

TALES OF SAVAGE ADVENTURE FROM NECROMUNDA

STATUS: DEADZONE

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WARHAMMER
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NOVEL

A World Above by Alex Hammond

THE FLOOR RACED before him, yellow guide lights casting harsh shadows across the face of his driver. Thin hum

of an electric engine, rubber wheels dashing across the steel, the rush of the air: the connecting corridors were lonely, humanless places. Fingering his las pistol, to a passer-by Aldus Harkon would have seemed to be simply scratching an irritating itch under his coat. Aldus watched the driver closely; an unimpressive-looking man, but his enemies knew Harkon was cautious of hit men and his escort ready for anything. 'Shuttle Bay 5b, sir.' The driver spoke with a mid-hive lilt.

'Come up in the world?' Aldus returned his hand to the cane lying upon his lap. 'Yes, sir. Used to work on the factory floor. Brother went down-hive, I was recruited up. Saved the foremen from a Delaque assassination attempt.'

'Made your masters proud, no doubt.' The man saluted. 'Ran Lo shuttle number five should be docking shortly' The transport's wheels skidded briefly, only to be muffled by the sound of the rush of depressurising air as the cart entered the landing bay. Almost immediately a throat-scaring rush of fumes hit Aldus full in the face. He inhaled deeply, painful though it may be -the shuttle bay would be witness to the biggest deal of his life.

The transport cart scuttled away, small wheels competing to keep up with one another. Aldus dusted down his coat and stood, cane in hand, poised near the edge of the tight mile-high precipice. About him men struggled with fuel pipes, prepared magnetic clamps and clung to the sides of the shuttle bay as though at any second the whole thing would lurch forward and toss them out into the night sky, down through the noxious clouds to land a bloodied pulp in the ash wastes so far below

Aldus loved Hive Primus. If you were strong-willed there were places for you. Places to find greatness. places to make a life for yourself in a giant city almost bursting with the pressure of millions of souls. If you were cast of iron like the city, you could go far. Aldus stepped closer to the edge of the shuttle bay's entrance. Winds battered him, slapping him hard in the face, stinging his old, cunning eyes. Peering out into the night air, he breathed deeply. A freshness unknown to his sickening body filled his lungs. The stars in the sky, every one a new solar system, were each a place for those of iron to reach greatness.

Aldus hacked hard into the front of his mouth. Sliding the phlegm about his mouth he manipulated it with his tongue until it met his approval. large and heavy. He leaned forward. A bay attendant behind him shrieked. Aldus delicately raised his hand and cast the phlegm from his mouth. The dark yellow globule dropped into the rushing winds and was swept around and backwards into the gusts. Now part of him would travel into the wastes, carried. perhaps, for ten miles or a hundred before it dropped upon the dead earth below. Aldus smiled within. 'Sir!' An attendant, arms replaced by machine loading mitts, screamed into Aldus's ear. 'The hunting party... their shuttle!' Aldus nodded and began the long walk to the end of the runway.

From beyond, from the dark sky, a bright green light burst into view

'They're going too fast!' A tech-priest looked up at the flickering, ghost-washed display panels before him, sweat running down his green-lit face, tracing the contours of the electronic sight that replaced his eye.

Aldus remained stationary as the bay was suddenly plunged into bright red light, warning beacons alerting fire safety crews to prepare for action.

The jagged shape of the shuttle grew larger. Aldus could make out the Ran Lo signature on its cockpit, the arcane R and L set in their white circle contrasting sharply with the arched windows above. 'Sir, get behind the fire wall!'

Aldus remained still, with the exception of his calm hands fondling the silver cast at the top of the cane.

As the shuttle continued its wayward plummet towards them, attendants began throwing themselves to the floor, the strobing lights staggering all movement. The tearing of metal screeched about the runway, the shuttle throwing sparks into the smoke-choked air as its wings clipped the sides of the bay. Bulbous wheels screamed like agonised creatures as they struggled to slow the oncoming craft. Small fires leapt up on the floor as the white-hot sparks ignited patches of fuel. The shuttle sped towards where Aldus stood, noxious fumes pouring from its vents. The shuttle veered off its path for a moment, almost colliding with the wall, only to spin back on line with Aldus. With an unutterably deafening screech, the wheels finally succumbed to the brakes and the shuttle screamed to a halt, its steel nose cone so close to Aldus' misshapen body he could have reached out and patted its flaking metal prow. The beaming face of a young man smiled down at the stationary figure through the arched cockpit windows. He waved and Aldus shook a hand in recognition. Attendants rushed about the shuttle bay, pouring foam directly from their augmented limbs onto the spot fires. Meanwhile priests moved in to consecrate the machine's safe landing with oils and unguents. Amidst the flurry of movement, a staircase was lowered from the shuttle's side, its gradual release incongruous with the speed of the men. Four body-suited figures, two boys and two girls, leapt from the access port. Only a robed man, leaving the shuttle last, used the stairs. This, Aldus Harkan knew instantly, was Terrak Ran Lo.

The sage old man walked gracefully towards Aldus, grey hair and groomed goatee painted red in parts. About him the youngsters leapt and shouted, slapping one another on the backs. Their combative prowess was immediately noticeable as they aimed mock kicks and lashed out at one another, pulling short with bladed weapons mere muscle spasms from one another's faces.

'I must apologise-' Terrak Ran Lo began.

'Scared as a cess rat!' The young pilot from the ship grinned at Aldus like a big dog, nodding his shorn head, revealing it to be tattooed with the kill marks of a seasoned hunter.

'Aadon, you oaf, you almost ripped the ship to pieces!' A woman in a tight-fitting body suit, dark, lacquered braid curled tight in the customary manner of all of the women warriors of Ran Lo, spat out the words at her companion.

'Does it matter. What about the thrill?' Aadon snapped back.

Aadon, you're a genius, did you see them run for the barricade?' laughed the other boy. He was huge, a full head taller than those about him. 'Call me Takarr. Thanks for making this hunt possible, Mr. Harkan.'

'Don't mention it,' Aldus replied. 'You should thank Lord Terrak for having the sense to come to me.'

'You can guarantee that everything will be in place by the time they get down there?' Terrak Ran Lo asked, his voice calm and commanding.

'Yes. As long as they keep to the schedule they'll be having the hunt of their lives.'

'You'd better hope so, Mr Harkan,' the dark-haired woman said snootily as she stepped forward. 'You're being paid a small fortune to make sure this is good.' 'I've had ten years' experience dealing with Underhivers. Four miles below us I have over thirty seasoned contacts; at six I have another forty. I'd like to think that my dealings with these scum has provided me with enough insight to know when something is worth it.' 'Excellent,' the young woman purred and spun on her heels. 'The mice will be in trouble tonight.'

HIGH ABOVE the Underbive, the air is cold. High above the Underbive you cannot

breathe for the lack of atmosphere. leer miles above the savage wasteland of Hive Bottom is where the city's peak lies. This where the souls of the dead will travel. This is where they gather. This is where they are blown across the four winds. Scattered like shards of glass. Scattered souls bear no memories. Blood...

Blood ran down Knife Edge Liz's face. She could feel it sliding down her chin, charting a course past old scars, through the valleys of new wounds. Liz reached her hand up to her face. She might as well have been attempting to lift a steel girder. She let the limb fall to the ground again. Slow waves of red washed over her eyes again. High above the hive the air is cold. Liz no longer felt her legs. High above the hive you cannot breathe for lack of atmosphere. Liz drew a heavy breath into her lungs. It fell short and sunk only as deep as her throat. She dragged her hand across the ground, feeling for something. anything that could help.

Her hand came across something soft and moist. Feeling up it - a small ring piercing stone cold skin, tattered cloth, the small face of a girl, eyes open. Big round eyes like a cat.

Kat.

Kat was dead.

Liz snatched her hand away. Blood rushed to her head. Liz rose to her feet pushing hard so that she fell away from the corpse. She staggered forward and fell upon a cushion of flesh. Arms slick with someone else's blood. Underneath her she could feel the cold grip of death. Someone was beneath her. Dead. Liz rubbed at her eyes, grit tearing at her pupils. For each layer of blood she wiped off, another would arrive - hers or the corpse's, she could not tell.

'Hive daemons take me!' Liz groaned, rolling off the corpse in panic.

Liz's limbs struck at the ground, each fist striking in search of a dry place, a steel place. Somewhere where there was no blood. A fist ricocheted off a steel case. Pain shot up Liz's arm, sending spasms about her shoulder and shooting tendrils of needle-sharp pangs about her. The steel case. Liz ran her fingers over its mesh texture, searching for a sign. She

flipped the case over and felt again. Small cross-hatches, like the mesh of the walkways she knew were above her. The criss-cross ended abruptly; a smooth disk lay in the centre of the case, medical cross engraved into its surface.

Liz flipped the medi-kit open and rummaged inside it with trembling fingers. She swallowed pills, wrapped bandages about her wounds. Took out a hypodermic, shook it and was rewarded by the slosh of the liquid within. She had to stab four times before she found a vein. Arm rushing with warmth, Liz fell back and continued falling.

In the darkness there was beat. In the darkness the sound of the hive drifted away. Liz rolled around. The painkillers, like the hands of a lover, held her tight and ran their fingers about her body. They sank deep into her skin. Deep into her soul. They traced patterns across her back. Spelt words she could not understand. Rubbed thoughts into her tired brain.

Kat was dead. She'd come from the streets. Wanted to join a gang. Looked for a way to find a meaning. A meaning for the Underhive. Couldn't have been more than sixteen. Dead so young. Half a life is more than none. Half a lie.

Liz rocketed into consciousness. A lie. Somewhere there was a lie.

Liz snapped her eyes open and looked about her. Smoke still rose from potholes in the ground. Electric conduits still buzzed and swung from the platforms above her. Beside her lay the medi-kit, plundered of all its contents. A few bright red slims lay scattered

about on the ground. Liz carefully picked these up and secreted them down the side of her boot. Something bit sharply into her ankle. She struggled with the boot and removed a hard, white card. Guilder credits. The lie was unravelling itself Liz regarded herself in the sheen of an effluent pool. Her leggings were torn. Deep gashes carved their way through her flesh. Her hair, once dyed blue, was a deep brown, nearer her natural colour.

Liz had fallen close to Bekka, Bekka the Harvester. Liz stared over at her corpse. Deep pock marks had cracked open that seemingly impenetrable body of hers. Hundreds of hours of weight-built work, cast aside like a child's rag doll. For so many Bekka was the paragon of Underhive womanhood: in control, strong, with a mind as strong as steel. Beside Bekka lay her weapon, its kill markings still as bright as they were the day they were scored. The day they captured that heavy bolt gun from their rivals, the Sump Pirates, had been one of their greatest. An offworld weapon, and ammunition too; an incredible prize! It was a victory that had led them through every bar in Deep Town. They'd got drunk on Second Best and collapsed on the barroom floor.

From the signs a story unfolded: the blood-sprayed walls, laceration wounds to her dead comrades. They had come to ambush someone. It should have been simple. A mistake? They took it too easy? Something had gone wrong. Desperate faces, terrified eyes — the dead faces betrayed much. Bekka. Her augmented eyes and powerful weapon would have given her the drop on any assailant. By the ruby scores, sunken into her flesh, perhaps she had been the first to go. A trail of light imprints in the earth belied some rapidly moving assailant. Liz slowly rose and staggered forwards, hand clutching delicately at her leg. With each step the wound tore open a little.

The imprints led to the body of a stranger, wired into a still-pulsing fighting suit. Bloodied mat of hair, disgorged eye sockets. The mechanical enhancements that had once filled these places lay torn on the ground. The stranger was young, Kat's age perhaps. Bladed gauntlets still moist with blood hung by his side. Liz regarded her leg. LIZ! - A SCREAM from behind her. She spun around. las gun at the ready. Kat was holed up behind a rock, heavy shells like blast caps erupting the rock from about her. Kat kept her head down. Liz scanned the smoke-filled tunnels for her assailant. Somewhere above, at the narrowing of the walls. Text-book bottleneck. They were surrounded.

'Liz, hel-' Kat gargled into silence.

Liz spun to catch sight of her comrade. A dark figure stood over where Kat had been hiding. Unashamed, he held pan of an Escher girl above his head like a trophy.

'Sonofa-! Liz threw herself towards the figure that was now dancing about Kat's shredded remains.

Cracking explosions splintered girders, concrete flinging dust into the air. Liz threw herself through this haze and fell upon the figure, unleashing a fiery beam of death from her lasgun. Hot shells crashed about her, some searing her skin as they bounced about the ground. The figure leapt, lightning fast, and threw itself towards Liz, sharp blades like cleavers dripping wet.

Liz spun about, anticipating her assailant's speed, and clipped him. Right arm a mangled pulp, the figure swept hard with its left. Blades sliced across Liz's leg. A sharp pain and sudden dizziness rushed over her. She rolled through the filth, the dirt clogging the wound, blood rush stemmed to a trickle. Liz unsheathed her chain sword and flicked its spinning teeth into action. The figure darted to one side and tumbled across the ground, its suit pumping stimulants into its dying body.

Chainsword buzzing, Liz lightly swept it in front of the oncoming figure's head. Her timing was on line. Like spearing a sump eel Liz timed the blow to anticipate the

movements of her attacker. The chainsword caught on the augmentation about the figure's head. Its weapon suit sputtered into a death rattle as armour plates and implants were ripped from its body. Both Escher and attacker crashed to the ground. Liz readied her lasgun and took aim on the hidden sniper's position.

Using a bent girder to bract her arm she peered into the darkness.

'Help me.' A voice nearby.

HELP ME: A voice nearby. Liz woke.

She had fallen by her bladed

attacker's body. Her arm lay draped across his carcass. The battlefield was silent, her head and leg bandaged. Liz reached into her boot and pulled out some more stims, swallowed them. The tiny red capsules almost came up again. Internal bleeding somewhere. Forcing the medicine up again. Liz rubbed her throat. making sure they were digested.

'Olaana?' The voice was weaker now Liz staggered to her feet and moved towards the noise. Crumpled at the base of a shell-pocked concrete wall was another suited figure. A woman, young... Kat's age. Dark hair tied in braids hung from her head; a las wound to her chest wept tarred blood.

'The mice, Olaana. The mice fought back.' The woman groaned.

Liz watched silently. The woman flapped uselessly at a respirator hanging limp at her side. Liz followed the stretch of conduit cords as they wrapped their way about the woman's suit back to their starting point at the base of her skull. Her face mask was torn and conduit fluid from the cords ran past her brow, across her open eyes. They did not blink but stared white-pupilled into the air.

'Damn suit's got me so high on stimulants that I'm having trouble dying. Olaana?' The woman looked straight at Liz but her eyes made no sign of recognition.

'Yeah?' Liz mumbled, leaning back against a giant girder.

'I- I can't see.' The woman's voice broke into a faint sob.

'I know'

'Thank the Emperor it's you. Thought you were one of those Underhive freaks.'

Liz paused, mind racing. 'No. They're all dead.'

'We won?' the woman sat forward a little, the effort causing her to gasp.

'Yes.'

'You going to get a head? Take it back?' the woman said, smiling despite her discomfort.

'Why would I want to do that?' Liz crouched before the woman and silently levelled her lasgun at her.

'You've done it after every other hunt.' Liz blinked. The woman remained still. Liz regarded the nose of her lasgun. Greasy effluent from a walkway above dripped down onto its power cell. The thin hiss of the boiling water was the only noise in the rubble shelter. Tainted rain began to fall. It drowned out the sound of the hissing lasgun. Somewhere in the city above them, the factories were resuming a new shift, emptying spent coolants into the levels below.

'Remember the time we came down and fought those scum at the ash falls? We herded them into that field of razor grass. They were so desperate they ran through it. Remember? Like a pack of mindless sump rats. Only one came out the other end. Lost so much blood he couldn't even pull his trigger. Easiest hunt... we ever had.' The woman's voice was getting weaker.

'This one was bad,' Liz whispered.

'The worst. Wish I'd never come. It was meant to be easier... fun. The plasma's still burning, Olaana. I can feel it through the pain repressors... Olaana? They won't wait at the ash falls for long. You should go... or you'll never get back.'

Liz rocked on her feet. Dizzy.

'Olaana?' The woman reached out towards Liz. 'Hold my hand?'

Liz remained still for a moment. She looked over her shoulder at her dead friends. Her gang. Her responsibility. 'Olaana?'

Liz reached out her hand and took hold of the woman's. It was soft, scarless. Liz stared at it in silence.

'Why was it so hard? They have nothing. No training, faulty weapons. They're animals. Barbarian scum with no right to kill us. We've got noble blood. We own this damn hive. They should be thankful we come down here and put them out of their misery... Harkon promised us an easy hunt.'

Liz released the woman's hand. 'Olaana? I don't want to die.' The woman broke down into tears.

Liz stood up and cast her eyes back over the battlefield. Harkon. Liz remembered that name.

WHO'S ALDUS Harkon? He's our contact from uphive, Bekka.' Liz's voice echoed through the tunnel as

they strode towards the site of their planned ambush.

And it's a House Orlock shipment?' Bekka asked, strapping tape about her thick, tattooed arms. Liz had always admired her strength in the face of the rat scars she suffered as a child.

'That's right. He's paid us in weapons, up front, to take care of the shipment so that he can offer to finance the deal instead. Least, that's what he told me.'

'Sounds complicated.'

'Uphivers tend to be.' Liz wrinkled her nose like she'd smelt a bad stink. 'Kill their mothers if it paid well. They're worse than mutants.'

'We're here.' She turned around to face her gang. 'Take up your positions. We're in a bottleneck, so they won't be able to run.' Liz's colleagues moved swiftly but silently down ladders and ramps into the dried-up canal.

Sometime later, the air still. 'Liz?' Bekka whispered, looked her square in the eyes.

'You trust this Harkon?'

An explosion silenced Liz. Rubble flew high into the air. Conduits burst and threw gas into the tunnels.

Ambush!' Kat yelled from down in the bottleneck.

'The Orlocks know?' Bekka screamed. No — uphivers! Look!' Liz pointed to a girder high above them. A figure clad in a dark, bladed suit. 'Sniper! Get down!' Liz yelled to Bekka.

Liz's muscled second ignored her. Bekka braced herself against a concrete block and let rip with the heavy bolter. Hot shells spewed from the ejection chamber igniting small chemical puddles about Bekka's legs. The uphiver dashed along a thin girder at full speed. Shells rang after it but failed to make a hit.

'Get down, Bekka!' Liz shrieked over the noise.

Below her Liz could hear the screams of her gangers. 'Harkon, you bastard.' she growled and leapt forward into the bottleneck. She took up cover behind a jutting girder and looked up to the lip of the rise above her.

'Bekka, you coming?' she called over the noise of the heavy bolter. 'Bekka?' The noise stopped. An ammunition belt rolled down the embankment. 'Bekka!'

'Help! Liz!' Kat screamed from across the battlefield.

'Our heavy's down!' Liz howled, trying to be heard above the ricochets. 'Retreat.' Liz looked over to Kat. She was pinned behind a bolder. Liz looked up to the embankment, grabbed hold of the chain of ammunition and used it to pull herself up. 'Bekka?' Liz lay flat in the dust, parallel with a fallen girder. 'Bekka?' she hissed. A

pack of ammunition lay by the discarded heavy bolter. An explosion ripped open the ground about her. Liz peered through the haze smoke. A large figure was lumbering towards the sniper's position.

'Bekkar.

Liz followed as Bekka began her ascent towards the sniper. Liz pressed her back up against a bulkhead and dragged the heavy weapon towards her. Feeding the ammunition over her thigh, she braced a foot against a boulder. Gripping the bolter between her arms, Liz pulled its trigger. Massive shudders shook through her arms and shoulders. Liz dragged the gun around to the sniper's position. She let its bullets ring about the tower.

'I hope this gives you some cover,' Liz puffed as she struggled to stop the weapon spinning loose. Within a few seconds discarded shell cases had piled in a steaming heap about her.

Liz paused and drew breath, watching stunned as the battle continued. Smoke plumes burst from the battlefield. and more of her companions dropped. Thin bursts traced their life fluid through the air. Chips of rubble rose and fell with each new barrage. They were being taken apart.

Liz's ears stopped ringing, thin trickles of blood gathering in her ears the only reminder of the weapon's ferocity. She looked skyward in an attempt to mark Bekka's position. The girders and walkways rose like an industrial cliff face. Bekka was nowhere. Bursts of light, las fire, flared in a dark recess above her. Liz craned her neck to see further into the darkness. With unearthly poise never granted in life, Bekka burst out of the darkness through a curtain of hanging chains and spun for a brief moment, like a classical dancer, on the precipice. And fell. Bekka's body curled into a ball, childlike, before crashing into the battlefield below Liz.

'Bastards!' Liz screamed as she saw for the first time the face of the sniper: a thin man, wired skull cap linking him to a body suit of angular metal pieces and bladed edges. Liz grabbed hold of a new belt of ammunition and began ramming it into the gun. The man leapt after Bekka's body. As he fell he unfurled thin metal meshes, joined from his wrists to his arms. Rather than drop like a stone as she expected, he glided rapidly towards Liz, unleashing bolts of burning light in her direction as she struggled to aim the heavy weapon at his slender form.

links of ammunition fed into the heavy bolter and finally it kicked into life. The winged sniper dropped faster towards her, darting between walkways and platforms. Liz reeled and pulled the trigger, letting the weapon throw her backwards as she attempted to follow the sniper's movements.

White-hot casings rained about her, leaving scald marks on her arms as she tried to keep pace with the sniper. The shells rang about the layers of steel above her, bursting through platforms, cables and piping. The sniper landed gracefully on a platform above Liz and lowered his las rifle in her direction like a viper spying a mouse for the first time.

Liz pushed hard against the girder and threw herself onto her back. The heavy bolter crashed down on top of her. Inside her chest something snapped. A burst of blue-green light impacted where Liz had lain. Aching all over and bleeding on the inside, Liz aimed for the structural supports of a walkway above the sniper. Her weapon thundered into action again, releasing burning hot metal at the supports. A second later and the walkway came crashing down. The sniper looked up for a brief moment. Liz no longer saw him, she didn't have the time. Flipping the heavy bolter onto its end, Liz huddled about its base and prayed. The walkway smashed through the platform on which the sniper was standing and continued downwards towards Liz. The girders and grated walkways crashed about her, knocking hard into the heavy bolter and smashing

into her body.

Liz opened her eyes. The bolter remained upright. The sheets of iron, mesh barriers and steel girders had fallen about her, the heavy weapon keeping the heaviest pieces from crushing her. The bloodied ganger pulled on the trigger and let the weapon carve a way out of the rubble.

The battle was going badly in the gorge below. Most of Liz's gang had fallen back into a large crater. Liz scanned the horizon for signs of the gang's assailants as she climbed down the embankment. Crista, one of the gang's veterans, sat spread-legged and slumped upon the ground. Liz reached forward to feel for her pulse. Crista looked up bloodybrowed at Liz and shook her head.

'I'll get you outta here,' Liz whispered. Crista shook her head again and her eyes widened. Liz started; reflected in them was a large figure. A trap. Liz snatched Crista's autogun from the ground and threw herself to one side. In that instant, an explosion burst into Crista's body and the concrete about her. Liz was showered with sharp flints and washed in crimson. Liz rolled over, struggling to remove a steel shard from her side. The figure lumbered forward. A man in a massive suit of meshed-plate armour. Oversized arms and shoulders provided protection to all but his head. Fibre cables were attached to the base of his neck. Massive gloved fists clicked and snapped as he walked forward, like a pianist preparing to play. Liz ripped out the shard and pulled the trigger of the autogun. It was light compared to the heavy bolter before it and she overcompensated for recoil. Her shots ran wide and the armoured man rushed her. Liz pulled the spray back and let several bursts impact into his chest.

'Die!' Liz screamed.

The man lumbered on, uninjured.

Liz swung the autogun at his head. Its shoulder stock caught him across the temple, gashing a wound open above his eyes. The man slapped the gun out of Liz's hands and lunged at the ganger before she could fling herself aside. He wrapped his arms about her and lifted her off the ground. He breathed hard into her face. His breath was young, untarnished by years of filtered air. His steel blue eyes were all she could see beneath his combat mask; they blinked at her.

The man's arms flexed, and Liz's spine was racked with pain. She slapped at the pouches on her legs, trying to get a hold. The armoured man bounced her hard to strengthen his position. Liz's hand slapped at her leg again. She had it. Her back spasmed. Her head rushed with blood and the battlefield spun.

Liz looked down into the face of the man, the blood from above his head running into the seamless cracks of his impenetrable armour. His eyes narrowed in strain. She smiled. His eyes widened in surprise. Liz brought her hand into view and opened it to reveal the grenade she held.

With her head spinning Liz punched her hand deep into the fibre cables about the man's head. She felt her hand slip down past his sweating shoulders. Liz pushed hard with her legs, trying to throw herself to the ground. The man struggled to pull her in two. An explosion burst inside the suit. Liz was flung back against a bulkhead. The suit remained untouched, but the man inside it could no longer be seen. Liz pushed forwards against the bulkhead, a jarring pain running up the length of her arm. The battlefield was silent. She shook her head; perhaps the explosion had unsettled her. Feet throwing up spent shells, she staggered forwards towards the crater where she had last seen her comrades. Liz lifted her head and in that instant her cover burst apart, dust and smoke replacing her protection.

The Escher lurched forward, running blindly through the smoke towards the position she'd last seen her gang. The ground burst open beneath her feet - her assailant was persistent. Her foot collided with a fallen girder. Half-falling, she crested the crater's

lip. Liz tumbled over, fortune rather than precision timing throwing her out of the way of an explosion.

A twisted wrist and broken rib later, Liz reached the base of the crater. Her stomach, already giddy with fluid deprivation, ran molten hot at the sight of carnage before her eyes. Her gang, some of them with their swords only half drawn, lay dead. Lacerations and deep red bruising the signature of their killer. The script was fluid, deep lines intersecting others with deadly precision. 'Liz!' A scream from behind her. Kat lay prone, barely concealed behind a rock. She was now the focus of the barrage of weapons fire. Similar blast pattern, same angle of fire. There was one more assailant. No, there were two: rising up from behind Kat, unfurling like a giant insect, was yet another attacker. Spines stitched in to a lacquered body suit, with two piston pumped blades attached to gauntlets on each arm. The uphiver rose like a mantis about to strike.

The young ganger, pinned down by enemy fire, could do nothing but remain in her position, fumbling with her long fighting knife. An arc of blood rose slowly into the air. Liz ran forwards, drawing her chainsword at the last minute to engage with Kat's slayer. The battle was brief. Wounds were exchanged. The reach afforded Liz by buzzing, bladed weapon had given her the advantage. The spiny uphiver lay broken on the ground.

Liz scrambled up a crumbling set of stairs, desperately trying to get herself out of the firing line. She scanned the bulkheads, recesses and cables of the walkways and the burnt-out shelters of the bottleneck about her. An air filter ground into action in one of the bulkheads, throbbing dust from the ground up into the air. A slow wind began to pull past her head. Liz paused in silence.

Closing her eyes, she trained her ears first to the noise of the hissing power cell in the weapon in her hand. Small electric sparks, thin and tuneless, rose and fell like ebbing waves. A sophisticated exchange of charged particles, undiscernible to her ears, was taking place in the sword in her hand. The approaching footsteps sounded like a jackhammer in comparison.

Liz remained still. Her head swam and her body ached. She had little time left and would have to make her stand quickly. Hundreds of these seconds would pass every day unnoticed. Now in the stillness of the final conflict they seemed to be glorious hours, dense and full of promise.

Liz waited. There was the crackle of a weapon charging behind her.

Releasing all the tension from her body she dropped like a marionette with its strings cut. At the exact same moment an energy blast rocketed over her head. Liz swivelled on the mesh flooring and kicked a foot into the abdomen of the advancing uphiver. It was a woman, curving black stealth suit and long braid giving Liz dues to the identity of the masked attacker. The woman's speed was unnatural. Augmented legs kept on pushing, knocking Liz from her precarious balance and sending the woman flying high over her head. They both collided, hard, with the metal floor.

The attacker released several charges from the plasma weapon in her left hand. Liz rolled across the concrete as it was carved up behind her. Pulling a grenade from her leg, she pulled its pin and let it follow the course carved by the plasma blast that had so recently followed her. The woman leapt high over the grenade's path. The timing was off. The grenade exploded and Liz was thrown back, the uphiver flung after her. In an awkward moment, afforded only by chance, Liz hit the ground seconds before the woman, then the woman from uphiver landed on top of her. Their combined weight caused the broken mesh on which they lay to creak alarmingly. A sudden movement and they'd both plummet to the ground.

Liz stared into the eyes of the woman from above. In another life they may have been sisters. For a brief, alien moment they were cast together, their blood intermingling, the danger of the situation something they shared.

The woman did not speak, a quick intake of air the only noise she made. Liz looked to her side. Through the mesh she could make out the smouldering battlefield below. A rivet popped out from the joint where the mesh was anchored to the walkway and spun away for the ground below. The woman gingerly raised herself off Liz. Her eyes darted from Liz to the popping rivets.

The Escher looked back at the ground, calculating. Deciding. She flicked her chainsword into action and severed the mesh in one sweeping thrust. They both dropped through, accelerating as they plummeted. Liz lost her grip on the woman. Neither screamed as they hit the ground. I THOUGHT THE FALL would kill me.' Startled, Liz turned to face the woman from uphive with a grunt. 'I thought the fall would kill me, Olaana. I fell with one of the prey. No regard for her life. Like an animal. Let us both fall to our deaths.' 'You're... you're going to die...'

'Yes.' The woman's voice was unnaturally calm. 'The suit will try and repair what it can but it's fighting a losing battle. Soon the stimulants will no longer stop the pain. If it's damaged, it will try and knit my skin to its circuitry. It's happened to others down here.'

'I've heard the stories, Liz lied.

'The pain is meant to-'

'What is it?' the Escher blurted out.

'It's starting.' The woman punched her own arm in agony.

'The suit's damaged?'

'The pneumatic pistons on the right arm. Damn! Nnggh!' The woman punched harder, frantic.

'Let me see.' Liz pushed the uphiver's fist from her wound. A deep wound had cut deep into the arm of the uphiver. The arcane offworld circuitry was attempting to repair both flesh and steel. Stitching bone to gears.

'Nnaaaaagh!!' The woman's scream was something unnatural, alien.

'Get out of the suit!' Liz shouted, hands fluttering over her.

'Olaana!

'Out!' Liz pulled the woman forwards and begun tugging at the magnetic locks that fastened the suit together.

'My access code! It won't open without it!'

'Call it out! Free yourself!'

'That's against the laws.'

'You're going to die.'

'Olaana, promise you nnggh-' Pain forced the woman's words to stop. 'Alpha two-five... ugh... twelve.'

The magnetic claps hissed open. Liz unwrapped the cords, pulled the skintight fittings and unplugged implant interfaces. The woman slid out of the bloody suit like a newborn from its placental sack. Her right arm was a mess of machinery and muscle.

'Olaana...' the woman moaned.

'Here. Take these.' Liz pushed some of the stims into the woman's mouth. 'They'll help with the pain.'

The woman went still. For a moment the Escher thought she was dead. Then the uphiver spat the stims out again. The red colouring from the pills was indistinguishable from the blood in her spittle.

'What?' Liz looked down to the blinded uphiver.

The woman said nothing.

'You know,' Liz said grimly. Her words hung in the silence.

'You're the woman that fell with me. Their leader,' the woman sneered in a wracked voice.

'That's right.'

Suddenly the uphiver flapped her hand about the ground for a moment and came up with a stretch of pipe. She swung wildly at Liz. Stunned for a moment Liz didn't move. The pipe caught her on the knee. Liz fell backwards.

'Stinking Underhive rat!' The woman strained, blood coursing from her wounds. She the veins on her temples ran hot, her face contorting in pain. 'You're nothing better than an animal. You're filth to be trodden on by your betters. Thought you could buy your salvation with kindness?'

'No,' the Fischer snapped back. 'I'd rather you died like the rest of your kind. Slowly. Let you bleed to death, alone and in the dark. You killed my friends!'

As did you.'

'We were set up.'

'You thought the ambush would be yours. How are you different to me? I hate your kind and you hate mine!' The woman flopped back in the dirt, spent. Liz stood slowly. She regarded the woman's damaged body. She looked at the machine-melded arm. At the suit. At her dead friends.

ALDUS HARKON stood on the edge of the shuttle bay, staring out into the night sky for the second evening

running. The city below him was lit up by thousands of lights from twenty-four hour furnaces. Higher up, the lights of each landing bay, jutting out from the hive like gargoyles. City lights. Star lights. There were almost as many tiny points of light emanating from Hive Primus as there were stars in the sky. Aldus could almost imagine he was staring into a lake.

Aldus spent a lot of time staring. He let his mind wander on these occasions to stop boredom from seeping in and addling his brain. He spent a lot of time waiting. But that was part of the job description. He needed the time to mull over and orchestrate his deals. It was during all the time that he spent thinking that he first realised that the highest price was not always the fastest way to the Upper Spire. Protection, security, special handshakes and powerful patrons were far more useful in the long term.

In the sky above him, Aldus saw one of the stars move. He brushed his lank, greying hair out of his eyes. Minutes passed. The star grew larger until Aldus could make out the Ran Lo symbol on the shuttle's nose. The lights marking the runway lit up. Aldus began his long walk back to the safety barrier at the runway's end, casting tall shadows along the walls as he passed over each guide light.

Harkon sat and watched, reassured to see the shuttle land at a reasonable speed. He began his approach as it settled on its landing gear and jets of steam poured from conduits. The stairs lowered and a lone figure stepped out of the hatch. Aldus recognised the hunter from earlier. Monomolecular sword sheathed at her side, swagger in her step, braided black hair. Moving slowly; she had been wounded. And her companions? Dead? Aldus stalked forward, rubbing his fingers. 'Welcome home.' He bowed severely before the woman, came up grinning, 'I hope the hunt was as successful as I promised.'

'The hunt, Aldus Harkon,' Knife Edge Liz replied, 'has only begun.'

THE DAY OF THIRST by Tully R. Summers

SURE YOU'VE GOT a heavy stubber. You just better hope Krug hired you to use it, and not for something else.

Oh, I'd rather not say. If Krug hasn't told you - and he obviously hasn't, because you're here - it's not for me to go spilling the beans. Drink your WildSnake, it'll take your mind off that hand of yours.

Of course it stings. The initiate brand ain't meant to tickle. Supposed to impress upon you the seriousness of joining the Black Hand. Don't pick at it, you'll catch spore rot and the arm'll drop off, then they'll have to bum it someplace else. What? Well of course it's watered down. The way you Black Hand swill the stuff I wouldn't have enough WildSnake to souse a sump rat.

Uh huh, that's right. Took you on to replace Dramuck. It's In what capacity. you should be worried about.

MI right, I'll tell you if you promise to stop calling me 'Weasel' - a most undeserved moniker for such an upstanding gaming den proprietor such as myself, and I don't care what Krug says. It was a quiet day at the Bonesapper's Lounge-

Yes, that's what they call this old heap of a troop transport.

Why? It's a gambling den, you figure it out.

Nope, hasn't moved for years. ever since whatever it was that blew its left tread off hit it - though some swear it's going somewhere when they get enough WildSnake in them. Look, do you want to hear this or not?

Anyway, it was relatively quiet, with half the Black Hand out working their territory. Krug Face-Mauler sat in a corner with a Guilder from Dead End, hacking out a slag mining contract-

Yes, I'm sure he has a brand somewhere, even if you can't see it behind all that admanterite plate he wears, he started the gang, for sump's sake! Shall I continue or do you want go search Krug for distinguishing marks? Very well. Not far from the hagglers, watching with steely eyes was Horgen, Krug's personal guard.

Yeah, you've seen him before, probably using those two chainswords on some poor gob in the fighting pit at Slimecrawl. Yes, that Horgen. Beside Horgen, Flange was primping and combing his long pink mohawk. He's something of a dandy, quite a feat in a crew of Goliaths. The only reason Krug and the others don't kill him is that he's good with those pistols. Soft moans came from the back room where Agar, who usually takes care of Black Hand's 'business' here at the Sapper, lay sweating on my sheets with the shakes. He'd paid some Ratskin to give him a glow mould tattoo the day before, that thing on his face that pulses green with his heartbeat. It's the glow spores under the skin, you see, but it made him sick as a Scavvy when he first got it.

On the other side of the room - the others trying to sit out of blast range - was Dramuck, a huge mountain of muscle. That suicidal heavy bolter of his dismantled for cleaning and scattered across my best rat-wheel table. Me holding my breath every time his

tinkering set those unstable bolt shells rolling around.

No, I didn't ask him to move. Sure his bolter was dismantled, but his fists weren't, and I didn't feel like eating my teeth just then.

That's when Mother Dark came in, clanging through the two hinged tread pieces of the door like she owned the place. Everyone froze, like a flag had just landed in their lap, and they were waiting to see if it'd go off. Behind Mother Dark strolled in three of her gang, like some kind of erotic carrion bats in black and red leathers.

Who's Mother Dark? You'll find out soon enough. Mother Dark is the High Priestess of the Blood Coven. A secretive Escher gang to the south, practising an obscure religion of their own. Up until recently the Coven had pretty much kept to themselves. Then, for no apparent reason, they began making bloody raids on surrounding territories. The raids themselves seemed rather pointless, with no obvious goal except carnage. Well, carnage and captives. Gangers and settlers taken by the Coven were

never seen again. That's when the rumours started of dark magic and unspeakable rituals.

This, then, was Mother Dark, their leader, standing in my entrance, and staring at Krug Face-Mauler like he was the only one in the room.

'Guilder leave!' she commanded, her voice like a razor through velvet.

The Guilder, sputtering indignation at being given orders, gathered his robes about him and scurried out past the warrior women.

Krug rose slowly, the muscles of his jaw working as he bit back his rage. 'You dare break our pact, witch?'

One of the Eschers behind Mother Dark raised a heavy stubber, levelling at all in the room. Horgen's hands flew to the chainswords sheathed on his back, and Flange's pistols were already out, aiming from his lap beneath the table.

'We have held our part of the bargain, and not entered your territory,' Mother Dark purred icily, ignoring the weapon-filled tension. 'But you have yet to deliver one for sacrifice.'

Until now Black Hand had not tangled with the Coven, but by the incredulous looks they directed towards their leader, they obviously had not attributed this to some dubious pact. The shock on their faces quickly turned to fury, and for a moment I thought Krug would be gunned down by his own men.

'You'll get your blasted sacrifice when we capture one of those Orlock scum!' Krug growled back, admirably keeping panic out of his voice.

'No, Krug. The time to sacrifice one of a rival gang is passed. The Day of Thirst approaches! So say the Books of Letting. Preparations must be made. The Sacrifice must be one of your own, one of Black Hand. You will bring the chosen one to the Drinking Stones in exactly four hours, or prepare for our wrath. The Day of Thirst approaches.'

And they vanished out of the door again before anyone could respond.

Krug turned to his men, who still held their weapons in their hands. All that babble about the Day of Thirst and the prospect of being chosen for sacrifice had done nothing to calm the men's nerves. 'Well, Krug, what's it going to be?' Horgen asked, his finger twitching on the trigger of his chainsword.

'War!' Krug barked. 'No sump-sucking Escher wench is going to give the Black Hand orders! We hit them. Hit 'em hard, and hit 'em now We'll catch them on the way back to their hideout.'

Krug's plan, though a relieving alternative to sacrifice, had its problems. First of all, only five Black Hand gangers were present, and with Agar sweating out his glow mould, that left only four gangers to 'hit 'em hard'. That's when I was deputised.

No, I can't shoot or fight worth a damn, but Krug wanted numbers. I refused at first, of course, but when Krug offered to wave his 'protection' fee on the Bonesapper's Lounge for a couple of weeks, well, my credit book got the better of my judgement. By all the gods, if I'd only known... I would've paid Krug twice as much not to go.

The second problem with Krug's plan was time of departure. It took Dramuck an hour to reassemble his heavy bolter, and another hour trudging through chemdust plains, across gantries and down air vents as we made our way into Blood Coven territory.

We never caught the Coven on their way home.

We emerged from the air ducts at the Drinking Stones, and a right mess we were too. The chemdust on our clothes had turned to mud in a particularly steamy duct, and our hair was thickly matted with ventmite web, but as we weren't there on a date, it didn't much matter.

The Drinking Stones served as the Blood Coven's headquarters. They lay in an ancient and crumbling dome, filled with debris and rusting catwalks. The Coven had erected

the circle of standing stones and a strange altar made out of broken chunks of concrete. Mother Dark and two of the Coven that had been at the Sapper were moving about the stones in bizarre circles. Miraculously, the heavy stubber was not there. We were two hours early, and had apparently caught them in the middle of some ritual. Dramuck opened fire from the gantry on which he emerged, three storeys up, raining death into the circle of stone with his heavy bolter. I ran to a junction and down the air vent to the next opening about five paces away and began shooting wildly the borrowed auto pistol bucking awkwardly in my hands. Krug, Horgen and Flange leapt down ladders to the rubble-strewn floor.

Things went well at first. The Coven had scattered and taken cover behind the standing stones, and Dramuck's hail of bolts were keeping them pinned there. I can't say my own shooting did much but add to the noise, but I think that was Krug's idea anyway.

He, Flange and Horgen took the opportunity to rush the Stones on the ground. They were almost there when the back of Flange's thigh burst open in a bloody spray. He went down, clutching the spewing wound.

Krug and Horgen spun to face their new attackers. A hatch had opened in the dome wall behind them. Sister Quench, the witch with the heavy stubber, stood in the opening, sending burning chunks of lead into the three Goliaths. Behind her, also drawn by the sound of gunfire, were two more Eschers, charging to their sisters' rescue.

Krug bent, grabbing Flange by the collar. the ground around him flying into sharp concrete slivers. Meanwhile Horgen, chainswords screaming, charged the three Eschers at the door, who wisely sought to avoid the onslaught of the maniacal pit fighter behind its steel jamb. Krug used the brief respite to drag the wounded Flange to the nearest cover, the steel lattice of a catwalk support pillar. Horgen changed the direction of his charge and followed suit.

High above, sweat poured from Dramuck's body, veins bulging like cords in his neck and arms. The heavy bolter ate belt after belt from its huge ammo pack. spitting those bolts from its glowing red muzzle with a sound like chugging thunder. The Coven's reinforcements had come through the hatch directly beneath the gantry that Dramuck had positioned himself on, so he continued his fire into the standing stones, unable to draw a bead on the new threat.

Me, on the other hand, being twenty feet off to the side, could just barely see the bottom of their entry hatch. With a target finally within range. I redirected my fire. Mother Dark and her cronies, the stones exploding around them, would periodically duck out to snap off wild shots. The two witches with Sister Quench made a dash through the hatch toward Krug and Horgen. my bullets sparking harmlessly off the nearby wall.

Krug aimed his shotgun through the crossbars of the support strut and blasted one of the charging Eschers. The solid slug hit the Coven juve in the neck, practically severing her head. Her lifeless body hurled back and crumpled on the floor amidst a rain of blood and bits of vertebrae.

Sister Quench's crouching form suddenly filled the part of the hatch I could see. Heavy stub slugs began pelting the ductwork around me. I pressed myself to the vent wall, only to hear the metallic shriek of the support lattice giving way. The whole air shaft I was in twisted, buckled, and plummeted to the ground like some huge rusted worm in its death throes.

When the noise and dust settled, I realised I was somehow still alive. I was on my back, buried up to my shoulders in twisted metal. The ventilation tube was still attached to the wall at the other end, slanting down at crumpled angles to the floor

where I now lay, trapped and immobile.

As if things weren't bad enough, Dramuck's pumping bolter finally overheated. The huge machine seized, jamming bolt after bolt together like a tube train crash. It exploded in his hands, sending his body soaring over the edge of the gantry. His fall halted with a sickening crunch, impaling him on the jagged end of a support that had held my fallen air shaft. I frantically tried to free myself and was rewarded with a new avalanche of debris that covered me completely.

That was it. With two men down and his heavy bolter skewered on a girder, Krug was hopelessly outnumbered. His harried voice came 'Out and back! Out and back! Note!' The Blood Coven jeered and fired off parting shots as Krug, Horgen and Flange fled the dome through a crevice in its shattered wall.

'Come again, Black Hand!' Mother Dark mocked. 'You're welcome any time!'

My stomach turned with sickening realisation that I had been left for dead. The pile of metal covering me had pinned my head to the side... if only it had broken my neck, I would have been spared the horrors I witnessed next. For though trapped and concealed from view, there was a small hole or tunnel through which I could breathe and see out of, directly in front of my face — staring directly at the Drinking Stones. Some time went by, in which I assume the Coven were tending their wounds, and scouring the dome for survivors. They did not find me. For that I can give some little thanks. I saw them finally enter the circle of stones carrying two bodies: that of their mangled juve, and Dramuck, who they had somehow managed to drag off the impaling support.

And this is the worst part: Dramuck was still alive.

Any normal man would have died in the blast of his exploding weapon, never mind a careening fall onto sharp metal. It was his massive physique, you see. An iron constitution that refused to let go. The wounds through his shoulder told me that the support hadn't passed through any vital organs. Poor (ragging bastard. If only it had hit his heart... Mother Dark appeared, wearing a robe made of, well, I couldn't swear, but it looked like skin. Yeah, human. No. I don't know for sure. Look, I wasn't that calm at the time... Anyway, she stood before the altar and produced a large bound tome that I chose not to inspect too closely. She began to recite words from the book, strange garbled stuff that I couldn't pronounce, even if I could remember them. A witch with a chainsword began slicing up the dead juve on the floor while four others lifted the groaning Dramuck onto the table-like altar.

I winced and grit my teeth as horrible stone spikes were driven through his wrists and ankles into holes bored deep into the stone surface. This nightmare continued as the rest of the sisters began painting the pock-marked stones with strange symbols and arcs, using the bloody appendages of the dead juve. I could barely watch. This done, the Coven gathered in a circle about the pinioned body of Dramuck.

Mother Dark looked up from her recitation. 'The Day of Thirst is approaching! So say the Books of Letting!' she shouted, lifting the book above her head. 'Preparations must be made!'

With that she opened her robe, revealing a girdle made out of leather. It was covered in dozens of loops and pockets, each holding a gruesome bladed hook, like some horrible surgical

instrument. The Coven members filed past Mother Dark one by one, each taking an instrument, and descended on Dramuck.

I thrashed, contorted and beat myself against the restraining pile of metal around me, in a desperate attempt to free myself. Desperate to be away, desperate not to see the hideous dismantling of Dramuck. Chunks of metal crashed to the floor with my exertions, but their reverberating clangs were drowned out by the inhuman screaming

coming from the Drinking Stones.

I finally succeeded in freeing most of my body. but the evil piece of rubble pinning my head would not budge. I could not look away. I caught one nightmare image before I clenched my eyes shut to the abhorrent act before me.

It wakes me at night. Screaming. Dramuck splayed out like an anatomy book, the witches with their little hooks and blades, teasing tendon, vein, and organ from their rightful places, rivers of blood coursing down the sides of the altar... and all the while, Dramuck's screaming...

It seemed to go on for hours, tears streaming down my cheeks, my face aching from pressing my lids together so hard I thought my eyeballs would burst. And then it stopped. I lay there, eyes closed, breathing, for what seemed the first time in weeks. Sometime later, when all was completely still, and I had heard the Coven depart, I chanced a look into the Drinking Stones. Dramuck's remains had mercifully been removed, though the red stone still glistened wetly. Mother Dark knelt at the base of the altar, praying.

Then, as the quiet of the dome carried her voice to me, I realised what I had taken for prayer was conversation. She was talking. Looking closer, I saw the altar sat upon a large drain, like a sewer grate. She was cooing as one speaks to a dear, small child.

'Yes. Yes my sweet. Drink. Drink deeply, for your day approaches. The day you will emerge and all the Hive will tremble before your glory'

My blood ran cold. There was something beneath the altar. Something huge. I could hear it, a slashing gelatinous mass, flopping and banging around in some vast liquid filled metal vat. She was talking to it. And at the pinnacle of my terror, it spoke back. A sucking, gurgling mockery of human sound echoing from the pit.

In an insane surge of panic driven energy, I wrenched my head free of its vice-like imprisonment, leaving a good portion of my scalp hanging on its edge. Bleeding, I ran like a madman up the twisted tunnel of the hanging air shaft and out of that accursed dome, but not before Mother Dark's sickly sweet voice came drifting up the metal tunnel.

'Yes, my sweet. Preparations are being made...'

SURE, YOU'VE got a heavy stubber, but you see the question you should be asking yourself, don't you? Have I been hired to replace Dramuck to fight those sump-sucking degenerate witches...

Or have I been hired to replace Dramuck as sacrifice to that thing, that abominable monstrosity beneath the altar?

You see, I'm not sure wily old Krug and that witch Mother Dark haven't got together and come to an agreement since our last—

No, wait!

Where are you going?

You haven't paid for your WildSnake yet!

Bad Spirits by Jonathan Green

PANIC REIGNED in the Ratskin camp. The great claw swept down again, this time decapitating an

old Ratskin with a sickening crunch of shattering vertebrae. In the flickering light of the campfire, Grey Spider watched the slaughter in horror. Here he saw the corpse of a squaw, still clutching a mewling infant in her arms. There an elder coughed and breathed his last as his precious life-blood poured from a gaping wound in his frail chest. And there, silhouetted against the fire in the darkness of the Underhive, was the mountainous outline of the beast. Only the tribe's totem pole towered above it. Grey Spider pumped the barrel of the shotgun and raised it to his shoulder. Now he had the

monster in his sights. Hearing the double click, the beast turned its misshapen head and fixed Grey Spider with its fiery gaze. The Ratskin felt the sick chill of fear creep down his spine and seize his stomach in its contorting grip. He found his gun sights wavering — he was shaking. Taking one hand from the shotgun he wiped the sweat from his brow. Roaring, the monster charged. Grey Spider fired.

The report rang out across the vast, empty waste of the dome and echoed faintly from the plascrete ceiling far overhead. Grey Spider felt the wind punched from him M a rush of air as an iron-hard shoulder rammed into his body, carrying him backwards. The beast slid to a halt and Grey Spider fell to the ground, his chest heaving as he tried to recover his breath. He could hear the beast snorting in great gulps itself as its body was seized by a rage-induced adrenaline surge.

The Ratskin still had the shotgun gripped firmly in one hand. Struggling against the pain he primed the weapon for a second time. This was like no other Underhive creature the tribe had ever encountered. It seemed impervious to weapons and had no understanding of compassion. Why was it attacking their camp? In their search for new hunting grounds had the tribe angered the inscrutable spirits of the Hive?

If only the hunting party had returned that night as had been expected. If only more of the menfolk had stayed behind to protect the camp. But if he and his Braves could not hold off this monster, then who was to say that all the Ratskin warriors of the Redsnake Tribe would make any difference. If he was to die that night he would die fighting and with honour, as a Ratskin warrior!

The monster charged for the last time. Grey Spider pulled the trigger but still the monster would not stop. The great gleaming claw descended and Grey Spider's world exploded into darkness. The settlement burned.

IT WAS UNDERHIVERS, I tell you!

Quaking Dome bellowed, shaking his

skull-headed staff in fury. As he screamed his anger, the shaman's face turned red beneath the sacred spirals painted on his cheeks.

'Try to be calm, my brothers,' the old Chief pleaded, his age-lined brow furrowed in distress. The hunting had not been good, the Giant Rats had slunk off to nest deeper in the Hive Bottom this season, and now the warriors had returned to find their families slaughtered. Chief Thunderslag felt powerless in the face of his warriors' grief.

Nothing he could say would take away their pain. He could only try to keep them from doing something they would all regret. 'We have always lived on fairly good terms with the hivers.' 'What've they ever done for us?' It was one of the more rebellious Braves who spoke, having found his courage at the bottom of a bottle of Second Best. 'How can you say that, Howling Vent? They have traded with us, buying the skins we hunt for, and our blindsnake pouches. In exchange we have received weapons,' Chief Thunderslag eyed the bottle gripped in the brave's hand with contempt, 'and that poison you guzzle so much!'

'You call it trade?' Quaking Dome exclaimed. There was no stopping the shaman now. 'It's nothing more than exploitation! The invaders have never respected the sanctity of our lands and now they've shown their true intentions!' He was physically shaking, the bones strung onto his ceremonial armour rattling with every convulsion. 'While we were away providing for our families, they murdered them all to drive us from our homes - so they can steal our territory!' The shaman's tirade was greeted with a chorus of agreement. Many had sought solace in alcohol since making the gruesome discovery on their return. The shock of what they had found in the cold, oxyacetylene haze of morning had been too much for even these hardened warriors to cope with. 'Stop, stop now!' the despairing Chief commanded. 'It is not the hivers who have done this. The spirits have been disturbed and become restless. We must find out why and

discover who, or what, has done this. We owe it to the souls of our departed loved ones!

'You don't know what you are talking about! You are getting old! Your words mean nothing to these people,' Quaking Dome hissed, turning on the ageing Chief his voice full of contempt. Dark eyes flashed in righteous anger. 'Words cannot bring back the dead. Actions are all that can appease their own troubled souls! We must put on war paint and prepare to die taking their scalps! It is the Ratskin way!' With that, the shaman turned on his heels and strode out of the camp. 'He who would avenge those who have been slaughtered here follow me!' he shouted back over his shoulder. The rest of the grief-stricken hunting party, high on Second Best, trailed after him.

Chief Thunderslag stood alone by the tribe's totem pole, watching the Ratskin warriors disappear from view as they were swallowed up by the blackness of the Underhive.

'You will be renegade if you choose the war-path!' he shouted forlornly after them.

'You will no longer be my people! I will not be able to save you this time!' No reply came from the darkness beyond the camp.

Thunderslag turned towards the totem. As so often, his eyes were drawn to the grotesque image carved from plascrete beneath the stylised form of a snarling rat. The thing was almost human in appearance and yet there was something monstrous about it.

'Yes, the spirits of the hive have been disturbed,' he muttered to himself. 'They must be put to rest.' Thunderslag instinctively felt a chill in his bones. Something evil was abroad, he knew. He put an uncertain hand to the autopistol holstered in his rat's-tail belt, hesitated and then withdrew it again. The chief looked to the totem with pleading eyes as if turning to it for help. 'But what can I do?' As Quaking Dome had said, the truth of it was that he was getting old. From the evidence lying all around him, even his native skills might not be enough to help him overcome this beast - if beast it was. Yet there had to be a way.

Abruptly, the old chief nodded to himself and grinned. There was always a way.

OLD THUNDERSLAG'S making trouble again? Didn't I always say those Ratskins couldn't be trusted?' the toothless bar-prop whistled.

'You sure did, Jemar,' Cooms, his middle-aged and overweight drinking companion, agreed.

And this was at the Jaygoth's place, you say, Calem?' Jack Finnian, the barman and proprietor of the Last Dregs Saloon asked, taking up his one-armed lean on the bar-top that he reserved for a genuine interest in what his customers were saying.

'That's right,' the grizzled miner confirmed. 'Old man Jaygoth and his wife and all their young 'uns - all dead. Scalped the lot of them!'

'Savages!' Cooms exclaimed, genuinely horrified. 'They can't be allowed to get away with that!'

'There's talk of some folks leaving town already 'cause of the troubles.' Finnian added, nodding knowingly.

'They need to be taught a lesson, that's what they need,' Jemar decided, slapping his hand on the bar. 'Did I ever tell you about the time I came across that band of Ratskins up by Mercury Falls?'

'You did,' Cooms interrupted.

'It's about time somebody did something about them,' Calem said suddenly. 'I would myself, only I'm sure I'm this close to striking a really big adamantorite seam.' 'That's what you said the last time,' Cooms muttered under his breath.

'What about the Guilders?' suggested Finnian. 'They should get their Watchmen to sort those Ratskins out once and for all.' 'They're only interested in what happens inside the

town,' Calem muttered sourly. With the scrape of metal on metal, the doors swung open and the Bounty Hunter entered the smoky haze of the Last Dregs Saloon. Silence fell over the saloon, all eyes watching the stranger intently as he strode purposefully over to the bar. The tails of his long leather coat flapped around his knee-length boots. For a moment, the cluster of seals pinned to the inside of his coat that attested to successful jobs were revealed. Everyone in the bar could also clearly see the two, long-barrelled stub guns hanging over the man's hips. He walked tall, his back straight and his steps considered and certain. At the bar, the Bounty Hunter took the smouldering butt of a cheroot from between his teeth and sucked in a long, hissing breath.

'Wild Snake,' he drawled in a voice that was no more than a husky whisper.

'You got it,' the barman replied, hurrying to grab a fresh bottle.

'Hey, mister, you want to kill yourself some Ratskins?' Jemar piped up.

'Nope.'

'What d'you mean?' Jemar exclaimed, in disbelief. 'You're a Bounty Hunter, ain't you?' 'I've already got a job.' The man turned a piercing gaze on the old drinker. In the flickering sodium light, his steely eyes glinted under the shadowy brim of his battered hat.

'Then I would encourage you to finish it and move on, friend,' came a new voice, low and cultured, from the other end of the bar. At the moment, Toxic Sump isn't a place where self-respecting gentlemen like ourselves would wish to remain for longer than was strictly necessary.'

The owner of the voice emerged from the smoky gloom. He too wore a long, battered leather coat, beneath which could be glimpsed green trousers. His slender hands were enclosed in thick black gloves; in one he held a drink. He was of medium build, his features angular and well-defined. His carefully-trimmed black beard and moustache were in stark contrast to the Bounty Hunter's four day stubble. 'Why's that?'

'Well, to be quite frank, Toxic Sump is becoming a ghost town.' The bearded man placed his glass carefully on the bar and turned to face the Bounty Hunter. 'The local Ratskin tribe have been causing a lot of trouble recently. They are driving many of the settlers away. Claims are being abandoned throughout the dome; there's no work for anyone anymore.'

'He's right,' Cooms piped up, his companions muttering their agreement. 'So when do you leave?' the Bounty Hunter asked bluntly, fixing the bearded man with a calm gaze as he raised his drink to his lips.

'I am a trader and unfortunately I have a personal financial commitment to fulfil, otherwise I would have departed long ago. When the next Guilder convoy arrives I'll conclude my business here, and when it leaves I intend to be on it.'

The Bounty Hunter downed his drink in one quick mouthful. 'I'm not going anywhere, yet. Like I said, I'm on a job.' 'I was merely looking out for a fellow man's best interests,' the man said with a hint of sighing despondency. 'Let me introduce myself. My name's Cyrus Beckerman.'

'I look after my own interests.' The Bounty Hunter replaced the cheroot between his lips. 'Now if you gentlemen will excuse me.' He turned to go.

With a ringing crash, the saloon doors were flung open and a ragged man burst into the bar. His grimy face was gaunt and drawn, his hair grey and tangled. His filthy and unhealthy appearance made him look far older than he probably was.

'Quinn? Is everything all right?' Finnian asked in surprise.

'Quick, get me a drink!' the wild-eyed man gasped, slumping down on a stool. 'I need a drink!' The barman didn't need to be told twice. Downing the shot in one go, Quinn slammed the glass back down on the bar. 'Another!' The second went the same way as

the first. The grimy character stared directly ahead of him. 'It was terrible, I tell you. I ain't seen nothing like it!'

'What's the matter, man?' pressed Finnian. By now everyone else in the bar was crowding around in concern. The Bounty Hunter paused. He turned back towards the bar but said nothing. His keen eyes took in the blood-stains beneath the dirt and the sodden red patches on the prospector's filthy clothes.

'I was attacked, out on my claim up on Blackash Ridge,' the prospector whimpered. 'I paid my dues. I don't deserve to be treated like this!'

'Blackash Ridge, eh?' Beckerman interjected. 'Let me get you another drink. Wild Snake!' He clicked his fingers and at once Finnian started refilling Quinn's glass.

'There were dozens of them!' the bewildered man went on. 'They were all screaming their war-chants and wearing their horrible rat hides. Their arms were covered in snake tattoos!' The man gratefully accepted the glass handed him by Beckerman.

'Sounds like the Redsnake Tribe,' toothless Jemar offered. 'Didn't I always say—'

'That's them!' Quinn exclaimed, fixing the old man with a wild stare. 'They were mad, gone renegade. Said they were going to scalp me and feed me to the Ripperjacks! They stole my finds and all my gear. I was on to something special up there, a really big strike! Then the monster came and I fled!'

'What monster?' Cooms asked.

'He's mad!' Beckerman scoffed loudly, looking around him. 'The man's obvious delirious.'

'Hear him out!' the barman said forcefully. 'Go on, Quinn, tell us more,' he encouraged. 'What was this monster like?' 'It was like some horror from the Sump, big as a test rig, with blazing eyes and one massive claw!' The prospector paused, sucking in ragged breath.

And?' Cooms pressed. 'Don't keep us hanging.'

Quinn made no reply. Instead the prospector clutched at his throat and his face started to turn purple. He tried to speak but all that came from his throat was a horrible croaking sound.

'He's choking!' Finnian exclaimed. 'Quick, someone help him!'

Before any of the startled crowd could do anything, Quinn collapsed face first onto the bar with a strangled groan and lay still. The drinkers looked on, dumbstruck.

Eventually Calem reached over to the prospector and felt cautiously for a pulse on the man's neck. 'He's dead!' the miner announced, in bewildered surprise.

'I guess it was all too much for him,' Finnian suggested, stunned. 'Heart must've burst! Shock'll do that to a man.' He paused, face infused with anger. 'Those Ratskins must have done him over worse than we thought'

'Well, that's it!' Cooms declared. 'I say we raise a posse right now, go up to Blackash Ridge and lynch old Thunderslag. Send the last women and children to Mercury Falls until it's dealt with. The old snake's gone too far this time!'

'Never mind all that,' Finnian interrupted, pointing at the body slumped over his bar.

'What do we do with him?'

And what about the monster?' Jemar reminded everyone.

'If there was one!' Beckerman snorted. 'Yeah, but what about Quinn?' Finnian pressed.

'I guess we just lay him out back and let the Guilders deal with it,' Cooms suggested.

The Bounty Hunter eyed the corpse suspiciously. His instincts told him that something wasn't quite adding up. Despite the convictions of the saloon's regulars, the prospector's wounds hadn't seemed to be that serious. And anyway, the man had choked, not bled to death.

Realisation abruptly struck the Bounty Hunter. The last thing Quinn had done before he died was to have a drink. The prospector's glass still stood on the bar. While the

others talked, the Bounty Hunter surreptitiously picked it up and, swilling around the dregs left in the bottom, gave it a cautious sniff. A bitter scent assailed his nostrils. He had consumed a fair amount of Wild Snake in his time but the glass smelt strange even for a particularly potent brewing. He thought back: only the barman and Beckerman had handled it. He put the glass back down on the bar and said nothing. Frowning, the Bounty Hunter looked around the room. Beckerman was nowhere to be seen. 'That trader left in an awful hurry,' he drawled.

'He's a busy man,' Cooms grunted over his shoulder by way of explanation.

Finnian was fidgeting nervously behind the bar, unable to keep his hands still. 'Come on, let's take Quinn out back,' he urged. 'Having a corpse in the bar's not good for trade. Makes customers feel uneasy.'

Between them the men picked up the prospector's body. The Bounty Hunter surprised everyone by taking Quinn's feet and helping carry the body out to the back room.

'Gotta show respect for the dead,' he drawled. No one saw him deftly withdraw a scrap of paper from the dead man's boot, secreting it in the long folds of his coat.

OUTSIDE THE Last Gasp Saloon, Nathan Creed, Bounty Hunter, took out the scrap of parchment and

unfolded it, grimacing at the stale smell of the dead man's boots. The spidery scrawl and worn lines forming the map were faded with age but their meaning was clear. If the map was genuine — and something in Creed's gut told him that it was - then it would appear that Toxic Sump's dome was built directly on top of another, much older settlement.

Who knew what ancient treasures lay buried beneath the ash? Creed took the cheroot from his mouth and spat into the dust. The prospector had known. Now he was dead, thanks to the aid of a little poison.

I guess someone else is in on the secret too, the Bounty Hunter thought to himself. Well, Beckerman, or whoever you are, Nathan Creed is involved now so you'd better watch your step.

There was no one else around: Toxic Sump really was turning into a ghost town.

Cocking the brim of his hat, Creed let his robo-sight visor scour the rocky outcrop to the west, beyond the barbed-wire topped settlement wall. Beyond the rim lay Blackash Ridge where the dead prospector's claim was situated.

Suddenly he caught the flash of a whiplash coat tail as a bearded figure disappearing around a corner on the other side of the street. Creed grinned. Guess it wouldn't hurt to do a bit of poking around of my own before! leave town, he thought to himself. His suspicions aroused, the Bounty Hunter set off

Making sure he kept well out of sight, Creed followed the man in the coat until the furtive figure stopped outside a long, low building. The barn-like construction stood close to where the town wall had been built, almost on top of the rocky outcrop beyond. Its windows were smeared with grime and the structure gave the impression that it had long been abandoned.

As he unlocked the door, the furtive character glanced around to make sure he hadn't been followed. Back in the shadows, unseen, Creed grinned. It was Beckerman, just as he had suspected. The trader ducked inside the building and closed the door.

Creed darted down a side alley, stopping next to a grimy window. Rubbing the dirt from the panes with his coat sleeve, he peered inside. There was no one about - Beckerman appeared to have vanished -but there was plenty to see nonetheless. The building was crammed full of crates that, from their condition, had only been packed recently. Their sizes suggested to Creed that whatever was inside was pretty big - and as a result probably quite valuable.

There was something else. At the back of the warehouse the Bounty Hunter could

make out a large door, slightly open. 'So that's where you've gone... What exactly are you up to?' Creed muttered. The door's rusty surface suggested that the door had been sealed for some time and only opened again recently.

Creed considered his options. He still had a job to do at Blackash Ridge. He crushed the stub of his cheroot beneath a worn boot heel and strode away. Beckerman could wait.

THE GLOW-GLOBES hanging from the ceiling of the dome were dimming by the time Creed crested the ash-covered rise. Before him lay the prospector's wrecked camp. Broken pipes jutted from piles of rubble, leaking steaming green fluid onto the crumbling masonry. Creed surveyed the devastation emotionlessly. The place was a mess: a cooking pot lay upturned next to the remains of a campfire; the prospector's shelter had been demolished; the seismic equipment the man would have used was missing. The dirt and dust around the site had been churned up; here and there lay a feather or scraps of fur. Ratskins had been here all right, but so had something else -something far more sinister.

Among the countless moccasin prints that covered the site, Creed spotted something unusual: boot marks. The pattern of the boot treads had the precision and regularity of a machine press. They hadn't the look of handmade Ratskin moccasins.

Something else troubled Creed: why would Ratskins steal machinery and seismic gear? His keen eyes scanned the

camp. It was common knowledge that the indigenous tribes of the Underhive worshipped ancient archeotech hoards. They had been known to go on the warpath to recover stolen sacred treasures, but to take modern equipment from a lone prospector? Ratskins had no need of such things. Their knowledge of the treacherous Underhive was unrivalled. There was definitely something strange going on.

It was easy to find where the prospector had been working. Close to a jutting outcrop of rock, a hole had been blasted in the side of the hill. Creed flicked down the photovisor from beneath the brim of his hat. Peering through the gloom beyond the opening, he could see the pitted walls of a cave and the entrance to a man-made tunnel, shored up with metal props.

Entering the cave, Creed felt a breeze blowing up from the tunnels below. The fetid air testified to the fact that whatever was down there had been there a long time, sealed away with the decomposing effluent that filtered down from the hive-city far above.

The dirt floor of the cave was covered with yet more Ratskin footprints and the same boot marks from the camp, leading both in and out of the tunnel entrance. And there, stamped into the dust, were the footprints of something else too, something much bigger. Creed crouched down to study the prints closer but couldn't identify them at all. They were large and flat, and ended in clawed tips. Claws that had cut deeply into the ground with every step. Maybe there was some truth to the old man's monster story after all. Creed grinned in the darkness.

Getting superstitious, Creed? he thought to himself. Pieces of the puzzle began to lock together in his mind. Dusting himself down, the Bounty Hunter began to rise. 'You're not going anywhere!' hissed a cultured voice. Beckerman!

Creed froze in his crouched position, feeling the cold muzzle of a gun pressed against the back of his neck. He had been so intent on his investigations that he had not heard the softly booted approach. Another footprint explained.

'So it was you,' Creed said calmly. 'I

guess you aren't any kind of trader at all. what's Van Saar's place in all this?'

The man didn't bother to confirm his identity 'I thought you were on another job,' he

snapped, almost in annoyance. 'I'm sure I can make time for you.'

'You have become a... complication.' Beckerman, or whatever the Van Saar's real name was, was about to kill. Creed recognised the signs from long years on the trail of untold killers.

In a fluid motion Creed slid the knife from his boot, the movement concealed by the tails of his coat. Twisting the blade around in his hand he jabbed it backwards. The knife sank deep into the ganger's leg, cutting through his boot, until it scraped against bone.

Beckerman cried out in pain. Dropping his hands to the wound, he gritted his teeth and yanked the blade out of his shin. It was all the time Creed needed. He sprang forwards, away from the muzzle of the gun and into the tunnel. As he did so, he turned to his enemy. On his feet again, he faced the ganger, a stub gun in each hand. Depressing both triggers he fired off a couple of rounds, feeling the familiar explosive recoil in his wrists. At the same moment the ganger fired. An instant later

Beckerman's body-suit tore apart at the shoulder, leaving a ragged hole — only a flesh wound, but it was enough to ruin his aim. Creed threw himself out of the way as the dust at his feet kicked up in bursts and the shells impacted against the rocky floor.

Lying on his back in the dirt, Creed pushed himself up onto his palms. Through the clearing dust he saw the ganger stumbling backwards, his own weapon dropped on the floor of the cave. Too late, the Bounty Hunter noticed the wires trailing away from the tunnel entrance. Before he could aim his stubbers, the Van Saar fell onto the detonating device. There was a shuddering boom, the roar of shattering rock and the passageway began to shake violently. The ground quaking beneath his feet, Nathan Creed hurled himself down the tunnel. Behind him the cave mouth collapsed in a jumble of rocks and wreckage. Creed knew only too well that

an uncontrolled explosion in a weakened dome could easily cause hivequakes. He had no idea how much of the rubble above him might come down at any second, so he kept on running. One thing was for certain: the way back was now blocked by the explosion. There was no going back. Regardless of what lay beyond, in the twisting network of tunnels, that was the way he would have to go.

CREED PAUSED in the semi-darkness. The artificial lighting in this section of the cave system had failed, forcing the

Bounty Hunter to peer more closely through his photo-visor. Ahead, to the right, the tunnel opened into a larger cave, possibly the remains of an ancient habitation dome or industrialised area. The passage to the left looked like a dozen others he had wandered along for the last few hours, always leading him deeper towards Hive Bottom. He chose to go right. He was about halfway across the cavern when he heard an unexpected sound that froze him in his tracks. His hands hovered over the holstered stub guns. It was like the sound he had heard when he had once encountered a nest of Milliasaurs. They had been picking at corpses from just another Badzone shoot-out. The sound was unmistakably the tearing of flesh. Ominously, as he listened, the noise ceased.

Moments later, through the gloom Creed was startled as the half-light caught in the jaundiced eyes of some kind of Zombie as it raised its scabrous head to look at him. The creature was half-clothed in filth-encrusted rags, beneath which its diseased skin was visible.

'Plague!' Creed gasped. Everyone knew about what happened to the victims of the neurone plague, but the Bounty Hunter had never been confronted by the results face-to-decomposing face.

The once-human thing hissed through its pock-marked lips. Instantly, the rest of the pack left off devouring the corpses, more interested in the prospect of fresh, tender

flesh. Half-rotted muscles dragged the Zombies towards the Bounty Hunter, spittle dripping in long strings from their gaping, moaning mouths. As the foul creatures shambled forward, Creed quickly glanced behind him. As he had feared, out of the corner of his eye he could see yet more Zombies stalking towards him from behind. Part of him knew he had to save his ammunition for as long as possible. He had no idea where the endless tunnels would lead him or what else he would have to face before he found a way out. If he ever found a way out. But the likely alternative at the moment was the risk of catching the Zombie plague himself. There was nothing else for it. Aiming a stubber at the head of the nearest horror, Creed pulled the trigger. The Zombie's skull exploded in a shower of blood, bone and brain matter. The walking corpse stumbled on a few feet further before it collapsed, still twitching. This violent display did nothing to stop the advance of the other Zombies. The brain-eating disease had obviously deprived them of both fear and pain. A second shell tore a hole in the side of another of the advancing Zombies as it slunk forward, a portion of putrefying intestine flopping from the wound. Marshalling his strength, Creed did not run but kept walking at a steady pace. He figured that until the brainless creatures caught the smell of blood it was unlikely that they would charge him. Hopefully the occasional shot would keep off the closest of them and clear a path across the cavern. Whatever, he knew full well that there was no going back now. He could only go on, despite not knowing what lay ahead. Creed felt time slow to a crawl as the interminable Zombie-shoot played itself out. He reloaded as he walked, always careful to keep a healthy distance between himself and the Zombies. Every instinct screamed at him to run, to put as much distance between the flesh-eating creatures as he could. But Creed resisted

the temptation. The ground underfoot was uneven, with hidden pot-holes and twisted pipes jutting from the ash, ready to trip an unwary fugitive.

A number of the creatures broke off from their laboured pursuit to feed on the carcasses of the Zombies that had already fallen. Creed smiled his fatalistic smile. Maybe you ugly sons of bitches have no attention span. He knew he had no option but to keep going. He just hoped that he found a way out of the cave system before he ran out of slugs. Creed walked on through the abyssal twilight.

CREED CROUCHED down behind the crate and allowed himself a deep breath of relief. He had left most of

the Zombies behind in the deeper, darker recesses of the cave system as they lost interest and began fighting amongst themselves. After several hours trudging through the underworld, he found himself at one end of a much larger cavern. As he had reached the properly lit passages leading up and out of the depths, the Zombies had seemed unwilling to follow. Maybe they feared something that lay beyond, Creed pondered, something to which they reacted on an instinctive, primal level.

Hearing the sounds of raised voices, Creed peered over the edge of the crate, careful to remain out of view. This cavern stretched out before him for over a hundred metres. Numerous halogen lamps illuminated the chamber, revealing the mouths of distant tunnels leading off into darkness. Twenty metres or so away, a band of maybe a dozen Ratskin warriors were in heated discussion with six members of a Van Saar gang, easily identifiable by their familiar padded green body suits. The two groups were clearly in league with each other.

Hmm... thick as thieves, Creed said to himself. Looks like the old man really was onto something. He scanned the cave for further evidence of his suspicions.

The place was a Guilder's dream. It was full of the most incredible archeotech Creed had ever seen. Bizarre clusters of machinery, dust-covered control panels and chrome-plated artefacts were in the process of being packed into crates... crates like those in

Beckerman's warehouse. Creed nodded to himself. This is bigger than I thought! It all added up. Creed cursed himself for not piecing the clues together earlier. There was an absolute fortune here. The credits raised from the sale of this stuff could buy the whole of ?War Sump, with Mercury Falls thrown in as well, he thought.

A shout brought his attention back to the discussion taking place in the centre of the cavern. Something was going down: the Ratskins and the gangers were almost coming to blows. Every now and again, the breeze from unseen vents carried wisps of conversation to the Bounty Hunter's ears.

'Not enough Trader tokens, hair facer 'Not enough Wild Snake!'

'You agreed to the deal.'

'The spirits are disturbed''

'Crap — nothing but superstitious fear.' 'The totem beast walks!'

'Rubbish.'

'Our ancestors are watching!'

Creed narrowed his eyes: now things were really getting interesting. The gangers had their backs to him. If he could just get a little nearer he might be able to identify the individuals. Keeping low behind the piles of crates, Creed slunk closer. He closed the distance between himself and the gangers without being seen, before ducking down again. Cautiously he peered around the edge of a crate.

Creed felt his coat tail sweep across the screwdriver just a moment too late to stop the object rolling off the top of a tool box and rattling onto the stony floor of the cave. He cursed silently. Gangers and Ratskins all turned in his direction. Creed knew he could not hide now

'Way too slow!' he drawled as he loosed a fusillade of shots from behind the crate, slamming several rounds into the assembled conspirators. One of the gangers flew backwards as a bullet

shattered several ribs: another screamed as a dum-dum punctured a lung on its passage through his body.

Then Ratskins and Van Saars were returning fire. The chamber echoed with the crack of the tribesmen's muskets and the zinging scream of rounds fired from the gangers' superior weapons. Creed knew he was hopelessly outnumbered, but he was confident that he was by far the better marksman. Despite the dazzling array of targeting devices bolted to the Van Saar's autoguns and bolters, his shots were hitting home. Creed grinned. He liked a good shoot-out. For every ten shots that impacted against the crate behind which he sheltered, one coolly executed shot from him found its target in the form of a renegade Ratskin or a corrupt ganger. The hail of bullets from a bolt gun tore through the empty crate. 'Durability exceeded,' Creed muttered, and bolted for new cover. He ran, wooden boxes exploding in an eruption of splintering planks behind him. Diving forwards he just avoided a glowing plasma burst as it streaked over his head. The barrel it eventually struck, on the far side of the cavern, contained some volatile substance. Forty metres away, Creed felt the wash from the resulting ball of superheated crimson flame. The cave was lit up momentarily by the inferno.

'What the...?' In the shadows did he catch sight of something big on the move? Then the scorching blast found the Bounty Hunter, and even protected by his thick coat he felt its fierce warmth on his back. Creed wrinkled his nose at the rank smell of singed leather. Somebody screamed. As he lay face down on the ground, he discarded the spent cartridges from his guns and reloaded. Once these precious rounds had been used up there were only enough bullets left for one more reload. 'Looking tough, girls,' he whispered to the stubbers. 'Looks like you're all but done.' His encounter with the Zombies had cost him dear.

A bestial mechanised roar suddenly rose above the deafening sounds of the firelight.

As Creed looked around, the monstrous noise was joined by the agonised howl of what could only be a dying man. Creed risked a look over the ancient piece of machinery he was hiding behind. To his horror he saw a nightmarish shape. It was fully three and a half metres tall, silhouetted in the bone-white glare of the halogen lamps. The thing lifted a screaming Van Saar into the air by a great curved metal hook. The cruel blade had been thrust through the man's back and was now projecting from his stomach. The hideous monster tossed the dying ganger carelessly aside and ploughed forwards through the mass of men, crushing a petrified Ratskin under one of its great, clawed steel feet.

Now or never! Creed thought, and with his adversaries brutally distracted he made his move. Skirting the edge of the cavern he saw the terrible creature revealed in the glare of the lamps in all its startling glory. Once-human, muscle and bone portions of the creature had been spliced to a droid chassis, so that the creature stomped across the cavern through the carnage on pistoning legs of solid metal. Something about its shape was strangely familiar, but Creed wasn't about to stop for a closer look.

The psychotic cyborg's visage was a grotesque parody of a human face. One bloodshot eye glared out from a head malformed by a serrated, metal jaw. Its bionic, red-glowing counterpart observed everything unblinkingly with electronic intensity. Atrophying tissue around the artificial implants had begun to peel away from the partially metal skull to reveal the corroded circuits of the endo-skeleton beneath.

Creed saw that the beast-machine's naked torso was crossed with livid, purple scars. The huge, steroid-enhanced muscles of its left arm, coursing with telescoping steel cables, supported the weight of a crude three-fingered talon. The claw flexed spasmodically. The right arm was missing entirely. The massive metal contraption in place of the limb began at the shoulder, plasteel-shielded wire bundles connecting with the monster's spinal cord beneath the skin. From its design and the aged condition of its components, Creed was sure that this was no modern day cyborg escaped from

higher up the Hive. How long had it been trapped down here, he wondered, its power cells on standby? Maybe a hivequake had reactivated it. Its program must have been corrupted along with the slow deterioration of its body in the inhospitable conditions in the caves. Now it was loose once more.

The cyborg was proving more than a match for the surprised conspirators. It seemed to be almost totally impervious to their weapons. Cauterised holes in its gore-splattered flesh attested to the fact that both the gangers and Ratskins had hit the creature.

However, its armour plating had halted the shells, and seemed to have stopped them from doing any severe damage.

The gangers and Ratskins fought on with increased vigour. This time it was they who felt out-gunned and out-numbered by the sheer might of the rampaging cyborg. Their agonised cries rang in Creed's ears as he ran from the cavern, leaving the carnage behind him.

The Bounty Hunter fled along a large, well-trodden tunnel. Halogen lights illuminated the passage and Creed noticed power cables running along its length towards the world above. Desperate, he followed the sloping path upward, his lungs heaving.

At the mouth of the tunnel, Creed ran into the first and last piece of his puzzle.

Wounded shoulder bound up in a temporary bandage, a bearded man was crouched over a small black box. Beckerman was trying to make the final connections between a pair of wires and a small detonator, his lacerated fingers scrabbling. The Van Saar looked up on hearing Creed's approach and a crazed, leering grin parted his lips. A pair of twisted wires ran along the access tunnel in conjunction with the power cables 'Not this time, Beckerman!' Creed roared, charging the last few paces. Ignoring the

weapons at his belt, the Bounty Hunter lunged forwards, his fatigued muscles fuelled by the adrenaline rush of exasperated desperation. His hands slick with his own blood, Beckerman's fingers slipped on the detonator screws, unable to get a grip. Powering up the tunnel, Creed reached the entrance and flung himself bodily forward at the ganger before he could make the final twist of the detonation cord.

As Beckerman fell, he grabbed Creed in two strong hands and twisted. Using his own weight and momentum, the Van Saar ganger flung the Bounty Hunter over his shoulder. Creed hit the ground hard, cracking his head on the rocky floor. He lay still, momentarily stunned by the shocking pain. As his vision began to clear, Creed looked up. Death looked back. Beckerman stood at his feet, a great chunk of plascrete raised above his head. The ganger smiled coldly as he prepared to destroy the Bounty Hunter once and for all. Desperately Creed fumbled for his guns, trying to shake the concussion which all but overcame him.

The Bounty Hunter blinked suddenly as something splashed against his face. Putting a hand to his cheek he felt a warm wetness. His grimy fingertips came away red with blood. He became aware of a horrible gurgling noise and through the fog of pain he looked up at his would-be killer. Beckerman's feet were hardly touching the ground as his body hung in the air, convulsing, a great, metallic claw thrust through his chest. With a growl like iron scraping on iron, the cyborg took hold of the ganger's head with its vice-like claw. With one savage tug, the man-machine tore Beckerman's head from his shoulders. In seconds Creed was on his feet, all pain forgotten. He had only one chance. In a supreme effort of willpower he ran towards the monster.

'Chew on this, clawfinger!' he rasped, raising his guns. Both stub guns blasted the last of their precious cargo at the insane cyborg at point blank range. The sound in the confined tunnel was deafening. Under the constant bombardment the creature was forced back by the impact of the shells. With clumping steps it staggered into the mouth of the tunnel as it tried to keep its balance.

Then Creed could hear nothing but the sound he had been dreading: the click, click, click of empty barrels. Flinging his guns aside, the Bounty Hunter dove for the detonator where Beckerman had dropped it. The cyborg roared and stomped up the tunnel. With one final twist of a screw, the connection was made; with the flick of a switch, the detonator primed. Hurling himself to the ground, Creed thumbed the lit red button then scrambled backwards up the tunnel as fast as he could propel himself. With a distant rumbling boom, the last explosives set by Beckerman detonated. At the echoing sound, the advancing monstrosity turned, confused. The rumble became a roar as the charges set along the tunnel triggered one another in quick succession. A great cloud of dust and stone shards erupted from the tunnel mouth. Face down on the dusty ground, hands flung over his crumpled hat, the Bounty Hunter waited for the stony hurricane to devour him. Scant metres behind his prostrate form, a hundred tonnes of rubble crashed down on top of the cyborg and Beckerman's mangled corpse alike.

Rocks and rubble rattled about the prone Bounty Hunter, but the fatal crush of the avalanche on his back never came. As the rumbling din and shaking subsided and finally ceased, Creed thought that perhaps he could hear the whirr of grinding servos for a moment. Maybe it was just the buzzing from his tortured ear drums. Then there was silence.

Coughing, he staggered upright and looked around him. The Bounty Hunter was covered in a fine grey dust which choked his mouth and clogged his nostrils. He was standing at the tunnel mouth, where it led into another, smaller cave. Through the settling dust he could see a hefty iron door that had been left slightly ajar at the other end of the chamber. Daylight crept around the door frame, piercing the dust.

Cautiously entering the cave, Creed hauled on the rusted door, which opened with surprising ease. Stepping through, he found himself surveying the crated contents of Beckerman's warehouse.

Limping towards the door, Creed winced at the pain from what felt like a hundred bruises. Nevertheless he grinned, a white slash of teeth in his black grimed face.

'Puzzle solved,' he said to himself. 'Guess I'm about done.'

THERE'S A WHOLE warehouse full of the stuff Creed explained, pointing

at the chrome sphere in the open crate at the old Chief's feet.

'It shall be treasured and given due reverence,' the Ratskin said solemnly. He dropping the bag of oblong, ceramite chips into Creed's hand with a sigh. 'I knew there had to be a way.'

Creed said nothing.

'I feel that perhaps I have betrayed my people,' Chief Thunderslag continued, looking around him. 'Many young braves have died. Such a pointless waste of life.' He shrugged sadly. 'But the spirits had to be appeased; our families had been killed. At least now the spirits are at rest once more.' The old Ratskin turned to face Creed.

'What do you think? Have I betrayed my tribe?'

'I'm not much of a thinking man,' the Bounty Hunter replied.

'Does it not trouble you to accept what is no better than blood money?' Thunderslag asked him, a suggestion of anger in his voice.

Creed took the stub of a cheroot from between his lips and squinted again at the totem pole and the grotesque image carved upon it. He saw it now a creature with one great claw and an ugly, fanged square face.

A job's a job, old man,' he said, turning his gaze on the old Ratskin chief Creed's expressionless features were an inscrutable mask, giving no clue as to his true feelings on the subject. 'See you round, old timer.' With that, Nathan Creed secreted the money in a deep recess of his long, trailing coat. Pushing his battered hat firmly down over his brow, he turned and strode off into the fading light of the dimming globes.

Badlands Skelter's Downhive Monster Show by Matthew Farrer

THE CENTRAL thoroughfare of Fever's Break started at the fortified gates and snaked under the huge ridge of metal where the dome floor had buckled during some upheaval hundreds of years before. Where it reached the moving stairs into the cliff-face that formed the uptown, it opened out into a plaza against the dome wall. That was where all the local hawkers, preachers, beggars and hoods spent their days, and that was where Skelter stopped and had his people set up the tent.

Starkey had unhitched the two biggest pack-bison from the main wagon and was using them to pull the poles upright, while his brother and daughter ran back and forth with magnetic clamps for the guy-ropes. Skelter's own kids were already at work, running back and forth through the streets nearby trying to look like locals and shouting 'Skelter's show is here! Skelter's show is here!' to each other. They were good at it. By the time tickets went on sale, everyone would know about them.

Another half-dozen of the troupe were strolling back and forth around the tent and the rows of wagons and trailers parked in a jumble beyond it, relaxed but watchful eyes on the crowd that was already building up. Skelter glanced out at the faces and did some quick mental arithmetic, and liked the result. In a few minutes he would begin his pitch.

Amongst the cages bustled the rest of them, making sure the covers were closed and

the more excitable exhibits were staying calm. Kamusz, the retired Bounty Hunter, winked at Skelter as he let a fold of tarpaulin fall away as if by accident. Instantly a huge scaly arm shot out and grabbed at him, got him by the front of his jerkin and yanked him toward the bars. There were screams from the crowd. Kamusz yelled as if in fear and Skelter got in on the act, running across and whacking at the arm with a pistol barrel. It retreated and as they put back the tarp Skelter saw Issig the Scaly snort through his nostrils in salute before he curled back up to snooze again. They sauntered away. 'That should sell us another couple of dozen tickets,' Skelter murmured.

Kamusz nodded. 'Are you putting Issig in tonight?'

'Sure.' There was a flapping behind them as the banner went up: 'badlands skelter's downhive monster show!'. They kept walking. 'I don't think the line-up we tried at Rathouse Gulch worked too well. I'm going to bring Issig on last. Most people up here by the Wall are so green they barely know what a Scaly is. Remember how they screamed the first time we brought him out at Winchcrag? I'll put on the Sump Toads early, maybe even have someone walk one around on a leash this afternoon to raise interest.' Kamusz nodded, then tapped Skelter's arm as a wave of shuffles and muttering rippled through the onlookers. 'Trouble.' Silent figures were making their way through the crowd, silent figures dressed in heavy cloaks and hats that made them look a head taller than the townsfolk around them. The gawpers melted aside as the leader stalked over. The two showmen tensed. The ganger was easily Skelter's height, which was unusual enough, but his heavy frame loomed where Skelter's long limbs just gangled. Kamusz began idly whistling the little tune that the troupe used as a signal for everyone to get armed and ready. There was a rattle behind them as the doors on the cages were loosened.

'Where is the Wyrd here?'

Skelter gave Kamusz a quick 'I knew it!' look, then brightened up and tried to look attentive.

'No Wyrds here, sir, I assure you. We have Guilder stamps of passage, everyone's been cleared by the Adeptus themselves. Just years of experience in the worst of the Badlands at the very Sump of the Hive, and training that brings out these creatures' natural behaviours. Brought up to these peaceful towns for the first time ever!' He raised his voice a little for the benefit of the crowd. 'For your education, edification and amazement, we give you-'

'There is a Wyrd here!' The leader cut him off.

Skelter suppressed a sigh and idly wondered if the man was from a gang he'd heard of. With practice, you could pick the Cawdor flunkies: lovely resonant voices. It was all those hymns and sermons. Not that it made up for the trouble they caused.

'Psykers and carousing and harbouring of mutations! This so-called "show" is a stench in the nostrils of the Emperor. The townsfolk would not listen to our warnings, but I know your kind - thieves and swindlers all.'

Another meaningful glance between Skelter and Kamusz. Damn, usually it doesn't happen this soon.

The ranter shoved a hand under his cloak for a weapon. Skelter let his needle pistol slide smoothly from his sleeve to his hand and fired a single, silent shot into the man's throat. The townsfolk yelped and dove for cover as two more gangers fell before they could bring weapons to bear.

Then the cages swung open and Tara ran past, blowing a whistle. Six huge Sump Toads recognised the signal and bounded out of their cages, chasing the last few gangers away down the street, as four of the troupe's wranglers grabbed nets and leashes and took off after them. The crowd parted before them, and Skelter was gratified to hear catcalls and clapping as the gangers scuttled away. The prone leader

was beginning to stir and groan, so Kamusz kicked him hard in the temple. He slumped again as Skelter fitted the little pistol back into its slip-sheath.

'How long have we been working the big-towns circuit, Kam? I can never get over the so-called "settled levels". Call themselves gangers? Soft as spider-gut. I mean, the banner and all our posters say I lived at Hive bottom for years. Why doesn't anybody ever act as though they believe me?' Kamusz was bent over the unconscious gangers. 'C'mon, best not to rob them. You know there'll be the Watch along in a second. Let them be the bad guys, hey?'

'I'm not robbing them, Skelter. Recognise these? The way the chamber and sight are set on the stub-gun here, the barrel configuration. And look, that knife, chisel-point and no quillions. Only one House makes that design. Give you odds he's got a mask collection at home.' 'Great. Just great. Back at the Gulch they told us this was a nice, fat, quiet town.' 'Probably is, most of the time. This whole level is only just within the Underhive by most people's reckoning. The upramps to Hive City proper are only a morning's ride away. Things up here get run pretty tightly. I had people ask around. There are two deputised Watch gangs, the Fireclouds and the Gunsmoke Shadows, and they're both Escheraffiliated. Cawdor loyalties in a town like this mean you have meetings in a cellar and keep your mask under your mattress. We must be something special to bring them out of their burrows.' Kamusz looked around. 'Skel, your crowd's getting pensive.'

The showman nodded, then wheeled around and raised his arms.

'That was no excitement, ladies and gentlemen! That was a scuffle any Downhive child could have won! I hope you think you were entertained before, folk of Fever's Break, because tonight I'll prove that wrong, wrong, wrong! Tonight, at 'Badlands Skelter's Downhive Monster Show!'

Behind him there was a rattle as the shutter went up in a wagon's side and the ticket window opened. Most of the crowd jostled for spots in the queue, and Skelter straightened his waistcoat, twirled his moustache and beamed at everyone.

THERE WAS a grey adamant slab set at eye-level in the far wall of the anteroom, with two lines carved in plain, blunt letters: we determine the guilty we decide the punishment. Skelter read them for the eighth time, scowled and shuffled his feet. Next to him, Tara gave an ostentatious yawn.

'It was those tickets we sold, wasn't it?' murmured Kamusz from Skelter's other side, and that was too much.

Skelter flapped his arms about. 'Refunds! There are no more hateful two syllables under the Emperor's sun. We had to give refunds!'

'Really? No syllables more hateful?' Kamusz scratched his thin white beard as he thought. Tara rocked on her heels, slender hands twitching. They had been disarmed when they were brought into the bunker, and she was missing having a weapon to hold.

'I mean, coming and griping about the show, that was fine. Wasn't that fine? That was OK! I welcome that! I welcome everybody to come and have their say, no one can say I'm unreasonable about that.' 'How about "Scavvy"?' Kamusz said while Skelter drew breath. 'That's pretty hateful.'

'I would have been happy to discuss the whole thing with them. Open a bottle or two, sit around a table, discuss any problem they had at all. But n000...'

—Cawdor", of course,' Tara put in. 'Two syllables and as hateful as you want.'

'Out they come and they get the bloody Arbites on us! Not the Watch, you'll notice, not the duly deputised Guilder representatives delegated to keep the peace and protect

the interests of the community. Oh, no, that's too simple.'

—Lashworm"?' Kamusz suggested. Tara shook her head.

—Lashworm" is a very congenial two syllables.' She ducked a particularly vehement gesture of Skelter's. 'You can train lashworms, you know. Mother's family taught me. You can teach them to pop out for certain types of sounds or smells. Tricky, though.'

'Really? How about — no, that's not two syllables. How about "No sales"?'

'Even Arbites would be acceptable!' Skelter pointedly raised his voice a notch to try to ride over them. 'I mean, Arbites, OK, we've dealt with them before. I mean, they say they serve the Emperor Himself, even Helmawr can't gainsay them. Oaths of loyalty, upright and true, all the rest of it. Fine! But they waited...'

'Ooh. "No sales." Ooh.' Tara rolled the words around a little. 'Yes, that's hateful.' 'I said they waited until we were almost sold out and then brought every damn thing down! I don't think you two have grasped this yet. Me! Skelter! A showing of the Downhive Monster Show cancelled! We have had. To give. Refunds!' Skelter could see from Tara's face that she was framing a tart reply when the far door clanged open and the Arbites marched in. Hukling after them came the Cawdor leader Skelter had shot, in full regalia now: dark tunic, oiled-leather mask, a stickpatch over the cut the needle had left in his neck. He was fidgeting with triumph or agitation — Skelter couldn't tell through the mask and shapeless clothes. The senior of the two Judges, in black and grey tunic in place of armour, walked to a heavy chair that rose silently through a floor-panel and settled into it in a swirl of his black cloak. His deputy watched impassively through a gleaming, mirror-tinted visor.

'Which of you is Skelter? Stand forward, please.' Skelter took a slow half-step. 'You have had something of a... fraught introduction to this precinct, Skelter. This district is a quiet one. Laws are obeyed. You, however, seem to have aroused some passions.' He flicked the showman an appraising look over steepled fingertips and suddenly pointed to the Cawdor.

'Citizen Jago, of the, urn...'

'Light of Fury!' boomed the mask.

'Light of Fury brethren has a number of claims against your, what is it, "Downhive Monster Show"?' He has declared it will encourage lawlessness and riot. I understand there was a scuffle when you set your exhibits up earlier. One that it was necessary to bring before the Adeptus.' The Judge's tone was ironic, but Jago had apparently missed that: he nodded in evident satisfaction and folded his arms.

'I can't understand that, sir. No alcohol is to be sold, certainly not drugs, not even food. There are some dangerous creatures, true, Milliasaurs and Ripper-jacks and so on, but we keep those in secure cages and simply charge people to look. I realise that these are settled parts, sir, and people aren't at ease about untamed hive life. That's why we also have acrobats, trick-shooting, more. We will be bringing out creatures from the lower Underhive, but I can vouch, sir, that through tireless training and tight technique that has tamed and...'

He realised he was pitching again, and cut himself short. 'We've been in this business for years, sir. We like order at our shows. If we start trouble, we don't get to come back. Our self-interest is your best evidence, sir.'

'Lies and ever perverse lies,' the voice snarled from under the leather mask, 'told to one who labours in utmost dignity in the service of the Emperor himself?' Jago made an elaborate holy sign at the word Emperor which Skelter didn't recognise.

'The Imperial seal is upon your shoulder, and yet this man profanes it! I came to you, Lord Justice, because surely you must see that the vicious poison of tolerance and loose thought that permits this parade of filth will rot away this town! Mutants and

savages lurk in their camp, even show themselves here in a house of the blessed Adeptus! Every hour that the simple people around us are drawn away from prayer, fasting and persecution is an hour that they lose from the path of their Redemption. Consorting with mutants, tricksters and wallowers in pleasure, and those who bring the curse of the witch into the midst of the faithful!

Skelter shifted uncomfortably. Good grief? I'm standing in a room with a man who can actually use the word 'midst' in cold blood.

The Judge nodded, and his gaze pivoted back to the showman.

'And there, Skelter, you have another answer to give. I have ample testimony on the creatures you have in your menagerie, and how co-operative they are. Now there are certain types of outcast with unnatural... affinities with Underhive animals. Outcasts whose names I will not speak here, but against whom I have fought in the Emperor's name. An honest showman such as yourself would have no truck with such, I trust? That is not a common-law crime, Skelter; it is most surely a spiritual one. You must know the penalties decreed for it.'

In answer, Skelter slipped a set of scroll tubes out of his carry-harness and held them out. Jago started to give little twitches of his head as he looked from Skelter to the Judge, trying to work out what was going on, and Skelter allowed himself a little smile. He stood a little further upright as the parchment was unrolled.

'Mutants!' declared Jago, who seemed to realise he'd lost the spotlight. 'Mutants and witchcraft. My brethren and I will soon have the truth. Hand them over to me, Lord Justice.' There was a rustle from the desk as the Judge rolled the papers up again.

'Thank you, Skelter, for you bringing these. I understand you have had to do this before?' The Judge's manner had palpably relaxed, and Skelter allowed himself to smile.

'Yes, sir. We usually keep them handy whenever we come into a new town. I mean, it's an understandable conclusion.' 'Are you serious, man, uh, my Lord Justice?' Jago pressed.

'With respect, lord, we cannot let the people see that these, these "entertainers" are tolerated just for having some kind of shady paperwork...' Jago's voice tailed off as he saw the Judge's face. Skelter took a discreet step back. 'What I have just seen, Mister Jago, is a certificate from a Primaris Psyker' — Jago gasped at the word - 'with one of our garrisons in Hive City. Its endorsement is less than a month old. It testifies that all the members of this troupe have been examined by an Adeptus Psyker, mark you, and there is no trace of any psychic spoor that signifies association with a Wyrd. There is an inspection chit from a Guilder technician stating that all the animal cages and pens are sound and well-built. And I have also just seen a permit to perform, on condition that that psychic examination is conducted every six months to make sure no Wyrds are recruited. That permit carries an Arbites counter-seal.' He held out the tubes, and Skelter hurried forward to take them. 'Mister Jago, downhive I suspect knowing when to quit would be a liability Up here, it's an asset. Think on that.'

For a long moment Jago quivered in frustration, and Skelter wondered whether to feel sorry for him. Then the man began to speak.

'Though here today a court of my fellow mortals, even under the name and oath of the Great Emperor himself, has deemed my words and my cause unworthy, I shall speak one last time. For though my voice may be as a whisper of breeze in some long-dark corner of this land, one day, that breeze may stir a draught, and the draught may stir a current, and the current will become a great clean wind that shall rise and sweep-'

And Skelter cut him off with a delighted cry. 'I knew that speech sounded familiar! I know that show! We toured with some actors once, it's one of their plays! The Triumph of Grimnar! This cretin's pinching his speech from a children's fairytale!'

Jago stood frozen as a statue, one arm still flung out in front of him, while behind him there were strangled sounds as Tara tried to stay solemn. Then Skelter saw the junior Judge put a hand over his face as if to cough, and couldn't control himself. Jago stamped out of the room and Tara and Kamusz exploded into laughter. Skelter's eyes caught the Judge's and he was sure he could see the faintest of glints.

ISO?' KAMUSZ ASKED after they had walked awhile. What do we do tomorrow?'

They had left the Arbites bunker at the top of the uptown, and were picking their way down through the sloping tunnels back to the plaza. The glow-globes were still in their day cycle up here, giving the three the novelty of light bright enough for sharp black shadows: Skelter's tall and thin like a giant black mantis, Kamusz's the square and jutting outline of his heavy jacket and cap, and Tara's as small and slender as she was. The breeze from the township's convector-fans tousled their hair.

'We go on. I think Jago knows he's lost the initiative tragically, now. And we should have packed out at least three shows in advance after the last couple of hours. Let's do all the shows we can in the next few days and rake it in. Hopefully the fool won't work up the nerve to do anything until we're out of town. I might get you to keep-'

'Extra eyes tonight, sure. What's in the show?'

'Most of the animals. I don't think Tara can spare any to use as guards. And I still think we're safe enough for a while, at least. I'd rather put everything in, have a great show, half a dozen full houses and roll out of here on a high note.' Skelter sighed.

'Why can't we have more places like the Gulch? Lovely, well-policed, cushy settlements who'll pay up for a good show. If I wanted hassle like this I'd still be down-hive wrestling plague-zombies.' The three of them strolled on. At the plaza gates they stopped while Tara bought a cup of the salty gruel that the downtown markets sold.

A level up, a knot of dark-clad men buying clip after clip of bullets turned to watch them through the barred window of the gunsmith's, staring after them until they disappeared into the crowds.

OH NO!' THERE WAS laughter as Tara put her hands on her hips and glared. 'Look what you've done! It's

everywhere!' Behind her, Genca was soaked in a watery brown dye that looked repellent from a distance. Bolitho, wearing a too-tight coverall that made his gawky body even more comical, goggled at her. Tara, in spangled leotard and boots, turned to the audience.

'I'm so sorry, my lords and ladies. We'll carry on for you anyway.' She waited a few moments for Bolitho to start pretending to clean up what he'd spilled, and after a silent count of three blew a staccato note on her whistle and cracked the glittery display whip. The three pipe-lizards immediately jumped onto Bolitho's bent back, instead of their stools - as they'd been trained to do. More laughter. Genca clapped his hands to his head in mock dismay, paunch wobbling. At the tent entrance, Skelter shook his head and muttered aloud.

'These people are taking forever to warm up! What's wrong with them?' 'Dhunno, Bhozz.'

Issig!' It always surprised Skelter that the alligator-snout could make words at all, let alone ones he could understand. Issig was peering past him into the tent, where Tara was pretending to scold the two men while the lizards turned somersaults behind her.

'Sss'funnhee. Thhey'rr noht lahhffhh'ng. Ss'ngthnnn whhrd.'

'Maybe they're just not into entertainment in this place. Too straightlaced and well-fed.' Even as he said it, Skelter knew how unconvincing that sounded. There was something about this crowd that made him prickle.

Bolitho and Genca walked out past him, mock-arguing, then stopped, grabbed

harnesses and waited. Behind them a mohawked silhouette muttered to itself and did shoulder-stretching exercises.

'You ready, Eva?'

'Yeah.' The ex-ganger pushed her way past the two men into the strong yellow light from the tent. She flipped her pistols out of their holsters, span, juggled, tossed and caught them, and snapped them home without taking her eyes off Issig. Eva had only joined the troupe two months before, and still hadn't come to terms with trusting a Scaly - she'd complained bitterly about using quarter-strength ammo for her act. Skelter supposed he didn't blame her.

'Cheev is controlling the targets from the box tonight, and Tara'll stay in there and do the thrown ones for you.' Eva nodded, her bright crest of hair catching the lights.

'Grim-faced crew, aren't they?' she muttered, then shuddered and touched an icon at her neck as Issig loped past her and disappeared into the gloom around the tents.

'You read my mind. But they were fighting for tickets all afternoon. Not a single empty seat.' Eva shrugged as their cue sounded, then sauntered out into the ring as the lizards trotted past her to be leashed and harnessed. Out in the ring, Tara took a large sequin from her belt and flipped it into the air, where Eva nonchalantly shot it in two to gasps and cheers.

Why are they so grim? Those lizard tricks are sure-fire. They're still not smiling, most of them. Just attentive. There was an idea, something big and spiky that his subconscious was trying to push at him, and he found himself shifting from foot to foot and chewing his lip. Half the audience seemed to have their hands in their laps, fiddling with bundled-up clothes. That made his mind spin a little faster, and he didn't know why.

Something is so wrong here.

Just as he felt the thought begin to come, just as he was sure the piece was about to click, there was a muffled shout from back behind him. Skelter's taut nerves jerked. He crept back a few paces and listened. He thought he heard a voice, and running footsteps, and a word that sounded like 'tent!'. Then his guts lurched as he heard the thump of gunfire.

IT HADN'T BEEN a very good ambush. Kamusz had been scanning a pile of tarpaulins when he noticed a shadow

that hadn't been there before. He was too old a hand to raise a shout straight away. He let them think he hadn't seen them, wandered back into the space between two trailers and ran like hell. Zian and Travis came at a quick whistled signal and they started back as a flash of light came from the perimeter. Kamusz roared and unslung his shotgun. Ten, twelve more paces and he was in cover behind a giant steel track as masked figures broke from the nearest pits and buttresses.

Damn damn damn!

Zian was squinting into a darkvisor. 'Nine, ten... no, just nine. Hey, Kamusz, this is a pretty spineless effort for a mob that knew we'd be on guard. There's gotta be more than this.'

Kamusz's mind worked faster than Skelter's had. His eyes widened.

'The tent! The tent! Back to-'

Then the darkness was alive with running, shouting figures and a shot spanged over Kamusz's head. He snarled and dropped back behind his cover as his gun came alive in his hands.

Behind them in the tent, a roar began to rise.

'Jago!' Skelter croaked, and then found his voice and strode into the tent, bellowing, 'Get out of my tent, Jago! Take all your Sump-damned bloody undercover foot-soldiers with you! No Cawdors! Out! GET OUT!'

Skelter whipped his head from left to right. He thought of shutters closing over windows, or a shroud of fog descending on the silt wastes. Suddenly all across the stands there were no eyes to meet, no expressions to watch - just rows of featureless masks. There were no eyes visible, just dark holes, but he could still feel their stares burning into him. His hand squirmed by his side where his holster normally was. There was a rush of words from the befuddled, unmasked faces left sitting -less than a third of the crowd now

'Hey what-'

'But why are they all-'

'Is this part of the-'

'Get your guns, this is-'

Skelter ground his teeth, and then Tara punched his arm and yelled 'Run!'. As gunmetal glinted all around the ring, they sprinted for the entrance and the curses, battle-cries and prayers of the Cawdor mob rose to a roar.

REALISATION SCREAMED in like a dislocated joint sliding back into place. For the first time that night,

Skelter's head felt clear. He stared into the tent with his mouth open. For a moment he simply couldn't believe they would - had - tried it. But the fidgeting, the solemn faces, the watchfulness, and those little folded bundles in their laps. They were waiting for the signal. To put on their masks.

Skelter's searching eyes settled on one of the biggest men in the crowd, sitting at the most visible point, high in the central stands. Arrogant set to his wide shoulders, rich black hair, thick arms folded - and a stickpatch on the left side of his throat.

THEY PELTED OUT OF the tent and scattered into the dark. Around the rim of the camp they could hear

gunshots and shouts. A flash and a shower of sparks from inside had them moving again, racing for weapons. People were at the trailer ahead of them. Starkey was scrabbling at the gun locker, half-sobbing to himself. Skelter grabbed him and spun him around. His hair was sweat-slick and his eyes stared.

'What's happening? What's happening?' Tara pushed past them.

"They went after the kids. They started shooting at the south side when Kamusz found them over to the west. They fired past us at where the kids were. This isn't a terror raid, Skel, they mean business!"

Skelter felt his stomach churn. 'Alright, we're going to fix this. Take an autogun and get back out. You and Genca cover the sideshow enclosures, where you were.' Starkey took a breath and nodded. Tara stood up, pulling a drab grey coverall on over the sparkling suit she had worn in the ring.

'Who's hurt, Starkey, who'd they get?' 'Gia got burnt when one of them fired a hotshot shell and it splashed, uh, they were, oh Emperor's name, they were throwing grenades, Kantor, you know, my son, they shot my son, he was screaming-'

'Who's dead?' Skelter fought the urge to shake him.

Starkey shook his head and wiped sweat from his face. 'Nobody so far, I don't think, people were hurt, the kids were hurt and we had to carry them to the wagons...'

Tara turned around with a shotgun in her hand and revenge written in her face. He heard a scrape and clack as Eva locked a live clip into each of her pistols.

'Genca, you and Starkey get going. Eva, cover the tent entrance as long as you can!'

The fat man nodded and led the way off through the camp, and Eva ducked back the way they'd come.

A fresh burst of gunfire made Skelter and Tara spin around. The Cawdors were trying to storm out of the tent, but the mass of regular punters had its own ideas. There were just enough bystanders to clog the narrow aisles and create knots of shouting,

brawling people at each tent-flap. Skelter grinned despite the sick anger building up in his gut - the advantage was to the bystanders, and the Cawdors couldn't fire in the swirling mob without hitting one another. The erstwhile show-goers were punching, stabbing and pistol-whipping with impunity, and the stands were rocking and threatening to give way. There was a crunch and a chorus of screams from inside, and Skelter realised that Cheev had used the controls in the master booth to drop the target gantry for Eva's act onto the rioters below. He let out a hiss of triumph and grabbed two autopistols from a rack, just as Cheev himself came scampering out of the tent with three Cawdors on his heels.

Tara dropped to one knee and put a man-stopper shell through the first, and Skelter cut down the second with a quick double-burst. The third dropped his chainsword and sprinted for the gates. Cheev gave them a grin, white teeth flashing, then reached for his pursuers' weapons.

'They were shooting at the kids!' Tara yelled. 'We need to get to the main trailer and make it safe.' Skelter bit back a foul taste in his mouth and ran after her as she flitted through the dark maze between metal wagon-walls.

'Tara, this is my fault! Emperor's eyes, Tara, I played stupid games with that Cawdor bastard, I pushed him too hard, they came back and they-'

'Not your fault and you know it! Shut up and- DOWN!'

Tam dropped and Skelter followed her. A smear of plasma hissed overhead, splashing the wagon behind them. A grinning, dwarfish Cawdor took aim again as, behind him, a hulk of a man in nothing but leggings and mask hefted a grenade launcher. Skelter tried to move even as he thought won't make it before it recharges but then something thrummed by his ear. There was a solid CHANK and both Cawdors seemed to loll oddly in the dim light until Skelter realised they had both been speared into the metal wall behind them. He looked around.

Behind him, Issig had already put the butt of his harpoon gun on the ground and had pulled another shaft, solid steel and wrist-thick, out of his quiver. His arms bulged as he forced it down, then the spring clicked into place and he pulled the weapon up under his arm, disappearing into the twilight again. They clambered up and Tara pointed ahead: the main trailer lay just across from them. 'I thought you'd made Issig get rid of that thing.'

'I thought he had! I vote he keeps it after this.'

They scurried across the open ground. Skelter, moving backwards with pistols hunting the air, thought he saw gun-muzzles in every shadow and hunched over.

Behind him, Tara hauled a door half-open and he heard children's cries.

'Kray!' Tara called. 'Who's in there with you?'

Kray was supporting a baby in one arm and cradling a tri-barrelled laspistol in the other. The bandage around the baby's chest was spotted with stains that looked black in the dim light. 'We got the kids away, they'd all been playing out by the fire. They ran right up there-'

'We've got that area covered. I think they're gone again. Who's in there?'

'All Starkey's kids, not badly hurt, just shaken up. Gia, and Eva's baby niece and Cheev's little brother, and Jayden's little girl. An-wei and her three are down the back there. Jayden's in here with the medical stuff, she's working on the hurt ones.' Skelter could see Tara's eyes narrowing, and he knew his own looked the same.

Kray looked stricken. 'I couldn't see Lee or Canda. They went running off to find you, Skelter, and the masked men were shooting-'

Tara slammed the door and spun around, grabbed shells from the pack at her hip. Her voice was clipped and level. 'We go to the hotspots first, then? Once we know they aren't there, we double back toward the tent and start looking.' Skelter nodded and

they were running again.

KAMUSZ STEPPED over a dead Cawdor, his shotgun on his back, stub-gun in one hand, power-maul in the other.

Around him, the mutant cages howled and rattled under their armour-cloth tarps - no chance of letting the animals out into the teeth of a firefight, not like this morning. Two gangers were crouching by the corner of the wagon, intent on priming the bombs they carried as shells ricocheted around them. Kamusz began the maul on its arc even as he glided forward and the first dropped in a shower of sparks. The other spun around and Kamusz drove the stubber into his gut. His body silenced the shots, then he dropped and Kamusz stepped out of the alley.

This was where they had had their campfire. Three Cawdors were here still, their backs to him as they shot at shapes lurking among the wagons. The troupe's fire stopped when Kamusz appeared and the Cawdors stood up to give chase, thinking their enemy routed. Kamusz dropped two of them with quick head-shots and clouted the third with the maul: he had thumbed the setting up and the flash of power took the man's face along with his mask. Issig and the others ran forward from their positions and then stopped. The massive figure slowly pointed over Kamusz's shoulder.

Kamusz didn't need to ask why. He could tell what the looks on their faces meant. He was lowering his weapons even as the voice from behind him boomed: 'You move and he dies.'

TARA AND SKELTER had split up at the mech-shop wagon and now she headed for the perimeter. The

shooting was tailing off and there were no fires. A shape appeared balanced on a shoulder-high trailer coupling.

'Repent and Redeem!' the Cawdor howled as he raised an autogun, but Tara didn't slow: she swerved in, pulled her knees up and ran two paces up the side of the trailer, kicked out and backflipped. The burst ricocheted off the metal behind her and she hit ground, rolled and fired a hotshot shell that toppled the Cawdor down next to her. He screamed and kicked in the flames, but weakly, and she took the time to spit an old Ratskin curse her grandmother had taught her. The man let out another cry, and she crushed his knee with the stock and left him to burn. She rounded the corner and hurdled a dead, masked body, but the scene by the remains of the campfire turned her limbs to lead. The shotgun sagged in her grasp and she stopped.

SKELTER FIRED A long burst from each pistol, and the masked woman with the grenades staggered back and fell.

He took two steps forward and looked at the little crowd beyond her: all hooded and armed, but stymied and uncertain. Amateurs playing at gangers, he thought, who don't know that in real life people shoot back. One began to raise a gun. Skelter saw the little girl with bloodied bandages around her in his mind. My. fault.

He raised the gun before they could fire and began long, sweeping bursts that scattered them and felled them and chased the rest of them, yipping and wailing, off into the dark. His pistols juddered and jammed, and he let them drop to his sides. He felt exhausted, and turned toward the camp... and heard Jago's voice roaring out his name. 'SKELTER! SHOW YOURSELF!' Jago held the boy in one elbow, the muzzle of his plasma pistol grinding back and forth against Lee's temple. One of Jago's boots pinned Canda's hand to the ground; she whimpered but would not cry.

'SKELTER! I know these are your children! Let me see you NOW!'

'No need to shout, Jago. Just turn around. Look, no pistols this time, no needier in the sleeve.' Skelter walked slowly into the firelight, hands spread by his sides. Jago lifted his foot, and Canda withdrew her hand. He kicked her hard as she got up to run: she cried out but moved fast. The Cawdor dragged Lee back until the two of them stood

by at the very edge of the camp, his back to the side of their one, prized power-wagon. 'There you are, vermin, you see? The little bitch back as a token of faith, although Emperor knows the only faith she'll know is that of the scum who spawned her. What faith do you know, any of you? What? WHAT FAITH?'

Holy Emperor and all the Saints and Primarcbs, Skelter thought, if you can hear me, help me now. This man has a gun to my son's head, and I am watching as he goes mad before my eyes. Please, help me now...

'Your filth may have broken my dearest brothers and sisters, but you will be the ones to weep and cry when the Emperor gathers us up! He will say to us "How have you proven your rotted souls that I might deliver you from the fire and agony", and we will point to where you wallow in your, your decay and your corruption and the, the spittle and vomit in which you have coated your souls, and we will say to our Emperor: We have lived by your Word, we have spread fire and anger and blood everywhere we looked, and when they came to spoil us with laughter and wine and lust and mutants and... and... We are Cawdor. We are CAWDOR!' The hand holding the pistol was starting to shake, and Jago's voice was growing jagged.

'There's a latch by your shoulder, Jago.' Tara's voice seemed to jolt the man out of a daze. He looked at her and Skelter thought he saw his arm loosen. He prayed Lee would run when he had the chance. 'Open the flap there. Are we really going to be able to pull anything before you can fire?' She glanced at Kamusz as she spoke, a look that said 'Try nothing'. Kamusz nodded. Moving like a sleepwalker, Jago tapped the cover up and looked at the brass scrollwork.

'It opens the hatch next to you. Lee knows how to work it, and if you let him, he will. We'll all move back while you get in. You can walk down through the wagon to the cab. It'll take you out of town and away from the Watch. And then you can sell it or burn it or whatever you want. And you'll be away.'

Skelter looked from Jago to Tara. Her eyes were wide and dark and watchful. What the hell is she doing?

Tee, it's alright, trust me. You can open it. I know you're normally not allowed to, but it's alright.' Jago's arm loosened, and the boy wriggled free. Lee's little hand went out, twisted the switch. There was a clunk and the hatch jolted as it unlocked. The window in its top reflected firelight. Tara started to say something, and then Jago gave Lee a gentle little push. The boy took an uncertain step, shot a look over his shoulder, and ran.

And behind him Jago raised the pistol. And as a reward, child, I am going to send you to the Emperor and save you from these—'

They never found out what he was going to call them. Skelter ran forward but Tara was quicker. His feet seemed to slow and there seemed to be time to look around and see everything happening around him with stately, dreamlike pace. Tara dived and grabbed, spun to protect Lee with her back. Next to Skelter, Eva's arm dipped and her laspistol was in her hand and a single silent trail of light drilled through Jago's elbow and sent his own shot into the girders high over their heads. The man had time for one scream before he staggered backward and heaved the hatch open, scrabbling for the machete at his belt.

By the time Skelter's roared curses could pass his lips, Jago was backing through the hatch, craning around as though he'd heard something move behind him... And Issig scooped up his empty speargun, eyeing the distance as he did so, and threw it underarm in a lazy, end-over-end arc that knocked Jago sprawling into the wagon. Light flooded out as the movement triggered interior lamps, and the hatch thumped shut again. Skelter took his first breath in what seemed like hours, ran to his son and rounded on the rest of them.

'What are you waiting for? Get to the cab and get him!'

Still no one moved. Tara raised an eyebrow.

'You never do remember where anything's parked, do you?'

Skelter stared at her.

'That's the Ripperjack wagon.'

As he turned, despite himself, to stare, the shouts of the Watch and the Arbites klaxons sounded from the surrounding tunnels. Something appeared at the little window in the wagon hatch. Something red and tattered that screamed and beat at the glass until it collapsed against the window, leaving a scarlet stain as it was dragged out of sight.

IT WAS WARM when they rode out for Ashclam. Skelter and Tara sat together on the steering platform of the lead tractor, the wagons and trailers spread out behind them and the buggies with their rattling little methane engines scooting past to take point. Issig had been allowed out when they were out of sight of the settlement and had dozed off on the roof of his trailer, a half-gnawed bone in his hand. Skelter had wondered if it really had been a Cawdor icon he'd seen dangling on a bracelet around that bone that morning, but he'd let it slide.

Tara yawned. 'What's Ashclam like? I only want quiet places for a while after this. At least with one thing and another no one thought to stir up trouble about Issig the way they normally do. But we were lucky to get out of it as well as we did, you know'

'I know' Skelter's face was set.

'I didn't mean it that way. It wasn't your fault, Skel. Jago was a freak, something was wrong with him. He'd have come out shooting, no matter what we did.'

He nodded, and they rode in silence for a while.

'We'll be fine. We're doing well. We're making money, got our permits. One day soon we'll get a Hive City gig, just like you said. And from there, it's just up and up.'

Skelter nodded again. They could just see the distant dot of light that was the giant road-pipe leading uphike to the Ashclam trail, and around them the dome walls curved up into dimness. After a while, Tara put her head on Skelter's shoulder. The lights of the buggies crisscrossed in the middle distance. And above their heads, the bloodstained Cawdor mask hanging from the roll bar swung and twisted on its thong. Skelter always had been a sucker for souvenirs.

Mark of a Warrior by Richard Williams

I COULD SEE THEM both from where I sat, the two dark figures crouching in the shadows. They had stalked one another for an hour now, round and round the mining settlement, sneaking quietly between buildings, senses alert, each waiting for a stray sound or smell to betray the position of the other. Now, it seemed, the end was at hand. One of them was huddled down on the ground, peering between two battered yellow cargo containers. He was scanning the open space barely visible through the crack, hoping to catch a glimpse of his quarry, but there was nothing. I saw him shift his weight and edge sideways a fraction, so he could scope the rest of the buildings. As he did a stud on his belt grazed the hard metal surface of the crate, and his enemy, a few paces behind him, took the opportunity to ease himself a little farther around the corner.

The huddled one looked down at the stud. A wire-thin strip of yellow paint twirled away from its point. The silver line of fresh metal glinted back in the darkness. Then he realised, I don't know how, the danger he was in. I saw his body Bench as he strained his ears for the softest brush of skin on cloth, of someone else's breathing suppressed to almost nothing. His eyes slid sideways in their sockets and he gripped

his gun tighter. There it was, the swipe of skin on skin, of an arm bringing a gun up to firing position. All pretence aside, he dropped forwards, boots kicking up dust, and rolled to his back. He whipped his arm around until he was staring down the barrel straight into his enemy's eyes.

Their gazes flashed across one another for an instant before they both inhaled savagely, gasping for every last bit of air, 'BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!'

The pieces of piping jerked in their hands as the vocal bullets spat forth. Once again, their chests heaved as they cried in perfect unison, 'GOT YOU FIRST!'

Another game of 'Outlaws and Watchmen' ends, the same way they always do. The kid standing had dived at the one on his back and they were wrestling on the ground. Their 'guns', pieces of scrap, had been forgotten, as the two settled their argument in a far more physical manner. When I looked back at them, one nearly had the other pinned, who, in turn, grabbed the tuft of hair on the other kid's head and slammed it down. Young skull met hard dirt with a thud and the struggle continued,

'You're DEAD!'

'You MISSED!'

'Did NOT!'

'GET OFF!'

I didn't know their names, but I knew who they were. I'd been the same a few years ago; creeping through settlements, hunting my friends. We thought we were just like the gangers who came through town everyday, either trading at the post or lounging in the bar, and every single one with a gun strapped to their hip or slung over their back. The mark of a warrior, that set them above all the rest of us.

They all knew that no one makes it in the Underhive without one thing.

Respect.

To get respect, you have to fight.

To fight, you need a gun.

Even we Goliaths know that. The biggest, the strongest of us would never go into a fight without packing something. It was kind of comforting to me when I was a kid, my little rebellious thought whenever some seven-foot, man-mountain of a ganger ordered me to fetch this or carry that. You may be larger than me, you may be louder, but without that piece of metal stuck in your belt, that piece of metal that looks so ridiculous when your oversized fingers are crammed around it, you would be nothing. I remember the feel of having a gun in my hand, even a make-believe one. To only have to point, to kill as if I were the Emperor himself. Now it was going to happen. Today was the beginning. I ran a hand over my shaven head. Already I could feel stubble, the tops of stiff hairs poking through the skin. I wanted to look my best, nose stud polished up, my thin strip of hair freshly dyed. Trying to look like the warrior that I would become, if the gang judged me worthy. There was only one thing missing: on my belt hung a knife and a holster, an empty holster. I tried to relax, tried to calm down, waiting for them to get started with whatever. After all, I couldn't look too wired, they might think I was scared. I dropped my head back on the pile of iron slag I lay against, staring up at the far away ceiling. Then again, it would be worse if I looked like I was snoozing or daydreaming. I shifted onto my side and propped myself up on my elbow. I squirmed to try and find a comfortable position among those sharp little rocks. A flash of pain stabbed through my side. I looked down. My braces had got twisted, the studs that lined them were digging into my flesh. Clambering to my knees I began adjusting the few clothes I was wearing, making sure everything sharp pointed outwards and looked keen, rather than pointing inwards and being ... inconvenient. Distracted, I didn't notice the shadow fall across me. I sure noticed the

meaty hand dropped on my shoulder, though.

I didn't shoot up, that would have been the worse thing to do. I knew who it was. The harsh metallic grating of respirated breathing and the edge of Second Best mingled with stale sweat in the air left me in no doubt. It was the ganger sent to test me. First impressions matter. He'd caught me off guard and if he saw me jump out of my skin he'd know I wasn't up to it, might even refuse to let me try. I didn't know whether he could do that or not, but I wasn't taking any chances. So, instead, I let him wait a second, like I knew he was there all along, and then I turned my head, slowly.

His hand gave him away; he was old. It's always the hands that show it most. He must have been nearly forty. Long past his best, still just a ganger with no hope of ever becoming anything more. He had become everything a young man dreaded. No wonder he reeked of cheap Second Best. I got up off my knees and his hoary limb fell away. I swung around to him. His head was shaven and the respirator covered most of his face. No, his head wasn't bare by choice, he didn't have any hair at all. I tried to stop staring at his gleaming dome. He didn't flinch. His scarred and hairy body still looked powerful, the two pistols hung at his belt and the studs and spikes and the ammo chains on his clothes would have made him an impressive figure indeed. As it was, though, I couldn't help but feel embarrassed to see such a man.

His hands rose to his face and his thick fingers undid the straps on his respirator with practised ease. He pulled it to the side of his face, revealing a gold ring through his nose and an old, faded tattoo on his cheek. His lips twisted and words emerged in his low, damaged voice: 'You ready?'

WE HADN'T WALKED far from the mining town before he stopped in front of me. 'This is it.'

What was it? The place was deserted, nothing apart from a pile of planks dumped nearby. What was the test supposed to be, single combat? Fine by me, I guess, I would just have to be careful not to kill the old man. He glanced back at me and must have mistaken my confusion for fear.

'You better not be wasting my time, juve. You still wanna do this?'

'Yes, sir,' I snapped back instinctively and hated myself for giving him the respect he didn't deserve.

'Cos it's easy by me if you wanna quit. Save me waiting around for you.'

I held my mouth in check. I didn't trust what would come out. He finally turned away and padded over to the planks. He crouched down and fumbled for his respirator.

After a drag he took a hold on the top piece and heaved. Nothing moved. I couldn't believe it, even a piece of recyc-plastic was too much for this guy. No one could be that puny, yet there he was, he wasn't grunting or anything but I could see the strain through his body, his muscles rippling along his back and the trembling of his head. Suddenly an almighty crack resounded around the plain and the old man shot up. He stood back and I peered at what he had left behind. The plastic plank had snapped in two, and this wasn't cheap package plastic either, but the reinforced kind. It had been bolted to the stone in the floor. I was stunned. Looking back on it, he could have weakened it before he collected me, or maybe it had already been damaged. But that didn't stop me reconsidering my opinion of him. He took another breath through his respirator, then let it hang to the side as he wiped away a bead of sweat that had formed on his brow. If he noticed the change in my expression, he didn't show it.

'This,' he announced, pointing at the planks, 'is what you're gonna do.'

Suddenly, for the first time, I wasn't sure whether I would make it, whether I could match such a feat.

'This leads straight into one of the mine shafts.'

Now the broken plank had shifted I could see that it had covered a small hole beneath.

It looked like it dropped straight down but in this light, I couldn't see more than a few feet.

'This shaft used to be worked, along with the others. But it got infested and the rock-worms inside started to come out for dinner. The main entrance was buried by the locals, and when they found that some of the nasties had burrowed out through this hole, they boarded it up and hoped nature would take its course, that everything inside would eat each other. If you want in, you go down there, you scrag one of the worms and you drag yourself back here with proof, something it couldn't live without. Get it?'

'Yes, sir.'

My mind raced, digesting the information. A mine infested with milliasaurs, kill one and bring back a trophy. Simple and straightforward, just like us Goliaths, but was I only going to have my knife? In answer to my unspoken question the ganger pulled one of the pistols, a stub gun, from his belt and offered it to me. My breath caught with anticipation.

'Here. Take this.'

I did so, with a careful reverence.

'But remember, we do not need such things. We are Goliath. Where others are weak, we are strong. Where others rely, we merely use.'

His grotesque voice carried on with its dogma. I'd heard it often enough. I concentrated instead on the magnificent object I held in my hand. A G40K revolver-style stub gun, a standard product of the Goliath heavy industries. Cheap, hard to break, easy to repair, there were thousand of weapons identical to this one in Hive Primus alone and countless millions of variants on the design across the planet. But as my fingers curled around the moulded plastic grip and brushed against the trigger I knew this one was unique, because it was the only one of that multitude that was in my hand. I hefted it and felt its comforting weight. I slid it into my holster and it fit perfectly. I let my hand rest on my hip, tensed in anticipation of the quick draw. My hand leapt forward, the pistol in its grasp nothing more than a streak of silver. I aimed it, clenched one eye and looked straight down the barrel. I felt the power, the power of life and death for whoever crossed those sights.

A red shape blocked my vision. Suddenly I was hauled from the ground. I dangled from my bracers which were sandwiched between the gnarled fists of the ganger. His eyes displayed his lack of amusement.

'Get it?' he demanded

'Yes. Yes, sir,' I stammered in response, my feet struggling in the air.

He snorted and released his grip. I felt the drop jar all the way up my body and collapsed to my knees in front of him, coughing in the dirt.

'You will.'

I FELL THE LAST few feet or, at least, I would have done if my belt hadn't caught on a small metal spur poking out

of the tunnel wall. The moment I spent hanging in mid-air, suspended by my trousers, screwed up my timing and so, when the inevitable happened, I clattered to the ground, landing one limb at a time. I'd shot to my feet, whipped the pistol from its holster and was scanning my surroundings for danger before my brain kicked in. I have to admit, after the wave of adrenaline had broken over me and my pulse settled down, that I felt pretty smug about that recovery. Yeah, I'd looked a fool but that happens sometimes and all the smooth moves after, pure instinct. After years of playing, it felt so natural to be doing the real thing.

A spark flashed across my eyes, jolting me from my self-congratulation and illuminating the dimly lit area. The sharp odour of ozone briefly overwhelmed the underlying smell of dank stone and rusting metal. It was a storage room, if the crates

and barrels were anything to go by. The main support column in the centre of the room had collapsed, more than that, it had been virtually felled by the explosion that had destroyed the tunnel entrance. As a result most of the other end had caved in. The sparks flared again. Something had been ripped off the wall, leaving circuitry exposed.

There was only one way out, apart from the hole above my head of course, and as I put my gloved hand on the frame to look through, I discovered what this exit had been, a window. It crunched and I felt, not pain exactly, just the threat of imminent pain if I gripped any tighter. Ever so gently I peeled my hand away and brushed off the pieces of glass embedded in my glove. Keeping well clear of the jagged edges, I leaned forward and peered down. It was quite a drop but, luckily for me, there were stacks of containers that would make the descent easier. I eased myself through the gap and moved onto the topmost box. It moved with me. With ponderous inevitability the stack gently began to topple away from the wall. Quickly I jammed my other foot back to steady the pile and rocked it back. Regaining my balance, I grudgingly tucked the pistol back into its holster and used both hands to lower myself cautiously down. Damn, I assumed the crates would be full, it never occurred that the miners would have emptied everything before they left, just as they had stripped whatever had been of use from the last room. Feet now firmly on the floor, pistol and knife in hand, my eyes searched. Nothing. Nothing but the piles of boxes and a big hole in the ground in front of me. A ladder was attached to the lip, leading down into the darkness. I slowly edged round the circumference of the opening, stub gun trained on the shadows. Nothing again, except this time there was the faint whiff of an effluent stream.

Once I'd got down there I had to follow the smell to find the source. Buried in the shadows in the corner there was a tiny crawlspace. As I leaned down into it I was hit by the reek of the sewage. It was dark, damp and a perfect place for milliasaurs. Now, you couldn't survive in the Underhive if you were claustrophobic. Everyone has his limits; and having to squeeze through a passage only big enough for a child, full of the stench of liquid garbage, to hunt monstrous worms who'd paralyse you and then drag you home for a slow digestion, is getting close to mine. Still I had no choice, and I had my gun. That was enough.

I dropped to my hands and knees, then to my belly. I coughed with the extra weight on my lungs. There would be barely be enough room for me to lift my head to see where I was going. I pushed my knife-sheath and holster around my belt until they were beside my hips, I couldn't have them dig into my waist as I pushed myself along. Steeling myself, I entered, nudging my pistol and knife in front of me. With my shoulders pressed against the sides, I put arm in front of arm, then swung a hip forwards and dragged my legs along behind me.

I struggled onwards. My chest scraped along the bottom, my hair was flattened against the top and it brushed dust down into my eyes, making me blink. When I finally had the full length of my body inside, I realised exactly how narrow the shaft was. My only way out would be to push myself backwards, completely blind. If something got behind me there was no room to turn around. Nothing I could do. What use would even a meltagun be if something bit me in the leg? And if it was a milliasaur, one bite would be all it needed for its poison to cripple me. My breathing quickened, I couldn't fill my lungs and I was gasping for air. My body heat reflected off the surfaces that covered me; it was hot, and the smell, I might as well have been drowning in it. I knew I was panicking, and that made it worse. My head was beginning to feel light. Deep breath, the thought sprung suddenly into my mind, that's what I need, a good deep breath. I stopped gasping for a second, dosed my eyes and gripped the butt of my gun. Whoosh; the dust-laden, stink-ridden air was blown into my lungs until my chest

had expanded so much that my back was driven into the roof of the tunnel. Then I let it flow out, until I felt quite deflated. I felt at peace for only a moment, then my nose began to itch, my head sprung back and a sneeze exploded from my face. My forehead bounced off the floor and the back of my head ricocheted into the top of the shaft. My hair softened the impact but my temple throbbed. After taking a moment to recover I wiped my nose on my hand and dragged myself on.

THE POOL OF filth gurgled and lapped against its metal banks in a hideous mockery of water. Pressed to

the ground as I was, my nose was unpleasantly close to it. There was no way across so I spun round on my belly and made my way back. The tunnel had opened out into the crawlspace proper. In fact the ceiling in the corner had fallen in so I clambered out, up into the room above. Another storage room. A column had collapsed across it, or it could have been a beam which had fallen from the roof; whatever, it had smashed the stairs, forcing me to climb along its length until I could drop off onto the floor above. I was confronted with a lift, twisted at an angle that gave no doubt as to its state of repair. I carried on, this time through a hole in the wall which led onto the rock face. Pleased as I was that I hadn't encountered anything down in that crawlspace, I couldn't kick the feeling of... having been cheated. There should have been something there, even if not a milliasaur, there should have been at least rats or spiders — or even a face-eater. I shuddered at the thought of stumbling across such a monster unexpectedly. Still, it was odd I hadn't seen signs of any activity at all. Perhaps, after the mine was collapsed, the milliasaurs had retreated deeper. Maybe the locals had been right and the creatures had turned on each other once their ready supply of food had been cut off. Maybe there'd never been anything and the gang had put me down here because they'd already rejected me, to go and scrag something that didn't exist. No, they wouldn't have spared the effort to tell me to get lost. I'd show them. I'd show them I was worthy of their gang, hell, I could lead their gang, given a chance. Even as I ventured on in my hunt, my mind was miles above as I sketched out my glorious career.

It wouldn't take much. After I'd passed this stupid initiation and shoved a half dozen rock-worm trophies down the old man's throat, we'd be hired to guard a Guilder trade caravan. The gang leader would have set the route, I'd have warned him that it took us too close to a fortified tower in Scavvy territory but none of them would've listened to me because I was so new. I would be ready when the first shots of the ambush rang out and would have sprung forwards, rushing the Scavvy raiders.

I jumped up on top of a crate to simulate climbing the tower.

They'd be surprised by how quickly I reacted and I would slaughter their leader's mutant bodyguards and put a gun to his head, demanding the rest of his ramshackle band give themselves up. As soon as they had, I would kick him off the top level — I booted the air for emphasis — and the rest of my gang would slaughter the rest of the degenerates. Our only casualty would be our foolish leader, cut down in the first few seconds. The Guilders would shower me with goods and cash and I would become the new gang boss.

Getting down from the crate, I continued on.

Would I be content then? With a female in one hand and a bottle of Wild Snake in the other? Hardly. I would purchase from the Van Saar techs two of their finest bolt pistols, for an exorbitant fee. They'd try to double-cross me, of course. Insist I come alone and then try to leave with both their weapons and my corpse. I would be too quick for them.

Two imaginary pistols leapt into my outstretched hands.

The Van Saars in the room would fall in seconds, before any of them had time to

draw. The rest of the gang would burst in and meet the same fate.

I crouched behind a barrel, picking off phantom enemies with my stub gun. Another victory, and then on and up, until I rested on a throne in the Hive City itself.

Spectral smoke coiled up from the barrel. I drew it up to my lips and gently blew it away.

High above me, a shape detached itself from the darkness and dropped. It dubbed me over the back of the head. My jaw smashed into the muzzle. My teeth howled in pain and blood spurted into my mouth. I was knocked down, hard. The stub gun tumbled away.

I was stunned for a critical second, not knowing what had happened. I thought the roof was caving in. Then I looked over my shoulder into the gaping mouth of the milliasaur, and I moved. Its first poisonous bite went wild as I spun onto my back. It shot back as fast as a snake, rearing to strike again. Its tiny legs stood out like horns running down the side of its rocky carapace. I saw the next strike coming and flattened myself against the ground as its incredibly powerful muscles rocketed it through the air.

It didn't even bother to draw back before it struck again. It lunged forwards clumsily but there was no more ground I could give. The fangs bore down and I threw my other arm up for what little protection it could provide. The monster, seeing something shoot into its mouth, crunched down early. The knife I'd held was shattered between its teeth and it flinched away. I struggled up and scrambled into the corner, scooped up the pistol and whirled around. I planted my back foot, one arm steadying the other, looking straight down the sights. A stance perfect for the first time I would feel the power the first time I would unleash the cold fury of this most deadly, most beautiful of weapons.

The milliasaur sprang. This was it. Point-blank. Point. Kill.

Click.

Misfire.

That was the last thought to scurry through my brain before the monster punched into my shoulder and slammed me back against a wall. I went down. Its writhing body fell on top. I had no escape. Its spasms pummelled me, its rock-shard hide crushed my body and pierced my skin and its steaming hiss assaulted my ears. I protected myself as best I could. Screwed into a ball, battered by its throes, I cowered. Then, an unseen lightning-fast blow, my face exploded. My head bounced off a stone and I was plunged into oblivion.

I LAY THERE. The weight of the milliasaur's corpse pressed down on me. I don't know how long it was, I'd

lost track of time. To begin with I didn't even know it was dead, that my broken knife blade had torn open its throat as it had tried to swallow the pieces. I was just grateful that it had stopped, I didn't care why. I was lucky it hadn't collapsed on my chest or I wouldn't have been able to breathe. Instead it had finished up lying over my entire right side, literally pinning me to the ground with the sharp edges of its hide. I was bleeding underneath it, but the weight of the creature cut off my blood supply, like a tourniquet. First I felt the warm fluid cooling, then, as the minutes crawled by, it began to scrape away in dots on my fingers. The gritty residue got under my nails.

I had to move. Even if I wasn't too badly hurt, I needed a drink. My raging thirst had been made worse by the add taste of the blood I'd swallowed. An image resurfaced in my mind, of me, with a beautiful woman in one arm and a bottle of Wild Snake in the other. Well, there was no booze and the only thing in my arms was... well. My half-hearted laugh turned into a splutter, which devolved into a coughing fit, a painful coughing fit as every movement pulled at my limbs and dug the milliasaur's hide in a

little more. I had to move. I figured what with a worm being basically one big cylinder it would be easiest to roll it off. Slowly I brought my free left leg up and around to get my foot against the corpse's side and squirmed my body to brace my shoulder against the wall, then I tried to move it. It was easier than I thought it would be. It had been its speed and power that had done the damage, not its weight. There wasn't much pain to begin with; everything was too numb. But when it rolled off my shoulder and thigh and flattened my hand I screamed myself hoarse as the rocks on its hide dug into healthy flesh. A swift kick fuelled by agony drove it off me completely as I yanked my injured hand clear. The limp tube flopped away.

You can't cut off the circulation to a limb without expecting some payback. I knew what was coming. With the arteries clear, the blood flooded back through my system. I rolled in torment on the rocky floor. I felt angry, angry that I had won. I had won, and all I got was pain and more pain. I knew this would pass, though. My real fear was that the scabs over my wounds would burst under the pressure and I'd start bleeding again. When it finally passed I struggled up against the wall, the wall that had kept me trapped against the dying milliasaur, so I was sitting upright. My arm was a mess; the dried blood had been scraped off in some places, leaving streaks of brown, alternating with skin either rubbed raw or bruised blue. My shoulder and elbow were sore, but I flexed my fingers fine. I couldn't see my leg through my trousers, but I guessed it looked pretty much the same.

Gingerly, I tried to get to my feet. I took it slow. I drew my left leg under me, then the right. I gasped; there was something wrong with that knee. Pushing myself up onto my hands, I tried to keep as much weight as possible off it. Then, leaning into the wall to balance myself, I got my left foot on the ground and stretched out that leg. My head swam and I fumbled for a firmer grip on the rock. Only then did I gently lower my battered right leg. It was stiff, and the knee hurt, but I figured that if I kept it straight I could make it.

I limped over to the body of the milliasaur. I needed proof that I had killed it and as sure as hell I wasn't going to drag the entire thing out of here. Something it couldn't live without, the old man had said. Now I'm no great student of worms, and I've heard stories of how you can cut them in half and make two of the monsters, but I know that in the vast majority of cases taking off the head is a pretty safe bet. It sounded simple when I thought of it. Later I realised how difficult it was to carve through a neck made of rock with a few shards of a broken knife. But that thought would wait, because I'd just seen my gun.

It was hiding underneath the body, it must have been dragged down there by the worm when I kicked it off me. I felt sick, betrayed. A misfire. I didn't want to pick it up, but I had to, if for no other reason than that it had been entrusted to me and it had to be returned. I eased myself down and grasped it with my bloody fingers. Maybe I could fix it, for the journey back. I flipped the barrel open and six empty chambers stared back at me.

When I finally heaved myself out of the pit, the breeze cooled the sweat on my body. He was standing there looking for all the world as if he hadn't moved an inch. I thought I noticed something in his eyes when he saw me, a... softening, only for a second and then it vanished.

Bruised, battered, blooded, with the face of a milliasaur strapped on to my belt. I must have been quite a sight. I limped towards him, my broken knife in one hand, the pistol in the other. Every single step back out I'd been thinking of what I would do. Should I get mad? Should I thank him? Or maybe act like I'd never noticed? I'd done what he asked, I'd got my trophy, I should just say what I was supposed to say, what he wanted

me to say, and then I'd be in. I'd be one of the gang. But part of me wanted more, wanted to demand an answer, wanted to rip his head off. It drove me mad. The choices whirled round and round in my mind until I said to myself; no more, when I got there, when I could look in his eyes I would know what to do.

Now that time had come. I let the gun slip from my grasp, it thudded in the dirt. I wrenched the dripping trophy from my belt and dropped it on top. There. My victory, my knowledge, my question were plain for him to see. I waited for a flicker of response. There was none. His aged, bloodshot eyes returned my gaze impassively. 'Get it now?'

The hard, metallic words whispered from his respirator. No praise. No apology. What little blood remained in me boiled. The fist came out of nowhere, I didn't even see it until his head slammed to the side. I couldn't believe what I'd done. I stared at my hand as if it were another's. I was shocked, but I felt good. He turned back to me, his respirator hung uselessly off the side of his face but his expression was the same. My pleasure turned to ashes. Had he even felt it? But then, there it was, a tiny drop of crimson emerged from the shadow of his nostril. It edged its way past his nose-ring and began the long journey down to his cracked lips. I smiled. I soared.

He didn't even bother to wipe it off before he picked me up and drove me into the ground. Then he hauled me on to his shoulder and started back. His laughing made it a bumpy ride, and he didn't stop for long damn time.

The Demon Bottle by Alex Hammond

0700 HRS '...And there will be fire from the heavens and righteous bolt guns will quicken and purge even the deepest crevices of the underhive. All that is foul and pestilent will be washed away! For this is the teaching of House Cawdor of the Redemption.'

First there was a sound. Like a burst of fire that stirred the dim mutterings of my mind to action. Somewhere in the back of my head, a woman from my dream, beautiful body scarless and soft, still danced in the upper hive. 'Look upon this scum. The deepest slag pits could not outmatch his sins in their filth and perversion.' Thoughts swelled. My dancing girl disappeared. 'Sec - though he wakes from his slumber, he does not release the bottle from his hand.'

The voice was closer than I remembered in my sleep. Louder too. Enraged. I opened my eyes.

Legs. Lots of legs, some bound in cloth, others wearing heavy boots, stretched out before me. I followed them upwards and discovered the hard, ash-worn faces of a crowd of settlers. Their attention flitted between my recumbent form and someone behind me. A preacher? I began to stand, bowlegged, still recovering from a bottle of WildSnake. On your feet and face the prophet of universal destruction! A solid boot in my back sent me floundering forward into the reeking mud.

The crowd cheered. I rolled over onto my back, elbows deep in the sludge. Through mud-splattered eyes I made out the robed preacher - thick burgundy cloth ran in torn strips from ground to neck. A leather mask covered all but a pair of rabid eyes and a mouth spitting blood. A House of Redemption preacher had come to town.

'Vermin man! Stand and answer to the House Cawdor, the true prophets of the flames of salvation.' Through the black leather face mask one eye caught my attention.

Bloodshot streams ran their course to a pupil as dark as pitch. Another boot struck me full in the face.

'Look,' my voice cracked, from behind the haze of last night's drinking, 'I'd be able to stand if you'd stop practising ratball with my face, old man.'

Stunned silence behind me. The preacher staggered and began to shake violently on

the spot. Theatrical performance or the jiggling of a religious psychopath, I wasn't going to hang around to find out. Slowly I stood. The Cawdor preacher stopped moving. The crowd clustered well back.

'Oh bugger,' I muttered as a leathered fist pulled out a hand flamer.

'Talk back will you, rat man? Mock those that herald cleansing flame?' A white tongue slid in and out of the priest's mouth. 'Seek ye retribution?'

'Look, I'm happy to go sleep in some other part of town.'

The preacher pointed his flamer in my direction. The crowd scrambled wide. 'This town is in no need of Ratskin scum. Go converse with your blasphemous hive spirits!' 'That's half-Ratskin, slimehole!' I rushed for the crowd hoping the distance and their bodies would afford me protection from the flames.

Click

Aaaaagh! I threw myself into a pile of scrap.

Plop

No wash of flame. I turned to look over my shoulder.

The zealot stood there. The antiquated weapon still levelled in my direction had failed to discharge its round. An empty fuel canister came to rest in the mud beside me.

The old man began to reach for a reload amongst his tattered robes.

A lead pipe, thick bolt rusted to one end, felt good in my hand. I wrenched it from the mess of ancient metal about me and whirled it about my head.

The priest, rustling about his drapery, produced another canister.

Aaaaargh! I screamed in terrified panic. Aaaaargh! The Redemptionist thrust his hands together, loading the weapon.

A warm trickle of liquid down my leg. My only source of comfort. I swung towards to the preacher and reconsidered my options...

...this man had friends...

...too late. The pipe sunk deep into the leather mask. Somewhere in his head something cracked. A muddy thud later, the preacher lay on the ground. I grabbed his flamer and spun to face the rabble. Only a silver snowfall of effluent ash from somewhere overhead - not a settler in sight.

The silver ash fall began to thicken. Somewhere in the hive city, miles above me, ancient machines were grinding over, pulling on pistons, driving cogs and starting the thousand year-old machines of Hive Primus.

0800 HRS The ash fall had worsened. I watched from inside Karag's Saloon as desperate underhivers ran for cover, trying to keep their particle intake to a minimum. Push your annual quota too high and you'd reduce your life span by as many rads as you'd inhaled. Inside the bar, smoke hung momentarily before air filters dragged it into the bowels of Downtown's evaporation tanks. I had used the old zealot's money to purchase a fresh bottle of WildSnake and a few pills from a fixer I knew. I began to think things over. Life was getting bad for settlement-dwelling Ratskins - so bad, it appeared, that even half-castes like myself were now the targets for retribution. I should move uphive, work in an Orlock factory till I had enough creels to pay for some NuFlesh and a day on a serum drip. (I had no need of a lung pump: the respirators I'd scavenged when I was young had kept me free from noxious air.) Once I'd had a wet overhaul, I'd have a better chance of getting employed by one of the spire noble families.

Karag's extraction fan above the bar spluttered, gave a grinding death rattle and stopped. Almost immediately all eyes turned to me. Karag - big man, lots of teeth - stretched out his hand towards me. His two real fingers held out a stack of guilder credits.

'Sarak, we'd all appreciate it if you'd go in there and fish out whatever's got caught in the fan.'

'I've quit cleaning ducts.'

'Even for your friends?' Karag flipped out a couple of extra coins.

'You try wrestling a Catchacan face-eater one day and then see if you're keen on going back into an air duct.'

'There's another bottle of WildSnake on me if you'll do it.'

0850 HRS Somewhere in the duct

something was half-

alive. Its squeals echoed down through

the steel lung that fed air into the bar

below me. The humid conditions of the

air ducts of the underhive were home to

creatures that just could not bear to live anywhere else: albino Millasaurs, phos-

phorescent Lashworms and all manner of tropical spores and bugs.

A few tiny carapaces cracked beneath my hands as I inched further towards the bar's

extraction fan. The squealing stopped. It had heard me. I struggled with a flashlight

and shone it forward onto the mechanism. *EEEEEEEEEE* Like a leathery bolt something rushed forward, needle teeth snapping at my face.

'Wha-' I slipped forwards.

The flashlight spun out of my hand sending spiralling patterns about the air vent. It

came to rest dead on the creature. Four eyes perched in a row across its brow stared

into mine, unblinking. A multitude of legs, wing flaps strung between them dipped -

the thing sprung again.

'Aaagh!'

*Snap*Snap*

Its teeth were just inches from my face. But no further.

Looking over the thing's back, I followed its tail, like a large welt of flesh, to the extraction fan. It was caught.

'Karag!' I called down to the mumbling bar through the vent.

'Quiet!' Karag poked at the air duct from below with a broom. 'Zat you, Sarak?'

'Karag, notch your fan up a few dots.' 'You sure about that?'

'Karag, this thing is going to eat my nose if you take any longer!' Hurried footsteps somewhere below.

The fan ground a full revolution, pulling the creature eight inches towards the rough blades.

Again!' I called.

The creature squealed and lost its footing, scrabbling on the metal. The fan, now free,

whirred up to full speed, sucking the thing backwards into its blades. It ground the

thing up like a paste, spitting its entrails, many legs and bright yellow ichor into the vents, all over me and down into the bar.

'It's dead!' Karag's voice observed astutely from below.

1000 HRS A fresh bottle of WildSnake in hand, a few off-cuts of giant rat skin tucked around my feet, I settled down in an alleyway behind a tanner's shop. I opened the stopper on the bottle and let its pungent odour hit me full in the face. had done well: the distiller had let part of the brewed snake slip into this bottle. Looked like a rib. I took a swig and swallowed one of the pills I'd acquired earlier. Somewhere in the distance, gunfire rattled out a staccato beat - the gangers were waking. Leaning back I looked skyward. The thousand walkways of the underhive disappeared up into the darkness like a thousand steel-black arteries feeding the life blood to the Hive City's

dark heart. I could make out underhivers moving along the lower levels. Little people moving. Little people with more scar tissue than sense. This place swarmed with the very worst humanity had to offer. Here I was, knee high in effluent with only a bottle of WildSnake, a dust-respirator, a dead man's weapon and a rad-counter to my name. I had to move uphive. I'd almost lost my life twice today and wasn't going to settle for a third. In the hive spire they don't have bugs. No bugs, no wounds either.

The tiny lights of the hive city above me looked like a galaxy of stars, a glimpse of greater things. A gentle breeze washed over my face and... and I knew I was in. The soft sound of music, light as though touched by the fingers of air - a small coloured bird in a cage - a clear night sky free from poisonous cloud cover - star freighters, bright blue thrusters propelling them deepspace - the woman, injury free and white skin dancing, turning around and around, calling out my name, soft melodious voice - no rattle of gunfire - just the soft wind, the dancer and the smell of real plants.

1200 HRS I woke for the second time that day. With the visions of the hive spire still playing through in my mind, I walked out of the alley way into the city streets, holding the fur off-cuts tight around my shoulders. For the first time in years, I smiled at a woman and child as they passed me by, fresh rats hung off their belts. I knew where to go and how to do it. I was going uphive.

1230 HRS When you've got little that you own and are still getting over the euphoric effects of a drug cocktail everything seems a lot easier. Perhaps if I had been straight I would have gone about my exodus a little differently. Perhaps I wouldn't have gone to the front gate.

'You Ratman Sarak?' Masked man. Three others with him

'Huh?' I stared through the two ancient pillars that denoted DownTown's front gate - it was five metres away. The drugs in my system tripled that distance.

'Ratman Sarak your name, half-breed?' The man was dressed in robes, a pair of ape like lips jutted out of a leather mask. Ah, yeah?

'Someone paid a lot of money so that they could have a problem with you instead of us.' One of the other men, cradling an auto pistol in his hands, spoke tightlipped through a similar mask to his friend.

'Oh?'

'Enough of this.' The big man was giving the orders. 'Pack him up and let's make that delivery' I couldn't remember where I'd tucked the flamer. One of the men stuck me with a syringe filled with black liquid. My body sagged- and then I realised what I'd done.

1400 HRS 'Hullo, my sweet.' The dancing woman? I'd be able to open my eyes if I could stop my head from rotating. There were others in the room.

I caught hold of my head and snapped my eyes open.

'Oh?' A bloated neck lead in rolls of flesh up to the back of a shaven head. 'He's awake.' The figure turned around to face me. A pair of bespectacled eyes starred down on me from within a wealth of flesh. A large guilder badge predominated a costume of rich cloth and precious metals.

'Greetings, Mr Gunta,' I slurred.

'Oh Sarak, there's no need for formalities. No, debts as steep as yours make us business partners. Call me Otto, do.'

Otto Gunta, the Black Tongued Guilder Prince of the Underhive. First time we'd met, although I knew his agents well. A guilder with as many kills to his name as he had guild bonds.

'OK, Otto.' I attempted to reach out a hand but found it tightly constrained by an iron

brace.

'Silly boy. You're in no state to move. There's enough Spore venom in your blood to have you flapping about like a fish on the floor if we don't keep you restrained.' His pitch-black tongue licked his lips.

'Which spore?'

'Lugtekk, what colour was it?' Otto turned back over his shoulder.

'Yellow.' A metallic voice in the shadows, the only other thing in the big, empty warehouse.

'Now, Sarak. I have the antidote to this poison if you'd just pay up your debts.'

'Nothing.'

'That used respirator, rad counter and that hand flamer you so cleverly hid on your belt make up at least, say, thirty credits? Now if you could make up the other one sixty?'

'I don't have any money.'

'Oh yes? Well this is no good. Discovered any archaotech recently?' The guildler's pudgy fingers danced at the mention of ancient technology.

'No.'

'Some green hivers I could extort?' 'No.'

'Well I guess I'm going to have to sell your carcass to a body bank-'

'Wait... I could offer you my services.' Perhaps I didn't sound desperate enough. 'I'm afraid you're a little under-skilled. You're the town drunk and a chemhead to boot.

You're worth about ten credits to a generous body harvester.'

'Seriously, I take care of infestations.'

'Infestations?'

'Pests.'

'Pests? ... Alright Sarak. You've got yourself a job. You take care of an infestation and we'll wipe the slate clean. I might even see about that dancing girl.'

'What?' Otto's nasty little mouth broke into a smile. 'You dare touch my mind with an sanctioned psyker and I'll-' 'I don't deal with psykers, Sarak. You spilled your guts to us when you were under - once metaphorically and the second time, well...'

'I'm not laughing, fat man,' I slurred. 'You're in no position to laugh, you mincing turd!' Otto's spittle sprayed my face. 'Lugtekk, give him the antidote and get his sorry behind rigged up to infiltrate those Scavvies.'

'What?'

'Your chosen vocation is pest exterminator? Well I'm up to my armpits in mutant scum from the bottom of the hive and they're costing me profit.' Otto spat out the words, slapping the guildler badge on his chest. 'What did you think I'd do, send you into my warehouses with a stick and a rat quota?'

'Yes.'

'Baha!' Otto wobbled as he broke out into a high shriek. 'Let's get this show on the road.' The warehouse suddenly came to life, lights cast the shadows aside and the ground shook and began a steady rumble.

'Where are we going?' I stumbled over the words, my fear obvious.

We're taking this rig deeper into the hive.' Otto smiled.

1500 HRS 'What Mr Gunta wants

is simple. And when Mr Gunta wants something simple done, for a lot of money, we do it. Right?' A strap was pulled tighter across my chest.

'Look - Lugtekk?' The man comprising more machine parts than real flesh stared across at me. 'You don't want to be leading an assault against these depraved cannibals - just like I don't want to be sneaking into their hide out and poisoning them.'

'Not all of 'em. Just the leader. Without him they're toasted rat.'

'That's a moot point. I'll be dead before I get close to any of them.'

'Not with this you won't.' Lugtekk fastened another strap across my chest and placed an electrode on my head.

'What is it?'

A holo-sult. Mr Gunta was planning on selling 'em to the Talloran rebels,' Lugtekk's metal fingers pressed another electrode roughly to my head, 'but an Imperial Patrol clamped down on his spaceport and the stock ain't moved since.'

'What's it do?'

'Rerouted to make you look more like a Skavvy. Here.' Lugtekk flashed a piece of mirrored glass in my face.

Woah. Welts and a third eye adorned my head.

'Come on, Lugtekk. You know I would look more realistic with sludge meal smeared on my face.'

'It's still configuring to your dimensions.'

'You really want to go into battle? Come on, we could ditch this caravan and head uphive together.'

'Sorry, little man. When exactly did you become a friend of mine?'

'Bu-'

'See these?' Lugtekk flashed out a series of pictures.

Aw, no, frag-' Skinned like sludge rats. 'These are the faces of gangers Mr Gunta had me ride out of town. These holos are all that's left. Right now they're eel food. I'm not in the business of being pleasant. I'm a hired gun, little man. Now get ready to go.'

I didn't speak to Lugtekk again. Otto, seated behind a control panel in his head caravan, issued orders to a band of mercenaries and hired scum, a posse he'd pulled together from the toughest bars in the underhive.

I pondered my predicament. In my sweat-drenched palms I held five melting capsules. Poison, Lugtekk had said, but I had my own suspicions. Through the shimmering light of the holo suit I pulled

on the fuel canister Otto had reimbursed me as part of the hand flamer. It was fresh.

Brand new

Otto finished his commands. 'Now Sarak.'

Ah-huh?'

We're going to equip you with that flamer to give you a little confidence. Pep you up some. Nothing is going to go wrong.'

Ah-hah?'

'We've been planing this for weeks. So all you have to do is mosey on up to them with that carcass and its juicy piece of bait in your hands, pop those pills in their leader's food and, hullo hullo, come home to mummy.'

2100 HRS The grinding of the machines above had always been of comfort to me. But down here at hive bottom I could not hear them, only the soft squelch of the mould carpet underneath me. Huge pillars bored into the ground, like the trunks of a steel forest. Fluorescent bugs scuttled up and down them like blood in the veins of an ancient giant.

In the darkness I regarded the dead ganger I had dragged all this way. His eyes were bloodied, a pock mark of jagged flesh torn through his jaw. His death had been slow. Into his belt was tucked a map and a guilder schedule, pretty good ones - even I couldn't tell they were fakes. I hoped the smell of blood hadn't attracted the nasty things from their recesses.

'Skav you're?' A voice in the darkness. A stunted figure.

'Un,' I replied trying to give as little indication of my uphive origin.

'Big Eat on. Hoegas kin?'

I didn't understand a word. 'Un.' I stuck to what worked.

'Sludge meal and manflesh to eat.'

'Oh, splendid,' I muttered under my breath.

The dark figure led on, stumbling towards a dim glow in the distance. We approached the Skavvies' stronghold, twenty figures gathered about a large fire in the middle of a shanty town. I nearly retched when I saw the faces of these depraved souls, the garish light the fire threw up highlighted their pustulent limbs, encrusted skulls and infested wounds.

Upon the fire was a giant, spent ammunition shell, used as a cooking pot. A stray limb fell out as a bloated Skavvy stirred. Not even the visions of my worst drug-induced stupor with its skinless apes and pit-eyed marionettes compared to this spectacle.

'More for pot?' A plastic-wrapped man, jagged smile and pointed teeth, stepped out of the mass of cannibals. 'You bring good eatin?'

'Un,' I muttered, sticking with the routine.

'Me Hoegas, I lead.' The half man reached out a wrapped hand.

I passed him the body.

'You kill him?' His eyes shifted.

'Uh-ha. Look like guilder.'

Hoegas looked down. His smile dropped. For a second the holo suit shimmered.

'What?' The Skavvy leader reached towards the body and removed its torn flack jacket. 'He got words!' The Skavvies left the pot. They huddled close, small luminous worms digging about their flesh. I closed my eyes. 'Words tell of more guilder kin, travel slow through old walls. Got good stuff Hoegas translated. 'Good stuff!' The Skavvies cheered, moaned and shrieked in near unison like a demonic chorus.

'Bring new Skav down front. Let 'im eat sum.' Hoegas flapped a claw at me. I would have been happier if I had been buried alive in a mass grave. These fiends gorged themselves for an hour on the half-decayed carcasses of former companions and the fresh kill I had delivered to them. The leader sipped periodically from a private keg of WildSnake by his side. His plastic squeaked and rustled as he stood to fetch another bowl of flesh gruel from the pot. I stumbled towards it through the crowd of Skavvies, half-rotten hands slapping me on the back as I moved. I reached for the keg. Its neck in my grasp, all sound and movement stopped. All eyes were on me.

Hoegas spun about. His eyes met mine. Thin wisps of psyker-electricity played across his fingers. I had to think quick. I unplugged the lid of the keg and, dropping to one knee, offered it to him.

'Hail Hoegas, witchman king!' I was fast running short of ideas.

'Hail!' chorused the Skavvies. Hoegas grinned a Jagged toothed smile at his monstrous comrades. In the moment his head turned I crushed Otto's pills through the gaps in my clenched hand. 'Hail Hoegas!' Hoegas chuckled and reached towards the keg of WildSnake. A shot rang out. The Skavvies fell to the ground, drawing out ancient blades and muskets. Hoegas fell to the ground -clutching at his chest.

A large scaled Skavvy stood up, smoking pistol still in his hands. 'No hail Hoegas. Hail Blotta, hail all Skavs!'

Oh great. I was in the middle of a Skavvy revolution. A cannibal collective. Hoegas gurgled, shimmering blue light dancing about his chest wound.

'Blotta!' Hoegas cried, then erupted in a rush of blue flame and sparks. The cannibal pot spilled its gore into the sludge. I slipped on a rotten intestine.

'Blotta good Skav, let other Skavs drink!' Blotta - three arms, one eye - snatched the WildSnake from my hands and took a deep swig. I scuttled back from him, eyes roaming the Skavvy crowd for an escape route. Blotta grinned across both his mouths.

'Good drink!' His eye caught mine, 'New Skav drink up. All Skavs drink!'

I shook my head. Blotta wasn't showing any signs of being poisoned yet; perhaps it took a little time to wear in.

'Drink!' Blotta waved his gun at me.

The other Skavvies fell silent. I fingered the trigger of the hand flamer tucked inside my shirt. An arching spray would hit most of them - what was I saying? I'd never shot a gun, let alone a highly volatile antique.

Click-chink 'Drink!' Blotta cocked and thrust his pistol at my head.

They must have been getting suspicious. I reached forward, taking as long as I could to reach the bottle. Still no sign from Blotta. Slowly I grasped its neck, and held it to my lips. A small clock was ticking down the time in my head, I tried to move its hands. I let only the smallest amount of the WildSnake touch my lips and trickle down my dry throat.

'More!' Blotta grabbed my hand and upended more of the drink into my mouth.

I spluttered backwards onto the ground to a burst of laughter. I lay there while the Skavvies drank themselves silly on the WildSnake. I was poisoned. I tried forcing my fingers back into my throat but nothing happened.

'New Skav. Come slay guilder kin!' It was Blotta. Looked like Hoegas' old plan still stood.

I staggered to my feet. Perhaps Otto had an antidote. All I had to do was circumvent the holo-suit and get up to his caravan. Half a chance was better than none. The Skavvies armed themselves with stolen weapons and rust-encrusted blades. As they busied themselves I struggled with Hoegas' body, trying to find some evidence of his death. In the end I cut a ring from his finger.

'New Skav?' Blotta and his mutant comrades were ready.

'Un.'

NOW (0000 HRS) Glad to be running. Good to be running. Perhaps we'll make up time. But what if there is no antidote? No means of stopping the poison that runs through me. I'm not feeling ill but it could be one of Otto's nastier concoctions, something seeping into my system and eating away at me from inside. Otto must have planned for the poison to kick in when the Skavvies arrived in his trap. Why didn't he tell me about it? How could he know they'd come straight away? What if-

We arrive. An old dome town, the metal braces that held its roof still remain like an old iron skeleton. The perfect place for a trap. A guilder caravan sits in the centre of the dome. The Skavvies cheer as

they see it below Guns blazing, they rush at it. I follow, keeping my distance, trying to catch sight of Otto.

Nothing... and then it starts. Before the Skavvies even reach the caravan one falls to the ground. It clutches its head and thrashes about on the ash floor. Dust kicks up at its feet and thin wisps of light crackle about its head. One last kick and it lies still, electricity tracing along its lifeless body. Blotta begins to scream, firing shots wildly into the air. One gets lucky and hits one of Otto's mercenaries hidden in the iron braces.

A volley of gunfire, heavy weapons and red hot lasers rains down on the Skavvies. A few shots are good but the mutants seem to have an uncanny speed. Blotta still screams and then begins to slowly rise from the ground. A wyrd? Spiralling upwards, his shotgun buckles as forces beyond his control wrack his body. Other Skavvies, hidden amidst the old machines and broken concrete slabs, begin to cast fire from their fingers, bum white hot and float.

'Gunta!' I yell over the sound of the screaming Skavvies and the gunfire. A red dot

traces its way across the ground towards me. I struggle with the electrodes stuck to my head. I start running. Bullets pepper the ground behind me, throwing up ash and ricochets from scrap metal. I duck into an old doorway and slump to the ground. A Skavvy's hiding here too. It draws out an old musket.

I wave my flamer at it.

'Skav?' It moans. 'Others think in my head.'

'What?'

'Big man laughing, metal man shoot metal from above. Skavs think of dead.' It slaps its brow. All in my head. All in my head.'

Suddenly I work it out. Spook. The street name for what wannabe Psychers hit up on in order to get some psychic action. It was banned throughout the underhive, but some still couldn't refuse the chance of wielding a bit of nether-forces. Otto must have wanted to fry the Skavvy boss' mind, make him overload on psychic juices or something. But now it was messing with everyone's head.

'You think man-thoughts. You not Skay. You friend of laughing man!' The Skavvy levels its musket at me.

I let my finger run the flamer's trigger as far as it will go.

Flaaaash The flamer begins spewing blazing napalm across the Skavvy and throughout the burnt-out room we were in. I leap from the flames. A bullet grazes my head from above. The sniper must have been waiting. I start running again, panting and desperate. One of my legs catches alight from a lick of flame that comes rushing down from above.

The scene outside is rife with destruction and carnage. Skavvy turns on Skavvy hallucinating wildly as the mercenaries gradually tighten their stranglehold. Bullets fall in waves about the dome. I drop to the ground and beat at the flames on my legs. I rip the electrodes from my head and hit the holo-suit's release button. Blood trickles down across my eyes. 'Gunta! You slimehole!' I scream.

Don't worry. He'll get his. A voice in my head.

'What?' I groan, flat on my back, the ancient dome above me. My head spins. Some thing is inside my head. Hive spirit?

Not exactly.

'What're you doing in my head?'

You eat those pills?

What? Uphive. Dreams of uphive. Think... Focus!

I pull myself across the ground. Skavvies lie twisted and contorted in the shapes of painful death. Many are alight.

You're the last one alive.

'How do you know?' Voices in the distance. Outside my head.

Trust me. I was there when each of them died.

Otto Gunta the Black Tongued Guilder Prince strolls about the corpses, surrounded by men, marking each dead Skavvy off on a clipboard.

'We've done well, Lugtekk.' Otto addresses the mechanoid man beside him. 'Quite well.'

'Gunta!' I call out.

He can't bear you.

It's true - he doesn't react.

'Gunta!' I scream so loud I think my lungs will burst.

I won't let him bear you. Not until we've had our chat.

'Who are you?' Sharp pain shoots throughout my body. 'Get out of my head.' I roll over, face-first in the ash.

She dances pretty well

'What?' Ash tastes like burnt bones. The girl in your head.

'Leave her alone.'

Ob-bo, silly boy! The Spire looks nothing like ibis. No no. Scrap the coloured birds and the warm breezes. They're all hooked up on life support systems up there. Air's too thin to breathe. The voice is jagged with cynicism.

'Liar!'

How'd you know? Like a pain in the back of my head. Pont cry now.

'Damn you!'

That's better, use those emotions all up. I feel my body being lifted. Now let's get us moving eh?

I stand to my feet, legs propelled by forces other than my own. The men move with suspicion. Otto is undeterred.

'Well done, Sarak.' Otto approaches. 'Why'd you use Spook?' My voice rings loud like a roll of thunder.

'Oh no. I don't deal in illegal substances.'

Crack

A pain through my chest. 'That's your payment done.' The obese guildler slides his pistol back into its holster.

Did that hurt? It bad to hurt.

'You're dead!' I stagger forwards, thrusting the flamer at Otto.

'Wa-?' Otto turns, my sudden actions making the fat man dance on his feet. 'Kill him!'

A hail of gunfire jousts with the wave of flame that I launch from the weapon in my hand. I'm struck all over, hot metal boring into my flesh. The bullets feel warm inside my cold body. Not too much pain.

That's the spirit!

I burst alight, the flamer dropping at my feet. Otto's men roll and writhe on the ground slapping at the flames.

Let's dance.

The few remaining mercenaries rush at me, controlled bursts breaking into wild fire as I fail to fall to the ground in a bloody heap.

'What are you doing to me' I scream as I am flung about like a puppet on a string.

You're possessed from the warp, boyo. It's a lesson in messing with psychic drugs.

Claws I never knew I had begin to cut the fighting men to ribbons. Only Lugtekk fights on. Blood and oil streams from his body, his machine limbs clogged with his own life fluid. All too soon he falls to a burning heap on the ground. This is it, I think, I'm going to die. But I have one last trick to play.

What trick?

'Never you mind,' I say aloud.

I take a few deep breaths and rush Otto. He screeches and tries to run, but I do not let him.

'Take my credit badge! Sarak, I can fix it! I have friends in the spire. I can get you work there!' Otto weeps like a child.

'No,' I reply calmly. I feel pain. 'No, Otto. We're both going to die.' The hurt runs in waves across my body.

What are you doing to me? The voice is fading.

'I have a present for you, Otto.' I release hold of all that I care for; let my emotions slip into nothing. Slumping forward, I fall on top of Otto, crushing his body to the ground. Otto shrieks. Already a death spasm grips my body.

You're dying.

'I know' I thrust a bloodied arm down the screaming guildler's throat. And let go of the dancing girl.

My eyes are glazing over. Consciousness slips away with the last drops of blood. A final image burns into my retina - the screaming guildler, possessed to die and burn for eternity.

Rites of Passage by Gordon Rennie

HEREK ROSE PAINFULLY to his feet, trying to rub some sensation into the stump of his left arm. The wound had

healed long ago but down here, in the dank air of the deepest tunnels of the Underhive, it continued to trouble him, reminding him painfully of the place where, years ago, a rusted Scavvie blade brought his career as leader of the Orlock-affiliated Steel Skull gang to an end. It was time once more to deliver The Speech.

He cast a shrewd eye over the fearful young faces looking at him in the dim light of the tunnel. Generations of Underhive dwellers had left their marks here, and the walls were covered in ganger graffiti: arcane symbols, faded boasts of warriors now long dead and dire warnings of what lay beyond the ancient blast-doors at the end of the tunnel. 'From here on in, you go alone,' Herek told them sternly. 'Anyone who wants to back out better speak up now There's no shame in it. You won't be the first, and I don't expect you'll be the last...'

As he had expected, Dorn, the largest and strongest of the pack, was the first to step forward, eagerly seeking his mentor's approval. Dorn was a born warrior, his face already marked with his first battle scars, proudly won in teenage rumbles against fellow gang members in the gang's fortified settlement, a kilometre or so above this desolate place.

'We will not disappoint you, Herek,' Dorn declared loudly, not waiting for the others. 'In two-cycles time, we will return to you not as children, but as warriors! This I swear to you, on the honour of House °dock!'

To his right, Mikhal, already as tall as his father and potentially as good a fighter, with just a little more experience under his belt, nodded his assent. Alongside him, Lan, as wiry and intense as a sump rat, did likewise. Both were keen and brave enough, Herek knew, but in all matters they followed Dorn, tying their fortunes to his. As he rose through the ranks of the gangs - as he surely would, if he survived the coming ordeal - he would take them with him as able lieutenants. Herek smiled to himself fondly remembering other, similarly commanding warriors from previous years who had gone on to earn greater glories for the gang. Herek turned towards the two remaining youths. And you, young Jaal, are you and your brother ready for what waits for you on the other side of those blast doors?' Jaal Rinn shifted uneasily, barely raising his eyes from his new, ill-fitting boots. As ever, it was his brother, Mallin, who answered for him. 'Aye, Master Herek. Show us our enemies, and we will prove our worthiness to our clan.'

Herek nodded, looking at the pair appraisingly. Such a different pair, not even truly brothers! Mallin was strong and capable, and wise beyond his young years. The other, Jaal, was small and pale-skinned, and bore none of the inherited traits of strength and hardiness normally associated with the House of Iron. The boy's parents had died when he was but an infant, killed in a raid upon the Skull's settlement by Cawdor gangers, and he had been taken in by Mallin's family and raised as their own. Quick and agile as he was, Jaal had never been the equal of his more confident brother and Herek suspected that it was only with Mallin's help that Jaal had made it this far through the training.

'Let the runt speak for himself?' Dorn sneered, his hands clenching into fists. 'Must he always hide in the shadow of his brother?'

Jaal blushed in anger — the runt of the litter, they called him! — and spoke out, his

voice shaking with emotion. 'My clan has raised me and protected me. All I ask is a chance to serve it in return and reclaim the blood debt owed to me by the murderers of my parents.'

Herek smiled in satisfaction, quietly impressed by the young ganger's resolve. He would need it where he was going. 'Brave words, young Jaal. Now let us see if you can make good on them. The enemies you go to face do indeed carry the colours of House Cawdor. Let your hatred give you strength, but never forget that we have more need of live warriors than dead heroes.' At Herek's signal, the two gangers who had accompanied them down to the entrance to Hive Bottom — seasoned veterans who had once fought under Herek's leadership — moved to haul open the immense blast-doors at the bottom of the shaft. Beyond these doors, their outer surfaces scarred and pitted by the centuries of ferocious assaults from the things that dwelled on the other side of them, lay a world of darkness and danger.

The young initiates crowded around the open doorway, eager to see what lay beyond. Hive Bottom. A place that, until now, they had only heard tell of in childhood stories tailored to frighten them into obedience. A fearful place populated by mutants and witches, and where deadly traps — toxic waste pools, poisonous mists and grotesque mutant creatures — were always waiting to ensnare the unwary. Back when he was leader of the Steel Skull, leading raids on Goliath merchant convoys and Cawdor settlements under the flag of House Orlock, Herek had braved the dangers of Hive Bottom many times. Even now, though, he still remembered his very first sight and smell of it during his own rite of manhood, and understood exactly the fear and apprehension his young charges must be feeling now.

The two gangers silently scanned the darkness around the doorway, their weapons primed and at the ready for any sign of danger. Satisfied, one of them waved the young bloods forward with a sharp gesture. Dorn looked around at his fellows with a wide, brave grin and strode into the darkness; the others followed with more nervous steps.

'Go easy on 'em, Dorn,' one of the veterans said, slapping the lad on the shoulders as he passed.

'Nab, give those Cawdor scum hell, Dorn,' the other grinned. 'Get yourself back in one piece and I'll give you some of my winnings!'

Herek watched the slight figures disappear from view, knowing that there was no more advice he could give them. For two day-cycles he would remain here, waiting to see which, if any, of the young juves returned.

'Good hunting — all of you!' called Herek into the gloom, stepping back and signalling for the two gangers to close the doors. He offered up a silent prayer, calling on the Emperor to watch over the young warriors. He had tried to teach them everything he knew. From now on they were on their own.

THE HUNTER MOVED easily through the crumbling ruins, more at home here than it had ever been in the

palaces and landscaped parks of the Upper Hive. If it had ever had a name, it had long ago forgotten it. It paused, checking the information relayed to it through its armoured body and savouring the thrill of the replay images being fed directly into its mind from the suit's memory systems. Steel claws punching through flesh. The feel of laser bolts and bullets ricocheting harmlessly off armoured skin. The screams of its victims and the images of their faces as they died in agony.

It had been too long — scarce two hours — since its last kill. It felt its body's auto-systems activate into life at the joyous replay of those few bloody seconds. Fibre-bundle muscles twitched with life, armoured plates clicked and flexed together and its claws slowly unsheathed themselves as memory circuits sent an electronic thrill of

pleasure through its body. Sensor systems flared into life, invisibly scanning the area and locking on to a distant group of targets moving through the darkness.

The prey was still far off, but coming closer. The Hunter turned and moved silently towards it.

LAN, GO AHEAD and check the way in front of us. Make sure your laspistol is

armed and charged,' Dorn insisted. The juve gang crouched near a barely lit glow-globe, taking cover amongst the twisted girders of a long-ago collapsed structure.

Dom barked orders as if it were his given right; he had already assumed natural command of the group. 'Mikhal, stay beside me. Mallin, cover our rear — and see that the runt doesn't get lost in the dark.'

Their destination was the ritual duelling area out in the wastes of Hive Bottom — the ruins of a one-time settlement long abandoned to bands of mutants and outlaw gangs. It was here they would meet their chosen opponents, but this coming battle was but a small part of the test. Any journey through Hive Bottom was hazardous, and the young warriors were only too well aware that anything could be waiting for them in the velvet darkness.

At the rear of the band, Mallin sensed his brother's uneasiness, and laid a reassuring hand on Jaal's shoulder. 'Ignore him,' he said levelly. 'Stay by me, and we'll both survive this together. Remember what Merck taught us. Fear is the greatest killer of all, more deadly than any weapon. Conquer fear, and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

Jaal nodded, realising the worth of his brother's words. He was afraid, but not of the coming battle. He was afraid of this place and the things that roamed its shadows. He pulled' nervously at his bandanna. A strange uneasiness filled him — a gut instinct that he had come to recognise as a warning of imminent danger. Such instincts had saved him from a knife in the back more than once, back when he was running with the younger juves of the Steel Skull's settlement, learning how to stalk and fight in the relative safety of the tunnels around the compound.

Now he felt that same familiar sensation of lurking danger again, coming from out there in the surrounding darkness. Somehow he just knew that something dark and deadly was out there — and it was coming closer.

THE HUNTER CROUCHED in the shadows atop a ruined metal shack, watching its prey. The chameleon scales

on the surface of its body-suit shifted to blend in perfectly with its surroundings.

Thermally sealed inside its body-suit, it was invisible even to infra-red detection. Its armoured suit had been crafted in the finest artificier workshops of a far distant world, and the suit's enhanced adaptation systems meant that it now possessed extra-evolved abilities that not even its creators could have predicted.

The Hunter activated its own infra-red systems, watching the heat patterns of its prey dance through the darkness. Five of them. Five lost children, all alone down here in the dark. It paused to consider its options, strategy simulations composed from the stored memories of previous hunts flickering through its hard-wired consciousness.

The Hunter ignored them. Memories of old kills no longer satisfied it. The prey was so close. It hungered for the thrill of fresh combat.

It leapt from its perch like a jaguar, sensor systems allowing it to track its prey's position effortlessly through the landscape of ruins. So confidently they moved, so unaware of the potential terrors that surrounded them down here!

Inside the skin of its suit, the Hunter smiled. They were sent down here to learn, and so it would teach them a lesson in terror. But first, in order for the lesson to begin, they must discover the surprise that lay in wait for them at their destination. After all,

thought the Hunter, it had gone to such lengths to prepare the scene, and it did not intend for such effort go to waste...

DEAD! THEY'RE ALL dead!' At Lan's shout, the rest of the gang came running with their weapons drawn.

They found their terrified comrade standing in the centre of the abandoned settlement. Its crumbling walls and burned-out dwelling holes were a testament to the destruction that had long ago been visited upon it by the marauding mutie gangs that roamed the wastes of Hive Bottom.

'Dead! They're all dead!' Lan repeated over and over, gesturing at the scene of bloody carnage around him. 'Look at them, Dom! What kind of thing could have done this to them!'

Dorn looked, stunned by what he saw. He had been prepared for some kind of ambush — the rules of the ritual allowed for almost anything, and victory often went to the first gang to reach the duelling arena and set a trap for their opponents. But this... This was something he could never have foreseen.

So far he had counted five dead Cawdor gangers, although so many body parts were spread across the ground that it was difficult to tell exactly how many of them there may have originally been. One of them hung high above their heads, impaled on a steel beam jutting out of a shredded walkway. They had all been killed at close range — that much, he was certain of — ripped apart and their remains left for the scavengers. But killed by what? he asked himself fearfully.

Dorn glanced around him, checking the positions of the rest of the gang. Mallin and his runt brother were searching amongst the bodies, but he became uncomfortably aware that Lan and Mikhal were looking to him for some sign of reassurance. As the appointed leader of the hunt, he knew it fell to him to assert his authority over the situation. An ambush,' he said, not feeling as confident as he tried to sound.

'Something was waiting for them before they arrived here. Scavvies, most likely. No ganger would kill like this, not even Cawdor scum. Whoever they were, they are long gone from here...'

'No. This was no ambush. Look at the evidence, Dorn. It is lying all around your feet.' Dorn turned at the sound of Mallin's voice, seeing his rival bending down over the butchered bodies of the dead gangers. 'There was a full-scale battle here. These Cawdor gangers died bravely as a warrior should, fighting to the last with a weapon in their hands.'

Mallin stood up, holding up the fused remains of a laspistol marked with House Cawdor battle emblems. He held it out for them all to see, a grim look on his young face. 'The power-pack on this laspistol has been burned out. Whoever was carrying it kept on firing until he'd exhausted its power-charge.

And those two juves—' He gestured with his arm at a pair of sprawling bodies. 'The ground around them is littered with spent cartridges from their stub pistols. Jaal and I count at least ten cartridges apiece for each weapon. That means they had time to reload and fire again before they died.' Mallin paused, looking directly into Dorn's eyes. 'No, Dorn, this was no ambush. These warriors all died fighting an enemy they knew was coming at them.' Behind Dom, Mikhal and Lan exchanged nervous glances and raised their weapons. From his position behind Mallin, Jaal surreptitiously released the safety catch on his own laspistol, hearing the reassuring hum that told him it was fully charged. Dorn stepped forward, locking eyes with his challenger, but none of them could have failed to notice the new note of uncertainty in his voice. 'Not an ambush, then. But I still say this was nothing more than the work of mutie scavengers.' He continued to glare at Mallin. 'Either way, we have nothing to worry about. Everyone knows Scavvie packs never stick around after a raid. Even now,

they'll be far away in their lair licking their wounds and counting their plunder.' All eyes were on Mallin as he crushed Dorn's words with the cold logic of his argument. 'Then where are the bodies?' he retorted. All these shots fired, and not one dead attacker? Everyone knows Scavvies leave their dead and even their injured behind them.'

Mallin paused, pointing towards the dead bodies around them. 'And, if it really was Scavvies that did this, why haven't the bodies been stripped of their weapons and equipment? Jaal and I have checked the area for tracks. All we can find are those of the Cawdor gangers.' Mallin stood defiant, awaiting Dom's answer.

'Then what are you saying?' sneered Dorn, running his hand over his close-cropped hair. 'That a ghost, a ghost that can walk through bullets and las-blasts, came here and killed them all?'

It was Jaal who answered, stepping forward to name the unspoken terror word on all their minds. 'No, not a ghost.' he stuttered hesitantly. Everyone turned to stare at him. Mallin nodding reassuringly at him to continue. 'It's a Spyrer. A single Spyrer did this. We are being hunted, Dom. All of us. It killed every single one of these Cawdor juves, and now it's coming after us.'

THE HUNTER WAS CLOSE, closer than any of them dared imagine. From its position high above, perched on the underside of an overhanging walkway, it could look down directly upon them to study its prey. Watching them, selecting which one would be the first of its victims. Its sensors tuned into the sound of their voices, storing them in memory. The words were unimportant — it had been years since the Hunter spoke or listened to the voice of another human being, save the sound of its victims' screams.

It listened only to the tone of their voices, realising after a moment that two of them, the two biggest, were arguing. Let them argue, it thought. As if the question of which of them led the others would make any difference to the final outcome!

The Hunter chose its target, sensors zeroing in on it to study and record. This one was stronger than the others, and the rest would look to it for leadership. The other one talked bravely, but the Hunter's sensors detected the nervous beat of its heart and the frightened tone in its voice which betrayed its words.

Let these striplings follow their new leader, it thought. It would soon show them just how vulnerable they were, when he would be the first to die.

The Hunter uncoiled itself from its hiding place, scuttling along the underside of the walkway as it moved silently towards its first chosen victim.

SPYRER! EVERYONE GLANCED fearfully at each other as Jaal dared to mention that dreaded name. Spyrers: cruel

hunters from the Upper Hive, descending down into the depths of the Underhive in packs to hunt their prey, seeking enough kills to return back up the Spyre to be recognised by their kind as rightful members of the Hive's aristocratic elite. All of the young Steel Skull gangers had heard fearful tales of the exploits of these most hated of killers, knowing that even the most battle-hardened veterans of their settlement were afraid of such enemies. But, it was whispered, there was one sort of Spyrer even other Spyre Hunters feared. The lone renegades. Those who had developed too much of a taste for death and never returned back to the Upper Hive. Instead, these lone killers remained in the Underhive, adapting to the environment of their new home and mercilessly hunting down all that crossed their path. When such a renegade was discovered, even the most bitter enemies amongst the gangs would join forces to destroy it.

'He's right, Dorn,' said Lan, panic breaking his voice. 'This is the work of a Spyrer!' Mallin nodded in agreement. 'We have no other choice. We must abandon the ritual

and return to Herek. He will know what to do. We have to warn our people that there is a Spyrer on the loose!

'No!' Dorn snarled, gesturing wildly with his laspistol. 'The test is not yet over! To return now, without any kills, would bring shame upon us all.' He paused, staring hard at the other juves and daring any of them to contradict him. 'Our enemies are dead, but we have been offered a far worthier opponent to face. The test goes on, and when we return it will be in triumph to present Herek with the head of a Spyrer!' 'This is madness, Dorn!' Mikhal interjected, trying to reason with his leader. 'Even the bravest gangers would not choose to fight such an enemy. I say Mallin is right. We should—' Mikhal's voice tailed off as Dorn silenced him with a single threatening glance. 'I am the leader here — and I say the test goes on. I thought you were loyal to me, Mikhal. Are you siding with this coward and his runt brother?' Mikhal stepped back a pace as if he had been physically struck, staring

shamefacedly at the ground and unable to meet Dom's eyes.

Unnoticed, at the back of the group, Jaal's head buzzed with sudden pain. That feeling again, a sense of utter dread, only stronger now than he had ever felt before. And, with it, something else: strange alien thoughts — violent and predatory — crowding into his mind from elsewhere. Jaal's vision blurred and the ground span beneath him.

Suddenly he was no longer standing with the others. He was hanging in the darkness high above, looking down on them all. His body was not his own. Instead, he felt himself sheathed in a cold metallic shell, powerful fibre-bundle muscles responding to his every move. He could hear Dom's challenge to Mikhal. See Mallin backing off his hand moving towards his pistol holster, unaware of this new danger above him. There was a rush of air. Jaal felt himself falling, no, leaping.

He snapped back into his own body. Numbed, he tried to shout out a warning as the thing descended down from the darkness towards its target. 'Main! Above you! Look—'

Too late, Mallin looked up to see the Spyrer dropping down towards him. Jaal caught a glimpse of a dark spider-like shape, its outline blurred as though it was a living part of the darkness from where it came, and then it was upon his brother. Mallin raised his weapon to fire. Something impossibly fast and terrifyingly sharp flashed through the air. Mallin screamed, the las-blast from his weapon discharging harmlessly into the air. Jaal fumbled for his own weapon. In the split-second it took to draw it, Main was gone. More laser blasts lanced through the darkness — Dorn, Lan and Mikhal firing upwards, their shots ricocheting off stonework and girders and illuminating the hellish scene in bright flashes. Jaal caught strobing glimpses of the Spyrer carrying the screaming figure of MAUI with it back up into the darkness. At first Jaal thought the Spyrer was actually floating through the air but, looking closer, he saw the gleam of something thin and silvery reflected in the light of the las-blasts: a metallic web-line anchored to some point in the darkness above and spun out from the Spyrer's wrists, strong enough for it to carry both it and its prey out of range of its enemies' weapons. Mallin. It had taken Mallin!

Jaal sank to the ground, knowing that the others were wasting their shots and that his brother was already lost to them. With a sickening lurch, Jaal saw the object lying on the ground where, only seconds ago, his brother had stood. Mallin's severed hand, still clutching the useless laspistol in its lifeless grasp.

Jaal doubled over and retched violently, this final horror too much for his shocked senses. He had known that the Spyrer was out there. He had seen it in his mind, known it was coming after them. He should have said something earlier, tried to warn them what was about to happen. If he had, Mallin would still be alive...

Dorn's boot crashed into his ribs, sending Jaal sprawling across the ground. With a

shock, Jaal realised that he had been babbling to himself speaking his thoughts out aloud. 'Traitor!' screamed Dom. 'What do you mean, you knew what was going to happen?'

Dorn turned towards Lan and pointing in fury at the figure of Jaal lying at his feet. 'You heard him! You heard him say he knew it was out there. He knew, and he led it straight to us! He's one of them. A witchling! He's been in league with this thing all along!'

Witchling. Jaal knew the word. Psykers, some called them. To be so named was a death sentence, the Redemptionists ruthlessly hunting down anyone suspected of possessing such feared powers.

'Then we should take him back, Dom,' stammered Mikhal, staring at Jaal as if the youth could strike him dead at any moment. The elders should judge him. It is not for us to decide...'

'No!' Dorn raged, aiming his laspistol directly into Jaal's face. 'He has betrayed us all and led his own brother to his death! He is a traitor, and I shall judge him where he stands!'

Terrified, Jaal closed his eyes, fearing he was only seconds away from execution at the hands of the wild-eyed Dom. But the expected shot never came. Instead, he heard the sound of an echoing voice calling out from the darkness around them.

'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' It was Mania. Mallin was still alive! Weak and in pain, judging by the agonised pleading of his voice, but still alive.

How could that be? thought Jaal. Spyrers never spare their victims. Perhaps Mallin had escaped Perhaps—

'On your feet, traitor,' said Dorn, dragging him to his feet by his clothes. 'It seems your Spyrer master still values the life of its servant.' Dorn jammed the barrel of his laspistol painfully against the back of Jaal's head and hissed into his ear in a voice full of anger and loathing. 'It has spared the life of your brother. Maybe it wants to trade his life for yours.'

HELP ME, DORN. Help me, Jaal. Help me...' The Hunter looped the

recording through its suit's vocal systems, mimicking the voice of its victim.

An old trick, but one that had often served it well in the past. The trap was set. Now it would wait and see if the prey took the bait.

THE YOUNG STEEL SKULL gangers moved warily through the ruins, following the distant sound of their comrade's pleading voice.

Mikhal and Lan took the lead, cautiously scanning the overhead ledges and structures for signs of their enemy. It had taken them by surprise once already. They were determined it would not do so again. Dom brought up the rear, roughly pushing Jaal in front of him, his laspistol trained on his captive's back.

Jaal stumbled, risking another blow from his ill-tempered captor. 'Dorn,' he dared to stammer, 'you're making a mistake. You're leading us into a trap. I don't know how, but that can't be the voice of Malkin out there...'

Dorn silenced Jaal with a painful prod from the barrel of the laspistol. 'Shut up, runt. Try and warn your ally that we're coming, and I'll blow you in half.' 'Help me, Dorn. Help me, Jaal. Help

Dom signalled for silence, trying to get a fix on the location of the voice. There, up ahead. Through the ruins of a tumbled archway they saw a walkway across a bubbling pool of toxic sludge, its acrid vapours giving off a noxious stench. Through the

poisonous mists they could see something waiting for them on the other side of the walkway.

They shuffled closer, covering their mouths to avoid breathing in too much of the fetid air. A couple of paces ahead of his fellows Lan was the first to see it. He stopped dead, barely able to believe the sight that awaited them. It was the body of MOM, hanging puppet-like from a metal web of razor-edged wire that cut through his body in a dozen places, Mallin's head lay on the ground in front of him, that same mocking voice sounding as if it was coming directly from his lifeless lips. 'Help me, Dom. Help me, Jaal. Help me...'

The Spyrer exploded out of waste pool. It landed nimbly on the walkway in front of Lan and Mikhal, its armoured body streaming with burning pollutants and corrosive acids. Jaal howled in terror as it reared up before its prey. Its sinuous body was composed of black armoured plating which flexed and locked together as it moved. Jaal was reminded horribly of the stories he had heard of the monstrous spider-things that inhabited the deepest reaches of the Underhive. Cruel diamond-edged claws extended from each of its wrists, their blades glistening with lubricants and deadly venom. Its horn-crested head swivelled round towards them and, with a sudden lurch of fear, Jaal realised that it had no face. Its human features were hidden behind the blank shell of its armour, guided by electronic senses the extent of which Jaal could only guess at. It came at them at an impossible speed before any of them had time to react. With one sweep of its claws, it cut through Lan's throat. The ganger was dead before he even had time to scream, his body hitting the walkway and his blood jetting out of him in one long spray.

Mikhal spun to bring his laspistol to bear, but the Spyrer was faster, thrusting the wrist-blade of its other hand deep into the juve's stomach. Servo-mechanisms tensed as the Spyrer lifted its still-living victim off his feet, raising him high above its head in a superhuman show of strength. Mikhal did scream, a long agonised howl from the very depths of his soul, as the Spyrer released the blade's venom cells into his body. With a dismissive gesture, the Spyrer hurled its victim over its head, ripping the blades out from the juve's body. Mikhal landed on the walkway behind, his body already starting to convulse and contort into agonising shapes as the deadly venom coursed through his veins. Then the Spyrer turned to face its two remaining victims. 'You bastard!' Dorn hurled Jaal aside and charged the Spyrer, blasts from his laspistol ricocheting harmlessly off its armour. At the last moment, Dorn dropped the pistol and drew his knife, throwing himself at the Spyrer with a roar of defiance. The ganger crashed into the Spyrer, catching it off-balance and sending both him and his enemy backwards into the waste pool. Jaal turned and ran, knowing that Dorn's attack had been a brave but hopeless gesture. Behind him, he could hear Dorn screaming in rage and agony as he tried to pull the Spyrer down with him into the corrosive depths of the waste pool. Jaal knew the Spyrer would survive - nothing could kill it - and it would be coming after him next. He snatched up Lan's laspistol, realising the futility of the gesture but wanting to at least die fighting with a weapon in his hand.

THE HUNTER PULLED itself out of the waste pool, leaving the burning and dissolved remains of Dorn behind it.

Neural links ran a damage check on its suit systems.

Its armour was corroded in several places and the burning acids had destroyed its chameleon camouflage system. In time, the suit would repair itself, but the Hunter, driven by the need to kill, was oblivious of all thoughts of rest or repair.

Even now, its last victim was escaping, and the Hunter was determined to finish its game.

JAAL RAN THROUGH the maze of ruins, knowing that the Spyrer was close behind

him. He could feel its thoughts buzzing in his head; whispering horrors that he barely recognised as coming from anything human. Occasionally, he would feel his mind spiral out from under him. Then he would be inside the mind of his enemy, seeing and experiencing everything around it as it moved across the top levels of the ruins, leaping from structure to structure and scuttling, insect-like, up the sheer sides of walls and shafts. He found himself running towards a rusting metal walkway, maybe a metre wide, spanning a chasm from some long-past hivequake, its sheer sides dropping away into nothingness. The Spyrer was hunting him, he knew, probably herding him into another of its traps. If only he could control this new ability; focus these visions that flashed through his mind...

His boots made the precarious walkway echo beneath his pounding feet. A voice in Jaal's head suddenly screamed a warning, telling him to stop. Jaal threw himself onto the reverberating walkway, seeing in an instant the deadly trap he had almost run into strands of the Spyrer's metallic web-line, strung out across the walkway. If Jaal had kept on running he would surely have been sliced apart.

A wave of terror washed through the young ganger. The Spyrer was just playing with him, toying with him like a cat until it closed in for the final kill. What chance did he, Jaal the runt, the weakling of the litter, stand against such an enemy?

A dark shape swooped low over his head and Jaal felt a vibration as it landed on the walkway behind him. He hauled himself up and span around to face the Spyrer, steadying his stance on the walkway and gripping the laspistol in both hands. The nightmare stalked slowly towards him, venom-dripping weapon claws slowly extending from their armoured casings. Jaal knew he had nowhere to run. Before him was the Spyrer. Behind him, the barrier of razor-wire web. Below the walkway, on either side, a long fall into oblivion. The final trap had been sprung and the game had reached its end. A terrible sliver of ice ran the full length of his spine.

'Fear is the greatest killer of all,' the Spyrer said mockingly, perfectly imitating the voice of his dead brother. 'Conquer fear and you will be ready to call yourself a true warrior.'

At the sound of Mallin's voice, something convulsed inside Jaal's head. Fear gave way to fiery rage and hatred as he heard this creature, this foul thing, speak with the voice and words of his dead brother. His fury opened up something within him, blossoming like a match igniting kerosene. Something that had been there all along, waiting to be set free. Power - pure, unfocussed power now channelled and released by his rage.

Jaal was thrown backwards onto the hard, cold metal, as he felt some uncontrollable energy erupt from his body, a wave of enormous concussive force spreading out from him in all directions. The walkway beneath his feet buckled as the aged metal was rent by the supernatural force Jaal had somehow released. With a scream he realised he was sliding down towards the Spyrer's web of razor-wire.

Jaal scrambled up the slope of the collapsing walkway, grabbing hold of a bent support beam. Turning he saw the Spyrer leap from the shifting platform as it gave way under its feet.

A thin web-line shot out from its outstretched wrist, seeking a secure anchor to the structure at the other end of the vanished bridge. 'No. Not this time,' swore Jaal, determined that the Spyrer would not escape him. 'This time the hunt ends here.'

Unthinking, Jaal raised the laspistol in his free hand, aiming not at the Spyrer but at the web-line supporting it. He reached out with his mind, focusing his expanded senses on the thin strand of metal glittering in the darkness, and pulled the trigger. A searing bolt of laser energy leapt from his gun, his mind flying out with it, leading it, taking it to its target. The shot hit true, vaporising one segment of the web-line in a

flash of white-hot energy.

Caught in mid-swing, the Spyrer tumbled down into the darkness, diamond-edged claws throwing off sparks as it tore at the sheer wall of the chasm, vainly striking out to find a desperate handhold.

'Nooooo! Mallin's dead voice cried as the creature fell. 'Jaaaaaaal!'

And then it was gone, its death-scream amplified by its suit systems, an electronic screech that seemed to echo forever across the Hive Bottom long after the Spyrer itself had been swallowed by the chasm.

HEREK? FACE IT. If Dorn ain't coming back, none of them are.' The Steel

Skull gangers waiting by the open blast-doors looked more worried about losing their wagers than any real sorrow The old man sighed to himself, and turned back toward the light. 'Very well. Seal the doors,' he ordered. 'They've had an extra day-cycle.

We've put ourselves at too much risk already by waiting here so long.'

Herek watched as his two lieutenants carried out his orders, and silently swore under his breath. He had lost whole parties of juves to the ritual before, but he'd had high hopes for at least some of this group. But, at the last, there would be other tests and other initiates, all of them eager to prove their manhood amidst the dangers that lay in wait on the other side of those doors.

From his hiding place, Jaal watched the gangers haul the blast doors closed. He wanted so much to shout, to run towards them, to tell Herek and the others that he was still alive, that it was over - that he was safe and just wanted to go home. But he knew that would be madness.

Everything had changed. Now that he knew what he was - a Psyker, a witchling -he knew he could never return home. Not that his step-family would mourn him, not when they had lost a real son. He was orphaned again. He was an outcast, a renegade, doomed to dwell in the darkest places with the others of his kind - the freaks, monsters and mutants of Hive Bottom.

After a long moment, Jaal turned and walked away. He did not look back at the final clank of the bolts when Herek's men sealed the doors shut behind him. Silently, he slipped off into the shadows, already welcoming the protection and anonymity they offered.

Sisters by Neil Rutledge

BLADES STARED DULLY at the beaker in front of her. Why was she drinking this filth? She knew only too well but pushed the thought away from her along with the empty cup.

Another one, princess?' Licksy, attentive to a fault, called softly from behind the bar. His scarred, crumpled face pressed against the grille looked like some penned animal, huge, dark eyes filled with the sadness of resignation.

Staring at him, her own eyes tormented, dark-ringed with more than paint, she felt her heart constrict. A sob choked her throat but, knuckles white against the pitted plastic of the table edge, she fought it down. Not trusting her own voice she simply nodded.

He turned, hunched over the battered flasks and she dragged herself up from her stool and over to the bar. There were no worms in, word must have got round fast, and Licksy didn't have the cage door shut, but affection for the old man and a wish to save his twisted feet got her up. As he passed her another full beaker through the slot, his thick fingers gently touched hers. His face looked even more yellow and riven than normal and his mute anxiety jerked back her memory. Ages back he had looked at her

just like that as she was about to leave on some juve foray, but back then she wouldn't have been alone at the bar. She quickly sat down and took a long slug. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the movement as Sasha glanced over at her, but by the time Blades looked up the big woman's head was back down. Without war paint, Sasha's jowly face looked oddly babyish as, apparently rapt with concentration, she studied the stripped-down stubber laid out in front of her. But Blades hadn't missed the glance up. What was it? Concern, warning, disapproval? Was she sizing her up, thinking she could take her, thinking it was time Blades's Gang needed a new leader? She knew she shouldn't have any more Wild Snake. The Ratskin could be back at any time with news of the zombie but, sump it! She felt wretched and needed fire from somewhere. The cloying smell of the slug oil Sasha was using carried over the bar, even over the acrid stink of WildSnake. Again Blades felt her stomach contract. Why did the stupid bitch have to slip? This time she could not fight the memory away. The numbness was wearing off. The armour of habit that had seen her through the aftermath of the fight and brought her back to Licksy's place had flaked away. The jagged blade of memory slashed across her eyes, even as she screwed them tight shut against it. The vision of Katz dancing nimbly across the gantry, bullets skipping around, was seared into her eyelids. Oh, Katz had got the Orlock all right, burnt him clean in the forehead, the last one of the schlokkbaggers. Then her sister was traipsing back gleefully when she slipped.

Spire! She could still see the expression on Katz's face. Just a startled smile, not even a yell before she hit the chem sink and was gone. Why, damn it? Blades's stomach heaved again and she staggered upright. It took all of her willpower to make herself walk to the midden and she only just made it before throwing up. Her body shook as, white-knuckled, she steadied herself against the cold, corrugated iron wall.

Weakly she punched the tap, vainly trying to get enough water to clean her face and rinse away the smell and the memories. She straightened up and started as she caught sight of herself in

the grimy mirror. Spire! She looked dreadful! Her eyes stared wild from dark pits and her paint had run in purple smears where she had tried to wipe away the vomit. Get a grip! This was life, not a dream tab. Blades realised she hadn't cleaned up since she had got back. Her hair, once extravagantly plumed, now stuck in a dank, clotted mass to the side of her head, green dye mixed with blood from the last juve she'd scragged. With a sudden stab of bleak humour, she thought she would have no problem surprising the zombie — the chugger would take her for one of its own! She felt a little better at that and, smiling grimly, she set about battering the tap into supplying enough for a more thorough clean up.

Blades managed her face well enough and got painted up again, although her hand refused to stop quivering when she was applying the stick. Not an ace job, but better than before. Her hair would have to wait for the full treatment but she cleaned it as best she could and pulled it back in a tight snake, binding it with a spare plasticuff. Moving to the door, Blades took a few deep breaths and walked back into the bar. Again she sensed quickly averted gazes but she walked calmly back over to the cage. If there was to be action it was better not to face it on an empty stomach. 'Some of your best stew and a couple of slormcrusts, Licksy,' she asked softly and smiled at the old ex-ganger.

'Coming right up, princess,' he grinned back, obviously reassured.

Of course, she could always send some of the girls to hunt down the zombie. The worms, as the citizens of Ashcliff were known, looked to Blades and her gang for protection but that didn't mean that Blades herself had to deal with every rogue slime gator or crazed mutant personally. The odd wandering zombie wasn't extraordinary.

Sometimes they just stumbled vaguely about and were easily torched. Sometimes a meaner one would show and scrag a careless worm or two, but they were still no big deal. Normally, in fact, she would have sent someone else, maybe even a couple of juves eager to notch their sluggers. Today, though, despite the sick feeling still lurking in the pit of her stomach, or perhaps even because of it, she knew she would go after the chugger herself. She flexed her fingers. They felt barely able to lift a spoon, never mind a shotgun, but maybe the action would help her get a grip on herself. Maybe? It had to.

Blades turned and looked down the bar hall. The bright, comforting light glared back off the pitted metal tables and the lurid murals. Angie and Torsh, their faces bleached spirit-pale by the light of their booth, were close as always. Their hands flickered over one of their interminable games of thornback, played, as usual, in silence save for the gentle rustle of cards and the soft scrape of counters being exchanged. Faye looked as if she was dozing at the vid desk but Blades knew better. Yooshie, she assumed, would be running the surprise box, out of sight, ready for gatecrashers, just in case. The rest of the girls were keeping out of her way. They were all behaving normally enough but, Blades wondered, was she imagining the tension in the air? The covert glances? Lips pursed with worry, or disapproval? Yes, this time she'd better go after the zombie; show she was still in control. Or some girl might just reckon she could take Blades's gang off her. 'Here y'are.' Licksy passed the stew and crusts through the hole in the security-grille. Blades took them, smiled her thanks and sat back down by herself again. The stew at Licksy's was near legendary in quality and for a while Blades lost herself in enjoyment of the spicy stodge. She was assiduously mopping up the last juice with a hunk of slormcrust when Faye called, Ratty's back.'

Blades stuffed down the crust and quickly took the bowl back to the cage before seating herself again.

The flickering green light showed Yooshie was ready in the box. One of Faye's hands hovered over the pit flick while she pushed the door button with the other and then grabbed up her stub gun. The double pairs of security doors clanked and wheezed through their cycle and eventually the Ratskin padded in. Angie left her game and followed him as Blades beckoned him over.

The Ratskin stood across the table from her, silent as the darkness. Like most of his kind he was short and slightly built, but Blades knew the appearance was deceptive. The Ratskin might look scrawny but he was tougher than boiled Milliasaur, with sinews like cured slime stringers and the reactions of a rubble snake. But now he just stood and stared, the blank eyes looking through her.

'Well?' the gang leader snapped. The Ratskins always quaked her a bit. There was no getting used to their silent, staring ways. She even preferred a rowdy ratty, tanked up on Second Best, to this sort of sober spook. The scout fingered some sort of amulet at his neck and for a moment his eyes seemed to focus on her. 'Found empty one,' he stated plainly, using the Ratskin word for a zombie.

'Where?' Blades was still sharp.

'In the pipes-that-echo by Joe's Crack.' 'Take me there.'

The Ratskin shrugged. 'It got foolish lone worm,' he added, unconcerned. There was a metallic rattle as Sasha finished re-assembling her stubber. 'Want me, Chief?' she asked with a smile that Blades could not read.

'No.' The gang leader rose. 'It's only a chugging zombie. Ratty and I'll manage.' The Ratskin shrugged again.

'I'll take your night-sight, though,' Blades said to Sasha again. 'Save me a walk to the glory hole.' The big girl thought for a moment, then nodded and passed over the visor.

'Scrag it, Chief!' Sasha encouraged and watched approvingly as with ease, almost graceful, her leader checked over her gear and lifted the faithful shotgun she'd carried ever since her first juve outings. Then with only a soft, 'See you ladies,' Blades followed the Ratskin through the asthmatic security doors and out into the Necromundan gloom.

THE GLOW GLOBES had never been great around Ashcliff and recently they seemed to have become even dimmer.

Blades shivered as she followed the silent Ratskin away from the last of the sheds and along the rough pack trail that wound through the slag dumps towards Raggy Gap. It was completely quiet. Sleep time and fear of the zombie had kept all indoors. Well, fear of the zombie and perhaps fear of her, Blades reflected. She smiled darkly — and just then heard the moaning.

It was an eerie whining, rising and falling, just audible; felt more on the neck than heard with the ears. Blades tightened her grip on the shotgun and paused. A few paces ahead the scout had stopped too. He turned, and with the skin over his head silhouetted against the sickly radiance that came from the ailing skylights it seemed as if some giant rodent had thrust its shoulders up through the clinker.

'The worm,' the Ratskin hissed.

'Why isn't he dead?' Blades demanded angrily. 'If the zombie wounded him then he should be scragged. Can't take chances with the plague! Blasted worms! You'd think living here they'd be tougher.' She thought the Ratskin shrugged but couldn't be sure in the gloom. He had turned again and was making off down the side track that led to Joe's Place.

JOE WAS LONG DEAD but the ash-brick and rubble hovels that he had built were still there, inhabited now by the extended family of his grandson. As they crested a low ash ridge Blades could see a few lights glowing ahead. The crack that Joe had given his name to and had made his livelihood from was still there too. It was a jagged scar between fifteen and thirty feet deep, narrow, sheer-sided and twisting through the ash for almost half a mile. Joe had discovered that various hapless creatures — snakes, rats, ashworms, and so on — would often fall in

it and be unable to get out. With care and the aid of a rope hoist, he made a good living out of the unfortunates. Well, until he was scragged by a huge slime gator that had fallen in while wandering from pool to pool. Jake, his son, climbed down and got the gator; he made so much money from it that it went to his head and he'd run off further down-hive with one of the duster girls from Peeky's Palace. Hanko, Jake's abandoned wife, was a tough old tunnel chicken and she and the kids had kept the place going. Jakey, the eldest, pretty much handled things now He was all right, Blades recalled. None too sharp but he kept out of trouble and paid his dues.

Almost bumping into the Ratskin's back jerked her out of her reverie. Careless, she bitterly admonished herself. Blades girl, what is wrong with you? she continued her mental self-castigation. But she knew what was wrong and again had to fight back unpleasant thoughts. The Ratskin was saying something.

'Tracked from here. Not big. Staggering.' He was whispering. Just ahead, Blades could see the overturned hopper of the bagger, its noxious cargo split across the path. Something was skittering among the rubble behind the hopper. The scout muttered a salutation in his own tongue and, fastidiously stepping around the spilled garbage, headed on up the path.

They soon reached the stading and were waved into a small rubble shed where a disturbing sight met their eyes. Lying on a trestle table was the injured bagger. He was still moaning but only quietly now, and he seemed only semiconscious. The

unfortunate victim had been stripped to the waist and Blades could see a long wound running down from his head, across his shoulder and over his ribs. His right ear and part of his cheek had been sliced away and the white of bone showed through the gash in several places. The table was slick with his blood and it had pooled beneath it too, but the worst of the bleeding had been stopped. Presumably this was thanks to the woman bending over the prostrate man and attending to the wound.

'Spire!' Blades swore, recognising the distinctive, bitter smell of stinger mould paste even over the sooty stench of the slug oil lamps. 'What are you doing?' the gang leader snapped at the woman. 'He should have been scragged and torched. You know the law!'

The woman did not look up but replied in a quiet voice. 'It's just a cut. The zombie only slashed him. The wound's clean and there are no bite marks.'

Jakey, the big prospector who had waved them in, whispered from behind Blades, 'It's Uncle Zot, Ma's brother.' Blades swallowed, 'You know the rules, Hanko. He's been got by a dead one, a zombie. The plague's too much of a risk. He's got to go.'

The woman turned. She had a slight, pinched face. It had been beautiful once but time and the Hive had taken its toll. The once-delicate features were now harsh and lined. Grey hair flopped listlessly from under a grubby red scarf. 'We can watch him.' Her voice was clipped into a challenge.

'Ma...' Jakey's voice tailed off.

'The rules are to protect all of us, Hanko,' Blades said firmly, gripping her shotgun. 'I can't allow this. What in Spire's name possessed him to be out with the zombie about anyway?'

'Four hungry girls.' Hanko's voice was bitter.

There was silence for a moment. One of the lamps spluttered and the distorted shadows flickered on the rubble wall. 'You'd better leave, Hanko,' Blades spoke softly now but still firmly.

'I'm not going,' the older woman turned and started dabbing at the wound again.

'Ma...' Jakey mumbled once more, then shuffled outside.

'You too, out!' Blades waved her gun at the Ratskin. He shrugged, his perennial gesture, and left.

'Hanko-' the younger woman began. 'I'm not leaving.'

Blades moved around the table opposite Hanko, who was now deftly stitching the widest gash.

The bagger lay quiet, now quite

unconscious. Blades bent over him. The lamp smoke and the stinger mould brought back an echo of her former nausea. Even so, her stiletto had pierced the man's heart and had been withdrawn before Hanko even noticed. The bagger gave one twitch and his sister looked over at the gang leader in silence.

Her face was blank and her voice flat as she asked, 'What about the youngsters?'

'We'll take any fit girl juves.' Blades voice was strained. 'If you can't take the others, Peeky probably will. It sucks as an arrangement, but better than starving.' The ganger turned and went out, wiped the stiletto on a patch of basket fungus and sheathed it.

'C'mon, Ratty,' she instructed, 'let's get the chugger.'

Jakey stared after them. They could hear his shaking voice. 'Ma...'

PIPES THIS WAY,' hissed the Ratskin.

Blades knew without having to be

told. The pipes had been considered a good play area. Close enough to hab zone so that it was unlikely that you would find anything really nasty holed up there but often housing snakes, rats and spiders. A good place for a sub-juve to cut her teeth. Then she and her sister, Katz, had often explored the pipes, after letting Joe know they were

there. Blades's memory flashed to the feeling of pride when they had sold their first four-footer to Hairy Mary. How the old hag had given each of them four shots of Second Best, 'One for each foot, my dears,' in a bottle of algae juice and they'd been ill all night. They were there... They had sold... They'd been ill...

The sob caught her unawares and escaped before she could choke it back. The Ratskin turned.

'Just ash in the throat,' Blades mumbled and quickly pulled the visor over her eyes. Detail sharpened immediately. No wonder she preferred not to wear the chugging things.

BLADES WAS GLAD to have to concentrate on her footing as she climbed the treacherous slag slope up to where the pipe holes stared out, two black pits. She had a fleeting image of Hanks's eyes but quickly turned her thoughts to trying to remember the pipe layout. No one knew what the pipes originally were. Nearly a mile of man-sized tubes running in and out of each other. The pipes echoed alarmingly and to the uninitiated seemed a maze. The appearance was deceptive, though, and they actually followed a fairly regular grid pattern. Even now, years after, Blades could remember it. There had been five entrances. Three had been down the other side of the hill, near the pack trail. They had been buried in the avalanche which renegades had triggered during a daring ambush of a guilder caravan a couple of strokes back. Now there were only two holes and they connected pretty soon.

The climb had been a steep one and the ganger was panting slightly as she gave her orders to the scout. 'You take this pipe, Ratty. After a bit there's a junction. The left fork only runs about ten paces and then stops but check it. Then go right. After a while it runs into the other tube. I'll meet you at the entrance and we can clear the rest together.' The Ratskin shrugged, half-cocked his musket, and disappeared into the pipe. Blades had no doubt he could handle the zombie if he met it. She laughed mirthlessly as she reflected that, in fact, he could probably sense better and move far more quietly than she could.

She toiled on up and to the right where the other pipe opened. She felt better now. The adrenaline was beginning to flow. Blades felt her lips tighten and the familiar prickle of thrill in the pit of her stomach. She checked the magazine of the shotgun again, man-stopper and incendiary mix. The chugger was going to pay for having picked her patch. She adjusted the fit of the borrowed night-sight visor and stepped cautiously into the pipe.

Using all her skill, the ganger moved stealthily into the hill. There was a fresh looking patch of gunk on the pipe, just inside the entrance. Could be the zombie, she mused. Could be just about anything. Not far into the hill, thought she heard a noise. Blades pulled up, raising the shotgun. Creeping slowly forward towards a twist in the passage she became positive. Something was around the corner. Could it be the zombie already? Shotgun cocked and moving with extreme caution lest she start the pipes reverberating, Blades crept around the corner.

A short way up the pipe, a large rat was nosing at something. Alone, it would probably be no problem. Blades stepped out. The rat froze, then turned and sniffed towards her. She took a step forward. The rat skittered off into the gloom at the edge of her visor's range. Still very cautious, Blades moved on. There was another splash of gunk on the pipe. It must have been what the rat was investigating. Blades stooped over it. In the eerie green universe of her passive visor it was hard to tell -anything about such goo; it was just that, a splash of gunk. She daren't poke at it and so, straightening, she moved on.

Blades was amazed at how the old habits came back: The strange shuffle that that kept

one to the bottom of the pipe and avoided the echoes. The careful sweeping ahead of the shotgun to check for webs that were almost impossible to see even with the visor. There were other memories of those juve days too but she pushed them firmly out of her mind. She must be near the intersection now

'These pipes clear.' The sudden hiss caught her completely off-guard. It was the Ratskin warning her in advance before she stumbled into him. Stepping closer she could just make out his watery, green form in the blank hole that was the mouth of the connecting pipe. Right at the limit of the visor's range. How in Spire's name had he detected her? Blades again reflected how the Ratskins quaked her. How did he see anything in here? They were spooks all right, but you had to be impressed.

The ganger controlled her voice

carefully. 'Clear down here too. Follow

me.' She was tempted to send the Ratskin in front but it smacked of weakness. And she was not weak, she wasn't. She was the leader, it was her gang, damn them! She couldn't help feeling a prickle of unease with him behind, though. Blades couldn't even hear a rustle from him, yet every slight noise she made roared in her ears. She had to fight the impulse to look round and check he was actually there. Perhaps it was this preoccupation that made her miss the web and only the discipline of years stopped her crying out as it slapped into her face. She stopped and checked carefully. No spiders. It must just have been a remnant. She shuddered slightly as she pulled the thick, sticky threads from her skin and hair. She had just cleared the last one when she thought she heard a noise. A light tap on her shoulder made her start but showed the Ratskin had heard it too.

It came again, a lisping, sucking, breathy noise half way between a whisper and a gurgle. Her heart pumped harder. Odd, zombies were normally quiet. Very slowly, shotgun at the ready, Blades shuffled forward. The noise was coming from a pipe intersection further up on the right. Tightening her grip on the shotgun, Blades slid round the corner.

There was a clatter as the shotgun fell and the echoes rebounded along the pipe.

Blades stood frozen, jaw slack and speechless, her hands held feebly out in front of her. Only when the figure in the pipe began limping towards her, stiletto raised in its one good hand, did the scream burst from Blade's throat, rising from her belly, rising from the past, drowning her as she slumped against the pipe wall. She was only dimly conscious of the flash and thunderous crash of a musket firing.

WHEN BLADES CAME TO, she tried to scream again but all that came out was a groan. Not a zombie at all!

The full horror swamped her. She knocked the visor aside and pressed her fists into her eyes trying to blot out the image of the ruined face that was burnt into her brain. The relentless, undying image of that chem-burned wreck dragging itself towards her. No recognition in its blank eyes, only mindless death.

Spire knew what agonies the chem sink must have inflicted to turn her into that wandering killer. Was she dimly still fighting that last gang fight? Was she in some insane hell dimly trying to battle her way home? Had some twisted memories from childhood drawn her back to those pipes?

Flushed, chest heaving, the ganger fought to stop the shaking that convulsed her.

Gradually she controlled herself and lowered her hands, opened her eyes.

The Ratskin was sitting opposite her, re-priming his musket, face a blank, unreadable mask.

'You killed her?' Blades asked weakly. 'It dead,' the scout replied.

'Let's get out,' Blades panted, struggling to her feet and straining to lift the shotgun.

The Ratskin started off and she followed shakily, the visor making the world

dreamlike once more

The effort of walking concentrated her thoughts. Blades's mind raced and her body physically reeled as she thought about what the scout had witnessed, and not just here in the pipes. He'd been there when she'd scragged the garbage-bagger! Because of the risk of plague. Spire! Spire! Chugging Spire!

Her brain was racing; before she was aware of it she stumbled. The scout turned.

Through the visor his eyes were just black pits. Like Hanko's! Seeming to her to accuse and condemn in a look... Spire! This would not do!

"Right, girl?" the Ratskin asked softly. 'Oh yes, Ratty! I'm all right,' the ganger replied, and there was steel in her voice. The scout turned without another word and continued up the pipe. Smoothly Blades raised her shotgun and put a man-stopper into the back of his head. He went down like a scragged zombie.

She leaned against the pipe wall until the echoes had subsided. 'Not much chugging use, your lucky amulet!' she muttered viciously at the lifeless body. Then the ganger forced herself to turn back and head down the pipe again. She only threw up once before she'd pumped three incendiaries into the already half-charred body, barely daring to look where she was aiming, not daring to miss and let it lie around for anyone to find. In the ghastly glow and stench of the flames, she made her way back to the dead Ratskin.

'Thanks, Ratty,' the ganger spat as she fired more incendiaries into the scout's body.

Eventually Blades dragged herself to the pipe entrance

Bright through the visor she could see a figure at the bottom of the hill: Jakey. The gang leader forced herself stiffly upright and made herself walk calmly down to where he was waiting.

'Get it?' the prospector asked nervously, fingering his own shotgun.

Blades did not raise the visor. 'Yeah,' she replied, her voice hollow 'It scragged the Ratskin, but I got it.'

Jakey shuffled. 'Ma said to say thanks,' he mumbled, unused, perhaps, to talking so much. 'Says she's sorry she was weak. Knows you can't take any chances with that zombie plague.'

Blades stumbled slightly and sat down hard on a flat rock.

'You all right?' Jakey said with obvious concern.

'Yeah... fine, fine. Go back to Licksy's and tell Sasha to bring some meltas and kraks. I'm sealing those pipes for good.' Jakey headed off into the glow globe twilight without a word, and the tears started.

'Oh, Katz,' she sobbed. 'Oh my sister!'