slammed a fresh clip into his bolt pistol. Squad Antiocles were being pushed back. The Devastators walked their fire closer in to the combat. A heavy bolter blasted half a dozen daemons into stinking meat. A missile blew, lifting more into the air. Messinius fell back himself now, leaving it to the last moment before ordering the Assault Marines to leap from the fray. Their jets ignited, driving back the daemons with washes of flame, and they lifted up over his head, leaving four of their brothers dead on the ground. Devastator fire hammered down from above. Anti-personnel weapons set into casemates and swivel turrets on the walls joined in, but the daemons mounted higher and higher in a wave of red that flooded over the parapet.

'Run!' he shouted at the stragglers of human soldiery. 'Run and survive! Your service is not yet done!'

The Penitent's Arch led from the square onto a wall walk that curved around to another layer of defences. His Space Marines were already making a firing line across the entrance. A gate could be extended across the arch, sealing the walk from the square, but Messinius refrained from requesting it be closed, as the humans were still streaming past the Adeptus Astartes. Kryvesh waved the banner, whirling it through the air to attract the terrified mortals. The Space Marines fired constantly into the mass of daemons sprinting after them, exhausting their ammunition supplies. Shattered false bodies tumbled down, shot from the front and above, yet still they came, overtaking and dismembering the last warriors fleeing away from the parapet.

Squad Antiocles roared through the arch, landing behind their brethren. Messinius passed between them. For a moment he surveyed the tide of coming fury. Endless red-skinned monsters filling the square like a lake of spilled blood, washing over a score of brightly armoured Space Marine corpses left behind in the retreat. Several hundred humans lay alongside them.

He opened a vox-channel to Gate Command.

'Wall batteries three-seven-three through three-seven-six, target sector nine five eighty-three, Penitent's Square, western edge. Five-minute bombardment.'

'On whose order?'

‘Captain Vitrian Messinius, White Consuls Chapter, Tenth Company. I have the primarch’s authority.’ As he dealt with gunnery control, he was also datapulsing a request for resupply, and checking through layered data screeds.

‘Voice print and signum ident match. Transponder codes valid. We obey.’

The far side of the square erupted in a wall of flame. Heavy cannon shells detonated in a string along the rampart. High-energy beams sliced into the square, turning stone and metal instantly to superheated gas. The approaching daemons were annihilated. A few bolt-rounds cracked off as the last daemons nearing the Space Marine line were put down.

‘Company, cease fire. Conserve ammunition.’ Nobody heard him. Nobody could. He re-sent the order via vox-script. The bolt-guns cut out.

Penitent’s Square was a cauldron of fire so intense he could feel the heat through his battleplate’s ceramite. The ground shook under his feet and he considered the possibility that the wall would give way. The noise was so all-consuming the idea of speech lost relevance. For five minutes the Lion’s Gate tore madly at its own hide, ripping out chunks of itself in a bid to scrape free the parasites infesting its fabric, then, as suddenly as it had begun, the bombardment ceased.

Where the Penitent’s Square had been, a twisted mass of black metal and shattered stone remained. So formidable were the defences of the Lion’s Gate that the structure beneath had not been penetrated, but it was like this, in small bursts of destruction, that they could lose this war.

Messinius accessed the gate’s noosphere. No daemons had as yet rounded the projecting Penitent’s Spur to come up against their new position. When the attack came again, which it would, it would come from the front.

An ammunition train raced down the walkway from the fortress interior and came to a squealing stop fifty yards away. Medicae personnel jumped down. A Space Marine Apothecary came with them. Human peons rushed about with heavy sack bags full of bolter magazines, passing them out to the transhumans. Spent magazines clattered to the floor. New ones were slammed home. Messinius contacted his squad leaders, taking a quick census of his surviving men, not trusting the digits that read ‘Company Casualties 23%’ blinking in the upper right of his visual field.

Through the smoke given off by burning metal on the far side of the ruined square, he saw movement. Auspex returns tripped his armour’s machine-spirit, and it blinked warnings in his helm.

<THREAT DETECTED.>

‘They’re coming again,’ he said.

‘My lord?’ A soft voice, one that did not belong in that moment. He ignored it.

‘Engage at fifty-yard range. Make every shot count.’

The ammunition train was hurriedly relieved of their allotted supplies, and sped off, bearing the worst-wounded, to aid whichever beleaguered unit needed it next.

‘Stand ready.’

‘My lord?’ The voice became more insistent.

The voidships in orbit were beginning to fire. Their targeting systems were perturbed by the boiling warp energy and the vortex in constant motion over the Imperial Palace, and many shots went wide, crashing down into the Anterior Barbican, a few falling as far out as Magnifican.

Red monsters bounded towards them, as numerous as before, as if their efforts to thin them had been for naught.

‘Fire,’ he said coldly.

‘My lord, your duty rotation begins in half an hour. You told me to wake you.’

This time he heard. Bolters boomed. Messinius froze them with a thought, and with another he shut down the hypnomat entirely.

Vitrian Messinius awoke groggily.

‘My lord,’ his servant said. Selwin, he was called. ‘You are returned from your recollections?’

‘I am awake, Selwin, yes,’ Messinius said irritably. His mouth was dry. He wanted to be left alone.

‘Shall I?’ Selwin gestured to the hypnomat.

Messinius nodded and rubbed his face. It felt numb. Selwin flicked a number of toggles on the hypnomat and it powered down, the steady glow of its innards fading to nothing and winking out, taking the immediacy of Messinius’ memories with it.

‘The wall again?’ Selwin asked.

The hypnomat’s primary use was to instil knowledge without active learning on the subject’s part, but it could reawaken memories to be lived again. Full immersion in the hypnomat required cooperation from Messinius’ catalepsean node, and coming out of the half-sleep was never as easy as true waking. Reliving past events dulled his wits. Messinius reminded himself to be guarded. He forgot sometimes that he was not on Sabatine any more. The local saying ‘This is Terra’ encompassed a multitude of sins. Spying was among them.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Personal debriefing.’ He shook his head and unplugged the hypnomat’s input cables from the neural ports set into his arms and neck. ‘Nothing new learned.’

Selwin nodded, then hesitantly said, ‘If I may be so bold as to ask, why do it, my lord, if you expect to learn nothing?’

‘Because I can always be wrong,’ Messinius said. He pointed at the hypnomat. It was a bulky machine set on a trolley, but not too big for an unaltered man to move. ‘Take that away. Inform my armourer I will be with him in a few minutes.’

Selwin bowed. ‘Already done, my lord.’

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