

Arena of Blood!

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Heatwaves shimmered off the blood soaked sand, while severed body parts lay scattered across the arena floor. And squig rats sniffed around the edges for the smaller bits of visceral. In the rusted and ramshackle stands Orks screamed, and Grots yelled; but all shouted for blood. Now, into the arena there strode the reigning champion of Grot hand-to-hand combat – *Snik the Knife*. Snik waved to the screaming crowds as he turned to face his latest opponent, an unknown Tau firewarrior, recently captured in a raid near the Damocles Gulf. Wielding his famous choppa “Da Kleava”, Snik circled his enemy cautiously, but confidently. The two circled each other on the blood stained sand of Gutzslinga’s Bludgeon Dome. But it was certain to be a quick and bloody fight, as every Ork and Grot knew. Blood, sand, and carnage was what this day was *all* about.

‘Why are we here again?’ asked Rogue Trader Captain Hildiwara sitting down on the rough wooden benches.

‘Ayez already told ya Kaptain. A bit o’drinkin’. A bit o’gambolin’. An’ all around day o’fun ya moight say!’ said Freeboota Kaptain Wartrakk. Then tipping his tricorn hat with its garish yellow squig-bird feathers, to Warboss Gutzslinga across the arena, he said, ‘An’ bein’ seen by da Warboss!’

There was much cursing and yelling coming from the Warboss and his Nobz; and not a few bottles of fungus beer came flying Wartrakk’s way. To the angry crowd Wartrakk now flashed his gold tusk rings, gold chains, and his many jewelled ear rings. Finally, with a flourish of his yellow frock coat, he sat down. Then he motioned for his Flashgitz to take their seats in the stands behind him.

‘They appear not to like you Kaptain Wartrakk,’ said Hildiwara taking a bottle of fungus beer from a Grot food vendor.

‘Ain’t nufin but a fing Kaptain!’ he replied waving his tricorn hat again at the screaming and cursing crowd. ‘Dey jost ’ate a sucksessful biznizman like meself!’

Meanwhile, back in the arena, the firewarrior seemed to stumble, and dropped to one knee. The Orky crowd started yelling, ‘*Kill da Blueie! Kill’em! Kill’em!*’

Snik the Knife saw his chance and rushed forward, when the firewarrior threw his knife underhanded from the hip. The knife penetrated Snik’s throat and he desperately grabbed at the blade; but green blood shot out from around his fingers, and gurgling horribly, he expired. The firewarrior stepped forward, and taking the dead Grot by the ears, promptly decapitated him. The crowd went wild.

‘Oh, m-my that was quick?!’ exclaimed Hildiwara.

‘Ow moch did ya put on da Blueie Slump?’ asked Wartrakk leaning over to his favourite Grot.

‘Well, itz been pretty borin’ up till now. Seen’ as the Blueie wot killed da first Grot by kickin’ him in da ’ead. Den he killed da second Grot by kickin’ him in the belly, an’ den kickin’ him in da ’ead. Soz, Ayez been ’edgin’ our bets so to

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speak. An' put' fifty teef on da Bluie, and fifty teef on whatever Grot dey send in,' said Slump adjusting his yellow bandanna. Slump was not only well thought of by his Kaptain, he was well-off too. He sported three gold rings in each ear, a gold ring in his nose, and numerous gold chains around his neck.

'Dat'll change now!' laughed Wartrakk. Then turning to Hildiwara he said, 'Seez da Warboss he don't like loozen. So he'll be sendin' in an Ork boi next. Say, why doncha ya put some teef on the da Bluie. It's a sure fing!'

'I didn't come here to bet Kaptain Wartrakk. Besides, I didn't bring any "teef" with me...' said Captain Hildiwara with a flash of annoyance in her large black eyes. Even beneath the wide bicorne hat, her raven black skin shone in the afternoon sun. '...I've got nothing but gold and silver ingots, Imperial credit chits, and jewellery.'

'Hmm...', said Wartrakk looking over both shoulders and then behind him. And leaning close to Hildiwara he said, 'But ya still wantz to bet Kaptain. See dat Bluie dere, well he ain't from around 'ere. Instead, he's comes from *waaay out dere* by da Damn'o'klees Golf...' Wartrakk suddenly lowered his voice to a whisper, '*...See he fights fer da Red Warleader!*' Both of Wartrakk's eye brows went up and down with excitement as he spoke; which made it look like a caterpillar was trying to escape his face.

However, Captain Hildiwara wasn't listening. Instead, she was too busy examining the strange Tau firewarrior. He was stripped of his body armour, and his underbody suit had been pulled down around his waist. His muscular blue body glistened with sweat in the afternoon sun; which highlighted his numerous red tattoos – sworls, circles, zig-zags, and strange animal designs. His long blue face was framed by a black and silver goatee; and the entire left side of his face was red, while the right side was covered in red spirals. Hildiwara noted his sensual "Y" nasal slit; but most wondrous of all, was his full head of jet black hair that reached down to below his knees.

'Holy Throne, he's good looking!...*Wait what was it you were saying Kaptain Wartrakk?*' she said shaking herself awake. 'Who's this Red Warleader again?' she asked turning to her first mate Mister Sokolov.

'Captain, I've no idea who he's talking about?' he answered.

'Ah, ya know who Ayez talkin' about Kaptain? Shaz'Oh'Shove-off! Why he's da Bluie wot carries da *Dawn Choppa* and kurb stomps Orky Warbosses one after da udder!' Then turning to his mob of Flazgitz he shouted, 'Ain't dat roight boyz!'

'Roight boss! Oh'Shove-off is da greatest warleader wot eva lived!' they all shouted. But then one enthusiastic Flashgitz stood up and fired off three rounds in quick succession, *blam-blam-blam!* Which caused other Flashgitz to also jump up and fire high into the air; or *not* fire high into the air, as the case maybe. A few of Gutzslinga's boyz were hit by wayward gold-plated rounds. And there was much cursing and return fire coming from that side of the arena.

'See, we'z fought Oh'Shove-off before, and we knowz wots wot wif him. But Warboss Gutzslinga and his boyz dey don't! Hur-hur-hur!' laughed Wartrakk loudly. '*Soz ya gonna bet?*'

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‘Perhaps,’ said Captain Hilidwara. But putting down her fungus beer she asked, ‘Did Gutzslinga do that to him? I mean, dress him up in the red war paint and such?’

‘Nah, he dun dat himself! Dem Far-site boyz dey realee knowz ’ow to dress snazzy like!’ laughed Wartrack, as a Grot vendor handed him three open bottles of fungus beer. Taking all three bottles in between the fingers of one hand, he knocked them all back at one go. ‘Aaah now dat ’itz da spot!’ he said wiping his sleeve across his face. He took another three fungus beers from the vendor; but then looking out of the corner of his eye at Hildiware, he said, *‘Fancy him do ya?’*

‘Pbfft! He’s just another filthy xenos Kaptain!’ snorted Hildiware.

‘Well, if yer lookin’ to bet on da Blueie. Yoz gotz lotz o’bits an’ bobs on ya, dat ya can trade fer teef!’ said Wartrakk pointing at her uniform.

And it was true, Captain Hildiware did have lots of bits and bobs on her. There were gold epaulettes, pearl buttons, and a purple silk sash around her waist. There were also multiple awards, medals, and decorations pinned to her imperial blue naval coat. And on each finger of her gloved hands, she sprouted a ring with either a precious or semi-precious stone. And at her throat she wore a white lace kerchief pinned with a large jewelled ruby.

‘Ow bout dat bauble dere? Give ya fifty teef for it!’ asked Wartrack pointing at a large sapphire and silver jewel on her red waistcoat.

‘Ach, I can’t give that away!’ she said with disgust on her face. ‘It’s my Warrant of Trade in the Klimakso sector. And was given to me by Imperial Governor Sergis Avraham Wordham.’

Wartrakk squinted his tiny red eyes at the Captain and said, ‘Hmm, ya don’t seem to like it dat much Kaptain. So, why iz yoz wearin’ it? *Did ya ’ave da earn it by lyin’ on yer back?*’

Hildiware went for one of her two ornate laspistols, but Mister Sokolov grabbed her arm.

‘If he’s dead, he can’t work for you now can he Captain?’ whispered her first mate.

She looked over at Sokolov, and he released her arm. Then removing the silver and sapphire jewel from her waistcoat she said, ‘Alright you can have the jewel, but I want a hundred teeth for it!’

‘Done!’ he laughed as she tossed him the bauble. ‘Ah, Kaptain yoz a roight propa biznizwoman ya iz!’ Now tossing it to Slump he said, ‘Da Kaptain ’ere would like to place a bet of a ’undred teef on da Blueie!’

‘Smart bet dat is!’ said Slump giving Hildiware a wink. ‘Ye’ll make some teef today ma’am. Oddz are 10-ta-1 against da Blueie!’

But Hilidwara was again distracted by the powerfully built Tau firewarrior in the arena. Who was now standing in front of Warboss Krunchfut Zag Gutzslinga; and the two of them seemed to be having a heated argument. What’s more, Gutzslinga didn’t appear to like what the firewarrior was saying. In his black armour, Gutzslinga’s massive form clanged and banged with his every movement. His triple taloned power claw grinding and snapping as he spoke.

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‘Soz ya killed tree in a row, wotz dat’s got to do wif diz ’ere pig-sticka?!’ yelled Gutzslinga waving a short black blade over his head. Unfortunately, the firewarrior’s reply was difficult to hear.

‘Slump what’s the Tau saying?’ asked Hildiwara.

‘Jost a moment ma’am; an’ Ay’ll find out fer ya!’ replied the Grot putting on a large set of mek ear-phones over his ears. Slump twisted dials and pulled levers on the box on his chest, until he got the set adjusted. Furrowing his forehead he said, *‘He’s tellin’ Gutzslinga... dat da choppa belongs to ’im...’*

‘Hell no this ain’t happening! I’m not going sit here and listen to some Grot doing play-by-play!’ yelled Hildiwara snatching the ear-phones from Slump.

‘Well, if ya wants diz ’ere blade o’ yors back, den ya gotz to fight one o’ me boyz!’ said the huge Ork throwing him a rusty choppa.

Hildiwara heard the firewarrior yelling something back to the Warboss; but couldn’t make it out. She adjusted dials and levers on the box, which was still attached to Slump, until the sound came in crisp and clear.

‘He says, that he’ll fight for his own sword...but only if he can fight a...Nob?!’ said Hildiwara looking shocked.

‘Hur-Hur-Hur!’ laughed Gutzslinga. ‘Soz ya wantz to foight a Nob, well den yoz got a Nob!’

The entire arena roared with laughter at the firewarrior. Gutzslinga now seemed to be lost in thought, as he scanned the arena for an “appropriate” Nob for the firewarrior to fight. Then, after a bit of mucking about, he pointed to his left and said, ‘Bigkraka, yaz foightn’ da Bluie!’

‘Sure fing boss!’ shouted a huge Ork.

‘He-he-he, Ay seez wot Gutzslinga is doin’!’ giggled Wartrakk. ‘Seez Bigkraka ova dere iz gettin’ too big fer a Nob. Meanin’, he’s now a rival fer da warboss. Soz, Gutzslinga iz gonna ’ave da Bluie do hiz durty work fer him!’

‘Wait Kaptain...’ interrupted Hildiwara removing the mek ear-phones. ‘...If the Tau kills Bigkraka, then he finishes off a rival for Gutzslinga. But then wouldn’t Gutzslinga loose a lot of teeth on the bet? And what happens if Bigkraka wins instead? Gutzslinga would win a lot of teeth; but then wouldn’t that make Bigkraka an even bigger threat? So, does he want the Tau to win or to loose?’

‘Eh?...’ Wartrakk’s eyes glazed over, and he stared off into the distance. The gubbins in Wartrakk’s head started to turn; and at the speed they were turning, you might have expected smoke to start pouring out of his ears. Blinking a couple of times he said, ‘Kaptain Hildee-whara ya make my brain ’urt!’

‘Odd ’az gone up Kaptain, 15-ta-1 against da Bluie,’ said Slump with a smile.

‘Uh?...’, said Wartrakk blinking hard a couple of times. ‘Well den put anofer ’underd on the Bluie Slump. And anofer for da Kaptain ’ere as well,’

‘What?’ protested the Rogue Trader.

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‘Ah, no worries Kaptain, Ayez’ll cova ya!’ said Wartrakk tipping his tricorn hat to her.

The big Nob stood up, and removing his black tusked helmet shouted, ‘’Ere Bluie, Aw’ll make it easier fer ya!’ And stripping himself bare of his heavy plate armour, he stepped over the ramshackle siding; and then down a rusty steel ladder into the arena. Bigkraka reached up and took a wide bladed axe from his Grot assistant. And leaning the axe up against his waist, then gave the Tau an evil smile. Bigkraka first intertwined his fingers and cracked them, then he rolled his shoulders to loosen them, before finally cracking his neck. Then spitting into both of his hands, he lifted his axe, and gave it a couple of practice swings.

‘Yoz ready Bluie? ’Cuz Ayez am!’ he shouted.

The firewarrior stood there defiantly, but said nothing. Instead, he threw down the rusty choppa; and making a fist of his right hand, banged it against his forehead three times. Finally, he pointed at Bigkraka.

‘Wot? Ya wantz to ’ead bang wif me?!’ shouted the confused Nob.

Again the firewarrior banged his fist three times against his forehead.

‘Ya seez dat?! Da Bluie wantz a ’ead buttin’ kontest!’ said the Nob throwing his axe over his shoulder. ‘Am gud wif dat!’

The arena went wild. There was screaming, yelling, and laughter. Shots were fired, beer bottles thrown, and someone kicked a squig into the arena. General mayhem ensued, until Warboss Gutzslinga fired his quad-linked big shootas into the air.

On the other side of the arena, Kaptain Wartrakk was agitated and his fingers twitched as he shouted, ‘Ooh... ooh...ooh, I knowz wot da Bluie iz donin’! Do ya see dat Boyz? Do ya see wot da Bluie iz doin’ dere?!’

There was a loud chorus of “*hur-hur-hur*”, stomping, and grunting from the Flashgitz in the stands.

From down the aisle there now came Jangles the Bookie Grot; followed by his Gaming Grots carrying buckets for placing bets in. Jangles wore a green head visor and smoked a fat stogie. He stopped next to Slump and asked, ‘Oi, soz iz yer boss gunna bet or wot?’

‘Boss wotz we gunna do?’ asked Slump.

‘Eh?...Well, bedda add anofer ’undred Slump. NO! MAKE DAT TWO ’UNDRED!’ shouted the excited Freeboota. ‘And add anofer ’underd fer Kaptain Hildee-whara as well!’

‘Sure fing boss. Anofer two ’undred fer us, an’ anofer ’undred fer da Kaptain ’ere!’ said Slump giving Hildiwara a wink.

‘Awright, soz ye’z increasin’ ya bet den?...Well, Warboss Gutzslinga iz glad to take yer teef!’ said Jangles shaking his head. But then taking his cigar out of his mouth, he pointed the butt at Hildiwara and Sokolov, and said, ‘Now we all knowz da Kaptain Wartrakk iz an’ idiot; but ya ’oomies is suppose to be smarter den dat. Ar’ ya sur ya wantz ta bet all dat on da Bluie?’

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‘Yes, I do,’ said Hildiwara. ‘Here, this should fetch another two hundred teeth. That will cover the hundred that Kaptain Wartrakk put in for me; and an additional one hundred from Mister Sokolov,’ said Hildiwara pulling an amber ring off of her thumb and handing it to Slump.

‘Thank you Captain. I was just about to ask you to spot me for a hundred teeth,’ said Sokolov grinning.

‘Well dat blue bauble wot ya gave us earlier waz really worf two ’undred. So, letz say we’re all squared up den!’ said Slump ordering another two hundred teeth be put into the buckets. More teeth came down from the Flashgitz, who were pooling their wealth to make bets on the firewarrior. Jangles was beside himself, and sent word via a squig pigeon to Gutzslinga. When the Warboss tore the message from the poor beast and read it, he roared with laughter. And pointing at Kaptain Wartrakk he shouted, ‘Yoz a komplette idiot Kaptain Wartrakk!’

There was another outburst of laughter and shooting into the air; and afterwards the odds went up again.

In the arena the firewarrior sat on his knees with his hands in his lap, and seemed to be in a state of meditation. Getting agitated, Bigkraka began pacing back and forth; until at last he shouted, ‘Ar’ we doin’ diz or not Bluie!’

The firewarrior stood up, and setting his hooves shoulder length apart, now stomped his right hoof to show he was ready. Bigkraka got the message and ran across the arena shouting, ‘WAAAGH!’

The crowd jumped to their feet, holding their breath in anticipation of the impact. But per Orky etiquette, Bigkraka then stopped at the “propa distanz”, for a head butting contest. And leaning forward, he brought his arms up to shoulders height, his fingers twitching from the adrenaline. The firewarrior crouched down, and leaning forward, set his hooves in the sand. And the two combatants now stood regarding each other. Kaptain Wartrakk shuddered and twitched from the excitement, his Flashgitz all doing the same. And in spite of herself, Captain Hildiwara was afraid for the exotic Tau firewarrior; and placed a hand to her mouth in anticipation.

Gutzslinga lifted his quad-linked big shootas, and firing off a burst he shouted, ‘Go at it boyz!’

Bigkraka reared back and lunged forward with all the power of his fungoid muscles. The firewarrior on the other hand waited. And the split second before the Nob came forward, he launched himself. When the Tau connected with the Ork’s forehead, it was like a sledge hammer hitting iron. A loud *ker-ack* heard all across the arena; and the Bigkraka stopped in his tracks. Staggering backwards, he looked as if he’d just headbutted a squiggoth. Slowly, he seemed to regain his footing. Meanwhile, the firewarrior was still on his hooves; and except for a stream of cyan blood running down his face, seemed no worse for wear. He crouched down once more, ready for the second round.

Bigkraka, however, was still shaking off the effects of the first round. He stood up to his full height, shook himself off again; but then leaned to the right with his left foot leaving the ground. The whole arena made, ‘*Oooh*’ sounds as his foot left the ground. Then leaning to the left with his right foot leaving the ground; and the crowd made ‘*Aahhh*’ sounds. At last Bigkraka seemed to pull himself together; and planting both feet firmly on the ground, shook himself off one last time. He pointed at the firewarrior and shouted, ‘Yoz...’

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And then promptly went over face first.

Bigkraka hit the arena with a loud *thud*, and didn't get up. The crowd of Orks and Grots went mad. There was screams of "*Dat's not fair!*"; "*Da Bluie cheated!*"; and "*Kill da Bluie!*". Beer bottles, squigs, and stikk bombs, flew around the arena; with much "teef" being lost to Freeboota Kaptain Wartrakk and his guests that day. And in their exuberance at winning, the Flashgitz laid down a mountain of suppressing fire; which did a fine job of silencing the irate crowd on the other side of the arena.

During the mayhem, the firewarrior strode over to where Bigkraka had left his axe. And hefting it onto his shoulder, walked back to where the unconscious Nob lay on the sand. And with a single stroke, separated Bigkraka's head from his body. Then with both hands, the firewarrior flung the severed head into Gutzslinga's lap.

The Warboss was not pleased.

'Bloody well done firewarrior! Bloody well done!' shouted Captain Hildiwara brushing the empty shell casings off her bicorné hat. Turning to her first mate she shouted, 'Did you see that Yağmur! Wasn't that amazing?!'

However, at that the moment, Mister Sokolov was lying on the floor between the aisles. Covered in shell casings, he gave her a cautious thumbs up.

Meanwhile, Kaptain Wartrakk was beside himself with joy! Thinking about how he was "smarter den da average Orky" and all. And one couldn't fault him for thinking that way, as the teeth now arrived in bucket after bucket to the Freeboota side of the arena. Jangles was not pleased, as he and his Gaming Grots, had to find places for all the buckets of teeth. There were so many buckets of teeth in fact, that they had to be stacked up in a pyramid on the arena floor, just in front of Kaptain Wartrakk. The Freeboota Kaptain rubbed his hands together in glee; and laughing maniacally, pointed over and over at the buckets of teeth. There was much consuming of fungus beer, squig wienies, and chips among the Flashgitz.

Hildiwara motioned to Slump and asked, 'Please have someone take this medi-kit over to the firewarrior. There's no one else to help him is there?'

'No worries ma'am. Anyfin' fer our new im-ploy-er!' answered Slump taking the medi-kit. He then clambered down the pyramid of teeth buckets, and over to the firewarrior. Hilidwara watched as Slump gave the medi kit to the him. Slump pointed back at her, and she saw the firewarrior lift the kit in acknowledgment. Her heart jumped a bit at the small gesture.

On the opposite side of the arena things were more than just a little bit crazy. Warboss Gutzslinga's face was going from smiles to frowns and back again, faster than a Grot with the trots running to the loo. He was happy that Bigkraka was dead, one more rival he didn't have to worry about – *smile!* But then was sad at loosing all those teeth – *frown!* And so it went, smile, frown, smile, frown; but Gutzslinga just couldn't decide on which of the two emotions, he wanted to be in at the moment. So, in frustration he went with the emotion that always works for Ork Warbosses – *anger!*

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‘YA CHEAT’D BLUIE! AYE DON’T KNOWZ ’OW YA DID IT, BUT YA DID! YA CHEAT’D!’ he bellowed down at the firewarrior. He fumed, stomped his feet, and shook his fist; but finally he threw the black blade at the firewarrior shouting, ‘Aw roight dere’s yer little pig-sticka!’

Slump, on the other had was now making his way up the pyramid of buckets, and back into the stands. He handed the medi-kit back to Captain Hildiwara and said, ‘Well ma’am, Ayez no Grot Orderly, but Ayez finks we got him cleaned up gud.’

‘Thank you so much Slump! I can’t tell you how much that meant to me,’ she answered slipping him a gold ingot. Slump took the gold, bit it, and then winked at Hildiwara.

The firewarrior was again standing in front of Gutzslinga and yelling up at him. Impatient as ever, Wartrakk begged Hildiwara, ‘Wot’s ’e sayin’ Kaptain?! Wot’s da Bluie sayin’?!’

This time Hildiwara shared an ear phone with Wartrakk, and as they both listened, she said, ‘The firewarrior says...that he’s fought enough for Gutzslinga. And that now...the Warboss should...let him go.’ Turning to Wartrakk she repeated, ‘He wants Gutzslinga to let him go!’

From across the arena Gutzslinga was heard to laugh, ‘Hur-hur-hur, da jokes on ya Bluie! Did ya fink we waz gonna let ya go after jost killin’ a few Grots and a Nob?’ Gutzslinga leaned over a parapet, as far as its ramshackle construction would let him, and said, ‘Bluie, ya bedda be kareful wot ya asks fer. Ya asked fer yer little pen knife back if ya killed a Nob. *Ya neva asked fer yer freedom!*’

The muscles on the firewarrior’s back visibly tensed; and balling up his hands into fists, he yelled back loud enough to be heard, but not understood, on the Freeboota side of the arena.

‘Ooh, he’s angry! He just told Gutzslinga off...does anyone know what “snae’ta” means?’ Hildiwara and Wartrakk both furrowed their brows as they listened. ‘He’s now saying...that if he’s got to fight another Nob...for his freedom...then he’s has to have...his armour.’ Hildiwara and Wartrakk both looked at each other. ‘And then he’ll fight... whomever Gutzslinga wants him too.’

‘Hur-hur-hur, wot a stoopid git ya iz Bluie! Sur ya can fight anofer Nob fer yer freedom; but ya ain’t neva gunna see it...’ *cuz ye’ll be dead!*’

Fruiously adjusting a dial Hildiwara said, ‘The Tau is asking...if he and Gutzslinga...have a deal?’

‘Didn’t Aye jost say dat Bluie? Yeah, we’z got a deal!’ yelled the Warboss. Then to the arena he yelled, ‘Who wantz ta foight da Bluie dis time?’

Meanwhile Jangles the Bookie Grot came down the aisle again and asked Slump, ‘Well, oddz ar’ goin’ up 8-ta-1 in favour of whoeva da Nob iz gonna be. Iz ya fellas in diz time or wot?’

‘Soz boss, iz we bettin’ on da Bluie dis time?’ asked Slump leaning over to Wartrakk.

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Wartrakk put a big green hand up against Slump's pointed ear, *'Wez bettin' aw of it on da Bluie Slump! But letz wait until ta last moment to place our bet.'*

'Okee dokee boss!' said Slump putting a finger upside his nose. And turning to Jangles he said, 'Wez be lettin' ya know in a bit!'

Jangles just shook his head and moved off down the aisle.

In the arena the Groundz Keepa Grots wheeled out a cart with the firewarrior's kit. After unloading his armour, they loaded up the body of Bigkraka; and with much effort, hauled him off. Meanwhile, Gutzslinga was still busy looking for a Nob for the Tau to fight. There were Nobs of all sorts vying for the honour, some weren't even in his mob. They screamed, shook their weapons, and fired bursts from their shootas, all to get his attention. Gutzslinga, however, was having none of it. He simply looked bored; and while lazily strumming his fingers, gazed around at the rabble of Orks.

The firewarrior now took to arming himself. His armour wasn't the typical Tau combat armour. Rather, it covered his entire body, in the manner of a fireblade's armour. However, it was less bulky and more close fitting. He wore no shoulder shield on his left arm; but instead, both shoulders were protected by round segmented pauldrons. Most strange of all was the colour of his armour; which was a natural steel colour, that reflected light in the afternoon sun. The firewarrior fixed the short sword to his belt, and was getting ready to tie up his hair.

Seeing this, Captain Hildiwara undid the ruby clasp at her throat; and removing her lace kerchief, tied up the ruby inside of it. She handed it to Slump with these instructions, 'Give this to the firewarrior. Tell him it's from me, and that it's for his hair. Hurry!'

Amazed Slump said, 'Will do ma'am!' and scurried down the buckets of teeth once more.

The firewarrior stopped to listen as Slump gave him the kerchief. He opened it and stared down at the ruby for a long minute. And looking up at Hildiwara in the stands, he gave her a deep bow. In response Hildiwara doffed her bicorne hat, and tilted her head towards him. The firewarrior then handed Slump back the ruby clasp, and gathering up his hair, tied it off with the lace kerchief. Then taking the ruby clasp from Slump, he fixed it to the kerchief.

Meanwhile, Gutzslinga signalled that he'd finally made up his mind. He slammed his fist on a large bullock skull and shouted, 'Awright, dis iz whoz gunna foight da Bluie. Big Nob Jawsmasha!'

On the opposite side of the arena a massive Ork Nob stood up. Wearing black armour that covered his upper body, and wielding a double bladed chainaxe; Jawsmasha was even more impressive than Bigkraka had been.

'Ayez ready ta krump da Bluie fer ya boss!' bellowed Jawsmasha shaking his chainaxe.

Gutzslinga gave a nod of approval, and the big Nob then made his way down another rusty ladder into the arena.

The firewarrior took his helmet under his arm, and followed Slump back to the pyramid of buckets. There he waited; while Slump scrambled up to ask the Rogue Trader. 'Ma'am da Bluie is askn' if ya gotz any 'oomie likor or booze? Ayez don't knowz wot 'e needs it fer. Oh, an' a klean kloth too! Don't knowz wot 'e need dat fer eva?'

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‘Hmm...liquor? In fact I do have some Slump, but give me a moment,’ said Hildiwara reaching into her frock coat and pulling out an ornate silver flask. And taking another kerchief from her sleeve, she handed them both to Slump. The Grot then dutifully carried them down to the firewarrior. The firewarrior received the flask of amsec and the second kerchief from Slump; and bowed once more to Captain Hildiwara.

First the firewarrior drew his sword and held it out at arms length. Then he ceremoniously poured the amsec over the shadow black blade; allowing a little of the liquor to drip from the blade’s tip, before wiping it down with the kerchief. He then returned the sword to its scabbard. The firewarrior then did the same for the dagger. Pouring a small amount of alcohol over the blade, wiping it down, and then re-sheathing it. The firewarrior’s final act was to turn and raise the flask to the Captain Hildiwara.

In that moment their eyes locked and Hildiwara was transfixed.

The Rogue Trader Captain could now see what she hadn’t been able to see before, the eyes of the strange firewarrior. They were of a glittering turquoise colour, the likes of which she had never seen in any human or xenos before. And there arose inside of her a feeling like fire. An incandescence so hot, that she felt as if she were burning up inside. Her brow was damp, her armpits wet, and her thighs moist; but Hildiwara kept her gazed fixed on his exotic blue-green eyes. And the firewarrior in turn, kept his eyes fixed on hers.

Their eyes were still locked as the firewarrior took a sip from the flask. Standing up, Hildiwara removed her bicorne hat, and bowed to the firewarrior. Upon seeing this, Mister Sokolov scrambled to his feet. And removing his tricorne hat, and also bowed to the Tau. The firewarrior returned the flask to Slump; but not the kerchief, which he tied around his neck, and then tucked inside his underbody suit. Slump shot up the pyramid to return the flask to Hildiwara.

Hildiwara and Sokolov both shouted, ‘Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah for the firewarrior from the Enclaves!’

Kaptain Wartrakk stood up and yelled, ‘Boyz letz giv da Bluie a salute!’ And while Kaptain Wartrakk doffed his tricorne; he and the Flashgitz all shouted, ‘Uraaagh! Uraaagh! Uraaagh fer da Bluie!’ This was accompanied, of course, by the usual firing into the air with their snazzgunz.

The firewarrior bowed one final time to Captain Hildiwara and to Kaptain Wartrakk. And tucking his hair into his helmet, then pulled it over his head. Turning around he strode out into the centre of the arena; where Jawsmasha was awaiting for him.

Big Nob Jawsmasha was as big as a Nob could get, in relative size to a Warboss, without getting a full clip fired into the back of his head. His massive frame stood out in the middle of the arena, like a mountain on two thick green legs. And his heavy armour just didn’t cover his upper body, as it first appeared; but instead covered *all* of his body, from his head down to his shins. And his black helmet sported two extra long bull squig horns, and a black iron jaw. And as Jawsmasha waited, he fingered the switch on his double-bladed chainaxe.

The firewarrior stopped at the same distance as before, drew his sword, and waited.

ARENA OF BLOOD!

Wartrakk signalled to Slump by tugging one of his earrings; and the Grot whistled to Jangles saying, ‘Oi, Jangles! Wez puttin’ it all on da Bluie!’

‘‘Ow much iz *all* Slump?’ asked Jangles getting his Orky abacus ready. ‘Oddz iz now 20-ta-1 in favour o’Jawsmasha.’

‘Wot? All-meanz-all Jangles! We’z betten’ everyfing on da Bluie. Every bucket o’teef!’ insisted Slump.

Jangles narrowed his eyes and sneered, ‘Ya knowz diz iz gunna change da oddz doncha?’

‘Yeah, we figured dat,’ said Slump tilting his head back to show off his gold nose ring.

‘*Wrruzgh...*’ growled Jangles as his long green fingers busily smacked and clacked the beads together on the abacus. ‘Alright dat bringz da oddz down ta 10-ta-1. Satisfied Slump?’

‘Wez *most satisfied* Mist’r Jangles!’ said Wartrakk putting his big Ork face in that of the Grot’s. ‘An’ no need to move da bukkets of teef eva. *Dey kan stay roight where dey is!*’

‘Y-yes sir Kaptain Wartrakk!’ said Jangles cringing.

Wartrakk then gave Jangles a swift boot to his backside; and laughed as he sailed over the edge, and out into the arena. Even Gutzslinga thought this was funny, as did the whole rest of the crowd. Only Jawsmasha and the firewarrior seemed unimpressed. Finally, Gutzslinga having had enough of the hilarity, raised his quad big shootas and shouted, ‘Readee boyz?’

To which Jawsmasha and the firewarrior both raised their weapons to show they were ready. And with that final acknowledgement Gutzslinga fired into the air yelling, ‘‘Ave at it boyz!’

The firewarrior put both hands on the hilt; and stepping to the side with his right hoof, set for the charge. Jawsmasha hit the switch on his double-sided axe and rushed the Tau. Clearing the distance in mere tenths-of-a-second, the Nob brought the chainaxe straight down; but the firewarrior stepped forward with his right hoof and cut. The black blade cutting deep through most of Jawsmash’s right knee. Jawsmash screamed at the pain; but managed to control his swing, not letting the chainaxe hit the sand. Still bellowing, he cranked the chainaxe around and down again. In response, the firewarrior did what looked like a well practised move. He set for the strike with his hooves set far apart; with the blade in a high guard along his back. Jawsmasha brought the chainaxe down hard against the blade. Amazingly, instead of snapping the blade in half, the teeth of the chainaxe sheared off in a massive shower of sparks and debris. There was a great *ker-chunk* sound, and the chainaxe stopped, spewing out black smoke. Enraged, Jawsmasha yanked the broken chainaxe away. He tried to redouble his attack; but the firewarrior spun out of range again. And the Nob instead drove the chainax into the ground.

ARENA OF BLOOD!

‘Soz dat’s wot dat pig-sticka kan do?’ shouted Gutzslinga. ‘Shou’da known dat damn pansy Tau waz bein’ tricksy!’ Pandemonium broke out in the arena as the crowd on Gutzslinga’s side shouted, ‘*Cheater! Da Bluie’s a cheater! Orks alwayz come out on top!*’

Kaptain Wartrakk shouted, ‘Ooh...ooh...ooh...Look at wot da Bluie did! Look at wot da Bluie did!’ His arms were up and his fingers were now twitching something terrible.

The firewarrior now attacked bringing his blade down on the Nob’s right hand. Fingers flew off like so many squig sausages being flung into the air. Jawsmasha bellowed and his whole body shook, as he spun around to face the firewarrior. However, the Tau was already zipping past the Nob as fast as a Harlequin. Spinning the chainaxe around to bring the second chain blade into action. Jawsmasha hit the switch again, and the chainaxe thundered to life once more. With his leg cut Jawsmasha was slowed but not immobile; and with green blood squirting from his right knee, he tore out after the firewarrior. The firewarrior, however, was now zig-zagging back and forth; all the while running in an ever widening circle.

‘He can’t possibly out run the Nob can he Kaptain? I mean the firewarrior doesn’t have the stamina to out run him does he?’ asked Hildiwara of Wartrakk.

‘Nah, nah da Bluie kan’t out run him. Kan’t tire him out eva,’ said Wartrakk. ‘But dat’z not wot the Bluie’s donin’! ‘E’s donin’ a “*Grot Fire Drill*”. Mean’ he’s runnin’ around in circles ta konfuse Jawsmasha. And dat Nob shou’d realee know bedda den ta fall fer dat!’

The firewarrior jinxed and weaved around the hobbled Jawsmasha, much to the annoyance of the Nob and the crowd both. But suddenly he swerved in close enough to nick the Nob, and Jawsmasha hollered in pain. The firewarrior did this a couple of more times, to the jeers and sneers of the crowd. Until, on his final pass, Jawsmasha caught him across the chest with the tip of his chainaxe. Which sent the firewarrior sprawling backwards; and Jawsmasha rushed in for the kill. Flat on his back, the firewarrior suddenly sprung up, and rushed forward. This caused Jawsmasha to miss the Tau, and bury the screaming axe into the sand. The chainaxe shut-off with a loud *klank*, and the broken the chain wrapped itself around the handle. Cursing and screaming, Jawsmasha yanked the axe out of the sand; but in that exact moment, the firewarrior cut off his left leg above the knee.

‘AAARGH!’ hollered Jawsmasha, and shook his broken chainaxe.

‘Bloody hell! Did you see that Kaptain?!’ shouted Hildiwara.

‘Ayez did!’ shouted back Wartrakk.

But Jawsmasha was anything but through; and reaching down, flung the severed leg at the firewarrior. Throwing with an accuracy that would have made a Grot sniper proud, he hit the firewarrior square in the face. The firewarrior went head-over-heels, landing prone on the sand.

ARENA OF BLOOD!

‘AAARGH!’ bellowed Jawsmasha. ‘Dis is yer def ya pansy Tau!’ And with that he hobbled over on the stump of his leg. So incensed was Jawsmasha at having his leg cut off, that he then grabbed the severed limb, and proceeded to beat the firewarrior with it. Screaming with each blow, ‘Take dat yoz pansy Tau! And dat! And dat! And dat!’

‘Get up firewarrior! Get up and kill that Nob!’ shouted Captain Hildiwara standing up. ‘Get up you blue bastard and kill-that-Nob! Do it for the bloody Enclaves! Do it for your bloody Commander Farsight!’

‘Get up an’ klobber dat git Bluie!’ yelled Wartrakk.

The Flashgitz all yelled, ‘Get’em Bluie, get’m!’ and fired off their snazzgunz in support, *blam-blam-blam!*

Without a warning the firewarrior jumped up; and doing a forward roll, snatched up the black blade from where it lay on the sand. Then he spun around to face the Ork again.

‘Oi, soz yoz back now, eh?’ laughed the Nob; who promptly chucked the leg at the firewarrior again.

This time, however, the firewarrior chopped the leg in two; sending the foot half of the limb, straight into Gutzslinga’s lap. The firewarrior rushed forward, and ducking under Jawsmasha’s broken axe, cut deep into the Nob’s left arm. The left hand spasmed, and the axe fell to the ground. Enraged, Jawsmasha bellowed, yelled, and stomped with his one good foot. In desperation, the Nob raised his wounded arm, and bit it off. But at that moment he was vulnerable; and the firewarrior drove the black blade deep in between his armour plates. Crying out in terror this time, Jawsmasha tried to beat the firewarrior with his armoured, but fingerless right hand.

But, the firewarrior took the blows in stride, as if he were an adeptus astartes. And then freed his blade free by cutting through the flesh of the Nob’s back. And as swift as an astartes, then spun around to cut off the Nob’s other leg, just at the knee. The black blade cutting through the armour as easily as if it were a power blade. Jawsmasha screamed in anguish; and knowing that he was done for, flailed about helplessly. The Tau himself seemed to be in a fit of rage, hacking and slashing the Nob from every angle. Roaring like a wounded Grox, Jawsmasha dropped down onto his remaining bits of arms and legs. The firewarrior abruptly leapt up, and kicked the Nob in the head with both hooves. The helmet twisted askew. The firewarrior now gave him a round house kick to the head. This time the iron jaw broke. The firewarrior then kicked him again in the head. This time the helmet flew off entirely. Screaming insanely, the firewarrior landed kick after kick into the Nob’s head. Kicking him until the Ork’s face was an unrecognizable green muck. Finally, he strode forward and drove the blade deep into Jawsmasha’s collar bone. The Nob gave off one last guttural cry, and dropped dead on the sand. The firewarrior yanked the black blade free; and taking it in both hands, cut Jawsmasha’s head off in one stroke.

‘Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!’ shouted Hildiwara and Sokolov.

‘URAAAGH FER DA BLUIE!’ shouted Wartrakk. But then to Captain Hildiwara he shouted. ‘Urry Kaptain ’urry! Wez gotta protekt yer in-vest-mint!’ And snatching Captain Hildiwara up under his arm, he jumped over the edge of the arena shouting, ‘C’mon boyz, wez gotta save dat Bluie Tau!’

ARENA OF BLOOD!

Slump, Mister Sokolov, and all the Flazgitz then jumped off right behind him. And none too soon, as the arena had become utter chaos. Fights broke out among the spectators, between those who won their bets, and those who lost their bets. The fighting escalated rapidly, and soon began to spill out onto the arena floor. Gutzslinga, himself was none too pleased at loosing; and was busy aiming his big shootas at the firewarrior, when Wartrakk jumped in front of him. Setting down the Rogue Trader, the two Captains quickly drew their weapons. A brace of big shootas for Wartrakk, and a matching pair of ivory handled laspistols for Hildiwara. Mister Sokolov and Slump ran forward to add their firepower; while the Flashgitz encircled them and the firewarrior. In the stands, the rowdy crowd of Orks, Grots, and squigs quickly dove for cover; as the Flashgitz again laid down heavy fire from their snazzgunz.

Wartrakk took a bead on the Warboss Krunchfut Zag Gutzslinga shouting, ‘’Old it roight dere Gutzslinga! Ayez iz Kaptain Wartrakk of the Bad Moon Freebootaz; and next ta me iz my im-ploy-eer Rogue Trader Kaptain Hildee-whara! An’ nufin’ iz ’appenin’ ta diz ’ere Bluie!’

Gutzslinga growled, fumed, and shook his power claw at Wartrakk screaming, ‘Dat Bluie wot cheated Kaptain Wartrakk! Ayez know’d it, an’ yoz know’d it! Soz letz me shoot dat blue bastard!’

‘No kan do Gutzslinga! Wez gotz an in-vest-mint in dis ’ere Bluie!’

In frustration the Warboss squeezed his power claw so hard, that it shattered into pieces. In disgust he threw the smoking remains into the arena. ‘Awroight, ye haz me dis time Wartrakk!’

‘Den letz da nego-shee-ayshuns get started shall wez?’ smiled Wartrakk doffing his tricorne hat.

‘You have this then Captain?’ asked Hildiwara.

‘Yeah, Ayez got dis! Get ta ya fayer-warriah,’ said Wartrakk out of the side of his mouth.

Hildiwara rushed back to the firewarrior, who was slumped up against the massive corpse of Jawsmasha. Still holding the black blade in his hand, his armour was awash in green blood. But Hildiwara could see cyan blood oozing from the jagged tear running across his cuirass. Before she could speak, he said, ‘I must first cleanse...my...mont’nan.’

Gathering that he meant his sword, she asked, ‘Would you permit me to clean it for you?’

The firewarrior turned his blue tandem lenses towards her and said, ‘Aye.’

‘Mister Sokolov come here I need you!’

The Captain took the blade from his hand; and held it out while Sokolov poured the amsec over it. Then she wiped it down with another lace kerchief. Finally, she returned the sword with the kerchief between her hand and the naked blade.

‘Nuni’qy Captain,’ he said slowly taking the blade and sheathing it. The firewarrior reached up; but struggled to remove his helmet. So Hildiwara and Sokolov helped him break the seal. Once free, they saw that his entire face was covered in blue blood.

ARENA OF BLOOD!

‘Mister Sokolov, the medi-kit please,’ said Hildiwara. But then removing her bicorne hat she said bowing, ‘My name is Captain Hildiwara Lalita Ksenija Guillory Garfini; and I am a Rogue Trader of the Imperium, and master of the *Star of Damocles*.’

‘I am Shas’Nvre’Vior’los Avarga Kunas Sum’saro Kisun’xarok. And I am a masterless firewarrior.’

Sokolov now broke open the medi-kit, and Hildiwara took it upon herself to wipe down the Avarga’s face. ‘This is my first mate, Mister Sokolov.’

‘Yağmur Sokolov at your service,’ said Sokolov removing his tricorne hat and bowing. ‘Sir, your sword is amazing!...’

‘It’s an Arkunasha blade. Meaning it’s made of adamantine...the armour is nano-crystalline...and my people have fought Orks for over four hundred of *your* years. Any more questions?’ said Avarga.

‘No,’ said Hildiwara shooting a glance at Sokolov.

At that moment Wartrakk and Gutzslinga were coming to an agreement.

‘Soz ’ere’z wot Ayes proposin’ Gutzslinga. Dat Ayez givz ya ’alf of my winnin’s fer lettin’ da Bluie go...AN’... fer lettin’ us all walk outta ’ere free. Soz ’ow about it?’ said Wartrakk with a nonchalant toss of the hand.

‘Wot?’ said a suspicious Gutzslinga. ‘Ya be given’ me ’alf a yoz winnin’s?’

‘Ayez wou’d indeed!’ said Wartrakk giving Slump a wink.

Gutzslinga sat up, scratched his nose, and looking down at Wartrakk said, ‘Well den...it’z *a deal!*’

‘Fanks Warboss Gutzslinga! Ya won’t regret it!’ said Wartrakk, as he was hoisted up on the shoulders of his Flashgitz. He and Gutzslinga then both spit in their hands and shook on the deal.

Once on the ground, Wartrakk ran up to Hildiwara and the firewarrior shouting, ‘Awroight lookz like wez gotz ourselfs a deal. Gutzslinga is lettin’ us all go free!’

‘So it’s true? We can safely leave?’ asked Hildiwara.

‘Yeah,’ said Wartrakk smiling. Then slapping the firewarrior on the back he said, ‘Oi! Fayer-warriah, dis iz yoz lucky day! Kaptain Hildee-whara here wantz ya! *An’ wotz more*, she’d like to hire ya!’ Smiling broadly to show all of his gold tusk rings he added, ‘Freeboota work sur brings in da teef Ayez tellz ya!’

‘One moment Avarga...’ said the Hildiwara. ‘Captain Wartrakk.’

‘Yez,’ said Wartrakk leaning down.

‘If you ever grab me and put me under your arm like that again...’ she said yanking on one of his gold ear rings. ‘...I’ll blast your head clean off your shoulders! Understand?’

‘*Roight, neva do dat again!*’ said Wartrakk smiling through the pain.

‘Captain, so you want to hire me?’ asked Avarga.

ARENA OF BLOOD!

‘Yes, I could always use a good man with a blade and a bolter...’ said Hildiwara releasing Wartrakk.

‘But you also...*want me?*’

‘We’ll talk about terms later Avarga,’ she replied taking the firewarrior by the arm.

Full of himself from his latest success, Kaptain Wartrakk now waved good-bye to the crowd with his tricorne hat. He led Captain Hildiwara, the firewarrior Avarga, Mister Sokolov, and of course all his Flashgitz out of the arena. Only Slump was left behind to supervise the loading of the trukks, that were hauling away the day’s winnings in teeth.

In a rusty iron cage high above the stadium, sat an Imperial Guard officer in a tattered and ragged uniform. Chained to a vox caster mic he shouted over the squeaky loudspeakers. ‘Hope you enjoyed that fight folks? Well, it’s intermission time here at Gutzslinga’s Bludgeon Dome. But be sure to stick around though, because there’s always plenty to see and do here at the WAAAGH fairgrounds! If you’re hankering for something to eat, there’s squig weenies, squig burgers, squig ka-bobs, and everyone’s favourite – squig-on-a-stick! And if your thirsty there’s always ice cold fungus beer! And don’t forget the kiddies! We’ve got cotton candy and of course everyone’s favourite Aledari clown, Solitaire! Watch him make balloon animals, or pull a Snotling out of your ear! But don’t go too far folks, because tonight it’s the heavy weight championship: Bludakka Wazkruncha versus Sergeant Festus of the Black Templars! And it’s all happening right here in the *Arena-of-Blood!*’

FINI

Arena of Blood!

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