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BOSSGROT

ERIC GREGORY

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BOSSGROT

by Eric Gregory

‘It’s the wrong way, innit?’

Gribblak opened the visor of his helm and squinted through the rain to survey the valley. His skrap was an avalanche before him, but it was falling in the wrong direction, falling *back*, a tide of grots and squigs and troggoths crashing towards Gribblak and the safety of the foothills.

His cave-shaman, Oghlott, fidgeted. ‘They’s leggin’ it, boss.’

‘I en’t told ’em to leg it.’

‘All respect,’ Oghlott said, ‘they’s bein’ chopped to bits.’

Gribblak’s visor creaked down over his eyes again. He left it down this time, stared at his shaman through the eye-slits. Oghlott was a keen enough shaman, but given to glumness. Now and then he needed some conviction slapped into him. Gribblak smacked the other grot’s back.

‘That’s rot. They’s just got to shape up.’ He cupped his hand around the grille of his helm and shouted, ‘Go back, you half-gitz! Shape up and go back!’

The dusk light was muted behind the clouds, and the freezing rain was picking up, turning to sleet. Out of the roiling clash bounded a clump of squig-riders, the grots clinging to their panicked mounts. Squig-breath fogged the air, and the beasts crashed through the outlying yurts of the enemy encampment like red fists pounding muddy slush.

That looked mighty fine to Gribblak. Smashing the camp, driving the roving ’umies away from King Skragrott’s territories – it was the whole point of this raid on the valley nomads. These weren’t even the cleverest ’umies. A bunch of blood worshippers, by the look of their banners. Fools enough to worship the mess inside ’emselves; fools who had wandered too far into Skragrott’s claim.

So why was Gribblak’s skrap running away?

He glanced aside at Oghlott. The shaman clutched his robes tight against his body, anxious or cold or both. Braids of roots and cave-fungi swayed from his neck as he shivered. Maybe...

‘Give us a Dincap,’ said Gribblak.

Oghlott’s frown deepened. ‘Why–?’

Gribblak snatched a deep purple mushroom from the braid around the shaman’s neck, opened his visor and swallowed the fungus whole. The moment the flesh of the Dincap touched saliva, it began to vibrate.

His throat thrummed and his guts shook as he swallowed the mushroom in a gulp.

Being a boss was about words. Anyone could see that. The boss-gods of the realms – the bloated pus-bag gods and big rat gods and shiny gold git gods – you didn't see them out here scrapping. You didn't see them at all. They were stories. They were words in the heads of their warriors.

The big bosses knew how to put the right words in the heads of their mobs, and that was why they won. That was Gribblak's way, too, and it had got him this far: boss of Gobbolog Skrap.

And it was going to take him further. Maybe Gorkamorka had taken a bite out of the Bad Moon, but Gribblak was going to eat the whole thing.

He was going to be the boss of gods.

'OY!' he shouted, and his voice reverberated down the valley. The Dincap's vibration in his stomach and chest and throat gave him the voice of a hundred grots, the voice of a riot.

'OY!' he shouted. 'LOOK 'ERE.'

In the muddy, rain-lashed valley below, the stampede of his skrap slowed. The eyes of his grots turned up to him; even the cave-squigs hesitated and turned around, confused. Now that the fighting slowed and Gribblak commanded the attention of the valley, he could see that the 'umie nomads looked up to him, too, clad in their crimson armour and furs, axes and butchers' knives in their hands. A thrill of pleasure ran across his scalp.

Look at 'em all, looking at me!

Gribblak imagined how he must have appeared to these common grots and 'umies, his lunar helm gazing down like the Bad Moon itself. Proper majestic.

'YOU LOT,' he thundered. 'SHAPE UP AND SHOW 'EM WHO'S BOSS!'

The grots of the skrap looked back and forth amongst one another. Now Gribblak raised an angry finger towards the enemy line.

'AND *YOU*. COWARDS! SEND YOUR BEST AND I'LL GIVE 'IM A POINTY ENDING.'

The entire valley seemed to hesitate as Gribblak's words echoed. The sleet drummed against his armour, and satisfaction welled in his chest.

This was how you did it. This was how fights were won. You didn't need to go down in the mud and actually stab an 'umie. Inspire your skrap, goad the other side, and watch the show – that's how gods did their business.

And then it stormed out of the fog of dirt and snow and flesh: the 'umie blood-boss.

It *had* to be the boss. Its armour was stained the colour of sunsets, and steam rose where the rain fell on its skin. It rode a beast like nothing Gribblak had ever seen, metal and sinew clenched around hellfire; the eyes blazed, and slag-spittle dripped from the jaws. The warboss' axehead burned, too, an otherworldly crimson borne aloft like a torch. A wreath of skulls hung around its neck.

The 'umie clutched a wriggling grot by the waist – a fanatic still gripping his ball and chain. The blood-boss raised the grot to its mouth and tore his head from his neck, then hurled the limp body aside and emitted a garbled, throaty scream.

The hooves of the beast burned the ground where they fell. The blood-boss crashed through the skrap's already tattered line and made straight for Gribblak.

'*Leg it,*' he squeaked, and his tinny alarm echoed across the valley. 'LEG IT!'

The blood-boss stormed past a troggoth, and the troggoth's arm – still wielding a stalactite plucked from an old lurklair – whirled into the air. Squigs scattered from the front lines, screeching their distress and bounding into the hills. And the sleet turned to hail.

Gribblak ran. He was already unsteady, breathing hard inside his helm as the ponderous thing

bobbed with every step, but now he was slipping in the mud, and pellets of ice threatened to knock him flat. ‘Oh please oh please oh please,’ he panted, and his own voice thundered all around him, ‘OH PLEASE OH PLEASE OH PLEASE–’

The cave mouth was close. From his perch in the crags of the foothills, he could wriggle into the damp, dark safety of his caverns. Squeeze his way into a narrow passage where no fire-eyed ’umie monstrosity could follow.

But the blood-boss was quick, and Gribblak couldn’t turn his head to see how close it was. He couldn’t see much of anything, ahead or behind. He was almost to the cave mouth, wasn’t he? He tried to blink away sweat and sleet. The ground was shaking, or he was – then something *massive* slammed him in the back and he went skidding through the mud.

‘*Please*,’ he screeched. ‘I en’t boss of ’em! Don’t kill me! I en’t bossgrot!’

And his throat vibrated, and his helm thrummed, and the words sounded all through the quicksilver valleys in the northern reaches of King Skragrott’s claim:

‘PLEASE! I EN’T BOSS OF ’EM! DON’T KILL ME! I EN’T BOSSGROT!’

He hardly knew he was talking, at first, he was so lost in his terror. He wanted to move, to run, but he was frozen where he lay. Was he dead? The rain drummed on his armour. He heard his own words playing around him, his own begging, and another voice, too.

‘Shut up!’ said the voice. ‘Just a squig.’

Gribblak looked up at his cave-shaman. Grimacing down at him, Oghlott gripped his arm and hauled him upright. ‘Up,’ he hissed. ‘Shut up and run, go!’

He ran. And as he scrambled towards the cave mouth, an echo of his begging chased him:

‘I EN’T BOSSGROT, I EN’T BOSSGROT, I EN’T BOSSGROT...’

A lot of bosses liked to boast that they’d never taken a shanking, but that wasn’t Gribblak’s way. You had to reckon your losses, he said, in order to know who to blame.

Once the shakes had died down and he felt fit to hold court in his Reckonin’ Room, Gribblak set his Gobbapalooza to work up a ledger of the damage. Oghlott recited the totals:

A full two dozen fanatics. A contingent of snufflers. Seventeen squig hoppers, and most of the squigs. Two Dankhold troggoths. One gargant named Hurg. A coterie of stabbas that no one actually remembered joining the skrap, but whose remains were present and who had definitely themselves suffered a stabbing.

‘And,’ Oghlott finished, ‘morale.’

The boss and his counsellors sat around the fossilised toadstool that served as a round table. Luminescent mould lit the lair a sickly blue.

‘Who?’ Gribblak asked.

Oghlott hesitated. ‘Wot?’

‘The last one. Whoizzit? Mor–’

‘Mor-*ale*.’ Oghlott pursed his lips. ‘The fightin’ feelin’ in the mob.’

Gribblak frowned and rubbed his eyes. ‘Is these the gitz I got to hold Skragrott’s claim?’ he asked no one in particular.

Several of the Gobbapalooza – his shroomancer and scaremonger and boggleye – exchanged glances. Hazzlegob, the scaremonger, munched absently on what looked like a small bat’s wing. He stuffed the wing through the mouth-hole in his Glareface mask, which was painted to make him look

like the primal enemy of all grots: the great burning face in the sky, bright-death incarnate, Glareface Frazzlegit.

‘I got to show the Loonking I’m *keen*,’ said Gribblak. ‘Show ’im I got this skrap in hand. But they got no stick-it-to-it, do they?’

‘No stick-it-to-it,’ repeated Hazzlegob glumly. He was the only one who answered, but he didn’t seem entirely attentive.

Gribblak had tried to be a good boss, a kind boss. A lot of grots wanted to rule with an iron claw, to command fear and timid obedience, but that wasn’t Gribblak’s way. If you lived on your skrap’s fear, you’d lose everything the second someone scared ’em more. What you wanted, what you *really* wanted, was unqualified adoration. Or failing that, some grudging respect. Gribblak thought he’d done right and proper by his mob – he gave ’em a place in the deep and dark, let ’em carouse a bit in between raids...

But maybe he’d gone too easy on ’em. Let ’em get soft. Some of these young grots hadn’t seen real scrapping since they were wee spores, and perhaps not even then. The moment they hit a band of blood-drunk ’umie daemon-worshippers, they turned tail and ran.

‘We got to get ’em fit and fighty,’ said Gribblak. ‘If you fall off the squig, you got to get right up, stab it in the eye and show it who’s in charge. We got to throw ’em back in a fight.’

Oghlott the cave-shaman glanced across the table at the members of the Gobbapalooza. ‘Once we heal up, build the mob back up a bit–’

‘I en’t talkin’ later. I’m talkin’ now.’

The chamber was quiet. The glowy moulds flickered.

‘Now,’ said Oghlott.

Gribblak smiled. He expected his counsellors were feeling pretty awestruck by his boldness of vision.

‘It’s got to be now. Give ’em a win ’fore they got time to get all mopey ’bout tonight. And ’fore Skragrott gets wind we took a shanking, starts to think we’s less than keen.’

‘When,’ said Oghlott carefully, ‘is *now*? And what fight do we got to throw ’em into?’

Gribblak felt such a surge of pride in his new plan that he spread his arms in a flourish of revelation.

‘Tonight! The Glinty Crown!’

King Skragrott’s territories had steadily expanded since his founding of the loon-city Skrappa Spill and the vast outlying network of lurklairs in the Yhorn Mountains. But in the northerly reaches, his Gloomspite hordes had hit a snag.

On the peak of Mount Pizmahr: a fortress hammered into an iron mountain of Chamon. Mob after mob and skrap after skrap had laid siege to the fastness, and each had been repelled. Not just repelled, but decimated. The fortress was cold and silent and flew no banners – no grot knew who held it, or why. But whenever a skrap approached, the massive cannons on the ramparts thundered, and even the finest mobs were broken.

A great Glinty Crown on the peak of Pizmahr, its cannons winking a taunt in the light of day. And a prize that the King of Grots hadn’t yet added to his pile.

If he could give Skragrott the Crown, any little missteps or embarrassments would be forgiven, forgotten. Surely he’d ascend to the ranks of the king’s most favoured generals alongside the likes of Izgit or Warrblag. The skrap would get its pep back – everyone would win!

‘No,’ whispered Oghlott.

The cave-shaman usually had a downcast look to him: tired or dour. But his demeanour was changed now. He met Gribblak's gaze, and his tone was resolute. Some decision seemed to have worked itself out behind his eyes.

Gribblak blinked. 'Wot?'

'No,' Oghlott repeated, more firmly this time.

'You en't allowed to say no,' said Gribblak, more puzzled than angry.

'I's sayin' no. The skrap'll riot. You try to send 'em on some death-wish blunder 'fore the moon has set on the *last* rout, these gitz'll tear you limb from limb and eat your tongue to shut you up. They'll rip us *all* up just to be safe.'

The moulds on the wall brightened, as if in response to Oghlott's raised voice. Gribblak sat back on his toadstool stump, aghast.

'They'd never. They adore me. Even the meanest gitz got some grudgin'—'

'They do *not* got some grudgin' respect for you,' Oghlott spat. 'Not before, and sure as Gork's fist not now. Not after the raid on the Corroded Hills, not after that awful sortie with the stunties and the time we lost a lair to some tree-aelves. Not after you ran squealing from the 'umies where any git could hear...'

The memory floated up out of his guts unbidden: *Please! I en't boss of 'em! Don't kill me! I en't boss-grot!*

He shook his head to dislodge the words. The valley had been noisy. No one had paid him any mind.

'Stop talkin' rot,' he said. 'This skrap is mine. I built 'em up with my own hands. I know what's best for 'em, and they *know* I know what's best for 'em.' He stood up. 'You lucky I don't shank you.'

Oghlott looked to the assembled Gobbapalooza, and all save for Hazzlegob – who had fallen asleep – nodded their support.

'We's all tried to do our jobs,' said Oghlott. 'But if we got to stop you to do right by the Loonking and the skrap, that's what we goin' to do.'

His counsellors stared at him, unified and obstinate. The mould-light flickered again, and each of their eyes glowed red in the dark.

Gribblak had been afraid of a great many things in his day, but never his own Gobbapalooza. None of them were very fighty taken alone, but together they commanded an awful brew of shroomspells and hallucinations and danksome magics. He backed out of the Reckonin' Room slowly.

'*You en't boss,*' Gribblak hissed. 'Y'hear me? By sun-up you'll see. I'll take the Glinty Crown and this skrap'll call me boss-grot and cheer. Mark my words. By sun-up.'

And with that, he turned and ran from his own skrap.

He needed a disguise.

In battle – or *near* battle – Gribblak was unmistakable. The plates of his prized boss-armour were layered with growths of war-fungi, and the bright yellow lunar helm put him a head above the other grots. The get-up always made him feel a bit more like a boss: he stood tall and heavy and looked out from behind the face of the Bad Moon itself.

But the armour was also a bit of a pain. The helm was cramped and unsteady, and its visor wouldn't stay up. The vambraces were sufficiently heavy that he had to grunt and strain to raise his arm and point at stuff, especially as a battle wore on. And while the crop of mushrooms growing across his armour were appealingly colourful and helped clear his head for wily tactical calculation, they also

smelled like the troggoth dung in which they had been cultivated.

When the skrap was at ease in their lurklair, Gribblak wore a different sort of dress: robes and sashes of the finest make a grot could get, dyed the colours of squig-skins and glow-moulds. Around his neck he wore the fangs of Chamonite ore-beasts bigger than gargants.

So he was always unmistakable.

Gribblak hurried away from the Reckonin' Room and through the windy lurklair passages that led to the common grot-holes. Puke pooled on the ground, and the leftover parts of half-eaten cave wyrms were strewn about everywhere, as if they'd been hurled at the cavern walls. The stench of both mixed with spilled brew.

Gribblak knew the skrap got rowdy, but this was ridiculous.

At his feet he found a grot passed out with his arms wrapped around a stalagmite, his black Moonclan robes splayed around him.

Aha, Gribblak thought.

With his new, pilfered hood pulled low over his eyes, Gribblak made his way through the tunnels of the lurklair and into the Ruckus Pit. The gitz had spent an inordinate amount of time equipping the chamber with massive kegs built into the walls. Everywhere, stalagmites were festooned with shroom-chains. Glowing spore-dust drifted through the air, giving off a faint light. Teeth and chunks of bone fashioned into dice littered the ground; the stench of bodily waste was thicker, and grots were passed out here and there in heaps.

Ordinarily, the noise of the Ruckus Pit echoed through the lurklair at all hours. But the mood was subdued now – a low music of mutters punctuated by the occasional bitter laugh.

If Gribblak knew one thing for certain, it was that his skrap adored – or grudgingly respected – him. And though he couldn't fathom why Oghlott and his band of back-stabbers would believe otherwise, he was going to have a mighty fine time showing them just how loyal his gitz could be.

In disguise, Gribblak would walk among his ordinary grots. He would speak with them of their hopes and dreams and plant the rumours of a glorious plot soon to unfold at the hands of their boss. Then, when the ground was prepared and the time was right, he would reveal himself as Gribblak and announce, with maximum drama, the siege of the Glinty Grown.

He couldn't wait to see the look on Oghlott's face.

Doing his best to walk like a common grot, Gribblak approached a cluster of gitz gathered in a circle. It looked like they were playing some dice-chucking game. As he came closer, he could make out fragments of the grumbled conversation.

'–fine and good but *I'd* pull out his tendons, to start.'

'Tendons. Mm.'

No one paid Gribblak much mind as he joined the circle. The dice-chucking game, he found, wasn't quite a game. Instead, the grots were trying to prod two runty squigs into a fight by half-heartedly throwing bone-dice at them.

A lot of bosses liked to mix with the common grots when they weren't fighting – have a few mouldroot brews, act like a regular git – but that wasn't Gribblak's way. You could pretend all you liked, but the fact was your leaders had one job, and your front-line grots had another. Maybe you could buy cheap affection with a shared drink, but a proper boss cultivated real love, real power, real command, all by drawing lines. Gribblak knew he was right about that – it was all the proper gods' way – but it meant he hadn't spent much time talking to his mob.

‘Howzit ’ere?’ Gribblak asked. He tried to sound like his idea of a common grot, and a little inebriated. ‘You’s drinkin’ anyfink good?’

No one answered for a while. The smallest grot fidgeted with an emblem of the Bad Moon. ‘Just the swill wot’s left,’ he said. He looked up at his friends and resumed the previous conversation. ‘I ’spect *I’d* work up a kinda grinder for ’im. Put ’im through nice and slow, turn ’im into a kinda paste.’

A grot with one eye nodded approvingly. ‘Nice one, Vork. We oughta put you in charge.’

‘I heard a rumour,’ Gribblak broke in, ‘dat da boss has some kinda proper plan to put Gobbolog Skrap on top. Right where we’s belong, eh?’

The one-eyed grot paused mid-throw, narrowed his remaining eye. ‘Aye. Right where we belong. What’s your name?’

Gribblak hesitated. ‘Hob... blangle,’ he said. ‘Hobblangle.’

Vork grunted. The one-eyed grot threw his dice, caught one of the tiny squigs on the head. It squealed and flopped into the other animal, but they didn’t seem to want to fight. ‘I’d like to hear what the boss’ll have us do now, then.’

‘Well,’ Gribblak said, ‘I ’ear he’s keen to take a *big* prize. Maybe even da Glinty Crown.’

‘I’ll bet ’e is,’ snorted Vork.

‘Reckon ’e aims to give us a win. Show us we’s a sharp lot of–’

‘You boys remember,’ Vork interrupted, ‘when we lost a lair to those *trees*? Trees in a cave. I never.’

The others laughed darkly.

‘We get shanked,’ Vork sighed. ‘Over’n over, we get shanked.’ He shook his head and threw his Bad Moon emblem at the larger of the runt squigs. The medal smashed the beastie’s head and left a luminescent pink goop on the cavern floor.

‘Aw, c’mon, Vork,’ someone said.

Gribblak tried not to let his consternation show. With this group of grots, at least, he was going to have to be a little more inspirational than he’d anticipated.

‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘wot you’s hopes’n dreams are – for after we take the Glinty Crown?’

‘Y’know,’ said the one-eyed grot, ‘we was just talkin’ through that. Rankar here was thinkin’ we oughta tie the boss’ arms and legs to four squigs and send ’em all running to the four winds. And I like that for a dream, but I’m really intrigued by Vork’s put-’im-through-a-grinder idea.’ The one-eyed grot stared at Gribblak, his eye unblinking. ‘You?’

Gribblak shivered. ‘I want a drink,’ he said quietly.

Vork grinned. ‘I’ll bet.’

Trying not to look too out of sorts, Gribblak backed away from the circle and hurried deeper into the Ruckus Pit, pulling his hood further over his head.

His thoughts wheeled like he’d eaten a bad toadstool. That was proper seditious talk from the dice-throwers. But it was just six gitz, right? Six gitz didn’t make a skrap. And these front-line grots were notoriously unreliable. You had to watch ’em every second.

In the farthest corner of the Ruckus Pit, where it was darkest and most danksome – and where the largest keg stood – Gribblak spotted his top boulder trio, known in the skrap as the Squigwind. Between the three of them, they’d been riding for six seasons, which was a prodigious and frankly improbable amount of time for anything to survive mounting a squig. The Squigwind was held in awe by the rest of the skrap – given all the best grub, the best grot-holes, the best trophies (though it had been some time since the skrap had occasion to take trophies). They were exactly the sort of voices

Gribblak wanted to hear, and wanted to speak for him. Respected. Influential. With the Squigwind behind him, the rest of the skrap was sure to fall in line and march on the Glinty Crown.

The trio sat along the spine of some long-dead subterranean beastie. The nominal leader, Ralgog, smoked an elaborate pipe of stunty make and stared at nothing, while the spore-twins Habblegrob and Grobblehab played a pilfered snare drum and lyre, or at least thwacked the instruments at intervals. The thwack-song was slow and disjointed and unpleasant to the ear, but – perhaps on account of the musicians’ status in the skrap – no one complained.

‘Oi!’ Gribblak called, waving to the Squigwind. ‘Howzit ’ere, bounderz?’

Ralgog didn’t look at him. ‘Zog off.’

It had been a good long while since anyone had told Gribblak to zog off from anywhere. For a moment, he was speechless.

‘I got – I mean, a rumour’s goin’ round y’ might want to hear,’ he managed.

The bounder Grobblehab slapped a discordant twang of irritation from his lyre and threw it to the ground in anger. ‘They said *zog off*, didn’t they?’

‘Now you stopped Grobblehab playin’,’ Ralgog growled.

‘I–’ Gribblak started.

‘*I want to hear the music*,’ Ralgog spat. ‘Go away. Or I’ll gut you.’

It was as though something in the air had gone rank and thick and bitter, and every grot Gribblak talked to had breathed it in. But that only made his plan more important. He resolved to stand firm.

‘Rumour is,’ he pressed, ‘boss is goin’ to lead us on a siege of the Glinty Crown ’fore sun-up.’

‘Ahh. I see what’s goin’ on here.’

Gribblak froze. ‘You do?’

Ralgog waved away Gribblak’s rumours like a faint odour. ‘Don’t y’worry, little grot. He tries anything that stupid, we’ll feed ’im to the squigs.’

‘I ’spect we’ll feed ’im to the squigs anyway,’ Habblegrob added in sing-song, banging the drum to each syllable of *an-y-way*.

‘It’s past time,’ Grobblehab agreed.

Somewhere in Gribblak’s head, a voice was beginning to scream, and he wasn’t sure he would be able to shut it up. He could feel the shakes starting up again, and he was desperate not to let that show – inside his robes, he gripped his own wrists and tried to hold himself together. The Squigwind was just a bunch of big-headed gitz with mouths full of rot, he told himself. Their pride was bruised; they didn’t mean what they said.

‘You en’t really goin’ to feed ’im to the squigs, though,’ he said quietly. ‘You wouldn’t. He’s the boss.’

There wasn’t a chance for the Squigwind trio to respond. Into the Ruckus Pit marched a grumbling, clattering, stomach-turning procession. Flanked by two Dankhold troggoths – one missing an arm – and their attendant trogg-herders, Oghlott and the Gobbapalooza entered the chamber, banging a piece of scrap metal like a bell.

‘OI!’ Oghlott shouted, Dincap-amplified. ‘NOW HEAR THIS. GRIBBLAK WANTS TO MAKE US FIGHT AGAIN TONIGHT. HE WANTS TO SEND US TO THE GLINTY CROWN TO DIE. BUT WE EN’T GONNA STAND FOR IT. WHO ’ERE THINKS ’IS TIME IS UP?’

The grots in the Ruckus Pit roared their approval.

‘Grind ’im up!’ shouted Vork.

‘Let’s feed ’im to the squigs!’ called Ralgog.

Gribblak couldn’t stop the shakes now. His whole body trembled; his hands shuddered in his robes. The screaming voice in his head made it hard to think straight. *This skrap is mine. I built ’em up with my own hands.* Were the words in his head, or was it his own voice screaming?

Gribblak hurried towards the lurklair tunnels farthest from his back-stabbing cave-shaman, and for the second time that night, he fled from the grots he was meant to command. And all the while a voice screeched, *You’ll see, I’ll show you, you’ll see.*

Frantic, hands shaking, he tried to strap the vambraces to his wrists. Latch the greaves. Usually he had someone to help him with his armour, and these irksome echoes kept sounding in his head:

I en’t bossgrot, I en’t bossgrot, I en’t bossgrot...

Stupid. Gribblak tried to shake away the past. Fumbled the last armour-strap through its loop and put on his moon-helm.

You’ll see, he thought. *I’ll take the Glinty Crown and this skrap’ll call me bossgrot and cheer.*

The armour-stash was quiet, except for the shifting, slobbering sounds of nearby squigs in their paddocks. All the grots were in their holes, licking their wounds, or else plotting revolt with the Gobbapalooza. Gribblak took up his slicer and made for the stables.

He was still shaking, and his thoughts were still a storm, but Gribblak moved with a new clarity of purpose. He opened the stable gates and stepped towards the sound of gnashing in the dark.

In the Gobbolog Skrap, a bounder of the Squigwind was held in awe for riding an ordinary cave squig and surviving the season. But there were madder and more deadly mounts.

Among many of the skraps most favoured by King Skragrott, it was customary for bosses to keep a mangler: two giant cave squigs chained together. Each of these monstrosities had grown to the size of a troggoth, or larger, and together they were a tide of destruction, two hungry disasters that hated one another.

Up to now, Gribblak hadn’t actually ridden his mangler. But now was the time. He was boss. This was his place. He opened the cave-mouth gate, then opened the paddocks.

What followed was a blur. The darkness filled with thundering squig-flesh; Gribblak grabbed hold of a rein and held on as the mangler squigs rammed into the walls of the stable, smashing the other paddocks and releasing the rest of the smaller cave squigs.

Then the mangler jerked in the opposite direction and they were outside, tumbling at an absurd velocity through the Yhorn foothills, night air whipping Gribblak’s skin.

Summoning all the strength in his shaky limbs, Gribblak climbed the leash and seized the harness and goad atop the larger of the mangler squigs. They touched ground and then leapt, again and again, creating a jerky, bobbing rhythm. Muddy slush flew as they bounded forwards; trees snapped and branches scritch across his helm. Gribblak looked above and below, looked for anything to guide him.

And there it was: the Bad Moon.

The grinning light shone down and lit a path towards Mount Pizmahr and the Glinty Crown. Gribblak exhaled in awe, then renewed his grip on the harness and goaded the mangler squigs north, towards the Crown.

For a wonderful moment, they answered his reins, or at least moved in the direction he harassed them into moving. He soared through the night under the light of the Bad Moon, and he raised his lunar

helm high, and in spite of the madness and sick-making speed, his shakes stopped.

This was it. The peace of perfect command. This was where he belonged. He fixed his gaze on the fortress atop Mount Pizmahr and grinned.

Then, with a *crack*, muzzle flashes lit the face of the mountain. The Bad Moon fell behind the clouds, and fire streaked at him through the sky.

The cannons on the ramparts of the Glinty Crown thundered, and it was as if an entire mountain were shooting flame at him. A shot must have hit the larger mangler – it yowled and surged forwards when it touched ground, somehow faster and angrier than before.

The fortress grew closer, closer. He could make out torches on the ramparts – what looked like 'umies.

They were moving too fast. His eyes teared up; he couldn't see. Another shot cracked, and it must have stopped one of the manglers this time. He lost his grip on the harness and now he was in the air, hurtling faster than he'd ever moved, tears in his eyes and his stomach in his throat, a lone grot in the night sky.

He woke to the sound of 'umies.

There was an ugly cadence to their speech. Their words were like stones in a wall, dull and neat and all in line. But you could catch the gist of 'em.

‘–a single rider?’ said one voice.

‘I shouldn't think so. I have encountered the creatures a great many times, and I have never known them to act alone.’

‘Perhaps it was inebriated.’

‘Oh, indubitably. But I'll guarantee that more of the filthy little sots are to follow.’

Gribblak was face down on damp straw. Night breeze still cooled his skin in the spots his armour didn't cover. He got to his knees, blinked, opened his visor, looked around.

He was under the stars, still. The sky was purpling to dawn. Underneath him, a thatched straw roof. The roof was inclined, and he had to work to keep his footing as he stood.

Below lay... well, it looked like an 'umie village. He'd seen – and razed, or *tried* to raze – plenty of little townships like this back in his early raids as boss, back before everything went to rot.

The first voice was speaking again. ‘To be frank, lord, I am uncomfortable firing the cannons while the instrument is tuning. The crew report... strange sights. Faces in the powder, lord. Tongues in the cannon fire.’

Gribblak looked out over the village. It wasn't quite the same as the 'umie settlements he'd seen before, now he looked closer. The buildings were crowded together, leaving only a web of narrow alleys between them. The village was surrounded by thick walls and cannon emplacements. And in the centre of the settlement was a vast machine of rings and spheres, twice again the size of the house he stood atop, golden and seeming to speak to every sense at once, shine-hum-vibrating and leaving a copper tang in his mouth and nose. Understanding struck him all at once.

The Glinty Crown. His mangler had hurled him into the Glinty Crown.

Alone.

Gribblak crawled to the edge of the thatched roof and glanced down at the owners of the voices. The 'umies were both covered head to toe in silver armour and red regalia, but what really seized Gribblak's attention were the blastas and fire-sticks strapped to their belts and backs. He felt the

shakes starting to return. These were some of the most heavily armed 'umies he'd ever seen. Soldiers in the same armour marched through alleys across the village, fire-sticks at the ready.

'Your objection is noted, captain,' said the 'umie with the biggest feather in its hat. 'I will report your crew's sightings to the battlemage. But I recommend that you master your discomfort. It is unlikely that the Collegiate wizards will interrupt the night's trials on the Orrery.'

'Yes, lord.'

The 'umies parted, and Gribblak exhaled. He looked up to the Bad Moon for reassurance, but the sky was empty now. No grin, no guiding light.

And that was about right, wasn't it? Coming here had been stupid, stupid. He couldn't break a fortress himself. His whole skrap couldn't have survived the first thirty steps of a march on those cannons.

Oghlott was right. He was a git. He'd never been bossgrot, not really: he was a stupid git, and grots had listened to him for a while, and now they didn't.

He was a stupid git whose luck had run out, and he was on his own.

Gribblak whispered a plea to the Bad Moon. 'Let me live,' he whispered, 'let me get outta here, and I'll just take what I get forever after. But let me live.'

The night was silent, except for the shine-hum-thrum of the golden machine and indistinct 'umie orders in the distance.

'Right,' said Gribblak. He was on his own.

First, he needed to get off the roof. Then he could sneak through the alleys, make his way to the top of the ramparts, avoid the gunnery crew, and climb down Mount Pizmahr.

He took a deep breath.

Below the edge of the roof, about a body-length down, was a cart full of straw. Gribblak scooted over the edge of the roof feet first, kicking to find a foothold on the cart. He misjudged the step, slid off the edge, hit the cart and fell onto the cobbles of the alley with a loud clang of armour on stone.

'What was that?' came the voice of the 'umie with the big feather. Gribblak scrambled under the cart as its footsteps neared. Four more pairs of feet followed shortly behind, and Gribblak watched the armoured boots approach.

'I saw one. One of the little sots. I would swear on it.'

'Heads and fingers steady,' said the 'umie boss. 'We *cannot* have any stray fire, understood?'

The boots stopped by the cart. Gribblak bit the insides of his cheeks and gripped his wrists and tried to stop himself shaking, fearful of his armour ringing against the cobblestones.

But it didn't matter. Slowly, the captain peered under the cart. There was nothing for it.

'Yaaaaa!' screeched Gribblak, and leapt out at the captain. He grabbed the 'umie's head and gripped its helmet; the 'umie stumbled backwards, dropping its weapon and batting at its own helm. The other soldiers raised their fire-sticks uncertainly.

'*Do not fire!*' the captain shouted, 'Do not fire! Hit it with the stock! Get it off me!'

Gribblak dug his armoured claws into the captain's eyes, eliciting a scream from the 'umie, then hurled himself from its shoulders to the spot where it had flung its fire-stick. The weapon was a lot to lug, but he could just manage to carry it with both hands. The 'umie soldiers decided to disregard their captain, spraying fire all around Gribblak as he rounded the corner and dived into another alley.

Which way were the ramparts? He tried to remember the view from the roof, but he couldn't quite place himself. He passed what looked like a blasta-stash, an 'umie mob-hole. In one doorway, an

armoured soldier blinked and reached for their fire-stick as Gribblak raced past. The line of 'umies in pursuit was growing.

He weaved left and right, zigged and zagged. Where were the drink-houses, the game-houses? He'd seen plenty of 'umie villages. There should have been big, dumb uggos stumbling out of taverns and puking in the streets. There should have been swindlers and night's-watch and angry card games and midnight music – all the messy life that turned to screaming when a Gloomspite raid caught a town unawares in the dead of night.

Instead, the Glinty Crown was all soldiers marching in rows and that awful shine-hum-thrum. Where were the spore-'umies and wrinkly-'umies? What kind of village was this? There was something wrong about the place. He thought again of stones, dull and all in line.

He emerged into a courtyard, and realised he was running the wrong way entirely. Before him was the great golden spinny machine, all spheres and rings. *Orrery*, the 'umie captain had called it. Around the instrument were gathered 'umies in robes of black, adorned with astronomic patterns in gold. The robes almost reminded him of a common Moonclan grot's.

The Orrery was bright-loud-heavy. The copper tang sharp on his tongue. The robed 'umies turned to regard Gribblak, and their eyes blazed white.

In the centre was a light as bright as death and hot as annihilation. He swore he saw eyes in the fire, eyes and a gaping mouth. He saw his scaremonger's mask before him, and every scare-story he'd ever heard as a little spore-git returned to him at once.

'Glareface,' he whispered.

Gribblak raised the fire-stick and shot at the Orrery. He wasn't sure what happened next. The recoil knocked him on his back and dislocated his arm. The muzzle-flash was light and thunder but it was also a face, and the face vomited more faces, which vomited more faces. The faces weren't grot or 'umie or anything else that made sense, and they licked the world with tongues of fire. He was pretty sure the fire-stick wouldn't have done that in a normal place, but somehow it didn't seem all that strange here, now, in the loud-heavy-bright aura of the Orrery.

Behind Gribblak, his 'umie pursuers opened fire. Their muzzle flashes made faces, too, and bright hairline cracks opened in the spheres of the Orrery, in the faces of wizards. The light in their eyes and mouths shifted from white to a pulsing rainbow.

The world was breaking. Gribblak got up, spun around and dived under the legs of his pursuers, back into the dull, cold alleys of the Glinty Crown. Gritting his teeth against the pain in his arm, heaving his armour forwards with every step, Gribblak did what he did best:

He ran.

In the wake of Gribblak's flight from Gobbolog Skrap, Oghlott was left with no choice but to abandon the lurklair. The paddocks were smashed and the tunnels were swarming with squigs, so the surviving grots made their way outside, into the foothills. It was the first real moment of cheer the skrap had shared in ages. The troggoths were grumpy to be awake, of course, but the grots laughed about Gribblak's flight and the various means by which they would kill their old boss when they found him.

For his part, Oghlott was almost gratified by the necessity. Of *course* Gribblak had ruined the lurklair as he left it – *of course*. Further proof that the Gobbapalooza made the right choice in deposing him.

For the first watches of the night, the craftiest grots fashioned effigies of Gribblak and entertained

themselves by flattening or shredding or burning or eating them. They scanned the horizon and kept half-joking watch for Gribblak, should he attempt to return. Some discussed who would be the next boss, glancing sidelong at Oghlott, who was careful to make no claims on bossdom. He had an idea that the leadership of the skrap ought to arise out of common agreement, but he was still working out how to put this to a mob of boisterous, intoxicated gitz.

As the night wore into morning, the grots of Gobbolog Skrap grew less boisterous, but more intoxicated. They'd started eating more potent mushrooms out of boredom, and many watched the horizon purple in a bleary stupor. Having nothing better to do, and having plenty of choice fungus on his person, Oghlott joined them.

And then something strange happened. The sky bloomed, its purples unfolding all at once into blues and pinks and reds and greens, a rainbow corona that expanded to encompass the sky.

In his fungal haze, Oghlott couldn't be sure for how long this unfolding in the sky carried on. It might have been minutes; it might have been hours. Then, as abruptly as the colours had opened, they collapsed into a single point on the peak of Mount Pizmahr. The Glinty Crown erupted in a column of flame that made a false daybreak.

Yelps of fear arose from the grots who were awake. Oghlott shielded his eyes.

It was late, and he was severely inebriated, and time shifted tricksily. An hour might have passed, or a night. At first, the cave-shaman thought he was hallucinating. But no, there he was, trudging through the woods towards him:

Gribblak.

One arm hung limp at his side, and the other lugged an 'umie fire-stick. The visor of his moon-helm was broken off, the yellow paint was scorched. The bonfire of an 'umie fortress burned on the mountain peak behind him.

He staggered towards Oghlott, panting hard, and hurled the helm from his head. The grot underneath was bloodied and squinting through a puffy eye, but it was unmistakably Gribblak. Oghlott looked back and forth from Gribblak to the ruins of the Glinty Crown to Gribblak again.

'You was right,' Gribblak gasped. 'I en't boss-grot. Never was. It oughta be you.'

Much of the skrap was passed out, but the ones who were awake and gazing at the horizon drifted closer to see what was happening. The scaremonger, Hazzlegob, left off chewing the head of an owl to stare at Gribblak.

'I en't interested in fightin' or runnin' no more,' said Gribblak. 'So you know. You don't got to hunt me down. I'm finished.'

Hazzlegob swallowed part of his owl. He removed his mask, briefly considered the crude Glareface scowl, and pointed at the blaze on Mount Pizmahr.

'You do that?'

Gribblak looked back at the destruction and frowned.

'Oi!' said Hazzlegob, sudden and sharp. A nearby pile of grots startled awake. 'Boss 'ere's burned down the Glinty Crown all by hisself.'

More of the skrap began to gather. 'I never seen Skragrott do nuffin' like that,' one said.

'I never seen a herd of troggoths do nuffin' like that.'

'You 'member those rumours in the Ruckus Pit?' said a one-eyed grot. 'I 'spect we got it wrong. I 'spect the boss was sayin' he'd take the Crown on 'is own.'

'If 'e can do that, 'e oughta take the crown. The real one.'

The talk was moving too quickly for Oghlott to follow properly. Gribblak seemed to feel the same, looking confusedly from speaker to speaker.

‘’ere’s to the boss—’

‘Down with Skragrott—’

‘The Bad Moon’s high!’

‘Give ’im a crown—’

More and more grots gathered, staring at Gribblak and the horizon in awe. The little grot looked helpless in his armour, dragging his ’umie fire-stick. In his numb fungal haze, Oghlott wasn’t sure what to feel. Despair? Relief? Resignation? What he did feel, as the skrap chanted around him, was an unnameable brew of the three. Snufflers and bounders and herders and every other sort of grot stomped over the effigies they’d made earlier to get a look at their returned leader.

‘Hail Gribblak!’

‘High King of Grots—’

‘Touched by the Bad Moon—’

‘Hail to the bossgrot!’

The mob cheered, and behind Gribblak, the sky burned. He looked questioningly at Oghlott. ‘I’m bossgrot?’

The cave-shaman shrugged.

‘I *am* bossgrot,’ he repeated, and it wasn’t a question this time. Gribblak surveyed the assembled mob, squared his shoulders, stood a little taller and raised his voice. ‘I killed the Glareface, y’know. Got ’im right in the eye.’ He grinned.

‘D’you want to hear the story?’

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Gregory's fiction has appeared in magazines and anthologies including *Lightspeed*, *Interzone*, *Strange Horizons*, *Nowa Fantastyka*, and others. He lives and works in Carrboro, North Carolina. 'Bossgrot' is Eric's first story for Black Library.

An extract from [*Gloomspite*](#).



Hendrick Saul was surrounded by a whirling storm of faces, transformed from meek villagers to twisted gargoyles by their fear, their anger and their hate. They pressed around him on all sides beneath a dark and clouded sky, the cadaverous walls of Stonehallow looming at their backs.

‘Varlen!’ he heard Romilla Aiden shouting. ‘Varlen, stop! Please, you have to stop this!’

She was answered by an inhuman scream, a sound that seemed ripped from several throats at once, not all of them human. It pierced the torch-lit darkness and rebounded from the towering walls of ancient ruins.

‘It brings death!’ screamed the awful tangle of voices, the words so mangled they were barely decipherable.

‘Get out of my way!’ roared Hendrick at the crowd around him, and for a moment he was tempted to swing his heavy warhammer, Reckoner, into their midst. His fierce temper surged, its flames stoked by fear of his own.

Fear of what was happening to his brother.

Fear of what Varlen had become.

He controlled himself with supreme effort, reminding himself these were good people who had not asked for this horror to be thrust upon them. Holding his warhammer two-handed like a quarterstaff, he thrust at the townsfolk around him rather than swinging for them with its weighty head. Ignoring the farming implements and rusty daggers they held. Ignoring their outraged cries of pain and their furious demands that he stop fighting them.

‘What did you people bring into our home?’ the village headman cried. Hendrick had already forgotten his name. In the midst of this horror, he had forgotten everything but his brother.

‘Varlen!’ he yelled, shoving his way through the jostling mass of angry townsfolk. ‘Varlen, you have to stop this! You have to fight it!’

Bedlam surrounded Hendrick. The dark of night was full of panicked bodies crashing and grinding together like the bone-jarring confusion of a battlefield rout. Blazing torches threw hard light that danced wildly. One moment, screaming faces were lit in hellish hues, the next they were but dark silhouettes, limned by fire.

‘That *monster* was your brother,’ screamed an old woman, her eyes bulging and her spittle spattering his face. ‘For Sigmar’s sake, kill it!’

‘Enwin...’ another babbled, tears streaming down her face. ‘It tore... It tore his head off.’

Hendrick stumbled over sprawled bodies and crashed down onto the cobbles, where he slithered in blood.

Varlen had done this, he thought wildly. His brother, his garrulous, good-hearted, courageous brother, the leader of the Swords of Sigmar. He had transformed into... *something*. Some monstrous

abomination had burst from within Varlen Saul's flesh as the crown on his brow pulsed with eldritch power. It had ploughed through the mercenaries of Varlen's company, battering Bartiman Kotrin aside with the tumorous flesh-mass that had been its right arm, gouging the flesh of Romilla Aiden with the thicket of talons sprouting from its left hand.

It had rampaged through ruined corridors and echoing chambers, and as it had come across knots of shocked townsfolk it had torn into them like a bladed hurricane. All the time its flesh ran like wax. All the time, that awful cursed crown upon its brow had pulsed with unclean light.

Hendrick and the others had pursued Varlen, or rather the thing that Varlen had become. They had gaped, appalled, at what their leader had done to the folk who had offered them sanctuary. They had chased it out onto the wide, grassy gathering space before the ruins that housed Stonehallow – but so had the townsfolk.

Filled with religious terror at the horror stalking their halls, the mob had flowed down upon Varlen. Hendrick's group had tried to intervene, to slow their cursed leader's rampage and subdue him before the mob could do so. Bartiman had cast an entropic curse upon Varlen that had made the monster stumble but had not slowed it. Romilla had compelled its taint to be gone in Sigmar's name, but though white fire had leapt at the priest's words, whatever power she could bring to bear could not overmatch that pouring from the cursed crown.

In desperation, Eleanora VanGhest had shot Varlen through the leg, hoping perhaps to slow or stop him. For her troubles she had been smashed aside by Varlen's mutating nest of appendages and only just escaped a messy evisceration. Hendrick had even struck his brother, more than once, and that at last had slowed the monster, though it had felt to Hendrick as though he struck himself with every blow.

Though more than two dozen of them had died in the act, the Stonehallow mob had bludgeoned Varlen to his knees and collared him with the long catch-poles they used for wrangling their gheln-hounds.

The Swords of Sigmar had tried to intervene, to protest that it was not Varlen's fault and explain that it was the cursed crown he had placed, all unknowing, upon his brow.

The folk of Stonehallow did not care.

Now Hendrick squinted against a sudden flare of light from ahead. Heat beat against his skin and a great *whoomph* filled the air.

A pyre, he realised, and his lips skinned back from his teeth in a desperate snarl.

‘The Moonshadow brings death!’ screamed his brother in a cacophony of ever-more-monstrous voices. ***‘The Moonshadow brings death to Draconium.’***

‘Don't you dare!’ bellowed Hendrick as the crowd surged and he saw a mass of terrified-looking villagers forcing his mutant brother towards the flames. The sight of Varlen knocked the breath from Hendrick's lungs. His brother's fine clothes had been torn to shreds by the masses of chitin and writhing muscle and quivering fat that had sprouted from the warped trunk of his body. He staggered on an uneven thicket of foul limbs that seemed ripped from a dozen species Hendrick couldn't even have named. Yet it was Varlen's face that filled his mind with horror, that stole his wits and made him howl with anguish. It was monstrous, deformed, the dark metal of the crown seared irreparably into the molten flesh of its forehead. Yet they were still Varlen's eyes that stared back at Hendrick. He saw fear and frustration in his brother's gaze, his true self thrashing frantically to stay afloat amidst the tide of revolting madness in which he was drowning.

Varlen.

They were going to burn Varlen.

Click here to buy [*Gloomspite*](#).

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