

WARHAMMER
40,000

SANCTUS REACH

THE RED WAAAGH!



CAMPAIGN SUPPLEMENT



WARHAMMER



The Warhammer Vault exists to preserve the rich lore and background of Warhammer 40,000 and Warhammer Age of Sigmar. As such, outdated game scenarios and unit rules have been removed from this publication.

THE RED WAAAGH!



THE OPENING OF THE
SANCTUS REACH CAMPAIGN

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INTRODUCTION

The Sanctus Reach System resounds to the roar of the Beast. The Red Waaagh! has conquered world after world in its galactic rampage. Only the valour of true heroes – and the low cunning of a few villains – has a hope of stopping it.

The Red Waaagh! is the first book in the Sanctus Reach campaign. It tells the story of the brutal invasion of Sanctus Reach by an armada of Ork spacecraft that grows mightier by the day. The campaign reaches its zenith on Alaric Prime, the last bastion of resistance in a system overrun by howling, battle-crazed greenskins. Alaric Prime is a Knight world, and the noble houses that govern it are more than happy to test their giant war machines against the sledgehammer planetary invasion of the Orks. Not only that, but their urgent requests for aid summon the elite of the Astra Militarum: several regiments of Cadian Shock Troops and a contingent of Tempestus Scions. But will their combined forces be enough to halt the Red Waaagh?

NARRATIVE SUPPLEMENTS

This book follows a narrative, chronicling a specific war that unfolds across a swathe of the Imperium. It features a plethora of evocative stories and stunning imagery, providing a landscape within which you can use your own prized collection of Citadel miniatures. The book includes not only a set of rules for planetary invasions, but also new missions and datasheets which you can use to add spice to your games, whether these are set during the time of the Red Waaagh! or elsewhere.

HOW THIS SUPPLEMENT WORKS

The Red Waaagh! contains the following sections:

- **Waaagh! Gruk:** The savage tale of the Ork invasion of Sanctus Reach, the brave Knights that defend the last of the Imperial worlds to fall to the Waaagh!, and the Cadians that reinforce them. Battle after battle unfolds in grand style as the war for Alaric Prime reaches fever pitch. However, as the true heroes of the war effort reveal themselves the story takes an unexpected turn...
- **New Missions:** Themed missions for your games of Warhammer 40,000, each representing a pivotal battle in the Red Waaagh! storyline.
- **Datasheets:** Datasheets that feature the Formations that fought in the campaign, allowing you to field these heroes and villains in your own games.
- **Planetstrike:** Rules for staging planetary invasions in the 41st Millennium, allowing you to fight such battles in any war zone, with any army. One player takes the role of attacker, throwing wave after wave of invaders at the planet, whilst the other stoically defends it with everything he's got. Drop ships loom in the firmament and the skies fill with flak as war unfolds on a new level.







WAAAGH! GRUKK

Waaagh! Gruk was a teeming fleet of Ork invaders that smashed its way straight through Sanctus Reach. At its head was Gruk himself, an Ork warlord with such a bloody reputation that Orks flocked from all around to fight at his side.



GORK

The Ork psyche is so strong and robust that their reflection in the mirror-universe of the Warp is a potent force indeed. There are two mighty, belligerent and boisterous Ork gods that the greenskins believe in above all others – Gork, who the Orks say is brutal but kunnin', and Mork, who is kunnin' but brutal. Though both are warrior gods, Gork is the primary deity of clobbering, smashing, breaking, killing and pummelling the rest of the galaxy into submission. This is a notion that resonates strongly with the more single-minded warbosses of the Ork race, of whom Gruk is a perfect example.

The Ork warlord Gruk is a ten-foot brute of muscle and rage. His physical presence alone makes him an intimidating sight, and underneath his scarred and pockmarked skin lies a body as hard as iron. Even when unarmed he is a terrifying sight. When he dons his monstrous power klaw, Gruk becomes practically unstoppable.

It is a well-known fact that Gruk will fly into a berserk fury whenever his temper reaches its limit, and it doesn't take much to set him off. He once trashed an entire settlement purely because a grot attendant spilt engine oil on his breakfast.

As a younger Ork, Gruk killed Krugg the Tyrant, Warboss of his tribe, to seize power for himself. While such leadership challenges are par for the course in Ork society, the utter brutality of the battle and the spectacular fashion in which Gruk finished his old rival gave rise to the nickname 'face-rippa'.

Though the Orks of Gruk's tribe would never admit it, they are all a bit scared of Gruk, and rightly so. No one wants to lose face in front of his mates, after all.



Gruk's power klaw is a howling, whining beast of a thing. It features a jutting kustom buzz-saw that Gruk uses to live up to his nickname as often as he can. It also magnifies his strength from merely impressive to utterly terrifying.

At the Slaughter of Black Gulch, Gruk famously tore open a malfunctioning Drop Pod to get at the Space Marines inside. He then cut all ten of the Adeptus Astartes into pieces, one by one, in a series of increasingly violent kills. It was such an ignoble fate that the commanders of

the battle company authorised a revenge strike upon Gruk himself. Despite inflicting severe damage, the Space Marines were unable to complete their mission. Gruk is still alive today, albeit covered in a grotesque patchwork of thick, knotted scars. The same cannot be said of the Obsidian Glaives Chapter.

Though his strength is legendary, it is Gruk's utter certainty that he cannot lose that makes him so dangerous. He makes a habit of leading every charge, no matter the odds, and publicly butchers any Ork stupid enough to question his rule.

Gruk is always encrusted with the clotted blood of those he has killed. He never wipes it off, either, considering such acts as cleaning or washing to be 'runt's work'. His supporters claim that he has never lost a fight, not even once. It is this bloody reputation – and Gruk's habit of painting his ships with gore – that has led to his crusade of violence being known to his followers as the Red Waaagh!

This kind of renown spreads like wildfire in Ork society. Though he has never spared a thought towards the arts of leadership, Gruk has unintentionally started a Waaagh! that has blazed from one side of Sanctus Reach to the other.

Ork fleets from every part of the Sanctus Reach System converge upon the front line each week, hoping to get a glimpse of the Face-rippa in action. Many of the Orks inbound on the system believe that Warlord Gruk is blessed by Gork himself.

With every battle the Ork warlord wins, Waaagh! Gruk grows more powerful. There is very little chance of stopping it before it reaches critical mass and wipes out a swathe of Imperial space altogether.

'CROSS ME, CURSE ME OR EVEN LOOK ME IN THE EYE AND I'LL KILL YA STONE DEAD, JUST TA TEACH YA A LESSON.'

- Gruk the Face-rippa



GRUKK'S RAMPAGE

SANCTUS

Stellar Primo Nova

Sanctus is the star at the heart of the Sanctus Reach system. It is currently one of the most stable stellar bodies in the sector, though its solar flares plague nearby Obstiria every year.

TERENDIL

Paradise World

DECLARED PERDITAS 773.M32

OBSTIRIA

Home World of the Obsidian Glaives

*<INFORMATION CLASSIFIED
– ORDO REDACTUS>*

Obstiria is a world of barren black rock, battered by radiation from solar flares. Despite its harsh conditions – or perhaps because of them – Obstiria is the home world of the Obsidian Glaives Chapter. The world was the first planet to bear the brunt of Waaagh! Grukk. The majority of the Obsidian Glaives Chapter mobilised to hold back the Ork menace, but despite slaying hundreds of thousands of the greenskins that made planetfall, every day saw millions more land upon Obstiria until the Space Marines were slain.

GHUL JENSEN

Hive World

Population: >200,000,000,000

Tithe Grade: Decuma Particular –

Exactis Extremis

Aggregate: 1,350:

Aestimare: B50-E400

Planetary Governor Ghul Jensen the Latter XXIV ordered the planet's PDF to fortify his capital, Hive Jensen, to the exclusion of all other duties. Such was his influence that his command was obeyed. The redeployment delayed the capital hive's destruction for three days after the rest of the planet had been ransacked.



THE WRATH OF GORK

The Ork flagship *Wrath of Gork* is a gigantic hulk of scrap metal, reinforced with giant slabs of obsidian scavenged from Obstiria's crust. Someone once told Grukk that 'red wunz go faster', but in Grukk's mind, bartering for red paint is a waste of time that could be spent on killing things. His hordes repaint their spacecraft after every battle – not with paint, but instead with the still-bleeding limbs of their fallen enemies. The gore-spattered *Wrath of Gork* has butchered its way across the stars with such bullish momentum that those in its wake call Grukk's violent rampage the Red Waaagh!

MALAGHAI MORCA

Rogue Trading Post

Population: >5,000,000

Tithe Grade: Solutio Tertius

Aggregate: 600:

Aestimare: D400-G40

The Orks were denied their fight on Malaghai Morca – the vendors that dwelt there were so well connected with Rogue Trader fleets that they had time enough to flee the planet before the Waaagh! stripped it bare.

SQUIRE'S REST

Agri World

Population: >10,000,000

Tithe Grade: Exactis Prima – Exactis Particular

Aggregate: 2,000:

Aestimare: C500-B50

Squire's Rest was once a peaceful agri world, but in the last few years it has been plagued by Ork raiders whose heavily armed junk-craft have the Jolly Ork symbol emblazoned upon their prow. It is thought that these raiders formed the outriders for Waaagh! Grukk.

ALARIC PRIME

Knight World

Population: >400,000,000

Tithe Grade: Solutio Extremis

Aggregate: 400:

Aestimare: C750-F1000

Alaric Prime is preparing for war on a scale undreamt of. Though there are Imperial reinforcements inbound, Alaric Prime's rulers fear it will be too little too late.

DISTANT THUNDER

As the planets of Sanctus Reach crumbled one by one before the onslaught of Waaagh! Gruk, Alaric Prime girded itself for war. Aid was summoned from a nearby fleet out of Cadia and from the Schola Progenium world of Edificus. Before long the planet was fortified for the coming invasion, though strife still blighted the ancient houses of Alaric Prime...

The first warning that Alaric Prime had of the greenskin menace was on the vernal equinox of 443998.M41, when the twin Astropaths of House Kestren experienced the same midnight trauma. Each of the gaunt twins had vomited green ectoplasm during a terrible nightmare. Barefoot, they had rushed through the sconce-lit corridors of Castle Kestren to the bedchamber of their master, Lord Gaulemort. The shivering Astropaths gabbled over each other's words, but each told of a billion bestial voices joined in one great unending warcry. Their spasms grew worse, and soon the pair lapsed into fever dreams.

When the import of their tale sank in, Gaulemort Kestren came close to panic. Every lord of the Imperium dreads his aides reporting an incoming xenos invasion. House Kestren's Astropaths had detected not just any incursion, but an entire Waaagh! headed in their direction.

That night Gaulemort sent messenger-skulls arcing out to every one of the knightly houses. Before long, each of the hovering devices had chattered its warning into the vox-chamber of a different Noble. All bar one was ignored.

THE BROKEN SHIELD

The houses of Alaric Prime had long stood divided. Many of the noble lineages had long-standing feuds, and the years of oppressive tradition had bred frequent civil wars that had blighted the archipelagos and land masses of Alaric Prime without exception.

Though Gaulemort Kestren's message had reached each of its intended recipients, almost all of Lord Gaulemort's rivals had scornfully dismissed its content as a bluff or a distraction tactic. They believed that House Kestren wanted to increase its own power base whilst the other lords turned their attentions to their own defence.

The exception was Lord Neru of House Degallio. Having once piloted his Knight suit against the Ork pirates raiding Squire's Rest, the old warrior knew that the greenskin threat was a deadly reality; one that could overpower even the Obsidian Glaives. His own Astropath had run screaming into the night two hours before Gaulemort's messenger-skull had drifted in, adding veracity to the claims of imminent invasion.

At dawn the next day, Lord Neru gathered his most trusted Nobles into his keep's Rotunda Magnificat. A heated discussion took place. Neru proposed that they breach the sealed doors of Sacred Mountain at the earliest opportunity, using the ancient technologies within to summon aid.

Such a course of action was tantamount to blasphemy. Degallio's chamberlains politely reminded their lord it was named Sacred Mountain for a reason, for it contained relics from the time of the knightly houses' founding over ten millennia ago. Not only that, but rumour had it that the mountain's gates bore a powerful curse. Surely no man would risk bringing doom upon his house.

Neru believed they had no choice. Across the globe, reports were trickling in that each house's Astropaths were falling into a fugue state, clawing at their skin and ranting about green-hued tides. The knightly houses could not stand against an entire Waaagh!, even in the unlikely event they could unite the scattered people of the planet into a single army. They must break open the vaults of Sacred Mountain or die to a man when the Ork invasion hit home.

The Noble's men fell quiet, for the strict laws of Alaric Prime forbade the breach of holy ground. Only two of Neru's men dared speak up in support of his plan; his Knight Regal, Ursor Firesword, and his Aegis, Sire Jedric of the Black Shield.

Shaking his head, Lord Degallio stormed out of the Rotunda Magnificat and strode straight to the Chamber of Echoes. There he installed himself into his Throne Mechanicum and descended into the control cortex of his



personalised Knight, the White Warden. The ancient war machine whirred into life, battle protocols flashing as it prepared for the trek to Castle Kestren.

Within a single day, Neru Degallio and his Noble escorts stood before Lord Gaulemort's candlelit court. Despite the protestations of his advisors, Gaulemort needed little convincing that Lord Neru's proposed course was sound. His own Astropaths had been completely incapacitated by the psychic bow wave of Orkoid energy, and he too had heard the legends of Imperial archeotech at the heart of Sacred Mountain.

The next day's sun rose as Neru Degallio, piloting the White Warden, ordered his retainers to melt through the adamantium bulkheads of Sacred Mountain. Deep inside the mountain's vaulted chambers, the Nobles of Houses Kestren and Degallio found all manner of forbidden technologies that bridged the gap between flesh and metal. Held high amongst the relics was a wrinkled Astropath, trapped like a fly in amber by a stasis field, his swollen cranium three times the size of a normal man's head.

Without hesitation, Neru Degallio deactivated the stasis field holding the ancient Astropath frozen in time. A psychic scream ripped through the darkness, stunning the Nobles and howling out into space. The psyker died almost immediately, but his cradle's dusty cogitator array showed that a distress call had been sent. All that was left was to wait.

A WORLD TRANSFORMED

A tense month passed. The knightly houses of Velemestrin, Brahmica, Terryn and Kamata were united in their censure of Houses Kestren and Degallio for their presumption in breaching Sacred Mountain, and the fragile diplomacy that held the planet's uneasy truce quickly broke down.

Just as the houses were on the brink of open war, a reed-thin message crackled out within each Keep's vox-chamber. Its audiosign was that of one Castellan Stein, a Cadian commander whose fleet had been tasked with reinforcing Ghul Jensen. Though the Cadians had arrived too late to fulfil their primary mission, they had outrun the cumbersome ships of the Red Waaagh! and hence were able to bolster the defenders of Alaric Prime. En route they had rendezvoused with a fleet of black-armoured warships hailing from the nearby Schola Progenium planet Edificus, scrambling in response to the astropathic distress call.

Less than two weeks after the bulk landers of the Astra Militarum had made planetfall, Alaric Prime had been transformed. Each of its cities, fortresses and island penitentiaries had been warscaped, optimised and reinforced by masterful Cadian strategos. Regiments of disciplined soldiery manned every Aegis line and crenellated bunker complex. Those knightly houses that had managed to put aside their differences loomed in support, ready for battle. Here the Imperium would make their stand.

'TWO CHOICES: WE ACT NOW, OR WE SIT HERE AND ROT, WAITING FOR THE BEAST'S JAWS TO CLOSE. HOUSE DEGALLIO CHOOSES ACTION! ARM THYSELF, SONS OF ALARIC; GATHER THINE ALLIES. THE WAR TO END ALL WARS IS ABOUT TO BEGIN.'

- Lord Neru Degallio

As every Cadian knows, the next most important piece of kit a Guardsman carries after his lasgun is his entrenching tool. In the final hours before the arrival of Grukk's rust-ships the men and women of the Cadian 1651st continued to dig. As Stein had told them only hours before, while inspecting the defences, 'A pint of sweat is worth a drop of blood, so dig those trenches deep.' The footsoldiers of the Imperial Guard were to be very thankful of their toil in the coming weeks.

ALARIC PRIME

The planet of Alaric Prime is as hidebound by tradition and protocol as any other Knight world, yet it also has to bear the further burden of several thousand years of careless lawmaking. No law upon Alaric Prime has ever been repealed. It is illegal to yawn during daylight hours, illegal to talk when a Noble is speaking in earshot, even illegal to point at the stars in the night sky. So numerous and restrictive are the archaic laws of Alaric Prime that a full two-thirds of the planet's populace has been incarcerated or exiled by the over-zealous Justicars attached to each knightly house.

Most of Alaric Prime's surface is covered in a viscous sulphuric solution far thicker than seawater. The main continent of Alaric Prime is known as Sacred Isle, each island around it the domain of one of its knightly houses. The islands that form the rest of the habitable lands are little more than penitentiaries. Very few of those imprisoned are truly guilty of malicious conduct, but those that are criminal by nature inevitably thrive in the lawless proto-societies that result.



HOUSE DEGALLIO

House Degallio was indisputably the most powerful knightly house upon Alaric Prime, in part due to the strength of its ancient alliance with the Adeptus Mechanicus. However, none could deny that Degallio's influence was directly related to an advantage that no other Alarican house could boast – unparalleled mobility in times of war.

House Degallio has a long and proud history of seafaring. Once, its steamships were little more than ugly hulks that conveyed the criminal elements of Alaric Prime to incarceration upon the volcanic hellscape of Isle Ignivitch. Since it opened a sideline in oceanic trade, the house has grown considerably in influence and wealth. At the house's inception, it had but one solitary Knight active, known as the White Warden. By the time its trade routes were fully established across Alaric Prime, its seaborne sacristies held several dozen Knights, each a warrior of great repute.

Even the mightiest battle steamer of Lord Neru's fleet is a mere tug beside the fusion-powered superstructure known as Isle Degallio. Originally a mobile conglomeration of prison hulks, Isle Degallio has become far more than a conjoined fleet. Over the centuries, layers of sea-mulch and captured turf have laid strata of organic matter over the adamantium stanchions of its foundations. It has come to resemble nothing less than a small landmass that roams the oceans of Alaric Prime under its own power.

In times of civil war, the titanic Isle Degallio makes haste for the coastline nearest to the battle, its fusion engines powering it through the ocean spray so fast that its attendant navy struggles to maintain its cordon around the island's perimeter. Once land is sighted, the navy spreads out into a great battle line of heavily-armed ships, pounding the coastline with artillery shells once the enemy is in range. Isle Degallio itself will power in close, its Knights striding across the bridges extruding from the isle's landmass into shallow waters before charging across the dunes and launching themselves into the fight.

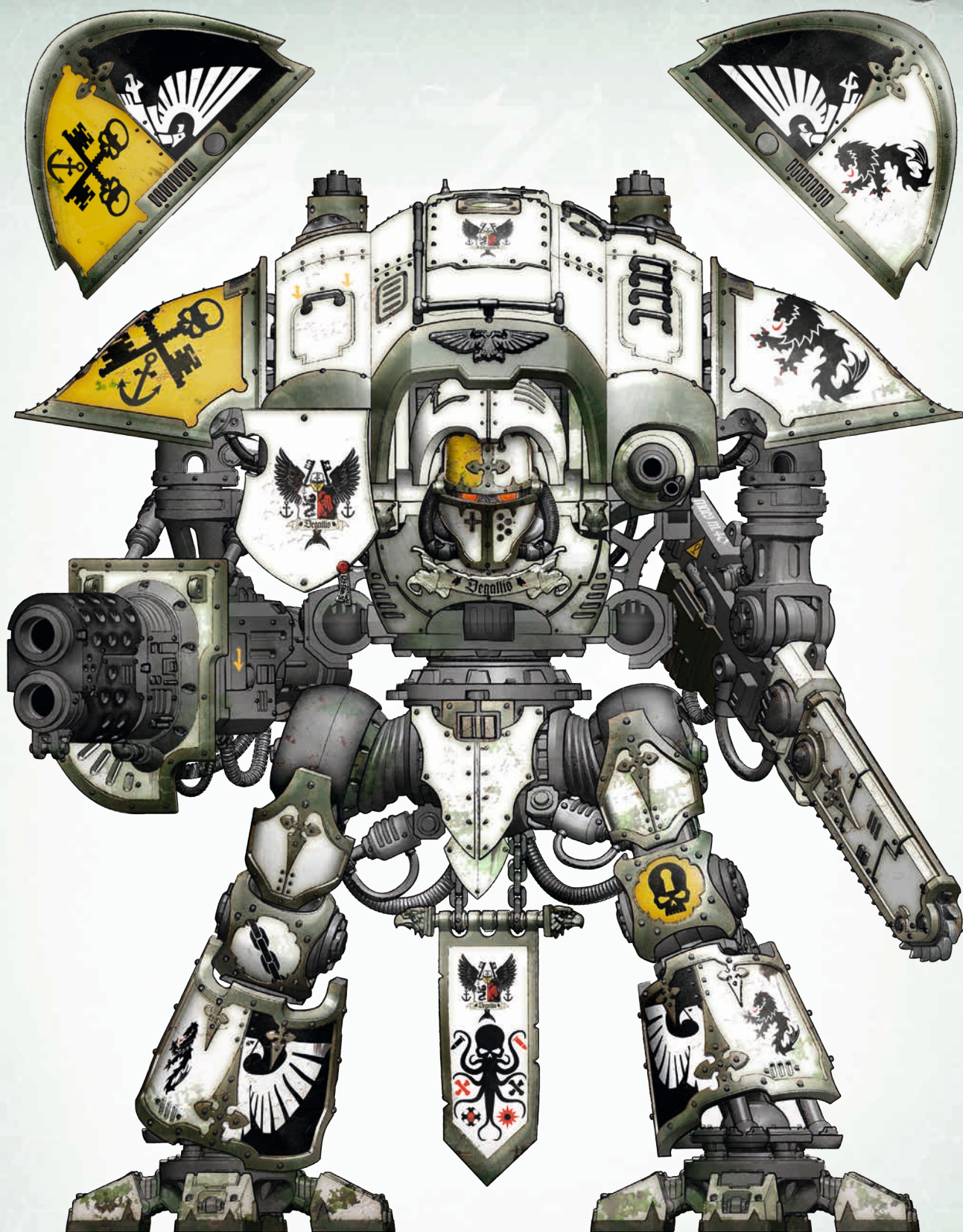
Isle Degallio is so large that it has its own civilian population. Several teeming cities dot its skyline, supporting all manner of industries and ensuring the isle's pre-eminence as a trading hub. Despite this, rival houses whisper that the islanders are inbred to a man, calling its warriors 'sea-lions', 'fish-eyes' and all manner of other unflattering nicknames. The noble lineage of House Degallio remains free from genetic weakness, in truth – there are always more than enough mamzels and consorts in each generation willing to exchange the boredom of their landbound houses for a life of seaborne adventure.

THE SEABLADE

The patriarch of the house is Neru Degallio, known to his men as the Seablade, and to his closest friends as the Old Walrus. Neru Degallio's flair in the arts of battle is legendary, as is his alarming facial hair. His consort, the svelte and skull-masked Lady of the Keys, is a powerful political force in her own right. She has been instrumental in the meteoric rise of House Degallio to the pinnacle of influence on Alaric Prime, possessing a fearsome intellect and considerable charisma.

Anyone who so much as hints that Neru or his consort might be past their prime is given the honour of fighting alongside the White Warden, Degallio's battle-scarred but indomitable Knight suit. As the battle rages, the patriarch's detractor is forced to reassess his opinion – no one can argue with a kill count that is more than double that of the next man.





Sire Garrett Degallio fights in one of House Degallio's Alabaster Lance formations, and is renowned for his courage and prowess in combat. Trained in the use of the sword by his uncle, the lord of the house, Garrett has won countless honours both on the field of battle and in ritualised combat with his fellow Nobles. As the Ork armada approached Alaric Prime, Garrett stood ready alongside his kin to drive the xenos invaders from his home world with righteous fury and the indomitable might of his Knight Errant.

THE WAAAGH! DESCENDS

The knightly houses of Alaric Prime marched to bolster their planet's defences at the very last opportunity. Millions of highly trained Imperial Guard already stood ready to defend the planet. Alaric Prime had become more than just a populous world – it was a symbol of the Imperium's defiance in the face of the Ork threat.



JAKREN STEIN

Jakren Stein stands tall among the castellans of Cadia, a stoic and canny commander with a feel for war and a taste for blood. His reputation was hard won, though the story of his rise to power is clouded with rumour. It is whispered among the subalterns of rival Cadian regiments that early in his career Stein commanded a company in the defence of Hive Svard and brutally put down the Sorschan rebellion. During the battle for the Crimson Deep, it is said his company became surrounded by superior rebel forces who demanded his surrender. Rather than succumb, Stein flew into a rage, ordering an immediate attack which saw his company break out of the encirclement but lose nine out of every ten men in the process. Since then, Stein has hidden his dark temper from his men.

Despite their initial reservations, most of the Nobles of the knightly houses were impressed by the no-nonsense approach of the Cadians. The officer in charge of Alaric Prime's defences was an irritable but extremely capable leader named Jakren Stein. Castellan Stein had barked orders and browbeaten his naysayers so consistently that, by the time the Orks neared the planet, his Hydra squadrons and Icarus batteries could throw a net of firepower into the skies above every vital site. Neru Degallio and Lord Gaulemort joked that their flying messenger-skulls had better roll along the ground if they wanted to escape being bullseyed by a Cadian with an itchy trigger finger.

The general atmosphere across the planet was one of courage under adversity – even those mainlander houses that still resented Degallio for forcing their hand held their peace whilst the Cadians and Schola Progenium troopers were around. Though the knightly houses of the main islands were at truce, dangerous discontent still brewed amongst the houses of the lesser islands. There were many hidden pacts and agreements made, several of which revolved around the 'accidental' extermination of Houses Degallio and Kestren when the fighting began in earnest. Many islander houses had enlisted thousands of minor offenders from the prison systems into regiments they had dubbed House Militia. These undisciplined and immoral companies were unpredictable, but even the strictest Commissar turned a blind eye, recognising they would need every able man when the Waaagh! hit home.

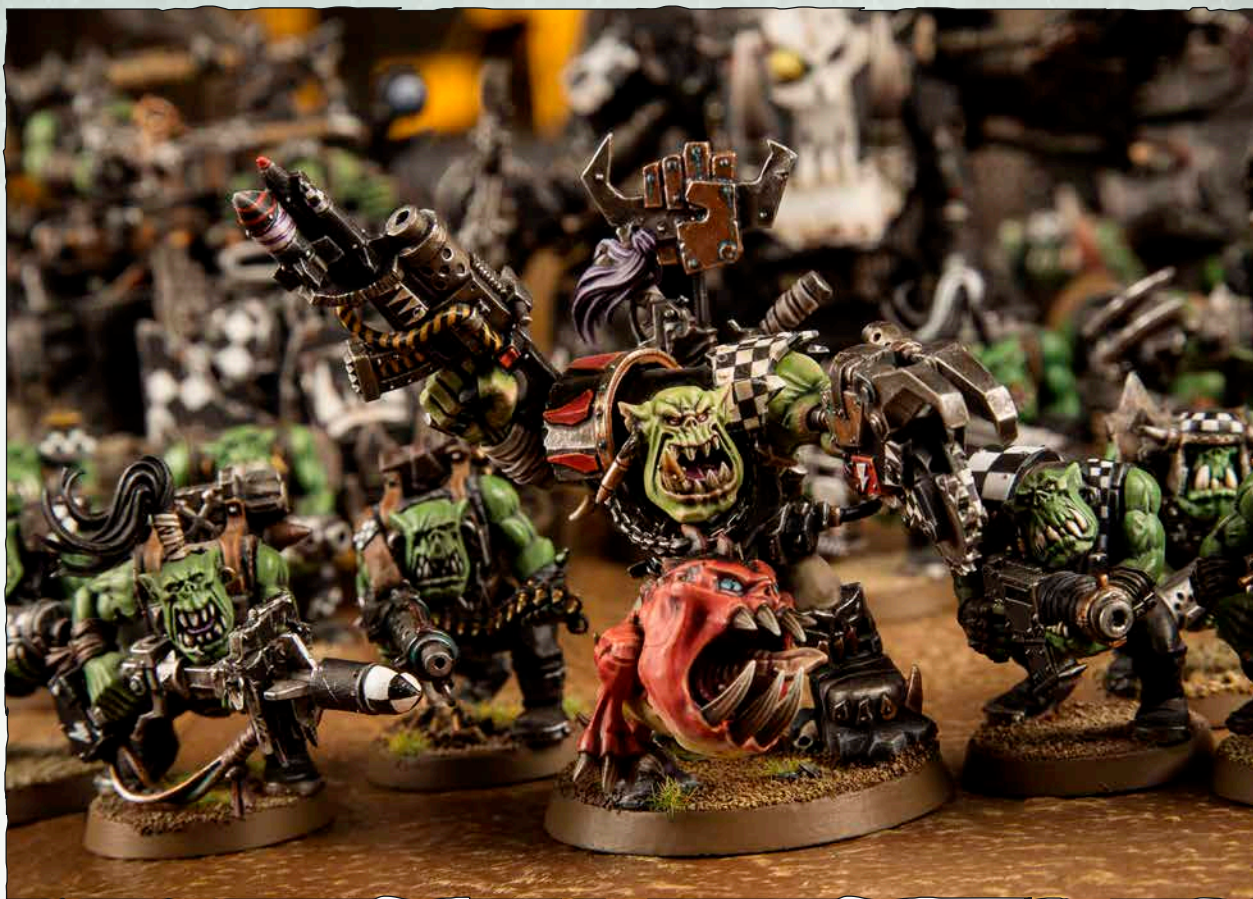
THE STORM BREAKS

Night after night slunk past. Word of the coming invasion had spread from one side of the planet to the other, and rumour was becoming certainty as the populace beheld the incoming invaders with their own eyes. Merely by looking up after sunset it was possible to see the pinpricks of light growing larger as the Ork fleet approached. Hundreds of new stars filled the skies, their engine flares flickering like pulsars. The civilians told themselves the Cadians had masterminded a defence

that would easily shatter the Ork fleet. As if to confirm the supposition, scoptic plates taken by the Cadian battleships showed an invading force that was ramshackle in the extreme. Most of the ships, though blunt and fearsome in their aspect, were little more than rusted iron slabs bolted together in a haphazard fashion. It was deemed a wonder they had not fallen apart during the invasions of Obstiria and Ghul Jensen. Nobles from Houses Kamata and Terryn began to take bets as to whose Knight would tally the most ship kills if any Orks made it through the Cadian flak-net. Neru Degallio shook his head in dismay, and the Cadians remained grimly silent on the matter. To underestimate the Orks was to prepare only for the grave.

As the Ork craft reached low orbit, the terrible truth of their invasion plan became clear. The night sky was stitched with a crosshatch of red light as the Icarus lascannons of Firestorm Redoubts answered Castellan Stein's commands. Almost every laser beam found its target, but almost every one of them fizzled into nothingness. On came the Ork ships, growing closer by the moment. A spherical corona of red blossomed around each of the Ork rust-ships as the energy of atmospheric entry betrayed their secret – a globe of force that protected the craft from harm. Though their physical construction was appalling, the force fields of the primitive xenos craft were all but impenetrable.

War-klaxons sounded across the planet as the Nobles joined their minds to the mechanical sentiences of their Knights. The Cadians kept up their attack, sending solid shot and laser fire into the skies. Perhaps one in twenty of the Ork rust-ships were turned into blazing comets, disintegrating as they came, but the rest of them thundered down to Alaric Prime's surface with a tortured scream of engines. The ground shook wherever the rust-ships struck, staggering even the great suits of Knight armour. Giant ramps and drawbridges slammed down from the sides of each craft, and with a roar that sent ice-cold fear into the spines of all who heard it, the Orks began to pour out.



Even the Cadians were astonished by the brutal efficiency with which the Orks' advance forces made planetfall. The ramshackle construction of the rust-ships, at first thought to be a great weakness, now proved an advantage. Thousands of greenskins poured out of every hatch, hole and seam, trampling over each other in their haste to launch the first assault. Smoke-belching vehicles trundled across the crude drawbridges. At the waist of each rust-ship, truly huge war engines ground their way bodily through their transport's hull plates to stagger onto the plains below. The initial Ork assault had thundered down upon the landmass around Sacred Mountain – it was rumoured the Orks had psykers of their own, of a sort, and perhaps they too had heard the psychic distress cry from within the depths of the peak.

The thousand-mile ring of fortifications around Sacred Mountain bristled with heavy guns. Macro-cannon strongpoints hurled shell after shell into the massing Orks that stomped and roared in the shadow of their rusted craft. Quad-linked lascannons blasted apart Deff Dreads and Battlewagons as they ground their way clear of the scrum, and heavy bolters

barked out a deadly rhythm whenever the massing greenskins spilled into their maximum range. Explosion after explosion boomed out, a deafening and blinding spectacle that made even the most battle-hardened Cadians shield their eyes at its intensity.

No matter the amount of carnage meted out by the Imperial gun lines, the Orks still came on. They poured towards the Imperial defences in a seething, shouting mass. Their great roar of bloodlust was like a wall of sound in itself, a roar that got louder with every passing second. The firecracker snap of lasgun volleys joined the thud of heavy weapons fire as the Orks came in range of the Cadian troopers manning each redoubt, and still it was not enough to halt the tide.

The Ork charge hit home like a tidal wave. Bodies were flung in all directions, bullets whizzed and ricocheted all about, and Guardsmen were snagged and dragged from the walls into the roiling mass of stinking alien flesh beneath. Incredibly, the Orks were using each other as stepping stones, piling atop one another in their haste to spill blood. The war for Alaric Prime had begun.

AIR WAR

Even as the Ork rust-ships fell like comets through the atmosphere, Castellan Stein threw squadrons of Thunderbolts against them in an attempt to knock them from the sky. From the ground, the Cadians could only watch as contrails wove between the enemy ships high in the upper atmosphere. What looked like a slow ballet of smoke and flame from the ground was a frenzied dogfight up close as Thunderbolts twisted and tumbled in aerial combat against Ork Dakkajets, their weapons leaving burning tracer fire in the thin air. Hopelessly outnumbered, the Thunderbolts were sent spiralling toward the earth one by one, their weapons no match for the brutal power of Gruk's assault.

THE KNIGHTS STRIKE BACK

Despite their extensive preparations, the Imperial Guard defenders were reeling from the intensity of the Ork attack. The Nobles of each knightly house strode into the fray in their titanic war machines, determined to prove their mettle on the field. They met their match when the Orks revealed a secret weapon of their own...

Steam-pistons groaned and lockbolts shuddered as the adamantium-clad war machines of the Alarican Nobles loped towards the Ork horde. Together the Knights numbered over two dozen. The foremost warriors of Houses Velemestrin and Brahmica pounded into battle behind those of Lord Gaulemort Kestren, eager to prove their worth. Rapid-firing battle cannons boomed, each blast overlapping the next in a tooth-rattling fusillade.

The waves of Orks hurling themselves forward were flung in all directions by each explosion. Great sprays of dark crimson blood gouted into the air like liquid fireworks wherever the battle cannon shells hit home. High inside the cockpits of their Knights Paladin, the Nobles of House Terryn panted like wolves on the hunt. Sire Dindh of House Brahmica laughed, on the edge of hysteria as he revelled in the glorious release of battle.

High on the ramparts of their fortresses, the Cadian officers watched intently, voxing back and forth as the charge of Alaric Prime's defenders hit home. The Knights were killing score upon score of the invading xenos, and

the occasional Ork missile that corkscrewed into the Knights exploded prematurely on their ion shields or ricocheted off their thick plating without causing any real harm. The planet's Nobles were clearly no strangers to war.

Lord Gaulemort's Paladins stormed into the broken morass of xenos bodies, the cold metal feet of their war engines crunching greenskins into the dirt wherever movement twitched. Giant helms swung left and right, scanning the horde for the banners and totems that indicated leadership whilst battle cannons blazed again and again. In their wake came the Knights Errant of Houses Velemestrin and Brahmica. Heavy stubbers suppressed any rallying xenos on their flanks whilst thermal cannons stabbed great columns of destruction into those Ork war-constructs that had survived the rampage.

Working in concert, the Knights systematically annihilated the Orks in a broad column that led straight into the central mass of the heaving green tide. A trail of blackened, steaming destruction extended behind them as they crushed, blasted and stamped their way to the heart of the horde. The Orks were responding, slowly at first, but with increasing cohesion. Like the parting of a great sea, the greenskins flowed around the Knights' forward blitz, then swarmed in again behind them, cutting them off from the Cadians altogether and aiming their haphazard volleys at the flank and rear of each machine.

Stein's bellowed vox-orders crackled over each Noble's choirnet. One by one, they were voluntarily muted by the Knights. It was their time to kill, and they were close to the throat of their prey. House Kestren's Paladins plunged on into the horde, ion shields reconfigured to guard their rears. Reaper chainswords smashed poorly made Ork walkers into scrap metal. Many of the xenos fled in disarray as yet more battle cannon shells and melta blasts hit home amongst them. The foremost Knights had reached the shadow of the largest rust-ship, but their true prey was nowhere to be seen. The war machines were surrounded, and their brazen challenge had yet to be answered in force.

THE COMING OF GRUKK

The air filled with the ear-splitting screech of tortured metal as a full quarter of the rust-ship's flank began to fall open. A hinged slab of oxidised iron taller than a hab-block, the flank fell downwards, blotting out the sun for those Knights that had drawn too near to the craft. Six of their number threw their war machines into full reverse, crushing Orks underfoot as they backed through the throng. The orange-striped Knight of Sire Vocus was not so nimble. Hamstrung by the weld-cutters of a mob of greenskin pyromaniacs, its pilot could do nothing but fire its battle cannon at maximum elevation in an impotent attempt to halt the immense tonnage bearing down on it.



Rolundus Velemestrin could hear the blood pounding in his ears as he strode toward the rust-ship in his Knight suit, Gauntlet. Locked by tubes and tendrils into his Throne Mechanicum's wiry embrace, he looked down on the greenskins from above, the vantage point making him feel like a vengeful god. As he neared the horde, he sent a silent thought-burst to trigger his heavy stubbers. The ancient weapons clattered into life, their staccato blast muted by the vista-plates of the Knight's helm.



Outside in the smoke and blood Orks were being culled in their hundreds. Many died screaming, crushed into the earth by the Knight's giant feet. Others were cut down by the slugs of the large-bore stubbers, their own small arms fire sparking uselessly off the war machine's armour. Rolundus weathered the storm, oblivious to the aliens' futile attacks. The flashing amber icons on his canopy showed the dwindling ammo counter of the stubbers and streams of ghostly firing portents that guided his guns to their targets.

It was only when the shadow of the rust-ship loomed up over him that Rolundus truly took stock of the wider battle. He peered out of the vista-plate, shifting to overlay the scrolling data runes and neural information that poured into his brain. His augurs were identifying alien warriors with heavy weapons closing in from all directions. Leader-beasts determinedly pushed lesser warriors into the line of fire of his fellow Knights, coming in close behind them. With a brutal impulse Rolundus triggered his battle cannon to swivel around and fire, its shells tearing into mob after mob of Orks in quick succession.

Suddenly the Noble recoiled in shock as a massive steel claw lunged out of the smoke and smashed into his Knight's vista-plate. Rolundus looked on in horror as a crack appeared in the canopy before his face, spreading with painful slowness like a spider's web. Oily smoke and the thick smell of blood suddenly poured into his war machine. A massive Ork war effigy filled the vista-plate for a second, its thrumming chain-arm raised to strike. Then the world burst into multicoloured light, and Rolundus Velemestrin was no more.

Sire Vocus' prized war machine was flattened like a rations tin under a jackboot. The muted thump of the Knight's detonation could be heard a split second before the rust-ship's flank hit the ground with a tremendous crash. A wave of dust and iron particles burst outward across the battlefield, blinding greenskin and Knight alike before billowing into the Cadian defence lines.



As one, the Orks roared their approval, beating their chests and storming forwards as the stunned defenders gave them the chance they needed. With their targets hidden by the dust storm, the tight volleys of the Cadians failed to find their mark. The green tide, barely held at bay in the first charge, broke over the Cadian fortifications with the force of a river bursting a dam.

Here the Orks were at their deadliest. Robbed of coordinated support from their big guns, platoon after platoon of Astra Militarum died as the xenos charge hit home. Tribes of barbaric, maniacal greenskins smashed heads from necks and sank chain-toothed axes into the faces of their reeling human prey. An unruly orgy of violence rolled outward, the bayonets of the Cadians barely slowing the musclebound terrors roaring and biting in their midst. Within the space of a minute

the Ork vanguard had broken the Cadian line wide open. Broken corpses and silenced heavy weapons were hurled into the platoons mustering behind, a barbaric challenge before the charge began anew.

By the sides of the rust-ship, the ochre clouds had begun to clear. The surviving Nobles gaped in horror as the thinning curtain of dust revealed a vision of destruction. Lumbering out of the rust-ship was an Orkoid war god made metal and given life, its titanic frame all belly and belligerence. The rusted beast was so large it made the Knights ranged around it look like hunchbacked mutants confronting a grossly overweight Ogryn.

One of the effigy's arms, a cannon taller than any of its adversaries, boomed its challenge. Sire Faragheist's Knight was flung backwards, ion shield overloaded and limbs scattered amongst the wreckage. War-horns blaring a reply, Sire Luminer's Knight charged up the rust-ship's impromptu ramp and ducked within the beast's reach. His reaper chainblade bit deep into its plated gut, which vented a geyser of oily steam. In response the monstrosity loosed a spiral-painted rocket at point blank range. It blasted Sire Luminer's Knight armour off balance for long enough that the beast could bring its grotesque chainsaw-arm around in a gnashing arc.

Luminer's Knight was not cut in half so much as mangled and crushed beyond recovery, falling to its knees a moment before the Ork monstrosity gut-barged its juddering corpse into a dozen pieces.

THE SECRETS OF HOUSE KAMATA

The tale of Dyros of House Kamata is one tinged with betrayal, disgrace and sorrow. The second son of Hynam Kamata, Dyros was raised to bring favour to his house, one of Alaric Prime's chosen elite. When his older brother died, leaving Dyros the honour of taking over his Knight, the young man was only strengthened in his resolve to fulfil his duty.

However, during the Ritual of Becoming he heard the whispers of his deceased brother from the Throne Mechanicum. In doing so he learned the truth of his brother's death at the hands of his father, and the deep lies and treachery which lurked in the heart of his house. Dyros immediately severed his ties to House Kamata, vowing to accept exile rather than fight beside his father, and became a Freeblade known only as the Blade of Redemption. With the arrival of Grukk and the Red Waaagh!, Dyros has returned from the far reaches of Alaric to fight for his world alongside the Knights of Kestren and Degallio.

THE FALL OF HOUSE KESTREN

The charging Knights had burnt a great furrow into the Ork horde, but in their haste to prove themselves they had overextended themselves badly. The magnitude of their mistake only became clear when an Ork war engine debarked from the flagship *Wrath of Gork*, guns blazing. Already the fate of the knightly houses hung in the balance...

All around the greenskin horde was closing in, their crude heavy weapons aimed at the engines and rear-quarters of the Knights as they faced down the war-beast. The remaining walkers circled the Ork monstrosity, their ion shields crackling defiance as they pounded its torso and head with battle cannon shells.

The beast's iron hide had to be thicker than a bastion's walls to survive such punishment, but survive it did. The monster loomed forward, staggering down what was left of the ship's ramp with the idiot aggression of a drunken brawler. Blasting wildly with its cannon, it smashed into Sire Falchine Kestren's purple-plumed Knight, knocking the walker into the dirt before raising a great foot and stamping the Knight's helm deep into its chest.

Lord Gaulemort cried out in grief and defiance, driving his Knight around to close on the beast's rear. His thermal cannon speared out, blasting the Ork machine's primary engines to molten slag. The war-beast stamped and shuddered as it tried to confront its tormentor, but the Knight's cannon screamed fire once more, carving off the monster's chainsaw arm in a spray of glowing gobbets.

A loud clank came from the brutish walker's head. Lord Gaulemort recoiled in shock as a hulking Ork leapt from the thick smoke between the war-beast's horns and landed with a thump on his Knight's helm. The patriarch fired his Knight's heavy stubbers, blasting point-blank at the maniac greenskin clinging to his war engine. Even inside his cockpit he could hear the bullets pinging from the fiend's armoured hide. Sweating and wide-eyed, he commanded his fellow nobles to hold fire as he sent a desperate pulse of thought to his ion shield. Electrical energies began to crackle around the Ork's armour, building to a deadly crescendo that threatened to fry the xenos alive.

Sylvost Velemestrin ignored Gaulemort's order to hold fire and took the shot. A battle cannon shell smashed into Gaulemort's cockpit with explosive force, sending his Knight reeling back as its ion shield dissipated.

It was all the chance the Ork Warboss needed. With a wrenching screech, the carapace hatch of Lord Gaulemort's Knight was ripped away. Xenos drool spattered onto the Noble's face as the Ork bellowed his triumph a few feet above him. A smoke-belching power claw lunged down and plucked Gaulemort from his throne, his body jerking wildly and spraying sheets of blood as it was sawed in two. All around, the green horde chanted and roared 'Grukk' over and over as their leader gorged on the hot flesh of his foe.

Reaper chainsaw raised, Gaulemort's son Moloris swung in for a revenge kill. However, as he passed the Ork war effigy it lurched suddenly to the left, hammering into Moloris' Knight and sending it stumbling into the dirt.

Growling, Warboss Grukk leapt from Gaulemort's crippled war machine to land in front of the bowed Moloris. Sparks rained down as the Ork's saw-claw sheared off the Kestren Knight's helm-plate. Servos strained and whined as Moloris fought to return his Knight to its feet, but he was not quick enough. Grukk headbutted the icon-screen that was the only thing between him and the Kestren Noble. It shattered, and the Ork stamped one iron-shod boot into the pudgy noble's chest – ribs crunched and blood squirted as Grukk ground his screaming foe's innards underfoot.

Reeling at the loss of their leaders, the surviving Knights Kestren backed away towards the Cadian defence line. In focusing on the war-beast's destruction, however, they had allowed the Ork horde to all but swallow them completely. The aliens clambered up each Knight's legs, lobbing stikkbombs into engine blocks and shearing cables with chain-toothed axes. Sire Dindh of House Brahmica fell backwards as an Ork tractor beam found purchase on his carapace, toppling his Knight a moment before a mob of greenskins with welding torches swarmed over it and cut it to pieces. Oberstrauss of House Terryn barged through the throng before his Knight was blasted apart by a lucky shot from one of the rust-ship's guns. The situation looked dire.

THE STEEL HOST

Only three Knights were left when the throaty roar of tank engines filled the air. Thirty blocky hulls crested the rolling hills to the east of the Imperial Guard's defence lines. The armoured division fanned out, laying down a rolling bombardment that fell just behind the remaining Knights. Encircling Ork vehicles were sent pinwheeling into the air or blasted into a rain of nuts, bolts and scything hull plates.

A great shout of aggression came from the Ork horde as it ran headlong towards the line of tanks. The Cadian vehicles calmly reversed at the same speed the Orks were advancing, drawing them into the teeth of their guns. The Orks that had been overrunning the defence lines, seeing this new foe, abandoned the slim pickings they had left and sprinted towards the attack converging on the armoured regiment. Their insane bravado proved their downfall when a trio of Hellhound flame tanks hurtled from behind the battle tanks, their sheets of liquid fire reducing mob after mob of charging Orks to ash. Before long the thick stench of burning greenskin flesh filled the air.

Bought a reprieve, the remaining Cadian platoons spread amongst the defence lines, and those few Knights that had escaped the disaster shared vox-signs with the terse Cadian high command. They were to head south and rendezvous by the banks of Boiling River. The Ork vanguard had been blunted, albeit at a tremendous cost. In the process, however, every single knight of House Kestren – including Lord Gaulemort – had met a violent and painful death.



THE CADIAN 1652ND, THE 'STEEL HOST'

Despite the relatively late founding of the Cadian 1652nd, the Steel Host is one of the most celebrated of all Cadia's tank regiments. The cohesion and mutual respect that binds its squadrons together enables them to function at peak efficiency, either by supporting the 1651st's infantry or by adding their firepower to the artillery barrages of the 1653rd.



TANK COMMANDER SILAS OVIK

Silas Ovik is a short, compact man who his men joke is half-Ratling. Ovik's answer to the taunts is to let his impeccable record speak for itself, for he has led Cadia's armour to victory time and time again.



Ovik's personalised Leman Russ Vanquisher, Ovik's Fist, has claimed hundreds of war engine kills over the centuries.



CREED'S GLAIVE

The Leman Russ Punisher known as Creed's Glaive is always the first into the fight. It has become a running joke among the Steel Host that if there is some way the crewmen of Creed's Glaive can bribe, trick, coerce or scheme their way to the front hours or even days before the rest of the company, they will take it. The crew maintain this is due to the relatively short range of their tank's punisher galling cannon, a well-oiled reaper of lives that has taken a great toll on the Emperor's enemies over the years – they claim that unless they get stuck in early, there won't be any of the enemy left to kill.

PRIDE OF CADIA

The Leman Russ Vanquisher Pride of Cadia is the command tank of Colonel Threska, the 1652nd's most senior officer after Ovik himself. Threska has always believed in leading by example and his venerable tank perfectly encapsulates his merciless style of warfare. During the Ironcore World Offensive, Pride of Cadia tallied a dozen confirmed armour kills during the opening hour of combat alone.





The grand banner of the Steel Host flutters above the tank in the regiment that has scored the most vehicle kills in the previous engagement. This tradition ensures much friendly competition, and occasional heroism, from the tankers of the Steel Host.

INDOMITABLE MIGHT

Indomitable Might, or simply 'Old Indomitable' to its crew, has a reputation for being a temperamental, unruly beast. Its machine spirit requires constant soothing and it has a habit of shutting down during training exercises. That such a cantankerous machine has found its way into one of Cadia's most prestigious tank companies is due only to its impressive warrior spirit, for when battle is joined Old Indomitable will rush forward to engage foes bigger than itself, often slaying them outright with its demolisher cannon.



THE THUNDERHEADS

Perhaps the most elite tank squadron in the Steel Host, the Thunderheads have been the regiment's lynchpin for over three centuries, spearheading every assault and acting as an anchor for every defence. The tanks of this honoured squadron have served since the 1652nd's founding; the scars and honours etched into their hulls can be read as a history of the regiment itself. Competition for a place as a Thunderhead crewman is justifiably fierce, and only tankers who have earned the *Valedicto Imperialis* are even considered for this distinguished duty.

SKY-REAPER

Before being attached to the Steel Host, the Hydra Sky-reaper was deployed alongside Shock Troop regiments during the Tellex Campaign, providing the Cadian infantry with much needed air-defence against the winged horrors of Hive Fleet Leviathan. Sky-reaper's attachment to the 1652nd was in direct response to the famed regiment's losses to Ork aircraft on Orgath's World. Whilst some of the Steel Host's more veteran tank crews see Sky-reaper's deployment as a constant reminder of their defeat, even these critics have reason to be grateful of its presence when enemy bombers are patrolling the skies.



STEIN'S ANVIL

The Cadians are famous for the precision with which they wage war, yet against a foe as unpredictable as the Orks, even their discipline was tested to the limit. As millions of Ork invaders spilled from their rust-ships, it became obvious that only by isolating and destroying each element of the xenos army could the Imperium hope for victory.

From his tank's cupola, Silas Ovik watched the Orks charge toward the bridges and into the teeth of his squadron's overlapping fields of fire. A veteran of many tank battles against the Orks, he recognised the distinctive black-and-white chequer patterns of their forward elements. Goffs, they called themselves, or something like it. While the beasts displayed no great wit or tactics, Ovik knew all too well how unstoppable they could be on the charge. The Goffs liked to fight as an avalanche of green-skinned muscle, iron-shod boots and horned helmets against which few foes could stand for long. Ovik had seen more than one Imperial position overrun by the Orks, the brutes leaping over their dead to get at the enemy.

As they charged towards Stein's defence lines, the Goffs chanted and yelled, their voices joining to become a deep rumble. The chant mixed with the hammering of their boots and filled the air with a wall of menacing sound. No matter how many times he heard it, the sound was enough to give Silas Ovik pause.

Better get to it, he thought, closing the cupola and drawing a bead on the forefront of the onrushing xenos horde.

Castellan Stein knew his *Tactica Imperialis* well. The war doctrine of that ancient tome teaches that where the enemy comes on in a great horde, it is best to meet them at a narrow point, so that their numbers cannot be brought to bear. The large numbers of rust-ships and the wide open plains of Alaric Prime had robbed him of such a strategy, so Stein had planned to rebuff the Ork attack from a defended position instead, attempting to blunt its momentum with a wall of lasfire. Once one rust-ship's horde had been neutralised, he intended to retreat to Boiling River and use its great bridges as killing fields to deal with the next rust-ship's swarm. If all went well, they would roll out their mobile defence across the continent, fighting a running battle where the Orks would struggle to bring their numbers to bear.

Things had gone worse than badly during the initial engagement, however. The calamitous events that unfolded amongst the Imperial lines had allowed more Orks to muster south of Sacred Mountain. Now the horizon was black with xenos marauders, stomping and shouting with boundless battlelust. Recon Sentinels had reported back that many of the greenskins were engaged in salvage operations, hauling not only their own wreckage back to the rust-ships but also that of the fallen Knights. What had become of the pilots Stein didn't like to think.

Lowering his magnoculars, the castellan shook his head in disappointment. The Ork attack had been slowed, but not stymied in the least. Greenskins still boiled out of the hull of the titanic craft, and to its leeward side another thousands-strong horde had amassed. Even now the greenskin throng flowed towards them, merging with the salvagers on the windward side to come on in a great mass.

The scale of the Ork invasion was becoming horribly clear. Stein made a quick mental calculation. If each one of the rust-ships fighting through the flakstorm in low orbit held a similar number of xenos warriors as those already planetside, Alaric Prime would be lost in less than a week.

With an effort of will the Cadian officer returned his thoughts to the task at hand. There was an extermination to be conducted, and with Boiling River as their ally, a great toll could be taken on the approaching horde. As the castellan's command tank sent vox-codes to the battle tanks and artillery of the Cadian 1652nd and 1653rd, his infantry quickly and efficiently formed up into the formation his men called 'Stein's Anvil'. Platoon after platoon took up position on the banks of the river, heavy weapons braced and ammunition piled high.

If reports from Stein's Valkyries were accurate, the poor coordination of the Ork invasion still afforded them a chance to suppress it section by section. The remainder of Gruk's forces planetside could be held and perhaps even broken on the banks of Boiling River before the warriors from the easternmost rust-ships made their way northwards to cut off the Cadian escape route. Such a military feat would require impeccable discipline and perfect timing. Stein smiled thinly to himself; those were qualities that every man in the Cadian 1651st possessed in great measure. He had seen to it himself.

As the Cadians made their final preparations on the banks of Boiling River, the vox-net crackled intermittently with nautical shanty-signs. To Stein's mind, they could have come from only one source. It looked like Warboss Gruk was about to get a surprise of his own.

THE RAIN OF DEATH

As soon as the Orks were in range, the artillery squadrons of the Cadian 1653rd opened fire. Heavy munitions rained death into the massed horde stomping its way towards the riverbanks. Manticores fired high-explosive rockets in soaring arcs, Wyverns hurled munitions that filled the air with razor shards, and Basilisks thundered a thirty-gun salute to Stein's battle plan.

The din of the rolling barrage was immense. From Stein's vantage point it looked as if the gods themselves were levelling their hatred at the xenos throng.



Just as the castellan had anticipated, the Ork masses ran forward rather than falling back, hoping to close within the reach of the Imperial Guard artillery.

It was a brave strategy, but ultimately a foolish one. A flotilla of ramshackle Ork vehicles hove into sight, the dust trails of their passage marking them clear as day. One by one, they found themselves under pinpoint fire from the platoons that occupied the bastions beyond the river, and one by one, they blossomed into flame. Wherever a mob of Orks grew close to the banks of Boiling River, a hundred lasguns would spike out into their ranks until the Orks had to climb over the corpses of their comrades to advance. Stein nodded appreciatively as his platoons went about their bloody work.

The signals ringing out across the vox-net were coming in so fast it was difficult to keep track. The Cadians stationed at Bridge Zeta Sec had fired their own artillery barrages into the ironclad Ork army inbound on their position, but with far less effect – their detonations had been all but nullified by crackling force fields that protected the Orks from harm. The riverside platoons were culling Orks at a

gratifying rate, but the tide of invaders would not be stemmed for much longer.

It was time for phase two of Stein's battle plan to swing into place. As the Ork footsoldiers pounded towards the bridges, a trio of Chimera armoured transports hurtled up the ramps of both the Zeta Sec and Zeta Tert bridges. The vehicles formed a wall of steel, multilasers blazing. They had barely stopped moving before squads of Ogryns debarked from inside and lumbered past them, each abhuman warrior hefting a slabshield as the Orks' fusillade thickened.

Crude bullets hammered away at the shieldwall to no real effect. Hurlled stikkbombs left the warriors unfazed, their thick armour plates absorbing each blast. Rotund xenos bomber-beasts bounded towards them, fuses hissing on their backs. The great Ogryns merely toe-kicked the beasts into the river, pillars of murky water erupting wherever they detonated. Amongst the bastions on the east side of Bridge Zeta Tert, Castellan Stein watched the exertions of his abhumans with no small measure of pride. The Ogryn counter-attack could buy them all the time they needed.

Commissar Palev screamed at the Bullgryn squad to hold the line as the first Orks slammed into their shields. Palev could almost feel the air tremble as the great abhumans strained their muscles to hold back the greenskins. As the Orks pressed forward, their choppos, boots and fists hammered into the slabshields. The Ogryns pushed back, bracing their heavy feet and gradually forcing the green tide back.

In isolated places Palev saw an Ork tumble over the shield wall, though these were quickly beaten to the ground under battle mauls and heavy feet. Even when the roaring Ork horde was more than a dozen deep against them, still the Ogryns stood their ground. They were a wall of steel, muscle and grit through which no mere mob of Boyz could hope to pass.

THE BATTLE OF THE BRIDGES

The Ork horde that poured from the landed rust-ships had overpowered the Knights sent against them, and the flames of battlelust burned bright in the invading greenskin armies as they pushed onwards. The Astra Militarum took a stand at Bridges Zeta Sec and Zeta Tert, hoping to engage the numberless throng across as narrow a frontage as possible.

Gholo Velemestrin watched as the Orks tried to cross Boiling River, cramming onto the bridges or leaping into the water. Through the magnification plates on the canopy of his Knight he could see the battle for the bridges slowly unfolding below him. The Noble smiled grimly as he watched the aliens thrash and burn in the sulphurous water of the river, remembering the old tales of the blood of the mountain and the toxic fires which burned still beneath its roots. One such tale told of how Boiling River had been known by another name, now lost to the march of time, but that it had turned toxic overnight when off-world invaders had sought to plunder the mountain. Some had mumbled that it was merely coincidence that the river had turned toxic that night, a deep fissure opened by a chance earthquake releasing virulent chemicals from deep below; cutting the raiders off from their vessel and cooking those that dared to cross. Gholo knew better. As he watched the Orks' skin burn and bleach, he knew that he was watching the vengeance of Sacred Mountain at work.

The Ork vanguard, in their eagerness for war, plunged bodily into the river and attempted to swim across. They soon found out why the people of Alaric Prime called it Boiling River – the sulphurous vents that bubbled on the riverbed made sections of the watercourse hiss with simmering, toxic fumes. To the amazement of the Cadians stationed on the riverbank, the greenskins kept on coming where a human would have been boiled alive. Across the wide watercourse, the Orks spilt into the water like a stampeding herd of beasts, thrashing their great ape-like arms as they slowly propelled themselves through the bubbling liquid.

Though the toxicity of the waters killed only a small portion of the Orks, it slowed the rest enough to make their deaths all but certain. Thousands of ruby-red lasbeams burned the air as the platoons stationed on the riverbanks ignored the egg-stink of the river's sulphur fumes and opened fire with well-drilled precision. Before long the water was filled with smouldering greenskin corpses that bumped together as they floated towards the yawning mouth of the Great Estuary.

GRUKK'S BIG RED CHARGE

Then Gruk himself reached the fight. With his war effigy reduced to a scrap metal fortress by Gaulemort Velemestrin, the Warboss had trundled to the front line in a massive horned wagon emblazoned with a giant white bull's head. The vehicle was the target of flurries of missiles and laser blasts from the Cadians manning the other side of the river, but despite dozens of armour plates being blasted from its chassis, the thing kept coming. It thumped bodily over the tank traps at the end of the bridge before its metal maw clanged open, disgorging a posse of massive Orks. At their head was Gruk himself, his power claw revving and his voice raised in a bestial roar while his massive attack squig drooled human blood from between mantrap jaws.

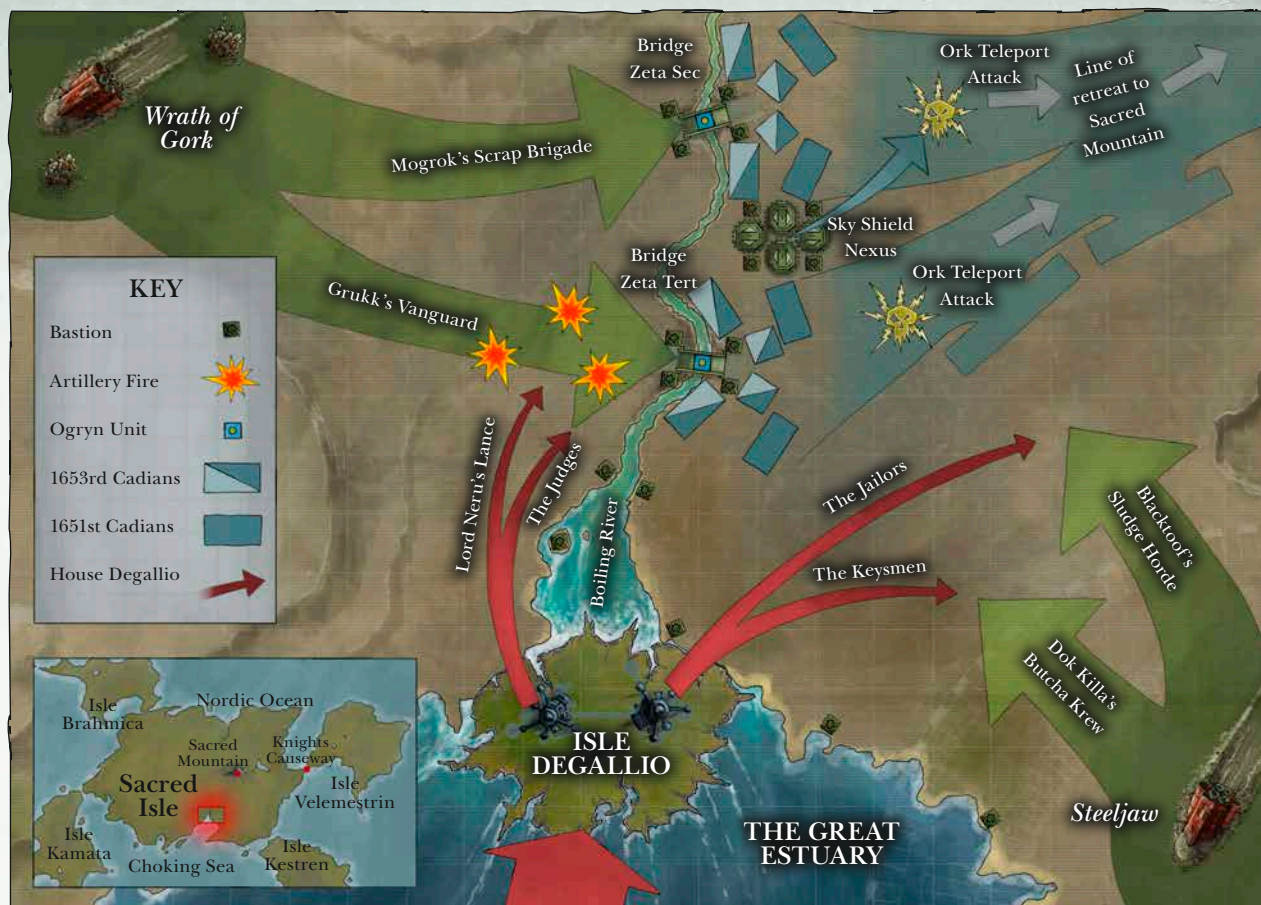
Stein and the rest of the Cadian high command muttered darkly at this new development, reassigning their Valkyrie

and Vendetta air support to intercept the xenos commander before he could reach the Cadian line. In the distance, lights winked and columns of jet-flame lit the night as the heavy aircraft of the Militarum Tempestus regiments lifted off from the Skyshield nexus, Taurox APCs tracking in their wake. They were only a few miles distant, stationed between bridges Zeta Sec and Zeta Tert, but the Warboss was faster. Smashing luckless underlings from his path, he stormed across the span of the bridge through a blinding net of lasfire, head lowered like a charging bull-grox.

The Ogryns upon the bridge set their slabshields and prepared for the Ork elite's impact, but Gruk had built up a cannonball momentum. He hit the Ogryns' line with such force the massive abhumans were bowled bodily to the ground. The Warboss started to lash out with his massive power claw, not sawing and crushing as he had against the Imperial Knights a few hours before, but using it as a giant metal club to bludgeon the reeling Ogryns to mush. Bonehead Grunk, the sergeant of the Bullgryn squad, raised his power maul in both hands and took a swing at Gruk's head that would have decapitated a Space Marine. Gruk stepped backwards at the critical moment before launching forward to shoulder-barge Grunk over the side of the bridge. The Ogryn's bellowing faded as Boiling River pulled him deep below.

The Ogryns were reinforced by another two Bullgryn squads just as Gruk's bodyguard hit home. Each Nob was clad in the heaviest armour their Mekks could provide. An untidy brawl that was more wrestling match than melee spilled across the bridge. The Valkyries and Vendettas that had scrambled from the nearby Skyshield nexus passed overhead, but with their abhuman comrades mingled amongst the Ork Meganobs, decent firing solutions were all but impossible.

Behind the Ork elite came a roaring flood of Ork warriors that stamped and chanted, the air all but set alight by their ravaging battlelust. Blasts of fizzing green energy arced up into the skies from



strangely-dressed shamans in their midst, two of them finding the Vendettas that roared overhead, striking their engines and sending them spinning out of control.

The Cadians stationed on the other side of the bridge focused their fire and made every volley count, killing hundreds of Orks and forcing those behind to scramble over the corpses of their comrades. They might as well have been throwing rocks against the waters of a burst dam. The green tide broke over the mauling Meganobs and Ogryns in the centre of the bridge and poured past, Grukk and his bodyguard all but hidden from sight as the Orks hurdled and leaped for the other side of the bridge. Lasfire spat, and with each passing second a dozen more Orks died. It was not enough.

THE STAGGERING STRIKE

Castellan Stein had predicted this eventuality; even expected it. Platoon by platoon, the Cadians began to withdraw, their pace measured as they moved to new predetermined positions without talking or slowing their rate of fire. Such was their precision and training that each soldier emptied his las-clip at the same time as

the rest of his squad, kneeling to reload just as the squad behind them took up the slack. The Orks boiled from the bridge in a scrambling heap, many of their number as much dead as alive as the horde fell over itself in their haste to reach close quarters. Some of them succeeded, tearing into the withdrawing Cadians with such force that the Guardsmen could not escape. Choppas rose and fell, limbs were hacked from bodies and heads cut in half as the frenzied violence of the Waaagh! took its toll.

Wherever a Cadian platoon fell, the triumphant Orks looked up from their bloody work only to realise they were exposed in a clear killing field. Heavy weapon platoons deployed at the rear of the Guard line hammered mass-reactive bolts and lascannon fire into the blood-covered marauders. Ork bodies shuddered and were ripped apart as the Guardsmen avenged their comrades with grim efficiency. Each time an Ork mob reached the Cadian line it would quickly find itself in no man's land. Moments later it would be ripped apart by the counterfire of nearby support platoons. Stein's trap had been set well, and its jaws were claiming xenos lives by the hundred.

'IF ANY OF YOU SO MUCH AS THINK ABOUT FIRING BEFORE I GIVE THE ORDER, YOU JUST VOLUNTEERED FOR PERMANENT REARGUARD AND LATRINE DUTY TO BOOT. WE ARE THE BEST SOLDIERS IN THE IMPERIUM, AND THE HONOUR OF CADIA RESTS ON YOUR SHOULDERS. THE GOD-EMPEROR HIMSELF IS WATCHING, SO DON'T YOU DARE FIRE, NOT BEFORE YOU SEE THE POINTS OF THEIR TEETH. BUT WHEN YOU DO, LET THEM HAVE ALL HELL!'

*- Sergeant Dain Halban,
Cadian 1651st regiment,
Infantry Company Epsilon*

THE RIVER RUNS RED

The Cadian strongpoint on the eastern side of Boiling River had proven all but unassailable. At that moment, though, the Orks' tribal shamans entered the fight. Moments later, mayhem reigned as the Ork invaders appeared from nowhere, falling upon the rear of Castellán Stein's lines and reversing the flow of the battle with one swift blow.

Stein's carefully positioned crumple zones had blunted the Ork advance at Zeta Tert and Zeta Sec alike. The Bullgryn squads had ultimately fallen to Gruk's onslaught, and the number of Orks charging across the bridges had proven practically endless. Still, the sheer discipline of the Cadian platoons had seen their ordered retreat tactics triumph again and again. As the Orks bottlenecked themselves on the far side of the river, the artillery companies of the 1653rd sent barrage after barrage hammering into the mass of green flesh, each blast taking a great chunk out of the horde. Stein nodded. So far, for every one of his men that had fallen, fifty, perhaps sixty Orks were littering the bridgeheads as corpses.

Then came something the Cadian high command had not predicted. Pinpricks of green light skidded and fizzed across the plains behind the Imperial Guard lines before blooming into shimmering hemispheres the size of hab-domes. The bubbles burst with audible pops to expose mob after mob of Orks, covered in blue warpaint and stomping their feet in unison as they chanted 'Ere we go' over and over again.

The artillery squadrons gazed in shocked awe at the frothing warriors that had materialised only a few hundred feet from them, the xenos psykers in their midst still glowing with faint green light. Desultory lasgun fire took down a handful of the newcomers, but it was of no use. The Orks swarmed amongst the static artillery, clambering over tracks and backplates to catch the panicking gunmen desperately trying to escape. It was hopeless. In a matter of minutes the Basilisk and Wyvern positions were overrun.

Stein frowned as the vox reports from his artillery went silent, and commanded his air support to come back around. Less than a minute later, Tempestor Prime Whitlock's Valkyries and Vendettas were inbound again, lascannons picking off Orks here and there with each pass. The Orks were all over the artillery batteries; even heavy bolter fire had little effect on them. Alarmingly, the barrel of each Basilisk had been raised to maximum elevation.

Many of the captured Basilisks lurched into one another with screeches of metal or turned slowly on the spot, but for the most part, they opened fire. There came a staccato series of booms as the artillery pieces looted by the blue-painted Ork raiders hammered their payloads into the skies. Up the earthshaker shells went, each tracing the steepest of parabolas in the air before falling back down into the ranks of the withdrawing Cadian platoons below.

The sheer violence of the sudden barrage destroyed all cohesion in the Cadian retreat. Each round killed a dozen or more of the tightly-packed soldiery slowly retreating from the front line. With the Guardsmen on the riverbanks occupied by the sudden heavy fire, the Orks that had swum across Boiling River were free to clamber up the banks, blades held between their snaggletoothed jaws. Within minutes the entire battleline was engulfed in violence. The ordered, disciplined Cadian withdrawal was fast becoming a total rout.

Stein was barking orders into his vox, desperate to restore the tatters of his battle plan and secure the planned retreat to the flanks of Sacred Mountain, when his Astropath, Zeil, approached him. Apprehension was etched upon the mystic's eyeless face.

Stein motioned for his men to be silent as Zeil stuttered his report. Two more Ork hordes had made planetfall to the southeast. He could feel a dull, threatening roar in the back of his mind that told him the savage armies were moving in to cut off their line of escape.

The vox-net crackled with shouts and screams as the Ork assault redoubled in intensity. Castellán Stein was cursing furiously when there came a clear and welcome drawl over the comms channel, calm and measured and heavy with the weight of years.



Sergeant Dain Halban spat into the dirt and ejected the smoking spent clip from his lasgun. He yelled at his squad to continue their measured retreat from the river as the men behind them laid down a rhythmic pattern of lasgun fire that scythed into the advancing Orks. Artillery rounds were hammering into their packed ranks as the xenos pressed close together to cross the bridges. Dain allowed himself a cruel smile as geysers of dirt and broken Ork bodies were hurled into the sky wherever a shell struck home. With clear orders and years of training, his men were stoic in the face of the foe. Every man and woman fired in well-disciplined ranks, not a single lasblast missing its target.

Dain was about to order another wave to fall back in good order when abruptly the artillery fell silent. For a moment amid the din of battle the sergeant was unsure of himself, perplexed as to why Stein would silence the guns with the Orks still pressing forward on all fronts. The next sound he heard was unmistakable, a descending whistle that every veteran knew to fear. He screamed out a warning only a fraction of a second before the first shell fell among the company. In an instant the neat firing line and ordered retreat of Dain's platoon was shattered, and it was the Orks' turn to yell and jeer as the Cadians' own artillery was

turned against them. For a few brief, chaotic moments, Dain tried to rally his men, reorder the lines and continue the fighting withdrawal, but all order was swept away by a barrage of shells, falling at random all along the Cadian line. At first only a few men turned and ran, panic distorting their faces as they fled, but in the space of less than a minute the fragile Cadian formation collapsed completely. The retreat swiftly became a rout.

As Orks pressed forward without the suppressing fire from the Cadians to slow their advance, the rear elements of the company became embroiled in a messy melee. Overrun by a snarling green tide, the defenders of Alaric were falling to crude blades and sheer brute force. Determined to die facing the enemy, Dain turned and emptied his clip in a hail of lasfire. With the Ork attackers almost upon him, Dain braced for death, bayonet raised, but was thrown to the ground by the shockwave of a battle cannon shell detonating. Deafened and gasping in the dirt, Dain looked up in awe. An Imperial Knight stepped over him, blotting out the light of the stars for a moment. The great war machine thundered into the Orks, engines roaring like some primeval predator ready to feed.

'This is Lord Neru Degallio, requesting permission to join the festivities.'

'Bloody well get on with it then!' shouted Stein, veins bulging in his neck.

Less than a minute later, the ground shook with such violence that the entire Cadian high command were almost pitched from their feet. All eyes turned south to see that the horizon had sprouted a profusion of towers and hive-spires. In the far distance, a looming cliff of metal ground towards the forces at Zeta Tert, its sheer mass forcing the ground to shudder in revulsion.



Isle Degallio slammed bodily into the mouth of the Great Estuary. It clogged the kilometer-wide watercourse like a cork sealing a bottle. Giant ramps, each easily as large as the river bridges the Ork invaders were now charging across, slammed down onto the mainland. Across their spans marched dozens, scores even, of Imperial Knights.

The giant walkers advanced at a loping run that filled the horizon with dull red dust, splitting up into four sub-houses as

they came. Two of the Knight lances took the west bank, moving in to bombard the thickening bottleneck of Orks attempting to cross at Zeta Tert. The other two groups headed east at speed, moving on an intercept course to cut off the Ork hordes that Zeil had detected to the south east. The dull thump of distant explosions echoed across the plains as the Knights blasted the leading vehicles at the head of each horde to scrap metal.

Stein breathed a heavy sigh of relief, thanking the Emperor for a moment before shouting out clipped instructions to each of his subsidiary commands. The orders were relayed through the ranks in tones that brooked no argument.

Slowly, painstakingly, and at a great cost in lives, the Cadian echelons re-established order. Militarum Tempestus regiments commanded by Tempestor Prime Whitlock flew in at speed, disembarking from the rear doors of their Valkyries in mid-air. Activating their grav-chutes, the descending warriors scythed down the Orks milling around the artillery batteries with pinpoint hot-shot lasgun fire, killing every last one of the xenos before their boots even touched the ground.

Squad by squad, the Cadians mounted up into their Taurox and Chimera transports and began their retreat in earnest. Cannon turrets pivoted backward to fire a stream of las and solid shot into the horde as it milled and swirled behind them, the xenos shouting obscenities in their wake.

**'BY THE ECHOES OF THE
GREAT SEA AND OUR
ANCESTOR KNIGHTS,**

**BY THE BLOOD OF OUR
BLOOD AND THE SPIRIT
OF ALARIC,**

**BE OUR BLADES NEVER DRY
AND OUR GUNS NEVER COLD,**

**WHILE THE ENEMIES OF
MAN WALK UPON THE
SACRED ISLE.'**

*- War Oath of
House Degallio*

SAVIOURS FROM THE SEA

The arrival of the Isle Degallio came not a moment too soon, for the greenskin hordes emerging from distant rust-ships were drawn to the sound of battle as starving men are drawn to the smell of freshly-cooked meat. As Lord Degallio made his presence felt, the struggle for Boiling River was rejoined with renewed fervour.

The Alabaster Lancers of Lord Neru Degallio, at full strength and with ammunition to spare, chanted the joyous battle hymns of their ancient order as they bore down upon the Ork invaders. They hit Gruk's bottlenecked column at Zeta Tert like a chevalier's spear plunging into the neck of a terrible green wyrm. Thermal cannons reduced Orks to superheated mist and rapid-firing battle cannons tore gouges out of the packed ranks just as the Cadian 1653rd artillery had done before. The death toll quickly mounted.

Lord Degallio himself led a squadron of his finest Knights to the far end of the bridge, ion shields reconfigured so they crackled between his warriors and the missiles that corkscrewed crazily from the horde in their direction. With a series of pinpoint blasts from their thermal cannons, the lancers melted through the stout girders and stanchions that raised the bridge above the boiling waters.

Their plan was sound – to strand the Orks of the first rust-ship on one side of the Great Estuary to allow their Cadian allies to escape – but the bridge had withstood the passage of millennia, and it would not fall easily. Worse still, the

massive forms of Gruk and his Meganobz were bullying their way through the horde toward them at speed

Lord Degallio's Knight suit, the White Warden, stamped its way into the throng. Crouching low with a hiss of hydraulics, the Knight's reaper chainsword whirled in a horizontal arc only a few feet from the ground. Dozens of Orks were chewed into red ruin as the Warden's arm ground on, but Degallio's true target was not the greenskins. At the fullest extent of the arc, the Warden's chainsword carved right into the central stanchion that held the bridge firm, screaming in exertion as its titanium teeth juddered through the heart of the bridge. Focused heavy stubber fire from Degallio's escort brought down any Orks that got too close to their lord, holding them back for a few vital seconds. With a great metallic scream, Degallio pushed the barrel of his Knight's battle cannon under the ruined bridge next to its chainsword and discharged a point-blank blast.

Slowly, miraculously, the White Warden lifted the splintering end of Bridge Zeta Tert like an ancient Alarican



demigod performing a mythical feat of strength. Rubble cascaded down, crushing the Orks that were pushed into the gap as hundreds of their tribe-mates fought to get within striking range of the great ivory walker. With a tremendous crack of stone, the bridge toppled to the right, a full half of its length falling away into the sulphurous waters of Boiling River. Hundreds of Orks fell with it. Grukk and his heavily-armoured retinue, only a few metres from bringing their power claws level with the White Warden's helm, staggered sideways for a moment before pitching into the depths with a great splash.

The Ork horde gave a monstrous bellow of rage and frustration. Bridge Zeta Tert, which had stood firm in the face of thousands of years of erosion and the hammer blows of Imperial artillery alike, had been destroyed.



THE SEABLADE OUTMATCHED

The sight of so many explosions erupting at the bridgehead of Zeta Tert had acted like a beacon for the bulk of the Ork horde. Lumbering, smoking war machines closed in on the Degallio Knights, their crude cannons sending fat-bodied shells hurtling towards the escort that protected Lord Neru as he collapsed the bridge. With the Degallio bodyguard focussed on keeping the Ork footsoldiers from swamping their master, a few of the approaching Ork walkers scored direct hits on the brightly-accountred Knights, dropping them to their knees or, in the case of Sire Betel Degallio, detonating their target spectacularly as the walker's reactor went critical.

With the bridge collapsed and a new threat fast approaching, Lord Neru ordered his Knights to rally in the watercourse of Boiling River itself. The Knights carefully stepped backwards into the shallows of the river, a feat of agility that the Ork walkers would find impossible to emulate. Navy-pattern ion shields were brought up in formation to form a crackling shield of energy that flared bright every few seconds as Ork shells struck home.

It was then that the xenos walkers came into view through the dust and confusion of battle. Squat Orkoid effigies ground forward on piston-driven legs, looking for all the world as if Grukk's own war machine had spawned a brood of metal monsters and sent them to finish what it had started. Solid-shot cannons of extreme size hung like muscular arms from each of the humanoid walkers, thundering an impressive volume of firepower into the Degallio ranks. The Alabaster Lancers' ion shields deflected or detonated the majority of the shot, but here and there a shell snuck through, detonating on an armoured thigh or ripping open a heraldic carapace.

Lord Neru quickly surveyed the situation from the cover of the ruined bridge. There were dozens of the damned things heading through the smoke, and the western

Degallio detachment had been reduced to fewer than ten strong in the fighting at the bridgehead. Worse still, the Knights were taking heavy fire from the Orks that had been fighting the Cadians on the other side of the river.

With two massive Ork armies having no foe to vent their fury upon other than the Degallios, Lord Neru's options were narrowing fast. He ordered his lance to break formation and stride downriver as fast as possible in box formation, the ion shields of the outlying Knights to either side and those of the rearmost Knights protecting their backs as they made all speed toward Isle Degallio. Along the banks of the river, the footslogging Ork horde did their best to keep pace, but the Knights were masters of their war engines and still had plenty of power left to burn.

THE GREAT ISLAND

A ramshackle flotilla of Ork vehicles followed the Degallio Knights, roaring along the river bank. They veered and swerved as they fired wildly inaccurate volleys at Lord Neru's lancers. The vehicles pursued the splashing, stomping Knights for kilometre after kilometre, their crew whooping and making foul gestures as they zoomed along the riverbank. Swarms of buzzing copter-craft hurtled up the watercourse, guns blazing as they darted past like giant mosquitos harrying their cumbersome prey. For the Knights to turn and fight would be to allow the pursuing hordes a chance to catch up, and that could not be allowed.



Lord Neru gritted his teeth as Sire Tetherine Degallio's Knight went down into the water, its leg blasted from its hip by a lucky rokkit shot. His Knights were so close now he could almost imagine the kiss of the sea on his face. Any moment now the Orks would learn a painful lesson.

Suddenly, there it was – a distant crack-boom that was swiftly followed by a vast column of water shooting upward at their flank, which consumed a trio of Deffkoptas that were whirring past the retreating Knights. A moment later the riverbank exploded into fire as detonations stitched their way through the xenos pursuit with merciless, relentless force. Scrap pinged and scythed through the air, bouncing off Knight carapaces and thudding into the dust as the Ork vehicles were reduced to shards of glowing shrapnel. Isle Degallio itself had joined the fight, its long-guns in range and accurate enough to hammer the Ork forces without endangering their own warriors.

With the immense firepower of the iron island brought to bear, the few surviving Ork vehicles howled off into the wilderness, looking for less ferocious prey. Warhorns blaring, Lord Neru Degallio's Knights marched the last few hundred metres to their fortress, a vast hangar bay opening in the island's guts as they drew near. The battle of the bridge was over, and with it, the momentum of Grukk's assault blunted.

DA FISTS OF GORK

Though slow and cumbersome, the Gorkanauts known as 'da Fists of Gork' are amongst Grukk's most powerful assets. Each has fought on a dozen worlds, and their rusted hulls are spattered with the remains of a wide variety of alien species as well as the blood of countless Imperial troops.



KANKILLA

Drogg, the pilot of Kankilla, was once stomped by a Killa Kan after its Grot pilot decided to take revenge on his bullying nemesis. Drogg survived, albeit barely. He then spent his fortune on the killiest Gorkanaut he could afford before crushing the offending Killa Kan, and every other Kan in the tribe.

BLAGFIST

Blagfist is piloted by a rich Deathskull Nob called Bokk Stickyfinga. He stole the war machine purely as a way to ensure he had his pick of the best loot. Not a week goes past without Blagfist being equipped with even more firepower, looted from the remains of another blasted battlefield. Indeed, so successful a thief is Bokk – an outcast from the Charadon empire – that he refers to himself as the 'arch-larcenist' of Charadon. Most of his comrades don't get the gag, of course, but this never stops old Bokk from having a chuckle. This jocular personality is set aside in battle, however, for Stickyfinga takes his fighting very seriously. The old Deathskull might have swiped Blagfist as a means to and end, but he has since become quite attached to his armoured steed. Indeed, he takes any damage to the mighty walker as a serious personal insult, focussing his anger on those who dare fire upon him. Needless to say, between the Gorkanaut's vast firepower and trampling mass, few foes live to make this same mistake twice...



DEFFHEAD

The Gorkanaut known as Deffhead earned its name not because of its beweaponed iron helm, but because during a battle on the canyon world of Mongrel III its looted comms gave out: the oblivious pilot ignored the advice of his comrades and toppled straight into a ravine.



GORKSPUNCH

Gorkspunch is an ugly mechanical brute whose pilot, Rotgrubb, is a fervent believer in that most brutal of Ork warrior gods. His giant klaw always has a fresh coat of green paint, for Rotgrubb maintains that the right hand of his machine is the instrument of Gork himself.



DA BLACK GUT

Da Black Gut is ancient by Gorkanaut standards. The veteran walker earned its name after tearing out the belly of a Hierophant Bio-titan on Vorpax Eliara. Since that day, the Gorkanaut's front plate has been scorched black by Tyranid bio-acid, as has the face of its pilot, Gobshak.



THE CLOCKWORK MASSACRE

The shocking impetus of Waaagh! Grukk's initial assault had been spent, and the Imperial troops had consolidated their forces at the base of Sacred Mountain. Wounded and out for revenge, Grukk had bashed together an army larger than his two previous forces combined. More so than ever before, the Imperial allies were ready for him.

The assault from House Degallio had bought the Cadians vital time to withdraw, as Castellán Stein had originally planned. The Cadian 1651st had mounted up in their transports, and whilst Lord Neru's Knights drew the Ork vehicles away south along the banks of Boiling River, the Cadians made good their escape. A thick pall of dust covered their tracks as they pulled away from the Ork assault at the twin bridges of Zeta Sec and Zeta Tert, heading towards the rallying point of Sacred Mountain.

Stein knew full well that, at this early stage in the war, the danger had been stayed rather than averted altogether. The scattered holdings of the planet had limited the amount of damage the Orks were able to do thus far, and the actions at Grukk's flagship and the bridges of Boiling River had killed thousands of Orks – perhaps even tens of thousands. Yet by the estimates of Stein's strategos, the marauding xenos numbered in the billions.

Wherever a rust-ship had landed, the Orks were still deploying in great numbers. Just as the castellan had feared, their hordes were converging upon the plumes of

smoke and dust that had been kicked up by the battles thus far. Unless a decisive blow was struck soon to break the back of the hordes, the Cadians and their Imperial Knight allies would be surrounded, forced into a defensive war where their superior mobility was next to useless.

Stein's vox-net was opened wide. His clarion sign eventually reached the barons of the remaining knightly houses, and a consensus was reached. The allies were to lay an ambush on the slopes of the mountain, using its steep shoulders and rugged terrain to slow the Ork advance to a crawl as the big guns of the Astra Militarum and knightly houses took their toll. Stein himself would lead the foremost defenders, a show of defiance that was sure to bring Ork leaders to battle and possibly even draw Grukk himself to the front line, for Stein's psyker adjutant was certain the brute had made it out of the Battle of Boiling River alive. The castellan knew from his past battles against the green menace that killing the leader of an Ork force would likely cripple its morale and cohesion in one blow. Still, it was a risky gamble – where the leaders of each Waaagh! went, the most devastating of attacks were sure to follow.

THE COMING OF GERANTIUS

As the hours of anticipation dragged past and the Cadians manned the slopes of Sacred Mountain, Lord Viashtu and the rest of House Brahmica marched into view. With them were the Knights of House Velemestrin and, at their rear, a slow-moving walker the Knights knew only as Gerantius. The creature was a Knight, but the pitted green and bronze of its structure spoke of an immense age that no mortal life could have spanned. Stein moved up to interrogate the new arrival, but his strident calls yielded no response.

There was a sudden series of booms as the artillery stationed on the scree just below Stein's position opened fire. The Ork hordes were within sight, and the castellan had given the artillery commander of the 1653rd a standing order to fire as soon as they were within extreme range. Stein spun on his heel to watch the volley of shells arc through the air to their vanishing point, blossoming into a string of dust clouds amongst the teeming hordes in the foothills below. A moment later the rumble of explosions reached them.

'All guns fire at will!' roared Stein. His message was relayed up and down the line with practiced efficiency. The Cadians had dug in across the fortified slopes of the mountain with overlapping fields of fire that reminded the castellan of the Kasrs back home. Textbook stuff, thought Castellán Stein. This should be a total slaughter.

Soon the platoons added their heavy weapons fire to the fusillade. The Orks below accelerated, but the closer they came, the more force met them from the slopes.



Stein looked down at the column of dark green tanks rolling into battle formation and nodded to himself. Plenty left, he thought. Plenty left to force a quick victory. He'd seen an Ork command-collapse before, but never from such a perfect vantage point as this.

Turning back to his unit, Stein had his vox officer send his clarion-sign for what felt like the fiftieth time. The interference caused by the mountain was not helping. Whatever was inside that forbidding peak had an electromagnetic signature to rival an Ark Mechanicus.

A screaming crackle came over the vox before Kavel tuned it in. A thick, formal Alarican accent emerged from the static.

'...rendez-vous. Cadia, this is Lord Viashtu for Houses Brahmica and Velemestrin, requesting of thee more details. Imperador Vidas.'

Stein rushed over and grabbed the transmitter gauntlet. 'Meet-point Sacred Mountain, coordinates Sanguine-Six-Alpha-Deus-Three.'

White noise filled the vox for a moment. Dust clouds dotted the horizon, closing in with deceptive speed. Judging by the numbers involved, they were definitely hostiles. Stein could hear the roar of the approaching Waaagh! on the wind; it was not a pleasant sound.

'Sacred Mountain is... rather large, Lord Stein,' came a tentative reply.

'What? I'll repeat; Sanguine-Six-Alpha...' shouted Stein. Then a horrible suspicion dawned. 'House Brahmica, are you telling me you don't actually understand Imperial grid coordinates?' Static fizzed over the vox-net, but nothing more.

'Look,' said Stein tersely, scanning around, 'you know the ridge that looks a bit like a big red teat? We're about a mile south east of that.'

'Ah,' said Lord Viashtu, 'received and understood. Will relay to Houses Brahmica and Velemestrin forthwith. Ave Imperador. Oh, and Lord Stein? We have a... distinguished visitor with us...'

Baneblades and Stormhammers added their voices to the infernal din; then the battle cannons of Houses Brahmica and Velemestrin's Knights Paladin. The Ork charge fragmented, becoming streams of greenskin vehicles that rumbled and bounced across the scree, but they were bullseyed with clinical efficiency by the lascannons of Stein's heavy weapon troopers. Lasguns bristled from behind every escarpment and battlement, but as yet, none of the small arms had been fired. The volume of heavy firepower that was pouring from the Cadian firing line had ensured not a single Ork had made it to within rifle range.

A thin tingle of unnatural energy crawled across Stein's scalp, and behind him bright green bubbles of energy began to sizzle into existence on the scree. Orks by the dozen shimmered and hissed into being wherever the bubbles burst, but hundreds of lasguns were already pointing towards them, and the teleporting Orks were felled by volley fire from rank upon rank of Guardsmen.

As Stein watched, the ancient Knight Gerantius strode down the slope, then loped faster, then leapt into the air. A knot of teleporting Meganobz materialised beneath him just in time for him to land with both feet. He crushed most of them in an explosion of loose stone before vaporising the rest with a close-range blast from his thermal cannon.

Stein could hear shouts of encouragement and applause from the other Alarican nobles drifting over the vox-net. 'Stop congratulating it and keep firing!' he snapped into the vox.

Even with the unpredictable heroics of the Knights, the battle plan was proceeding like clockwork. Ork fighter jets sailed through the skies towards their position, but the Steel Host's Hydra was quick to fill the skies with a flak pattern that saw them tumble down in flames. Fat-tired Ork buggies bounced along the mountain pathways, each torn to shreds by cannon fire from the Taurox transports that formed a gun line of their own on the lower slopes. A trio of the bladed mini-copters the Orks used as outriders swept low, their guns chattering. Gerantius launched itself off a boulder and bodily smashed two of them out of the sky whilst its pivoting heavy stubber brought down the third. Stein blinked in disbelief at the ancient walker's agility.

The cloud of dust below was coming closer, but the uneven terrain of the mountainside was forcing the greenskins to attack piecemeal. Another two Ork fighter planes were punched from the skies by Hydra fire, whilst mortar shells were lobbed high by Cadian Wyverns before detonating in a string of explosions. The Ork race's compulsion to engage in melee would be their undoing, thought Stein; he would ensure it.

AN ANCIENT ALLY

During the first battle for Sacred Mountain, the appearance of Gerantius, the Forgotten Knight, had a potent and dramatic effect upon the Nobles present.

Every one of them had grown up hearing tales of the legendary Knight, stories told to them by their fathers, peers and even whispered to them by the echoes of their ancestors from inside their Thrones Mechanicum.

Such was the presence the ancient Knight carried with him that it filled the Nobles with terrible and final purpose; they were resolved to destroy Warboss Gruk and rout his Red Waaagh! utterly for daring to set foot upon their world.

GERANTIUS

THE FORGOTTEN KNIGHT

The ancient Knight that dwells in the heart of Sacred Mountain bears the scars of millennia of war. Though the legend of a cyclopean guardian possessed of uncanny prescience is common to all the islands of Alaric Prime, these tales vary massively in the detail. Some islands believe Gerantius is a giant cast in iron, others that he is a psychic ghost trapped in the form of a machine, and still more that he is an immortal Knight frozen in time from ages past. Despite their theories, none truly know who the mysterious warrior once was, nor the secrets of the vault in which he whiles away the centuries. Without him the priceless secrets of Sacred Mountain – and perhaps Alaric Prime itself – would have been lost long ago.

323.M33 THE SCOURING OF THE TROGLODYTES

Gerantius exterminates the viridian troglodytes that infest the dank tunnels beneath Sacred Mountain. He kills their hulking, sightless king in single combat and reroutes a sulphurous underground river to flush the rest of the vile brood from the mountain's roots.

454.M35 ARCHAEO TECH RAIDERS

The Rogue Trader Belleraphio van Dyne breaches Sacred Mountain with the help of a pack of inquisitive Ratling mechanics. The light-fingered 'investigators' are crushed under Gerantius' armoured feet.

959.M36 RENEGADE ASSAULT

The renegade Space Marines that call themselves the Malefactors descend upon Alaric Prime, intent on seizing as many Imperial Knights as they can for their own burgeoning warband. Gerantius leads the defence of Sacred Mountain before hunting down and destroying enough of the invaders to drive the rest off-planet.

114.M39 THE TORONAC AMBULL CULL

When the ambull population of Isle Toronac threatens to destabilise Alaric Prime's ecosystem, Gerantius emerges once more and begins to hunt the lumbering claw-beasts one by one. He kills over six thousand ambulls before retreating to Sacred Mountain, his battered shell encrusted with the dried gore of his kills.

898.M41 XENOS HUNT

When a scattering of Tyranid vanguard organisms make their way onto Alaric Prime, Gerantius hunts the Lictors and Genestealers down until all have been exterminated. In the process, he prevents a tendrill of Hive Fleet Gorgon from diverting its deadly attentions to the planet.

998.M41 WAAAGH! GRUKK

The Orks invade Alaric Prime in force, and Gerantius stirs from his slumbers once more.

268.M35 THE DAEMONBREACH KILL

Gerantius stalks out of Sacred Mountain when a botched ritual in Castle Veric results in a daemonic infestation. Though the horned beasts that spill from the Warp breach are eventually driven back by the Knights of Alaric's noble houses, the Inquisitor that coordinated the war effort decides that the populace has been tainted beyond recovery. He decrees that Exterminatus is the only answer. Before the Inquisitor's deadly message can be sent, Gerantius detonates his ship's fusion drives with his thermal cannon, killing everyone on board. The event is reported to the Imperium as a 'regrettable accident'.

397.M36 THE RUSTING CURSE

Without warning, Gerantius appears on the far side of Alaric Prime and douses a remote monastery in purifying flame. Though none will ever know, this act suppresses a dreadful rust-plague that would have reduced all metal upon the planet to ferrous dust.

291.M37 A CRUEL SURPRISE

The Commorrite raiders that descend upon Alaric Prime in search of mortal playthings are met by the wrath of the planet's silent sentinel as soon as they open their webway portal. Barely a handful of the vicious xenos warriors make it through the storm of thermal cannon fire that greets their arrival, and the survivors' retreat is just as swift as their appearance.

792.M39 A TRAGEDY OUT OF TIME

Six regiments of Astra Militarum make the translation from Warp space on the outskirts of the Sanctus Reach System, heading to Alaric upon orders to intercept and destroy the Malefactors. Unbeknownst to them, the fickle tides of the Warp have dislocated their arrival time. They arrive several millennia too late. The Imperial Guard instead wage war upon the incarcerated masses of the Alarican prison isles, believing the criminals there to be the renegades they have been ordered to kill. The intervention of Gerantius complicates matters just as the Alarican knightly houses are trying to prove their loyalty to the Imperium. War breaks out, but only for a few days – the Degallio household successfully brokers peace after its messenger-skulls make it to the Imperial Guard high command. The death toll still numbers in the thousands.





FALL OF A LEGEND

The Ork invaders were throwing themselves at the defended positions in ever-greater numbers, but so far the Cadians and their Knight allies had proved equal to the task of hurling them back. As the mountain slopes became littered with smouldering corpses, Grukk himself entered the fray, and the Knight Gerantius moved to stop him.

While the battle raged on the slopes of Sacred Mountain, fighting still sputtered and flared around Boiling River and the beached rust-ships. Orks and Guardsmen continued to fight for their lives in the wake of the great Warboss' defeat and the intervention of the Knights of Alaric.

Distracted by the events on the mountain, the Ork bosses were taken by surprise by the lone Knight of House Kamata that emerged from the smoke and fog of battle, charging across the open ground toward the Wrath of Gork. The Guardsmen still holding positions on the same side of Boiling River gave a ragged cheer as the Knight crashed through the thinned Ork lines and bodily smashed its way inside the hulking rust-ship.

The Freeblade Dyros Kamata had returned. He lumbered into the ship's hold, where Mekes were cutting up the remains of the Knights that had fallen in Kestren's charge. Over the hiss of burners and the whine of saws, feeble human moans and wails drifted around the ship's hold. With a withering hail of fire from his heavy stubbers, Dyros cleared the chamber and set about searching the wrecks for the living.

The ground shook as a trio of gaudily-painted Ork wagons grumbled up the slope below the Cadian lines. In their wake came the tusked monstrosity that was Grukk's own personal transport, protected to some degree by the wall of scrap metal trundling before it. Krak missiles and lascannon blasts blew away plates of ablative armour, but the Orks had anticipated such a fusillade, and it slowed them hardly at all.

Stein gestured with his arms to the nobles of House Velemestrin and Brahmica, and their Knights Errant stomped forward in response. Thermal cannons screamed as the Battlewagons trundled into range, coring two of the three Ork wagons and clipping the third so that it veered sharply into a boulder-strewn ravine. Grukk's own transport barged through the flames of its predecessors, its curving tusks sending scrap metal in all directions. The thing was coming right for Stein's position.

Without warning, Gerantius changed direction and barged sidelong into the Ork wagon, sending it crashing over onto its side. The massive vehicle skidded down the slope for a few metres before grinding to a halt, its passengers spilling out into the dust and flinging themselves towards the legs of the ancient Knight that had overturned their ride. A hulking figure was amongst them, light glinting from its giant saw-palmed claw.

'Forward teams, advance and fire,' said Stein in clipped tones. In response, three Cadian weapon squads revealed themselves from behind the boulders strewn around Stein's position. Grukk stumbled towards them, bellowing defiance through bloodied jaws.

Stein raised his plasma pistol and fired. The bolt struck home in Grukk's midsection. On cue, all three of his special weapons teams opened fire, a staccato thump filling the air as krak grenades fell around the Warboss in an explosive rain.

Grukk was hurled from his feet as the grenades struck home, his roars blotted out by a string of deafening bangs. Dust,

stone and burned blood spumed into the air amid puffs of blinding flame. A moment later, Gerantius' great claw-like foot came around in a sweeping kick, rolling the Warboss' wrecked Battlewagon onto his broken body with a final, resounding crash.



The spectacular felling of the Ork Warboss had been so explosive and, most of all, so public that not one single Cadian or Ork could have failed to see it. Waves of dismay rippled through the Orks at the base of the mountain.

'Now!' shouted Stein, 'Charge! For Cadia and the Emperor, charge!'

In response, a thousand Cadians poured from the barricades and boulders, roaring a war cry of their own. Lasfire lit the slopes and bayonets flashed bright. Running down the slopes, they fell upon the reeling Ork vanguard with impressive force. Few of them reached the resultant combat, for Stein had judged his timing perfectly. Robbed of their great leader, the Orks turned tail, and were already in full retreat by the time the Cadians hit home.

The battle had turned into a massacre. With the rout of the Ork front line, the xenos milled in confusion. Those retreating hampered those who tried to advance, whilst those advancing got in the way of those who were trying to retreat. It could hardly have been a more target-rich environment for the Cadian artillery stationed high on the slopes.

A hailstorm of ordnance rained down and greenskinned limbs were blasted high into the air as Imperial Guard Basilisks and Wyverns walked their deadly barrages through the horde.

The breaking of Grukk's horde was every bit as spectacular as Stein had hoped. He smiled wide, cracked his knuckles, and gave the order for pursuit.

THE BREAKING OF THE CLANS

As the ordnance rained down and word of Grukk's death spread throughout the teeming masses, the cohesion of the Ork invasion began to break apart. Castellan Stein and his men watched the Ork horde erupt into a series of scuffles, then brawls, then full-blown battles as the bosses of each tribe fought to become the new master of the leaderless Waaagh! and claim the invasion for their own, even as the Imperial bombardment continued. With the death of Grukk, the battle for Sacred Mountain was effectively over, at least for now.

Having broken like a wave against the tidal bastion of Sacred Mountain, the Ork horde was easily scattered over the next few days by the determined assaults of the Cadians and their Knight allies. Stein's after-siege actions were every bit as inspired as his layered defences. With each bombardment and Militarum Tempestus assault they forced more and more ground in between the Ork clans and tribes, deliberately driving wedges between those who wore blue warpaint and those who painted their vehicles red, and separating those clad in chequered black and white from those in ostentatious yellow.

The goal of the Astra Militarum's new strategy was not to exterminate the xenos outright, for the Orks still numbered in their billions, but to divide and displace. Castellan Stein believed that, should he succeed in breaking the Ork clans into separate armies, they would fight amongst themselves. In the battle for ultimate leadership that ensued, the warring Ork tribes would effectively be doing the defenders' job for them.



Big Mek Mogrok oversaw the vanguard advance from atop a requisitioned Morkanaut. Idly picking his nose, he watched as Warboss Grukk and his Battlewagons blazed a path up the mountainside. The dumb brute was heading into a humie trap, Mogrok mused, flicking a nose-squig into his maw and biting down with a crunch. Even a snotling could see that.

Same old Grukk, always charging in. His bullish temper had got him good and boiled at the battle for the bridges. To his credit, he had got back into the fray soon enough, dripping wet and pale as a Squiggoth's guts, but angrier than ever. Only a fool would have challenged his right to lead right then. Still, one day that foul temper would be the boss' undoing; all of Mogrok's fellow Bad Moons were agreed on that.

The Big Mek had a feeling that day would be today. Especially as he'd personally disabled the force field on Grukk's ride less than half an hour ago and triggered his personal tellyporta gubbins before the big lunk could find out.

Mogrok twisted the aerials on his telly-scope, and the heart of the enemy lines came into dirty focus. There was that pansy flag, the one the humie king used as his bosspole. After the kicking Grukk had taken at the bridges, the flag was a red rag to a bull-grox, and the humies knew it. Sure enough, Grukk's Battlewagon was hurtling right toward it, smashing through the wreckage of his escort in the hope of a trophy kill. The green humie walker nearby had other ideas. Mogrok chuckled as the war machine

barged Grukk's ride onto its side and started stamping on the retinue that spilled out.

'I got a good shot on that big green fing, boss,' said Mogrok's Mek mate, Dagogg, squinting into the crosshairs of his shokk attack gun. 'Want me to give him a nasty shokk?'

'Nah,' replied Mogrok, scratching some dried blood off the end of his piston-klaw. 'I reckon Grukk's got this one covered.'

There was a rippling string of bangs as the humie king's gunmen blew Grukk off his feet. The big green walker drew back a foot, booted the Warboss' wrecked ride and rolled it over onto Grukk's fallen body. At this sight, a shuddering roar of disbelief spread across the mountainside.

'Oh dear, I was wrong, wot a disaster,' said Mogrok, drily. 'Back to the ship, Dagz. Time for us Meks to show 'em how it's done.'



THE TRIBES DIVIDED

Following Grukk's fall at the battle of Sacred Mountain, the Ork clan rulers scattered throughout the invading armies began a series of civil wars to determine who would lead in the defeated Warboss' stead. There were several main contenders dotted across the planet, each bashing heads at his own rust-ship in order to steal a march on his rivals.



BADDFRAG THE TANK BOSS

Baddfrag knows his Mark 8 Mars pattern Chimera from his Mark 6, and takes any excuse to lecture his fellow Blood Axes on the subject. He loves nothing more than showing off his collection of looted wagons in battle by levelling a storm of crude but effective firepower at the foe.



RADDAK BLUEFINGA

The Deathskulls are a superstitious lot, and none more so than Raddak Bluefinga. A shortage of blue pigment saw him fight without his warpaint upon Obstiria, and he lost his arm in the first hour. Since then he has been covered in 'lucky' blue paint, and demands the same of his followers.



SKYBOSS WINGNUTZ

An avowed Speed Freek, Wingnutz had a near-religious experience upon the hive world of Ghul Jensen when he first piloted a Dakkajet. Since that day, Wingnutz has amassed a ramshackle fleet of looted and kustomised aircraft that follow in his wake.



BOGROT BONES

Bogrot is a dirty, low-down cheat, and a legend amongst the clans of Waaagh! Grukk. An itinerant peddler with an eye for a crooked deal, Bogrot rides his pet Squiggoth at the head of a massive scrap caravan that boasts more Orky artillery than the rest of the tribes put together.



GASHRAKK DA FLASH

Warboss Gashrakk is that rarest of all things – a clean Ork. A former first mate of Badrukk himself, he was thrown out of the Kaptin's armada for being too much of a show-off git, and that's really saying something.

Gashrakk has an unusual compulsion to own the shiniest, newest wargear he can get his hands on, and keeps his grot hordes busy in a never-ending cycle of polishing, scrubbing and repainting. His lads like to boast their boss never fires the same gun twice. Most of the time, they're right – Gashrakk has a crew of Gretchin who carry a selection of his kustom shootas to war so he never has to worry about repeating himself.

Despite – or perhaps because of – his obsessive need to show off, Gashrakk is a serious force to be reckoned with. The Bad Moon's every act is thought out in advance. Battle plans are carefully prepared to ensure maximum showyness. Indeed, it is not unheard of for Gashrakk to refuse to commit his forces to a fight unless he knows he's on to a winner. This has been known to cause grumbles of resentment amongst Gashrakk's ladz, but the boss keeps his warband in line by showering them with loot.

Besides, the only thing a Bad Moon likes better than looking good is kicking their enemies' heads in while they're doing it. Gashrakk's obsessive planning ensures that more often than not, this is exactly what his followers get to do. The other Ork warleaders on Alaric Prime sneer at 'old last minute Gashrakk', for Da Flash's warband have been known to come thundering in only once the real fighting's done and victory already assured. Yet this scorn is just thinly veiled envy – Gashrakk's ladz have all the best kit, and always seem to be in the right place at the right time to snatch the glory for themselves.

Unsurprisingly, Gashrakk's rather un-Orky approach to warfare has led to him accumulating preposterous amounts of wealth. After all, it's easy to bully your way to the pick of the loot when your ladz are less shot-up than everyone else's. His warband boasts dozens of Flash Gitz, and hundreds of richer-than-your-average-Ork Boyz. Furthermore, this vast slab of muscle is backed up with an impressive arsenal of war engines and killer contraptions. Artillery galore, walkers of every (bright yellow) stripe, and a fleet of gold-chased Trukks and Battlegagons cement Gashrakk's military might.



BIG REDD DA WARPHEAD

The mysterious Warphead known only as Big Redd is held in awe amongst the madboyz of Waaagh! Gruk. Taller than a full-grown Goff Nob, and forever muttering to himself, Big Redd vomits green lightning at any who challenge him, burning them to a crisp.

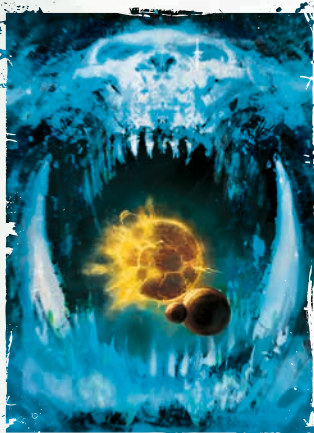


GOFFBOSS DROGG

The battle-hungry psychopath who calls himself Goffboss Drogg is in contention for the leadership of the Ork hordes purely because his rust-ship arrived late. Having escaped the slaughter of Boiling River and Sacred Mountain, Drogg's horde is untouched and spoiling for a fight.

WAAAGH! MOGROK

Unbeknownst to the rest of the Ork bosses vying for leadership, there was one amongst them who was already well ahead of the game. Whilst the other clans and tribes fought amongst themselves, Big Mek Mogrok and his Bad Moons were already enacting their plan to embroil the Imperial forces in the greatest battle Alaric Prime had seen yet.



MORK

Mork, the most cunning god of the Ork pantheon, is the patron deity of greenskin thinkers, creators and shamans. Whereas Gork is most likely to clobber an enemy god in the face, Mork will happily wait until his enemy's back is turned before raising his club and belting him around the back of the head. It is Mork who is revered by the stranger and arguably more intelligent strains of Orks – Kommandos, Weirdboyz, Mekboyz, and those rare Warbosses who like to have a good hard think about their battle plans before beating their enemies into a bloody red paste.

Big Mek Mogrok was a know-it-all git through and through. He was the kind of Ork who would rather build a giant war engine covered in dakkaguns than run towards the foe pell-mell, getting shot to bits in the normal greenskin manner. Though he has often been accused of 'not being one of da Boyz,' Mogrok is so good at creating big, impressive war machines that not even Grukk himself was dumb enough to refuse him a place in the upper echelons of the tribe.

Though none of the would-be Ork warlords of the Waaagh! liked to admit it, Mogrok had been the power behind the throne for quite some time. It was Mogrok that pioneered the force fields that allowed an armada of rust-ships to blast their way through the Warp rift that led to the Alaric system, force fields so powerful they could even shrug off the ground-to-orbit defence lasers of their target world's fortified cities. It was Mogrok who was behind the creation of the deadly Gorkanauts that engaged the Imperial Knights at Boiling River, and it was his intermittent genius that spawned the Morkanauts hidden at the heart of his own personal horde.

What few of the Ork invaders suspected was that Mogrok had been waiting for his chance to usurp Grukk's rule for many years. Mogrok intentionally steered the Waaagh! toward Obstiria, reasoning that a Chapter of Space Marines defending their home world would be fierce enough to cut Grukk down to size or even, with a bit of luck, slay him once and for all.

Amazingly, the Warboss' headlong charge had been powerful enough to smash open the Obsidian Glaives' fortress monastery before they could turn the tide. With several billion Orks falling upon a thousand Space Marines in a sudden avalanche of violence, Grukk secured victory, and Mogrok was forced to keep to his back seat role for a little longer.

Alaric Prime was Mogrok's last chance to see Grukk brought low before the Waaagh! left the system in flames, and the tedious interstellar voyage to the next system put a crimp on his plans. Luckily

the Knights of the planet proved up to the task, and the gateway to true leadership soon swung open.

Mogrok's first act after Grukk's downfall at Sacred Mountain was to muster his forces back at his titanic rust-ship, *Toof o' Mork*. No sooner had he marshalled his horde of Mekboyz, Lootas, Battlewagons and walkers than he had set off across the plains, heading for the largest concentration of humans he could find.

Mogrok knew that humies had some weird ideas about who and what was worth protecting. For some reason, the bigger and badder the humie, the more likely he was to come to the aid of the smaller humies when they got into trouble. The Space Marines were proof enough of that, turning up to the fight whenever a Waaagh! got a bit of momentum behind it. It was exactly the sort of thing that annoyed the Big Mek about these weaklings that had somehow spread across the galaxy – weaklings who deserved to be slaughtered, not saved. Still, that was why Mork had sent him to grind them into the dust and take their planets for himself.

Whilst his rival Warbosses were still fighting amongst themselves, Mogrok led his Mek horde towards the massed formations of human infantry making their way across the savannah towards a plateau of crenellated keeps in the distance. Humie runts, thought Mogrok; killing a few thousand of those weaklings should be the perfect bait for bringing the big stompy Imperial walkers out into the scrap – and, in the process, lure more battle-hungry Orks to join Mogrok's fight.

This time, however, it would be the Orks that sprung the traps on the humies, not the other way round. Mogrok's horde had more than enough dirty tricks to take out even the biggest of the humies' war robots, and a few hundred tanks besides.

The Big Mek grinned toothily as his fizzing telly-scope brought the human army trekking across the plains below into focus. With all the preparations he'd put in place, the payoff was going to be a lot of fun.



THE WAR OF KUNNIN'

The sledgehammer tactics of Waaagh! Grukk had taken a massive bite out of the Sanctus Reach System, but had failed at the last. The methods of his successor, Mogrok, were unusual for his kind – he preferred to think first, then fight later. As the Imperial forces were about to find out, they could be shockingly effective.

When Grukk was taken out, his loyal Skull-Nobz were swiftly run off by Mogrok's followers. Led by Bossnob Skrak, they herded together those grots and oddboyz they could kick into line, before setting off to find somewhere new to plant their bosspoles.

Days later, the last survivors of this ragtag tribe washed up on the shores of Blistered Isle. The scrap-skiffs that had borne them to this isolated spot were coming apart, yet they had served their purpose. As Grukk's last greenskins stumbled up the beach between hissing sulphur vents, their beady red eyes settled on the distant silhouettes of humie buildings. Stuff to kill, stuff to loot, and best of all no Mogrok – Grukk's ladz shot each other toothy grins before setting off to get stuck in.

The first stage of Mogrok's grand plan was geared more around the Ork mindset than that of his foes. The Big Mek understood what made the Ork race tick, and knew how to use that knowledge to his own advantage.

Whilst the other tribes were fighting amongst themselves, Mogrok intended to start a sufficiently large and impressive battle against the human forces to draw the attention of the other Orks. The Big Mek's rivals would kick themselves for not thinking of the same plan, and hurry to join the fighting in order to prove to their tribes that they too were up for a good scrap and not a bunch of skulking wimps. In the process, the rival Ork tribes would concede that Mogrok was the fastest and most killy of them all.

If Mogrok's plan worked, and if he could keep the kill count nice and high, he would become the de facto new Warlord of the Waaagh! before long. Of course, this was only the beginning, but Mogrok wasn't about to reveal the true scale of his plans just yet – not even to his best mate, the metal-limbed Painboy known as Fourklaw, or his fellow Big Mek taking up position across the planet.

DA BIG SCRAP

So began a series of ever more unusual battles that unfolded across the hinterlands of Alaric Prime. The first of these displayed Mogrok's typical cunning.

On the rolling Auspice Savannah, far to the east of Sacred Mountain, Stein's second in command, Sergeant Fleiss, had rendezvoused with the remaining Knights of House Brahmica. Thousands of tanks and millions of infantry teemed across the plains in loose formation, intending to use the castle of the knightly house as their base of operations whilst they scoured the eastern side of the continent of greenskins.

Mogrok mustered his lads together, and mounted up alongside every one of those tribes he could bribe, trick or coerce to accompany him. A massive armoured wedge of Ork vehicles trundled and

bounced across the open plains towards the marching Cadians, sending up a cloud of dust so large it could be seen from the Imperial augur-craft in high orbit.

When the human troopers saw what was approaching them, they had plenty of time to prepare for it. They deployed their heavy weapons and formed up their tank companies with practiced efficiency, turning to face the oncoming wall of Ork vehicles whilst stockpiling ammunition for a marathon slaughter. Without cover, the greenskins would be easily picked off at range – with three full regiments of Astra Militarum at his disposal, Sergeant Fleiss was confident that he could cover the Auspice Savannah in Ork corpses before the sun set without the loss of a single Cadian life.

As the wall of mismatched Ork vehicles came closer and closer, the Imperial Guard heavy weapons teams worked out their firing solutions. At a barked command from Fleiss they let fly with every gun they had. Krak missiles blasted scrapwagons into bits one after another, autocannons barked an insistent rhythm as they tore Trakks and Trukks to pieces, and lascannon beams flashed a searing red as they bullseyed iron-jawed Battlewagons. Again and again, Ork vehicles were flipped end over end with the force of the impact. The first wave of vehicles was utterly destroyed, halting in their headlong charge and forcing those behind to slew to a halt. It was not long before the second wave was picked off in its turn.

Running as fast as he could through the fug of dust behind the vehicles, Mogrok stifled an evil chuckle. The humies had taken the bait. Being a Mek had its advantages when it came to asking favours; he'd personally promised every one of the Wheel Steelas tribe a better wagon with more wheels than they could count if they would lend him their rides for the day. It took some convincing, and a lot of pressure from Mogrok's heavily-armoured mates, the Mekanobs, but it had definitely been worth it. The humans had smashed the tribe's wagons up good and proper, forming a wall of scrap metal right

across the plains. What the human army-boys didn't know was that the vehicles were empty of everything apart from the occasional steering-grot, and the desert rocks that Mogrok had placed on each accelerator pedal. As for those stubborn speed freaks who had opted to disobey Mogrok and stay in their driving seats for the big charge; well, they wouldn't be a problem for long.

The advance of the footslogging Ork horde had been completely obscured by the linear junkyard of scrap metal and the clouds of dust and smoke the vehicles had left in their wake. The mainstay of the Ork army was running like hell towards the humie lines, the most resilient of Mogrok's troops at the fore. First to bash their way through the wall of scrap metal were the Feet of Mork, Mogrok's hundreds-strong Dread Mob. Their numbers were bolstered by the primitive steam-dreads of the Kogheads, anxious to get into the fight.

Behind the massed Killa Kans and Deff Dreads came the Mekanobs. Mogrok grinned toothily as he watched the armoured veterans advance – whenever the humie army's missiles hit home, they either bounced off or knocked the Nobs over for a moment, only for them to struggle up and lumber back into the line.

Rushing behind the iron-clad vanguard came Boss Raddak's Deathskulls, 'lucky' blue paint still dripping from jaws and armour plates alike. Mogrok reckoned the

armour was probably more of a source of good luck than the blue pigment, but they'd agreed to the big charge, and that was good enough for him.

In their wake came Mogrok himself and the vast mass of iron-armoured Boyz that ran alongside him, their squabbling Gretchin servants holding onto their tinpot hats as they scurried to keep up in the rear. All told, the armoured horde covered the plains in a tide of shouting, whooping maniacs that stormed towards the Cadian lines with choppas raised.



The Imperial Guard held their ground, just like Mogrok had known they would – the proud humans still had little idea of the dangers they were facing. Massed lasguns took their toll, but with so many armoured brutes at the front of the charge, only the heavy weapons put sizeable dents into the charge.

Mogrok's horde hit home with the force of a tidal wave, smashing through carefully deployed formations to careen into the ranks behind. Before the hour was out, a dozen square miles of open savannah had been embroiled in a desperate close quarters battle.

'HUMIES THINK THEY IS THE SMARTEST, MAKING TWISTY PLANS AND LAYIN' KUNNIN' TRAPS LIKE THEY COME UP WITH WAR. WE COME UP WITH WAR! ORKS ARE THE BEST AT SCRAPPING, GET US CLOSE AND WE'LL TEAR ANYTHING TO BLOODY BITS. ALL THE BOYZ NEED IS A SHOVE IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, AND MORK'LL DO THE REST!'

- Mogrok the Mangler

THE SMOULDERING ISLE

The Smouldering Isle lies in the farthest reaches of the Choking Sea and is among one of the few deep water mines on Alaric Prime. During the rust-ship invasion, significant numbers of Orks landed on the isle under cover of a terrible sulphuric cyclone that had driven the workers and Astra Militarum garrison underground. What followed was a vicious and bloody battle in which the Cadians, supported by convict militia and a handful of Knights, fought to keep the island's ports in Imperial hands.

Blinded by the acid wind and rain, both sides exchanged fire and ran sorties though the storm. Infantry were forced to fight from on board sealed transports, or else cower within whatever shelter they could find. Those footsoldiers exposed to the elements were slain within hours, whole platoons of Cadians and rampaging Ork mobs flayed to the bone by driving acid rain. Ork wagons and Imperial battle tanks alike cracked and melted under the vitriolic downpour, their liquidised hull plates mixing with the organic slurry of the passengers trapped on board. Every hour brought some new horror, yet the battle ground on.

Only the Knights seemed immune to the cyclone's wrath, their specially treated hulls shrugging off the sulphur rain. The mighty war engines charged the Ork lines time and again, smashing one attack wave after another despite their own mounting casualties.

However, even the bravery of the isle's Nobles and their Cadian allies was not enough. One by one, the ports fell to the Greenskin menace. Port Adamant was the last to be overrun, the isle's defenders fighting to the last amid the collapsing galleries of the Collesium Administrata. Sire Danforth, the last Noble alive on the Smouldering Isle, drove his Knight suit into the very midst of the enemy horde. As the cyclone winds howled around him, Danforth screamed his hatred and fired until his guns ran dry, yet even his inspiring charge could not prevail. Caught in a storm of rokkit and energy bolts, Danforth's Knight finally detonated, reduced to a searing fireball that threw flickering light and shadow across the Collesium's blasted ruins. In the end all that remained was horde after horde of screaming Orks, their skin bleached white and scarred by acid rain.

MORK'S MEKS

A Big Mek has to be both kunnin' and fixy to pilot a Morkanaut, and that goes double for Mogrok's lads. During the Red Waaagh!, Mogrok gathered together some of his best Big Meks and unleashed them on the defenders of Alaric Prime by the most direct invasion vector he could devise.

Rokstik Ironstitch

All Meks like to tinker with things, but Rokstik's enthusiasm includes himself. With the help of his Painboy, the Mek looted three of his four limbs from other Orks. His Morkanaut is similarly patchwork, its riot of colour evidence of many 'donors'.

Gutmash Festork

Being a Big Mek is dangerous – even if the enemy don't get you, your own machines might. Festork has 'died' and been brought back more times than he can count (not that he can count particularly high); he now marks his Morkanaut's armour with his own 'deaths' rather than his kills.

Midgit Mogok

Suspiciously small for an Ork, Midgit is rumoured to have been built by Mogrok. Some Orks reckon he is a failed experiment to make a Morkanaut think for itself, while others reckon it was Mogrok trying to make another version of himself.

Gitfink Hollowskull

Orks are natural looters and are always after bigger and better trophies. Gitfink has taken this to the extreme; anything he stomps ends up hanging from the hull of his Morkanaut. The collection of skulls, hull plates and other shiny stuff clanks and bangs whenever it moves, leaving his foes in no doubt that something big is coming for them.

FLIGHT OF THE MORKANAUTS

The first of Mogrok's big plans had gone off without a hitch, but there were plenty more to come. Dark shadows fell across the savannah as a gigantic rust-ship descended from the clouds above. Fearing the worst, flak-tanks at the rear of the Imperial armies hammered into the skies until their ammunition reserves ran dry, but their volley fire did little more than tickle the belly of the mammoth spacecraft that loomed above them.

A shrill whistling sound drifted over the roar of battle for a moment before several massive balls of scrap metal dropped out of the skies, unceremoniously ejected from the airlocks of the rust-ship above. In the war for Obstiria, Mogrok had been most impressed when Grukk's hordes had been struck by the orbital assaults of the Obsidian Glaives. Yet the scrap-pods that tumbled out of the rust-ship's guts held a far more unusual cargo than even the superhuman Adeptus Astartes.

Smashing down into the rear echelons of the Cadian armies, the building-sized balls of iron burst apart, killing dozens of men with each impact. At first the reeling Guardsmen thought that the hillocks of badly-painted metal were intended as blunt projectiles and nothing more. The true purpose of the bombardment only became clear when some of the scrap-hills started to come to life. Fixer-grots scurried from hatches that had been exposed by ablative layers that had fallen away, taking advantage of the confusion to hammer sheets of metal back into place and spot-weld broken joints.

One by one, the Morkanauts that had plummeted into the Cadian ranks crackled with green-white electricity and stomped forward step by hesitant step. The humming energy weapons that formed their arms ratcheted downwards and discharged great blasts of lightning into the Cadian ranks, frying men to blackened stumps wherever they hit home.

Battle tanks and transport carriers hammered shells into the rotund monsters that had dropped into the Cadian rearguard, but with little effect. Though they looked like the illicit offspring of a Stompa and a Mek's workshop, the beasts had been built to last.

As the Cadian headquarters barked frantic orders to re-arm and re-engage, the rust-ship above revealed the next of its

secrets. Colossal hangar doors opened in the rear of the giant craft, a profusion of mag-cranes lowering down another metal mountain. The beast looked like some awful deity of the Morkanauts rampaging below, three times the size of the largest of their number, and with guns to match.

From his vantage in the big scrap at the front line, Mogrok looked up with paternal pride as Gungutz slowly descended into the fight. As he had instructed, the titanic war effigy opened fire long before its dangling feet crunched into the plains. Giant bolts of energy flew from the crackling electrokannon that it had in place of its left arm. Some even hit home in the Imperial ranks below, adding to the mayhem in the human lines.

Right on cue, the humies' own walkers were stalking out of the giant stone castle that Mogrok could see jutting from a plateau in the middle distance. Beetle-backed but long-legged, they loped forward at quite a pace. Mogrok wasn't bothered one bit. The big engines were dwarfed by Gungutz – that much was obvious, even from a distance – and he had a nasty surprise in store for them, too. The Big Mek snorted in derision, still watching the Knights as he absent-mindedly clouted a screaming humie into the ground with his greatspanner. Their god must be puny indeed if these little walkers were embodiments of the Emperor they kept squeaking about.

Though Grukk's vanguard attack had been doomed from the start – Mogrok had seen to that – it had at least shown the Big Mek what the humie walkers could do. The war machines hammered their long-range shells into the seething tide of Orks pouring into the big scrap on the savannah, a steady flow of bellowing greenskin warriors that was even now being bolstered by the tribes of Mogrok's rivals. Not nearly good enough, thought Mogrok – shooting shells into an Ork horde was like dropping stikkbombz into a river in the hope of stopping its flow. The Big Mek scanned the skies, but there was no sign of his next trump card just yet. The main event was up ahead.

The humie walkers loped towards Gungutz in groups of three, the ground shaking as they synchronised their attack run. Now was the real test. The Big Mek raised his telly-scope to his good eye, muttering a quick prayer to Mork that his lieutenants could remember what they had been told the night before the battle.

As if in answer, the massive gut-kannon mounted in the centre of Gungutz's great belly boomed once. A double whip-crack echoed across the plain, and a spinning bolas made from mooring chain and two boulder-sized cannonballs hurtled outward. It missed the incoming Knights by a mile. 'Try and hit 'em then!' bawled Mogrok, raising his kustom mega-blasta and turning a couple of heavily-armoured humies into a fused mess to make himself feel better. So much for that idea.

ATTACK OF THE WRECKIN' KREW

Up ahead, the humies were making a concerted attack now, and Mogrok was forced to focus on the serious business of breaking heads. Such was the din of battle that he barely noticed when the roar of jet engines signalled that Skyboss Wingnutz and his lads had finally made their appearance. And they call themselves Speed Freeks, mused Mogrok as he punched a human trooper's ribcage into his lungs. Surely the whole point of having your own red Dakkajet was getting stuck in nice and early?

One of Wingnutz's aerial nutters came in low. The giant wrecking ball that Mogrok's Meks had chained to its tailplane ploughed a furrow through Orks and humans alike as it passed. Stupid git, thought Mogrok; he'll be dead in a moment. Sure enough, the heavy metal lump caught on the wreckage of a humie tank that the Mekanobz had just scragged. A split second later it yanked the cable tight, forcing the cocky flyboy's jet to take a nosedive into the battle below and sending up a plume of greasy flame. Dozens of Wingnutz's Blitz-bommas took this as their cue for a point-blank strafing run. They peeled off and hurtled downwards at top velocity, many of them failing to pull up in time and slamming nose-first into the ranks of the Cadians scattering across the plains below.

Up in the skies, the rest of Wingnutz's lads were more or less sticking to the plan. As the human walkers stalked forward, hammering Gungutz with their cannons, the Ork jets veered towards them at low altitude with their wrecking balls trailing behind. As the jets skimmed directly over each of the walkers, they released their heavy iron cargoes so that they hurtled and bounced unstoppably through the Imperial lines. Several careened into the wide carapaces and shoulder-plates of the humie walkers, bowling over some and breaking open others. Wingnutz himself scored a direct hit, the giant lump of pig iron he released from his trail-cable smashing straight into the command cockpit of the walker below and crushing it into mangled scrap.



Those Knights that were still standing turned and blazed away with the light-bore auto-weapons on their carapaces and the much more formidable shell throwers on their arms. One of the flyboys was tagged and had his wing torn off, spinning around and around before slamming into the walls of the humie's fort on the plateau in the distance.



Mogrok fought his way clear of the melee around him and clambered atop the ruined shell of a humie tank for a better view. Only a few hundred metres away, a red-armoured walker was storming towards Gungutz in the confusion, lances of deadly energy spitting out from the spiral-painted gun on its weapon arm. One of the blasts took Gungutz right in the head, vaporising it in an instant. The effigy still strode on, raising its guns once more. 'Nice try, ya runts,' muttered the Big Mek as a double boom echoed across the plains.

This time the chain-bolas worked as Mogrok had intended, whipping around in a spinning horizontal arc that took the Knight's legs out from under it and sent it pitching headlong into the ground. The bolas ploughed on across the plains, bouncing and yanking in crazy arcs before taking the knee joint from another walker and sending it slowly toppling into the dirt.

The battle was going strong, and hundreds more Orks were piling into the fray. It was more than enough to bring the rest of the tribes running, and there was plenty of spectacle for the lads to chew over later. 'That ought to do it,' thought Mogrok, reaching up to flip open a panel on the side of his tellyport blasta. A few deft tweaks of the device's kustom wiring achieved the desired effect, the weapon beginning to emit a bass hum. 'Let's see any other zogger pull this off,' grinned Mogrok to himself as a teleport flare enveloped him. The coordinates were set, and Mogrok was on his way. There was plenty of work still to be done.

THE ISLES UNDER SIEGE

Mogrok's tellyport jump would carry him away toward the coastlands, the battle for the Auspice Savannah raging in his wake. The human forces would no doubt attempt to bring their own reinforcements to the battle via the natural bridges that linked Alaric Prime's major islands. The Big Mek could not allow this to happen. Luckily, he had a cunning plan.

Dagogg's cunning as a Mek could be seen in the terrible carnage he wrought as part of the Red Waaagh! During the assault against the Obsidian Blades Space Marines it was Dagogg who knocked the orbital defence platforms out of the sky by flinging them at each other using his Shokk Amplifier (though it promptly broke after this one exhibition of its awesome power).

In the following ground battle, and with the aid of his Runtherd, Grabber, he was responsible for the nightmare that was 'Snotling rain'. Tragically there were only a handful of survivors on either side to tell the tale of Dagogg's cunning, and the Mek had to content himself with Grabber's vacant grins of approval instead of the widespread acclaim he felt he deserved.

As day turned to night and the carnage on the savannah grew to ever more epic heights, the Knights of House Velemestrin sought to cross the gap that lay between their own island and Sacred Isle. There was but one fordable point between the two land masses, a place where an archipelago of huge flat stones protruded out of the sea. The site was known to the natives as the Knight's Causeway. With care, and assuming the tides were right, a Knight could pick its way across from Isle Velemestrin to Sacred Isle. Mogrok, who had invested a lot of effort and millions of Orks in keeping the savannah embattled, had made it his personal mission to ensure no such thing occurred. Unfortunately, the forces he had to spare were very little – quite literally, in fact.

When Mogrok zapped into view on the cliffs overlooking the Knight's Causeway, hundreds of Gretchin were scurrying to and fro along the rocks. They were desperately trying to mount the flat plates of electronic gubbins that Mogrok had entrusted to their Runtherds the previous day. The plates should have been in place by now; the horizon was already dotted by the hulking shapes of the human walkers approaching the causeway. Mogrok spat out a string of swear words that would have made a Goff flinch. At this rate they would have nothing that could stop them from crossing the causeway in time.

Mogrok stormed up to the largest, gnarliest Runtherd he could find and demanded to know what was taking so long. In response, the grumpy old Ork just waved his herding stikk vaguely in the direction of a knot of Gretchin wrestling an electro-plate across a rope bridge of loose wooden slats. As Mogrok watched, the bridge bucked and twisted wildly. The metal plate pitched into the sea, a bunch of Gretchin falling in after it.

Snarling his disappointment, Mogrok shoved the Runtherd over the edge of the cliff and watched him splatter on the rocks below. It improved his mood a little. He stomped on through the confusion, resolving to root out Mek Dagogg from wherever the useless git was hiding and get his shokk attack gun into the fight.

By the time Mogrok had found Dagogg, the first of the human walkers had picked a path halfway across the Knight's Causeway, slowly striding from one flat stone to another. Dagogg narrowly escaped a beating from Mogrok's piston-klaw when he protested that he had not been sleeping and was merely aiming with his eyes closed whilst he waited for the targets to get into range. Firing up his shokk attack gun, Dagogg called for his Runtherd mate Grabber to get the snotling mobs nice and close.

A thunderous boom interrupted him as the first of the Knights crossing the causeway took a ranging shot with its cannon. The shell detonated on the face of the cliffs nearby, and Mogrok swore in consternation. Dagogg grumbled about how you couldn't rush these things, his black tongue protruding from the corner of his mouth as the shokk attack gun's whirly bits spun faster and faster.

A fat pop like a bursting bubble punctuated the sound of crashing surf as a shimmering hole in reality appeared in front of the gun's propellers. The noise was swiftly followed by the whooshing rush of the vacuum tube at the gun's rear. Grabber the Runtherd took his cue, shoving Snotlings closer to the gun and kicking his squig-hound into action.

Mogrok squinted across the causeway to see a stream of spasming Snotlings appear in mid-air some twenty feet from the nearest Knight before tumbling into the booming waves below. The Big Mek growled threateningly, his menacing bass tones carrying under the din of squealing Snotlings. 'I know, I know,' said the gunner irritably as he adjusted dials and twiddled screws. 'Grabber, get them snotties in here now!'

The world filled with noise, light and pain as a battle cannon shell detonated right in the midst of the Snotling farm. Mogrok felt the force of the explosion hit him like the hand of Gork, hurling him toward the edge of the cliff. He barely had time to shout in terror before Grabber's runt-catching stick lashed out, its spiked pincers sinking into the pitted metal

of Mogrok's armour and arresting his lurching fall. 'Gotcher!' wheezed Grabber, straining mightily as he and his grots hauled Mogrok's mega-armoured weight back to safety. 'Biggest runt I caught all day!' Half-deafened by the explosion, the Big Mek let the comment slide. He made a mental note to find the Runtherd a nice new electroprod, though he hadn't made up his mind yet about which end of the prod he would present to Grabber first.

Down on the causeway, one of the Knights had nearly made it across. Still shaken by his close escape, Mogrok could only watch as the Knight aimed its battle cannon straight at him. Then the giant walker put its foot down right on one of the electro-plates the scurrying Gretchin had managed to get into position.

There was a sudden flare of green energy under the Knight's foot, and the walker's leg vanished, reappearing ten feet to the right. It dropped down into the surf as gravity claimed its due. A moment later a blunt shell whistled over Dagogg's head, sailing harmlessly into the distance as the towering warrior's aim was spoiled. As the walker began to tumble sidelong

into the crashing waves, Mogrok found his voice. He shouted in triumph, turning to Dagogg, 'The plates work! You can have the next one, Dagz – get 'em inna head this time!'

Unfortunately, almost all of the Snotlings that had survived the battle cannon blast had scurried away or were running around shrieking with Grabber's squighound in hot pursuit. Mogrok cast around frantically, seeking any alternative. His gaze settled on several Burna Boyz who were loafing about nearby, and an evil grin spread across the Big Mek's face.

'Ready?' shouted Mogrok moments later, his question answered by a thumbs-up from Dagogg. As the gunner Mek squeezed the firing bar, the Burna Boyz let fly, sending a roaring column of flame straight into the vacuum tube.

Halfway across the strait, fire blasted from the foremost Knight's eye-plates. It fell to its knees with a clang as the Shokk Attack gun filled its cockpit with flame, but its corpse stayed upright. The causeway was blocked – and with it, any chance of swift reinforcement for the Imperial forces.

*Cadian Signals Batt.
Epsilon, Vox Intercept 345b
[CALLSIGNS ALARIC]*

*'...Vermillion Lance
proceeding apace, Sire
Versteran, causeway appears
stable and clear...'*

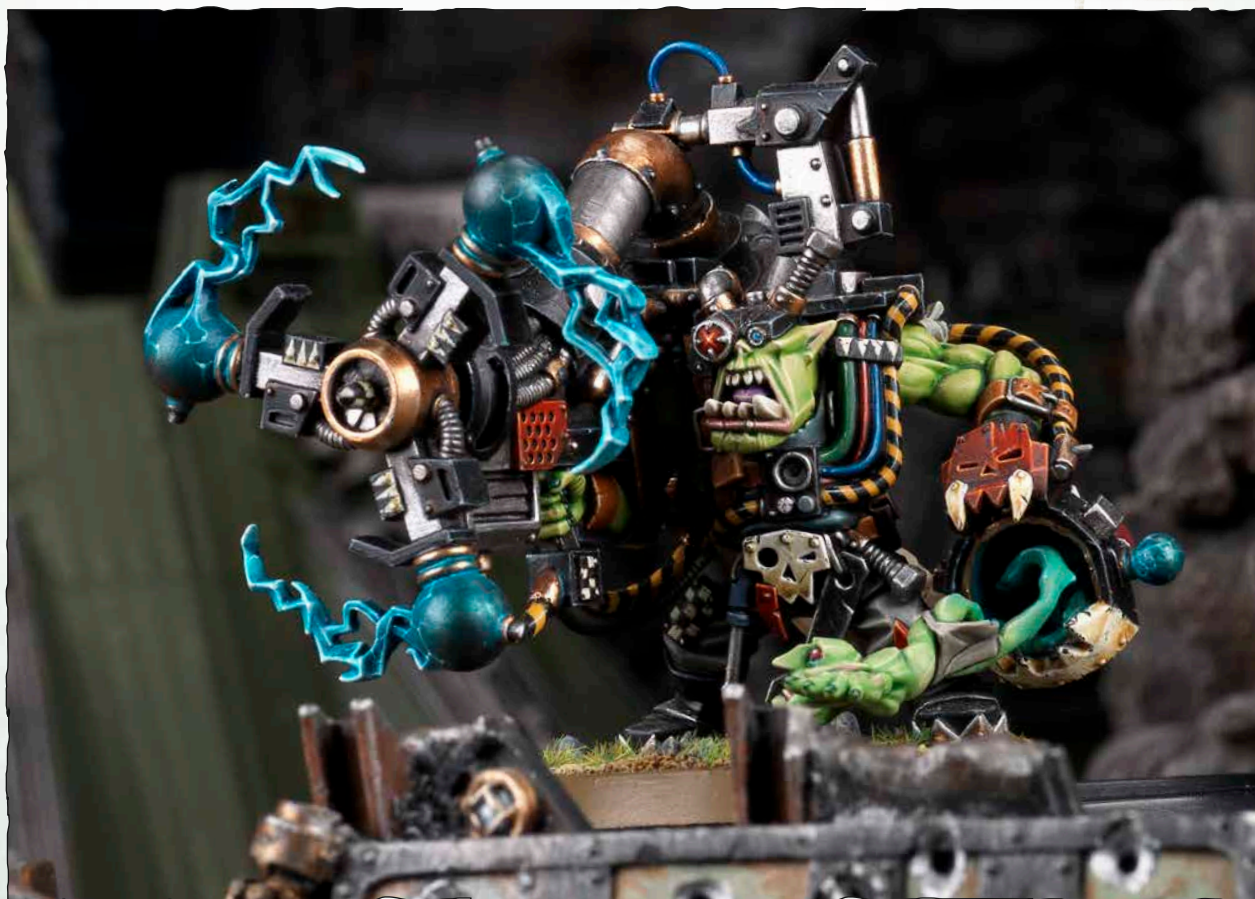
*'Understood Sire Tormus,
send out your Sword and
Shield, make sure the way
is open... These damnable
creatures are wont to hide
among the rocks.'*

*'By your word my lord, I
can see some movement on
the cliff, and some kind of—'*

*'Tormus! What was that
flash? What is going on?
Tormus! Respond!'*

*'EMPEROR'S TEETH! MY
FACE! MY—'*

*[VOX DISORDERED:
INTERCEPT ENDS]*



THE FROZEN COMET

With its first sightings dating back to the Time of Settlement, the Frozen Comet has lit the skies of Sanctus Reach for as long as anyone can remember. A massive ball of spaceborne rock, the comet takes its name from the vivid white tails that stretch out in its wake, looking to the people of Alaric like a vast double icicle in the sky. The comet completes a slow circuit of Sanctus Reach, some years drifting far out into the void, others almost brushing the atmosphere of the system's worlds. In the time of the Red Waaagh! the comet drifted close to Alaric Prime, casting a ghostly radiance through the night.

THE KAMATA KOMMANDOS

Whilst Mogrok's schemes were causing unbridled carnage across the eastern reaches of the Sacred Isle, his Blood Axe ally Tankboss Baddfrag was carving around Isle Kamata at the head of a loose column of two hundred heavy Ork tanks.

Baddfrag's collection of repurposed Imperial armour had almost doubled in size since he had made planetfall upon Alaric Prime. Whilst the rest of the Orks had looked for a nice open space in which to muster their forces, Baddfrag had aimed his rust-ship *Da Choppa* squarely at the Imperial tank company on manoeuvres in the Kamata Desert.

After the rust-ship's earth-shaking descent, the Tankboss had targeted those battle tanks that had escaped his initial strike with the kannons of his rust-ship, destroying them one after another before his prized wagons trundled out onto the sands. Once his own armoured company was deployed in a defensive perimeter around *Da Choppa*, Baddfrag's lads salvaged as many of the burning wrecks as they could. The Tankboss' Meks had a whale of a time rebuilding Leman Russ tanks of all descriptions, adding more dakka and painting glyphs wherever they could. Yet despite his new acquisitions, Baddfrag was unable to claim the desert for his own.

Though Isle Kamata's knightly defenders were embroiled in the war for Sacred Isle, Baddfrag's company of reclaimed vehicles was constantly outranged by the Imperial Guard artillery company stationed around the Great Oasis. Even his Blood Axe air support, the infamous Drop Kommandos, had lost too many of their fighta-bommas to anti-aircraft fire to risk a return run. A perimeter of Ork wrecks ringed the oasis, each marking the extreme range of the earthshaker cannons and Hydra autocannons that guarded it. The Cadians had enough water and shade to keep position for as long as necessary, and the vast tracts of desert were so large that it was all but impossible to cut off their ammunition supply lines. It was a problem that even the famously cunning Blood Axes were at a loss as to how to solve.

The breakthrough came when a mob of Drop Kommandos that were prowling the dunes found themselves in the path of a column of Chimera armoured transports heading towards Kamata Keep. Realising they were badly outmatched, the Kommandos dropped into the sands

and camouflaged themselves as best they could. Being Blood Axes, they did a pretty decent job – good enough for some of the Guard tanks to stop directly over two of their number whilst the tanks' crews slaughtered the rest.

Inspired by their reprieve from Mork, the lucky Kommandos strapped themselves to the undersides of the Chimeras with as many of their bandoliers and belts as they could. When the transports started off again, the Orks hung on for grim life, and they were borne across the dunes for several miles. The Kommandos were eventually shaken loose by their unwitting hosts, and one of them was run over by the next tank in the armoured column as soon as he was free. The other escaped, and trudged back to Baddfrag's camp with a toothy grin plastered across his face.

At dawn on the next day, three more Drop Kommando mobs set out into the desert, each with his kit wrapped in sackcloth the colour of sand. They searched for days for the tank tracks of Imperial supply routes, circling the Great Oasis whilst taking care not to stray anywhere near the burnt-out wrecks of previous Ork attacks. Sure enough, they eventually found the trails of an Imperial supply route toward the oasis.

One by one the Kommandos buried themselves good and deep in the dunes between each of the paired tank treads. The sand shivered occasionally here and there as a Kommando suppressed a gleeful chuckle. It took the best part of two days for an Imperial supply run to come past, and when it did, it was going in the wrong direction. Several of the Kommandos clamped themselves to the underside of the tanks anyway and were borne away to the Sacred Isle. Two were crushed to death, having got the wrong end of the stick and buried themselves under the track-marks rather than between them. This effectively weeded out the chaff, for Kommandos are possessed of that rarest of Orky virtues – patience.

When a supply convoy headed for the Great Oasis did eventually come past, each of those Kommandos who had not wandered off or been stung to death by burner-scorpions latched themselves on to the underside of a Chimera, revelling in the rewarding prospect of some well-earned kills. When the supply train trundled into the perimeter of the Great Oasis, they were waved on by the Cadian guards without incident. It was an oversight that was to doom the entire isle.



THE BATTLE FOR THE OASIS

The Kommandos waited under their vehicle hosts until the dark of night before making their move, but when they did, it was spectacular. After carefully sowing charges and bundled stikkbommz around the backs of each of the Cadian quartermaster tents, they detonated the artillery company's ammunition in a series of spectacular explosions that sent flames and mushroom clouds billowing up into the night sky.

This was the signal that Tankboss Baddfrag had been waiting for. His Battle Fortress gave a menacing growl as it prowled over the dunes towards the oasis, two hundred looted vehicles in its wake. This time the artillery barrage that hammered into the armoured wedge was short-lived. Baddfrag drooled with anticipation as his prized tank company closed in for the kill.

They were beaten to the punch by the airborne forces of the Drop Kommandos. Ten, fifteen, twenty looted skimmers braved the flakstorm hurtling up towards them, their bay doors opening to send scores of Kommandos spilling out. Each of the Orks fired up an improvised rokket

pack as he fell and corkscrewed down into the Cadian ranks, from a distance looking much like a fireworks display in reverse. Many of them made the landing, but many more came to earth with a dull thump, or ploughed like burning comets straight into the waters of the oasis.

Above them, Orky aircraft and whirring Deffkoptas were sent hurtling down in flames by the Hydra flak tanks and aegis interceptor guns of the Cadian defenders. But with so much of their ammunition gone up in smoke and the Kommandos running wild in their ranks, the Cadian fire patterns were in tatters. Explosions blossomed again and again; what had begun as a midnight raid was escalating into full-scale war.

The morning sun rose on the smouldering remains of the 1645th Cadian support regiment, not a soul alive amongst them. Baddfrag had already moved on. The story of his victory spread from tribe to tribe, and it was not long before his tactics were being aped across the island. Captured tanks, looted transports, even stolen Knights soon roamed Isle Kamata. The Imperial defenders had a new foe to take into account – their own scrap metal.

'LOOK AT THEM GREEN-
LOOKIN' HUMIES, PARADIN'
AROUND IN LINES LIKE A
BUNCHA STORMBOYZ. THEY
ACT LIKE THEY'VE GOT STICKS
UP THEIR ARSES. OI – HANG
ON – I FINK I GOT AN IDEA.
GOBSTRAP, GET ME A FEW
O' THEM HUMIE CORPSES.
THEY'RE GONNA GET
ANUVVER CHANCE TO RIDE
ABOUT STICKIN' OUT THE TOP
OF THEIR PRECIOUS TANKS...'

- Tankboss Baddfrag, prior
to the infiltration of
Kamata Hold



MOGROK'S LADZ

Though he does not inspire the same terror as his hulking predecessor, Mogrok has a swathe of tribes devoted to his rule. From amongst this horde, Mogrok has hand-picked the most inventive or belligerent to act as his personal retinue.

Big Mek Mogrok is a veteran of a hundred battles, many of which he started himself. Over the decades since he first began to break heads for fun and profit, he has accumulated a vast number of followers. These are not the usual Orky hangers-on, for Mogrok has never been one to follow the norms of greenskin society. Instead they are a collection of the junkyard dogs and metal-heads of greenskin society; scrappers, show-offs, looters, thieves and mechanics to an Ork. The unbridled creativity exhibited by the Meks in Mogrok's horde means that his Bad Moons are never wanting for large and extremely dangerous machines of war, from man-portable kustom blastas to Mek Stompas that blast the enemy to bits with bolts of green energy.



A DA MEKANOBZ

The Nobs in Mogrok's warband are so rich they are always clad in the best armour that teef can buy. So advanced are the technologies involved – for Orks, at any rate – that their wearers have had to master the knack of fixing gubbins and resetting wossnames even in the midst of battle. Some of them even consider themselves to be Meks in their own right, though next to Mogrok, they have about as much mechanical knowhow as a braindead Snotling. Still, every one of them understands the fundamental tenet of wearing mega armour – get stuck in as quick as possible and kill anything you can catch.

B DA WHEEL STEELAZ

Since the triumphant charge of their many-wheeled Battlewagon 'Big Yella' at the Battle of Black Gulch, the Wheel Steelaz have clung to the idea that the more wheels a Battlewagon has, the faster it will go. Because of this belief it is not uncommon for one of Mogrok's tribe to wake up one morning to find his favourite wagon raised up on a stack of rocks and its wheels mysteriously absent.



C DA KANNON KREW

For Mogrok, simply shooting the enemy is a waste of an opportunity. Far more fun to test out a few new inventions in the process, especially if the field test results in the foe being blown to atoms in the process. The batteries of Da Kannon Krew are replete with their master's latest inventions, all manner of wild and potentially unstable weapons jostling for position in their ranks. It takes a special type of grot to crew these guns without getting blown up, but then again, that's half the fun...

D DA DAKKABOYZ

The average Ork Boy wants nothing more than to get stuck in at close quarters as quickly as he possibly can. However, Mogrok prefers a certain discerning desire for dakka in his handpicked ladz. After all, charging at the enemy guns is all part of a good fight, but the odds of victory are much improved by the ability to fire back. To this end, the Dakkaboys all wield the biggest, noisiest shootas they can get their snaggle-taloned hands on. This is made easier for them by a combination of teef galore and Mogrok's personal patronage. Indeed, Mekboyz in Mogrok's Waaagh! have been known to drop kustom jobs for greenskins of other tribes in order to get Da Dakkaboys' work done first. Unsurprisingly, this leads to widespread resentment and no small amount of violence. However, so long as Da Dakkaboys go to battle with all guns blazing, Mogrok couldn't care less.

E DA BURNIN' TEEF

This convoy of Wartukk-driving loons is so named for their initiation ritual of drinking a gallon of promethium and igniting the resulting belches. This is hardly their only peculiarity, for the enduring obsession of these Bad Moon speed freaks is to be at one with their Trukks. They believe that the more in tune they are with their vehicles, the better those vehicles will work. This odd belief sees the Orks of Da Burnin' Teef roaring like Trukk engines, decorating their bodies with hammered in engine-bits, and even eating whole handfuls of oil squigs before battle. For any other race, such behaviour would be at best eccentric and at worst physically harmful. However, Orks being Orks, this crude attempt at synergy actually gets results. The Trukks of Da Burnin' Teef bellow like wild beasts, responding to their drivers' every deft touch and proving more reliable than any Ork contraption has any right to be.

F DA FEET OF MORK

The Deff Dreads and Killa Kans of Mogrok's Bad Moons are known collectively as the Feet of Mork, because they are as stompy as Mogrok's Mekks could make them. Owing to the Dreadmoon Contests – regular competitions that Mogrok holds (and always wins) as to who can build the most Deff Dreads over the course of a single lunar cycle – his hordes boast so many of these clanking, smoke-spewing walkers that the Feet of Mork often outnumber the greenskinned throngs at the heart of their rival tribes..

THE GREAT LOOTIN' SPREE

As Mogrok's big plans got into full swing, the war produced a mountain of scrap metal to be claimed by the clans. The abundance of wrecked hulls gave the creative Orks plentiful opportunities to hammer out new contraptions, but a good few got their skulls banged together by Mogrok's lieutenants in the process – time was of the essence.

DEATHSKULLS

The Deathskulls enjoy pillaging a good pile of scrap every bit as much as they enjoy killing the previous owners. Upon landing on Alaric Prime, however, their rust-ship was ravaged by gunfire. The reservoir of blue paint that they'd brought to slap on their bodies and any bits of metal that came their way ended up gushing out of bullet holes like blood spilt by a fallen herd creature. Many of the Deathskulls tried to stem the leaks with their own arms and even their bodies, but the damage had been done, and most of the lucky paint was lost.

This was considered by all to be a bad omen. Craving blue-hued metal for their fighting machines, the Deathskulls singled out the cobalt walkers of House Terryn, but their foes would not fall easily. Grots were dispatched to filch blue-barrelled big guns from Da Kannon Krew, steal bits of armour from Da Mekanobs and even pinch blue scrap from Da Wheel Steelaz. The Deathskulls were soon kitted out well enough, but when the other clans recognised bits of their old vehicles with hastily scrawled out insignia, fist-fights were not far behind.

For a large part of the fighting on Alaric Prime, the Deathskulls had to defend themselves against attacks from their own kind as well as from the human forces – a clear sign, Raddak Bluefinga grunted, of the bad omen unfolding.

It was clear to Alaric Prime's human forces that the reputation the Orks had for destroying everything within sight was not unfounded. Yet there exist greenskins of an unusually innovative nature who see war as a time for creation as well as destruction. Much to Mork's delight, they constantly recycle whatever scrap they can salvage in an effort to build even more guns and metal beasts – and perhaps even get a fight out of it in the process.

With the toll of ruined humie vehicles mounting up nicely, the Deathskulls and the Blood Axes set to work creating new battlefield curiosities on an ad-hoc basis. In the pauses between rounds of gunfire, wave upon wave of their lads scoured the battlefield for some good old-fashioned lootin'. Within hours a whole array of fancy new gizmos, the likes of which had never before being imagined, could be seen rumbling back into the fray.

Da Wheel Steelaz, however, found the spoils of war to be slim pickings. Some were lucky enough to stumble upon decent wrecks, and a good number of tanks had their treads prised off and replaced by fat-tired wheels. Out of desire for greater speed, the Steelaz modified several Trukks to bear as many pairs of wheels on top of their chassis as were usually found underneath. The Steelaz' Meks reckoned that, should any of these things be blown upside down in battle, they could still rumble forwards.

Sadly, as became clear in the heat of battle, no Ork had thought to properly connect these other wheels to the axles or engines. Those few flipped over by incoming fire simply scooted to a halt in the middle of the battlefield. It was not uncommon for some dumbstruck Guardsman or Cadian Whiteshield to witness upside-down Trukks being shoved into battle by grunting (and thoroughly disgruntled) Ork mobs.

Before long those same human troops found themselves on the receiving end of the slowest Trukk assault in history. Dug-in platoons were swamped by the tribe's 'pushas', Boyz who were keener than ever for the bloody vindication of battle.

Many of the more enterprising Wheel Steelaz looted the wrecks of Sentinels or the towering Knights that had met them in battle. Despite their disappointment in these things not possessing any proper wheels at all, the lads would not give up their loot to the other clans. Their curiosity soon led them to yank apart all armour plates and internal gizmos in an effort to find anything vaguely circular; whether they were dials or cogs, each round object was stuck to the side of their new acquisitions to see if it would make them go faster.

Soon, Trukk-treddas, Wagon-walkers and Bigga Kans marched with a mind-bogglingly awkward gait into war. Da Wheel Steelaz were well pleased, hooting with laughter as the juddering movements of the wagons tilted them this way and that. A lot of fights erupted even before they got into the main scrap. When the Steelaz finally got there, many of their contraptions proved unexpectedly useful, allowing the greenskins to cross broken ground and lob stuff from a great height.

Their newfound delight was momentarily ruined when Gashrakk da Flash rumbled past in his new ride: a massive, gleaming Battle Fortress with the helm of a fallen Knight lashed to its bonnet. Gashrakk himself sat smugly in a central throne bashed together from loads of shiny exhausts, and even as the Wheel Steelaz watched in envy, teams of Gretchin were painting the armour panels hammered to the sides with big yellow stripes. Its highly polished metal was so bright that Alaric's blazing sun reflected from it with dazzling intensity, sending one Trukk-tredda veering out of control and another careening into the side of a nearby rust-ship. Gashrakk paused only to laugh, pat one fat wheel and hurl an obscenity before speeding away, leaving Da Wheel Steelaz to chug onwards through a cloud of smoke and dust.

Yet the smoke-belching wagons that came to life on the veldt were little more than distractions in the greater war effort. Behind the mayhem of the front line, Mogrok was working on an invention that could destroy an entire island in one blow.



SKRAPSMASHA

A Deffskull Battlewagon with a dangerous reputation, Skrapsmasha is amongst Raddak Bluefinga's favourite war machines. Its notoriety is mostly down to Skrapsmasha's gunboss, a one-eyed old skarboy by the name of Wrecka. Originally this gnarled pirate was a Mek with a thing for building unusually accurate artillery. However, a fateful rain of battlecannon shells left Wrecka's Mek Gunz in ruins and the Mekboy himself a mangled mess. The Painboyz did what they could – or at least, what they could be bothered – and the newly bionic greenskin found himself a place on Skrapsmasha's crew. Here he has excelled, putting all his old artillery know-wotz into practice at the controls of the Battlewagon's killkannon. Indeed, Wrecka is even able to place his shots to cripple enemy vehicles instead of destroying them outright. His helpless targets are left at the mercy of the Deffskull lootin' gangs, a bounty ready to be grabbed.

DA RUMBLEFORT

The crew of Da Rumblefort make most Deffskulls look positively respectable by comparison. This scabby gang of freeloaders are so irredeemably light-fingered that even their own clanmates don't trust them, and for good reason. Da Rumblefort is, in fact, an agglomeration of nicked components from countless other greenskin wagons. Its chassis alone is made up of bits from no less than four other Battlewagons, two Wartrukks, and a smashed up Morkanaut. Da Rumblefort's engine is as much dakkajet as battle fortress, and its tracks hail from half a dozen different tanks. Meanwhile its guns were stolen from so many unwitting contributors that half the mobs in Raddak Bluefinga's tribe would take umbrage were the truth to be known. Da Rumblefort always gets patched up after every battle, and if that means a few other crews find themselves missing vital gubbinz in the heat of battle, well that's good for a laugh too.



Deffbringa, a Battlewagon that does exactly what its name suggests.



Streaking through the wartorn skies, the Dakkajet known as Blue Funda spots the best wrecks for looting and radios their position back to the Boyz below.

THE VALIANT

The fighting on Alaric Prime took a bitter toll, accounting for millions of lives. While the Cadian 1652nd regiment bore the brunt of the Orks' wrath, few among Alaric's populace escaped unscathed from the terrible crucible of war. The lists of those that had given their names in Alaric's defence stretched endlessly across the great tally halls of the Nobles.

FALLEN NOBLES OF ALARIC

Blessed be his name and deeds, **Goralan Helmast** fell during the glorious House Kestren charge, taken when his Knight fell before the Warboss Gruk, Alaric curse his soul. Though his bones were lost to the foe, his spirit will live on forever in the stones of his keep and the blood of his progeny.

Foully slain during the sulphur storm at Kraken Falls, **Kyrana Calestros** held back an Ork flotilla for half a cycle even as the toxic rain and wind stripped his Knight to its bones. Only when his canopy cracked and his flesh fell from his skull did his guns fall silent.

Long live the memory of **Phyne Degallio**, favoured progeny of our Great Lord of the Sea and skilled at both blade and lance. Taken by the treachery of the enemy while defending the citizens of the Smouldering Isle, he drowned in his Knight and was borne to the sea floor by an Orkoid war effigy.

Ingloriously taken, **Rolundus Velemestrin** was murdered in his sleep by foul xenos infiltrators who slipped into his stronghold beneath the careless watch of his thrice-cursed servants and guards. Praise be to the Noble who, even bereft of his Knight, laid low many of the aliens' number before succumbing to his wounds.

HONOURED DEAD OF CADIA, ANNO MERIDIAN 232.443.998. M41, ALARIC PRIME

Cpt. P. Foyle 4531652b – Battle of Hill Epsilon Kay 1216 – Extensive xenos close combat trauma, identified by uniform fragments and rank insignia.

Lt. 2nd C. Kern 9221652k – Landing Zone Primus 'Rust-ship' landings – Partially consumed by hostile xenos parasite (ref. b784k 'Biter Squig').

Lt. 3rd T. Roan 6761652d – Gamma Kay 229 Bridgehead Boiling River Defence – Missing during bridge collapse and consequent sulphuric rain deluge.

Cp. H. Breen 4431652b – Battle for Shrouded Port, Smouldering Isle Campaign – Killed in destruction of port facilities, body unrecoverable (ref. Witness 3511652c).

Cp. K. Darnelos 8211652k – Landing Zone Primus 'Rust-ship' landings – Crushed by allied asset during counter-attack (ref. M77 'Knight').

Lt. 1st S. Gerbin 6301652c – Battle of Hill Epsilon Kay 1216 – Cause of death spontaneous psychic combustion and massive organ rupture (ref. b583y Ork Psyker).

Sgt. 1st E. Venks 9091652d – Warden Island Mercy Sanctions – Missing during the disappearance of local convict population and Astra Militarum assets.

Lt. 2nd Y. Torm 7291652e – Battle of Hill Epsilon Kay 1216 – Slain by treachery within the ranks, inadvertently enforcing Commissariat Edict (ongoing investigation ref. Hill Epsilon Martyr-pact).

AUTOMOURNED SERVANTS OF THE IMPERIUM

Tech-Magos Terus Corgan – Killed during the battle of Boiling River, Magos Corgan died defending the Cadian 1653rd artillery position. Unwilling to surrender a Basilisk to the greenskins, Magos Corgan – blessed by the Omnissiah be his name – detonated an earthshaker shell in the breach of the gun, releasing its machine spirit and saving it from the foe.

Astropath Ascendant Seemus Neth – Euthanised by Commissar Dyrk during the Battle of Hill Epsilon when tainted by xenos' psychic spoor. To prevent the alien from plundering his mind, Seemus Neth chose the blessed bolt shell as an end to his torment.

[EXPUNGED BY HOLY ORDER]
– For notable actions in the [RESTRICTED CITATION ORDO XENOS] death and ruin upon the foe [PURGED FROM MEMORY]
– A single bullet of vengeance [RESTRICTED CITATION ORDO XENOS] died in silent agony [VANQUISHED BY HOLY ORDER]

Cpt. Cobolt Laynce, 12th Cadian Airwing – Killed during engagement over landing zone Primus 'Rust-ship' landings – After sustaining extensive damage to his Thunderbolt, Cpt. Laynce showed great valour and faith in the Emperor, ramming a rust-ship with his aircraft and permanently disabling its guns in the process.

DYROS, THE SCORCHED KNIGHT

The Freeblade known as the Scorched Knight was as much a product of the Red Waaagh! as he was a combatant within it. Having rejected his family only scant months before the arrival of Grukk and his Ork hordes, Dyros was still finding his way within a world become strange to him. When he had learnt of his older brother's murder at the hands of his father he had cast off his family obligations. Overnight he rejected the caste systems of Alaric, taking his Knight and striking out on his own.

Scorching off the symbols of House Kamata in the Damatoi volcano range, Dyros struck out into the hinterlands of the world, determined to right the wrong committed against his brother by their father, Hiram Kamata. The Red Waaagh! gave him all the opportunity he could ask for. In the chaos of the invasion he returned to the shadow of Sacred Mountain to see the blood debt paid.

A skilled and able warrior, Dyros was instrumental in disrupting the Ork forces around the mountain and accounted for hundreds of greenskin kills. He chose not to fight alongside the other Nobles, instead striking against rearward units or Ork artillery. His lone Knight would often be seen by Cadian Guardsmen, its burnt hull obscured by smoke and flame as it smashed Ork wagons to scrap or tore through massed ranks of greenskins with its reaper chainsword. In the space of a few cycles the legend of the Scorched Knight had sprung up among the Imperial forces. Guardsmen and commanders cut off or abandoned to the tides of war would pray for his appearance, their eyes scanning the horizon for the distinctive hunched form.

Unknown to the Cadians, Dyros did not fight for them. He fought to keep his world free, to purge the alien and maintain his honour; but mostly he fought for revenge.

What no one could know was that when Dyros' brother Tyras had perished within his Throne Mechanicum, part of his mind had remained. It was this fragment of Tyras that had told Dyros about the deadly malfunction his father had engineered, about the madness in the heart of his house and the long list of crimes committed by Hiram. While words alone might not have been enough to sway Dyros, his brother was able to share visions of their father's madness via the Throne, forever changing the young man.

Dyros was to get his chance for vengeance during the last battle for Sacred Mountain. In the chaos of the melee, Hiram's own Knight was toppled by a crashing Dakkajet. Dyros, who had been fighting in the vanguard of the Imperial forces, saw his father fall and hastened to his side. When Hiram looked up to see which Knight had come to his aid his gaze fell upon the armour of Dyros. One look at its scorched insignia and, even through his insanity, the patriarch knew his time had come. Levelling his thermal cannon at his father's canopy, Dyros let the rage and hatred of his brother wash over him. A final mental pulse ended the crimes of his father once and for all.

Though dozens of other Nobles had seen Dyros decapitate his father's Knight, none barred his way when he finally strode from the field of battle, for each and every Noble respects the right to settle debts within his own house.



'THOUGH WE STAND TALL WITHIN OUR KNIGHTS, WE ARE NOT ABOVE THE LAWS OF MEN. LET EVERY TYRANT TREMBLE IN MY SIGHT SHOULD HE THINK HIMSELF IMMUNE. AS LONG AS I DRAW BREATH THE GUILTY WILL BE PUNISHED, BE THEY XENOS INVADER, CURSED TRAITOR OR Highborn CRIMINAL.'

- The Freeblade Dyros, speaking to the surviving kin of House Kamata



TANK COMMANDER SILAS OVIK

Rumoured to have been the bastard son of a noble family who was exiled to carve out a life in the wilderness, Silas Ovik has developed something of a grim, determined and aloof nature, even for a Cadian. As a child he came to the attention of the Imperial Guard officer corps after he shot dead a pack of slobbering Cultists attacking a local settlement. It transpired this boy had taught himself how to maintain and even improve the lasgun he had used to such effect in the incident. Despite the feral look about the lad, and his small, wiry frame, the value of such initiative and instinct did not go unnoticed.

Due to his time spent hunting in the wilds of Cadia, Ovik had developed a strange propensity to wait until the last possible moment, making absolutely sure of the shot before pulling the trigger. His rivals in the cadet brigades would mutter that this betrayed suicidal tendencies, but his senior officers recognised it indicated an unusual level of calm and focus under pressure. They decided that young Ovik's skills were perfectly suited to the tank regiments.

Because of his short stature, his upbringing and his rather unusual nose, Ovik has received more than his fair share taunts – over the years, many have joked that Ovik's father was a Ratling. But he has never risen to the bait. As a man of few words, he has instead earned the respect of his men by letting them witness his skills at the hunt.

Despite being a master of all variants of the Leman Russ, Ovik prefers to command from the cupola of a Vanquisher, where he can destroy war engines from afar just as he hunted wild beasts as a child on Cadia: one shot, one kill.

With his deft touch and quick mind guiding the tankers under his command, Ovik's squadron famously stalked the Daemon Engines that had infested Prosan during the Belliger invasions of 988.M41. His pinpoint accuracy took apart Warpsmith Vutos' monstrous creations one by one and denied the momentum that would surely have seen the fall of the planet. Later that year, during the Ork incursion of Crisson Vael, Ovik was forced to assume command after a suicidal air strike took out the Cadian command HQ. There, he led two squadrons of tanks against three Stompas, outwitting and frustrating his foes long enough for further support to arrive and destroy them outright.

Such demonstrations of grit, nerve and intelligence saw Ovik promoted to the legendary Steel Host of the Cadian 1652nd. In a regiment already celebrated for its high level of efficiency, Ovik's record since joining has been nothing short of remarkable. As the commander of the Steel Host, he has repeatedly led Cadia's armies to victory from within his Leman Russ Vanquisher, *Ovik's Fist*. It has become a mark of pride for other tankers to have fought alongside him, and his men obey him without question.



TEMPESTOR PRIME SALEM WHITLOCK

Tempestor Prime Salem Whitlock is the epitome of a Schola Progenium officer – bold, courageous and utterly dedicated to the Imperium. Whitlock's personal honours and roll of victories would put most career officers to shame, and the respect he instils in his men is the envy of any Commissar. The Tempestor Prime commands none other than the 50th Kappic Eagles – the toughest, most decorated company of Tempestus Scions this side of Segmentum Solar. Though they number barely a single company, under Whitlock's command they are worth more than a regiment of regular Guardsmen – and they know it. If Whitlock and the Kappic Eagles have any flaw at all, it is their assumption that their orders will be obeyed to the letter regardless of whom they are delivered to.

Orphaned at the age of two, Salem Whitlock was raised by the Schola Progenium on the Shrine World of Phrell. During his youth, his determination, devout loyalty and natural leadership marked him out as officer material, and for many years it was believed he was destined to join the Commissariat. However, as a Tempestus Scion cadet, Whitlock displayed an acumen for tactics that his drill abbots felt more suited to Militarum Tempestus command. His subsequent advance through the ranks of the Militarum Tempestus has been nothing short of meteoric.

As a Tempestor, Whitlock led the drop assault that brought the decade-long siege of Fortress Hellstar to a bloody end. His squad swept through the stronghold with ruthless efficiency, gunning down every Cultist inside in less than eighty minutes. As a Tempestor Prime, Whitlock

orchestrated the strikes that crippled an Eldar warhost at Telvarr Prime. He then personally led the assault against the xenos witch-commander, who he slew whilst simultaneously redeploying his Valkyries and Vendettas to cut off the warhost's line of retreat, resulting in a bitter aerial duel that the Astra Militarum won through attrition and sheer determination.

There are few Imperial Guard officers who can coordinate the actions of an entire company as fluently as Tempestor Prime Whitlock. Even fewer can do so in the thick of the fight, where Whitlock can be seen barking orders while snapping off shots with his bolt pistol. Whitlock insists on leading from the front, facing the same dangers as his men and assessing the battlefield first hand. It is this selfless bravery that inspires the Kappic Eagles to victory, the same quality that saw them at the front when the fate of Alaric Prime hung in the balance.

'RIGHT, LISTEN UP, ALL OF YOU. VOGSTRAU, DERKEL, GET YOUR TEAMS UPSTAIRS AND SECURE A VERTICAL PERIMETER.

SHRIVER SQUADRON – YOU'RE AIR COVER. VENDREL, KLEIST, YOU'RE WITH ME. RESPS ON FULL; THESE UNDERTUNNELS AREN'T GOING TO BE PRETTY. LORD BRAHMICA – KEEP THOSE GATES CLOSED, EVEN IF YOU HAVE TO BLOCK THEM WITH YOUR WALKER'S ARSE. JUST GET IT DONE. NOW.'

- Salem Whitlock, prior to the Purge of Alexei Keep



THE KLAW OF MORK

Big Mek Mogrok had already made his mark on a dozen warfronts, but the true glory of his plan to assault Sacred Mountain was yet to unfold. When Cadian high command got word that a planetoid passing Alaric Prime had been altered in its course and was now heading right for Sacred Isle, a desperate gamble began to unfold...

ORK FORCE FIELDS

Ork technology seems to work in no small part because the Greenskins believe it will, and their force fields are no different. Electrical shields like those protecting the rust-ships in Gruk's fleet are fuelled not just by a ragged collection of conduits and compactors, but also by the unshakeable self-belief of the greenskin horde. This somehow gives these fields the strength to thwart all but the most determined attempts to breach them, the Orks inside laughing and flinging insults as heavy shells and missiles explode harmlessly against their fizzing, hissing shield.

Thirty miles to the south-east of the Sacred Mountain, Mogrok had been hammering and bashing away at the rust-ship *Bad Gob* with a grim intensity. Day and night he had been busy with his greatspanner and welding torch, bolting on some bits and tearing off others.

Only when the ship's nose cone fell away to reveal a great twisted claw did a collective grunt of understanding rise up from the Meks gathered around it. Standing almost as high as a Stompa, the Klaw of Mork was covered in thrumming compactors and strange protrusions, all linked together by a maze of cables and wires. With a final blow from his bending wrench, the Big Mek activated the strange weapon. A few moments later, vivid green light coruscated around its talons before shooting out into the sky.

High above the giant claw, the beam of greenish energy probed in the darkness before coiling like a snake around the celestial glimmerings of the Frozen Comet. Tearing the star-debris from its ancient orbit, the device dragged the giant rock toward Alaric, bringing it downward with terrible inevitability.

THE CASTELLAN'S COUNCIL

When the vast energies of the new Ork super-weapon sprang to life alarms went off across the Imperial augur array. Dozens of servo-skulls and cogitator cores whirled to life in a babble of binary whispers. From within tiny asteroids and clusters of orbital debris, hidden mechanical eyes searched the surface of Alaric Prime. Scanning the great tractor beam, they began sending a stream of data back down to the surface and the cogitators of the Cadian headquarters.

Castellan Stein shifted through the dataslate reports, re-reading the same urgent missives again and again from his commanders. As hard as it was for him to believe, it seemed the Orks had built some kind of orbital tractor beam. They were using it to pull down the celestial body the Alaricans called the Frozen Comet. Worse still, if the reports were accurate it would slam to earth on top of Sacred Mountain.

Stein and his allies convened an emergency council to discuss their next course of action. Many of the Nobles argued for an immediate assault against the Ork tractor beam, even if it meant stripping vital forces from other fronts to do so, while Stein's commanders urged a massive artillery strike. By now, Stein knew enough about the Ork rust-ships to be sure that a frontal assault against the invaders' guns would be tantamount to suicide, whilst any artillery attack would prove useless against their force fields.



Whitlock, the Tempestor Prime, spoke up. He believed there was a weak point in the field, reasoning that where the beam for the tractor cannon went out, there must also be a way in. Though the gap would be too small to fly a Valkyrie through or make an accurate strike with a Deathstrike missile, it was in all likelihood large enough for a trooper to drop through with a grav-chute. The Tempestor Prime was sure that if they could get in intact, his men could destroy the force field generator from the inside. Once the field was down, an airborne Militarum Tempestus unit could make a run on the tractor cannon itself and take it out. Stein agreed; it looked like their best shot. With the tractor cannon disabled, the comet would hopefully be put off course in time, and maybe even orbit the planet instead of striking it. It was a slim hope, but they would not get a second chance.

A LEAP OF FAITH

A few hours later, Whitlock's Valkyrie came in low across the plain under cover of darkness. The Tempestor Prime leant out the open doorway as flattened grass whipped by below. In the gloom alongside his own craft, two other vague shadows signalled the rest of his flight. Up ahead he could see the shimmering crackle of the Ork force field and the vivid green

beam that reached up into the night sky. Turning back, he could see the red light of the cockpit illuminating the shadows of his men. He held a hand to his jaw, keying his microbead and voxing all three Valkyries at once.

'Five minutes to contact. Squad Secundus and Squad Tertius, be in place and ready when that field comes down. We'll only get one shot at this. Squad Primus, we get the honour of going in first. Prepare grav-chutes for the jump.'

As the Valkyries closed in on the Ork force field dome, Whitlock's craft peeled off, climbing toward the invisible opening at its peak. It was a sound enough theory – there must be some kind of gap around the tractor cannon beam. It was a calculated risk, but it was this sort of gamble that he had built his career upon.

Whitlock didn't even pause as he leapt out into the darkness. Hurling down toward the force field, the Tempestor Prime leant into the wind, aiming for the blazing green beam and the barely visible ring of distortion around it. He hardly had time enough to think that the Orks probably didn't even know about this hole in their force field before it flashed past him. Behind him several other Scions free-fell through the gap, arms held tight at their sides. All slipped past unscathed, save Orrost, who drifted too close to the tractor beam. Its irresistible power snatched him from the air like an insect caught by a lizard's tongue, yanking him downward and vaporising him upon the claw itself. Whitlock had no time to mourn his loss as his grav-chute arrested his descent. A split-second later his boots hit the ground, his men forming up close behind.



'This here's Da Klaw of Mork,' yelled Mogrok to the assembled Bad Moons. 'It's going to smash the humies' mountain good!'

The Big Mek flicked switches and yanked levers on his huge traktor kannon's control panel to roars of approval from the gathering Ork horde. Shaking and sputtering, the contraption's engines sprang to life, the cables leading to the Klaw arcing with jolts of greenish energy. Standing at Mogrok's side, Dagogg and Grabber watched the scrap engine rattle into life with eyes wide.

'Wot's it for den?' Grabber asked, scratching his head.



Mogrok pointed a gnarled green finger at the sky. Squinting, the other two Orks could just make out a pale speck carving a path through the heavens. Adjusting his bionik eye, Dagogg took a closer look. The speck resolved itself into a frozen comet, its surface swathed in clouds of ice and rock. Even as he watched, a flickering green beam reached out from the Klaw and washed

around the comet. With painful slowness the satellite started to swell in size. Each moment, the beam spitting from Mogrok's Klaw drew it a little closer to Alaric Prime.

'So how do you kill a humie mountain?' said Mogrok. 'Well, I reckon droppin' another mountain on top of it's a good place to start. We bring that sparkly great comet fink down into the fight, it'll blow up everyfink wot ain't under a force field. Enuff talkin,' the Big Mek said, adjusting his tool belt. 'I got to go and sort some fings out. Don't let nuffink mess with me Klaw, or I'll boil ya in oil!'

Dagogg could only nod in dumb agreement as he watched the comet glimmer in the green light that shot up into the heavens. Fine-tuning his bionik eye, he could see that it was definitely headed in their direction.

'So wot's this fink doing again, Dagz?' said Grabber, looking even more confused than normal.

'Right,' said Dagogg. 'You know how you grab the grots wiv yer grabba stick, and then you chuck 'em about the place fer a larf?'

'Yep,' replied Grabber promptly, his pincer-stave flexing to illustrate his point.

'Well,' replied Dagogg, sighing happily. 'It's a bit like that. But wiv a moon.'

DAREDEVILS AND DETONATIONS

Having identified the source of the strange tractor beam that was drawing the Frozen Comet ever closer, the Tempestus Scions under Salem Whitlock made speed to their rust-ship target. Attacking under cover of night, they mounted a full-throttle assault into the heart of the Ork base, their mission to disable its force fields and destroy the tractor beam.

GRAV-CHUTES

The Militarum Tempestus have at their disposal some of the best gear of any Astra Militarum unit. Among this specialised equipment is the grav-chute, a single-man anti-grav device that grants its wearer a dangerously direct method of entering the fray. Engineered from ancient suspensor technology, the chute has a complex integral cogitator that uses augurs to detect altitude and velocities. It is a testament to the Tempestus Scions' bravery that a soldier never really knows how long this charge will last, or whether it will kick in at the right altitude, each time he makes a jump.

MISSION: DISABLE

The Tempestus Scions slipped swiftly across the Ork encampment, moving like shadows among the piles of scrap and debris. The Tempestor Prime led them toward a hastily-built flak tower, where a cluster of Ork guns protected both the tractor beam and the force field generator that shielded it. Whitlock directed half his squad to make for the top of the tower while he led the rest toward the generator at the structure's base.

Taking the Orks completely by surprise, the Tempestus Scions blasted their way into the tower's lower level. Through the smoke and chaos the Imperials pushed inside the teetering structure, hot-shot fire scything down anything which moved. Even though none of the Orks had any idea where their attackers had come from, they knew a fight when they heard one. Mobs poured in from every direction, drawn by the sound of combat. The sentry Orks inside the tower fired their shootas wildly in the confined space, solid rounds blowing holes in the rusting walls or ricocheting off in random directions.

Dagogg the Mek had been tinkering with the guns at the top of the tower when the first Scion charged over the perimeter wall below, gunning down the closest cluster of grots with a salvo of red laser blasts. Growling, the Mek manned an artillery piece of his own invention, kicking protesting grots out of the way. With a whine and pop the big gun grabbed one of the humies, flinging him into the air and squishing him like a bug.

No sooner had the corpse fallen than half a dozen took his place, fanning out across the lower gun deck. Under the lash of Grabber, the grots turned their guns on the Tempestus Scions and opened fire. The tower lit up with the flash of zzap guns and the boom of kannons. At such close range, most of the shots went wide, but another Scion was mashed into the deck by a lucky hit from a bubble chukka's ball of force.

In the bowels of the tower, Tempestor Prime Whitlock fought his way into the generator room, fending off wild choppa

swings and ducking mad shoota fire. Guarding the controls was a towering Ork Nob. The xenos gave the Tempestor Prime a broken toothed grin and cracked its knuckles. Whitlock didn't even pause as he brought up his pistol, obliterating the Nob's head in a volley of bolt shells.

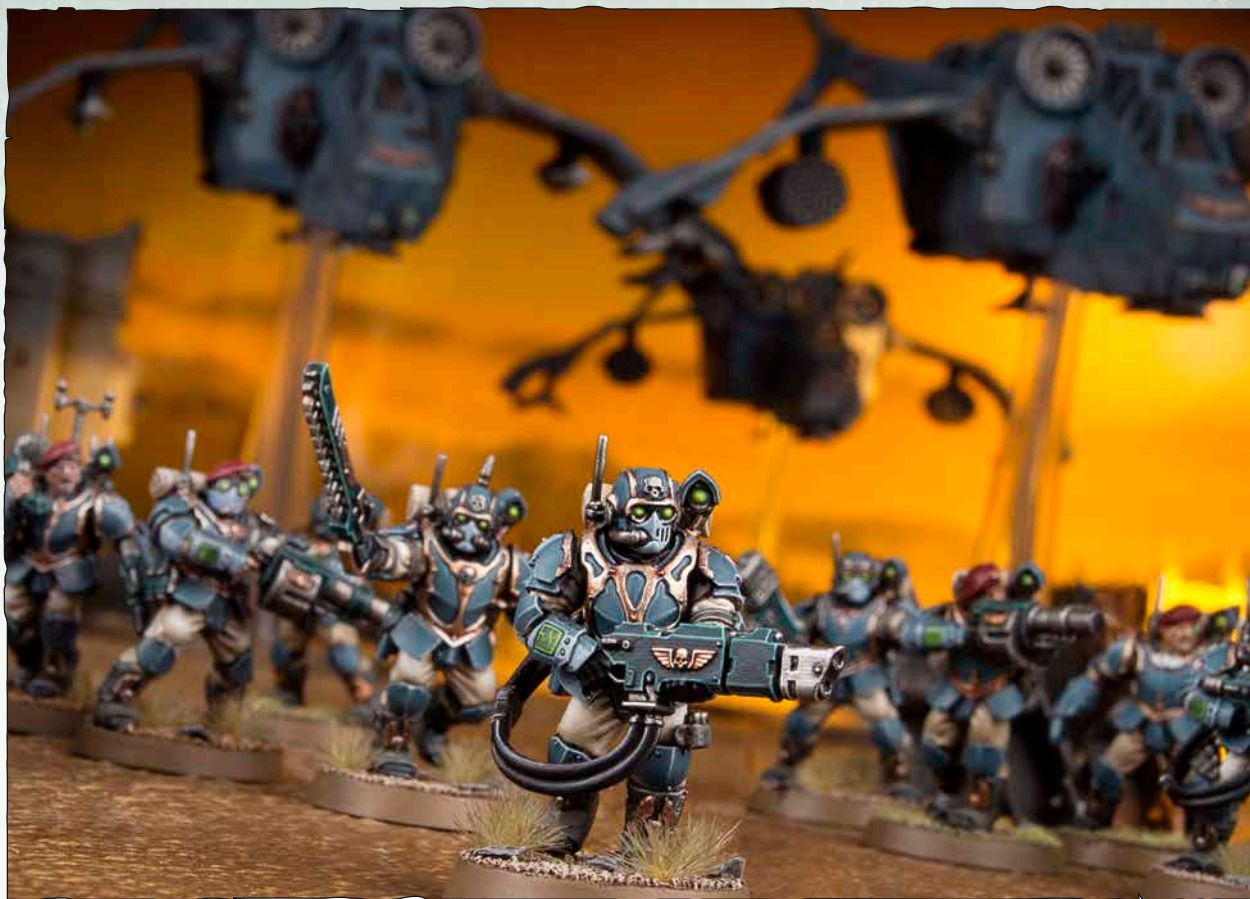
'Charges here, here and here!' he yelled, and his men swiftly set their satchel bombs. As soon as the Scions had obeyed they retreated from the room. A heartbeat later, the tower shuddered from a contained explosion as the explosives on the generator detonated.

MISSION: DESTROY

With a deafening crack of energy and a vivid green flash the force field collapsed. Almost immediately the scream of engines announced the arrival of Whitlock's Valkyrie reinforcements, near-invisible in the darkness as they raced across the sky.



Still in a state of confusion, the Orks were firing at anything that moved. Tracer rounds lit up the dark. Dagogg had a group of the Tempestus Scions below pinned down, grots trying to drag them into the dirt while their guns flashed and fizzled. Hearing the arrival of the Valkyries, Dagogg swung his Smasha upward and peered into the dark. His bionik eye pierced the blackness, adjusting until he could clearly see the telltale glow of Imperial aircraft engines. Waiting until the last possible second, Dagogg fired the Smasha, its gravimetric beam reaching out and enveloping the craft. The big gun bucked as the Mek threw the captured Valkyrie into the ground. A sudden flash of fire marked the point where it smashed into the ground, its burning remains tumbling end over end across the encampment. Content that Grabber's lads had the humies in check below, Dagogg lined up the Smasha on the second Valkyrie.



Halfway up the tower, Tempestus Prime Whitlock saw the first Valkyrie come apart in a ball of fire as it hit the ground. 'Dammit,' he spat, 'we need those guns taken down!' The Tempestus Prime sprinted on, leading his men once more onto the gun platform.

The Tempestus Scions fought up the rickety stairs to the Ork gunners and slave-runs up top, throwing themselves into the fray. Whitlock saw a large, brutish Ork lining up a gun on his remaining Valkyrie and emptied his bolt pistol's clip in the beast's direction, forcing it to dive for cover.



All around him beams of arcing energy, solid rounds and explosive shells flew filled the air. Whitlock took cover behind a pile of broken crates. Nearby, one of his men jerked violently as a zzap gun burned a hole right through him, while another was blown to fragments by a kannon hit. Ork reinforcements poured in at a steady rate.

Scanning the battle with a quick glance, Whitlock gave the order to retreat. The surviving Tempestus Scions fell back to the edge of the upper gun platform, dodging fire before leaping off into the darkness. In their wake the Orks yelled insults at the retreating foe.

As he fell through the darkness, Whitlock pulled the detonator from his belt, squeezing the trigger and setting off the satchel charge he had left leaning against the pile of ammo crates. Above and behind him the sky lit up as the gun platform vanished in a cloud of fire.

With their grav-chutes slowing their fall at the last moment, the Tempestus Scions hastily formed up around the Tempestus Prime. 'Primary target open,' he voxed. 'Repeat, primary target is open!'

The Tempestus Scions rushed to the edge of the Ork encampment. Behind them the xenos were banding together into mobs, screaming, waving their choppas and firing their shootas wildly as they charged.

Even as Whitlock braced himself for close combat, the closest mob vanished under a hail of heavy bolter fire. Looking up, he watched as a Valkyrie bellied in low on howling engines, the door gunners firing into the gathered Ork warriors. Leaping up into the cabin, the Tempestus Prime looked toward the rust-ship where the tractor beam still hummed and flickered. Out of the darkness a single Valkyrie appeared, falling into formation with Whitlock's craft as they climbed and sped off across the plain. The Tempestus Prime counted down silently in his head.

The flash turned night into day. Shading his eyes, Salem Whitlock allowed himself a smile as he watched the rust-ship come apart in a spectacular conflagration of orange-green flame.

THE SACRED AND THE SCARRED

The tractor beam had been disabled by Whitlock's efforts. Though the inbound comet would hit the planet, it had been knocked off course; its impact point was projected to be in the sea north of the Sacred Isle. A massive Ork attack on Sacred Mountain was going ahead anyway. All across the planet, preparations for the final battle were made.

THE BEACON LIT

Castellan Stein stowed his magnoculars for the tenth time, teeth pressed together in frustration. His command Chimera was bumping and rolling across the savannah towards the centre of the Sacred Isle, its passage so erratic it was impossible to pick out details more than ten or so kilometers distant. Yet this was the most direct route to their destination.

With the teeming Ork hordes storming unchecked across several of Alaric Prime's largest islands, it was only a matter of time before their convoys of badly-made vehicles converged. Every clan and every tribe would be desperate to be part of the grand battle that would break Alaric Prime once and for all. By the best calculations of the augur array, the invaders were converging upon the largest landmark of them all.

On the horizon ahead a great column of brown smoke linked the earth to the sky, a stilled tornado against the dark blue firmament. Below it was Sacred Mountain, its many peaks and ridges jutting towards the evening stars.

The armoured columns were getting close; Stein could just about make out the strange concentric ridges that dotted the mountain's flanks. He had lost several of his finest platoons there in the battle against Warlord Gruk, despite his best efforts. For every Imperial Guardsman that had died, though, a hundred Orks had been cut down. In the cold mathematics of war, it was a great victory, and one that Castellan Stein would gladly repeat a dozen times over if he could.

Unfortunately, the smoke trail they had left in the wake of the battle was the largest on Sacred Isle by far, and it had proved a beacon to xenos and Imperial defender alike.



Judging by the scores of dust-trails converging on the mountain from all over the horizon, protecting the peak's outer approaches would not be so straightforward this time. East, south, south-west; the distance left between each xenos convoy and the mountain itself was worryingly similar. He'd seen the stills relayed from orbit a dozen times over. Played in chronological sequence on the data-slate, it was as if a noose of smoke trails was tightening around the neck of Sacred Mountain.

That's not coincidence, thought Stein. One of the damned things is coordinating all this. The one with the brain.

The Chimera's command augurium chimed three times, and Stein ducked back into the cupola to examine its display. The energy spikes it was detecting were immense. There was something inside the mountain's depths that crackled with an insane amount of potential energy, and if anything, the readings were increasing. In last night's war council the Alarican nobles had insisted that the peak should be defended to the last, though none seemed to be able to give him a convincing reason as to why. Yet they were clearly on to something. Stein's Astropath, Zeil, had told him that, when viewed with the witch-sight, the mountain positively glowed.

Late the previous night, the moustachioed Lord Neru of House Degallio had announced the dispatch of a task force of Knights to the mountain's easternmost gulch. Having no real authority to stop him, Stein had merely shrugged w. Backwards bastards all, he thought. They were probably sacrificing virgins to the Volcano God this very minute.

Neru Degallio's anxious frown wrestled with a disapproving scowl for control of his eyebrows. The frown won. While he sat fretting within his Knight armour, his consort was still up there on the ridge, her silver-plated skull gleaming in the evening sun as she offered up one of House Degallio's Greater Keys. Even in her robes of state, she looked tiny and delicate next to the caryatids that framed the Sacred Gate.



It should be him up there at her side, thought Neru, not some other Knight – even if that Knight was the legend Gerantius. Neru sighed heavily. In matters of duty he could no sooner win a fight with his consort than he could wrestle Gerantius to the ground barehanded. Above them, the comet was getting larger by the hour, and a sense of imminence pervaded every house and regiment. Now was not a time for a fiery argument, nor for half measures.

A muffled boom echoed across the slopes. Startled from his reverie, Neru subconsciously raised the White Warden's weapon-arms in response, even as his eyes scanned the display

in front of him for the source of the noise. Directly ahead of the Lady of the Keys and her looming companion, a black line had appeared down the length of the Sacred Gate, partially concealed by the drifting dust set up by the movement of such an ancient mechanism. With a banshee screech the great brass-plated doors opened inwards; a metre, then a metre more. Then they stuck fast.

Gerantius strode forward, lowered one knee in the rubble, and put an armoured shoulder to the nearest, forcing it open in a shower of sparks. The ancient Knight, made small by the dimensions of the immense portal, gestured with a elegant sweep of his chainsword for the Lady Degallio to enter first. She curtsied daintily, and her seraph-mites accompanied her inside in a fluttering halo. Gerantius stood to his full magnificent height and stomped after her, briefly saluting the timeworn caryatids that guarded the gate before disappearing into the darkness.

Lord Neru was still staring hard at the great open gate three hours later. As the sun was beginning to set, a low rumble shook the firmament, sending klaxons ringing around his Throne Mechanicus. The earth-tremor grew more intense, its vibrations more and more severe until the White Warden was forced to kneel to keep its balance. Cracks were appearing left and right, cutting strangely regular patterns across the parched stone and tumbled scree.

Sacred Mountain was waking at last.

THE MAN AND THE MOUNTAIN

Stein watched in awe as the Imperial Guard armoured columns rumbled closer to the mountain ahead. The entire landmark was shuddering hard, its outline blurring as boulders and loose rocks cascaded down its flanks. The Cadian officer ordered the all-halt – he had no wish to get his men buried alive. Great cracks and lines were appearing all across the mountain's surface. The mountain was shaking loose the scree and rubble that covered its sides. Angular shapes and metal-plated domes were being revealed in each concentric ring that girdled its peaks.

Avalanches of loose stone cascaded down slopes that tipped from steep to vertical, their rubble tumbling into sheer-walled chasms that yawned where tumbleweed had rolled only moments before. Pitted metal defence lines shook free of their rocky camouflage, redoubts and bluffs revealing blunt fortifications that conformed so well to the natural lines of the mountain that it was no wonder Stein had not spotted them before. Slabs of permasteel and plascrete slid and ground into hidden recesses as eagle-headed shields unfurled around artillery pieces with a bore so large that a soldier could crawl inside with room to spare.

One by one, the Cadian tankers were opening the cupolas and hatches of their tanks, climbing out with a shocked slowness to their movements, their eyes riveted on the vision ahead. Speechless, they watched the mountain transform into a giant stronghold that made the famous Cadian kasrs look like molehills by comparison. A voice in Stein's head objected at the breach of protocol, but he couldn't tear his attention away to order his men back into their vehicles. Their awe was completely understandable.

The peak folded and reconfigured, shouldering off slabs of rock like a prehistoric monstrosity shaking off the ice of the glacier that had trapped it over the aeons. At its feet, a deep chasm had opened up in the ground around its circumference; a chasm that was swiftly filling with boiling water from the subterranean rivers below. A giant drawbridge clanked out from the eastern ridges, extending across the newly-formed moat. Stein was watching the military brilliance of a people long dead.

This was what Gerantius had been guarding. This was what Degallio's heirloom-keys unlocked. No wonder the knightly houses were so protective of it, even if so many millennia had passed since its construction that they no longer knew why. As the dust of its hatching began to settle, Stein gazed up at one of the great wonders of the Imperium; the colossal tomb of the planet's founder, so vast and militarised that he could protect his world in death just as he did in life. Below him, in the Chimera's humid guts, the castellan heard the Astropath Zeil breathe two words of wonder.

'Fortress Alaric...'

THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

Focusing on the task at hand once more, Castellan Stein barked a series of orders into the comms array. He had already mentally assigned the different corps under his control to the various battlements and redoubts ringing the mountainsides, and his men were quick to obey. By the time night had fallen, his tank companies had trundled across the giant span of the drawbridge that had emerged on the eastern side of the vast fortress.



The Baneblade *Iron Ettin* and its Shadowsword companion *Steel Cyclops* took up position on either side of the great gate, the last line of defence should any assault somehow manage to get past the armoured companies that lined the bridge. The Knights of House Velemestrin, Terryn and Kamata, having reached the Cadians' position a few hours earlier, paced back and forth at the mouth of the bridge as if impatient for battle. The Imperial Guard made better use of the time available to them before their artillery was in range. Gunners familiarised themselves with point weaponry and anti-aircraft installations. Unexpected reinforcements from Alaric's criminal elements had been assigned to defensive positions, each Ogryn team briefed three times over and each defence line further shored up by debris and dead bodies.



Night drew in as the Ork hordes grew closer, darkness cloaking the horizon. Yet the mountainsides were illuminated as if by the fullest of moons. The comet that blazed through the stratosphere above the mountain was getting larger and brighter by the hour. Whitlock had disabled the Ork tractor beam that had been drawing it closer, but the satellite's momentum was such that it was

still heading towards the planet's crust. Stein took some comfort from the knowledge that, due to Whitlock's efforts, its projected course would see it crash into the ocean north of Sacred Isle instead of into the mainland as the Orks had no doubt intended. The resultant tidal wave would be disastrous for those on the plains, but not so much for those warriors high up on the mountainsides.



If anything, Stein was cautiously grateful for the inbound comet – as well as posing a very real threat to the Ork hordes that would no doubt be converging on their position, it gave the Imperial Guard a little more light to work by. Astropath Zeil seemed to think otherwise, but the castellan was close to ignoring him altogether. His speech had become ever more desperate and erratic over the last few days, and he had even taken to babbling about magical floods, blood-warriors and noble beasts in his sleep. Perhaps the heraldry of the knightly houses was conjuring vivid imagery in his troubled mind, perhaps there was some symbolic riddle yet to be cracked. There was enough work to be done without having to decipher the nightmares of a psyker. Stein put it out of his mind and focused on the force dispersals for the battle ahead. This time he would break the invasion for good.

THE FINAL ASSAULT

The Orks are converging upon Fortress Alaric in their countless millions. This time, their advance is not the uncoordinated, belligerent thrust typical of Warlord Gruk, but a cunningly wrought series of tactics that lead the Orks right to the doorstep of the Cadian defenders. Worse still, the threat from the skies is far from over...

THE HORDE APPROACHES

Stein's men were still shoring up the defences that had shuddered out of the slopes of Sacred Mountain when the mass of greenish-black on the horizon came into visual range. A great horde of Ork walkers led the assault, ranging from the size of Ogryns to the size of hab-blocks. Each was waving its weapons, be they giant shears, chainsaws, wrecking balls, massive buzz saws, rock-drills, or a profusion of large-bore guns jutting out from their shoulders and arms. Every one of them had a set of wire-coil horns curving around its head, crackling with barely-harnessed energy.

At the heart of the walker horde was the giant effigy the Nobles had encountered upon the Great Savannah, the ruin of its missing head replaced with the tusked cab of an armoured Battlewagon. It was

escorted on either side by two captured Imperial Knights. They stumbled and lurched like the dead brought to life, the heraldic devices on their carapaces daubed over with crude death's heads that dripped blue paint into the dust.

To the east and west alike the Ork hordes were spilling around the foothills of Sacred Mountain. Stein looked at his dataslate in consternation. It was receiving live cant from those pict-skulls that had made it into low orbit without being crippled by the energies of the approaching comet. Fortress Alaric looked much like an island lost in a green-black sea of bodies. His gut rumbling, the castellan gnawed on the end of his lho-stick, fighting to keep his calm as the sheer scale of the task sank in. 'Better get started,' he muttered to himself as the Orks came into extreme artillery range.

Patience. Waiting for a satisfying kill required patience in spades.

Though Silas Ovik had brought down many greenskin vehicles so far, he still thirsted for a genuine trophy. Now he had found a worthy specimen.

The Orks had thoroughly sullied a Baneblade. The super-heavy tank sported a great iron maw, huge exhausts, and mechanical claws jutting out of the sides. Well, Ovik thought, if these Orks were to treat the machine like a beast, he'd have to slay it like one.



'Commander,' came the call over the vox, 'the vehicle's done what you said and followed us out. You want us to handle it, sir?'

'No. This one's ours.'

'That might take some doing, sir.'

'Just as well we've got the right tool for the job.'

The looted Baneblade rumbled across the plain and fired. The shell exploded mere yards away, a shudder rocking the Vanquisher.

Ovik grinned. 'We'll start by removing that.'

At his command, Ovik's Fist rumbled nimbly parallel to the Baneblade, and the gunner rotated their cannon. A pause, an order, a shot, and in the distance the turret of the Baneblade exploded. Somehow, the prey managed to keep moving – towards them.

'Sir,' the driver shouted, 'it's going to ram us!'

'Ready another shot,' Ovik replied coolly.

They waited as the crippled Baneblade closed with them. Ovik held his ground, savouring the moment.

'Awaiting orders, sir...'

Ovik ignored the madly chiming auspex now, resorting to more basic instincts. He could almost hear the hollering of the greenskins before he finally issued the order.

Ovik's Fist fired at close range, the explosion obliterating the looted vehicle. When the smoke settled, it revealed little more than a ruined shell, without a greenskin in sight.

Stein gave his aide, the Master of the Ordnance, the signal to commence bombardment and strode to the parapet of the Aquila stronghold he was using as his base. Within seconds the Basilisks stationed on the lowest foothills of the mountain had spoken. Great plumes of smoke drifted up from each of their earthshaker cannons. Stein followed the high parabolas of each artillery squadron's barrage, nodding in approval that the next volley had been fired before the first had even struck home.

The smile dropped away from his face when the first set of shells slowed and then stopped in their ascent twenty metres above the Orks, hanging in the air as if they had sunk into some thick, invisible jelly. The second volley thundered down after the first, only to suffer the same fate. The castellan raised his magnoculars, a horrible suspicion dawning as a scattering of live ordnance thickened above the Ork horde. The crackling wire horns attached to each of the walkers – was it possible they were creating some kind of electromagnetic field, one that repelled falling ordnance as easily as a duralumin rainshield stopped an acid squall? If so, the Orks had robbed the Cadians of their long-range advantage in one fell swoop.

A galling half-hour of impotent artillery fire later, the Ork vanguard had piled forward at impressive speed. Mobs of howling xenos had reached the edge of the boiling moat in a dozen different places. As they had covered the last half-mile, lascannon teams had picked out a few of the largest clusters of artillery shells that still hovered high above the Ork walkers. The resultant chain explosions had taken down pockets of Ork vehicles here and there, but hundreds, perhaps thousands more remained. It felt to Stein as though every tribe, clan and mob on Alaric Prime had somehow converged on his position at the same time.

Stein grumbled under his breath. If they could not rain shells down on the foe, they would have to deliver them via a more direct method. The castellan spat an order into his vox-bead, and the Leman Russ battle tank companies ranged along the length of the boiling moat trundled into position. Three by three they opened fire, each shell raising a wake of white spume across the moat as it thundered towards the approaching Ork horde. Several of the shells exploded amongst the greenskin ranks with gratifying thumps, but many more detonated prematurely,

flame blossoming across invisible hemispheres of force. Guttural laughter drifted up from the plains below, seeming to mock the castellan's pitiful efforts to thin the horde. Somewhere, thought Stein, there was an Ork war-mechanic begging for a priority kill.

THE BEAST UNSTOPPABLE

A high-yield artillery shell whistled down out of the skies, its trajectory taking it straight towards Mogrok's upraised face. The Mek twitched one of the levers on his shoulder-gubbins and chuckled darkly to himself as the shell slowed to a crawl, then a complete stop. It span in the air twenty metres above him, a metal fist denied its killing strike. Mogrok's netmagnet was working even better than he had hoped. He was fine with the humies' big guns chucking even more of their shells over to his side of the moat. They would be reused soon enough.

Up ahead, the bubble fields were working well enough, protecting the rest of the lads from the tank squadrons at the front of the humie line. Just a thin strip of river to deal with before they could get stuck in, and Mogrok already had plans for that little problem too.

Trundling and stomping their way across the plains to the east were the scrapper caravans of Bogrot Bones, the famously irascible Snakebite warboss. Goaded by Runtherds, his Squiggoths lumbered up to the edge of the boiling river and knelt down, the scrapheaps of useless nick-knacks and badly rusted gubbins they carried on their howdahs cascading haphazardly into the churning waters. Loading wagons and flatbed Trukks acted in much the same way, their piston-raised hindquarters scattering yet more rubbish into the water. Slowly but surely the moat began to fill at its thinnest point, a rough causeway of junk promising a way across.

A few hundred metres to the west, a trio of pug-nosed anti-grav minelayers dangled the flank of a rust-ship into place, forming a rough and ready bridge for Bogrot's lads to cross. All the while the scraplord's artillery farms were hurling solid shot into the Cadians that were moving to intercept, forcing them to keep their heads down. To Mogrok's approval, all of the Snakebite tribe's really zappy guns were kept way back, on maximum elevation or just jammed in the earth pointing upwards. They had their part to play too; just not yet.

A series of klaxons and horns blared across the plains as the Wheel Steelas found out that the shiny new rides Mogrok had built for them had no brakes. The Big Mek slapped Dagogg on the back and pointed as the entire tribe hurtled headlong into the boiling waters of the moat, their bellows of outrage rising above the bass thunder of the human guns. Just as Mogrok had planned, the unfortunate Speed Freetks formed another fordable point as their wagons piled in one atop another. Orks of all stripes began to leap across from one sinking vehicle to the next to reach the opposite shore and get the killing started up close.



To the west, Tankboss Baddfrag and his coveted Chimeras were crossing the moat in twos and threes. To Mogrok's pleasant surprise the Blood Axe warboss' claims that the humie tanks could traverse water were being borne out. All around the circumference of Fortress Alaric the Orks were closing in on the humie defenders. 'That there river's gonna be red come morning,' said Mogrok to himself, picking a gob-squig out of his cheek and inspecting it for a moment before biting down hard. Things were warming up nicely. Any time now the humies would take the bait and come out of their hidey-holes ready to be killed properly.

THE NOBLES SALLY FORTH

'Three fordable points by my count,' said Stein, grimly. Half a mile below him, hundreds of Orks were stumbling or sinking into the boiling waters of the moat. Somehow, though, hundreds more were making it across the improvised scrap bridges, buoyed up by a combination of dogged determination, bloodlust and suicidal bravery. Mob after mob were gunned down by the massed Taurox transports the Tempestus Scions had stationed along the inner bank of the boiling moat, but with their attention focused on the Orks that had already made it over, they were allowing those still to come the time they needed to effect a crossing. They had to counter-attack fast.

The castellan clearly wasn't the only one to have reached the same conclusion. Stomping down the slopes in great sprays of scree were the surviving Knights of the Alarican noble houses. At their head were three spearheads of Knights from House Degallio, their off-white armour clearly visible to friend and foe alike. On the western slopes, four of the Knights from House Terryn had formed a tight square and were covering each other's advance. As they grew closer to the improvised Ork bridges, volley after volley of rokkitis soared towards them, impacting on their ion shields with a series of small explosions. Try again, thought Stein, watching as the Knights stamped and blasted the Orks back into the boiling waters of the moat. It would take a lot more than that to fell Terryn's Nobles.



At the far end of the vast drawbridge defended by Stein's super-heavy tanks, a scattered contingent of Imperial Knights fanned out to take on the Orks thundering across the plains. The blackened beast the men had taken to calling the Scorched Knight was first to reach the enemy lines. As Ork artillery shells smacked from its carapace to its left, the Knight swung its ion shield around to deflect the barrage, only to leave its right side exposed to a roiling gout of fire from the flamethrower-armed Orks at the fore of the horde. The walker fought on, wreathed in flames.

To its rear came a Knight whose heraldry marked its pilot as Hiram, patriarch of House Kamata. Stein hurriedly voxed a warning as he saw an Ork aircraft come in low, a wrecking ball of rusted metal trailing behind it. It made no difference. The plane pulled up from its dive too late, smacking nose-first into the walker and ploughing both of them into the dirt in a horizontal column of fire. Ahead, the flaming figure of the Scorched Knight turned around and loped back to its fellow Noble, its ion shield covering its rear. To Stein's amazement, after only a moment of hesitation it lowered its thermal cannon and spat fire right into the pilot's helm, detonating it from the inside.

Nearby, the Knight whose heraldry identified him as Sylvest Velemestrin was knee-deep in roaring Orks. Each of the greenskins was wielding a large sledgehammer capped with a crude rocket, and they were manually detonating their charges against the weak spots of Sylvest's Knight. The walker flailed its arms wildly, blaring its war-horn in an appeal for help just as Lord Gaulemort Kestren had done moments before Sylvest had sealed his fate. Knights from several houses turned, but none of them did more than watch as Sylvest was taken apart limb by limb.

The Degallio vox-net crackled with the chime of a bell.

'Thus does the ghost of Gaulemort Kestren find his rest.'

HONOUR AND DEATH

Lord Degallio, the Seablade, bowed his head for a second and retuned the vox of his Throne Mechanicus. The lord and master of their Cadian allies had let loose a stream of invective that would have made a kennelmaster blush, screaming that the Knights were supposed to be defending the bridge, not settling old scores. The poor man clearly had only a rudimentary understanding of honour, and of the forces that haunted the slopes of Fortress Alaric.

It was obvious that they needed to crush the infernal beast that was coordinating the invasion to secure victory. Such kills were the speciality of the Degallio house – lop off the head of the beast, and slay its body in the process. The knightly triumvirates he had named Alabaster Lances were up to the task. With the White Warden at their head, House Degallio's finest would soon carry the day.

Ahead of Degallio's striding Knights the legendary figure of Gerantius was storming through the Ork ranks, his shield flickering fast as it blocked incoming fire left and right. The ancient was heading off on some quest of his own, but the White Warden loped after it like a devoted squire; Degallio would be damned if he'd let Gerantius

go unsupported. The mysterious Knight's legend spoke of always defending the needs of Alaric Prime, and there was every chance that it instinctively knew what needed to be done. If there was indeed some fiendish mastermind coordinating the Ork assault, Gerantius would like as not be heading straight for him, and Lord Neru intended to be around for the kill. He had no doubt that he could dispatch the beast if it was only identified, and such a prominent part in the victory would cement his position as Alaric Prime's leading patriarch for decades to come.



The waves of Ork infantry that seethed around them were giving way to larger and ever more impressive constructs. Some were almost the same height as the Knights themselves, the fat-bellied war machines that they had encountered west of Boiling River. Degallio blew away the upper half of one of the beasts with a flurry of shots from his battle cannon, revealing the torso of the walker behind. Standing on the shoulder of the next greenskin effigy was a metal-headed Ork mechanic hoisting a strange, whirring contraption that was firing a ghostly green beam right at Gerantius' helm. Degallio's battle cannon was still reloading, so he mind-fired a stream of stubber bullets at the Ork gunner, but only burst apart some of the runtish creatures that scurried at the greenskin's feet.

Suddenly a terrible shriek pierced the roar of battle. Where the green beam touched Gerantius' helm, its light was turning white. The tendrils of that light reached back to the Ork mechanic himself, pulling him and a half-dozen of his runt-creatures into the tunnel of ghostly emanations. Degallio watched in fascination as the Ork gunner twisted and thinned, his corporeal form mingling with those of the screaming slave-creatures. His impossibly elongated body bristled with tiny, twitching hands and horribly distended jaws before the tunnel of light vanished with a wet pop. Gerantius strode on.

MAYHEM UNBOUND

High on the ramparts of Fortress Alaric, Stein was coordinating tight bursts of interceptor fire on the ramshackle Ork flyers and one-man 'copters that were buzzing across the boiling moat. Dozens of the crude aircraft had been brought down in flames and oily smoke, but more were heading in. With his Thunderbolt squadrons expended against the descending rust-ships, only Whitlock and his men afforded any kind of air superiority.

Worse still, the gates that the Baneblade *Iron Ettin* and Shadowsword *Steel Cyclops* had been guarding had been fired upon several times by greenskin artillery and lumbering Mek-walkers – the resulting damage and electromagnetic interference had permanently jammed

them halfway open. To Stein's surprise, swarms of servo-skulls, stained by verdigris, had poured unbidden and unexpected out of the dark tunnels of Fortress Alaric, their clacking claws and lasbiters nipping at those Orks that had taken the drawbridge. A brave attack, thought Stein, but such diminutive assets would not confound the brawling greenskin hordes for long.

On the slopes themselves, wherever the Ork artillery barrages had taken chunks out of the corpse-shored defence lines, Stein's pre-briefed Ogryn teams were filling the breach. Their slabshields were locked in a wall of metal and flesh that bounced back any greenskin mob foolish enough to assault it. To his knowledge not a single line had yet been breached, a testament to the Ogryns' dull but effective fortitude.

The next few seconds put the lie to Stein's conclusions as a mob of promethium-stained Ork arsonists stood well back from the Ogryns and soaked them in flame. To their credit, the abhumans stood their ground for almost a full minute before losing their temper and charging out, clubs swinging and badly-burnt faces roaring in anger. Stein knew how they felt. Unfortunately the Orks were quick to take advantage, pouring around the flanks of the Ogryn unit and running pell-mell into the defence lines behind.

Stein knew that his plans had enough redundancy built in that such minor breaches would be contained and the xenos invaders exterminated by disciplined fire traps.



However, the sight heading for the heavens made a claw of ice contract around his heart.

Across the world, the Ork rust-ships had been used as ready-made fortresses by the Ork invaders, and Stein had assumed them beached like the megawhales they resembled. He had been wrong. A massive Ork spacecraft was lurching through the skies in a series of bursts and explosions, hoisted aloft once more by the mad science of the greenskin mechanic caste. To Stein's horror it was curving around on an intercept course towards the comet that even now streaked through the skies. Tempestor Prime Whitlock's Valkyries and Vendettas had veered off to intercept, but their long-range lascannon fire was achieving little more than searing off the ablative sheets that comprised the thing's hide. Only by boarding the craft could Whitlock have any hope of taking control. Stein still had hope it could be neutralised before making too much of an impact – if the castellan could choose any men for the mission, Whitlock's Tempestus Scions would be top of the list.

Stein watched the Militarum Tempestus craft move in, climbing higher and higher towards the rust-ship's belly. Then something terrible happened. All of the unexploded ordnance that had been captured by the greenskin mag-field on the plains below suddenly shot up into the air as one, a curtain of steel shells hurled by a giant invisible hand. Dozens of Taurox Primes were plucked from the flanks of Fortress Alaric and thrust up into the air with them by the electromagnetic field's upward force.

Just as the inverse rain of metal reached the same altitude as Whitlock's flyers, green beams of crackling energy flew skyward from the rear of the Orkoid scrap caravan. The resultant chain of detonations lit up the skies for miles around. The burning chunks of Whitlock's skimmer-borne platoons and Stein's transports fell from the skies to spear down into the chaos of the battle raging below.

Stein's heart sank as, above the still-blossoming explosions, the burning rust-ship rose with terrible, unstoppable momentum, a flaming meteor in reverse breaching the stratosphere of a firebound planet. The castellan cried out in horror as the burning rust-ship blazed white for a second, then detonated directly adjacent to the inbound comet. The skies were devoured by a great halo of blinding flame that roared overhead in all directions. When Stein recovered his wits, he saw that the sheer force of the multi-megatonne explosion had knocked the frozen comet onto a new course at the last moment. It was heading right for the armoured flank of Fortress Alaric.

THE FOOT OF GORK DESCENDS

'Shields!' shouted Stein into his vox-array, 'Regiments 1651 to 1654, get inside the mountain, and raise whatever shields you can find! 1655 to 1657, retreat as fast as possible!'

Even as the castellan shouted the words, he knew it was no use. There was no way the Cadians could withstand the meteoric impact of the celestial body inbound on their position. Even the Knights would be obliterated by its sheer godlike force.

The Orks would be burnt from the face of the planet too, a black testament to their mindless need for titanic violence. Despair roiled through his chest. Even those men that managed to get inside the mountain would be buried alive in the very tomb they were trying to defend. Something snapped in Stein's mind. 'Cancel those last orders!' he roared into the vox, 'All Cadians, all Ogryns, all Knights, all personnel to attack with full force! You're dead already, so face the Emperor soaked in xenos blood. For Cadia! For Alaric Prime! Kill 'em all!'

A great roar resounded across the slopes of Fortress Alaric. It was not the guttural heave of a greenskin war-bellow, but the raw-throated cry of ten thousand human warriors united in desperate bloodlust. The skies burned a dangerous red as the massed regiments of the Cadians charged over their defensive positions to the Orks spilling across the circumference of the moat. Las-bolts burned open torsos, bayonets speared guts and gloved fists broke snaggletoothed fangs. Within seconds of Stein's order, every man and beast within a mile of the fortress was embroiled in desperate close combat.

Unbidden, the Knights were racing to form a half-mile ring around the thickest knot of Stein's forces. There were only two dozen of them left, now, but they were united in purpose. The Orks on the plains below were erecting great force-pylons that crackled as they were hoisted into the air. There was barely a minute before the fortress would be flattened. The comet blazed like a suicidal sun.

Stein flagged down his command Chimera as it scrambled to the front line, hoisting himself up onto the front and drawing his ornate power sword. Ahead was a knot of Ork drop-troopers, many of their crude rokkit packs ignited by the heat of the inbound comet. The transport slewed to a halt, and Stein used its momentum to leap screaming into the midst of the xenos warriors, his blade scything a head from a thick neck, then getting lodged in the skull of another as his plasma pistol blasted the guts out from a third. The screams and roars of battle were eclipsed by an omnipresent roar and a bow-wave of heat that filled the air with the stench of burning hair.



The world filled with blinding white light as the comet struck home. Every man, Ork and machine outside the protective aegis of a power field was blasted to ash in an instant. A whole flank of the Sacred Mountain was torn away, crumbling down into the boiling moat to leave the honeycombed innards of the great peak open to the air.

Roaring in triumph, the surviving Orks poured forward in an unstoppable mass. Sacred Mountain had fallen.



As great clouds of smoke curled across the mountain's southern slopes, a flash of green light flared in the gloom. With a crack, several Ork Nobz and a herd of terrified-looking Gretchin teleported into existence. They glanced about themselves urgently, alert to potential threats, but in the wake of the comet's impact no-one was looking 'for one more small band of greenskins. Satisfied that their arrival had gone unmarked, the Nobz set off, jogging uphill with the grots scurrying on their heels. At the top of a wreckage-strewn ridge, the greenskins stopped and cast about. Finally, at the violent gesticulations of their horn-helmed leader, the Nobz and grots descended upon a particularly large heap of junk from which a rusting kannon barrel stuck up like a marker.

In the wake of the clockwork massacre, the war had swept on at a pace that left little time for clean-up. As the greenskins dug frantically through the wreckage, they soon found the rusted hulk of Gruk's Battlewagon still lying where Gerantius had kicked it all those weeks before. It was one of the Nobs that struck gold, hefting aside a slab of mangled metal and shouting excitedly to his comrades to come look at what he'd found. His grunting was cut short as a massive green fist, scarred and shaking, pistoned up from the wreckage to grab him about his thick throat. Watching the bulge-eyed Ork's struggles with interest, the group's grinning Mekboy brandished a mass of wires, glowy lights and spinning gubbins. The greenskins braced, several grots jamming grubby fingers in their ears or pinching their long noses tight, then with another deafening crack the entire mob vanished along with their miraculous prize...

Meanwhile, cradled in Stein's arms, Astropath Zeil coughed blood onto his robes. Of the command squad, only Stein's vox officer had died in the comet's moment of impact. Using some ancient protocol that Stein would never understand, the Alarican Knights had united their ion shields in a great aegis dome that had shielded hundreds of Cadians from death by incineration. It had burned out many of the Knights' number, several of the giant machine-martyrs now pillars of flame that lit the hellish tableau around them as the after-effects of the comet's collision faded.

Alaric Prime's dead Nobles were in good company. Millions of fighting men and women had their lives snuffed out in the instant that the frozen comet had struck the fortress. Even the mountain itself was grievously wounded, its flank laid open to the skies.

Many of the cannier Ork tribes had erected their own shields too – the bubble-fields that had protected them thus far proof even against the godly impact of the comet. Thousands of the beasts were roaring unimpeded towards the breach in the mountain's flank even now. Stein felt like he had died inside, even if his body was still alive.

Zeil coughed again, and pointed at the skies. Stein looked up. More meteorites, by the look of it; the final blow. Then the flame of hope sparked in his chest once more.

They were the contrails of Imperial Drop Pods.







